

**Police Interrogation and Its Impact on False Confessions**

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It's difficult to understand why someone would confess to a crime they didn't commit. The Innocence Project, a non-profit organization that focuses on freeing innocent people from prison, estimated that 25% of their wrongful conviction cases are a result of false confessions. Most who falsely confessed were interrogated for an average of 16 hours and were lied to by law enforcement regarding evidence that supports their innocence (Innocence Project 2025). The three types of false confessions are voluntary, coerced-compliant, and coerced-internalized. Voluntary false confessions are made without coercion or pressure from the police. The reason for confessing depends on the individual, but many attribute it to attention-seeking behaviors (Bartol 2021). Coerced-compliant and coerced-internalized are characterized by pressure and coercion from police that elicits a confession. The difference is that those who falsely confess compliantly don't change their internal perceptions of innocence; they're only conforming to what law enforcement wants. Coerced internalization is when an individual begins to doubt their perceptions of their innocence and becomes convinced that they're guilty (Bartol 2021).

One study conducted by Okoka and Kheswa (2024) aimed to evaluate whether state anxiety, trait anxiety, and perceived stress contribute to false confession rates in detention cells at the Kaduna

State Police Department of State Criminal Investigation in Nigeria. State anxiety is the temporary feeling that stems from one's current state, while trait anxiety is long-term and connected to the emotions and personality of the person. Perceived stress "gauges how stressful certain circumstances are perceived to be in one's life" (Okoka and Kheswa 2024). Participants included 109 randomly selected suspects from detention cells in the Kaduna State Police Department. 74 males and 35 females were questioned using the Gudjonsson Confession

Questionnaire-Revised (GCQ-R), the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI), and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). All three of these measurement tools asked questions using the Likert scale, ranging from “not at all” or “almost never” to “very much so” or “almost always.” They sought to account for attitudes, anxiety levels, and perceived stress levels toward falsely confessing (Okoka and Kheswa 2024). The results supported both state anxiety and perceived stress as factors that predicted and increased the likelihood of signing a false confession. This is potentially because law enforcement tends to question individuals after they experience or witness a violent or traumatic event that increases stress (Okoka and Kheswa 2024). This study shows that state anxiety impacts false confessions more than trait anxiety because the anxiety experienced during the interrogation outweighs the baseline anxiety many experience daily. This doesn’t mean all individuals are equally as vulnerable to falsely confessing, just that state anxiety has more of an impact during the interrogation itself (Okoka and Kheswa 2024).

Niland and Ortu (2020) analyzed cases and interrogation techniques to examine how various factors contribute to false confession rates. These rates have increased alongside the rise of DNA evidence, as those confessing believe their innocence will be proven with physical evidence despite the confession. Law enforcement officers are trained to view confessions as the main goal of an interrogation using the Reid Technique, prioritizing isolating the suspect and increasing their feelings of “loneliness and vulnerability” (Niland and Ortu 2020). This stress increases after experiencing a traumatic event, being accused of a crime, or experiencing alcohol/drug withdrawals while being held for interrogation. The need to escape these stressors is often so great that individuals confess solely to escape their current environment. This study's main finding is the dangers of “contaminated” confessions, which occur when a law enforcement

officer plants confidential information about the case throughout the interrogation process (Niland and Ortu 2020). They may hint at the murder weapon, the time of death, or other information that only the perpetrator would know. Suspects can weave this information into their false confessions, which increases the validity of the confession in court and results in increased wrongful convictions. Niland and Ortu (2020) suggest that the narrative shaping and contamination, which increase the rates of false confessions, are sufficient to reduce the role of confessions in determining a suspect's guilt or innocence. The real determination should be made through the presence of objective evidence.

Suspects are willing to falsely confess because they believe objective evidence will hold more weight than a confession. Regardless of contradictions to their statement or DNA evidence that proves their innocence, the court often prosecutes because of the confession (Niland and Ortu 2020). Suspects are often subject to intense interrogation techniques after a traumatic event, such as being denied basic needs for hours, which leads them to confess in an attempt to reduce the state anxiety that accumulates from their current stressors and environment (Okoka and Kheswa 2024). This decision to confess is anticipated by law enforcement, as the interrogation environment is curated to elicit said confession by increasing feelings of isolation, vulnerability, and discomfort. Despite contradictory evidence, suspects are still prosecuted because contaminated information is often incorporated into their confessions. Law enforcement can claim this information is only known by the offender to increase its validity in court (Niland and Ortu 2020). Overall, we cannot judge someone for falsely confessing when we haven't experienced the same stressors or been subject to the same interrogative techniques. The system can reduce rates of false confessions by prioritizing objective evidence and limiting the

manipulation tactics law enforcement are permitted to utilize during an interrogation, such as lying about evidence, extending holding time, and denying basic human needs.

#### References

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