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The Psychology of False Confessions: Cognitive and Emotional Factors Influencing False Self-Incrimination

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Abstract

False confessions represent one of the most significant challenges to the fairness and reliability of criminal justice systems, often leading to wrongful convictions and undermining public confidence in legal institutions. While confessions are traditionally regarded as compelling evidence of guilt, research has demonstrated that innocent individuals may admit to crimes they did not commit under the influence of various psychological, cognitive, emotional and situational factors.

This paper examines the psychological mechanisms underlying false self-incrimination, with particular emphasis on the interaction between cognitive vulnerabilities, emotional distress, and interrogation practices. The analysis explores the principal categories of false confessions—voluntary, coerced-compliant and coerced-internalized—and discusses the individual characteristics that increase susceptibility, including youth, intellectual disabilities, mental disorders, heightened suggestibility, memory distortions and elevated stress levels. Particular attention is given to the impact of psychologically coercive interrogation techniques, prolonged questioning, authority pressure, fatigue and social isolation on decision-making processes. The paper further evaluates empirical findings from forensic psychology and criminology, highlighting the role of cognitive biases, compliance and emotional regulation in shaping confession behavior.

From a legal perspective, the study emphasizes the importance of procedural safeguards designed to minimize the risk of false confessions, including mandatory electronic recording of interrogations, access to legal counsel, evidence-based interviewing methods and specialized protections for vulnerable suspects. By integrating psychological and legal perspectives, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of false confessions and underscores the need for investigative practices that prioritize both the effective administration of justice and the protection of fundamental human rights.

Keywords: False Confessions; False Self-Incrimination; Forensic Psychology; Criminal Investigations; Interrogation Techniques; Cognitive Vulnerability; Emotional Factors; Suggestibility; Wrongful Convictions; Human Rights