

Confessions don't mean crime has been solved

JonBenet Ramsey suspect could be lying or delusional, experts speculate
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NEW YORK - It is rare, but not unheard of, for some people to confess to notorious crimes they did not commit — and suspicions have been raised that John Mark Karr is one such false confessor.

Picked up by police in Thailand on Wednesday, Karr readily admitted that he is guilty in the slaying of child beauty queen, JonBenet Ramsey. But aside from his confession, there is little public evidence linking him to the 1996 crime, leading some experts to speculate that he is either lying or delusional.

"Many high-publicity crimes have these people coming out of the woodwork," said Elizabeth Loftus, director of the Center for Psychology and Law at the University of California-Irvine.

More than 200 people confessed to the 1932 kidnapping and murder of Charles Lindbergh's infant son. The 1947 "Black Dahlia" murder — the slaying of aspiring actress Elizabeth Short, who was found naked and sliced in half in a vacant Los Angeles lot — attracted numerous spurious confessions.

And lawyers for the Ramsey family said Friday that a number of people have already confessed to the killing of JonBenet, none of them with enough credibility to attract the attention of law enforcement.

"Often you're looking at a pathological need for attention," said Saul Kassin, a psychology professor at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

Eager to gain notoriety

Henry Lee Lucas died in prison in 2001, convicted of 11 murders. But he had confessed to hundreds of others, though authorities did not believe most of his confessions.

Gisli Gudjonsson, a professor of forensic psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry at King's College London, concluded that Lucas "would say and do things for immediate gain, attention and reaction ... he was eager to please and impress people ... the notoriety aspect of the confessions was appealing to him."

But there are countless other reasons that people confess to crimes they never committed. Some people are tricked by police interrogation tactics. Sometimes people

confess to take the rap for friends or relatives who have previous convictions. Others simply relent under intense questioning and agree to anything that will end the ordeal.

There is the story of the time Nazi commander Heinrich Himmler lost his pipe while visiting a concentration camp; he found it later in his car, but by that time six people had confessed to stealing it.

It is even possible for people to convince themselves, sometimes with help or coercion, that they have actually committed a crime they would have considered unimaginable. In 1988 Richard Ingram, a sheriff's deputy in Olympia, Washington, confessed to the ritual sexual abuse of his daughters after being convinced by leaders of his church that Satan had compelled his actions and then erased his memory of them.

"People can come to believe that they did things, saw things, experienced things that they didn't do or see," said Loftus, who is well known for implanting false memories in subjects' minds with cleverly constructed psychological experiments.

A need to be punished

Psychoanalysts have suggested that some false confessions can be motivated by a subconscious psychological need to be punished for something a person wants to do but has not. Karr has been convicted on child pornography charges and has expressed fascination with young girls in general and the murders of both JonBenet Ramsey and Polly Klaas in particular.

Klass was abducted from her Petaluma, California, home and killed in 1993. Karr moved his family to Petaluma in 2000, and reportedly told authorities he corresponded with Polly Klaas' killer, Richard Allen Davis.

Karr has written poems to JonBenet Ramsey and he professed his love for her in statements to The Associated Press this week. For four years he has corresponded by e-mail with Michael Tracey, a University of Colorado journalism professor who produced three documentaries about the Ramsey case.

Kassin said police can usually see through false confessions relatively easily by asking a few questions about the crime that only the culprit could accurately answer. Tracey and others have suggested that Karr knows details he could not have gleaned from press reports and other sources, but so far no specific examples have been given.

If Karr does turn out to have confessed falsely, Kassin said, it will be interesting from a psychological standpoint to know whether he did it knowingly to attract attention or actually believes he committed the crime.

Experts are also curious about Karr's insistence that the killing was an accident. The assertion may be an attempt to avoid charges of first-degree murder, said Sharon L. Davies, a professor at Ohio State University law school. But it could also reveal a

discrepancy between the forensic evidence, which indicates a brutal attack, and Karr's fantasy of the crime.

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