

PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Only sometimes are confessors big liars

By David Conti

TRIBUNE-REVIEW

Sunday, August 27, 2006

The question crops up during just about any discussion of John Mark Karr: If he didn't kill JonBenet Ramsey, why would he confess?

"There's any number of reasons for a false confession," said Saul Kassin, a professor of psychology at Williams College in Massachusetts and a leading national researcher on the topic. "Sometimes, they have a pathological need for attention. More often than not, the false confession comes from the pressure of a police interrogation."

Within hours of Karr's surfacing in Thailand last week, many criminal justice experts and pundits -- including former Allegheny County Coroner Dr. Cyril Wecht -- began airing their doubts about the former teacher's confession to killing the 6-year-old beauty queen.

History shows false confessions are a reality. Retired Edinboro University Professor Jim Fisher proved that it happened here in Western Pennsylvania, with two high-profile cases from the 1950s.

As detailed in his 1996 book, "Fall Guys: False Confessions and the Politics of Murder," heavy-handed police tactics pushed two young boys to confess to two separate murders in 1956 and 1958. Both were cleared of the crimes in 1991.

"Karr will make an interesting case study when this confession is eventually corroborated or disproved," said Fisher, who was an FBI agent from 1966 to 1972 before he began teaching criminal justice.

False confessions played a role in nearly 30 percent of cases in which a conviction has been overturned by DNA testing, according to the New York-based Innocence Project at the Benjamin N. Cardoza School of Law.

Kassin said false confessions come about in two ways: through interrogation tactics or because of psychological issues.

"The interrogation is designed to break down the suspect's resistance," he said, detailing the isolation, confrontation and bluffing that often occurs in the police interview room.

Charlie Zubryd, 11, and Jerry Pacek, 13, were victims of that process, according to Fisher.

Zubryd confessed to killing his mother, Helen, with a hatchet in their Sewickley home in 1956 when he was 8. Because he was only 11 when he confessed -- too young to prosecute -- Zubryd was never jailed, but spent the next 30 years shunned by his family.

In 1958, Pacek confessed to raping and killing Lillian Stevick, 51, in Brackenridge. The admission came after 41 hours of interrogation, Fisher said. Pacek spent 10 years in prison.

"Time in the interrogation room is a huge factor in these confessions," said Kassin. "Eventually, the person just wants to get out of there."

Fisher's research led to a pardon for Pacek -- who died in 2004 -- and the identification of Zubryd's mother's real killer.

Local prosecutors and police said state laws and local procedures safeguard against false confessions today.

"It does us no good to put the wrong person in jail," said Pittsburgh police Lt. Kevin Kraus.

According to Kraus and Deputy District Attorney Mark Tranquilli -- who oversees homicide prosecutions in Allegheny County -- the goal of a good police interrogation is to elicit information from the suspect that only the perpetrator would know.

"We want to know what they know, and the police won't tell (a suspect) what they already know," Tranquilli said.

State law limits a police interrogation in most cases to six hours, Tranquilli said. And police often will spend hours after a confession confirming what a suspect told them, Kraus said.

"The investigation does not stop with a confession," Kraus said.

That process of confirming details from the admission should keep the other group of false confessors -- those with mental illness or a pathological need for attention -- out of court.

"Most confessions in those cases, it's obvious and they can be disproved quickly," Fisher said.

Police have grown accustomed to sifting through false statements from social misfits who want to claim responsibility for high-profile murders, from the Lindbergh kidnapping in 1932 to the O.J. Simpson case in 1994.

"I don't think there is a way to know with Karr until we hear more about the evidence and the confession," Kassin said. "I want to hear what information he has on this."

David Conti can be reached at dconti@tribweb.com or (412) 391-0927.

Images and text copyright © 2006 by The Tribune-Review Publishing Co.
Reproduction or reuse prohibited without written consent from PghTrib.com