

Article Last Updated: 8/17/2006 11:36 PM

denver & the west

Karr confession raises "red flags" among experts

A CRY FOR ATTENTION?

By Steve Lipsher
Denver Post Staff Writer
DenverPost.com

The curious confession in the murder of JonBenét Ramsey raised grave doubts Thursday among legal observers, who cautioned that sensational cases often generate false claims of responsibility.

John Mark Karr's admission in Bangkok, Thailand, that he was involved in the 1996 slaying of the 6-year-old beauty-pageant contestant contains enough disputed information - notably including his claim that he drugged the girl and his then-wife's assertion that he was home in Alabama at the time - that his involvement must be viewed skeptically, experts said.

"There are some red flags here," said James Alan Fox, a professor of criminal justice at Northeastern University in Boston.

High-profile cases frequently create obsessions, he said, with every public detail of the murder recited in pages of tabloids and in Internet chatrooms.

"It very easily could have been somebody who wanted to place himself in the drama, in the excitement, and feel a part of something that is fascinating," Fox said.

Denver defense attorney Phil Cherner suggests that the public nature of Karr's mea culpa seems to be a cry for attention rather than an act of contrition.

"The guy seems to be not just confessing, but openly inviting everyone to a microphone to hear him confess," Cherner said. "That raises questions in my mind about his guilt."

The key to determining the truthfulness of the confession is whether Karr has information known only to investigators and the killer and determining whether he faced any coercion by Thai police, said Saul Kassin, a psychology professor at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., and one of the nation's leading experts on false confessions.

"I'm agnostic with regard to the value of that confession," he said. "You'd want to know that he provided information that was accurate and that was not derivable from the newspapers or the press reports."

And Boulder law enforcement officials have refused to describe any evidence they have linking Karr to JonBenét's death.

Suspects fabricate admissions to crimes - particularly high-profile ones - for a variety of reasons, Kassin said, including a pathological need for attention, a mental illness or a desire to punish themselves for other acts.

About 200 people confessed to the abduction and slaying of Charles Lindbergh's baby in the 1930s, he noted.

Sam Kamin, associate law professor at the University of Denver, said numerous suspects have been convicted and sent to prison on the basis of false confessions, which may be derived from stress of the interrogation process.

"You do get cases where the interrogation tactics convince a person that they did a crime that they did not, in fact, do," he said. "The other thing is the interrogation can be so intense that people will admit to anything if they feel it will end the questioning."

Staff writer Steve Lipsher can be reached at 970-513-9495 or slipsher@denverpost.com.

Para leer este artículo en español, vaya a denverpost.com/aldia