

Experts: Signs of coercion cloud JonBenet confession

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It seemed like a spontaneous admission, without any element of coercion. John Mark Karr faced the cameras and said he was with JonBenet Ramsey the night the 6-year-old died.

But was it a voluntary confession of complicity in homicide, as it first appeared? Or was it something else?

The question is puzzling U.S. legal experts who have studied false confessions for years. They see signs that police interrogation may have helped shape Karr's public statements. But they're not sure because so many details about his arrest in Bangkok aren't available.

"There's something going on here that's very strange ... and no reason on God's green earth to assume that this is a voluntary confession," said Richard Ofshe, a sociology professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

It's not clear how much questioning Karr was subjected to while he was in the custody of Thai police. Nor is there any indication that he was forced to speak with reporters.

Sometimes, people offer confessions without prompting because they're overcome by guilt over a crime; often, a religious conversion can motivate someone to admit culpability he or she had previously concealed. And sometimes, the prospect that someone else has been wrongly convicted serves as an incentive.

The lure of attention or publicity associated with infamous cases also has inspired people to confess to crimes they never committed, among them the 1930s Lindbergh kidnapping.



John Mark Karr, seated, is escorted Sunday on a plane from Thailand. He's headed for Colorado after his arrest in JonBenet Ramsey's killing. (ELIZABETH DALZIEL/Associated Press)

Karr flies to U.S.

John Mark Karr, the suspect in the death of JonBenet Ramsey, was escorted back to the United States on Sunday aboard a flight from Bangkok, Thailand, to Los Angeles.

Karr is expected to face charges in Boulder, Colo., of first-degree murder, kidnapping and child sexual assault in

But most people who volunteer confessions surrender to authorities, rather than evading law enforcement for years and fleeing overseas as Karr did after a 2001 arrest on child pornography charges in California.

"What happens is, someone walks into a police station and turns himself in," said Steven Drizin, legal director of the Northwestern University School of Law's Center on Wrongful Convictions. "In this case, authorities had to go all the way across the world to bring this guy into custody."

Did police questioning sway him?

The language of Karr's televised confession last week troubles Drizin and Ofshe. Both said a red flag was raised in their minds when the 41-year-old insisted that JonBenet's death in 1996 in Boulder, Colo., was "an accident" and "unintentional."

"This is a classic example of the kind of language someone would use after a police interrogation," said Ofshe, one of the foremost U.S. experts on false confessions.

Drizin asked: "Clearly, the killing of this girl was not an accident, so why would he say that? Police officers are trained to suggest to a suspect that a crime was an accident ... a less heinous account ... in order to elicit a confession."

And why would anyone proclaim that his or her involvement merited a charge of "second-degree murder," as Karr is reported to have told police in Thailand, without being told by police that a lesser charge might be possible?

"Suspects just don't come forward and say, 'I committed second-degree murder.' It doesn't happen," Drizin said.

Other factors in false confessions

Research shows that aggressive interrogation can cause people to admit to crimes they didn't commit -- out of fear, anxiety, a desire to escape punishment, suggestibility and misunderstanding of the consequences, among other reasons.

Of death row inmates later found to be innocent because of DNA evidence, as many as 25% had confessed without just cause, according to New York's Innocence Project.

Despite these flags, it is possible that Karr's statements were voluntary, Ofshe and Drizin said.

the 1996 killing of the 6-year-old JonBenet.

Hours before Karr's departure, Dr. Thep Vechavisit, who runs a Bangkok clinic specializing in sex-change surgery, said Karr had come in for treatment. He wouldn't provide details.

Associated Press

Even if Karr didn't have a hand in JonBenet's death, his willingness to take responsibility may be entirely his own. False confessions are surprisingly common.

Especially in high-profile cases, people are frequently more than ready to admit to crimes they didn't commit, said Saul Kassin, a psychology professor at Williams College in Massachusetts.

"It sounds like this guy was in a confessional mode long before any police were involved," Kassin said.

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