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Confess now, 'nay' later?

Experts puzzle over why the innocent sometimes say that they've committed murder.

By JOHN SHULTZ
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In 1819, Jesse and Stephen Boorn of Vermont were destined for the gallows, thanks to detailed confessions about how they killed and disposed of their insufferable brother-in-law.

A year later, the Boorns were free men. Their alleged victim, it turned out, was in New Jersey, blissfully unaware of his own murder.

The Boorns' contemporaries were perplexed. Why would innocent men confess to crimes they didn't commit?

That question came creeping back into the public consciousness this week with the first cracks in the very public confession of John Mark Karr, the schoolteacher who stunningly took responsibility for the decade-old unsolved slaying of child beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey. Authorities are investigating whether he's telling the truth.

"We understand why people would confess under torture," said Rob Warden, director of the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law. He noted that "not a day goes by that someone doesn't walk into a police station and confess to killing the Black Dahlia or Nicole Brown Simpson. These are mentally ill people.

"What we don't understand is why intelligent people do this, and it happens over, and over and over again."

The answer, legal experts say, is complicated — a problem best solved by understanding the confessor's motives and mental capacity, and whether the declaration of guilt came voluntarily or only after a stretch of artful police interrogation.

Whatever the reasons, fake confessions often have a similar hallmark: assertions that don't quite mesh with the facts.

"You don't expect a criminal's recollection to be perfect, but if in fact he gets key details wrong ... that certainly raises a red flag," said Saul Kassin, a psychology professor at Williams College in Massachusetts, and an expert in the phenomenon of false confessions. "If he gets them right, then the next question is where did he get them from?"

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False voluntary confessions often involve high-profile cases.

About 200 misguided or mean-spirited folks claimed responsibility for the 1932 Lindbergh baby kidnapping. In 1991, a man calling from a mental hospital wrongly copped to the slayings of six Buddhist monks in Phoenix, and he fingered three accomplices who in turn signed fake confessions.

"It could be a pathological need for fame or attention," Kassin said. "They may be delusional, they may have mental-health problems. Sometimes there are rational reasons; there are cases where juveniles confess to protect their parents."

Others may already feel guilty of something else.

Most phony voluntary confessions are easily dismissed by law enforcement, Kassin noted. Police often hold back key details of a crime to distinguish an account told by the real culprit from the ravings of avid news readers.

Other times, they're more difficult to weed out.

Convicted killer Henry Lee Lucas, after repeated jailhouse conversions in the 1980s, owned up to hundreds of murders, even implicating himself in the death of Jimmy Hoffa and linking himself to the 1978 Jonestown massacre.

He later recanted many of his confessions, and his death sentence in one case was eventually commuted by then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush after it was determined he wasn't in the same state as his purported victim.

Lucas died in prison of natural causes in 2001.

Warden, who worked a summer at the *Joplin Globe*, remembers covering the case of a man from Kentucky charged with burglary in Jasper County, Mo.

After his arrest, the man suddenly confessed to a lover's lane slaying of a couple in his home state. The story turned out to be false.

"This kid had a really solid burglary rap in Jasper County, and what's he trying to do?" asked Warden. "He's trying to get sent back to Kentucky."

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Far more common, experts say, are confessions that emerge after police interrogation. And most of those cases involved individuals who were particularly susceptible to interrogation techniques, a group that includes the young and people with mental disabilities.

In Missouri, both Melvin Lee Reynolds and Johnny Lee Wilson were convicted of murder and served prison time based in large part on their confessions.

Reynolds was convicted in 1979 in the death of 4-year-old Eric Christgen in St. Joseph. Wilson went to prison for the 1986 slaying of Pauline Martz, 76, in Aurora, Mo. In both cases, another man eventually confessed to the slayings.

Both Reynolds and Lee were considered mentally challenged. Both said they confessed to stop the interrogation.

Experts say innocent people sometimes confess during a police interrogation for a variety of reasons.

"Sometimes, they (suspects) just want to get out of an adverse situation," said Lawrence Wrightsman, a psychology professor at the University of Kansas. "They look for instant release and figure, 'Well, later on I'll somehow get out of this.'• "

The high-profile case of New York's Central Park jogger, for example, involved young suspects recounting details fed to them by law enforcement.

In the 200-year-old case of the Boorns, both confessed because they figured authorities had them cold.

A fellow prisoner had volunteered to testify against Jesse Boorn, and in the face of that, Jesse turned on his brother and claimed that he had only helped dispose of the body. With his brother already turned, Stephen Boorn tried to spin the non-existent murder into a case of self-defense.

Such cases exist today, experts say, with suspects seeing no way out of their predicament besides confessing. DNA evidence is now knocking down some cases built largely on confessions.

"A confession is considered the gold standard," said Warden. But law enforcement interrogation techniques "can somehow persuade the person that it's in their best interest to confess to the crime. ... And the techniques are so effective that they can work on people who are innocent."

Developments

•Police asked JonBenet Ramsey's mother just before she died if she would meet with John Mark Karr, suspected in her daughter's slaying, the family's attorney says.

•Prison guards search the San Quentin death-row cell of Polly Klaas' killer after learning that he may have corresponded with Karr. No letters were found.

•The Rocky Mountain News publishes excerpts of e-mails that Karr sent to a University of Colorado journalism professor, who had produced documentaries on the Ramsey case.

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