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## Karr joins the ranks of crime star wanna-bes

**Up to 25 percent of defendants cleared by DNA confessed before their trials.**

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John Mark Karr now has joined a famous, or infamous, list of people who took the blame for horrific crimes they apparently didn't commit - among them the 200 people who falsely confessed to kidnapping Charles Lindbergh's baby and the five teenage boys who falsely confessed to the rape of a Central Park jogger in 1989.

There have always been people eager to confess to things they didn't do. The surprising aspect of Karr's claim of responsibility for JonBenet Ramsey's death was that prosecutors didn't automatically accept it, said a national expert on false confessions.

That's because technology has changed the way police look at such cases, said Saul Kassin, director of psychology at Williams College in Massachusetts and author of *Confessions in the Courtroom*.

"The confession has always been the gold standard of evidence," he said Monday in a phone interview. "It's the sight and sound of a man standing there, telling what he did and why, and even sometimes expressing contrition."

But since the advent of DNA testing, law enforcement has begun to understand that innocent people sometimes want to believe as much as police do that they committed a crime, Kassin said.

About 15 to 25 percent of defendants who have been exonerated by DNA evidence confessed before their trials.

"Sometimes people make false, self-incriminating statements on their own, without prodding or pressure," he said by e-mail after Karr's Aug. 16 arrest. He cited the Lindbergh case as one example.

"In the 1980s, Henry Lee Lucas volunteered confessions to hundreds of unsolved murders, making him the most prolific serial confessor in history.

"People volunteer false confessions for any number of bad reasons. Often they have a psychiatric problem, like a pathological craving for attention; a conscious or unconscious need to punish themselves for prior

transgressions, real or imagined; or a confusion of reality and fantasy. This may turn out to be the story line in the case of Karr."

In some cases, Kassin said Monday, people immerse themselves so deeply in the details of a crime that they come to believe they committed it. Karr is known to have been fascinated with the Ramsey case for years.

Kassin said the vast majority of false confessions are coerced.

"Most of these come from powerful interrogation methods, the kind used in the Central Park jogger case," he said.

In that sensational crime of 1989, a young woman was beaten, raped and left for dead. She lost her memory and was unable to say who did it.

After hours of unrelenting questioning, five teenagers confessed in vivid detail. In such cases, Kassin wrote, the suspect's instinct for self-preservation is "out-muscled by a process of influence so intoxicating ... as to disable the individual's rational decision-making."

Thirteen years after the teens' convictions, DNA evidence connected a convicted murderer named Matias Reyes to the attack. The boys were set free.

The circumstances of Karr's confession aren't publicly known. "We haven't heard a confession," Kassin said. "All we've heard is a brief public admission," which Karr made to reporters.

But Karr's use of the word "accident" to describe how JonBenet Ramsey died caught Kassin's attention. "It's a common interrogation tactic," he said. "The interrogator suggests that what happened was an accident. It makes it easier for the suspect to confess."

Whatever happened, the Karr case will be studied for years, Kassin said.

Just as another famous false confession has been talked about since World War II. The story goes that Nazi SS chief Heinrich Himmler lost his pipe on a visit to a concentration camp. It finally was found in his car.

But against all instincts of self-preservation, six prisoners had already confessed to stealing it.

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