

False Confessions: Coercion often leads to false confessions

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By Bill Moushey, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Despondent over finding his parents brutally murdered on their farm in northern Illinois, Gary Gauger was interrogated for 19 hours until he admitted, hypothetically, he could have killed them during a drunken blackout.

Five New York City teenagers convicted in the infamous Central Park Jogger case were questioned at length -- the longest for 28 hours -- until all but one offered shaky confessions.

Harrisburg area police convinced Barry Laughman, a man with an IQ near 70 and the mentality of a 10-year-old, that he had killed his neighbor, so Mr. Laughman confessed.

These crimes occurred in different places and under different circumstances, but in each case people confessed to heinous crimes and spent years in prison before their innocence was proven.

Innocent people confess to crimes for many reasons, including the desire for notoriety. That was the apparent motive in the celebrated unraveling this week of John Mark Karr's false admission that he had killed JonBenet Ramsey.

But false confessions usually involve coercive interrogations in which police claim to have evidence of a suspect's guilt and then promise leniency for cooperation or severe punishment for non-cooperation.

In a study of 340 overturned convictions between 1989 and 2003, Dr. Samuel R. Gross of the University of Michigan Law School and his colleagues found that 51, or 15 percent,



Carolyn Kaster, Associated Press
Barry Laughman hugs his sister-in-law moments after being released from the Adams County Prison in Gettysburg in November 2003. The mentally retarded man, who confessed to killing a girl in 1987, was freed after a DNA sample proved his innocence.

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involved false confessions. Most of those confessions resulted from police coercion.

The Innocence Institute of Point Park University, which investigates allegations of wrongful convictions in partnership with the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, has sifted through hundreds of complaints and examined dozens of cases in Western Pennsylvania in which people claim to have falsely confessed under police pressure.

Such allegations can be difficult to document because many Pennsylvania police agencies fail to fully record interrogations, leaving controversies to stew for years. Among them:

■ Attorney Francis Sichko agreed to let state police polygraph his client, 18-year-old Tiffany Pritchett, in the middle of her 1994 murder trial in Washington County. Instead of accompanying her, Mr. Sichko went to a Pitt-Temple football game. Days later, state police -- who did not record or immediately write notes about their interview with Miss Pritchett -- said she confessed to the execution-style slaying of an acquaintance. Miss Pritchett has denied it.

■ Homewood teen Da'Ron Cox, 18, had a reputation as a "mama's boy" among neighborhood gang members, making him an unlikely suspect in the murder of a drug dealer in 1996. After three hours of unrecorded threats and promises, Mr. Cox says, detectives wheedled a confession from him. Only eight minutes of the session were videotaped.

■ Troy Joseph, 18, admitted he was going outside to fight with his sister's boyfriend, Richard Pearson, but he said he fled the East Liberty scene when a masked man gunned down Mr. Pearson during a botched robbery attempt. After several hours of interrogation, police twisted his words into a confession, he claims, despite witness evidence supporting his story that was not presented at trial.

Good cop/bad cop

Gone are the days when American detective bureaus routinely beat confessions out of criminal suspects.

Beth A. Keiser, Associated Press
Former death row inmate Gary Gauger plows one of the fields on his Richmond, Ill., farm, in July 1999. Mr. Gauger, who was convicted of killing his parents, was freed in 1996 after spending three years in prison. Almost a year after his release, two members of the Outlaws motorcycle gang confessed to the murders.

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More on the story:

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■ [The Cases](#)

■ [Graphic: Convicting the wrong person](#)

Tomorrow:

The controversial cases of Tiffany Pritchett, Da'Ron Cox and Troy Joseph. All three were 18 years old when they were convicted of murder based mainly on questionable confessions.

About this series

The Innocence Institute of Point Park University, a partnership between the Post-Gazette and Point Park's Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, teaches investigative journalism by examining allegations that people were wrongly convicted.

Over the past year, journalism students at Point Park have reviewed hundreds of allegations that people were wrongly convicted based on coerced or otherwise untrue confessions. They have read thousands of pages of court records and police reports and

But pressure still can be brought to bear, and many interrogation techniques widely accepted by law enforcement agencies have been found to produce false confessions.

The "good cop/bad cop" approach, which experts call "maximization and minimization," is one of the most common and has been supported by U.S. Supreme Court rulings that allow police to lie to suspects.

Interrogations often start with the "bad cop" maximizing the situation. "The suspect is led to believe there is independent evidence of his guilt and that things will be particularly onerous if he doesn't cooperate," said Dr. Saul Kassin, a professor of psychology at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass., who has written extensively on false confessions.

The suspect is then cajoled into confessing by a "good cop" who minimizes the crime, suggesting, for example, "Perhaps it was accidental, perhaps it was provoked, perhaps he was pushed into it by his friends, perhaps he was under the influence of drugs at the time," Dr. Kassin said.

Children, like those accused in the Central Park jogger case, and the mentally ill or retarded, like Barry Laughman, are particularly vulnerable to such techniques, according to the study completed last year by Dr. Gross.

Of the juveniles who had been wrongly convicted between 1989 and 2003, Dr. Gross found that 42 percent were convicted because of false confessions -- compared with only 13 percent of the adults.

Of the exonerated adults who were mentally ill or retarded, 69 percent had falsely confessed -- compared with only 8 percent of the adults with no known mental disability.

While those numbers are dramatic, under the right circumstances almost anyone could be "worn down by coercive police interrogations," said Steven Drizin, an expert on false confessions and legal director of the Center for Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law in Chicago.

"The interrogation often becomes an exercise in trying to confirm the suspicion that the suspect is guilty, rather than trying to figure out the truth," he said.

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interviewed inmates, witnesses, victims, officials and others with direct knowledge of the cases featured in this series.

The students taking part in this project were Elizabeth Perry, Cynthia Levy and Bridget DiCosmo. The institute is directed by Post-Gazette staff writer Bill Moushey, who led the research and wrote or supervised the writing of the stories.

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