

False Evidence In Interrogations

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False confessions occur in an alarming amount of convictions in the US. Almost 15% of all exonerations involved false confessions. (National Registry of Exonerations, 2025). Confessions often assumed, are accurate and truthful due to their nature, creating strong persuasion on rulings. (Leo, 2009). However, this is inaccurate, false confessions are frequently police induced. (Moore, et al. 2011). These techniques allow for tactics such as lying about evidence, contributing to false convictions seen in the Norfolk Four Case.

Frontline: “The Confessions” showcases the story of four innocent US Navy Sailors plead guilty to the murder and rape of Michelle Moore Bosko. The documentary outlines all four were lied to regarding the polygraph results. The usage of false evidence contributed to leading Daniel Williams, Joseph Dick Jr, and Derek Tice to falsely confess. The tactic used by the REID technique, a nine step procedure to extract confessions in interrogations. (Kassin, 2025) False evidence usage is defended by the Criminal Justice system as an aspect of interrogations that is useful for achieving a confession, however researchers argue the harm in which the technique leads to false confessions.

Kassin and Kichel examine how false evidence presented contributes to false confessions in a study of 79 undergraduates. Students were instructed to type and not hit the ‘alt’ key. Separated into four conditions with a confederate and without, as well as fast typing and slow. Participants were then asked to sign a form if they believed they pressed the key, those in the confederate condition had the confederate stating they saw this occur. The results showed 69% of all participants ended up signing a confession, 89% of confederate slow speed, and 100% confederate fast speed. Compared to those in the no confederate group, 35% slow pace and 65% fast pace (Kassin et, al. 1996). Further demonstrating false evidence presented during interrogation contributes to false confessions. In a real interrogation one can presume it would be higher stress than typing fast, therefore creating an environment where denial appears futile. (Kassin, 2014).

A vast majority of studies regarding false evidence concludes there is a risk of inducing false confessions. A significant case demonstrating the ethical dilemma of false evidence, a sheriff told Susan Smith that he did not believe her story that her children were abducted in a carjacking. Officer Howard Wells said that undercover detectives were on scene and did not see anything occur and then prayed with Susan. She then confessed falsely to murdering her children. (Young, 1995). This incident was rather not the first, as false evidence contributes to false confessions frequently as seen throughout research. In one case an officer pretended to compare a defendant's fingerprints to a fingerprint on the victims checkbook and said they matched. There was no checkbook, nor fingerprint recovered, and the defendant was later exonerated. (Young, 1995) Considering the fact confessions have a power to trump evidence in cases that have shown to be flawed even with false DNA analysis, this recurring theme is rather troubling.

The use of false evidence to obtain confessions is ethically problematic and harmful. Interrogations themselves offer ethical concerns and when combined with false evidence fosters an alarming risk, especially for vulnerable populations. These types of coerced confessions are particularly impactful for those susceptible to compliance such as people with intellectual disabilities, highly anxious people, as well as youth. (Gubi-Kelm et al 2020). Studies of police interrogations have concluded that they often can not reliably distinguish between true or false confessions in the first place and routinely make erroneous judgements. (Leo, 2009); further contributing to the prevalence and concern of false confessions. This ongoing dilemma showcases a need to refine interrogation techniques as well as regulations to improve accessibility and ethical concerns.

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