False Confessions of Women

Research
Nova Southeastern University College of Psychology
Dr. Lenore Walker, Professor
WHAT IS A FALSE CONFESSION

* Incriminating statement an individual makes regarding a crime they were not involved in, or a significant exaggeration of crime involvement.

* In our research, it is important to consider that false confessions come about in various ways and it can be difficult to determine the veracity of a confession.

* Nonetheless, once made, it is difficult to get people to believe it was a false statement.
Legal v. Factual Innocence

Legal innocence is a judicial, executive, or legislative acknowledgment (exoneration)

• Factual innocence is when evidence supports that the individual did not commit the crime in question

• A confession can be factually proven false when evidence supports that the individual could not have committed the crime in question

• However, even when facts are proven false, it is difficult to exonerate someone legally.
Why Do Research

• False confessions in men studied 20+ years
• Few women were being included in research
• Research showed various reasons for why men made a false confession
• Men often misidentified by eye witness testimony but confess anyway
• Most common was police interrogation techniques for vulnerable men
• Vulnerable defined as confused, intellectual disabilities, culture & language problems & mentally ill.
• DNA helped exonerate men falsely convicted. Rarely present for women.
Why Study Women?

• The underrepresentation of women in false confession exonerations
• Female cases are harder to identify
• Female cases are harder to prove innocence
• Gender-specific research into the phenomenon of female false confessions necessary to determine commonalities and differences between male and female cases
Creating a Database

• The Innocence Network and the National Registry of Exonerations \((n=24)\)
• Previous FC literature (185 cases, \(n=12\) W)
  –Methodology adopted and search expanded (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Leo & Ofshe, 1998)
• Legal sources \((n=50)\)
• News sources \((n=11)\)
• Total of 97 claimed cases included in original database
• Now almost 120 cases.
Women Different From Men

• Fewer women commit serious crimes.
• Fewer women have DNA identification issues.
• Over 40% women in our sample falsely confessed to crimes against children
• Most were involved with an co-defendant who was abusive to them and the children
• Some were protecting the abuser or afraid of him.
Why Did Women Say They Gave a False Confession?

- Protect herself, her children, or the abuser.
- Fear of direct or indirect threats from abuser.
- Interrogation pressures and submission to authority (vulnerable because of trauma/BWS)
- Internalized guilt because of trauma history, memory disturbance, dissociation.
- Difficulty remembering incident, or confusion about details.
- Externalized guilt about not being a “good enough” mother who could fit the image of the middle class TV image.
Vulnerabilities for Women

- Trauma (PTSD &/or BWS)
- Substance Abuse
- Threats to take away children (Abuser & CPS)
- Threats to kill her & family
- Threats to harm children
- Other mental illnesses
- Intellectual Disability
Trauma Backgrounds in Women

• Nearly 50% of women in database had histories of trauma and abuse.
• Think this is low estimate as many others stated they were not permitted to discuss abuse in their trial.
• Over 40% women were wrongfully convicted of crimes against children as compared to 22% of the men (National Registry of Exonerations).
• 30% exonerated women wrongfully convicted of killing a child as compared to 17% of men.
• Even after facts proved wrongful conviction, many women accepted a plea rather than re-trial usually due to being released on time-served or medical reasons.
Types of Trauma & Abuse*

- 42% Trauma & Abuse
- 19% Childhood Abuse
- 20% Sexual Abuse
- 22% Domestic Violence
- 10% Diagnosed with BWS

*Some had more than one
Research Findings To Date

Unique to Women

- Women who falsely confess are more likely then men to have trauma backgrounds.
- Women who falsely confess are more likely involved in crimes against children.
- Women who falsely confess often protect the abuser out of love and/or fear.
- Women internalize guilt about not protecting children better due to their own abuse and inability to persuade batterer to seek help.
- Women who falsely confess are more vulnerable to authoritarian police interrogation, get confused, and believe promises similar to battering relationships.