A Brief History of Modern Police Interviewing

A review of the scientific literature highlights three major waves of research on confessions to date. In the first wave of literature, which was more theoretical in nature, researchers mainly focused on explaining why someone would confess or admit to a crime they have committed and various explanatory models were proposed. Falling within the psychoanalytic theories of personality, some authors proposed that confessions are the result of internal conflicts (e.g., guilt; Berggren, 1975; Horowitz, 1956; Reik, 1959). Other authors resorted to the principles of rational choice (Hilgendorf & Irving, 1981; Jayne, 1986), suggesting that a confession results from a cost-benefit analysis. Finally, some researchers in this first wave stressed the importance of considering emotional, criminogenic, crime-related, and situational factors in a suspect's decision to confess, as these factors can help explain how guilt and shame, the relationship between the interrogator and the suspect, and the interviewing techniques used can persuade suspects to confess without altering the perceived harms and benefits of confession (Gudjonsson, 1992, 2003).

As mentioned by Beauregard et al. (2010), although the models offered in this literature differ in some respects, they all tend to consider some central concerns: (1) the resistance and deception of the suspect and the need to use psychological manipulation to overcome these behaviors; (2) factors influencing the suspect's decision-making during the interview; (3) the suspect's internal conflicts (i.e., guilt); (4) the interactions between suspect characteristics and the crime committed, and; (5) the events preceding the interrogation and their perceived consequences. In sum, these theoretical models suggest that individual characteristics (e.g., age, social capital), the criminal background, and the context of the interview (e.g., presence of guilt, length and conditions under which the interrogation is undertaken, attitude and behaviors of the police interrogator) could all play a role in the offender's decision to confess during a police interrogation.

In the second wave of literature, which was published in the 1990s and 2000s, researchers focused on empirically validating the explanations and motivations put forward in these theoretical models. Across various studies on the topic, research has shown that confessions are indeed significantly associated with several individual, crime-related, and situational/contextual factors, including the age of the suspect (e.g., Pearse et al., 1998; Viljoen et al., 2005), parental and marital status (e.g., Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2011a; Gudjonsson, 2003), the type of crime committed and its severity (e.g., Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2011a; Phillips & Brown, 1998; Sigurdsson & Gudjonsson, 1994), the offender's criminal background (e.g., Pearse et al., 1998; Snook et al., 2015), the level of intoxication at the time of the crime and during the interrogation (e.g., Pearse et al., 1998; Sigurdsson & Gudjonsson, 1994), feelings of guilt and remorse (e.g., Gudjonsson & Sigurdsson, 1999; Gudjonsson et al., 2004), the suspect's personality profile (e.g., introverted/extroverted; Gudjonsson & Petursson, 1991; St-Yves, 2002), the use or non-use of a lawyer and legal advice (e.g., Leo, 1996; Moston et al., 1992; Snook et al., 2015; Stephenson & Moston, 1994), and the (perceived) quality of the evidence held by the police (e.g., Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2011a; Gudjonsson & Petursson, 1991; Moston et al., 1992; Phillips & Brown, 1998). Although studies examining these factors sometimes present contradictory results, it is possible to suggest a profile of the individual who is more likely to confess. They are: younger, more vulnerable and prone to social desirability, without children, neither married nor in a stable relationship, without a criminal background, suspected of committing a less serious crime, guilt-ridden about their actions, under the influence of alcohol or other substances, without the aid of legal advice, and facing strong evidence. Moreover, results from these previous studies show that contextual factors (e.g., techniques used, strength of evidence, context in which the interview is conducted) are particularly important predictors of a suspect's decision to confess (e.g., Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2011a, 2011b; Moston et al., 1992; for a review, see Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2020).

. . . it is not surprising that the third wave of research, which took place over the last decade, largely focused on further analyzing the influence of situational and contextual factors, particularly the effect of interrogation techniques and the relational context in which interrogations take place. Much of this research has examined the role of evidence strength (e.g., Brimbal & Luke, 2019; Deslauriers-Varin et al., 2011a, 2020; Moston & Engelberg, 2011) and the way in which evidence is presented (e.g., strategic use of evidence; Clemens et al., 2020; Granhag et al., 2013). Studies from this third wave have also focused on the role of police investigators and investigative techniques, and highlight that suspects are more likely to confess, cooperate with the police, and provide valid (incriminating) information when the interrogation is conducted in a respectful, openminded, and empathetic relational context (e.g., May et al., 2017; St-Yves & Meissner, 2014; Snook et al., 2015; Wachi et al., 2014), rather than a context defined by dominance, humiliation, and confrontation (e.g., Alison et al., 2013). More specifically, the use of techniques that promote the development of a trusting relationship between the investigator and the suspect (e.g., open-ended questions, demonstrations of empathy), rather than coercive and adversarial techniques (e.g., repetitive and negative questions, maximization), is more effective for getting the suspect to cooperate (e.g., a confession) and to obtain incriminating or contributing information (Goodman-Delahunty & Martschuk, 2020; Meissner et al., 2014; Soukara et al., 2009).

When all the factors from this third wave of research are put together, the most effective techniques to encourage suspect cooperation in an interrogation context can be highlighted. May et al. (2017) showed that the most effective interrogation technique requires more than the simple strategic use of evidence. They state that the interviewer needs to elicit and present statement-evidence inconsistencies in a non-judgmental manner. In fact, it is quite clear that, beyond the strategic use of evidence, the way to address and discuss the alleged offense seems highly important and that direct accusations toward the suspect prompts suspect denials and decreases the level of investigation-relevant information that can be extracted (Adams-Quackenbush et al., 2019). A more recent study conducted by Brimbal and her colleagues (2019) also showed that the efforts to build rapport help establish a cooperative state for the interview, which is necessary to motivate individuals to provide (more) information. The authors, however, highlight limits of using this technique in cases where the suspect is protecting someone; as the more sympathy a suspect feels toward a person, the less information they will likely be willing to provide to investigators.

In the third wave of research, researchers have also analyzed the influence of the physical environment on the decision to confess. The results of this research show that a decorated, non-coercive environment in which the individual feels comfortable promotes disclosure, cooperation, and the gathering of reliable information (Goodman-Delahunty & Martschuk, 2020; Hoogesteyn et al., 2018, 2020). The attitude of the police interrogator, the relationship between the suspect and the interrogator, and the environment in which the interrogation takes place would therefore all be important for the proper conduct of an investigative interview with suspects (and likely be predictive of the outcome).

The Psychology of Confessions: A Review of the Literature and Issues
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