

False Confession Identification Accuracy in Groups of College Students

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Abstract

The current study examined college student's abilities to identify true and false confessions. Each participant watched eight videos containing a confession and students were asked to identify whether the confession was true or false. They also indicated whether or not they had previously learned about false confessions in class. Overall, students were more accurate when identifying the true confessions. A comparison between students who had previously taken a class where false confessions were discussed and students who had not taken classes where false confessions were discussed resulted in no significance. These findings are consistent with previous research that shows training or previous exposure does not increase accuracy.

Introduction

Erroneous convictions are a serious problem for the criminal justice system. This is demonstrated by the Innocence Project, which has exonerated 312 people through the use of DNA evidence since its inception ("Understanding the Cause," n.d.). False statements and full false confessions account for 25% of those exonerated, pointing to a major flaw in the criminal justice system: that people are confessing to crimes that they did not commit. Further, these innocent people are being convicted and incarcerated. Such issues seem counterintuitive, as one would think those involved in the criminal justice system, such as police officers, prosecutors, and defense attorneys, would be experts at detecting false confessions. To test this assumption, Kassin, Meissner, and Norwick (2005) examined both true and false confession identification accuracy between college students and police officers. The results indicated that college students were generally more accurate than police officers, however, only slightly better than chance. Kassin and Fong (1999) examined whether training college students in how to detect verbal and non-verbal cues of deception made them more accurate in identifying false denials that were made during interrogations. It was found that the participants who took part in the training were less accurate than the untrained group.

The current study examined the difference in accuracy rates for identifying true and false confessions between students who have taken classes where false confessions were discussed and those who have not.

Method

Participants

The participants for this study were 93 college students from the University of New Haven. Twenty-eight students had taken a class where false confessions were discussed and 65 had not. Students ranged in academic major.

Apparatus/Materials

The survey engine, Qualtrics, was used to design and distribute the survey to the students. The survey could be taken on any computer at any time but completed in one

sitting. The survey contained eight short video confessions to crimes and questions accompanied each video.

Procedures

The students received an email that was generated through the Qualtrics survey engine. In the email there was an individualized link for the survey. When the student clicked on the link a new window opened displaying the consent form. Once they indicated their acceptance of the consent form the first video was displayed. A series of eight videos were displayed to the participants one at a time. With each video was a question asking them if they thought the confession in the video was true or false. They were also asked to rank their confidence of their judgment on a seven point Likert scale. Once all eight videos and their questions were completed the students were asked to report their academic major, whether or not they had taken a class where false confessions were discussed, and if so how many. Lastly they were thanked for their participation and given the choice to click on a new link to enter their demographic information for a gift card drawing. This page was completely separate from their responses and not linked in any way.

Results

Overall, the students were more accurate when identifying true confessions rather than false confessions with an average accuracy rate of 61.7% overall for true confessions and 54.1% overall for false confessions. Next, Chi Square analyses were run to compare students who had taken classes in which false confessions were discussed and students who had not in their hit rates (correctly identifying a true confession as true) and false alarm rates (incorrectly identifying a false confession as true). The alpha level for this experiment was set at $p=.05$

Table 1: Hit Rate

Hit Rate (True Identified as True)						
Percentage	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%	Total
Taken Class	0	5	5	13	5	28
Not Taken Class	1	10	24	20	10	65
Total	1	15	29	33	15	93

The Pearson Chi Square significance for Hit Rate is $p=.378$

Table 2: False Alarms

False Alarm (False Identified as True)						
Percentage	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%	Total
Taken Class	4	9	7	6	2	28
Not Taken Class	5	23	17	13	7	65
Total	9	32	24	19	9	93

The Pearson Chi Square significance for False Alarm is $p=.872$

No significant differences were found between students who had taken a class and those who had not in either hit rates or false alarms.

Discussion

There is no evidence to suggest that previously being exposed to knowledge about false confessions in class made students any more accurate when identifying confessions. This finding is consistent with the findings of the previous literature. This further illustrates that training, whether formal (Kassin & Fong, 1999), or informal, such as in a class setting, does not increase accuracy when identifying false confessions.

Limitations to this study include that there is no guarantee that every participant watched the whole video. The length of video watched could impact the participant's accuracy.

Future research should examine different groups involved in the Criminal Justice systems ability to identify false confessions such as defense attorneys, prosecuting attorneys, and judges. Additionally, different training methods and topics should be compared to see if there is in fact a reliable way to increase accuracy in false confession identification.

References

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Biography

Kassondra Bertulis is originally from Northfield, CT and is a senior at the University of New Haven. She is perusing dual degrees in Criminal Justice: Forensic Psychology and Psychology: General. Kassondra is also a Resident Assistant and a member of numerous organizations on campus. She is also consistently on the University Deans list. Upon graduation, she plans to get a job as a research assistant and then attend a clinical psychology Ph.D. program.

