

FALSE CONFESSIONS IN NIGERIAN POLICE CUSTODY: A THEORETICAL AND LITERATURE-BASED CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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ABSTRACT: This study critically examines the issue of false confessions among suspects in police custody, focusing on the psychological, social, and systemic factors contributing to this phenomenon, particularly within Nigeria's criminal justice system. Through a theoretical and literature-based review, the paper explores how coercive interrogation methods, authority pressure, and psychological vulnerability lead to false confessions. Drawing on key theoretical frameworks, including Psychological Coercion Theory, Social Influence Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Labeling Theory, the study synthesizes evidence suggesting that prolonged interrogations, the absence of legal representation, and manipulation tactics such as promises of leniency or threats of harm are significant factors in producing false confessions. The review also highlights the vulnerability of certain suspect groups, such as minors or individuals with cognitive impairments, and the exacerbating role of weak institutional safeguards and poor training for investigators. Key recommendations include adopting video-recorded interrogations, requiring the presence of legal counsel during questioning, and enhancing police officer training in ethical, evidence-based interrogation techniques. This theoretical review underscores the need for systemic reforms in policing practices, particularly in developing countries like Nigeria, to reduce the incidence of false confessions and protect the integrity of the justice system.

Keywords: False Confession, Police Custody, Coercive Interrogation, Psychological Vulnerability, Criminal Justice, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

Confession has long been viewed as a cornerstone of criminal justice systems worldwide, with a significant role in determining guilt or innocence (Mindthoff et al., 2024). Historically, confessions have been regarded as highly reliable forms of evidence, particularly in legal systems influenced by colonial policing practices (Tersago et al., 2020). In most jurisdictions, the extraction of confessions often became a shortcut to conviction, with little regard for procedural safeguards. In Nigeria, for instance, the police continue to prioritise confessional statements, sometimes at the expense of fundamental legal protections such as the right against self-incrimination, enshrined in Section 35 of the 1999 Constitution and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (2015). Reports from both the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC, 2022) and Amnesty International (2021) highlight the systemic abuse of suspects, who are often subjected to prolonged detention, physical violence, and psychological intimidation, all aimed at eliciting confessions.

Nevertheless, decades of criminological and psychological research have revealed that confessions obtained under duress are frequently unreliable (Kassin et al., 2025). False confessions, those admissions of guilt for crimes not committed, are a well-documented phenomenon, often induced by the coercive nature of interrogations. Such confessions can arise from a variety of psychological pressures, including fatigue, suggestibility, and the intense fear of authority (Leo & Drizin, 2010; Gudjonsson, 2018). This phenomenon has been explored through several theoretical lenses, including Gudjonsson's Suggestibility Theory, which posits that under stress, individuals may be highly susceptible to leading questions and manipulative interrogation tactics, particularly when deprived of legal counsel and social support. Social Influence Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory further illuminate how authority figures can exploit social pressure and internal conflict, compelling suspects to either comply with police demands or rationalise false admissions of guilt (Milgram, 1963; Festinger, 1957).

In the Nigerian context, these psychological dynamics are exacerbated by institutional weaknesses, including poor investigative infrastructure, a lack of forensic tools, and the insufficient training of law enforcement officers in ethical interrogation practices. This institutional failure is compounded by an overwhelming reliance on confessional evidence over objective, empirical proof, which significantly heightens the risk of wrongful convictions (Otu, 2017; Onuigbo, 2020). As a result, the Nigerian criminal justice system faces a dilemma where the pursuit of justice is hindered, leading to the conviction of innocent individuals while real perpetrators often go unpunished, further eroding public trust in law enforcement agencies.

False confessions, therefore, present a profound ethical, psychological, and legal challenge to the integrity of the criminal justice process. This issue is especially prevalent in developing nations like Nigeria, where interrogation practices, still heavily reliant on forceful tactics and confessions, contribute to the vulnerability of suspects. Research indicates that the risk of obtaining false confessions in such contexts is particularly high, as the balance of power between law enforcement officers and suspects is often skewed by systemic coercion and intimidation (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005; Enweremadu, 2019). This study aims to critically examine the mechanisms underlying false confessions within Nigerian police custody, offering a theoretical exploration through psychological and sociological frameworks to understand why innocent individuals may confess to crimes they did not commit.

By engaging with these theoretical perspectives, this paper seeks not only to identify the contributing factors to false confessions but also to offer a comprehensive view of how these factors interact within the unique context of Nigeria's criminal justice system. Through this exploration, the study aims to provide critical insights into the systemic, psychological, and institutional dynamics that enable such confessions, while simultaneously contributing to broader discussions about the role of justice and truth in contemporary legal systems.

Conceptual Clarifications

This section delves into the key concepts that underpin the analysis of false confessions within the criminal justice system, specifically focusing on the terms: confession, false confession, police custody, interrogation, coercion, and psychological vulnerability. These concepts are fundamental

in establishing the framework for understanding the underlying dynamics of false confessions and the theoretical approaches that inform this study. By clarifying these terms, the study seeks to position the phenomenon of false confession within a broader criminological and psychological context.

Confession

At its core, a confession is understood as a voluntary statement by an accused individual acknowledging their involvement in a crime, either in full or in part. Globally, confessions are considered to be some of the most persuasive forms of evidence in legal systems, often regarded as the “queen of evidence” due to their direct nature and the presumption that they reflect the accused's inner truth (Leo & Drizin, 2010). However, for a confession to be legally admissible, it must meet stringent criteria: it must be voluntary, reliable, and free from coercion or inducement (Kassin, 2017). In psychological terms, confession behaviour is influenced by a range of internal factors—such as guilt, anxiety, or remorse—and external pressures, including the interrogative context, physical fatigue, and social isolation. Within the Nigerian criminal justice system, confessions are particularly prominent, due in part to the limited availability of forensic tools and investigative resources (Enweremadu, 2019). This reliance, however, has resulted in a troubling number of wrongful convictions, raising questions about the conditions under which confessions are extracted and their subsequent use as evidence in court.

False Confession

A false confession, defined as the admission of guilt for a crime that the confessor did not commit, is a paradoxical yet well-established phenomenon in the fields of psychology and law (Gudjonsson, 2018; Kassin, 2021). False confessions arise when individuals, under the influence of psychological or institutional pressures, admit to crimes they did not commit. Scholars typically categorise false confessions into three distinct types:

1. **Voluntary False Confessions:** These confessions occur without external pressure. Individuals may falsely confess due to a desire for notoriety, a misguided belief in their own guilt, or an attempt to protect someone else (Leo & Drizin, 2010).
2. **Coerced-Compliant False Confessions:** These confessions arise when suspects, in an attempt to escape an intolerable situation—such as prolonged interrogation, fear of violence, or threats of harsher punishment—admit to crimes they know they did not commit (Gudjonsson, 2018).
3. **Coerced-Internalized False Confessions:** In these cases, the suspect begins to believe in their own guilt due to suggestive questioning, mental exhaustion, or confusion during the interrogation process (Kassin, 2017).

Importantly, false confessions are not outliers or mere deviations from the norm; rather, they are symptomatic of deeper systemic failures within the criminal justice system. They reveal the interaction between psychological vulnerabilities and institutional coercion, highlighting the critical need for reform in both interrogation practices and judicial reliance on confessional evidence.

Police Custody

Police custody refers to the period in which an individual is detained by law enforcement authorities for interrogation or investigation. During this time, suspects are deprived of their liberty and placed under the control of the police, rendering them highly susceptible to various forms of abuse and manipulation. According to the Nigerian Constitution (1999, Section 35) and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (ACJA, 2015), suspects possess certain fundamental rights, including the right to remain silent, the right to be informed of the reason for their arrest, and the right to access legal counsel. Yet, reports from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC, 2022) and Amnesty International (2021) have consistently revealed that these rights are often violated. Detainees are frequently held beyond the legally permissible time limits, denied access to legal representation, and subjected to coercive interrogation tactics aimed more at extracting confessions than establishing factual guilt. Such conditions create an environment where the risk of false confessions is markedly heightened, further undermining the credibility of the criminal justice process.

Interrogation

Interrogation is a critical process within criminal investigations, involving a structured questioning of suspects in order to gather information or obtain confessions. While interrogation is a legitimate tool in law enforcement, its potential for abuse becomes evident when it is conducted under conditions of coercion, deceit, or psychological manipulation. The methods, duration, and tone of interrogation can significantly influence the suspect's responses, affecting both the accuracy and voluntariness of their statements (Kassin, 2017). A particularly well-documented method of interrogation, the Reid Technique, often used in various jurisdictions, is built upon psychological manipulation and presupposes the guilt of the suspect, thus pressuring even innocent individuals into falsely confessing (Leo, 2008). In contrast, modern investigative psychology advocates for alternative models, such as the PEACE model (Preparation and Planning, Engage and Explain, Account, Closure, and Evaluation), which prioritises fairness and focuses on information gathering rather than confession extraction (Gudjonsson, 2018). The emphasis on ethical interrogation practices is vital to preventing the emergence of false confessions and maintaining the integrity of the justice system.

Coercion

Coercion refers to the use of force, threats, intimidation, or psychological pressure to influence a person's decision-making. In the context of police interrogation, coercion often takes the form of physical assault, sleep deprivation, prolonged detention, or promises of leniency in exchange for a confession. Coercion has a significant psychological impact on suspects, undermining their autonomy and fostering a state of compliance, in which individuals may falsely confess simply to alleviate immediate distress or avoid perceived harm (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). The practice of coercion within Nigeria's policing system has been widely documented and is recognised as a systemic issue that undermines due process and violates fundamental human rights (Otu, 2017). The consequences of coercion are far-reaching, not only contributing to the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals but also further eroding public trust in law enforcement agencies.

Psychological Vulnerability

Psychological vulnerability refers to the mental and emotional states or personal characteristics that make individuals more susceptible to external pressures, particularly in high-stress environments such as police custody. Vulnerable populations include minors, individuals with intellectual disabilities, those suffering from mental illness, and people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Gudjonsson, 2018). These individuals are more likely to misinterpret questions, comply with authority figures, or internalise guilt they did not experience. In the Nigerian context, where education levels and legal literacy rates are often low, psychological vulnerability plays a significant role in explaining why certain suspects may confess to crimes they did not commit (Enweremadu, 2019). In particular, individuals who lack a comprehensive understanding of their legal rights or the implications of confession are especially prone to being manipulated into making false admissions.

The clarifications provided above demonstrate that false confessions are not merely the result of individual deceit or malfeasance but are multifactorial outcomes that arise from the intersection of psychological coercion, institutional power imbalances, and social vulnerability. They are indicative of broader systemic issues within the criminal justice framework, encompassing deficiencies in policing culture, interrogation practices, and the protection of human rights. Thus, a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of false confession requires a multidisciplinary theoretical approach, one that integrates psychological, sociological, and legal perspectives. This study, therefore, explores these dynamics in the subsequent sections, seeking to illuminate the complex and interconnected factors that contribute to the occurrence of false confessions within the Nigerian criminal justice system.

Theoretical Perspectives

The dynamics of false confessions in police custody are multi-faceted and can be better understood through a variety of theoretical lenses. This section explores four key theories that offer complementary explanations for how, why, and under what conditions false confessions emerge: Psychological Coercion Theory, Social Influence Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Labeling Theory. These frameworks not only help to elucidate the psychological and social mechanisms underpinning false confessions but also provide a means to critically examine the structural dynamics that facilitate such confessions, particularly within developing contexts such as Nigeria.

Psychological Coercion Theory

The Psychological Coercion Theory, primarily developed by Gísli H. Gudjonsson (1984, 1992, 2018), posits that individuals may falsely confess when subjected to intense psychological pressure, fear, fatigue, or manipulation during interrogation. According to this theory, coercion can be both physical and psychological, involving tactics such as threats, deception, isolation, and emotional exhaustion. These methods gradually erode the suspect's cognitive control, leaving them vulnerable to manipulation and compliance with authorities, often without a true belief in their own guilt (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Kassin, 2017).

In the Nigerian context, this theory offers a potent explanation for how false confessions arise within police custody. Reports from the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC, 2022), CLEEN Foundation (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005), and Amnesty International (2021) document recurrent cases where suspects are detained under substandard conditions—often in overcrowded and unhygienic environments—and subjected to prolonged and coercive interrogations. These practices are not only a violation of the basic human rights of detainees but also create a fertile ground for psychological coercion. For example, suspects in Nigeria may confess to crimes after being told that cooperation will lead to their release, while refusal will result in indefinite detention or worse punishment (Otu, 2017). Even when such confessions are later retracted, the damage is often irreversible: judges and prosecutors may still treat these confessions as credible evidence, reflecting what Gudjonsson (2018) terms "instrumental compliance." This form of compliance occurs when the suspect's primary objective becomes the immediate relief from suffering, rather than the pursuit of truth.

Despite its contributions, the Psychological Coercion Theory has been critiqued for its heavy focus on external pressures and its insufficient attention to individual differences. Scholars like Leo (2008) argue that the theory largely ignores the role of personality traits, prior experiences, and cultural factors that might influence an individual's susceptibility to coercion. Additionally, Williamson (2019) suggests that the theory downplays institutional incentives for police misconduct, such as the pressure to secure convictions or the lack of adequate oversight, which are critical factors in fostering coercive practices. Nevertheless, the theory remains invaluable for explaining how vulnerable individuals, particularly those from marginalised communities, may succumb to the pressures of a coercive interrogation environment, often leading to false confessions.

Social Influence Theory

Social Influence Theory, developed by Solomon Asch (1955) and further expanded by Stanley Milgram (1963), explains how individuals modify their attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours to conform to social expectations or authority commands. This theory is rooted in the premise that people are generally inclined to comply with those perceived as having power, legitimacy, or expertise, even when such compliance contradicts their personal values or understanding of truth. In the context of police interrogations, the interrogator, as a figure of authority, embodies state power and control over the suspect's liberty. This creates a psychological imbalance, particularly for suspects from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who may have lower self-esteem or limited educational resources and thus feel compelled to obey or appease the interrogator (Milgram, 1963; Kassin, 2017).

Two key mechanisms of social influence are particularly relevant in the context of false confessions:

1. **Normative Influence:** Suspects may confess in an attempt to gain approval or avoid punishment, perceiving compliance as a way to mitigate tension or hostility.

2. **Informational Influence:** Suspects may come to believe the police version of events, especially when isolated or fatigued, thus internalising the interrogator's narrative as factual truth (Asch, 1955).

Milgram's (1963) seminal experiments on obedience demonstrated that ordinary individuals could commit harmful acts under the command of an authority figure, a dynamic also prevalent in custodial interrogations. Under intense pressure, suspects may falsely confess simply to avoid perceived harm or out of deference to the perceived legitimacy of the police authority.

In Nigeria, where law enforcement operates within rigid hierarchical structures and where obedience to authority is deeply ingrained in the culture, Social Influence Theory provides critical insights. Many suspects, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, perceive the police as unchallengeable figures of authority. Consequently, even a false confession may seem like a rational choice to restore personal safety or social standing. The NHRC (2022) and Amnesty International (2021) have documented numerous instances where detainees confess under duress, driven by threats, intimidation, or promises of leniency. Moreover, societal norms of respect for elders, power figures, and government officials further reinforce obedience, even when it leads to wrongful confessions (Enweremadu, 2019).

However, critics such as Leo (2008) and Williamson (2019) argue that Social Influence Theory focuses too heavily on interpersonal dynamics of obedience while neglecting the structural factors—such as corruption, lack of adequate training, or systemic impunity—that sustain coercive practices in developing countries. While the theory provides an essential understanding of social conformity, it requires integration with a more nuanced understanding of the institutional and cultural factors that facilitate false confessions in hierarchical societies.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Cognitive Dissonance Theory, introduced by Leon Festinger (1957), posits that individuals experience psychological discomfort when confronted with conflicting thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes. In an attempt to alleviate this discomfort, individuals may change their cognition or behaviour to restore internal consistency. Within the context of police interrogation, suspects often face a clash between two opposing cognitions: "I am innocent" versus "the authorities insist I am guilty." In this context, the psychological discomfort resulting from this dissonance can drive suspects to resolve the tension by accepting responsibility for the crime, often leading to a false confession (Kassin, 2017). The power of this rationalisation process is heightened under conditions of fear, fatigue, or repeated suggestion, which are commonplace in custodial settings.

Prolonged detention, lack of legal counsel, and deprivation of basic needs exacerbate the mental exhaustion of suspects, pushing them towards a state of cognitive imbalance. Over time, as they are subjected to repeated, accusatory questioning, suspects may internalise guilt and begin to believe they have committed the crime, despite their innocence (Gudjonsson, 2018). This internalisation of false guilt has been observed particularly in vulnerable individuals, such as minors, those with intellectual disabilities, or those suffering from mental health issues, who may lack the cognitive and emotional resilience to withstand such psychological stressors.

While Festinger's theory offers a robust framework for understanding how cognitive dissonance can lead to false confessions, it is not without its limitations. Critics such as Leo (2008) argue that the theory overly emphasises internal psychological processes, without adequately accounting for external factors such as physical coercion, police brutality, or socio-economic inequality—factors that significantly contribute to decision-making under duress. Furthermore, the assumption that individuals will always strive for internal consistency may overlook the emotional and psychological fragility that can lead to impulsive confessions in extreme conditions. Nevertheless, Cognitive Dissonance Theory remains crucial for understanding how false confessions are not simply acts of compliance but psychological coping mechanisms driven by the need to resolve internal tension.

Labelling Theory

Labelling Theory, developed within the framework of symbolic interactionism by Howard Becker (1963) and Erving Goffman (1963), argues that deviance is a social construct, shaped not by the intrinsic qualities of behaviour, but by the societal reactions to it. Once an individual is labelled as “criminal,” “suspect,” or “deviant,” they are often treated as guilty, and this label can profoundly affect their self-concept and subsequent actions. In the context of interrogation, labelling occurs through stereotyping and presumptions of guilt, often reinforced by the police's preconceived notions of a suspect's character. Officers may approach certain individuals—especially those from marginalised or disadvantaged backgrounds—as inherently suspicious, regardless of the actual evidence.

In the Nigerian context, where profiling and stigmatisation are commonplace, Labelling Theory offers an insightful explanation for false confessions. Individuals, particularly young men, commercial drivers, and artisans, are often targeted in mass arrests and publicly branded as “criminal elements” (Enweremadu, 2019). Once labelled as suspects, these individuals face significant prejudice, harassment, and denial of due process, making them more likely to falsely confess to end the ordeal or gain favour. The theory also highlights how systemic biases, such as poverty, low literacy, and class inequality, determine who gets arrested and how they are treated within the justice system. False confessions, thus, become a part of a broader cycle of criminalisation, perpetuated by societal labelling.

Critics of Labelling Theory, such as Lemert (1972), argue that the theory places too much emphasis on societal reactions and fails to adequately address individual agency or psychological factors. Furthermore, in the Nigerian policing context, labelling is not solely shaped by social stereotypes but is also reinforced by institutional corruption and power imbalances. To fully comprehend the role of labelling in the emergence of false confessions, it is essential to integrate the theory with psychological and structural analyses that account for the broader socio-political dynamics at play. Ultimately, Labelling Theory's strength lies in its ability to illustrate how societal prejudice and police profiling contribute to the prevalence of false confessions, reframing them as products of systemic discrimination rather than individual moral failings.

Factors Contributing to False Confession

False confessions in police custody are the result of a multifaceted interplay of psychological, situational, and institutional factors rather than stemming from a singular cause. Over the years, extensive studies in psychology, criminology, and legal scholarship have shown that false confessions emerge when individual vulnerabilities, coercive interrogation methods, institutional weaknesses, and socio-cultural pressures converge. The interaction between these factors significantly shapes the conditions under which suspects are led to admit to crimes they did not commit (Gudjonsson, 2018; Kassin, 2021; Leo & Drizin, 2010). Understanding these factors is crucial for addressing the problem and mitigating its impact on the integrity of criminal justice systems.

Psychological Vulnerability

One of the central determinants of false confessions is psychological vulnerability. Individuals with specific psychological characteristics, such as juveniles, those suffering from mental health issues, or those with cognitive impairments, are particularly susceptible to interrogation pressures and suggestive questioning (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). Juvenile suspects, for instance, often lack the cognitive maturity and emotional resilience necessary to understand the full implications of a confession or withstand prolonged questioning (Cleary, 2017). Similarly, individuals with mental health challenges, including depression or intellectual disabilities, may be more likely to comply with authority figures, especially during stressful situations where they perceive resistance as futile (Gudjonsson, 2018).

In Nigeria, these vulnerabilities are compounded by a lack of legal literacy, with many suspects being unaware of their constitutional rights. Low literacy levels and limited access to legal resources leave individuals more susceptible to manipulation by interrogators (Enweremadu, 2019). Furthermore, societal factors such as the lack of awareness regarding the legal implications of confession in custodial settings increase the likelihood that vulnerable suspects will be coerced into making false admissions, often without fully understanding the ramifications of their actions. The susceptibility to psychological manipulation is further heightened in contexts where there is a lack of procedural safeguards, such as access to legal counsel, which can ensure that the suspect's rights are protected during the interrogation process.

Coercive Interrogation Techniques

The use of coercive interrogation techniques is another significant contributor to false confessions. Methods such as intimidation, deception, prolonged detention, threats of violence, and promises of leniency have been widely documented as catalysts for false confessions (Kassin, 2017). Interrogators often employ “maximisation” tactics, exaggerating the strength of the evidence against the suspect, or “minimisation” tactics, downplaying the seriousness of the offence in an attempt to secure a confession (Leo, 2008). These psychological tactics are designed to lower the suspect's resistance and create a sense of urgency, which increases the likelihood that they will capitulate under pressure, even if they are innocent.

In Nigeria, where law enforcement agencies often operate under significant pressure to resolve cases quickly, aggressive interrogation techniques are commonly employed. The absence of electronic recording devices further exacerbates the problem, as there is limited accountability for the methods used during interrogations (NHRC, 2022; Amnesty International, 2021). Suspects are often subjected to long periods of questioning, sometimes lasting hours or even days, with little opportunity for rest or legal counsel. This creates an environment where the suspect, exhausted and psychologically distressed, may be led to believe that confessing is the only way to end their ordeal. The practice of extracting confessions through coercion not only violates the individual's human rights but also undermines the integrity of the justice system, as confessions obtained under such conditions are often unreliable.

Environmental and Situational Factors

Environmental and situational factors play a crucial role in shaping the likelihood of false confessions. Detainees held in poor conditions—such as overcrowded cells with inadequate ventilation, lack of food, sleep deprivation, and restricted access to family or legal counsel—often experience intense psychological distress (Drizin & Leo, 2004). Under these conditions, the individual may view confession as a way to escape their immediate suffering. The environmental stressors not only diminish the individual's capacity to think clearly and make rational decisions but also increase the psychological pressure to comply with the demands of the interrogators.

In Nigerian police stations, these environmental conditions are often dire, with suspects regularly held in inhumane and degrading environments. The lack of basic necessities such as food, water, and rest, compounded by the absence of legal representation, creates a scenario where detainees are pushed to their psychological limits (Otu, 2017). The ability of suspects to resist coercion is significantly undermined, and the risk of false confessions is heightened when detainees are deprived of the means to challenge the validity of the interrogation process. These factors contribute to the coercive atmosphere in police custody, increasing the likelihood that innocent individuals will falsely confess to crimes they did not commit.

Institutional and Systemic Deficiencies

At the institutional level, the systemic and structural weaknesses within law enforcement agencies and the broader justice system exacerbate the prevalence of false confessions. Historically, Nigerian policing has been heavily reliant on confessions as the primary form of evidence in criminal cases, a legacy of colonial-era investigative practices (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2005). This over-reliance on confessional statements, rather than empirical or forensic evidence, creates an environment where the focus of police investigations shifts from searching for the truth to obtaining a confession at all costs.

The drive for quick case resolutions, often influenced by pressures from superiors and the need to demonstrate efficiency, encourages officers to prioritise confessions over thorough, evidence-based investigations (Enweremadu, 2019). Furthermore, weak oversight mechanisms and institutional corruption compound the issue, as there is little accountability for coercive practices within the police force. The lack of technological resources, such as forensic laboratories or body cameras,

further enables the use of coercive interrogation tactics without fear of detection or reprisal (NHRC, 2022). These institutional deficiencies create an environment where the extraction of confessions through coercion becomes the norm rather than the exception, undermining the integrity of the justice system and leading to the wrongful conviction of innocent individuals.

Cultural and Societal Norms

Cultural and societal norms further exacerbate the likelihood of false confessions. In Nigeria, there is a deep-seated cultural emphasis on respect for authority, communal harmony, and deference to figures of power. In such a hierarchical society, suspects may feel an overwhelming pressure to comply with the demands of law enforcement, particularly when they view the police as representing the unassailable power of the state (Milgram, 1963; Asch, 1955). This cultural dynamic is especially pronounced among individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who may feel both socially and psychologically compelled to accede to the authority of law enforcement, even when doing so contradicts their own understanding of the truth.

Furthermore, widespread social profiling, particularly of unemployed youths, drivers, and artisans, reinforces stereotypes of criminality, making individuals from these groups more likely to be targeted by the police. Once labelled as suspects, these individuals often face intimidation, discrimination, and denial of due process, further increasing their susceptibility to coercive tactics (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). The societal stigma associated with being a “suspect” creates a powerful incentive for individuals to confess, even if they are innocent, in order to escape the associated social shame and legal consequences.

Media Sensationalism and Public Pressure

Finally, media sensationalism and public pressure also play a significant role in contributing to false confessions. In high-profile criminal cases, law enforcement agencies are often under intense public scrutiny to resolve cases quickly and efficiently. In such an environment, the pressure to obtain confessions in a timely manner can overshadow the pursuit of justice, with law enforcement prioritising the appearance of solving a case over ensuring the accuracy of the confession (Leo & Drizin, 2010). The rush to secure confessions is further fuelled by the media, which sensationalises criminal cases and heightens the public’s demand for swift justice. This performance-based policing culture fosters an environment where the confession itself becomes a symbol of success, irrespective of its authenticity.

The factors contributing to false confessions are diverse and interconnected, involving a convergence of personal vulnerabilities, coercive practices, institutional failures, and cultural dynamics. In Nigeria, these factors are compounded by a weak rule of law, limited access to legal counsel, and inadequate human rights protections (Amnesty International, 2021; NHRC, 2022). Addressing the prevalence of false confessions therefore requires a comprehensive reform strategy that incorporates psychological insights, ethical policing practices, and systemic accountability mechanisms. Only through such a multifaceted approach can the criminal justice system hope to safeguard suspects’ rights and preserve the integrity of the justice process.

Psychological Consequences of False Confession

False confessions have profound psychological and emotional consequences that extend long after the legal process ends. Research in forensic and clinical psychology reveals that individuals who falsely confess often suffer intense mental distress resulting from the trauma of interrogation, the stigma of being labeled guilty, and the emotional toll of wrongful accusation or imprisonment (Gudjonsson, 2018; Kassin, 2021). These effects manifest across multiple dimensions, emotional, cognitive, and behavioural, and can significantly impair psychological well-being.

Emotional Trauma and Stress Disorders: The interrogation process itself can be highly traumatic. Suspects subjected to coercion, intimidation, or prolonged isolation experience fear, helplessness, and humiliation, leading to acute stress reactions or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Leo & Drizin, 2010; Gudjonsson, 2018). Many individuals report recurring nightmares, hypervigilance, anxiety, and flashbacks linked to the interrogation experience. For those wrongfully convicted, the sense of injustice and loss of control exacerbates emotional distress and fosters chronic depression.

Guilt, Shame, and Loss of Self-Esteem: False confessors often internalize guilt or shame even when later exonerated. The public labeling and social stigma associated with being seen as “criminal” or “dishonest” can damage self-concept and social identity (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). Individuals may question their own integrity and worth, resulting in low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and feelings of inadequacy. This internalized guilt is particularly severe among those who confessed under pressure and later struggle to reconcile their innocence with their perceived betrayal of self.

Cognitive Distortion and Learned Helplessness: Prolonged coercion during interrogation can distort cognitive processing and decision-making. Some suspects develop learned helplessness, a psychological state where they believe they have no control over outcomes, leading to passivity and resignation (Seligman, 1975). Even after release, former detainees may exhibit mistrust of authority, difficulty concentrating, and intrusive thoughts. The internal conflict between innocence and the act of confession often produces long-term cognitive dissonance and confusion about personal responsibility (Festinger, 1957).

Social Alienation and Relationship Breakdown: False confessors frequently face social exclusion and loss of relationships due to stigma, community judgment, and family disappointment. The label of “criminal” persists even after legal vindication, leading to social isolation and difficulty reintegrating into society (Goffman, 1963). Many also experience economic hardship and employment discrimination, compounding emotional distress and reinforcing cycles of marginalization.

Social Shame and Psychological Ostracism: False confessions often lead to intense social shame and psychological ostracism, which compound the emotional trauma of wrongful accusation. Social shame arises when individuals internalize society’s negative judgments about their supposed guilt.

In many cultures, including Nigeria's, a confession, whether coerced or genuine, is perceived as proof of moral failure. As a result, false confessors are often branded as criminals, liars, or morally corrupt, even after exoneration (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). In addition to internalized shame, individuals who falsely confess frequently experience psychological ostracism, a form of social rejection or exclusion by family, peers, and the wider community. Once labeled as offenders, they are often shunned, avoided, or treated with suspicion, even after being declared innocent.

In essence, the psychological consequences of false confession extend beyond the interrogation room. They encompass trauma, cognitive distortion, guilt, and social alienation, producing deep emotional scars that hinder recovery and reintegration. Addressing these harms requires incorporating forensic psychological support, counseling for victims of wrongful confession, and training for investigators to recognize the mental health impacts of coercive practices. Protecting the psychological welfare of suspects is therefore both a moral duty and a cornerstone of fair and humane justice.

Implications for Criminal Justice and Policing

The issue of false confessions presents serious implications for the criminal justice system, particularly in its ability to uphold fairness, protect human rights, and sustain public confidence. False confessions, whether induced through psychological coercion or systemic malpractice, distort the truth-seeking purpose of justice and lead to grave miscarriages of justice (Kassin, 2017; Gudjonsson, 2018). When suspects confess falsely due to fear, intimidation, or misunderstanding, it undermines the reliability of the judicial process and may result in wrongful convictions, the acquittal of actual offenders, and a general decline in trust toward law enforcement institutions (Leo & Drizin, 2010). From a psychological perspective, reliance on coercive interrogation undermines objective investigation. When investigators prioritize extracting confessions over collecting empirical evidence, they risk developing confirmation bias, where information that supports the suspect's guilt is emphasized, while exculpatory evidence is ignored (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). This practice damages the integrity of investigations and violates the ethical principle of the presumption of innocence. Moreover, interrogations conducted under fear or duress produce stress responses such as anxiety, cognitive fatigue, and compliance that impair a suspect's decision-making ability, leading to confessions that reflect submission rather than truth (Gudjonsson, 2018).

Institutionally, the persistence of false confessions exposes systemic weaknesses within Nigeria's law enforcement agencies. The absence of modern investigative tools, such as video-recorded interrogations, body cameras, and digital case-tracking systems, makes it difficult to verify whether confessions are voluntary (Enweremadu, 2019). Many detention facilities also lack oversight, creating opportunities for human rights violations without accountability. Strengthening internal discipline mechanisms within the police, empowering oversight bodies such as the Police Service Commission and the National Human Rights Commission, and ensuring transparent investigative

processes would greatly reduce instances of coerced or fabricated confessions (Amnesty International, 2021).

Conclusion

This study aims to investigate the critical assessment of false confessions among suspects in police custody: theoretical perspectives. In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that false confessions represent one of the most serious challenges to the integrity of criminal justice systems, particularly in developing societies such as Nigeria. Through the integration of Psychological Coercion Theory (Gudjonsson, 2018), Social Influence Theory (Asch, 1955; Milgram, 1963), Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), and Labeling Theory (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963), the study reveals that false confessions are not isolated incidents of deceit but rather the outcome of psychological vulnerability, systemic coercion, and sociocultural pressure. The evidence reviewed shows that suspects often confess under extreme stress, fear, or authority intimidation conditions that impair judgment and compromise voluntariness (Kassin, 2017; Leo & Drizin, 2010). In Nigeria, these dynamics are exacerbated by poor detention conditions, lack of legal representation, and an institutional overreliance on confession as “proof” of guilt (NHRC, 2022; Amnesty International, 2021). False confessions therefore carry devastating human, psychological, and institutional consequences ranging from wrongful convictions and emotional trauma to public distrust in law enforcement. They violate constitutional rights and international human-rights standards, while also undermining the credibility of judicial outcomes. The theoretical perspectives collectively illustrate that coercive interrogation, obedience to authority, internalized guilt, and social labeling work in tandem to produce false admissions. Thus, reforming interrogation procedures, strengthening oversight, and embedding psychological insight into policing are vital steps toward safeguarding justice and human dignity.

Recommendations

Based on the study’s findings, the following are proffered:

- i. The Nigerian Police Force should adopt internationally recognized models of interrogation, such as the PEACE Model (Preparation and Planning, Engage and Explain, Account, Closure, and Evaluation), which emphasizes rapport-building, transparency, and information-gathering rather than coercion. This approach discourages intimidation and ensures that confessions are voluntary and reliable.
- ii. Law enforcement agencies should ensure that every suspect is granted access to qualified legal counsel before and during interrogation, in line with Section 35(2) of the 1999 Constitution and the Administration of Criminal Justice Act (2015). The presence of counsel protects suspects from coercion and reinforces procedural fairness.
- iii. All interrogations should be video- and audio-recorded to provide verifiable evidence of voluntariness and protect both the suspect and the investigator from false allegations. This will enhance transparency and accountability in the criminal justice process.
- iv. Officers involved in investigations should undergo continuous professional development in forensic psychology, investigative interviewing, and stress management. Such training would improve understanding of suspect behaviour, reduce reliance on force, and promote evidence-based policing (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004).

- v. The Anti-Torture Act (2017) should be actively enforced, and officers found guilty of using physical or psychological coercion to extract confessions should face disciplinary and criminal sanctions. Strengthening internal oversight bodies, such as the Police Service Commission, is crucial for implementation.
- vi. Law enforcement should invest in modern forensic technologies and digital evidence systems to reduce dependence on confessional statements. This will ensure that convictions are grounded on objective proof rather than subjective admissions of guilt.
- vii. There is a need for empirical research on the prevalence, causes, and psychological effects of false confessions in Nigeria. Collaboration between universities, police academies, and justice-sector institutions can help develop localized training materials and data-driven reform strategies.

Overall Contribution to Knowledge

This study makes important contributions to understanding the problem of false confessions within Nigeria's criminal justice system by integrating psychological, sociological, and institutional perspectives. Drawing on Psychological Coercion Theory, Social Influence Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Labeling Theory, it explains false confession as a multidimensional phenomenon arising from the interaction of stress, authority pressure, internalized guilt, and societal labeling (Gudjonsson, 2018; Festinger, 1957; Becker, 1963). By contextualizing these theories within Nigeria's policing environment, the study provides an indigenous understanding of how cultural hierarchy, weak procedural safeguards, and institutional coercion contribute to false admissions (NHRC, 2022; Enweremadu, 2019). Beyond theory, the study enriches legal and forensic psychology by showing how psychological factors influence confession behaviour under duress. It also offers practical insights for policy reform, recommending ethical interrogation procedures, improved police training, judicial oversight, and protection of human rights in line with global standards (Amnesty International, 2021). Finally, it lays a foundation for future research on suspect psychology and policing ethics in Nigeria, thereby bridging the gap between psychological theory and criminal justice practice in Africa.

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