

## **False confessions in non-forensic and forensic settings.**

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The key aims of the research are to examine personality and situational factors associated with false confessions (one of the major causes of wrongful conviction). The research will incorporate experimental work, observational studies and interviews with offenders who allege to have falsely confessed.

In the first study, members of the public completed four psychological tests to obtain measures of various personality traits, including compliance, suggestibility and self-esteem, before engaging in a computer-based typing task. They were instructed to type letters which appeared on the screen and were specifically warned not to hit the 'windows' key which would cause the computer to crash losing all the data. After one minute an error message appeared on-screen indicating a serious computer malfunction. Participants, unaware that the crash was simulated, were falsely accused of hitting the 'windows' key and were asked to sign a confession stating they were responsible for the crash and data loss.

Despite a lack of pressure to confess, 70.4% of participants signed the confession with 90% of those who did so signing after the first request. This has implications for innocent suspects who may experience high levels of anxiety, uncertainty and pressure during investigative interviews. Perhaps surprisingly only one personality trait (Extraversion) differentiated false from non-false confessors. However, although previous research has found an association between various personality traits, including compliance and suggestibility and false confessions, findings have been mixed and inconclusive. The results of this study suggest that situational factors (e.g. the research environment and the researcher's demeanour) rather than personality factors were more influential in eliciting false confessions.

Each participant was debriefed immediately after each trial when they were told that the computer crash was simply a simulation and assured that absolutely no data had been lost. The debriefing session also provided the opportunity for participants to ask any further questions about the research. The next logical stage is to conduct an observational study of police interviews with suspects to gain an understanding not only of the process of investigative interviewing but also the situational (and personality) factors which may affect the quality and outcome of the interview and which may increase vulnerability to falsely confessing. These observations will inform and enhance future studies and will also improve the realism of the work.