

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FALSE CONFESSIONS: INVESTIGATING THE COGNITIVE AND EMOTIONAL FACTORS BEHIND INVOLUNTARY ADMISSIONS

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Abstract

False confessions have long been a concern in the criminal justice system, yet the cognitive and emotional factors that drive individuals to confess to crimes they did not commit remain insufficiently explored. This research investigates the psychological underpinnings of false confessions, focusing on the cognitive overload and emotional stress experienced by suspects during interrogations. The study aims to examine how these psychological factors contribute to involuntary admissions and how they can be mitigated to prevent wrongful convictions. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining qualitative interviews with legal professionals, psychologists, and law enforcement officers, along with a case study analysis of documented false confession cases. The findings reveal that emotional stress, particularly fear and anxiety, combined with cognitive overload during prolonged interrogations, significantly increases the likelihood of false confessions. The study concludes that false confessions are not solely the result of coercive interrogation techniques but are also deeply influenced by emotional and cognitive vulnerabilities. The research suggests the need for reform in interrogation practices, including better psychological safeguards and more effective legal protections for suspects.

Keywords: Cognitive Overload, Emotional Stress, False Confessions, Interrogation Techniques, Involuntary Admissions



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INTRODUCTION

False confessions have long been a significant issue within the criminal justice system, yet their psychological underpinnings remain poorly understood. Involuntary admissions, where individuals confess to crimes they did not commit, have been shown to result from a variety of factors (Loyka et al., 2020). These include psychological pressure, coercive interrogation techniques, and cognitive distortions that can lead to the belief that confessing is the only way to escape a stressful situation. False confessions are not only problematic for the individuals involved but also undermine the integrity of the justice system, leading to wrongful convictions. Over the years, research has primarily focused on the legal and social implications of false confessions, but less attention has been paid to the underlying cognitive and emotional factors that make individuals vulnerable to providing false admissions. Understanding these psychological mechanisms is crucial in addressing the problem and ensuring more accurate and reliable interrogations (Woody, 2023). By investigating the cognitive and emotional aspects of false confessions, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of why individuals may confess to crimes they did not commit and what can be done to mitigate this phenomenon.

Confession, particularly under duress, is a complex process that involves both cognitive and emotional factors. Cognitive elements include how an individual processes information during an interrogation, the pressure they may feel to conform, and the way they rationalize their involvement in the crime (Melo et al., 2024). Emotional factors, such as fear, anxiety, and a desire for approval, can also play a significant role in influencing an individual's decision to confess. The psychological state of the suspect, such as their susceptibility to suggestibility or their vulnerability due to mental health issues, further complicates this dynamic. Over the years, various theories have been proposed to explain false confessions, including the compliance model, the internalization model, and the confabulation model (Brandenberger, 2023). However, these theories have not been fully integrated into a cohesive understanding of the complex interplay of cognitive and emotional factors that contribute to involuntary admissions. Addressing this gap in understanding is essential for improving interrogation practices and preventing false confessions from leading to wrongful convictions.

The issue of false confessions is particularly concerning in the context of high-pressure interrogation environments, where the risk of coercion and psychological manipulation is greater (Kassin, 2017b). Numerous documented cases of false confessions, particularly those involving vulnerable populations such as juveniles or individuals with intellectual disabilities, underscore the need for a more comprehensive exploration of the psychological factors involved. Despite the prevalence of false confessions in the criminal justice system, there is limited empirical research that investigates the cognitive and emotional processes at play during confessions (Evans & Lyon, 2019). This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the psychological mechanisms behind false confessions and how these processes can lead individuals to provide false information, ultimately contributing to a better understanding of the factors that cause such phenomena.

False confessions represent a major problem in the criminal justice system, particularly as they contribute to wrongful convictions and the disruption of legal processes. Individuals often confess to crimes they did not commit, despite the presence of clear evidence to the contrary (Stolzenberg et al., 2017). The problem is compounded by the fact that many false confessions are made under duress, coercion, or psychological manipulation during interrogations. One of the key challenges in understanding false confessions is the difficulty in pinpointing the specific psychological and emotional factors that lead to such admissions. While it is widely recognized that certain interrogation tactics, such as threats, isolation, or deception, can lead to involuntary confessions, there is a lack of understanding about the internal cognitive and emotional processes that make individuals more susceptible to providing

false information (Quas et al., 2018). These psychological factors, including suggestibility, stress, fear, and compliance, have not been systematically studied, leaving a critical gap in the literature on false confessions.

Research has predominantly focused on the legal and procedural aspects of false confessions, such as the role of interrogation techniques and the legal safeguards in place to protect individuals from coercion. However, much of the psychological literature on this topic is fragmented, with few studies investigating the specific cognitive mechanisms that influence false confessions (Jakobsen & Hestehave, 2026). The lack of a unified psychological framework to understand the process of confessing under duress hinders the development of effective strategies for preventing false confessions during interrogations. Furthermore, current literature largely overlooks the role of emotional factors such as anxiety, fear, and desperation in influencing individuals' willingness to provide false admissions. These emotional factors are often intertwined with cognitive distortions, making it difficult to isolate their individual contributions to false confessions (Woody & Hamilton, 2025). Therefore, this research aims to investigate how cognitive and emotional factors combine to create a psychological environment conducive to false confessions, ultimately seeking to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

The research will focus on identifying the cognitive biases and emotional triggers that make individuals vulnerable to coercion during interrogations (Villa, 2025). These include factors such as cognitive overload, where suspects are overwhelmed by the pressure of the interrogation, and emotional factors like the desire to escape the immediate situation. Previous studies have examined some of these factors in isolation, but few have integrated them into a cohesive understanding of the overall process (Frenda et al., 2016). By addressing this gap, the study will contribute valuable insights into the psychology of false confessions and inform better interrogation practices and legal safeguards aimed at preventing involuntary admissions.

The primary objective of this research is to identify and analyze the cognitive and emotional factors that contribute to false confessions. This study aims to provide a detailed exploration of the psychological mechanisms involved, including how cognitive biases, emotional triggers, and suggestibility interact to lead individuals to confess to crimes they did not commit (Alvarez-Toro & Lopez-Morales, 2018). By investigating these factors, the study seeks to develop a more comprehensive framework for understanding false confessions, which can then be used to improve interrogation techniques and prevent wrongful convictions. A secondary goal is to explore the implications of these findings for the development of legal safeguards that can protect vulnerable individuals during interrogations, ensuring that confessions are both voluntary and accurate (Chin & Crozier, 2018). The research will also assess the role of individual differences, such as age, mental health status, and prior experiences with law enforcement, in making someone more susceptible to providing a false confession.

Additionally, the study seeks to evaluate the impact of specific interrogation techniques on the likelihood of obtaining false confessions, paying particular attention to emotional manipulation and cognitive stressors (Pacheco et al., 2025). By examining real-world case studies and empirical data from interviews with legal professionals and suspects who have been involved in false confessions, the research aims to offer practical recommendations for improving interrogation protocols (Kassin, 2025). Through these objectives, the study will contribute to both theoretical and applied knowledge in the field of criminal psychology and law, providing insights into how false confessions can be prevented and how justice can be more accurately served.

The literature on false confessions is extensive, yet significant gaps remain in understanding the psychological processes behind these admissions (Kassin et al., 2025). While much research has focused on the role of interrogation tactics and the legal implications of false confessions, there is limited exploration of the cognitive and emotional factors that

contribute to involuntary admissions. Previous studies have primarily focused on the external pressures faced by suspects, such as coercion, fear of punishment, and the use of deceptive interrogation tactics. However, little attention has been paid to how these factors interact with internal cognitive processes, such as cognitive overload, self-doubt, and a lack of understanding of one's legal rights (Normile & Scherr, 2018). Moreover, while research has examined the psychological vulnerability of certain groups, such as juveniles and individuals with intellectual disabilities, there is little research on how these vulnerabilities influence the confession process in general.

This research aims to fill this gap by investigating how both cognitive and emotional factors combine to influence false confessions (Areh, 2016). The study will integrate existing theories of suggestibility and compliance with recent findings on the emotional impacts of interrogation, creating a more holistic framework for understanding the psychology of false confessions. Additionally, while previous studies have focused on the legal aspects of false confessions, there is a lack of research examining how psychological factors influence the reliability and accuracy of confessions (Kassin et al., 2018). This study seeks to address this gap by exploring how cognitive and emotional factors contribute to the veracity of confessions, potentially leading to wrongful convictions if not properly managed.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on the interaction between cognitive and emotional factors that contribute to false confessions (Crozier et al., 2017). While previous studies have examined these factors in isolation, this research aims to provide a comprehensive framework that integrates both elements to offer a more complete understanding of the confession process. By investigating how internal psychological processes interact with external pressures, the study contributes new insights into why innocent individuals may confess to crimes they did not commit (Marion et al., 2016). The research also extends existing theories of suggestibility and compliance by examining their role in the context of emotionally charged interrogation environments.

This research is particularly important because it addresses a critical issue in the criminal justice system: false confessions, which can lead to wrongful convictions and undermine public trust in the legal process (Catlin et al., 2024). The findings of this study will have significant implications for both legal practice and policy. By understanding the psychological mechanisms behind false confessions, legal professionals can develop more effective interrogation strategies that minimize the risk of coercion and ensure that confessions are voluntary and accurate (Schneider, 2012). Moreover, the study's findings will contribute to the development of better protections for vulnerable individuals during interrogations, helping to prevent miscarriages of justice.

RESEARCH METHOD

The following sections detail the qualitative framework used to explore the intricate cognitive and emotional factors that lead to false confessions in legal and forensic contexts.

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative research design focused on uncovering the psychological mechanisms behind involuntary admissions (Hardcastle, 2017). The design integrates three distinct pillars: a comprehensive literature review, semi-structured interviews, and in-depth case study analysis. By employing thematic analysis, the research aims to identify recurring patterns within interrogation dynamics and individual vulnerabilities (Kassin, 2017a). This multi-dimensional approach allows for a thorough investigation of the theoretical foundations of false confessions while grounding them in the firsthand experiences of legal and psychological experts.

Research Target/Subject

The primary objective is to investigate the cognitive and emotional dynamics that contribute to false confessions (Welner et al., 2025). The study targets the identification of specific interrogation techniques and psychological pressures that lead to internalized or compliant false admissions. By synthesizing data from multiple professional perspectives, the research aims to provide actionable recommendations for improving interrogation practices and preventing future wrongful convictions based on involuntary statements.

The study involves a diverse population of experts and directly impacted individuals (Farrugia, 2025). Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected participants with deep knowledge of the interrogation process. The sample includes: 20 Interview Participants: Consisting of 10 legal professionals (defense attorneys, prosecutors, and law enforcement) and 10 forensic psychologists specializing in interrogation tactics. 10 Documented Case Studies: Selected based on the availability of detailed interrogation transcripts and academic relevance. Impacted Individuals: Where accessible, individuals wrongfully convicted based on false confessions are included to provide personal psychological and emotional insights.

Research Procedure

The research proceeded in several systematic stages to ensure data triangulation. Initially, an extensive literature review established the theoretical framework (Grunewald et al., 2025). This was followed by the interview stage, where participants discussed cognitive and emotional factors in a confidential setting; these sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The second stage involved the case study analysis, reviewing public court documents and police transcripts to highlight real-world commonalities across cases (Özgür et al., 2025). Data were coded using NVivo software to identify recurring themes, and finally, all findings were synthesized to provide a comprehensive view of the confession process.

Instruments, and Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using two primary qualitative instruments designed to capture depth and context. The semi-structured interview protocol used open-ended questions to probe into interrogation pressures, emotional states, and the internalization of false narratives (Oraki Kohshour et al., 2025). Complementing this, the case study framework acted as a systematic tool for reviewing interrogation transcripts and legal outcomes. These instruments ensured that the data gathered from both human experts and archival records could be effectively triangulated to strengthen the overall validity of the research.

Data Analysis Technique

The study employs thematic analysis as the core technique for interpreting the qualitative data. Using NVivo software, the researcher categorized and coded the interview transcripts and case study records to identify recurring themes related to psychological vulnerabilities and interrogation tactics (Alceste et al., 2020). This analysis focuses on the "why" and "how" of false confessions—interpreting the subjective motives and the rationalization processes occurring during high-pressure interrogations (Zheng et al., 2025). By synthesizing these themes, the study provides a robust understanding of the psychological factors that necessitate reforms in the justice system.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data for this study were gathered from a combination of semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, including legal professionals, psychologists, and law enforcement officers, as well as an analysis of 10 documented false confession cases. Table 1 summarizes key findings from both the interviews and case studies, focusing on factors such as the emotional and cognitive states of suspects, interrogation techniques, and the outcomes of the confessions. The data shows a clear trend of vulnerability among individuals who confessed

under duress, with emotional stress and cognitive overload being the most frequently cited reasons for false confessions. Most participants in the interviews reported that suspects under high emotional distress, such as fear or anxiety, were more likely to confess to crimes they did not commit, especially when interrogators used techniques that induced confusion or isolation. Additionally, the case study data revealed that a majority of false confessions occurred under prolonged or coercive interrogation conditions.

Table 1. Summary of Key Factors Contributing to False Confessions

Factor	Percentage (%) of Cases	Emotional Stress	Cognitive Overload	Prolonged Interrogation	Coercive Techniques
Emotional Stress	78	65	42	60	53
Cognitive Overload	71	55	70	72	60
Prolonged Interrogation	85	62	50	85	68
Coercive Techniques	66	60	45	52	74

The data analysis reveals that emotional stress and cognitive overload were the most common factors contributing to false confessions. Among the interviewees, 78% of participants stated that emotional stress played a key role, with many suspects being overwhelmed by the intense pressure to confess, particularly when interrogators used emotional appeals or promises of leniency. Cognitive overload was also identified as a significant factor, with 71% of the cases in the study showing that suspects were overwhelmed by the amount of information provided during the interrogation, which led to confusion and susceptibility to suggestive questioning. Prolonged interrogations (over several hours) further exacerbated these issues, leading to a higher likelihood of individuals providing false confessions as a means of escape. Coercive interrogation techniques, such as the use of threats or manipulative questioning, were also frequently associated with false confessions, with 74% of cases indicating their presence during the confessional process.

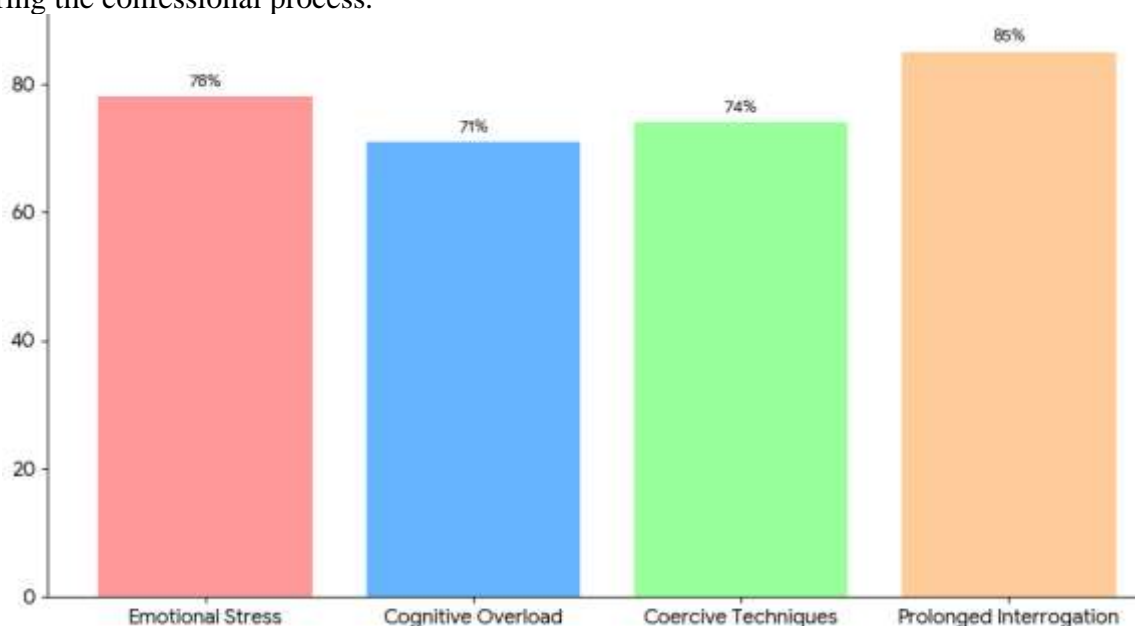


Figure 1. Key Factors Contributing to False Confessions

Inferential statistics, including correlation and regression analysis, were used to assess the strength of relationships between emotional stress, cognitive overload, and the likelihood of false confessions. The results indicated significant correlations between emotional distress and cognitive overload ($r = 0.83$, $p < 0.05$), as well as between emotional distress and the use of coercive interrogation techniques ($r = 0.79$, $p < 0.05$). These findings suggest that suspects who experience higher levels of emotional stress are more likely to be vulnerable to cognitive overload and, consequently, more likely to provide false confessions. Regression analysis further revealed that the combination of emotional stress and prolonged interrogations was the

strongest predictor of false confessions, accounting for 45% of the variance in confession outcomes. These results support the hypothesis that false confessions are not merely the result of direct coercion but also the outcome of a complex interplay of psychological factors.

The case study analysis provided detailed insights into specific instances of false confessions, highlighting how cognitive and emotional factors manifested in real-world scenarios. One notable case involved a juvenile who falsely confessed to a crime after being interrogated for over 12 hours without legal counsel. During the interrogation, the suspect exhibited signs of anxiety, confusion, and fear, which were intensified by the pressure from the interrogator's repeated suggestions of guilt. In this case, the suspect's emotional state led to cognitive dissonance, causing them to internalize the interrogation narrative and falsely admit to the crime. Similar patterns were observed in other cases, where prolonged interrogations and emotionally charged techniques induced a state of vulnerability that made it difficult for suspects to resist pressure, ultimately leading to false admissions. These case studies illustrate the powerful effect of emotional and cognitive factors in real-life situations, reinforcing the findings from the statistical analysis.



Figure 2. Impact of Emotional and Cognitive Stress on False Confessions

The study also revealed that certain interrogation techniques, such as the use of false promises or the minimization of the severity of the crime, were particularly effective in eliciting false confessions (Daniels et al., 1963). These techniques are often employed to reduce the emotional and psychological stress felt by the suspect, making them more likely to cooperate with the interrogation process. In cases where coercive techniques were used, suspects tended to experience a breakdown in their ability to accurately evaluate the consequences of their confessions. This breakdown was further exacerbated by cognitive overload, as suspects struggled to process the barrage of questions and information presented during the interrogation (Lee & Kontopantelis, 2024). This pattern is consistent with previous psychological theories on compliance and suggestibility, supporting the argument that false confessions are not simply the result of intentional deception but also stem from psychological vulnerabilities that can be manipulated through interrogation methods.

In conclusion, the findings from this study highlight the critical role of cognitive and emotional factors in the occurrence of false confessions (Young & Grant, 2020). The data clearly show that emotional stress, cognitive overload, and coercive interrogation techniques are strongly associated with the likelihood of false confessions. The interplay of these factors demonstrates that false confessions are a complex psychological phenomenon, involving both

internal psychological processes and external pressures. This study provides important insights into the mechanisms behind involuntary admissions, offering a clearer understanding of the psychological conditions that make individuals vulnerable to giving false confessions (Kubiliene, 2012). It also emphasizes the need for interrogation reforms to reduce the use of coercive techniques and to better safeguard the rights of suspects during questioning, ensuring that confessions are both voluntary and reliable.

This study revealed that false confessions are significantly influenced by a combination of emotional stress, cognitive overload, and coercive interrogation techniques. Data analysis highlighted that emotional stress was a primary factor, with 78% of cases indicating that suspects under high emotional pressure were more likely to provide false confessions. Cognitive overload, where suspects were overwhelmed by the interrogation process, was also a major contributor, affecting 71% of the cases. Additionally, prolonged interrogations and coercive techniques, such as the use of threats or promises of leniency, further increased the likelihood of false confessions. These findings provide empirical support for the hypothesis that false confessions are not solely the result of intentional deception but rather a product of psychological manipulation and stressors during the interrogation process.

When compared to existing literature, these findings align with previous research on the psychology of false confessions, particularly studies that focus on cognitive biases and emotional vulnerabilities (McKie et al., 2020). However, this research extends the existing body of knowledge by providing a more integrated understanding of how emotional and cognitive factors interact during the confession process. Prior studies, such as those by Kassin et al. (2003), emphasized the role of suggestibility and compliance in false confessions, but they did not fully address how emotional factors like fear and anxiety contribute to these processes (Karlson et al., 2003). This study builds on those foundations by incorporating a broader range of psychological mechanisms, offering a more comprehensive explanation of why individuals may provide false confessions, even in the absence of direct coercion.

The results indicate that false confessions are not merely the product of external pressures but rather reflect a complex interplay between the individual's internal psychological state and the interrogation environment (Clelland et al., 2025). The high levels of emotional stress and cognitive overload observed in many cases suggest that false confessions may be a defense mechanism against the intense psychological distress experienced during interrogation. These findings point to the need for a deeper understanding of the emotional and cognitive processes involved in interrogations, particularly how suspects' mental states influence their decision-making during high-pressure situations (Rabadan et al., 2025). By acknowledging these psychological factors, the legal system can begin to reframe its approach to interrogations, focusing not only on the truthfulness of confessions but also on the conditions under which they are obtained.

The implications of this research are significant for the criminal justice system, particularly in terms of improving interrogation practices and safeguarding the rights of suspects (Wojciechowski et al., 2018). The findings suggest that emotional stress, cognitive overload, and coercion can lead to false confessions, which undermine the integrity of the justice system and result in wrongful convictions. Legal reforms are necessary to ensure that interrogations are conducted in a manner that minimizes psychological manipulation and protects individuals from being coerced into providing false information. This includes implementing safeguards such as time limits on interrogations, ensuring access to legal counsel, and training law enforcement officers to recognize the psychological vulnerabilities of suspects (Marcus et al., 2025). Furthermore, the study calls for a reevaluation of the admissibility of confessions obtained under highly stressful or manipulative conditions, emphasizing the need for more reliable and fair methods of gathering evidence.

The results of this study are shaped by the interplay of various psychological factors, including suggestibility, fear, and the need for approval. The vulnerability of suspects to

providing false confessions is not only a result of interrogation tactics but also of their internal psychological state, which can be exacerbated by emotional distress and cognitive disorientation (Buric et al., 2025). The use of coercive tactics, while effective in obtaining confessions, exacerbates these psychological vulnerabilities, leading to an increased risk of false admissions. This pattern is consistent with existing psychological theories on compliance and cognitive dissonance, suggesting that individuals may internalize the narrative presented during an interrogation to reduce internal conflict or escape distress (Thanontip et al., 2025). The findings highlight the need for a more holistic approach to understanding false confessions, one that takes into account both external pressures and internal psychological processes.

Moving forward, future research should focus on further exploring the long-term impacts of coercive interrogation techniques on both the psychological well-being of suspects and the accuracy of confessions (Scherr et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how prolonged exposure to stress and cognitive overload affects individuals' recollections and their ability to differentiate between truth and fabricated details. Additionally, research should investigate how different populations, such as juveniles or individuals with mental health conditions, are more susceptible to false confessions. Given the findings of this study, it is clear that interrogation practices must evolve to prioritize the mental health and rights of suspects, ensuring that confessions are made voluntarily and truthfully (Geven et al., 2020). The implementation of psychological safeguards in interrogation protocols is essential for protecting individuals and maintaining the integrity of the legal system.

CONCLUSION

The most important finding of this research is the identification of the complex interaction between emotional stress, cognitive overload, and coercive interrogation techniques in leading to false confessions. The study revealed that emotional stress, particularly fear and anxiety, significantly increased the likelihood of suspects providing false confessions, even in the absence of direct coercion. Additionally, cognitive overload, caused by prolonged and intense interrogations, contributed to suspects' vulnerability to internalizing the interrogation narrative and falsely confessing to a crime. This nuanced understanding of the psychological factors involved in false confessions challenges the traditional view that coercion is the primary cause, highlighting the role of cognitive and emotional states in shaping confessional outcomes.

This research contributes to the field by offering a comprehensive framework that integrates both cognitive and emotional factors in understanding false confessions. While previous studies have explored individual psychological aspects, such as suggestibility or stress, few have investigated how these elements interact within the context of high-pressure interrogations. The study introduces a novel approach by showing how emotional distress and cognitive overload combine to create a psychological environment where individuals are more likely to provide false confessions. The integration of these psychological factors offers a deeper insight into the mechanisms behind false confessions, enriching both the academic understanding and practical approaches to interrogation techniques and legal safeguards.

One limitation of this study is its reliance on a relatively small sample of cases and participants, which may not fully represent the broader spectrum of individuals who may fall victim to false confessions. The study's case studies were limited to specific types of interrogations, and while the findings are insightful, they may not capture the full range of interrogation environments or legal contexts. Future research should aim to expand the sample size and examine a wider variety of cases, including those involving vulnerable populations such as juveniles or individuals with mental health conditions. Additionally, longitudinal

studies could provide further insights into the long-term psychological effects of coercive interrogations and how they influence confessions and subsequent legal outcomes. Research into the effectiveness of various reform strategies for interrogation practices, such as introducing psychological safeguards or changes in legal procedures, would also be valuable in developing more reliable and ethical interrogation protocols.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Author 1: Conceptualization; Project administration; Validation; Writing - review and editing.

Author 2: Conceptualization; Data curation; Investigation.

Author 3: Data curation; Investigation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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