Self-Incrimination and Culpability: Examining Perceptions of Biological vs. Psychological Evidence

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Contributing Causes of Wrongful Convictions (first 225 DNA exonerations)
Total is more than 100% because wrongful convictions can have more than one cause.

- Eyewitness Misidentification (173 cases): 77%
- Unvalidated / Improper Forensics (116 cases): 52%
- False Confessions / Admissions (51 cases): 23%
- Informants / Snitches (36 cases): 16%
Biological Evidence

- Body Fluids (blood, semen, saliva)
- Mitochondrial DNA (hairs, bones, teeth)
- Impression Evidence (fingerprints, bitemarks)

**DNA Analysis**
- Body Fluids
- Mitochondrial DNA
- Considered gold standard

**Other Forensic Disciplines**
- Impression evidence
- Lack of scientific basis
- Improper forensic testimony
Juries & Forensic Evidence

• Exaggerated view overall

• “CSI Effect”

• Match viewed as evidence of guilt, but nonmatch NOT viewed as evidence of innocence (Kaasa et al., 2007)
Confession Evidence

Why do innocent people confess? (Kassin, 2008)

- Mental impairment / diminished capacity
- Coercion
- Extreme fatigue
- Fear of violence/threat of charges
- Juveniles
Juries & Confessions

• Corroboration Inflation: tendency for confessions to produce an illusion of support for other evidence (Kassin, 2012)
  • Details of the confession statement
  • Extrinsic evidence
  • Confirmation bias
Purpose of this research

• To gain a greater understanding of people’s beliefs about both confession and DNA evidence
Method

• Participants
  • 80 jury eligible adults attending Wofford College

• Materials
  • Survey consisting of 21 items plus some demographic questions

• Survey assessed people’s beliefs about DNA and confession evidence
Exonerating Evidence

Responses (%)

Eyewitness misidentification: 3.8%
New person confesses: 7.5%
New forensic evidence match: 85%
Misconduct: 3.8%
Biological v. Psychological

Source of Evidence

Responses (%)

DNA Evidence 71.3%
Confession 28.7%
Weight of Biological Evidence

Responses (%)

- Bodily fluid/DNA: 90%
- Impression: 7.5%
- Hair: 2.5%
Biological v. Psychological

Incriminating Evidence

- DNA
- Confession

Rating
Confession Evidence

Rating

Retracted Confession
Incriminating Evidence
Confession
Confession Evidence

Retracted Confession
Confession
Inconsistent Confession

Incriminating Evidence

Rating

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Biological v. Psychological

Inconclusive DNA Retracted Confession

Mean Evidence

Inconclusive DNA Retracted Confession
Discussion

• Similar guilt ratings for biological and psychological evidence

• Great doubt that false confessions occur

• Biological evidence is very incriminating; often considered critical for a conviction

• Inconclusive DNA results and retracted confessions are not fully discounted
Some Future Directions

• Further exploration of demographic variables

• Can jurors disregard any piece of how a confession is obtained when instructed to do so by the judge?
Thank you! 😊

Questions?