



## City Research Online

### City, University of London Institutional Repository

---

**Citation:** Otgaar, H., Schell-Leugers, J. M., Howe, M., de la Fuente Vilar, A., Houben, S. & Merckelbach, H. (2024). The link between false confessions, suggestibility, and compliance: A review using experimental and field studies. *Applied Police Briefings*,

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version.

---

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/33975/>

**Link to published version:**

**Copyright:** City Research Online aims to make research outputs of City, University of London available to a wider audience. Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. URLs from City Research Online may be freely distributed and linked to.

**Reuse:** Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

---

---

---

City Research Online:

<http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/>

[publications@city.ac.uk](mailto:publications@city.ac.uk)

---

**The Link between False Confessions, Suggestibility, and Compliance:  
A Review Using Experimental and Field Studies**

Henry Otgaar<sup>1,2</sup>, Jennifer Maria Schell-Leugers<sup>3</sup>, Mark L. Howe<sup>4</sup>, Alejandra De La Fuente Vilar<sup>5</sup>, Sanne T.L. Houben<sup>1</sup>, & Harald Merckelbach<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Psychology and Neuroscience, Maastricht University, the Netherlands

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Law and Criminology, KU Leuven, Belgium

<sup>3</sup> University College Maastricht, Maastricht University, the Netherlands

<sup>4</sup> Department of Psychology, City St. George's, University of London, UK

<sup>5</sup> School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Portsmouth, UK

IN PRESS: *Applied Police Briefings*  
(Accepted November 1, 2024)

## **Take Home Messages**

- People are most likely to confess to a crime that they did not commit if they are highly suggestible
- People are somewhat likely to confess to a crime that they did not commit if they are highly compliant
- Suggestive questions should be avoided in police interviews with suspects as they can lead to false confessions and miscarriages of justice

## **Why Did the Authors Conduct This Study?**

Innocent suspects sometimes confess to crimes that they did not commit (Kassin, 2017). Such false confessions can occur when they are, for example, put under pressure by the police. Such pressure can take place when a suspect denies involvement in a crime resulting in the police using suggestive tactics (e.g., misleading questions, deceit) to obtain a confession. In many countries, such false confessions have led to wrongful convictions (Gudjonsson, 2018).

Apart from external reasons such as the occurrence of suggestive interrogations, scholars have been interested in identifying whether individual differences exist that might make people more likely to falsely confess to a crime. Suggestibility and compliance have frequently been mentioned as two possible individual differences (Gudjonsson, 2010, 2018). However, disagreement exists on the importance of these individual differences leading people to falsely confess to crimes (e.g., Rassin & Israëls, 2014). The consequence is that psychologists who act as expert witnesses in the courtroom might sometimes provide conflicting testimony on whether these individual differences play a role in false confessions. Therefore, the authors reviewed studies examining the link between suggestibility, compliance, and false confessions to determine whether a consensus could be drawn based on the existing research.

## **How Did the Authors Conduct This Study?**

The authors reviewed six experimental studies in which participants were induced to falsely confess, and suggestibility and compliance were measured. The studies that were reviewed involved student participants who were asked to type letters on a computer. The researchers instructed participants not to press the Alt key, because pressing it would crash the computer. However, the computer was designed to crash regardless of whether the participants pressed the Alt key or not.

Once the computer crashed, the researchers would falsely accuse participants of pressing this key and causing the crash. Participants could either deny pressing the key, or falsely confess and sign a document stating that they crashed the computer. If the participant falsely confessed, it could either be to comply with the researcher (i.e., non-internalized compliant false confession), or they could actually believe that they crashed the computer (i.e., internalized false confession).

Within the studies that the authors reviewed, suggestibility was primarily measured using the Gudjonsson Suggestibility Scale (GSS). In short, in the GSS, participants read a story and receive – amongst other – suggestive questions related to the story (e.g., “Did the woman's glasses break in the struggle?”). The critical measure is whether participants yield or accept the suggested information in those questions. Compliance was mainly measured using the Gudjonsson Compliance Scale (GCS). The GCS is a questionnaire containing 20

true/false statements on people's willingness to go along with leading questions (e.g., "I give in easily to people when I am pressured").

Furthermore, the authors reviewed field data of potential false confessions in real life criminal cases, and their relationship with suggestibility and compliance. The field data consisted of five field studies, in which suspects and inmates who indicated they had provided a false confession were tested. The authors examined whether false confessors had higher suggestibility and compliance scores than subjects that did not falsely confess.

### **What Did the Researchers Find?**

The following main findings were observed:

- 1) For the experimental studies, participants who falsely confessed by signing a document admitting culpability had higher suggestibility scores than participants who did not sign the document.
- 2) For the experimental studies, participants who falsely confessed by signing a document admitting culpability were not more compliant than participants who did not sign the document.
- 3) Limited data existed to compare suggestibility and compliance between internalized and non-internalized false confessions.
- 4) For the field studies, false confessors had higher suggestibility and compliance scores than people that did not falsely confess.

### **What do These Results Mean for Policing?**

The review showed that a meaningful relationship exists between false confessions and suggestibility. Based on the findings of the review, several recommendations for policing can be put forward:

- 1) Because suggestibility is linked to false confessions, the findings stress the importance of conducting police interviews without using any forms of suggestion.
- 2) This review also emphasizes the importance of using open-ended questions and avoiding suggestive questions.
- 3) Specialised training is needed for police officers to recognise and provide appropriate support to individuals with vulnerabilities (such as high suggestibility and compliance) in police interviews.

### **References**

- Gudjonsson, G. H. (2010). Psychological vulnerabilities during police interviews. Why are they important? *Legal and Criminological Psychology*, 15(2), 161–175. <https://doi.org/10.1348/135532510X500064>
- Gudjonsson, G. H. (2018). *The psychology of false confessions. Forty years of science and practice*. Wiley Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119315636>
- Kassin, S. M. (2017). False confessions: How can psychology so basic be so counterintuitive? *American Psychologist*, 72(9), 951–964. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000195>
- Rassin, E., & Israëls, H. (2014). False confessions in the lab: A review. *Erasmus Law Review*, 4, 2019–2224. <https://doi.org/10.5553/ELR.000019>