

Voluntary false confessions

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Summary

Researchers have extensively examined coerced-compliant false confessions (for an overview see Gudjonsson, 2003; Kassin et al., 2010). In contrast, voluntary false confessions to protect someone else (voluntary blame-taking) received very little attention. However, surveys with students and prisoners show that they occur at least as often as coerced-compliant false confessions (e.g., Volbert et al., 2019; Willard et al., 2015). This dissertation examined (a) how situational risk factors influence blame-taking and (b) how such confessions influence the attribution of suspects' guilt.

Based on theories of prosocial behavior and real-life cases, I examined the situational risk factors guilt feelings, relationship status, incentives and group membership. **Chapter 1** introduces the topic and describes the underlying theories in detail. **Chapter 2** describes a laboratory experiment ($N_{E1b} = 108$) that tested whether guilt feelings towards the guilty person would increase blame-taking. Guilt manipulations did not influence blame-taking rates. **Chapter 3** presents two online-experiments that examined the influence of relationship status and different types of incentives on willingness to take the blame ($N_{E2a} = 211$; $N_{E2b} = 232$). The results highlight the importance of kin relationships for decisions to take the blame, whereas social and cash incentives did not increase willingness to take the blame. **Chapter 4** examined in an online-experiment the influence of non-kin relationship status on willingness to take the blame ($N_{E3} = 130$). Participants were more willing to take the blame for their best friend than for a stranger. Chapter 4 further examined whether group membership affects voluntary blame-taking behavior in two field experiments. Participants ($N_{E4a} = 60$; $N_{E4b} = 89$) were more likely to take the blame for an in-group member than an out-group member. **Chapter 5** presents three online-experiments ($N_{E5} = 153$; $N_{E6a} = 318$; $N_{E6b} = 334$) that examined how retracted coerced-compliant and retracted voluntary confessions to protect someone else influence attributions of guilt with varying evidence. Overall, participants were able to consider situational risk factors for coerced-compliant confessions and primarily based their attributions of guilt on exculpatory DNA evidence. However, situational risk factors for voluntary false confessions (e.g., a close kin relationship to the perpetrator, the same group-membership) were not always considered when assessing guilt.

Finally, **Chapter 6** discusses the most important findings of the current research and presents the results of two further studies. Moreover, the chapter provides suggestions for future research and discusses practical implications of the research findings. The knowledge about risk factors for voluntary false confessions to protect someone else and the difficulties in recognizing such confessions can help police officers, public prosecutors, judges and lawyers when assessing confession evidence. In particular, the findings can help to formulate and test alternative hypotheses stating that suspects might have falsely confessed to protect someone else.