Imagine the scene: A suspect is arrested on suspicion of involvement in an offence; they are questioned and, in the course of it all, finally confess. On the basis of this confession, plus some circumstantial evidence surrounding the case, a conviction is secured. But after a while fresh DNA evidence comes to light: it turns out that the confession was false and actually the product of coercion during questioning. False confessions obtained during police questioning have indeed been shown to be present in around 15–20 per cent of DNA exonerations cases worldwide. Included in this percentage are a number of high-profile miscarriages of justice within the UK (see Gudjonsson, 2002), where the presence of psychological vulnerability (i.e. interrogative suggestibility and compliance) was seen as the main factor that may have contributed to the false confessions. 

These landmark successful appeal cases during the 1980s and 90s triggered widespread concern and awareness that police interviews had gone seriously wrong. This in turn highlighted the need for change in the way that police approached suspect interviews in England, reinforced through the publication of the Memorandum of Good Practice in 1992 and the Home Office guidelines Achieving Best Evidence in Criminal Proceedings in 2002 and 2008. Formal police interview training thus began in 1992 following the successful Guildford Four and Birmingham Six appeals (see Gudjonsson, 2010; Williamson, 2007). 

Despite this positive shift in interviewing practice, however, the danger of vulnerability manifesting during police questioning continues to be an issue (Keibell & Gilchrist, 2004). Psychological vulnerabilities are often still left recognised and the appropriate provisions are not always afforded (Bradley, 2009). Little is known about why it is that some suspects come to be so vulnerable during police interview, especially those who do not present with any mental health issue or learning disability.

What has been known for some time is that a proportion of suspects simply come to be vulnerable through their character or personality. Suspects with a vulnerable character have presented themselves fairly frequently throughout history (e.g. Birmingham Six, Guildford Four, Judith Ward, and Alfred Allen amongst others), yet this population of suspects is the least well understood; that is, it has been less clear how their lesser ability to cope with the pressure of police questioning may have come about.

This article will focus on discussing this population by introducing a fairly new avenue of published research that seems to implicate the experience of life adversity in the development of a psychologically vulnerable character. This work is important because it sheds light on why some suspects, who do not appear to be vulnerable through mental health issues or learning disabilities, may end up at greater risk of false confessions during police questioning.

How might this vulnerable character come about? Being sensitive to pressure can be a serious psychological vulnerability during police interview (Gudjonsson, 2003). This sensitivity can lead to the acceptance of misleading suggestions, and the production of false statements and confessions.

The Gudjonsson and Clark model (1986) focuses on factors that, during interview, appear central in encouraging
Successful appeal cases triggered widespread concern and awareness that police interviews had gone wrong of suggestible behaviour – which can be the basis for false confessions (Kassin et al., 2010).

Over the past five years my research has sought to investigate the psychology of the vulnerable interviewee in more detail. The first study conducted in 2005 (Drake, 2008) uncovered a link between the reported experience of intense negative life events and interrogative suggestibility. The reported experience of intense negative life events appeared particularly related to suggestibility to external pressure during questioning; this suggestibility can be observed by interviewees changing their initial answers (to questions) in response to negative feedback given by the interviewer. Since this time, the finding has been replicated four times in my own work (see Drake, 2010b). Other work by Gislí Gudjonsson and colleagues (Gudjonsson et al., 2008, 2009) has also demonstrated an association between the experience of major adverse life events and reported false confessions.

The types of adverse events most relevant seem to be dependent (and especially interpersonal) negative events such as: (a) difficulties in the workplace, in school and within relationships; (b) familial issues (e.g. parental divorce, death within the family); (c) a decline in social activity; and/or (d) being a victim of crime. Dependent negative events are more controllable and dependent upon a person’s character. Interpersonal negative life events are a specific type of dependent negative events and refer solely to interpersonal difficulties. For some time now dependent negative life events have been linked with the development of other psychological vulnerabilities (such as depression, anxiety and sensitivity to social challenge: Eley et al., 2004; Jaffee & Price, 2007). This research now shows that such events may also increase the risk of suggestible behaviour, through cultivating a lesser ability to cope with the pressure of questioning.

Studies suggest that vulnerable individuals may have an endogenous tendency towards heightened distress (Donnellan et al., 2007; Drake, 2010b). Could this have its origins in attachment behaviour? This is mainly concerned with the maintenance of emotional, psychological and physical closeness with a significant other person (Bowby, 1988). Vulnerable individuals score high on fearful-avoidant attachment (characterised by high levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance; Drake, 2010b). Attachment anxiety is related to emotion-oriented coping and the regulation of affective processes. Attachment avoidance governs degree of detachment and suspiciousness (Donnellan et al., 2008). The degree to which individuals express attachment anxiety and/or avoidance seems to result from the early family environment and can be reinforced through the subsequent experience of negative events.

Negative emotionality and anxiety can draw out hostile reactions from the environment. This can encourage problematic social interactions/relationships and reinforce insecure attachment patterns that have established as a result of unsupportive parenting and negative environmental influences (Scarr & McCartney, 1983). This is seen in institutionalised children where there is a high staff turnover; such children fail to form attachments, which reduces their capacity to deal with stress and causes problems during future relationships and interactions (Zeanah & Emde, 1994).

Exposure to negative environmental influences, especially in early life, can lead to insecure attachment patterns becoming established within the child. These insecure attachment patterns increase the risk of later psychological vulnerability through such children becoming particularly receptive and sensitive to negativity. The probability of experiencing further adversity is in turn heightened which reinforces any vulnerability (Taghavi et al., 2000). Negative influences include, for example, those affecting parents directly (e.g. divorce or difficulties finding

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false confessions

housing or employment), which adversely affect parenting style and therefore impact the child (Bifulco et al., 2002) as well as events that directly affect the child (e.g. hostile or neglectful parenting itself, a lack of emotional support, experiencing bullying at school, and/or other contextual risk factors, such as exposure to area deprivation and socio-economic disadvantage (Flouri et al., 2010; Jaffee & Price, 2007). It seems that exposure to early adversity can lead to hypervigilance in inherently stress-reactive children and an increased susceptibility to the negative effects of adversity, expressed as emotional and behavioural problems (Belsky & Pluess, 2009).

Adversities experienced during childhood can therefore continue to cast a shadow over subsequent development. Work dating back to Brown et al. (1986) emphasises this point further by showing that a lack of parental care predicts subsequent tendencies towards depression due to social and emotional deprivation and the experience of more stressful events. Family material and emotional circumstances affect parents and their parenting style (Bifulco et al., 2002). Combined with the effects of peer influence, these factors influence the psychological developmental trajectory of the individual (Maughan & Kim-Cohen, 2005).

Insecure attachment patterns that develop precipitate the experience of adversity and, if such individuals are brought into stressful situations such as police interview, contribute towards heightened uncertainty, expectations of success, and suggestible behaviour during questioning through attenuated stress-reactivity and negative perception.

An important implication of this work is that, even if there are no obvious signs of pressure during interview, vulnerable suspects may still feel that they are not given the chance to tell the truth through sensitivity to perceived negativity. A key issue therefore encouraging vulnerable behaviour is whether suspects perceive pressure from the interviewer. The perception of pressure alone could well be enough to elicit suggestible or compliant behaviour during police interview.

This perspective on the development of psychological vulnerability has evolutionary underpinnings. Studies within this area suggest that both the urge to confess, as well as actual confessions, stem from anxiety and stress-reactivity within the suspect in response to perceived social pressure; this renders the suspect more susceptible to negativity and may also drive a desire to tell others about their offence, especially those with whom the suspect has a bond (Bering & Shackelford, 2005).

By virtue of the interviewer establishing rapport with the suspect at the beginning of the interview (which is a requirement; see Williamson, 1993), it seems that police interviewers, during questioning, may well be tapping into an evolved tendency within us to seek confidants and preserve relationships. Police interviewers may be inadvertently tapping into this need for security, leading suspects to feel that making a confession (whether true or false) is more beneficial to them than continuing to maintain their innocence. Stress-reactive children have been shown to suffer the most during adversity but also to benefit the most from...
positive influences and interactions (Belsky & Pluess, 2009). Apart from during police interview (where this behaviour could lead to negative consequences), being easily influenced during adverse interactions may pay perceived dividends, for example it may have helped to ‘keep the peace’ and avoid conflict with parents. This could be the ultimate reason why suggestibility and false confessions (within the context of a custodial interview) is so consistently related to the experience of intense adversity (see Drake, 2010b for a review).

Nonetheless there are some cases where these psychological factors can lead to the opposite effect in individuals (interrogative resistance; Drake et al., 2011; Gudjonsson, 2003). High levels of attachment anxiety can lead to a heterogenous reaction to stressful events, such that either psychological vulnerability or resistance may result. Therefore these factors alone are not necessarily always indicators of vulnerability. There needs to be further work into what differentiates the two groups of individuals: identify how they differ, and the valid indicators of sensitivity to pressure may well be brought to light.

**Concluding remarks**

Over 100 years ago the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg wrote an entire chapter on ‘untrue confessions’, in which he attempted to try to understand the cause of such occurrences; some of the words he used to describe the possible causes of this phenomenon were promises, threats and suggestion. The idea that suggestions and coercion may be factors inducing false confessions/statements was thus already being considered a possibility. Psychological research has, from that time forward, continued to achieve a number of advances: Amongst many (see Gudjonsson, 2003), the Gudjonsson and Clark (1986) model was an important step in our understanding of vulnerable behaviour during interview, and was the first to highlight the principle factors that may increase the risk of suggestive behaviour manifesting during questioning. The body of work, from 2005 onwards, has since begun to expand on this framework to explore the psychology of vulnerability more fully from a developmental perspective; to understand the relationship between trait personality variables, insecure attachment tendencies, and the experience of intense life adversity, leading to an increased risk of experiencing uncertainty, expectations of success, and providing false confessions and statements during interview.

Based on the research findings so far, psychological vulnerability during police questioning may develop through the following means: insecure attachment patterns and neuroticism are characteristics lending themselves to problematic and negative dyadic interactions (Brennan & Shaver, 2002; Drake, 2010b). Parents with such characteristics can be especially negative (albeit passive-aggressively or in an emotionally volatile way) to those with whom there is an intimate tie or a bond (e.g. children, spouses) (Dutton, 2007). The result of these unconstructive interactions is that children may learn to doubt their judgements and memories (and to assume that the parent is right). Such children (and later adolescents and adults), depending on course of subsequent experiences and interactions (Donnellan et al., 2008; Todman & Drysdale, 2004), may well have a lower self-esteem and higher levels of self-doubt (Murphy & Eckhardt, 2005), especially during dyadic interactions (such as an interview) where the interviewer may be perceived as an authority figure (Gudjonsson, 2003).

When being questioned, these individuals may seem more uncertain as to the required answers to the (interview) questions. This uncertainty though, at the root of it, is insecurity, a fear of negative feedback, and a tendency towards self-doubt, which has been cultivated and reinforced through such individuals’ life span (Donnellan et al., 2008). I propose that this uncertainty has a deeper, psychological basis, rooted in infancy and reinforced through their subsequent experience of intense adverse events. This effect is exacerbated further by the interviewer, through the building of rapport, inadvertently tapping into a primordial tendency within already insecurely attached individuals to seek confidants, preserve relationships and relieve their distress and anxiety (Drake, 2010b, Bering & Shackelford, 2005). These environmental influences may (depending on other factors surrounding a case) increase the risk, fuelled by self-doubt, of uncertainty in the face of questioning, leading to vulnerable behaviour.

This research will help to shed light on why some suspects may be at greater risk of false confessions during police questioning. It must be made clear though that this work is in its infancy, so caution must be exercised before any definitive conclusion(s) can be drawn as to the role of adverse experiences. Yet this emerging body of evidence resonates with studies within the differential, evolutionary and developmental psychopathological literature, showing a solid foundation for further investigation.

**false confessions**

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