Camera perspective and trivial details interact to influence jurors’ evaluations of a retracted confession

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Prior research demonstrates that observers rate videotaped confessions as more voluntary if the camera focuses on the suspect rather than on the interrogator or on both individuals. The present study extends this finding by examining whether the amount of detail within the content of a confession interacts with camera perspective to influence jurors’ assessments. Mock jurors viewed a videotaped confession embedded within a murder trial that contained either a high or low amount of detail about the crime. The confession was recorded with the camera focused either on the defendant, on the defendant and detective equally, or on the detective. As predicted, the amount of detail had no effect when the camera focused either on the detective or on both individuals equally. However, in the defendant-focused condition, a high rather than low detail confession led jurors to conclude that the defendant had a better memory for the crime, to rate his confession as more authentic and incriminating, and to view him as more likely guilty.

Keywords: confessions; juror decision making; amount of detail; camera perspective

Introduction

Among the evidence items introduced during a criminal trial, a prior admission of guilt is highly incriminating and often more influential than other compelling types of evidence such as eyewitness accounts and character testimony (Kassin & Neumann, 1997). A confession is very incriminating even if it is unsupported by other evidence, and even if it is false (Drizin & Leo, 2004). If a case involving a false confession goes to trial, the confession ‘almost always seal[s] the defendant’s fate – either by leading the innocent defendant to choose to accept a plea bargain or, more commonly, by leading a judge or jury to wrongfully convict the factually innocent defendant’ (Drizin & Leo, 2004, p. 961).

Surprisingly, suspects do sometimes confess to crimes they know they did not commit in response to coercive tactics. To elicit these ‘compliant false confessions’ (Kassin, 2008; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Kassin & Wrightsman, 1985), police may use any number of different psychologically-oriented techniques. One of the most effective approaches, commonly referred to as ‘maximization’ (Drizin & Leo,
To persuade suspects that the evidence against them is so overwhelming that their fate at trial would certainly be conviction and that there are advantages to confessing, police may confront suspects with fabricated evidence such as nonexistent eyewitnesses, false fingerprints, videotapes that do not exist, and fake polygraph results. If investigators do possess real evidence, they may exaggerate its strength. Thus, confessions can be elicited from innocent individuals by leading them to believe their situation is so hopeless that it could only be improved by confessing. Alternatively, ‘minimization’ involves downplaying the suspect’s alleged actions or the associated consequences by morally justifying the crime, suggesting that it is not very serious, representing it as an accident or the result of provocation or peer pressure, blaming the victim, or implying that a confession will bring about leniency from the prosecutor or judge (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Kassin, 2008; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). In addition to these techniques, interrogators may create an aversive environment, for example by isolating suspects or refusing to let them smoke cigarettes or access other drugs to which they are addicted. Some suspects may naively conclude that they will be released from custody after admitting their guilt (Sigurdsson & Gudjonsson, 1996). Moreover, previous research has suggested that certain populations, such as juveniles and persons who are mentally handicapped, mentally ill, or under the influence of controlled substances, are especially susceptible to police pressure and are thus at risk of implicating themselves in crimes they did not commit (Bruck & Ceci, 1999; Ceci & Bruck, 1995; Drizin & Leo, 2004; Kassin, 2008; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004; Pearse, Gudjonsson, Clare, & Rutter, 1998).

After suspects realize the consequences of their actions and/or consult with their attorney, some retract their confession prior to trial. In such cases, a judge (in US courts) determines at a preliminary hearing whether the confession is admissible at trial (Kassin, 2008; Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). If deemed admissible, the judge will then allow jurors to hear the confession evidence, leaving them with the difficult task of deciding how much probative value to assign it. This decision, in turn, ideally should depend on whether the defendant apparently confessed voluntarily (although in reality jurors may treat a confession as incriminating even after concluding that it was coerced; Kassin & Sukel, 1997).

One variable known to affect voluntariness judgments is the camera perspective used to record interrogations (see Lassiter, 2002, for a review). In recent decades the practice of videotaping police interrogations has increased, and its use will surely continue to rise, with some jurisdictions even mandating it (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002). Many police departments position the camera behind the detective and focused on the suspect (Kassin, 1997). However, suspect-focused confessions, compared to those focused either on the detective or on the suspect and detective equally, are perceived as more voluntary by jurors and are more likely to lead to guilty verdicts (Lassiter, Geers, Handley, Weiland, & Munhall, 2002). This systematic bias emerges even when participants are explicitly instructed to avoid being influenced by the camera perspective or are warned that it can have a prejudicial effect (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002; Lassiter, Geers et al., 2002). Moreover, varying the ‘realness’ of the stimulus confession (an actual police interrogation versus a fabricated one) or the type of crime involved (e.g. burglary, rape, drug trafficking, manslaughter) makes no difference in the outcome (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002;
This effect may be caused by two factors (Ware, Lassiter, Patterson, & Ransom, 2008). First, observers tend to direct their visual attention toward the individual on whom the camera is focused and to ‘overestimate the causal role of the individual who is most visually prominent’ (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002, p. 267), as suggested by social attribution research (e.g. Taylor & Fiske, 1978). Second, different visual cues are available depending on the camera perspective. For example, the suspect’s face would be fully visible only in the suspect-focused condition, so jurors in that condition could evaluate the suspect’s facial expression in an attempt to determine whether the confession was voluntarily given or coerced.

Besides camera perspective, another variable that may affect judgments of retracted confessions is the amount of detail within the suspect’s statement. This variable might sometimes be a valid indicator of a confession’s authenticity, because a guilty suspect could have the knowledge necessary to provide many details. However, a false confession could also be vivid; police investigators typically press suspects to give a thorough and descriptive account of the crime (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004). In any event, it seems reasonable to expect jurors to use this salient cue. No studies have examined the process by which jurors evaluate details in the content of confessions. However, researchers have shown that jurors can be persuaded by eyewitness testimony containing many rather than few ‘trivial’ details, or details that are legally irrelevant and that add no probative value (Bell & Loftus, 1988, 1989; Reyes, Thompson, & Bower, 1980; Shedler & Manis, 1986). For example, in one experiment Bell and Loftus (1988) asked mock jurors to read a case summary involving the robbing and killing of a convenience store clerk. In different versions the testimony of a prosecution witness was either high or low in detail; the witness said either that the defendant asked for ‘Kleenex, Tylenol, and a six-pack of Diet Pepsi’ before shooting the clerk or merely that he wanted ‘a few store items’. Jurors who read the more detailed testimony thought the witness was more credible and were more likely to find the defendant guilty than those who read the less detailed version.

One possible explanation for this effect is that more detailed testimony is easier to remember than vague information and therefore has a stronger influence on jurors as they reflect on the evidence prior to choosing a verdict. However, analyses of previous data do not support the hypothesis that jurors’ memory for the testimony mediates its impact on their judgments (Bell & Loftus, 1989; Shedler & Manis, 1986). Moreover, the same effect has been found when jurors determine verdicts with their case materials in front of them so that their task is not memory-based (Bell & Loftus, 1988). An alternative interpretation, proposed by Bell and Loftus (1988, 1989), is that jurors who hear highly detailed testimony infer that the witness must have paid more attention as the crime unfolded and can remember what happened more accurately. Accordingly, mock jurors in the high detail condition of their study rated the witness as having better memory abilities and as having attended more closely to the perpetrator compared to jurors in the low detail condition.

Related to Bell and Loftus’s interpretation of their results is the concept of ‘interpersonal reality monitoring’ (Johnson, Bush, & Mitchell, 1998), which is based on Johnson and Raye’s (1981) reality monitoring theory. According to the theory, people can distinguish their own memories of actually experienced events from their
memories of imagined events because the former, being perceptually generated, usually contain relatively more sensory details (such as the color or size of objects that were present) as well as spatial and temporal contextual information, whereas internally-generated events produce memories that usually include references to the cognitive operations that were active during the course of imagining the events. In other words, people typically employ a heuristic process that involves identifying the characteristics of their memories and then using them to determine the source of those memories (although they can also rely on more systematic processes, such as evaluating the plausibility of a given memory in light of other knowledge). This procedure often succeeds, but attribution errors can occur because perceptually-generated memories sometimes contain characteristics usually associated with internally generated ones, and vice versa.

Johnson and colleagues (Johnson, Foley, Suengas, & Raye, 1988; Johnson, Hashtroudi, & Lindsay, 1993; Johnson & Raye, 1981) reported data showing how their theory explains individuals’ attributions about the origins of their own memories, but the same principles apply to judgments about the sources of other people’s memories (Johnson et al., 1998; Keogh & Markham, 1998; Schooler, Gerhard, & Loftus, 1986). For example, Johnson et al. (1998) asked participants to read first-person narratives of common experiences, such as a visit to a physician’s office, that ostensibly had been either personally experienced by the writer or experienced by another person and told to the writer. The researchers found that adding incidental perceptual details (e.g. ‘[the nurse called my name] in a loud voice’) to a narrative increased the likelihood that participants would classify it as based on personal experience. Perhaps jurors might similarly consider the amount of details within a confession in an effort to determine whether it is authentic or not (i.e. whether it accurately describes the defendant’s personal experience of committing the crime or is instead based on speculation, imagination, or secondhand knowledge of the event).

In the present study, mock jurors listened to a murder trial that included a videotaped retracted confession. To extend Lassiter and colleagues’ research regarding the effects of camera perspective, we varied the amount of trivial detail within the confession as well as the camera perspective used to record the interrogation. If jurors use amount of detail as an indicator of eyewitness credibility, they might also use it to assess the authenticity of a retracted confession. Thus, a very detailed confession should generally seem more authentic than a vague one because it suggests that the defendant has a thorough memory of the crime, based on personal experience, and is trying to be cooperative and forthcoming. Jurors might not draw such inferences, though, if they believe the confession was obtained under at least some coercion. Instead, they might assume that defendants who yielded to police pressure may have invented details in response to the pressure, and as a result the level of detail in the confession might seem unrelated to authenticity. Therefore, we hypothesized that detail would interact with camera perspective. Specifically, when the confession is judged to be more voluntary (because the camera is focused on the defendant), a detailed confession should appear more authentic and incriminating, and the defendant should seem more likely guilty. In contrast, when the confession seems less voluntary (because the camera is focused either on the detective or on both individuals equally), judgments should not differ as a function of level of detail.
Method

Participants

Introductory psychology students ($n = 221$) at a Midwestern US university participated in groups of up to 10 as a class requirement. They ranged in age from 18 to 45 years ($M = 19.60$, $SD = 2.63$); 56% were female and 89% were White.

Stimuli and procedure

Acting as mock jurors, the participants listened to a recording (approximate length 25 min) of a murder trial adapted from Kassin and Sukel (1997) in which a college student is charged with killing his girlfriend and a neighbor. The trial includes the attorneys’ opening and closing arguments and testimony from three witnesses: the detective who investigated the case, the medical examiner (both for the prosecution), and the accused student (for the defense). The prosecutor’s theory is that the defendant arrived home after class and found his girlfriend in the kitchen talking with their neighbor. Convinced that the two were having an affair, the defendant stabbed the neighbor to death and then strangled his girlfriend. The prosecutor also explains that the defendant confessed to the murders during the police investigation but later retracted his confession, claiming that he found the bodies upon arriving home but killed no one. The confession was presented to the jurors in the form of a video made during the interrogation. After the detective testifies that he videotaped the defendant’s statement at the police station and the prosecutor asks the judge to admit the video as evidence, the audio recording was paused so that the jurors could watch it.

Three versions of the video were created by simultaneously filming the White male actors who portrayed the defendant and the police detective with three cameras. One camera focused on the defendant and showed his face and torso as he sat at a table across from the detective; the back of the detective’s head and shoulders were also visible. The second camera focused on the detective rather than the defendant, and the third captured both individuals from the side.

We also varied the trivial details in the defendant’s confession (see Table 1). The 10 manipulated details lack probative value and, legally, should not affect jurors’ decisions; the high detail information does not incriminate the defendant more than the low detail version. The gist of the defendant’s confession is that he arrived home and entered the kitchen, where his girlfriend was putting away groceries. Their neighbor, who was also present in the kitchen, spoke to the defendant as he came in. The defendant picked up a knife and stabbed the neighbor, and then grabbed his girlfriend and strangled her.

The study’s design was $3 \times 2$ (Camera Perspective: Defendant-focused, Detective-focused, Equal-focus) factorial. Jurors were randomly assigned to one of the six cells. After hearing the trial and watching the confession embedded within it, they received pattern instructions from the judge regarding reasonable doubt and the legal definition of ‘murder’ (the appropriate charge in the state in which the trial takes place). They next completed a questionnaire asking them to choose a verdict (either guilty of murder or not guilty), estimate the probability of guilt, and rate on a 10-point scale their confidence in their verdict (from ‘no confidence at all’ to ‘complete confidence’), the authenticity
of the confession (defined for jurors as the extent to which they believe the defendant committed the murders recounted in the confession; the scale ranged from ‘not at all authentic’ to ‘completely authentic’), the degree to which the confession incriminates the defendant (from ‘not at all’ to ‘very much’), the extent to which the defendant seems to have a good memory for the crime event (from ‘does not at all have a good memory’ to ‘has an excellent memory’), and the voluntariness of the confession (from ‘not at all voluntary’ to ‘completely voluntary’). As a manipulation check, jurors also rated the amount of detail in the confession (from ‘no detail at all’ to ‘very large amount of detail’). Additionally, to make sure they accurately remembered the confession, they answered 13 open-ended questions about its content. Ten of those questions asked about the 10 critical details shown in Table 1, and three questions were fillers. The jurors were explicitly told that the information requested by a particular question might not have been presented within the confession, and if so they should write ‘information was not provided’.

### Results

**Amount of detail in confession (manipulation check)**

A $3 \times 2$ analysis of variance (the same approach used to examine all dependent variables discussed below except verdict) revealed a main effect of detail, $F(1,215) = 132.43, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.38$; as expected, jurors in the high detail conditions rated the confession as more detailed ($M = 8.75, SD = 1.57$) than jurors in the low detail conditions ($M = 5.67, SD = 2.28$). No other effects were found ($F$s < 2).

**Memory for confession**

Jurors’ responses to the questions asking them to recall the 10 critical details within the confession indicated that they remembered the information well regardless of condition (overall $M = 8.10, SD = 1.34$). We obtained no main effects and no interaction ($F$s < 2).

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### Table 1. Differences between low and high detail versions of the confession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>High detail version</th>
<th>Low detail version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defendant arrived at home:</td>
<td>at exactly 7:56</td>
<td>a little before 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend had bought:</td>
<td>green, unripe bananas</td>
<td>grocery items</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbor said:</td>
<td>defendant is invited to play poker tomorrow</td>
<td>something to defendant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defendant retrieved a knife:</td>
<td>with a red handle kitchen counter beside microwave four times</td>
<td>color not specified location not specified a few times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife came from:</td>
<td>his Dr Pepper kitchen counter beside microwave four times</td>
<td>his soda part of body not specified location not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defendant stabbed neighbor:</td>
<td>on his left elbow on the floor under the kitchen table</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighbor spilled:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend touched neighbor:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girlfriend’s body was left:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defendant found cell phone:</td>
<td>in pocket of girlfriend’s yellow Adidas jacket</td>
<td>location not specified</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Each version of the confession contains approximately the same number of words.
Voluntariness of confession

As expected, we found a main effect of camera perspective, $F(2,215)=9.70$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p=0.08$ (see Table 2). A Newman–Keuls test showed that jurors in the suspect-focused condition rated the confession as more voluntary than those in the other focus conditions. There was no main effect of detail or interaction ($Fs < 2$).

Verdict

Because verdict was a dichotomous variable, a hierarchical log-linear analysis was used to test the effects of camera perspective and detail. A main effect of detail emerged, revealing that jurors who watched the high detail confession rendered significantly more guilty verdicts than those who watched the low detail confession, $\chi^2(1, n=221)=6.64$, $p=0.01$. There was no main effect of camera perspective, $\chi^2(2, n=221)=2.73$, $p=0.25$.

Additionally, the two-way interaction was significant, $\chi^2(2, n=221)=8.13$, $p < 0.02$, indicating that guilty verdicts differed as a function of detail only when the jurors viewed the suspect-focused confession. In this condition, jurors exposed to the high detail confession were much more likely to render a guilty verdict than those in the low detail confession. In contrast, jurors who viewed the detective and equal focused interrogations did not greatly differ with regard to verdicts.

Probability of guilt

We found a main effect of detail such that high-detail jurors thought the defendant was more likely guilty than low-detail jurors, $F(1,215)=4.22$, $p=0.04$, $\eta^2_p=0.02$. There was also a main effect of camera perspective, $F(2,215)=3.42$, $p=0.03$, $\eta^2_p=0.03$. According to a Newman–Keuls test, jurors in the suspect-focused condition gave higher probability ratings than those in the detective-focused condition; the equal focus mean fell between the other two and did not differ from either.

In addition to the main effects, an interaction emerged, $F(2,215)=3.39$, $p=0.04$, $\eta^2_p=0.03$. Simple effects tests indicated that jurors watching the high detail, suspect-focused interrogation gave higher probability ratings than those watching the low detail, suspect-focused interrogation, $F(2,215)=10.85$, $p < 0.001$. The ratings did not differ for jurors watching either the equal or detective-focused interrogations ($Fs < 1$).

Degree to which confession was incriminating

Regarding incrimination ratings, we found a main effect of detail, with high-detail jurors rating the confession as more incriminating than low-detail jurors, $F(1,215)=8.52$, $p=0.004$, $\eta^2_p=0.04$. In addition, the mean for jurors who saw the suspect-focused confession was higher than the means in the other two camera perspective conditions, $F(2,215)=3.09$, $p=0.05$, $\eta^2_p=0.03$.

We also obtained an interaction, $F(2,215)=3.45$, $p=0.03$, $\eta^2_p=0.03$. To clarify this relationship, simple effects analyses revealed that jurors who viewed the high detail, suspect-focused condition rated the confession as more incriminating than low detail, suspect-focused jurors, $F(2,215)=14.72$, $p < 0.001$; however, there was no
Table 2. Jurors’ mean judgments and proportion of guilty verdicts as a function of amount of detail and camera perspective.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Voluntariness</th>
<th>Verdict</th>
<th>Probability of guilt</th>
<th>Incrimination</th>
<th>Defendant’s memory</th>
<th>Authenticity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Suspect-focused</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low detail</td>
<td>7.36 (2.03)</td>
<td>0.11 (1.01)</td>
<td>0.68 (0.24)</td>
<td>6.81 (2.49)</td>
<td>5.47 (2.72)</td>
<td>6.17 (2.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High detail</td>
<td>8.07 (1.70)</td>
<td>0.85 (0.53)</td>
<td>0.85 (0.14)</td>
<td>8.80 (1.59)</td>
<td>8.95 (1.24)</td>
<td>8.25 (1.91)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7.74 (1.89)*</td>
<td>0.50 (0.87)</td>
<td>0.77 (0.21)*</td>
<td>7.86 (2.28)*</td>
<td>7.30 (2.70)*</td>
<td>7.26 (2.33)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Equal focus</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low detail</td>
<td>6.00 (2.75)</td>
<td>0.24 (0.98)</td>
<td>0.69 (0.21)</td>
<td>6.70 (2.22)</td>
<td>5.54 (2.32)</td>
<td>6.38 (2.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High detail</td>
<td>6.64 (2.58)</td>
<td>0.27 (0.98)</td>
<td>0.72 (0.26)</td>
<td>7.21 (2.62)</td>
<td>6.15 (2.97)</td>
<td>6.30 (2.94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.30 (2.67)b</td>
<td>0.26 (0.97)</td>
<td>0.70 (0.24)b</td>
<td>6.94 (2.41)b</td>
<td>5.83 (2.64)b</td>
<td>6.34 (2.60)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Detective-focused</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low detail</td>
<td>6.33 (2.42)</td>
<td>0.20 (0.99)</td>
<td>0.68 (0.25)</td>
<td>6.98 (2.25)</td>
<td>5.45 (2.60)</td>
<td>6.05 (2.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High detail</td>
<td>6.23 (2.05)</td>
<td>0.37 (0.94)</td>
<td>0.67 (0.17)</td>
<td>7.14 (2.37)</td>
<td>5.97 (3.11)</td>
<td>6.34 (3.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.28 (2.24)b</td>
<td>0.28 (0.97)</td>
<td>0.67 (0.22)b</td>
<td>7.05 (2.29)b</td>
<td>5.69 (2.84)b</td>
<td>6.19 (2.64)b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total low detail</td>
<td>6.55 (2.47)*</td>
<td>0.19 (0.99)*</td>
<td>0.68 (0.23)*</td>
<td>6.83 (2.30)*</td>
<td>5.49 (2.53)*</td>
<td>6.19 (2.26)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total high detail</td>
<td>7.04 (2.25)*</td>
<td>0.52 (0.86)*</td>
<td>0.75 (0.21)*</td>
<td>7.78 (2.32)*</td>
<td>7.13 (2.87)*</td>
<td>7.04 (2.79)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standard deviations are in parentheses. Ratings of voluntariness, incrimination, defendant’s memory, and authenticity were made on a 10-point scale; higher numbers indicate greater levels of each variable. Means in the same column that appear in boldface differ significantly according to simple effects analyses (described in the text) that were calculated to clarify significant interactions. Means in the same column that do not share the same alphabetical superscript (or numerical superscript in the case of the two ‘total detail’ rows) differ significantly.
difference between the high and low detail conditions for the equal and detective-focused videos ($F$s < 1).

**Defendant’s memory**

When jurors rated the extent to which they believed that the defendant had a good memory for the crime event, a main effect of detail emerged, $F(1,215) = 20.13, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.09$. Ratings were higher in the high- than the low-detail condition. Moreover, a main effect of camera perspective revealed that suspect-focused jurors thought the defendant’s memory was better than those in the other two camera conditions, $F(2,215) = 7.98, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.07$.

An interaction was also revealed, $F(2,215) = 8.18, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.07$. To understand the exact nature of this relationship, simple effects analyses were conducted. We found that jurors who watched the high detail, suspect-focused confession thought the defendant had a better memory than jurors in the low detail, suspect-focused confession, $F(2,215) = 8.24, p < 0.01$. There was no difference between means in the other camera perspective conditions ($F$s ≤ 1).

**Authenticity of confession**

A main effect of detail was uncovered for ratings of the confession’s authenticity; ratings were higher in the high compared to the low detail condition $F(1,215) = 5.31, p = 0.02, \eta^2_p = 0.02$. Furthermore, there was a main effect of camera perspective, $F(2,215) = 3.68, p = 0.03, \eta^2_p = 0.03$. Jurors in the suspect-focused condition rated the confession as more authentic than jurors in the other two perspective conditions.

We also discovered an interaction, $F(2,215) = 4.05, p = 0.02, \eta^2_p = 0.04$. Simple effects analyses showed that jurors who watched the high detail, suspect-focused confession reported a stronger belief than low detail jurors that the defendant actually committed the murders, $F(2,215) = 13.50, p < 0.001$. There was no effect of detail for either the equal or detective-focused confessions ($F$s < 1).

We hypothesized that, in the suspect-focused video condition, amount of detail would influence jurors’ perceptions of the accuracy of the defendant’s memory, which in turn would affect judgments of authenticity. In order to test this prediction, we conducted a path analysis using the guidelines provided by Baron and Kenny (1986). Regression analyses were conducted to determine the significance of the path coefficients. The results of the mediational analysis using data from the suspect-focused condition supported our prediction (see Figure 1). We obtained significant beta coefficients for the path from amount of detail to ratings of the defendant’s memory and for the path from the defendant’s memory to the authenticity of the confession (for both coefficients $p < 0.001$). The direct path from amount of detail to authenticity (after partialing out the effect of the defendant’s memory) was not significant ($p = 0.27$), suggesting a fully mediated model is more appropriate.

PRODCLIN (MacKinnon, Fritz, Williams, & Lockwood, 2007) was used to test the significance of the indirect effect of the mediated model. This procedure is more accurate than the Sobel method or bootstrapping because, in calculating the confidence interval, it takes into account the fact that the product of two non-zero normal variables is distributed asymmetrically. A significant indirect effect of detail
on authenticity through the mediator (defendant’s memory) was revealed, which yielded lower and upper 95% confidence limits of 0.64 and 2.33.

Discussion

Our results regarding voluntariness replicate Lassiter and colleagues’ (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002; Lassiter, Diamond, Schmidt, & Elek, 2007; Lassiter, Geers et al., 2002; Lassiter et al., 2001) finding that, compared to other camera perspectives, focusing on the suspect/defendant biases observers to judge the confession as more likely freely given. As explained earlier, this effect may occur because (a) observers visually attend to the more salient individual within the scene and also judge that person as having a more causal role (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002; Taylor & Fiske, 1978) and (b) observers use visual content within the video to assess voluntariness, and content varies with camera perspective (Ware et al., 2008). Thus, when the focus was on the defendant, our jurors assigned him more responsibility for choosing to confess, which in turn made his statement seem more likely authentic and more incriminating. In contrast, when the focus was solely or partially on the detective, jurors attributed at least some of the responsibility to that individual, inferring that he may have pressured or forced the defendant to make a statement; consequently, the confession seemed less authentic and incriminating. As other researchers have typically reported (e.g. Lassiter, 2002; Lassiter et al., 2007), we obtained no difference between the equal and detective-focused conditions.

Our study extends Lassiter and colleagues’ findings by demonstrating that the details in a confession can influence jurors when the confession video focuses on the defendant. In this situation, jurors infer that the defendant’s statement was more likely voluntarily given, so more rather than fewer trivial details may imply that the defendant has a comprehensive, perceptually-based memory for the crime and is probably providing an accurate account. Thus, more details suggest greater authenticity and guilt (at least up to a point; future research could examine whether there is a limit to the number of details jurors think a defendant could plausibly recall). In contrast, when the video focuses partly or primarily on the interrogator, jurors consider the defendant less accountable for the confession and may assume instead that it resulted at least to an extent from police coercion and that the defendant perhaps simply said whatever he thought the detective wanted to hear. In

Figure 1. A mediational model was tested to examine the impact that amount of detail may have on judgments of authenticity via perceptions of the defendant’s memory. Numbers on the paths are standardized regression coefficients, and asterisks indicate significant coefficients, $p < 0.001$.
In this situation, the defendant’s memory for the crime is less relevant (because it is less certain that he committed it), and the amount of detail in the confession is not diagnostic. To summarize the results another way, our results suggest that a change in the camera perspective may affect jurors’ judgments if the confession is sufficiently detailed (as in Lassiter, Geers et al., 2002), but otherwise not.

Like previous researchers (Bell & Loftus, 1989; Shedler & Manis, 1986), we found no evidence that the effects of level of detail are mediated by participants’ memory for the critical information. Although it seems logical that a very detailed confession might be recalled more easily or more accurately than a less detailed one, our jurors remembered the confession equally well across both detail conditions. This finding, combined with the results of the mediational analysis, imply that the trivial details in the confession probably exerted their influence by affecting jurors’ inferences about the defendant’s memory for the crime event. On the other hand, we did not manipulate retention interval. Actual trials may last for days or weeks, so that considerable time could elapse from the presentation of the confession to the verdict decision. In such situations jurors’ memory for the confession could play a role. Future research could examine this issue.

In most of the conditions in the present experiment, fewer than half of the jurors chose guilty verdicts. Although confessions are often described as very damaging to defendants at trial (Drizin & Leo, 2004; Kassin & Neumann, 1997), conviction rates are affected by numerous variables, including jurors’ perceptions of the extent to which investigators pressured the defendant to confess, judicial instructions regarding the confession, other evidence presented by the prosecution to corroborate the confession, and (of course) the camera perspective. Previous researchers have sometimes reported relatively low conviction rates within individual experiments (e.g. 0–40% in Study 1 of Lassiter, Geers et al., 2002; 18–29% in Experiment 1 of Kassin & Sukel, 1997). Thus, our verdict results are not anomalous.

It is interesting to consider how jurors would react to a confession that not only has few details but also includes explicit declarations by the suspect that he or she is unable to describe particular details. In the low detail confession in the present research, the defendant omitted specifics that were present in the high detail version but never said that he could not remember or did not know certain pieces of information. One might hypothesize that ‘don’t know’ statements would emphasize the low level of details in the confession and make it salient to jurors that the account is vague, with the consequence that they would discount the (suspect-focused) confession even more than our low detail, suspect-focused version. On the other hand, research on eyewitness credibility indicates that, although ‘don’t know’ statements in witnesses’ reports do predict accuracy, observers underutilize this cue (Leippe, Manion, & Romanczyk, 1992). Thus, it is possible that jurors would not rate confessions containing such statements any differently than confessions that simply lack many descriptive details.

Our results are applicable to actual police investigations. As Kassin and Gudjonsson (2004) noted, detectives typically push suspects to provide a narrative account of the crime rather than a simple admission of guilt (‘Yes, I did it’), but unfortunately this narrative could include details gleaned from news reports, leading questions, photographs, or other secondhand sources instead of personal experience. Consequently, ‘police-induced false confessions often contain vivid and accurate sensory details about the crime scene and victim’ (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004, p. 59)
so that they seem to be authentic descriptions of the perpetrators’ crimes. Coupled with the common practice of videotaping confessions using a suspect-focused perspective, the high level of detail could ultimately increase the probability that jurors will convict an innocent defendant.

As previously noted, in recent years law enforcement agencies have increasingly chosen to videotape confessions, and this trend is expected to continue (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002). Lassiter and colleagues doubt that police departments would be willing to film interrogations by focusing on the detective, but they remain more hopeful that policies requiring equal-focus videos might be adopted, as they have been in New Zealand. Such policies would be beneficial; in many comparisons equal-focus participants have demonstrated no greater bias than those in the detective-focused condition (e.g. Lassiter et al., 2007).

Although videotaping is now common and is increasing, some departments audiotape confessions or obtain them in writing. Would the amount of detail in the confession affect jurors’ judgments using those formats? We propose that detail would still interact with perceived voluntariness, which could be influenced by, for example, evidence of high levels of police pressure, such as indications that the defendant was in physical discomfort during the interrogation or that the investigator seemed to threaten the defendant with a weapon (Kassin & Sukel, 1997).

The present results could arguably have limited generalizability because the mock jurors were college students who did not deliberate or make decisions with real consequences. However, the same effects of camera perspective have been obtained with community samples as with students (Lassiter, Geers et al., 2002), regardless of deliberation (Lassiter, Beers et al., 2002; Lassiter, Geers et al., 2002), and even when participants believed they would have to justify their judgments (Lassiter et al., 2001). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the interaction between amount of detail and camera perspective would also emerge under more realistic conditions; additional research could explore this possibility as well as attempt to replicate the results of the single experiment we conducted.

Further research is especially important given that ‘false confessions are the primary cause of wrongful convictions in many cases’ (Kassin & Gudjonsson, 2004, p. 49). In Drizin and Leo’s (2004) analysis of 125 cases involving proven false confessions, 81% of the suspects who proceeded to trial were convicted. Of those incarcerated after being convicted or through a plea agreement, 61% served at least 6 years, and 16% had not been released at the time that Drizin and Leo’s research was published.

Sometimes false confessors are exonerated, for example through the results of DNA testing that has become available in recent years. Roughly 25% of the more than 200 convictions that have been overturned in the US through DNA analyses involved false confessions (Innocence Project, n.d.). Some of these individuals served time on death row before being exonerated, and such troubling cases have prompted a few organizations, such as the American Bar Association, to recommend a national moratorium on capital punishment (American Bar Association, n.d.). Clearly, more study is critically needed to understand how jurors use both content and presentational information to evaluate retracted confessions.
References


