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The Systemic Side of Disinformation

The Reid Technique as exploitative disinformation production

By: Jayden Perez

Introduction

The police in the US learn and employ the Reid Technique more than any other interrogation technique, and yet it regularly produces false confessions. By applying theories of systemic disinformation to the Reid Technique, I uncover four ways that it systemically produces disinformation: psychological stress, implicit bias, bait questions, and internalization.

Psychological Stress

The Reid technique relies on inducing psychological stress to elicit confessions that are then seen as having a high degree of truth because the person interrogated has admitted to committing the crime. The stress involved in eliciting these confessions can lead perfectly innocent people to confess to a crime they haven't truly committed (Kassin, 2015 27-28). The Reid Technique achieves its high confession rate through the targeted application of stress. The guidebook to criminal interrogation and confessions describes the technique as "a multistep approach to interrogation that is designed to increase the anxiety associated with denial while reducing the anxiety associated with confession" (Inbau et al, 2001). These interrogations meet resistance; so experienced officers try to hold people as long as possible. When looking at proven false confession cases that recorded interrogation time, 73% of all cases far exceeded the average length of 1-2 hours (Drizin, S. A., & Leo, R. A., 2004 (947-950)). These stress-induced confessions are then seen as having a high degree of truth, undermining their ability to tell the truth later.



Distinguished Professor Saul Kassin, Ph.D. in front of his "wall of faces," a photo archive of innocent people convicted after false confessions

Implicit Bias

The Reid Technique teaches police officers to misidentify their implicit biases as intuition that leads to truthful confessions. The police officers using the Reid Technique are not necessarily pushing disinformation, but are being harnessed as tools to create disinformation. In lieu of genuine investigation, interrogators are told to focus exclusively on confessions, and were formerly taught to use "relevant bio-social characteristics" such as race and gender in identifying guilt (The Reid Technique Archive). This leads officers, and the Reid Technique to disproportionately target people of color and other marginalized communities. When combined with the already harsher treatment people of color face from policing, the Reid technique reinforces divisions between these communities and police. The Reid technique upholds racial division and structural inequalities wherever it is implemented. (Kuo and Marwick, Racial and Imperial histories of information).

Bait Questions

Bait questions are hypotheticals used by interrogators to imply the existence of incriminating evidence, which may or may not exist. The usage of the bait question is not just harmful to the subject of the interrogation, but also to jurors. When interrogations are used as evidence during trials, the Reid Technique strategy of bait questions can lead jurors to misremember falsified evidence as legitimate. This effect persists even when jurors were warned that falsified evidence existed in the interrogation footage (Timothy J. Luke et al, 264-269). The prosecution would be aware of the falsified evidence and are still willing to present interrogations that showcase them, a clear case of disinformation. Bait questions can also be harmful by causing subjects of interrogation to believe confessing is the most rational choice, allowing them to avoid worse consequences. In some rare instances, they can cause individuals to believe they committed the crime outright, a phenomenon known as internalization. .

Internalization

The Reid Technique practices of intense psychological stress and lying about evidence via the bait question can cause people to question the legitimacy of their own experiences. Some individuals can come to truly believe they have committed the crime they were suspected of. This is called internalization, described by professor Kassin as a phenomenon "in which innocent people, subjected to highly misleading claims about the evidence, question their own innocence, come to infer their own guilt, and in some cases confabulate memories to support that inference" (Kassin, 2015). This represents a clear epistemic wrong as these suspects are unable to come to a fair conclusion. The presence of false information and intense stress wrongly obstructs their cognitive success (Mattias and Ram, 1.6). This tactic is especially effective on individuals who struggle with mental illness and adolescents, further upholding structural inequality (Kuo and Marwick, Racial and Imperial histories of information).

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