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Blind Injustice: Wrongful Convictions

22 April 2019

The Innocent Man

Tunnel Vision is one of the most dangerous things that happens to the players in the criminal justice system. Tunnel vision and confirmation bias are the first steps in a very slippery slope that lead to wrongful convictions. Tunnel vision both affects, and is affected by, other flawed procedures in the criminal justice system. For example, police officers are taught bad interrogation techniques that make them think they are good at detecting lies. This leads to the police getting tunnel vision, which opens the door and leads to all of the other things that are wrong with the criminal justice system. Tunnel vision leads to junk science; the experts already have in their mind who is supposed to be guilty and it can skew how they look at evidence. Tunnel vision leads to false confessions; interrogators force a confession because they are convinced that the person they are interrogating is guilty. Tunnel vision leads to jailhouse snitches, who are coached on what to say based on what the prosecutor believes is the right story. The list goes on and on; tunnel vision is such an integral part of the flawed criminal justice system. A perfect example of tunnel vision in practice are the two murders that occurred in Ada, Oklahoma in 1982 and 1984. The detectives and the attorneys had such strong confirmation bias and tunnel vision that they sent four innocent people to jail. Their tunnel vision led to a snowball effect that compounded all of the issues into the system into each case.

The first of two gruesome murders that happened in Ada was of Debbie Carter. Debbie Carter was a 21 year old that worked as a bartender and server at the Coach Light Club. On the night of December 7th, 1982, she was seen talking to someone outside of her car after work.

That was the last time that she was seen. Later that night, between approximately 2:30 a.m. and 3:00 a.m., Carter's friend Vietta received a phone call from Carter asking her to come and pick her up at her apartment because someone was there who made her uncomfortable". Vietta then got another call from Carter saying that she was ok and had decided to stay home. The next morning, another friend of Debbie's went to her apartment and found the place a mess and Debbie Carter naked and dead on the ground. Glen Gore, a witness from the Coach Light the night before, said that a man named Ron Williamson was the one that was arguing with Debbie Carter the night that she died. Paired with the fact that a friend of Debbie's said that Ron made her nervous, Ron became the primary suspect. Five years after the murder, Dennis Fritz was also brought in for questioning because a jailhouse snitch said that he had confessed to the murder. After interrogation, Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz both confessed to the murder. They were convicted of the murder and sentenced to the death penalty.

A couple years later, in 1984, Denice Haraway went missing. Denice worked at McAnally's gas station, and on April 28, 1984, she was taken from the convenience store and was never seen again. A woman who worked a gas station close to Denice's saw a couple suspicious people in her store right before the kidnapping happened, so she worked with the police to create a composite sketch. The police received many calls after releasing the sketches, and quite a few people said that one of the sketches looked like Tommy Ward. Tommy was interrogated extensively, and after a few days he told the police that he had a dream about the murder. The police recorded Tommy recounting his dream and used it as a confession tape. Karl Fontenot was taken in the next day and he too recounted the murder on tape. Both of the men implicated an Odell Titsworth, and said that he was the one that actually killed Denice. However, Titsworth had a broken arm and an alibi that removed him as a suspect.

Both Tommy Ward and Karl Fontenot were convicted of murder based mainly on their confession tapes.

As straightforward as these cases may seem, they were actually riddled with bad and in some cases illegal practice. In my opinion, the biggest driving factor that caused all of the problems was the fact that Ada is such a small, close knit town. When Debbie Carter was murdered, it caused a huge ripple in a lot of people's lives. The community was very invested in the investigation, and on top of that, the police were personally connected to Debbie and Denice and were also personally invested. The police officers and prosecutors felt an immense pressure to solve the cases. For example, Dennis Smith, the lead detective, had a daughter that was friends with the victims. He was understandably rattled by this, and promised that he would solve the murders before he retired. This, however, is a very poor mentality to have when entering a criminal investigation. When there is such a pressure and conviction to convict, there is a high tendency to cut corners in order to put who they believe is guilty in jail.

From the very beginning, all of the players in the system developed tunnel vision. There are so many instances where someone can look back on these cases and be shocked in hindsight at what the police and prosecutors did. However, since everyone believed that these men were truly guilty, everyone was willing to cut some corners to make sure that the bad guys got off the streets. One example of tunnel vision that shocked me the most was the response to Ricky Jo Simmonds. While he was in jail, Ron Williamson heard that a man named Ricky Jo Simmonds had confessed to the crime. Ron understandably got really worked up about it and made a video yelling about how Ricky Jo Simmonds actually committed the crime and that he was innocent. The police, however, did not look into this lead at all. Instead, the psychologist said that Ricky Jo Simmonds was the name of Ron's alter ego and that this tape of him yelling about Simmonds was actually a confession to the crime. Even after Ricky Jo Simmonds actually

confessed and turned himself into the police, they told him that he was making it all up. In the eyes of the police and prosecutors, they already had the right men in jail, so Simmonds had to be lying. He was cleared as a suspect without any investigation because the police had developed such a strong tunnel vision that blinded them from looking into any other options.

There were so many examples of tunnel vision in both of these cases. When police were given a journal and receipts that gave Ron Williamson an alibi, both mysteriously went missing as the police didn't want anything that could be used to disprove their story of events. A girl came to the police and said that she was at a party with Tommy Ward the night of the murder and that he couldn't have committed the crime. The police not only didn't listen to her or consider what she had to say, but they also told her that what she was telling them was false. Bill Peterson told her "You're not leaving here until you get back on that stand". He was so sure that she was lying that he tried to force her to change her memory. Debbie's sister told cops about previous incidents with Glen (the real perpetrator) and Debbie and they just let that go under the rug. There were also a few leads that the police didn't even look into. They got some tips that a man named Billy Charley looked like the sketches, and a friend of Charley's even said that the sketches looked like Charley and that Charley is capable of this crime. However, this tip wasn't even put in the police report and Billy Charley was cleared as a suspect. A friend of Billy Charley's, Jim Bob Howard, confessed to shooting a female clerk in Ada in a robbery that had gone wrong. This evidence against Billy Charley and Jim Bob Howard in hindsight looks like pretty damning evidence that should have at least been looked into, but the police simply ignored this lead. There isn't any report of even an interview with Billy Charley. A man named Floyd McGraw was another possible suspect, but Gary Rogers, the most logical person to go talk to him, passed on an interview. The police and prosecutors were so convinced that they had the right people that they disregarded any information that contradicted what they

believed was the correct version of the story. They kept pushing even when all the evidence went against them. Even after Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz were exonerated, people still believe that these men committed the crime. The DA said that he is still looking into this case as he doesn't believe that these men were innocent.

The biggest thing that sent these men to jail though was their confessions. Every single one of them, Ron, Dennis, Karl, and Tommy, confessed to their respective crimes on tape. This was pretty damning for them, as most juries don't understand the concept of coerced confessions. Lay people who aren't in the system don't understand why someone who didn't commit a crime would commit to said crime. Therefore, although there wasn't really any evidence against these men, they were all assumed to be guilty of the murders by the juries because of their confessions. What the jury didn't hear, however, was everything that came before the confession tapes. They were held and questioned for hours before the camera was actually turned on. They took them into the interrogation rooms and "just [came] at [them] and started saying 'you did it, you know you did it, this is how you did it.... They kept lying and lying and in fact, after a while, it just got [them] to lie". The jury didn't see any of this. Another thing that was a sign that these were false, coerced confessions was the fact that all of the men being interrogated didn't seem to know what they were talking about - they were guided by leading questions from their interrogators. For example, this was an actual exchange that occurred during Karl Fontenot's confession. The interrogator asked, "What were you planning on doing with her?" Karl Fontenot replied "raping her". This wasn't exactly the answer that the police were looking for, so the next question posed was "raping her and then killing her and getting rid of her?". The interrogator was feeding Karl Fontenot exactly what he wanted him to say. It wasn't hard for them to pick up on what the police wanted from them. In the confessions, there were also facts about the case that the men knew that weren't directly fed to them. However, this

came from the fact that Ada was a very small town where news spread very quickly. For example, one fact that was confessed to by both Karl Fontenot and Tommy Ward was the color and style of the blouse that Denise was wearing when they took her. However, this was a piece of information that was going around town, and was no longer something that only the killer would know. On top of that, when Denise's body was found, she was wearing a shirt completely different than what the boys had described. They both said she was wearing a purple ruffled shirt with flowers on it, when in fact she was wearing a red striped t-shirt. But because they both came up with the same colored and style of blouse in their confession, it made it seem very convincing that they were both there the night that Denise disappeared.

All of the men that were interrogated in these cases caved and falsely confessed, and a big reason for that is that they were all mentally ill, especially Karl Fontenot and Ron Williamson. Karl was very slow when it came to his thinking, and his taped confession has very low level grammar. He had a very low IQ which made him very vulnerable to being manipulated into falsely confessing. Fontenot had "abnormally low intelligence - people with low IQs, low-level cognitive functioning, and high levels of immaturity tend to break much more easily". Ron Williamson wasn't unintelligent, but he had a lot of mental issues. He was bipolar and had paranoid tendencies, and he heard voices. Putting someone with low intelligence or mental issues in a room and proceeding to mess with their mind for hours can break this person very quickly.

A completely different thing that was used to wrongfully convict all of these men was junk science. One "science" that was used during the trials was hair analysis. In the Debbie Carter case, a hair was found on the washcloth that had been found in Debbie's mouth. An "expert hair witness" then confirmed that it was Dennis's pubic hair that was on the washcloth. This was definitely confirmation bias - there is no true science to hair matching. The expert simply went in

believing Dennis was guilty and therefore believed the hair matched Dennis's. Another junk science that was used was palm print analysis. There were smears of blood all over the walls at Debbie Carter's house, and they were able to get a partial hand print from one of the smears. An investigator compared the palm print to Debbie's and confirmed that it was not Debbie's handprint. However, it was found to not be Ron or Dennis's handprint either. Five years later, Debbie's body was exhumed to look at her handprint again. For the police and prosecutors' story to follow, the handprint had to be Debbie's because Ron, Dennis, and Debbie were the only ones there that night. With this mindset, the same investigator looked at her handprint five years after death and confirmed that it was Debbie's handprint. The body and therefore handprint had been decomposing for five years and yet the investigator somehow got a better read on the handprint than they did right after she died. Junk science carries a lot of weight in court considering how completely false it is. The jury believes what the investigators are saying because they drop big words and are called experts in their field. The investigators say they are 99% certain when truly it was just a blind guess. However, when a jury hears something is 99% certain, they probably hear it as 100% true.

On top of all the bad lawyering that came innocently enough from confirmation bias and tunnel vision, there was also a lot of bad lawyering in which the lawyers knew full well what they were doing. First of all, there were quite a few Brady violations in these cases. The biggest things that weren't turned over were a two hour interview, the fact that Denise was getting threatening calls, and 860 pages of police paperwork on the case. This is blatantly not allowed and it hindered the defense attorneys in properly representing their clients. On top of that, however, the defense attorneys that the convicted men got were not good at all. Ron Williamson's lawyer didn't introduce a tape in which Ricky Jo Simmonds confessed to committing the crime. Competency wasn't raised at all for Ron Williamson either. Before this trial

even happened, Ron Williamson was getting social security disability based on mental health. He had even been found incompetent to stand trial in a different case. However, Ron's defense attorney never brought up Ron Williamson's health issues. In all of these cases, "there was so much that was unsaid in the trial. And so much that was just kind of skewed. Because there was nobody fighting back as they could have. It was not apparent that he was an innocent man".

There were so many different aspects of these trials that compounded to put these men in prison. In 1999, Ron Williamson and Dennis Fritz were exonerated for the murder of Debbie Carter. They were exonerated by DNA evidence. However, Karl Fontenot and Tommy Ward were not as lucky. They are still both in prison serving life sentences for crimes they very likely did not commit. Their case especially shows how frustrating wrongful convictions are. All of the stories are about the ones that are exonerated, but in truth most wrongful convictions are never righted. There are so many common errors that are made in our criminal justice system and many of these errors put together by the clouded judgement of the police and prosecutors put all four of these men in jail, and many more across the country.