

Remembering a Crime That You Didn't Commit

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The New Yorker:

In 1906, Hugo Münsterberg, the chair of the psychology laboratory at Harvard University and the president of the American Psychological Association, wrote in the *Times Magazine* about a case of false confession. A woman had been found dead in Chicago, garroted with a copper wire and left in a barnyard, and the simpleminded farmer's son who had discovered her body stood accused. The young man had an alibi, but after questioning by police he admitted to the murder. He did not simply confess, Münsterberg wrote; "he was quite willing to repeat his confession again and again. Each time it became richer in detail." The young man's account, he continued, was "absurd and contradictory," a clear instance of "the involuntary elaboration of a suggestion" from his interrogators. Münsterberg cited the Salem witch trials, in which similarly vulnerable people were coerced into self-incrimination. He shared his opinion in a letter to a Chicago nerve specialist, which made the local press. A week later, the farmer's son was hanged.

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A cognitive psychologist named Elizabeth Loftus, who had consulted on the case, wondered whether the children's memories might have been fabricated—in Münsterberg's formulation, involuntarily elaborated—rather than actually recovered.

Read the whole story: [*The New Yorker*](#)