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Wrongfully Convicted Seminar

Amanda Knox

Wrongful convictions occur all over the world. In the case of Amanda Knox an Italian conviction of the innocent American made global news. Amanda Knox was an American college student spending a semester studying abroad in Perugia, Italy. She lived in a small house with another international student, Meredith Kercher. Meredith was a British student majoring in English. The girls did not know each other before they began the program in Perugia.

After beginning her studies, Amanda found herself with far more free time than she was anticipating. Amanda met Patrick Lumumba who owned a bar and restaurant in Perugia called “Le Chic Pub”. Patrick offered Amanda a job and she accepted. Around this same time Amanda met a young man named Raffaele Sollecito. Raffaele introduced himself to Amanda at a concert. He was an Italian native with good English skills. The two hit it off almost immediately and spent every day together for the next week.

On the morning of November 2nd, 2007 Amanda returned to her house after spending the night with Raffaele. Patrick had texted Amanda the evening before saying she did not need to come into work, so she stayed at Raffaele’s apartment. Amanda came home as usual, dropping her things in her room and then going to the bathroom to take a shower. In the bathroom Amanda noticed a couple of drops of blood in the sink but disregarded them. After her shower she noticed a light bloody footprint on the bathmat and that the toilet had been used but not flushed. Now concerned, Amanda tried to find Meredith. Meredith did not answer, and her bedroom door was locked. Amanda immediately called Raffaele, telling him something was wrong and asking him

to come over. Raffaele attempted to break the door to Meredith's room down but was not successful. He then called the police reporting Meredith as missing.

The Italian police came to Amanda's house and broke the door to Meredith's room down. Inside Meredith was laying, dead on the floor covered with a blanket from her bed. Her clothes were strewn around the room along with a large amount of blood. Meredith had been raped and murdered. Giuliano Mignini was assigned to the case as the lead prosecutor. At the scene of the crime, Mignini found Meredith's body with nicks from the tip of a knife cut into her chin from someone threatening her. There was also no sign of a break-in, so the perpetrator had to have been let inside. When Mignini exited the house Amanda and Raffaele were consoling each other outside. Mignini believed the young couple's hugs and kisses were inappropriate given the situation. He began to suspect that Amanda had more to do with the crime than she was admitting.

Mignini later brought Amanda back to the house and took her inside for the first time since finding Meredith. Mignini opened the drawer with the kitchen knives and repeatedly instructed Amanda to look for any that are missing - for the murder weapon. Amanda broke down crying and covered her head with her hands. Mignini decided this was an act of guilt and that Amanda was trying to block out the memory of the cries Meredith let out during her attack.

Later that week Mignini called Raffaele into the police station to answer some questions. It was the middle of the night and the detectives were determined to get new information from him. Raffaele says he was hit across the head, screamed at, and asked the same questions repeatedly being told he was not satisfying interrogators. Eventually Raffaele told Mignini there was a chance Amanda did not spend the entire night before Meredith's murder at his home.

Amanda was immediately pulled into a separate interrogation room and told that Raffaele had finally turned her in. In an attempt to prove she was not out that evening, Amanda showed the interrogators her cell phone with a string of messages from Patrick, her boss. Patrick's message said she did not have to work and her response which translated to "we will see each other later, have a good night." Interrogators told her the message in Italian actually meant she agreed to meet with him. Under the same pressure as Raffaele, Amanda ultimately confessed to seeing Patrick that night, then to the open door to her house, and hearing the sound of Meredith screaming. Patrick was arrested but quickly released with an alibi for the night of the murder. Both Amanda and Raffaele later recanted these confessions, saying it was not true and only because of the immense pressure that was placed on them.

Soon after, police searched Raffaele's apartment and found a knife matching the forensic description of the one which killed Meredith. Around this same time law enforcement was finishing their investigation in Amanda's house and found the clasp to Meredith's bra clasp, which had been torn off, under a rug. DNA results from the evidence found at the scene of the crime quickly began coming back from the lab: the knife from Raffaele's apartment had Amanda's DNA on the handle and trace amounts of Meredith's DNA on the blade, Raffaele's DNA was found on the bra clasp, and a man named Rudy Hermann Guede's DNA was found throughout Meredith's bedroom.

Rudy was brought in and admitted to being with Meredith at the house the night of her death but said he did not kill her. At first Rudy was clear in saying Amanda was not home and had no part in Meredith's death, but after a few more interrogations his story changes. Rudy says

he saw Amanda walking away from the house after he found Meredith dead, but he still did not kill her.

Rudy was found guilty and sentenced to thirty years in prison. Amanda and Raffaele were also found guilty and sentenced to twenty-six and twenty-five years in prison. Three years after the murder both Amanda and Raffaele appealed the conviction and the investigation reopened. It was discovered that there had been contamination in the laboratory and that the DNA evidence found on the knife and bra clasp was not reliable. It was also found that the bras clasp had two other sets of unknown male DNA, in addition to Raffaele's, which the police were aware of but did not disclose.

Amanda and Raffaele were acquitted and released from prison. Rudy never admitted to the murder but finished out his sentence, receiving parole. Six years after the murder the Italian court threw out Amanda and Raffaele's acquittal. Again, the court found both Amanda and Raffaele innocent, saying that the evidence was all circumstantial with "stunning flaws" during a "frantic search" because of international attention.

The global audience throughout what is now known as "The Amanda Knox Case" undoubtedly had effects on the investigation and played a role in the two wrongful convictions. Throughout this investigation and set of trials the pressure from international media was extreme. The investigation focused on Amanda and Raffaele as prime suspects, and once journalists were aware no one wanted to question the idea, no one wanted to be viewed as moving backward. The only thing that mattered was a conviction.

Mignini especially focused on Amanda and, as the lead prosecutor, under the most pressure to find the truth. Mignini developed tunnel vision and quickly looked only for

information that supported Amanda and Raffaele's guilt. Mignini felt he knew the truth from the moment he arrived at the scene solely because Amanda and Raffaele, "were comforting each other with an affection inappropriate for the moment." Mignini even disregarded evidence of other DNA found at the scene of the crime. All that mattered was Amanda and Raffaele. He stated he did not feel bad throughout any part of the trial because he had no question about their guilt. Mignini felt certain even though the evidence was not.

It was Mignini's implicit bias that worked to support his immediate ideas. He believes a woman must have been involved in the murder because Meredith's body was covered with a blanket and, "a man would never think to do this." Mignini's instincts on human behavior solidified his investigation. Every piece of evidence that Mignini and his team could shape into evidence against Amanda and Raffaele confirmed their preconceived ideas. Confirmation bias fueled the investigation and conviction. Events such as Amanda's reaction to the knife drawer when she was taken back into her house were construed as terror from guilt, because if she was genuinely upset about what happened to Meredith, she may not be the murderer. Everyone in the investigation searched for evidence that supported Amanda's guilt and saw only that.

Furthermore, the lack of connection between Rudy's obvious involvement in the crime and Amanda's questionable involvement was never pursued. Mignini did not accept Amanda or Raffaele's recantation after their late-night interrogations. The information gained through both questionings was inconsistent and forced yet viewed as nothing less than the truth. After multiple attempts to give the police what they said they needed, Amanda implicated Patrick as the lead perpetrator. Her entire "confession" was centered around Patrick, but he was proven innocent less than two weeks later. Mignini ignored the flaw and interpreted the rest of Amanda's story as

good reasoning. Amanda's eyewitness identification was obviously bad, which would implicate that her entire memory was false. To this day Mignini does not believe there were any false memories involved in the investigation or that Amanda's memory was at all malleable. Beyond Amanda and Raffaele's interrogations, Rudy's description of the night Meredith was murdered was inconsistent. Not only did Rudy have no connection to Amanda or Raffaele, but his story changed over time to include Amanda. Although it is obvious that the confessions from Amanda and Raffaele were false, they were key pieces of evidence used in their convictions.

The psychology supporting wrongful convictions, coupled with the political pressure, put Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito in prison for nearly four years. The combination of tunnel vision, confirmation and implicit bias, false confessions from malleable memory, poor forensics, and political pressure from international press lead to two wrongful convictions and an attempt to repeat the convictions.

Lead prosecutor Mignini stated that "all proof has aspects of uncertainty," yet the evidence he found against Amanda was strong enough for him to believe with full certainty that she was guilty. Legitimate murder convictions anywhere in the world are not based on uncertainty.

Sources

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