Paging Constitutional Protections: Interrogating Vulnerable Suspects In Hospitals [People v. Sampson, 404 P.3d 273 ( Colo. 2017)]

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In People v. Sampson, the Colorado Supreme Court held that a police interrogation of a suspect while he was receiving medical treatment for a stab wound in a hospital did not violate the suspect’s rights. In doing so, the Colorado Supreme Court allowed police to continue to use arguably coercive interrogation techniques. This appears to run counter to one of the goals of Miranda warnings, which is to ensure that statements made during an interrogation are voluntary.

I. INTRODUCTION

Few duties are as crucial to successful police work as the interrogation of suspects. The purpose of interrogation is to find the truth, and it is an integral part of the criminal justice system. Interrogation only serves its purpose if the circumstances under which it is performed are reasonable—otherwise the public has no reason to believe the answers received. The interrogation of suspects who have just received medical attention for severe injuries, and are possibly under the influence of drugs does not help officers find the truth. Information that has been obtained from a person in a fragile mental or physical state should be viewed with a suspicious eye. In People v. Sampson, the interrogation failed to serve its truth-finding purpose.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Case Description

In January 2016, Aurora Police questioned James Ashley Sampson because he was in the hospital being treated for a stab wound. The police received a report that Sampson walked into the emergency room and claimed

he was stabbed by somebody on the street. Sampson initially claimed that “a good Samaritan drove him to the hospital.” The responding officer, Officer Martinez, checked the local police database using Sampson’s information and found that he had been suspected of domestic assault a year earlier. Because that incident took place near where Sampson told Officer Martinez he was stabbed, officers were dispatched to see if it was a crime scene.

Upon arriving, officers found blood on the apartment door, and forced their way inside when no one answered. Inside, they found Ms. R with a knife wound. She told them “Sampson had attacked [me] with a bat,” forcing her to defend herself using a knife. The officers at the scene passed this information along to Officer Martinez, who was still at the hospital with Sampson. Officer Martinez first told Sampson “that [I know] what had happened” that night, to which Sampson responded by again saying he had been stabbed while being robbed. Officer Martinez then repeated, “look, we already know what happened,” at which point Sampson admitted he was lying. After Sampson’s admission, Officer Martinez read Sampson his Miranda rights.

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3. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 274.
4. Id.
5. Id. Like much of the United States, domestic violence is a significant problem within Colorado. See NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN COLORADO 1 (2015), https://www.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/colorado.pdf [https://perma.cc/89CY-8BZC]. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, “domestic violence hotlines receive approximately 21,000 calls” per day, which averages about one call every 15 minutes. Id. Further, Colorado police received reports from at least 16,700 people in 2014 concerning domestic violence, and some of those people made multiple reports. Id. That same year, “1,108 people in Colorado were abducted by current or former intimate partners. Over half were abducted by current or former dating partners.” Id. These scenarios can be deadly, as “72% of all murder-suicides involve an intimate partner [and] 94% of the victims of these crimes are female.” Id.
6. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 274–75.
7. Id. at 275.
8. Id. Although not in the context of state court proceedings, federal courts have specific rules about when certain parties to an action can have pseudonyms; Rule 49.1(a) protects the identity of minors by requiring that courts use the minor’s initials in court filings. Fed. R. Civ. P. 49.1(a). The use of pseudonyms by adults in federal criminal cases is generally decided by the court on a case-by-case basis. Federal courts have always been reluctant to allow victims to proceed anonymously, but have historically protected the identities of juveniles. When an adult victim or witness wishes to proceed pseudonymously, the court must balance the witness’s privacy interests with the defendant’s Sixth Amendment right to confront his accuser. The standard for proceeding pseudonymously in criminal cases is generally higher than in civil cases and a victim must show that she is at risk of actual physical danger or public censure if she proceeds using her real name. In rare instances, courts have also considered damage to a person’s reputation and emotional impact of testifying when deciding whether or not to allow a victim to proceed pseudonymously.
10. Id.
11. Id.
12. Id.
13. Id.
Sampson said the fight began with an argument with Ms. R. When she told him to leave, he called another woman to come pick him up. According to Sampson, this angered Ms. R and caused her to attack and stab him.

The entire exchange between Officer Martinez and Sampson took place while Sampson was sitting in a hospital bed. At the time of the questioning, Sampson was “hooked up to medical equipment” and appeared to be in pain. Meanwhile, Officer Martinez stood uniformed and carrying a gun between Sampson and the lone door in the small room. Additionally, “Officer Martinez told Sampson he would be arrested after he was released from the hospital.” Because of these circumstances, Sampson challenged the admissibility of his statements.

At trial, the district court ruled that anything said before Sampson’s Miranda advisement was admissible. According to the district court judge, “[a]n objective observer would not believe [Sampson] was in police custody” before Miranda was given. Given Sampson’s claim that he was the victim in the incident and that he denied Ms. R’s allegations of violence, the court held that his statements were made voluntarily and that he was not in custody.

Moreover, the district court explicitly stated that Sampson’s mental condition at the time and any medical treatment to which he was subject were irrelevant to the admissibility of the statements.

However, the district court ruled that everything said after Officer Martinez provided the Miranda warning. The district court was concerned by the lack of facts surrounding Sampson’s medical treatment: it was unclear how serious the injuries were and what (or how much) medication Sampson had taken. According to the court, the State failed to meet its burden to show the waiver of Miranda rights was knowing and voluntary, and therefore the court suppressed the statements. The State filed an interlocutory appeal contesting the district court’s suppression of the statements after the Miranda warning.

14. Id.
15. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 275.
16. Id.
17. Id.
18. Id.
19. Id. at 278.
20. Id.
22. Id.
23. Id.
24. Id.
25. Id.
26. Id.
27. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 276.
28. Id.
29. Id.
B. Legal Background

In *Howes v. Fields*, the United States Supreme Court recognized a two-step analysis to determine whether a person was in custody. First, courts simply look at “the circumstances surrounding the interrogation.” Second, considering those circumstances, courts decide whether “a ‘reasonable person [believed] he or she was not at liberty to terminate the interrogation and leave.” However, “the ultimate inquiry is simply whether there is a ‘formal arrest or restraint on freedom of movement’ of the degree associated with a formal arrest.”

The phrase “in custody” is a term of art that has developed significantly since its inception, with multiple factors added into its analysis over the years. The United States Supreme Court has explicitly identified multiple factors for deciding whether someone is in custody: (1) location of the questioning; (2) duration of the questioning; (3) statements made during the interview; (4) whether the suspect was physically restrained during the questioning; and (5) whether the suspect was released at the end of the questioning. The Court has, however, unambiguously stated a “totality of circumstances” analysis is permitted—everything is considered relevant.

Courts consider the location of the interrogation critical to the analysis. In *Maryland v. Shatzer*, the Supreme Court discussed the issue of location to determine whether a break in custody had occurred. One of the main issues the Court addressed was whether releasing a prisoner back into the general prison population after interrogation still meant the prisoner was in custody for purposes of *Miranda*. The Court held that the prisoner was not still in custody, and emphasized that he lived in prison and “return[ed] to [his] accustomed surroundings and daily routine . . . regain[ing] the degree of control [he] had over [his life] prior to the interrogation.” The return to a

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32. Id. at 509 (quoting Stansbury v. California, 511 U.S. 318, 322–23 (1994)).
34. Beheler, 463 U.S. at 1125 (quoting Oregon v. Mathiason, 429 U.S. 492, 495 (1977)).
35. See Fields, 565 U.S. at 508–09.
36. Id. at 508–09; see, e.g., Mathiason, 429 U.S. at 494 (discussing a case where the interrogating officer told the defendant he was free to go, that he was not under arrest after taping his confession, and that he was allowed to leave after questioning); Beheler, 463 U.S. at 1122, 1124–26 (comparing the instant case to Mathiason and finding the defendant was not in custody, in part because he was released at the end of questioning).
37. See Beheler, 463 U.S. at 1125 (stating that a court can look at the totality of the circumstances when deciding whether a person is in “custody”).
38. See Maryland v. Shatzer, 559 U.S. 98, 110 (2010) (analyzing the issue of location and whether a person was in custody in the context of prison inmates).
40. Id. at 112.
41. Id. at 112–13.
42. Id. at 113 (alteration in original).
relatively normal life removed the “inherently compelling pressures” of custodial interrogation."\textsuperscript{43}

The Court has also looked to statements made during the interrogation.\textsuperscript{44} In \textit{Yarborough v. Alvarado},\textsuperscript{45} the Court analyzed whether a minor had been in custody for purposes of \textit{Miranda} warnings.\textsuperscript{46} Although the Court held that he was not, it specifically pointed to the fact that the officer did not affirmatively tell the minor he could leave as a reason why the minor was not in custody.\textsuperscript{47} Conversely, the officer did not make any threats or tell him he was going to be placed under arrest, which the Court found leaned in favor of finding he was not in custody.\textsuperscript{48} The Court noted that this was unlike \textit{Oregon v. Mathiason},\textsuperscript{49} in which the interrogating investigator explicitly told the defendant that he was not under arrest and that he was free to go.\textsuperscript{50}

The Supreme Court has also expressed concern for whether the person being interrogated was physically restrained.\textsuperscript{51} A person that has been physically restrained lacks the ability to terminate an encounter with police, thus physical restraint is, by definition, a restraint on one’s freedom of movement.\textsuperscript{52}

The Court dealt with this scenario in \textit{New York v. Quarles}\textsuperscript{53} after a man suspected of rape was questioned by police while handcuffed.\textsuperscript{54} The defendant attempted to evade police on foot after his victim found police and told them where her assailant was.\textsuperscript{55} After apprehending the defendant, the officer noticed the defendant was wearing an empty shoulder holster.\textsuperscript{56} The officer handcuffed the defendant and asked the defendant where the weapon was located.\textsuperscript{57} The defendant provided the officer the location, and later challenged the admissibility of the statement.\textsuperscript{58} In holding that the defendant was in custody, the Court found it dispositive that he had been handcuffed—which physically restrained his movement—and surrounded by four other officers when he was questioned.\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[43.] Id. at 114.
\item[45.] 541 U.S. 652 (2004).
\item[46.] See id. at 664–65.
\item[47.] Id. at 665.
\item[48.] Id. at 664–65.
\item[49.] 429 U.S. 492 (1977).
\item[52.] See id. (holding that the defendant was in custody where multiple armed officers surrounded, handcuffed, and questioned him).
\item[53.] 467 U.S. 649 (1984).
\item[54.] Id. at 651–52.
\item[55.] Id.
\item[56.] Id. at 652.
\item[57.] Id.
\item[58.] Id.
\item[59.] Id. at 655.
\end{enumerate}
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In addition to the United States Supreme Court’s factors, the Colorado Supreme Court has its own non-exhaustive list of factors courts are required to consider in determining custody:

(1) the time, place, and purpose of the encounter; (2) the persons present during the interrogation; (3) the words spoken by the officer to the defendant; (4) the officer’s tone of voice and general demeanor; (5) the length and mood of the interrogation; (6) whether any limitation of movement or other form of restraint was placed on the defendant during the interrogation; (7) the officer’s response to any questions asked by the defendant; (8) whether directions were given to the defendant during the interrogation; and (9) the defendant’s verbal or nonverbal response to such directions.\

Moreover, Colorado has previously addressed the issue of being “in custody” in a hospital setting using these factors. In People v. Minjarez, John Mario Minjarez took his infant daughter to the hospital because she was not breathing. Police suspected him of child abuse and began questioning him. Minjarez told the officers that his daughter had accidentally knocked over his younger daughter, which caused her to hit her head. The next day, police received information from the attending physicians that the injuries the child sustained were not consistent with Minjarez’s version of events. The officers returned to the hospital and questioned Minjarez. In finding that Minjarez was in custody, the court relied on several facts: (1) Minjarez was interrogated in a small room; (2) the room was private; (3) the police were seated between him and the door; (4) the tone of the conversation was “confrontational” and “accusatory;” (5) the officers told Minjarez they thought he was guilty; and (6) the officers initiated contact with Minjarez.

III. COURT’S DECISION

In Sampson, the Colorado Supreme Court looked at a number of factors and ultimately decided that Sampson was not in custody before or after Officer Martinez read him his Miranda rights in the hospital room. First, “the overall
The court held that factors weighing against custody included: (1) Sampson responded in “narrative form” to Officer Martinez’s “open-ended questions” and (2) Sampson was not obviously upset or emotional.71 The fact that Officer Martinez put himself in between Sampson and the door while Sampson was connected to medical equipment did not outweigh the other factors.72 Second, the court was persuaded by the fact that Officer Martinez did not assert his governmental authority.73 Although he was uniformed, Officer Martinez “did not physically restrain Sampson [or] touch, reference, or gesture toward his weapon.”74

Third, the court accorded significant weight to the fact that Officer Martinez told “Sampson he would be arrested upon [being] discharge[d]” from the hospital.75 The court stated this showed that Sampson was not in custody when he was being questioned—he would be in custody later.76 For the court, “confronting [Sampson] with the evidence against him and threatening . . . to charge [Sampson]” in no way amounted to custody.77 Fourth, the court considered that because medical staff could enter and exit the room during the interview, Sampson was less likely in custody.78 The court likened this to “the public nature” of traffic stops, and found that comparison persuasive.79

IV. COMMENTARY

This interrogation should have been considered confrontational.80 To begin, the circumstances surrounding the interrogation were inherently coercive.81 The United States Supreme Court has explicitly recognized the coercive nature of a government agent questioning someone and accusing him or her of a crime that could lead to an arrest.82 Thus, the interaction with Sampson went beyond mere questioning. He was in a small room while a police officer accused him of lying, the officers asked him questions a reasonable person would know were trying to induce an incriminating response, and it occurred while he received medical treatment for a knife wound.83

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70. Id.
71. Id.
72. Id.
73. Id.
74. Id.
75. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 278.
76. Id.
77. Id. (alteration in original).
78. Id. at 278.
79. See id. at 278–79 (comparing traffic stops to questioning a suspect in a hospital).
80. See id. at 278.
81. See id.
82. See Oregon v. Mathiason, 429 U.S. 492, 495 (1977) (“Any interview of one suspected of a crime by a police officer will have coercive aspects to it, simply by virtue of the fact that the police officer is part of a law enforcement system which may ultimately cause the suspect to be charged with a crime.”).
83. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 278.
Under United States Supreme Court precedent, the location of Sampson’s questioning should be considered inherently coercive. Sampson was questioned at the hospital in a small room that left only a short distance between him and Officer Martinez. Furthermore, unlike the defendant in Shatzer, Sampson was neither being released into a situation in which he would regain the control he previously lost nor was he in an environment that afforded him more control than before. Sampson was hooked up to medical equipment and, although there are not enough facts to be sure, he was likely under the influence of drugs that could have made him more susceptible to coercive questioning.

Although Sampson was told he would be arrested when he left the hospital, the communication did not mean that he was not in custody during the interrogation. This statement effectively told Sampson he was already in custody because he did not have the ability to leave the hospital. The Mathiason rational, that letting a suspect leave after questioning is an indicator that the suspect was not in custody, should indicate Sampson was in custody. Officers told Sampson he was going to be arrested as soon as he left, thus he was never allowed to leave the interrogation.

These details within Sampson’s case are substantially similar to the circumstances that the Minjarez court found persuasive. Moreover, a

84. Id. at 277; see Maryland v. Shatzer, 559 U.S. 98, 111–14 (2010).
85. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 278.
86. Shatzer, 559 U.S. at 110 (analyzing the issue of location and whether a person was in custody in the context of prison inmates).
87. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 276. The issue of what drugs Sampson could have been under the influence of was a particular sticking point for the district court. Id. at 276. The district court aptly noted that there was not enough of a factual record to establish whether Sampson had taken “any medications that might [have affected] his cognitive abilities,” therefore questioning whether his Miranda waiver was truly knowing and voluntary.
88. Id. The idea that drugs can make people more susceptible to divulging incriminating information is not a new idea—the Latin phrase “in vino veritas”—in wine there is truth embodies this concept. C.W. Muelheber, Interrogation under Drug Influence, 42 J. OF CRIM. L. & CRIMINOLOGY 513, 513 (1951). Early 19th century physicians mixed scopolamine, morphine, and chloroform together and gave it to mothers during childbirth. George Bimmerle, “Truth” Drugs in Interrogation, CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY (Sept. 22, 1993), https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol5no2html/v05i2a09p_0001.htm [https://perma.cc/R7TB-6XK3]. After the administration of scopolamine, these women began giving “exceedingly candid” and accurate answers when questioned. Id. In 1922, a Texas obstetrician, Robert House, was allowed to administer scopolamine to two suspected criminals. Id. Neither person admitted to criminal activity, even though there was evidence to support the charges, and both were eventually found not guilty by a jury. Id. Thus, “House concluded that a patient under the influence of scopolamine ‘cannot create a lie . . . and there is no power to think or reason.’” Id. Reports of his experiment are believed to be where the term “truth serum” was created. Id. Scopolamine was eventually abandoned for use in interrogations due to its side effects. Id.
89. Sampson, 404 P.3d at 278.
90. Id.; see Oregon v. Mathiason, 429 U.S. 492, 495 (1977) (indicating that restricting a suspect’s “freedom to depart” would be considered in favor of holding that a custodial interrogation occurred).
91. Id.
92. Compare People v. Minjarez, 81 P.3d 348, 351–52 (Colo. 2003) (finding the defendant had been in “custody” when the defendant was interrogated in a small room, the interrogation took place in a private room, the police were seated between him and the door, the tone of the conversation was “confrontational” and “accusatory,” the officers told the defendant they thought he was guilty, and the officers initiated contact with
uniformed officer can be considered inherently coercive given the sociological tendency to comply with the commands of people in positions of power.\textsuperscript{93} Furthermore, the nature of human psychology means that an officer does not need to touch or gesture towards his weapon to command authority possessed by virtue of the uniform.\textsuperscript{94} These details lend credence to the idea that a reasonable person in Sampson’s situation would not have felt free to terminate the encounter and that Sampson therefore was in custody.\textsuperscript{95}

V. CONCLUSION

In this case, Sampson was in custody because of the nature of his environment and the inherently coercive interaction with the law enforcement officer. Based on the Colorado Supreme Court’s own precedent, the outcome of Sampson’s case does not appear to comport with analysis that has been laid out in case law. The district court was correct to recognize that Sampson was clearly in custody and the nature of the interaction was obviously coercive. Allowing interrogation under factual situations such as Sampson’s only serves to increase the coerciveness of interrogations.

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\textsuperscript{93} See Stanley Milgram, \textit{Behavioral Study of Obedience}, 67 J. OF ABNO RML & SOC. PSYCHOL. 371, 372 (1963). The Milgram experiment, for example, tested how adult men respond when an authority figure gives them a command. \textit{Id.} During this experiment, the adult men (the “participants”) were commanded by another man in a technician’s coat to shock a third man (the “victim”) using “a simulated shock generator…with 30 clearly marked voltage levels that range from 15 to 450 volts.” \textit{Id.} at 372–73. The victim was separated from the other two by a wall so he could be heard, but not seen. \textit{Id.} at 373. The man in the technician’s coat commanded each participant to administer increasingly higher levels of electroshock, despite the pleadings of the fake victim, until reaching the point on the machine that read “Danger: Severe Shock.” \textit{Id.} at 372–73. To the experimenters’ surprise, a high number of participants continued to electroshock levels that would have killed the victim had the shocks been real. \textit{Id.} at 376.

\textsuperscript{94} See \textit{id.} at 371–78; "Sampson," 404 P.3d at 278 (saying Officer Martinez did not expressly or impliedly use his authority as an officer because he did not gesture towards his weapon).

\textsuperscript{95} See Howes v. Fields, 565 U.S. 499, 508–09 (2012) (discussing relevant factors for when a reasonable person would not feel free to terminate an interrogation); Thompson v. Keohane, 516 U.S. 99, 112 (1995) (giving standard for determining when a person is considered to be in custody for \textit{Miranda} purposes).
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