



After innocence: Perceptions of individuals who have been wrongfully convicted

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Purpose. Although it is easy to assume that individuals who have been wrongfully convicted are stigmatized, research has not systematically examined this issue. This research compares perceptions of individuals who have been wrongfully convicted to perceptions of offenders to investigate the stigma that wrongfully convicted persons report.

Method. Participants were randomly assigned to complete surveys regarding their attitudes, stereotypes, and discrimination tendencies towards one of three different groups: individuals who were wrongfully convicted of a crime, actual offenders, or people in general (control).

Results. Results suggested contemptuous prejudice towards offenders and wrongfully convicted persons. In comparison to the control group, individuals who had been wrongfully convicted were stereotyped more negatively, elicited more negative emotions, and were held at a greater social distance. Although participants did report greater pity for wrongfully convicted persons than others, this pity did not translate into greater assistance or support.

Conclusions. Perceptions of wrongfully convicted persons appear similar to negative, stigmatized views of offenders. Individuals faced stigma and discrimination even after exoneration.

In the United States, more than 300 wrongfully convicted individuals have been exonerated by DNA evidence (Innocence Project, 2012). Considering that this figure only represents (1) exonerations due to DNA evidence (which is not available in the majority of cases) and (2) American cases, this figure is merely the tip of the iceberg in terms of the actual number of wrongful convictions worldwide. In fact, The National Registry of Exonerations (2012) has documented over 1,050 cases of wrongful conviction in the United States alone. In Canada, Doob (1997) found that nearly half of the criminal defence lawyers sampled believed that they had represented a client who had been wrongfully convicted and sentenced to at least 1 year in prison. Moreover, estimates of wrongful conviction rates range from 0.5% to 15% (or more) of all convictions, suggesting that thousands of innocent citizens are wrongfully imprisoned every year (e.g., Huff, Rattner, & Sagarin, 1996; Poveda, 2001; Ramsey & Frank, 2007; Zalman, Smith, & Kiger, 2008).

Considerable research has investigated the underlying factors that contribute to wrongful conviction, such as mistaken eyewitnesses, false confessions, jailhouse snitches,

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erroneous use of forensic science, ineffective lawyering, police misconduct, prosecutorial misconduct, and tunnel vision (Kassin, 2005; Lindsay & Wells, 1985; Scheck, Neufeld, & Dwyer, 2000). Very little research, however, has focused on the lives of individuals who have been wrongfully convicted post-incarceration (Westervelt & Cook, 2009). What research has been done has been predominantly qualitative (for a review, see Clow, Leach, & Ricciardelli, 2011) and has suggested that wrongfully convicted persons are essentially victimized by their wrongful conviction experiences and that their experiences can be likened to victims of torture (Weigand, 2009; Westervelt & Cook, 2009).

These qualitative interviews suggest that there is a stigma associated with wrongful conviction, that being wrongfully convicted is an attribute that 'is deeply discrediting' (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). A stigma is a devalued social identity – a mark or an indicator that an individual is flawed, spoiled, or less than human (e.g., Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963; Markowitz, 2005). Often, this discrediting attribute is associated with negative stereotypes that convey that an individual is dangerous or a social threat (Goffman, 1963). As more people become aware of the stigmatizing attribute or social identity, the more the stigma can alter how the individual is perceived by others (Goffman, 1963; Markowitz, 2005).

Although wrongful conviction is not a visible stigma per se, anecdotal evidence suggests that stigma may be a pervasive factor for individuals who have been wrongfully convicted. Their lives are often made public through media coverage of the original crime, their arrest, the first trial, appeals, the issues that have made innocence organizations (or others) suspicious of a wrongful conviction, the day the individual is released from prison, any news of a subsequent trial or stay of proceedings and so on. Thus, many individuals do know that a person has been wrongfully convicted and can discredit him or her based on this knowledge. For example, Kirk Bloodsworth, the first man exonerated from death row through the use of post-conviction DNA testing, reported that people had written 'child killer' in the dirt on his truck multiple times (Junkin, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2008). As Sabrina Butler, who was wrongfully convicted at age 19 for child abuse, was filling out the paperwork for a job, an assistant manager recognized her and terminated her employment (Westervelt & Cook, 2008). As a man who was wrongfully convicted of sexual assault explains, "the label 'rapist' follows you, even if you dyed your hair black and changed your skin colour. Like it or not, the label 'rapist' is there all the time ..." (Campbell & Denov, 2004, p. 151). These examples appear to be demonstrations of Becker's (1963) 'falsely accused', where factually innocent individuals are mistakenly labelled and perceived as outsiders and deviant (see Brown, Esbensen, & Geis, 2012, for an application of Becker's [1963] falsely accused to wrongful conviction). Individuals who have been wrongfully convicted may be incorrectly labelled as criminals, creating tension with neighbours, impeding their ability to secure employment, and preventing them from moving forward with their lives (Campbell & Denov, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2009).

Despite these reports of stigma, public opinion surveys have found people to be generally supportive of wrongfully convicted persons (e.g., Angus Reid Group, 1995; Ricciardelli, Bell, & Clow, 2009). There are a few possible explanations for these seemingly discrepant feelings of wrongfully convicted persons and the public. First, the research that has found positive attitudes towards wrongfully convicted persons has a different focus than the research that suggests stigma. Primarily, the public opinion research has often explored whether the public believes that the *government* needs to do more or to change how they deal with wrongful conviction, as opposed to asking whether individuals would be willing to hire wrongfully convicted persons, rent rooms to wrongfully convicted persons, or have wrongfully convicted persons babysit their

children. Second, it may be the case that only a minority of individuals hold negative attitudes towards wrongfully convicted persons and that most people are supportive of them, as the public opinion studies suggest. If this were the case, wrongfully convicted persons' interactions with these few prejudicial individuals might be so negative that they are more memorable in comparison with all of the neutral or positive interactions that they have with others in society, possibly leading wrongfully convicted persons to overestimate the number of individuals who stigmatize them. Third, it may be the case that many, or most, people do hold prejudicial attitudes towards wrongfully convicted persons, but these same individuals are hiding their true feelings and responding in a more socially desirable way in the public opinion research. Thus, how pervasive an issue this stigma may be is currently not known, as the stigma of wrongful conviction has yet to be systematically investigated.

Conviction and stigma

Although research has not yet examined the stigma associated with wrongful conviction, research has explored the stigmatization of actual offenders (e.g., Demski & McGlynn, 1999; Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; LeBel, 2006; Murphy & Brown, 2000). Winnick and Bodkin (2008) surveyed 450 male prisoners regarding the stigma that they expected to experience after incarceration and their strategies for managing that stigma. The majority of participants expected to be stereotyped as being less trustworthy, less intelligent, and less successful. They also expected potential friends and employers to discriminate against them because they were offenders. Clear, Rose, and Ryder (2001) interviewed 39 residents in high-incarceration neighbourhoods in Florida to investigate the consequences of incarceration on communities. One of the main themes that emerged was that incarceration led to stigma. Even in high-incarceration neighbourhoods, being sent to prison lowered one's social status and incarceration was perceived as a shameful event that was not discussed. Because individuals who have been wrongfully convicted have also been incarcerated, they may experience similar stigma.

Incarceration may also affect stereotypes and prejudice. Clow and Esses (2007) found that the stereotype of criminals was very negative: Criminals were thought to be dishonest, immoral, rebellious, devious, scary, violent, angry, and crazy. Although there were a few positive characteristics (e.g., smooth, cunning, and street-smart) associated with criminals, negative attributes were more predominant. Melvin, Gramling, and Gardner's (1985) Attitudes towards Prisoners Scale, which contains items such as 'prisoners are just plain immoral', 'it is not wise to trust a prisoner too far', 'you never know when a prisoner is telling the truth', 'prisoners are just plain mean at heart', and 'most prisoners are stupid', corroborate this negativity. According to the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), offenders would likely be stereotyped as low in warmth and competence, resulting in contemptuous prejudice. Research on contemptuous prejudice has found that this form of prejudice targets low status groups, such as welfare recipients and the poor, and is associated with feelings of contempt, disgust, anger, and resentment (Caprariello, Cuddy, & Fiske, 2009; Fiske *et al.*, 2002). This negative tone is consistent with research on criminal stereotypes, which has found violence, cruelty, insanity, and immorality to be core elements of the stereotype (for a review, see MacLin & Herrera, 2006).

As people may believe that wrongfully convicted persons have been associating with criminals while incarcerated, or that wrongfully convicted persons are really prior criminals themselves, the stigma associated with offenders may become associated with

wrongfully convicted persons, as well (see Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012). In addition, wrongfully convicted persons are generally low in status, through their lost years in prison and difficulties in attaining housing and employment post-incarceration; thus, they may also fall prey to contemptuous prejudice.

Not all low status groups are subjected to contemptuous prejudice, however; some low status groups are targeted by paternalistic prejudice (Fiske *et al.*, 2002). Paternalistic prejudice results when people feel warmth towards a social group, but consider the group to be low in competency (e.g., housewives, senior citizens; Caprariello *et al.*, 2009). As a result, people feel pity and sympathy for these outgroup members (e.g., Fiske *et al.*, 2002). It is currently not known how stereotypes of individuals who have been wrongfully convicted are related to stereotypes of actual offenders and whether they are targeted by contemptuous or paternalistic prejudice.

In terms of discrimination, individuals who have been incarcerated may face fewer employment opportunities. Employment is an important factor in the successful reintegration of offenders into the community (e.g., Anderson, Schumacker, & Anderson, 1991; Krienert, 2005; Petersilia, 2005). However, offenders encounter a number of explicit barriers to employment, including occupational policies and code licensing requirements that exclude offenders and sometimes even individuals with a record of arrest. Criminal background checks are typical in areas such as child care, education, security, nursing, and home health care (Petersilia, 2005), preventing individuals with criminal records from entering these fields. Prospective employers may also indirectly restrict the hiring of offenders by requiring employees to have 'good moral character' (e.g., Harris & Keller, 2005). In fact, many employers are reluctant to hire individuals with criminal records (e.g., Giguere & Dundes, 2002; Krienert, 2005; Petersilia, 2005). Even undergraduate students have exhibited biases against hiring ex-offenders – though they showed similar biases towards other stigmatized individuals (individuals who were mentally ill or obese), suggesting that stigma was leading to job discrimination (Homant & Kennedy, 1982). Individuals who have been wrongfully convicted do not automatically have their records expunged and, thus, may experience similar discrimination as they, too, have been arrested and have criminal records.

Another form of discrimination faced by offenders involves social distance. Researchers can assess how physically and psychologically removed individuals would like to keep others from themselves (e.g., willingness to have a person live in their country vs. be their neighbour). Considerable social distance is desired from sex offenders (Shechory & Idisis, 2006). Other research has revealed that social distance influences community corrections officers' (CCO) attitudes towards offenders, such that CCOs who scored high in social distance from offenders were significantly more likely to disagree that offenders, like all human beings, are inherently good people and that the community needs to play a role in the reintegration of offenders (Helfgott & Gunnison, 2008). In addition, Shechory and Idisis (2006) found that people were less willing to have social contact with innocent individuals who were associated with crimes (i.e., victims). Thus, increased social distance is desired from traditionally stigmatized groups as well as the individuals that are associated with these groups (e.g., Rozin, Markwith, & Nemeroff, 1992; Shechory & Idisis, 2006).

Research has revealed that stigma seems to spread, as if it were a magical contagion, moving from stigmatized individuals to formerly non-stigmatized individuals with whom they come into contacts (e.g., Nemeroff & Rozin, 2000; Sigelman, Howell, Cornell, & Cutright, 1991). For example, Sigelman *et al.* (1991) found that participants with a strong intolerance for gay men stigmatized a fictitious student described as choosing to room

with a gay male student similar to how they stigmatized a fictitious gay male student (i.e., the stigma of being homosexual seemed to spread from the gay man to his voluntary roommate). This magical contagion even affects associated objects. Rozin *et al.* (1992) discovered that a new sweater owned – but not yet worn – by an individual with HIV was later devalued. As the wrongfully convicted are negatively associated with the criminal justice system and have been incarcerated, it is possible that the stigma associated with offenders and prison will spread and magically contaminate wrongfully convicted persons, as well.

In sum, little is known about the stigma of wrongful conviction. Researchers generally assume that individuals who have been wrongfully convicted are stigmatized and wrongfully convicted persons themselves report instances of stigmatization (e.g., Campbell & Denov, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2009), yet public opinion research appears to paint a different picture (e.g., Angus Reid Group, 1995; Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2009). To determine whether wrongfully convicted persons are encountering substantial stigma, and the nature of that stigma, we examined participants' perceptions of wrongfully convicted persons and offenders.

Current study

In particular, we examined participants' stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination towards people who have been wrongfully convicted of a crime, people who have been convicted of a crime that they actually committed, and people in general (control). Participants were randomly assigned to respond to one of the three target groups and to answer questions regarding perceptions of competence and warmth, overall attitudes, feelings of anger and pity, desired social distance, and willingness to endorse various forms of assistance. If participants responded similarly to all three groups, this would suggest socially desirable responding, given the known findings of prejudice towards offenders (e.g., Clow & Esses, 2007; MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Melvin *et al.*, 1985). If perceptions of these three groups differed, we wished to test whether individuals who were wrongfully convicted were perceived and treated (1) similar to other innocent citizens, (2) similar to actual offenders, or (3) different from both of these comparison groups.

Hypothesis 1 was that participants would stigmatize the wrongfully convicted and offender groups in comparison to the control condition (people in general). Past research has found that people and objects associated with stigmatized targets often become similarly stigmatized themselves (e.g., Rozin *et al.*, 1992). Thus, we expected that wrongfully convicted individuals, who would be associating with offenders in prison, might similarly become 'infected' by the stigma of offenders (see Clow *et al.*, 2012). We predicted that participants would express more negative stereotypes (lower warmth and lower competency ratings), greater prejudice (less favourable attitudes, more anger and less pity), and more discrimination (desired greater social distance, less endorsed assistance) in the wrongful conviction and offender conditions than in the control condition.

Hypothesis 2 was that offenders would fall into the contemptuous prejudice category of the Stereotype Content Model. Past research suggests that offenders are perceived as low in status (e.g., Clear *et al.*, 2001) and that offender stereotypes contain considerable negativity (e.g., Clow & Esses, 2007; MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Melvin *et al.*, 1985). Thus, we expected offenders to be rated lower on the warmth and competence dimensions than people in general.

Hypothesis 3 was that wrongfully convicted individuals would be targeted by contemptuous prejudice, similar to offenders. Although one could argue that wrongfully convicted persons might be victims of paternalistic prejudice, qualitative research (e.g., Campbell & Denov, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2009) suggests that the experiences of wrongfully convicted persons would be better captured by contemptuous prejudice. Thus, we tested whether contemptuous prejudice or paternalistic prejudice best described participant responses in the wrongful conviction condition.

Method

Participants

A sample of 86 introductory psychology students (44 men, 40 women, 2 declined to answer) from a small university in southern Ontario, Canada participated in the study in exchange for extra credit ($M_{\text{age}} = 20.64$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 2.98$, age range: 18–39). Half of the participants self-identified as Caucasian (50.6%). The remaining participants were from diverse ethnic backgrounds, including South East Asian (15.3%), Black (8.2%), Arab/West Asian (5.9%), and Filipino (3.5%).

Materials

Three different survey packages were created to manipulate the experimental condition. In the wrongfully convicted condition, participants were instructed to answer a series of questions about ‘people who have been wrongfully convicted of a crime’. In the offender condition, participants answered the questions about ‘people who have been convicted of a crime that they actually committed’. In the control condition, participants answered the questions about ‘people in general’. Other research has successfully used similar general control groups, such as ‘English Canadians’, ‘the average person’, or ‘people in general’ (e.g., McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997; Scharrer, 2002; Weinfurt & Moghaddam, 2001). The wording throughout the survey reminded participants of the group of people they were to consider when answering the questions (i.e., wrongfully convicted, offenders, or people in general). The last page of the survey package consisted of demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, and ethnicity). The order of the measures was counterbalanced across participants, except that the demographic questions always appeared at the end of the survey.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes were assessed by asking participants to rate (1 = *not at all* and 5 = *extremely*) the group on a series of positive and negative characteristics that were modified from Fiske *et al.* (2002). Competence (confident, competent, intelligent, and respected) and warmth (friendly, liked, warm, sincere, and trustworthy) items were averaged together ($\alpha_{\text{competence}} = .66$; $\alpha_{\text{warmth}} = .75$). We also included additional items (aggressive, lazy, mentally ill, violent, and weak) based on past research investigating stereotypes of criminals (Clow & Esses, 2007; MacLin & Herrera, 2006).

Prejudice

Emotions towards the group were assessed in two different ways. An Attitude Thermometer provided a global evaluation, whereas emotion rating scales allowed for

more specific emotional reactions. The Attitude Thermometer asked participants to provide a number between 0° (*extremely unfavourable*) and 100° (*extremely favourable*) to indicate their attitude towards the group. A diagram of a thermometer with 10° increments and attitude labels was provided (e.g., 10° = *very unfavourable*, 20° = *quite unfavourable*, 30° = *fairly unfavourable*, 40° = *slightly unfavourable*, 50° = *neither favourable nor unfavourable*, 60° = *slightly favourable*, etc.), but it was stressed that participants could choose whatever number between 0 and 100 best described their own attitude. Researchers have found this one-item attitude measure to have high test-retest reliability (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993) and have shown that it correlates with multiple-item attitude scales (Haddock *et al.*, 1993; Stangor, Sullivan, & Ford, 1991).

We created emotion rating scales that asked participants to rate their specific emotional reactions to the group from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). 'Anger' was included for contemptuous prejudice and 'pity' for paternalistic prejudice. These key emotions were embedded in a list of other positive and negative emotion items (disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise). These other emotions were filler items and not analysed.

Discrimination

Two different measures assessed participants' behaviour towards the group.¹ The assistance items assessed participants' willingness to endorse particular forms of government assistance and a self-report social distance measure assessed how psychologically close participants were willing to become to group members. We created a series of forced-choice (*yes or no*) items that asked participants to indicate whether they thought that the group was entitled to different forms of government assistance (i.e., career counselling, job training, psychological counselling, monthly living expenses, and subsidized housing). Responses were averaged together to create an overall assistance score (range: 0–1; $\alpha = .58$). As the reliability for the overall assistance score was low, these items were also analysed individually.

Participants also completed a modified version of Triandis and Triandis' (1960) social distance measure. Participants were told to envision, as accurately as possible, whether they would wish to be in various social situations with group members (e.g., live in the same city as members of the group, live on the same street as members from the group, have their sibling marry someone from the group). Responses to the 16 social distance items were averaged together to create an average social distance score (range: 0–1). The scale was highly reliable in the current sample ($\alpha = .91$). Previous research has used social distance measures to successfully assess stigma associated with race, social class, religious affiliation, mental disorders, and nationality (e.g., Mann & Himelein, 2008; Triandis & Triandis, 1960; Weaver, 2008).

Procedure

Participants were tested, individually, in a small room. Each participant was randomly assigned to the wrongfully convicted (people who have been wrongfully convicted of a crime), offender (people who have been convicted of a crime that they actually

¹ A third discrimination measure (how close participants were willing to sit to a chair where they thought a wrongfully convicted vs. a convicted vs. another student would be sitting) was used but did not yield reliable results (e.g., participants sat particularly close when they thought they would be sitting next to someone convicted). Thus, this measure was removed from the study.

committed), or control (people in general) group. The experimenter asked participants to complete all questions based on the group provided. Completing the surveys required approximately 30 min. Prior to debriefing, the experimenter probed for hypothesis awareness by asking participants what the study was about. One participant admitted that a roommate had told him the true nature of the study and, thus, this participant was removed from the sample. No other participants correctly guessed the true purpose of the study. Afterwards, participants were fully debriefed and thanked for their participation.

Results

All analyses were conducted with and without participant gender as a variable. As there were no significant gender findings, the analyses reported do not include gender.

Stereotypes

One-way ANOVAs were conducted on average ratings of competence and warmth with condition (control vs. wrongfully convicted vs. offender) as a between-participant variable. The predicted main effects of condition were significant for both competence, $F(2, 82) = 5.20, p = .007, \eta_p^2 = .12$, and warmth ratings, $F(2, 82) = 14.87, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .28$ (see Table 1). Bonferroni *post-hoc* tests revealed that participants rated people in general significantly higher in competence, $t(82) = 3.22, p < .05$, and warmth, $t(82) = 5.06, p < .05$, than offenders, suggesting negative stereotypes of offenders. In addition, participants rated people in general significantly higher in warmth than wrongfully convicted persons, $t(82) = 4.27, p < .05$, suggesting some stigma towards the latter group. Participants did not differ in terms of the competence ratings assigned to wrongfully convicted and people in general, $t(82) = 1.78, ns$. However, participants did not significantly differ in their ratings of offenders and wrongfully convicted persons for competence, $t(82) = 1.47, ns$, or warmth, $t(82) < 1, ns$, either. Thus, overall, participants seemed to like wrongfully convicted individuals as much as they liked offenders – which is significantly less than they liked people in general, revealing stigma towards offenders and wrongfully convicted persons. In addition, offenders suffered from negative stereotypes related to lack of competence in comparison to people in general.

As a further test, paired samples *t*-tests compared warmth and competence rating within offenders and wrongfully convicted persons. If participants were expressing contemptuous prejudice towards a group, then ratings of both competence and warmth should have been low. However, if participants were expressing paternalistic prejudice towards a group instead, then ratings of warmth should be higher than ratings of

Table 1. Stereotype ratings by condition

Condition	Competence			Warmth			<i>n</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% CI	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% CI	
People in general	3.22 _a	0.53	[3.02, 3.42]	3.40 _a	0.52	[3.20, 3.60]	29
Wrongfully convicted	2.89 _{ab}	0.69	[2.62, 3.15]	2.70 _b	0.51	[2.51, 2.90]	29
Offenders	2.60 _b	0.90	[2.25, 2.96]	2.56 _b	0.81	[2.23, 2.88]	27

Note. Within a column, numbers with different letter subscripts significantly differ. Competency and warmth scores range from 1 to 5, with larger numbers indicating greater competence and warmth.

competence. *T*-tests suggested that participants felt contemptuous prejudice towards both offenders, $t(28) < 1$, *ns*, and wrongfully convicted persons, $t(28) = 1.25$, *ns*, as average ratings of both competence and warmth were below the midpoint of the scale and the ratings did not significantly differ from one another.

To further explore stereotypes outside the Stereotype Content Model, one-way ANOVAs, with condition as the independent variable, were conducted on each of the stereotype characteristics. Of the 14 different stereotype characteristics, ratings significantly differed on 10 (see Table 2). As would be expected, if wrongfully convicted persons and offenders were stigmatized, people in general were rated significantly higher in respect, friendliness, and warmth than wrongfully convicted persons and offenders (and wrongfully convicted and offenders did not differ from one another). Offenders were rated as significantly less sincere and significantly more violent than wrongfully convicted persons or people in general. In addition, offenders were rated as significantly less liked, less trustworthy, more mentally ill, and more aggressive than people in general, whereas ratings of individuals who were wrongfully convicted did not significantly differ from either offenders or people in general on these characteristics. Finally, people in general were rated as significantly lazier than individuals who were wrongfully convicted, whereas offenders did not significantly differ from either group.

Thus, for the most part, participants were stereotyping offenders more negatively than people in general. Perceptions of wrongfully convicted persons were generally in between these extremes, where they were sometimes viewed more negatively than people in general (and similar to offenders, such as in terms of respect, friendliness, and warmth) and sometimes viewed more positively than offenders (and similar to people in general, such as in terms of sincerity and violence). On several traits, such as liked, trustworthy, mentally ill, and aggressive, ratings of wrongfully convicted individuals did not differ from ratings of offenders, but they did not differ from ratings of people in general either. It appears that participants do not view wrongfully convicted individuals like ordinary citizens, but they do not seem to stigmatize them as severely as they do offenders.

Prejudice

One-way ANOVAs were conducted on average ratings of attitudes, anger, and pity, with condition (control vs. wrongfully convicted vs. offender) as a between-participant variable. The predicted main effects of condition were significant for attitudes, $F(2, 82) = 10.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .21$, anger, $F(2, 82) = 3.67$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$, and pity, $F(2, 82) = 3.41$, $p < .05$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$ (see Table 3). Bonferroni *post-hoc* tests revealed that participants reported significantly more positive global evaluations of people in general than people who had been wrongfully convicted, $t(82) = 2.60$, $p < .05$, and actual offenders, $t(82) = 4.64$, $p < .05$. The attitudes reported in the wrongful conviction and offender conditions did not significantly differ, $t(82) = 2.08$, *ns*, suggesting that participants held similar attitudes towards both groups.

Contrary to expectation, participants did not express less anger towards people in general than wrongfully convicted persons, $t(82) < 1$, *ns*, and offenders, $t(82) = 1.98$, *ns*. Instead, participants expressed significantly more anger towards offenders than wrongfully convicted persons, $t(82) = 2.61$, $p < .05$, which seems to suggest greater contemptuous prejudice towards this group. In addition, rather than expressing less pity towards offenders than wrongfully convicted persons or offenders and people in general, ratings of pity did not significantly differ between the groups, $t(82) = 1.65$, *ns* and, $t(82) < 1$, *ns* respectively. However, participants did express significantly more pity towards

Table 2. Stereotype characteristic ratings by condition

Characteristic	Group	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% CI	<i>n</i>	<i>F</i>	η_p^2
Aggressive	People in general	2.76 _a	0.79	[2.46, 3.06]	29	4.17*	0.09
	Wrongly convicted	3.07 _{ab}	1.07	[2.66, 3.47]	29		
	Offenders	3.52 _b	1.09	[3.09, 3.95]	27		
Competent	People in general	3.24 _a	0.64	[3.00, 3.48]	29	1.11	0.03
	Wrongly convicted	3.14 _a	0.95	[2.78, 3.50]	29		
	Offenders	2.89 _a	1.09	[2.46, 3.32]	27		
Confident	People in general	3.10 _a	0.82	[2.79, 3.41]	29	1.10	0.03
	Wrongly convicted	2.69 _a	1.26	[2.21, 3.17]	29		
	Offenders	2.96 _a	1.13	[2.52, 3.41]	27		
Friendly	People in general	3.48 _a	0.95	[3.12, 3.84]	29	5.81**	0.12
	Wrongly convicted	2.79 _b	0.94	[2.44, 3.15]	29		
	Offenders	2.63 _b	1.11	[2.19, 3.07]	27		
Intelligent	People in general	3.17 _a	0.76	[2.88, 3.46]	29	1.53	0.04
	Wrongly convicted	3.17 _a	0.93	[2.82, 3.53]	29		
	Offenders	2.78 _a	1.19	[2.31, 3.25]	27		
Lazy	People in general	3.00 _a	1.10	[2.58, 3.42]	29	3.67*	0.08
	Wrongly convicted	2.28 _b	0.84	[1.96, 2.60]	29		
	Offenders	2.56 _{ab}	1.12	[2.11, 3.00]	27		
Liked	People in general	3.24 _a	0.69	[2.98, 3.50]	29	4.65*	0.10
	Wrongly convicted	2.69 _{ab}	1.07	[2.28, 3.10]	29		
	Offenders	2.56 _b	0.89	[2.20, 2.91]	27		
Mentally Ill	People in general	2.10 _a	1.01	[1.72, 2.49]	29	3.81*	0.09
	Wrongly convicted	2.24 _{ab}	1.09	[1.83, 2.66]	29		
	Offenders	2.89 _b	1.28	[2.38, 3.40]	27		
Respected	People in general	3.24 _a	0.83	[2.93, 3.56]	29	10.81***	0.21
	Wrongly convicted	2.34 _b	0.90	[2.00, 2.69]	29		
	Offenders	2.15 _b	1.10	[1.71, 2.58]	27		
Sincere	People in general	3.14 _a	0.95	[2.78, 3.50]	29	9.12***	0.18
	Wrongly convicted	3.21 _a	0.90	[2.86, 3.55]	29		
	Offenders	2.26 _b	0.90	[1.90, 2.62]	27		
Trustworthy	People in general	2.79 _a	1.05	[2.39, 3.19]	29	3.77*	0.08
	Wrongly convicted	2.62 _{ab}	1.18	[2.17, 3.07]	29		
	Offenders	2.04 _b	0.98	[1.65, 2.42]	27		
Violent	People in general	2.52 _a	0.83	[2.20, 2.83]	29	4.56*	0.10
	Wrongly convicted	2.48 _a	1.06	[2.08, 2.88]	29		
	Offenders	3.26 _b	1.32	[2.74, 3.78]	27		
Warm	People in general	3.48 _a	0.83	[3.17, 3.80]	29	10.61***	0.21
	Wrongly convicted	2.62 _b	0.78	[2.33, 2.92]	29		
	Offenders	2.48 _b	1.05	[2.07, 2.90]	27		
Weak	People in general	2.59 _a	0.95	[2.23, 2.95]	29	1.07	0.03
	Wrongly convicted	2.97 _a	1.12	[2.54, 3.39]	29		
	Offenders	2.96 _a	1.32	[2.33, 3.48]	27		

Note. Means with different subscripts significantly differ using Bonferonni *post-hoc* tests.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

wrongfully convicted persons than people in general, $t(82) = 2.57, p < .05$. Participants' emotional reactions were more subtle than we had anticipated. Participants were not generally angry at offenders; they simply were angrier at offenders than wrongfully

convicted persons. Similarly, participants did not generally pity wrongfully convicted individuals; they felt more pity for wrongfully convicted persons than for people in general.

Discrimination

One-way ANOVAs were conducted on average social distance scores and average assistance scores, with condition (control vs. wrongfully convicted vs. offender) as a between-participant variable. The predicted main effect of condition was significant for social distance, $F(2, 77) = 19.06, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .33$. As predicted, Bonferroni *post-hoc* tests revealed that participants desired significantly less social distance from people in general ($M = 0.85, SD = 0.17, 95\% CI [0.79, 0.91]$) than individuals who had been wrongfully convicted ($M = 0.62, SD = 0.32, 95\% CI [0.50, 0.74]$), $t(82) = 3.40, p < .05$, and offenders ($M = 0.42, SD = 0.26, 95\% CI [0.32, 0.53]$), $t(82) = 6.14, p < .05$. In addition, participants also desired significantly greater social distance from offenders than from individuals who were wrongfully convicted, $t(82) = 2.80, p < .05$. Thus, it appears that participants were less willing to socially interact with wrongfully convicted persons than other regular citizens and they were even less willing to socially interact with offenders. These findings suggest that wrongfully convicted persons and offenders are stigmatized, with greater contemptuous prejudice towards offenders than towards wrongfully convicted persons.

The predicted main effect of condition was marginally significant for assistance, $F(2, 82) = 2.84, p = .064, \eta_p^2 = .06$. Although the means for assistance exhibited the predicted pattern (people in general: $M = 0.88, SD = 0.15, 95\% CI [0.83, 0.94]$; wrongly convicted: $M = 0.77, SD = 0.31, 95\% CI [0.65, 0.88]$; offenders: $M = 0.75, SD = 0.20, 95\% CI [0.67, 0.83]$), they did not differ significantly using Bonferroni *post-hoc* tests. To test the assistance items further, separate chi-squares were used to test the effect of condition (wrongful conviction, offender, control) on participants' willingness to endorse each of the different forms of government assistance (see Table 4). Contrary to our prediction, participants were more likely to endorse monthly living expenses for people in general (72%) and the wrongfully convicted (63%) than offenders (38%), $\chi^2 = 6.84, p < .05$. Not surprisingly, participants were more likely to endorse financial compensation for people who had been wrongfully convicted (64%) than offenders (19%), $\chi^2 = 11.83, p < .001$ (this item was not included for people in general). There

Table 3. Prejudice scores by condition

Condition	Attitude			Anger			Pity			n
	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI	M	SD	95% CI	
People in general	68.90 _a	20.06	[61.27, 76.53]	2.21 _{ab}	1.05	[1.81, 2.61]	2.31 _a	0.97	[1.94, 2.68]	29
Wrongfully convicted	52.86 _b	29.62	[41.60, 64.13]	2.00 _a	1.28	[1.51, 2.49]	3.14 _b	1.36	[2.62, 3.65]	29
Offenders	39.81 _b	18.89	[32.34, 37.29]	2.85 _b	1.32	[2.33, 3.37]	2.85 _{ab}	1.32	[2.49, 3.04]	27

Note. Within a column, numbers with different letter subscripts significantly differ. Attitude scores range from 0 to 100, where larger numbers indicate more favourable attitudes. Anger and pity scores range from 1 to 5, where larger numbers indicate more anger and pity.

Table 4. Assistance items by condition

Assistance	Group	% Support	χ^2	<i>p</i>
Career counselling	People in general	96.30	4.66	.10
	Wrongly convicted	79.31		
	Offenders	92.59		
Job training	People in general	93.10	1.06	.59
	Wrongly convicted	85.71		
	Offenders	92.31		
Psychological counselling	People in general	96.30	3.59	.17
	Wrongly convicted	79.31		
	Offenders	85.19		
Monthly living expenses	People in general	72.41	6.84	.03
	Wrongly convicted	62.96		
	Offenders	38.46		
Subsidized housing	People in general	81.48	2.59	.27
	Wrongly convicted	71.43		
	Offenders	61.54		
Financial compensation	Wrongly convicted	64.29	11.83	.001
	Offenders	18.52		

were no other significant effects. Thus, participants did not significantly differ in their endorsement of career counselling, job training, psychological counselling, or subsidized housing across the three groups.

Discussion

A wrongfully convicted individual should be viewed as any other non-convicted citizen. Our findings, however, suggest that this does not occur. Participants rated individuals who were wrongfully convicted as less warm than controls (i.e., people in general), reported more negative attitudes towards individuals who were wrongfully convicted than controls, and desired more social distance from wrongfully convicted individuals than controls. Thus, participant responses mirrored the reports of wrongfully convicted persons (e.g., Adornato, 2009; Westervelt & Cook, 2009): Wrongfully convicted persons are not perceived as other citizens.

Although participants did report greater pity for individuals who had been wrongfully convicted than controls, generally, this pity did not translate into greater assistance. In other words, participants were often as willing to promote assistance (i.e., career counselling, job training, psychological counselling, and subsidized housing) for people in general as they were to promote assistance for individuals who were wrongfully convicted. In fact, more participants endorsed assisting people in general with monthly living expenses than wrongfully convicted persons.

Comparing individuals who had been wrongfully convicted to offenders revealed that the two groups were viewed similarly. Out of seven planned analyses, participants rated wrongfully convicted persons significantly different from offenders only twice (i.e., participants felt more anger towards, and desired greater social distance from, offenders than wrongfully convicted persons). Participants' ratings of competence, warmth, and attitudes did not differ between offenders and wrongfully convicted persons. In addition, participants did not differ in their ratings of pity towards, or general willingness to assist,

wrongfully convicted persons and actual offenders. Although more participants endorsed financial compensation for wrongfully convicted persons than offenders, 19% of participants advocated financial compensation for individuals who were convicted for crimes they actually committed!

Participants may have assumed that wrongfully convicted persons engaged in previous criminal activity to make them suspects in the first place or, as one of the first author's colleagues once told her, 'sure, they might be innocent of that crime but they probably committed other crimes that they got away with'. Although some wrongfully convicted persons do have criminal records prior to their wrongful conviction, many have no previous interactions with the criminal justice system (e.g., Vollen & Eggers, 2005). Thus, the assumption that wrongfully convicted persons really are criminals is a false stereotype. Whether this stereotype is what is leading to negative views of wrongfully convicted persons or whether the stereotype is being used to justify pre-existing negative views is an issue that could be explored in future research.

Alternatively, participants may have viewed wrongfully convicted persons and offenders fairly similarly because they assumed that incarceration has a detrimental impact on people. In fact, Grounds (2004) has suggested that wrongful conviction leads to mental health issues and significant personality change and other researchers have suggested that wrongfully convicted persons leave prison with a general fear and suspicion of future injustice (e.g., Campbell & Denov, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2008). Thus, participants would be correct in assuming that there are consequences to wrongful conviction. However, that does not explain why participants would not be more willing to help an individual who they believed was changed due to wrongful imprisonment. Thus, the findings from this study lend themselves more to the idea that participants felt that wrongfully convicted persons may be somewhat responsible for their wrongful imprisonment (e.g., past criminal behaviour) as opposed to thinking that wrongfully convicted persons were innocent victims.

The stigma of wrongful conviction may arise from other sources as well. Caprariello *et al.* (2009) explain contemptuous prejudice as arising from perceptions of competition for resources, power, or status with a low status group. As wrongfully convicted persons are released from prison with little to no assistance (Innocence Project, 2010), we would argue that they are perceived as a low status group. Media stories of wrongful conviction and financial compensation may lead to perceptions of these individuals as being in competition for resources, as well. Other sources of this stigma may be negative associations or magical contagion (e.g., Clow *et al.*, 2012; Rozin *et al.*, 1992). Thus, participants might have negative views about the wrongfully convicted because they are associated with crimes or prison and this association contaminates them. In addition, Shechory and Idisis (2006) observed that participants desired greater social distance from innocent victims of crime. Thus, participants may stigmatize individuals who have been wrongfully convicted because they were victims of the criminal justice system (see Westervelt & Cook, 2009). All of these possibilities require further testing.

Stereotypes and prejudice directed towards offenders and wrongfully convicted persons were also comparable. Participants rated offenders as low in both warmth and competence. These ratings (and the highest anger score) suggest that participants experienced contemptuous prejudice towards offenders (e.g., Fiske *et al.*, 2002). This finding corresponds with past research, which has found stereotypes of offenders to be very negative (Clow & Esses, 2007; MacLin & Herrera, 2006; Melvin *et al.*, 1985). In addition, the mean competence and warmth ratings for wrongfully convicted persons and offenders were both below the midpoint of the scales. Although participants did express

more pity towards wrongfully convicted persons than controls, it does not appear that this pity was indicative of paternalistic prejudice in this study because it was not associated with a greater willingness to provide assistance. Instead, the greater weighting of evidence suggests contemptuous prejudice towards wrongfully convicted persons – the same stigma that offenders face.

Limitations and future research

Past research on attributions, helping behaviour, and aggression (Rudolph, Roesch, Greitemeyer, & Weiner, 2004; Weiner, 1993; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988) has found that when perceivers believe someone is responsible for a bad situation that befalls them, perceivers are more angry and less willing to help. In contrast, when perceivers do not believe someone is responsible for a bad situation, they are more likely to pity the individual and help him or her. Contrary to this research (e.g., Rudolph *et al.*, 2004), participants generally were *not* more willing to assist wrongfully convicted individuals even though they pitied them more than offenders or the general public. In fact, the only assistance item where participants were more willing to assist wrongfully convicted persons more than offenders was in terms of financial compensation from the government. However, because we did not assess responsibility, it is not clear whether participants perceived wrongfully convicted individuals as being responsible for their stigma or not. More direct tests of responsibility and different methodological approaches in future research would further advance our understanding in this area.

Although 64% of participants in the wrongful conviction condition endorsed financial compensation for wrongfully convicted persons, it appears that this sample of university students was less supportive than community members (Angus Reid Group, 1995). Past research has suggested that a university education has a liberalizing effect on students (e.g., Brouillette, 1985), but rather than our sample being more liberal and supportive of wrongfully convicted persons, they appear – if anything – to be more prejudiced. As both the past research on community members and this study on university students have been conducted on Canadian samples, nationality is not a confound here. Possibly, community members were responding in a more socially desirable manner, whereas the participants in this study did not appear to be doing so (based on their rather negative responses about offenders and wrongfully convicted persons). Alternatively, because the community members were answering questions about how they felt the *government* was handling issues surrounding wrongful conviction, it may have been easier for them to respond in ways that were sympathetic to wrongfully convicted persons – respondents were asking the government to change its ways rather than suggesting that they, themselves, needed to change (see Bell & Clow, 2007; Ricciardelli *et al.*, 2009 for similar findings using student samples). In contrast, our participants were responding about how they personally felt about individuals who had been wrongfully convicted. Diverse samples and larger samples would assist in testing the generalizability of these findings.

As this study was an early approach to stigma and wrongful conviction, we started with very general materials. We wanted to know what participants thought when they heard the term ‘wrongful conviction’ and did not try to influence how they interpreted that phrase. For example, we made no mention of DNA exonerations. We simply asked participants to respond to ‘people who have been wrongfully convicted of a crime’. In future, researchers may wish to ask participants to define wrongful conviction, to see

what the term means to them, or to examine specific types of wrongful convictions, such as DNA exonerations.

This study investigated self-reported stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination at the group level as opposed to investigating perceptions of particular group members (e.g., specific individuals who had been wrongfully convicted of a crime). Future research could examine intergroup attitudes directed towards the larger group as well as individual group members and how those attitudes are similar or different. In addition, research may wish to incorporate more behavioural measures and methodologies that go beyond pen and paper responses to establish whether or not people really do respond to wrongfully convicted persons as they say they will.

Conclusion

The effects of wrongful conviction do not end when individuals are released from prison. Our research suggests that individuals who have been wrongfully convicted are stereotyped more negatively (low in competence and low in warmth), elicit more negative emotions, and are held at a greater social distance than non-convicted controls. These findings suggest contemptuous prejudice towards wrongfully convicted persons – similar to perceptions of offenders. Public perceptions can facilitate or further impede the issues that wrongfully convicted individuals face. Only by more fully understanding the nature of the stigma experienced by the wrongfully convicted can we more effectively work towards reducing it.

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