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## Public Perceptions of the Stigmatization of Wrongly Convicted Individuals: Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

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## Public Perceptions of the Stigmatization of Wrongly Convicted Individuals: Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

### Abstract

Many exonerees report stigmatizing experiences and difficulties securing gainful employment post-incarceration. Although researchers have begun to investigate public perceptions of wrongful conviction, there remains a dearth of knowledge about public perceptions of exonerees. To provide insight into how the public perceives exonerees, face-to-face interviews were conducted with members (n=30) of a suburban city in South Central Ontario. Data analysis included a constructed grounded approach to reveal emergent themes in the transcripts. All interviewees acknowledged that wrongly convicted individuals are stigmatized by the public and that this can have negative effects in many of their lived experiences. In addition, findings of this exploratory study suggest that some interviewees, indirectly or directly, stigmatize exonerees in their responses while being interviewed—lending insight into how the public views and reacts to exonerees. Findings and policy implications are theoretically framed in Erving Goffman's (1963) seminal work on stigma. Implications include the potential role of research and education in informing community members, and all levels of government, about wrongful convictions in general, and the negative implications of stigma, in particular.

### Keywords

Public Perception, Stigma, Schematic Framing, Wrongful Conviction, Exonerees, Semi-Structured Interviews, Constructed Grounded Theory

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## Public Perceptions of the Stigmatization of Wrongly Convicted Individuals: Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews

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Consider the following experience (as reported in Grounds, 2005): An exoneree walks into a supermarket in his community. As he enters the store, he hears a young girl say, "That's the man who was on the TV, Mommy" (p. 7). Immediately, the mother grabs her daughter and tells her not to go near the man. The exoneree, overwhelmed by this reaction, abandons his groceries and walks out of the store (Grounds, 2005). Looking at this encounter, it appears that stigma played a key role in determining how this wrongly convicted individual was perceived and responded to in this public venue.

With the above experience in mind, we draw on Goffman's (1963) classic theory of stigma because it is a seminal benchmark for stigma research and continues to have relevant applications in present-day discussions of stigmatization. Particularly, stigma will be discussed in reference to wrongful conviction in order to lend insight into the discriminatory situations exonerees may encounter post-conviction. In addition to stigma theory, framing approaches related to in-group and out-group formations, as well as prognostic framing, will also be presented and explored. These approaches look at how the public creates groups of similar others and mobilize to exclude those who seemingly do not belong, which may lead to the stigmatization of exonerees.

### **Stigma: Defining the “Other”**

Stigma is a discrediting label that “marks” an individual, indicating that he or she should be discounted from society (Goffman, 1963). In the minds of others, the marked individual is reduced from a whole and usual person to a tainted, disregarded one (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Especially when this discrediting effect is extensive, the individual is viewed to be different from others and tied to uninviting markers such as bad, dangerous, or weak. In the previous example, for instance, the exoneree had been marked as deviant and interactions were immediately avoided based on the negative attributes associated with this group (e.g., bad, dangerous). Goffman (1963) argued that stigmas can take several forms, including abominations of the body, blemishes of individual character, and tribal stigmas.

Abominations of the body are physical deformities or disabilities that render a person visibly different from others. As these individuals do not look like the rest of society, often due to factors outside of their own control, their every action is perceived differently as well. As Goffman (1963) explained, a blind individual is no longer perceived like everyone else: “his once most ordinary deeds—walking nonchalantly up the street, locating the peas on his plate, lighting a cigarette—are no longer ordinary” (p. 15). In contrast, blemishes of individual character are not readily visible to others and must be inferred once a discrediting attribute about the person is discovered. For example, learning that an individual has a psychological disorder, has been incarcerated, has an addiction, or is unemployed sets him or her apart from others by linking this person to undesirable characteristics (Link & Phelan, 2001). These undesirable characteristics are then used to discount all other positive attributes the individual might possess (Goffman, 1963). Should this blemished individual encounter any difficulties in life, others relate the difficulties to the stigmatizing attribute(s), as opposed to possible situational influences. Lastly, tribal stigmas are derived from belonging to a particular stigmatized group, such as an ethnic minority group, a foreign country, or the non-dominant religion in a society. In many cases, these individuals are born into their stigmas by being descendants of a “tribe” or group that is devalued by that society’s dominant group(s).

Regardless of its form, stigma spoils an individual’s social identity and reduces his/her “life chances,” causing him or her to face a negative or “unaccepting world” (Goffman, 1963, p. 19). In essence, stigmatized individuals are perceived as subhuman or not whole. As a result, others view them as inferior and rationalize any obstacles that limit their societal opportunities. For example, when a stranger or unknown individual comes into the presence of others, he or she is immediately categorized based on first impressions and associated attributes (Goffman, 1963). Accordingly, people may make assumptions on who the individual ought to be rather than who he or she truly is—what Goffman (1963) called a “virtual social identity.” The characterizations and labels given to the individual are often made from generalizations about persons within the same group and without knowing the personal attributes the individual actually possesses (Goffman, 1963). Should the stranger possess some sort of stigma, however, these depictions are linked to uninviting traits that often prompt discriminatory behaviour by others.

Goffman (1974) argued that stigmatization via framing processes, or “schemata of interpretation,” (p. 21) was an active phenomenon in which individuals have agency and control over their construction of reality. In other words, framing satisfies the human need to categorize reality. This enables members of the public to locate, perceive, and label occurrences within their lives or society, targeting experiences and people who stand out (Benford & Snow, 2000). For example, the fact that an exoneree has gone through the criminal justice system—possibly for a serious crime like murder—facilitates the perception that exonerees are different from regular people. Collectively, people with similar views are mobilized, garnering mutual support to omit the perceived “antagonists” from society (Snow & Benford, 1988, p. 198).

Indeed, exonerees do report encountering considerable stigma post-incarceration (e.g., Blume, 2008; Chunias & Aufgang, 2008; Kauzlarich, Matthews, & Miller, 2001). For instance, exoneree, Ken Wyniemko, described wrongful conviction as “walking around with a scarlet letter” (as cited in Roberts & Stanton, 2007, p. 2). This represents a blemish of character stigma, as the discovery of a discrediting attribute (i.e., wrongful conviction) prompts discriminatory actions against the exoneree. Stigma can tarnish an individual’s identity and reduce his or her life chances (Goffman, 1963)—in these examples, employment opportunities and financial viability for exonerees. In essence, assumptions are made about exonerees’ character—despite their demeanour or qualifications—due to their stigmatizing attribute. Their true identity is then replaced with a virtual social identity based on the knowledge and/or characterizations (whether accurate or not) others have about that stigmatized group.

Prejudice often occurs as a means for individuals to rationalize their fear of the marked person and the danger this individual is assumed to pose (Goffman, 1963). The public, for example, may feel that experiences of incarceration—let alone having been incarcerated for a crime one did not commit—changed the exoneree somehow, making his or her personality less predictable and less safe post-incarceration (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012). Grounds (2005) argued that wrongful conviction can alter personality and often results in psychological disorders (e.g., post-traumatic stress disorder). Although he was concerned for the welfare of exonerees, prejudiced individuals may perceive personality change and mental illness as character blemishes and use them to justify their fears of exonerees. Research has demonstrated that people stigmatize and discriminate against individuals suffering from mental illness (e.g., Corrigan, Powell, & Rüsck, 2012). Ultimately, wrongly convicted individuals may be incorrectly framed as having psychological issues based on assumptions about their experiences and how others expect those experiences to negatively impact them.

Wrongful conviction itself introduces the discussion of whether stigmas are readily obvious to others or not. Goffman (1963) differentiated between stigmas that are visible and those that are not. First, a “discredited stigma” is observable to others in social settings because the stigmatizing attribute is visibly apparent (e.g., physical deformity). In contrast, stigmas that are not observable are considered to be “discreditable.” While individuals who are discredited by their stigma cannot control who knows about it (it is observed), individuals with a discreditable stigma can select whether to divulge or conceal their stigmatizing attribute (Goffman, 1963). Unfortunately for exonerees, even though their wrongful convictions are not observable, media coverage of their cases may publicize and impose stigma on them. The exoneree may be fearful that everyone he or she encounters knows his or her story, granting less control over when and whom to inform about his or her past—transforming the stigma from discreditable to discredited.

The way the media (television news, newspapers) presents criminal justice issues to the public can influence how societal members frame individuals who come in contact with the criminal justice system (see Hough & Park, 2002). Specifically, sensationalized portrayals often deal with serious crimes such as murder and offenders are typically described using negative language like “armed and dangerous.” The public may be concerned or fearful that the dangerous offenders portrayed in the media may be released back into society (e.g., Roberts, 2007)—justifying a desire to avoid contact with these types of people. Exonerees have experienced the correctional system; many have lived alongside prisoners convicted of serious crimes. Thus, these dangerous labels are conceivably applied to exonerees—especially if their cases are publicized—further contributing to their stigmatization (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012).

At times, stigma is extended to include persons who associate with the stigmatized individual as well (e.g., Goffman, 1963; Neuberg, Smith, Hoffman, & Russell, 1994). “Courtesy stigma” or stigma-by-association occurs when previously non-stigmatized

individuals are discriminated against due to their association with the discredited person (Goffman, 1963). From this perspective, it is possible that people apply a courtesy stigma to exonerees due to their exposure to actual offenders while incarcerated, rather than due to any discrediting attribute thought to be possessed by exonerees (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012). Said another way, exonerees are tainted from their non-voluntary exposure to offenders and prison. According to exoneree, Calvin Willis, even though an exoneree is free, people still view him or her as contaminated because of the years incarcerated in a “criminalistic environment” (Innocence Project, 2009, p. 11). The perception may be that the exoneree was corrupted by these experiences and should be avoided as a precaution.

Clearly, some people devalue certain identities for fear of acquiring a label themselves (Goffman, 1963). The tendency for stigma to spread from the stigmatized person to prospective others possibly explains why people bearing a stigma are avoided and relationships are terminated upon its disclosure. This tactic is used to prevent the transfer of a marked individual’s stigma to another person. Reminiscent of Goffman’s (1963) courtesy stigma, an employer may avoid hiring someone who has been wrongly convicted—especially if his or her criminal record has not been expunged—because society’s reaction to this public figure may negatively impact how the business is viewed. Therefore, the fear that the exoneree’s stigma will be imparted on others should they choose to associate with him or her, acts as a strong motivator to avoid any interaction.

Given that the public may have uncertainties about exonerees, framing can be used to justify the labelling of exonerees as separate from other people. Allport (1979) argued that these perceptions reflect an “us” (in-group) versus “them” (out-group) mentality. Likewise, he believed that people are naturally conditioned to create categories and interact with individuals who they view as similar to themselves. Therefore, frames or categories are created for people to quickly identify individuals who do not belong within their in-group, facilitating prejudice (Allport, 1979). For many people, individuals who have not been incarcerated form the in-group, while individuals who have been incarcerated (even exonerees) make up the out-group. This stems from the perception that out-group members are often assumed to possess negative or undesirable traits. Allport (1979) contended that these negative assumptions cause people to automatically avoid members of the out-group and develop habits of rejection. And, on a collective level, frames are created when like-minded persons choose to reject people based on their negative characteristics. Thus, the public’s actions and prejudices are guided by frames based on the desire to separate the out-group from others, prompting the in-group to avoid these out-group individuals, such as people who have encountered the criminal justice system.

Discriminating behaviours can also be explained using “prognostic framing,” which involves the articulation of a problem or debate and offers reasonable strategies (e.g., acts of mobilization) for resolving the issue by the concerned individuals (Benford, 1987; Benford & Snow, 2000). Once the problem has been established, invested individuals decide how to handle the situation using schemas of interpretation. For instance, researchers have stated that more guilty individuals are judicially released than innocent individuals (e.g., Huff, Rattner, & Sagarin, 1996); thus, the public may be more aware of these guilty individuals going free—creating uncertainties regarding the innocence of exonerees and possibly making them second-guess wrongful convictions.

### **Why Do Public Perceptions Matter?**

How the public frames wrongful conviction and labels exonerees impacts reintegration efforts and exonerees’ quality of life. If these perceptions are negative, as interviews with exonerees have suggested (e.g., Campbell & Denov, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2008), a greater understanding of the public’s schemata of interpretation may lead to better strategies to

challenge this negative framing. In addition, public perception research specific to wrongful convictions can identify areas where there is a current need for further education, or may suggest policies that would or would not garner public support (e.g., Angus Reid, 1995; Clow, Blandisi, Ricciardelli, & Schuller, 2012). In turn, this may encourage governments to change existing practices and procedures. For example, public perception research may lead to the implementation of new policies to better assist those who have been wrongfully convicted (e.g., providing post-exoneration services to exonerees) as well as reduce stigmatization (e.g., education and awareness). By shedding light on the effects of stigmatization in cases of wrongful conviction, research may assist with advocating for positive change. Indeed, Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) found that a guest lecture delivered by an exoneree positively impacted schematic interpretations of wrongful conviction.

### **Current Study**

At present, there is limited research looking at public perceptions of exonerees and wrongful conviction. However, as mentioned, the existing literature suggests positive attitudes toward exonerees (e.g., Angus Reid, 1995; Bell, Clow, & Ricciardelli, 2008). For example, the Angus Reid (1995) survey found that 9 out of 10 Canadians believed exonerees deserved compensation for their wrongful conviction. Additionally, 65% of respondents believed that the government should increase its efforts to prevent wrongful convictions from occurring (Angus, 1995). Similarly, Bell and Clow (2007) found that more than half of their respondents (59.2%) disagreed with the statement “wrongful convictions are not a problem in the Canadian criminal justice system” (p. 101). An American study found comparable results—57.4% of respondents believed that wrongful convictions occur frequently enough to warrant major systematic changes (Zalman, Larson, & Smith, 2012). While this research positively supports wrongly convicted individuals by advocating for reformatory policies, it seems to contradict the negative experiences reported by exonerees themselves (e.g., Campbell & Denov, 2004, 2005; Vollen & Eggers, 2005).

The abovementioned research on public perceptions of wrongful convictions has been mostly quantitative in nature (e.g., Angus Reid, 1995; Bell & Clow, 2007; Zalman et al., 2012), whereas the research investigating the stigmatizing experiences of exonerees has been mostly qualitative (e.g., Campbell & Denov, 2004, 2005). Thus, to complement the exoneree research and to expand the research on public perceptions, we opted to use a qualitative approach (e.g., open-ended, semi-structured interviews) in order to give interviewees the opportunity to express their views using rich descriptions. Specifically, we wanted to explore and assess how members of the public perceived the lived experiences of exonerees resulting from their wrongful conviction—in an attempt to offer insight on the seemingly contradictory findings between survey data and exonerees’ narratives. We used a constructed grounded approach to analyze our data (Charmaz, 2014; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006), which enables issues deemed important by respondents (e.g., stigma) to emerge from the data instead of approaching the data with perceived hypotheses guiding our analyses. In particular, we focused on public opinion and perceptions of exonerees. To this end, we interviewed individuals of a suburban city in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) to determine whether exonerees’ negative experiences with stigma and prejudice are echoed in society’s schematic interpretations of wrongful conviction. Attention is directed to the themes of stigma that arose from the data.

### **Role of the Researchers**

Our research team consisted of three people: a criminology graduate student (MA from the University of Ontario Institute of Technology), a psychology associate professor (University of Ontario Institute of Technology), and a sociology assistant professor (Memorial University of Newfoundland). I. Blandisi's research interest in wrongful convictions began during her undergraduate practicum where she was a student case reviewer for the Association in Defence of the Wrongly Convicted (AIDWYC). Inspired by her interactions with exonerees and advocates working with AIDWYC, her graduate thesis examined public perceptions of wrongful convictions. As a developing scholar, I. Blandisi's research interests are situated in theories of stigma and the hardships of wrongful convictions more generally. Both professors have experience with—and an appreciation for—qualitative and quantitative research designs. Although K. Clow has greater experience with laboratory experiments, and R. Ricciardelli has greater experience with qualitative field research, they frequently collaborate to bring different skills and knowledge to the work. K. Clow's research background is situated in psychological approaches to stereotypes and prejudice, as well as social-cognitive methodologies, whereas R. Ricciardelli is known for her sociological work on masculinities, prisoners/prisons, and correctional/police officers.

K. Clow's uses a mixed methods approach to her research. Much of her work is structured within Social Role Theory, Role Congruity Theory, Ambivalent Sexism, and attribution theories of helping behaviour. R. Ricciardelli firmly believes that doing research in the field and listening to—hearing—the voices of the persons she speaks with is essential to developing research questions and analyzing data. She frames her research across an interconnection of diverse frameworks that draw from the traditions of risk and the interpretive paradigm. The multidisciplinary nature of our team allows us to approach the interdisciplinary issue of wrongful conviction from diverse perspectives.

## Method

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews ( $n=30$ ) were conducted until theme saturation was achieved. In essence, new individuals were interviewed until data saturation occurred; the point at which analyses failed to uncover any new perspectives or insights (Bowen, 2008). As such, the interviewees were 18 men and 12 women recruited from a city on the outskirts of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Education levels included respondents who stopped after high school ( $n=4$ ), were currently working toward university bachelor degrees ( $n=15$ ), had attained college diplomas ( $n=6$ ), and had attained university degrees ( $n=5$ )—with two of these interviewees holding post-graduate degrees. Ages ranged from 18 to 69 years of age (*Median*=28).

Even though these interviews were conducted within one particular suburban city, interviewees generally lived throughout the GTA. As such, recruitment was two-fold: some interviewees were recruited through a nearby university, and others through coffee shops located within the city. In the university, students were informed about the study through an advertisement posted on the university's research recruitment website, where they could earn partial course credit for participating. Those interested in participating were able to sign-up for available timeslots through this research software—a common practice at the university. These individuals were interviewed in a private room at one of the university's psychology laboratories, where informed and voluntary consent were secured prior to commencing the interviews. To ensure voluntary participation, interviewees were told they would receive their partial course credit even if they decided not to finish the interview. All interviewees who were recruited via the university's research website chose to complete their interviews.



Community members were recruited by the first author in various coffee shops in the downtown area of the city and offered a small honorarium (10 dollars). The coffee shops were selected to cover a range of clientele, such as Tim Horton's (less expensive chain), an independent store, and Coffee Culture (more expensive chain). Permission to conduct interviews on site in the coffee shops was acquired from management prior to data collection and only lone coffee shop patrons (e.g., those who were not with another person) were approached for participation. Of the approached patrons, three men declined to participate. For those who agreed to participate, the interview was conducted at the coffee establishment (except for one respondent who requested to reconvene at her place of employment) either immediately or at a more convenient future date. Across interview locations, the procedure always began with informed consent and voluntary participation. Specifically, interviewees were informed that they would receive the honorarium even if they did not complete the interview and could stop the interview at any time. All respondents who agreed to participate finished their interviews.

**Data collection.** This study was approved by a university Research Ethics Board (REB) based on its compliance with the standards set out in the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS). The interviews were conducted over 4 months, from May 31, 2011 to August 3, 2011. Interviews ranged in duration from 15 to 60 minutes, with the average interview lasting approximately 30 minutes.

The data for this paper come from a larger study, which used a 20-item interview guide to cover a range of topics relevant to wrongful conviction (see Appendix A). Specifically, questions were created in light of a knowledge gap evinced in the current public perception research and our desire to take strides toward closing this gap with empirical findings from face-to-face interviews with the public (versus survey methods previously done). While interviewees were directly asked questions noted in this guide, the conversational path that emerged followed what was put forth by the interviewee—not the interviewer. Thus, to facilitate discussion, additional questions may have been posed to respondents outside of this guide to solicit clarification or further discussion of a topic of interest.

The interview questions did not specifically ask about stigmatization (it was an emergent theme) because we did not want to force the concept of stigma into the dialogue. Instead, we wanted to see if stigma emerged from the data—learning about stigma without sensitizing interviewees to the issue intentionally. Indeed, if stigma had not been spontaneously raised by interviewees, then that would also be telling. As stigma was a theme that did emerge of the interviewees' accord, it is clear that stigma is an issue of concern for interviewees when considering exonerees. The questions that frequently elicited discussions of stigmatization pertained to topics such as respondents' feelings about the criminal justice system (e.g., *how do you generally feel about the Canadian criminal justice system?*), factors leading to wrongful convictions, (e.g., *why do you think wrongful convictions happen?*), public apologies (e.g., *do you think wrongly convicted individuals should receive an apology?*), compensation (e.g., *do you think the wrongly convicted should be financially compensated?*), prospective level of comfort around an exoneree (e.g., *would you be comfortable around him or her?*) as well as how they felt about an identified exoneree's case (e.g., *how do you feel about...?*).

**Analysis and coding.** All interviews were transcribed verbatim by the first author (i.e., the interviewer). Then, inductive analysis was used to examine the transcribed data, wherein the categories, themes, and patterns came from the data (Janesick, 1998). Thus, a constructed grounded approach was our method of analysis (Charmaz, 2014). It is important to note that the themes and categories that were constructed from the interviews were not imposed prior to data collection. The codebook was an extensive Excel spreadsheet/table in which we organized the research categories, subcategories, and tallied interviewees' responses. We also included interviewees' demographic information (e.g., sex, education). Preliminary pseudonyms (e.g.,

P8, P9) were used in the codebook. The interviewees' responses were recorded as coding progressed, with topics being added as they emerged (e.g., stigmatization).

During the initial reading of the data, the first author located themes and assigned initial codes in an attempt to condense the data into organized categories. This form of "open coding" brought themes to the surface from deep within the data (Charmaz, 2014; Neuman, 2003). The first author determined emergent themes based on a topic or concept that recurred repeatedly, with multiple interviewees expressing a similar perspective. This prompted her to examine these themes in more depth as coding advanced. Respondents were included in every theme or subtheme they mentioned; therefore they could be represented in several categories simultaneously. For instance, a respondent could have made a statement, placing him or her within a main category (e.g., reasons for stigmatization). Then, components of their response could also be tallied under descriptors of that theme (e.g., doubt, incarceration). Please refer to Appendix B for thematic breakdown.

During the second reading of the data, the first author reviewed and examined the initial codes, with a focus on linking emergent themes. In particular, she looked for categories or concepts that clustered together (Charmaz, 2014; Neuman, 2003). For example, "stigma" formed the main theme and a subtheme included "reasons for stigmatization." The first author further broke down this subtheme into descriptive topics such as "media and technology." In essence, the first author created and tallied detailed subcategories for each major theme at this stage. In the final stages of coding, the major themes and subcategories were established and the first author conducted another sweep of the data—ensuring that all cases illustrating the established codes were included.

To finalize these codes, the second author read all transcripts and examined the coding scheme. If any discrepancies or concerns arose, the first two authors attempted to resolve the issue through discussion and/or reanalysis of the transcripts, which resulted in additional subcategories and/or the collapsing of similar topics. More than one coder (first and second authors) analyzed the data in order to ensure the rigor of the study by "passing" reliability and dependability checks (Saumure & Given, 2008). Through communication between these two coders during the coding process, we ensured the same thematic interpretations were observed across different researchers.

The first and second authors also maintained comparability throughout by ensuring the analysis was conducted with constant comparison within and across the data, and in light of current research (Mills et al., 2006; Saumure & Given, 2008). Within the data, they consistently examined various responses in order to establish themes/subthemes that represented the voices of persons in the study group (Saumure & Given, 2008). In terms of current research, emergent themes were viewed parallel to the literature on perceptions of wrongful conviction (e.g., Clow & Leach, 2015) as well as exonerees' experiences (e.g., Westervelt & Cook, 2012). As such, our exploratory findings related to broader research contexts (Saumure & Given, 2008)—establishing similarities, differences, and new areas of inquiry for future researchers to pursue. It is important to note that all authors used pseudonyms in order to protect the confidentiality of interviewees. In addition, the first and second authors made minor edits to respondents' quotes to improve grammar, reduce speech fillers or utterances (e.g., pauses), and to improve comprehensibility and flow.

## **Results and Discussion**

Our results shed light on how the public perceives wrongly convicted persons to be stigmatized. The following themes emerged from interviewees' responses: (a) blatant versus subtle stigma, (b) reasons for stigmatization, and (c) being against stigma (see Appendix B). The findings are situated in stigma theory and framing.

## **Blatant Stigma Versus Subtle Stigma**

Eight respondents admitted to having their own biases toward exonerees (i.e., blatant stigma), describing these biases as their own views and how they personally felt, rather than how they expected others would feel. Of those 8, 3 people specifically mentioned being uncomfortable with the fact that the exoneree had been in prison:

If I didn't know [about incarceration]. . .at the time, I don't think it would be a big deal, but once finding out, I don't know. I'd just be like, "Oh. . .this guy went to jail." So, I don't know. I've never been around someone that's been to prison and accused of such crimes (Todd).

This comment supports previous research, where being incarcerated was found to be off putting, leading to stigmatization (Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012). That is, simply being imprisoned can impart a stigma on the individual—whether he or she committed the crime or not. Moreover, a pervasive view was that being in prison with “offenders” could change an exoneree, or that simply being incarcerated would alter his or her personality in negative ways. As Wayne explained:

I wouldn't really be comfortable [socializing with an exoneree] because of what happened and what he's been through in jail<sup>1</sup>. The people he met. And sometimes, [from being in] jail, people—even if you were a good person, the situation [incarceration] you are put in—often changes your behaviour and the way you think.

Wayne's words demonstrate the belief that an exoneree's personality and demeanour can negatively change as a result of non-voluntary exposure to offenders and prison, justifying the public's discomfort and desire to avoid exonerees.

Three of these eight interviewees also suggested that exonerees contribute to their own wrongful convictions. For instance, Kelly implied that exonerees contribute to their own plight when she said: “I personally feel like I would never have to worry about being wrongfully convicted, just because I don't put myself in those situations.” Based on this comment, she appears to feel immune to wrongful conviction and suggests it is exonerees' fault for being in compromising situations. This thought process fuels the exoneree's virtual social identity of guilt or being at fault in some way—facilitating incorrect judgements about his or her personality based on the view that certain people can be wrongly convicted, but not others. In disregarding the possibility of being wrongfully convicted herself, Kelly corroborated research on the transfer of blame (e.g., Kauzlarich et al., 2001) to exonerees. Adding to this, Derek believed, “most innocent people aren't really charged for these crimes on a daily basis, right? That's what I think. . .he [exoneree] probably did something [to be convicted].” Perceiving exonerees as contributors to their wrongful conviction appeases the public's concern for wrongful conviction by justifying the criminal justice system's conduct and, thus, regular people would not have to worry about being erroneously convicted.

If only other people, or bad people, are at risk of wrongful conviction, then the world remains a fair and just place (see Lerner, 1980) even with the existence of wrongful

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<sup>1</sup> Respondents used jail and prison synonymously. Thus, the quotes have been interpreted using the term “prison,” but the original term (i.e., “jail”) was maintained in the interviewees' quotes.

convictions. It further supports Allport's (1979) argument of in-group and out-group formations; people view themselves as one group and exonerees as an out-group who are in situations that can lead to being wrongly convicted. As people prefer and choose to interact with individuals who have similar characterizations (e.g., Allport, 1979; Snow & Benford, 1988), this sort of categorization might lead people to isolate and discriminate against wrongly convicted persons as they are misperceived as being at fault for their erroneous convictions.

Interviewees also described being apprehensive if they found themselves in a room with an exoneree based on uncertainties surrounding the exoneree's innocence: "[If he was] right there it might raise a little flag in the back of my head. . .even though he was wrongfully convicted, I could still look at him and [feel] awkward, you know?" (Joshua). This "little flag" of doubt seemed to raise interviewees' anxieties about being in an exoneree's presence, perhaps because they did not trust that a potential exoneree would be truly innocent. As Jack explained, "People can say anything they want, right? I can't believe what he [exoneree] says [unless] there's evidence to prove that he didn't do it." These viewpoints express uncertainty surrounding exonerees' innocence and may explain the negative stigma exonerees report when interacting with the public (Grounds, 2005)—specifically, feeling relegated from the "us" to the "them" category due to apprehension surrounding their innocence.

Additionally, two respondents stated that the word, conviction, stood out for them more than the word, wrongful, when it came to the term wrongful conviction. For these interviewees, wrongful conviction seemed to be framed as a type of conviction instead of a type of wrongful action or error:

If I was [an] employer and I knew someone was wrongfully convicted, I would still probably have second thoughts [because]. . .anyone who encounters a criminal situation and who has been convicted—just that word "conviction" really stands out. So, I guess people tend not to think of the "wrongful" part when they hear about a wrongful conviction. It's the conviction part that really stands out and that's why I [personally] would have second thoughts (Peter).

As Peter explained, the conviction part is salient and causes doubt. In a similar vein, when explaining his hesitation to converse with an exoneree, Joshua said, "I don't know, he killed. . . [Well], he didn't kill anyone, but the fact that he was convicted. The *conviction* part [stands out to me]." Based on these viewpoints, being tied to a criminal conviction may facilitate the negative framing of exonerees, and may overshadow the knowledge of their innocence.

Although only 8 interviewees openly discussed their personal biases, this does not mean other respondents did not hold stigmatizing views. These 8 interviewees were suspected to be upfront and honest about their biases. Despite other respondents claiming to not hold stigmatizing views, they may not have been aware of their own biases or were aware of their biases but chose to hide them in order to appear more socially presentable.

Indeed, 3 other interviewees made comments that seemed indicative of underlying stigma. Although these respondents explained that they were personally not biased and would not stigmatize exonerees, some of their word choices suggested negative framing and stigma (i.e., subtle stigma). For example, when discussing whether he would be comfortable interacting with exonerees, Philip said, "I would feel comfortable around those individuals [exonerees]. I mean, being wrongfully convicted doesn't make you a bad person." Referring to exonerees as "*those* individuals" may indicate the distinction of in-group and out-group dynamics. Allport (1979) argued that this us versus them mentality leads to prejudicial attitudes.

Other interviewees seemed to distance themselves from their stigmatizing comments, suggesting that other people—not the interviewee—might stigmatize exonerees. For example, Ruth commented that “if you have children, even if they prove that that person [exoneree] didn’t do it, somebody as a mother or father would probably not leave their child alone with that person.” Although not explicitly saying that she would feel this way, Ruth used prognostic framing to justify discrimination against exonerees in this particular situation. Specifically, the public may feel justified in denying an exoneree direct contact with others—especially if individuals are protective of that social setting (e.g., their home, school, daycare). As argued by Allport (1979), these types of views often facilitate in-group and out-group formations—the idea of keeping danger (or the prospect of danger) at a distance. Although not as obvious and forward as the interviewees expressing blatant stigma, these three respondents appeared to indirectly exhibit stigma through their language choices (for additional information, see Shattell, 2009).

### Reasons for Stigmatization

Twenty-six respondents mentioned why they believed exonerees are stigmatized by the public. These comments focused on how *the public* sees exonerees, not what the interviewees themselves believed. Of these respondents, 6 people felt that media coverage of exonerees’ cases facilitated their stigmatization. They acknowledged that early media coverage of the case (i.e., when the exoneree was assumed to be guilty) could have detrimental and lingering impacts on exonerees. James explained this process: “[For wrongly convicted people] having their names dragged in the mud all those years [can be problematic]—the media puts that seed in your brain.” In this way, the media could essentially tarnish how others viewed the exoneree based on how the media framed him or her earlier on. For these interviewees, seeing an exoneree’s story in the media prior to the wrongful conviction may form the basis for how he or she is viewed by the public years later:

I think it’s because bad news spreads faster than wrongful convictions or better news [like an exoneration]. Convictions concern everyone. . . people tend to pay attention to bad news first and that spreads really fast. Let’s say a person was arrested for something—almost everyone would know because of the Internet, the media...they like the “juicy” stuff, right? (Charles).

As evinced in Charles’ words, broadcasters who typically report negative stories can taint an exoneree’s reputation after (or if) their story received coverage. That is, the public would remember the arrest or sensationalized details of the case, making it difficult to accept news that contradicts this—facilitating prejudice and discrimination even after exoneration.

Given current technologies (e.g., Google searches, news-video archives) that allow the history of the exoneree to be easily accessible to the public, the impact of negatively framed media reports may linger for years. For instance, when an exoneree tries to reintegrate post-exoneration by applying to rent an apartment, he or she can be easily Googled or searched by a landlord, which exposes news stories covering the earlier assumptions of guilt as well as the updated stories of his or her innocence. Searches can also present both fiction and fact—often interchangeably. Thus, modern technologies may facilitate the framing process, wherein people may seek to avoid an exoneree based on a stereotype of danger or uncertainties about his or her person. Moreover, this information may easily be shared by social media and other networking technologies among peers and acquaintances, possibly leading to a shared desire to exclude or avoid the exoneree.

Five respondents felt that people do not have extensive knowledge on the functioning of the criminal justice system, in general, or wrongful convictions, in particular. As Lynn explained, “I would say [stigma occurs] because not a lot of people know about our justice system or anything, so it’s just a lack of that education.” These interviewees felt that stigma occurs because societal members are relying on information that may be inaccurate and/or incomplete. Moreover, lack of exposure to wrongful conviction in certain communities was also thought to facilitate stigma toward exonerees. For example, Sean noted:

I think it’s [stigma] a factor where you’re dealing with [wrongful conviction] cases within a community where. . .exposure is very small. I feel that tends to [occur] when you’re dealing with people who are really not exposed and they’re living in a “small world.”

This limited knowledge may enable the stigmatization of exonerees due to the public’s lack of awareness about the prevalence of wrongful convictions (e.g., Bell et al., 2008), factors that can lead to wrongful convictions (see Campbell & Denov, 2005), post-exoneration obstacles (e.g., Grounds, 2005), or the implications of stigmatization for exonerees (e.g., Westervelt & Cook, 2008, 2010). More importantly, these perceptions stress the importance of expanding education on wrongful convictions beyond the academic realm, as education may positively impact schematic interpretations of exonerees (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012).

Ten interviewees commented on how the incarceration of wrongly convicted individuals contributed to their stigma. Interestingly, this theme echoes an earlier theme in which respondents admitted to being personally biased toward an exoneree based on their contact with prison and offenders. However, the general view here was that *other* people (not the interviewees themselves) negatively view prison and, as a result, exonerees who have been incarcerated become viewed negatively by association. Jack explained that despite an exoneree’s innocence, for some people, prison is ultimately a place where criminals go:

Society wouldn’t accept them [exoneree]. To everybody, even though he’s been wrongly convicted they’re going to still think, “Oh, look he’s been in jail or she’s been in jail.” Once you go to jail, automatically, everyone thinks you’re a bad person. It doesn’t matter if you’re good or bad. Once you’ve been in there, and you come out, they automatically think you’re a bad person, so no one would want to associate with you.

His comment shows how assumptions are made about an individual’s character based on a stigmatizing attribute—in this case, having been incarcerated. Martin corroborated this further when he said,

The fact that they [exonerees] were exposed to cons in jail...sets them [people] off even though he has been wrongfully convicted and released...It’s the element of danger...You know, you’ve been in prison, you could [have] be[come] a dangerous person. They [exoneree] could hurt you or attack someone; they [exoneree] did some hard time.

Ultimately, these comments suggest that even though an exoneree is innocent, having been incarcerated marks him or her as a societal danger and places him or her within this stigmatized group for some individuals.

Just under half of the interviewees in this theme believed that people avoid and stigmatize exonerees for fear of being victims of courtesy stigma. In this regard, James

explained that people would not want to associate with exonerees because “they wouldn’t want their own character damaged.” The desire to avoid a tarnished image—by associating with someone who bears a stigma—was prevalent among respondents. This discussion on the fear of courtesy stigma provides insight into how in-group and out-group memberships are maintained among members of society. That is, by associating with an exoneree, people fear losing their in-group position and being forced into the out-group alongside the wrongly convicted individual. This fear of being cast out from their in-group encourages social distance from exonerees.

Some respondents felt that courtesy stigma fears might be particularly concerning for employers. As Philip described,

I mean first of all, the person has been wrongfully convicted. Although we [know that the conviction] was wrong there may be a particular employer that may not want to associate with that person [because] of the attention and the publicity. A wrongful conviction is a history right? [By] going through this process, everybody [wonders], “Oh where’s Bert, he was [that] wrongfully convicted person, where is he working [now]?” [So] employers may be wary [to hire someone who has been wrongfully convicted].

Employers may believe that their business will decline if customers learn they hired someone with a criminal record (whether innocent or not), so they opt to maintain the perceived integrity of their business, as well as evade the risk of courtesy stigma, by denying employment opportunities to exonerees (Roberts & Stanton, 2007; Westervelt & Cook, 2008). Since exonerees have been in contact with the justice system, employers may presume that customers and employees may not feel comfortable interacting, working with, and/or being served by someone who has been wrongfully convicted. These findings lend further insight into the cognitive underpinnings of frames—particularly, the “us versus them” mentality that typically facilitates this form of stigmatization.

Earlier, we discussed how respondents personally would hesitate to interact with an exoneree based on doubt. In this theme, some respondents explained how *others* tended to second-guess and question wrongful convictions. This topic of doubt was further discussed in regards to: (a) the judicially released guilty, (b) the type of crime for which the exoneree was wrongfully convicted, and (c) if the exoneree had a past criminal record.

Indeed, just over half of the interviewees believed that exonerees were stigmatized because the *public* doubted their innocence. Ruth, for example, explained that a person can never be completely sure of another’s guilt or innocence:

I guess in some people’s minds, there will always be that doubt. You know, when somebody has been accused of molesting someone and it comes out in the public and it’s been shown [later] that they didn’t do it. I think that no matter what, it has affected their [exoneree’s] life because people will always look at them wondering, with that little bit of doubt, if they did or really didn’t do it or [if] they just managed to get away with it.

Here, Ruth is not speaking of her own views, but explaining how other people might be suspicious about exonerees. She hints that simply being tied to a horrible crime is enough to leave doubt in some people’s minds.

Speaking hypothetically, Derek similarly commented:

Well let's say I've been put away for 5 years. People ask questions: why was this person put away for 5 years even though he didn't do anything? The justice system is power[ful], so even though I didn't do anything, they [society] can't make sense of how the justice system can make [these] mistakes. That's why they [the public] would act differently [toward the exoneree] because they would think that [he/she is likely a] guilty criminal and that's why [he/she was] arrested.

Similar to how this theme emerged in blatant stigma, Ruth and Derek's comments further explain why some people may be quick to create categories and frames that place exonerees on the outskirts of a desirable social group. What is different from the expressions of doubt in the earlier theme is that here, respondents are trying to explain how this doubt can emerge from people's faith in the infallibility of the criminal justice system.

**Judicially released guilty.** Even though the interviews focused exclusively on wrongful conviction, 8 interviewees spontaneously raised the issue of the judicially released guilty, suggesting that it was a pressing concern in their minds:

...there was a case where they let [a group] free because they didn't get to court soon enough or they didn't get convicted soon enough, so they were all let free and they had serious criminal charges. That's what I mean...hardened criminals getting away with too soft punishments...Sure [wrongful convictions] are important, but I think it is a relatively small problem compared to all the other problems we have (Edward).

Given that it is more common for guilty people to be judicially released than the innocent (e.g., Huff et al., 1996), the concern about dangerous individuals returning to society may be contributing to the uncertainties some people feel toward exonerees' innocence. Additionally, Joshua commented that it is not just innocent individuals who are "exonerated:" "There [are] people where a crime happened. . .the person did it, but they [justice system] didn't have enough facts to prove him guilty. So, his charges [have to be] dropped." Considering these perceptions, suspicions surrounding the judicially released guilty may spread to exonerees, tarnishing their reputations. Thus, if the public doubts—or is uncertain of—the innocence of exonerees, they are more likely to engage in prognostic framing.

**Type of crime.** Just over half of the 26 respondents in this theme suggested that the public doubts and stigmatizes exonerees, in part, because of the crime for which they were wrongly convicted. Todd, for instance, explained that, "The worse the crime, the more someone feels scared. I guess scared or, doesn't want to be around that person. . .even though they've been wrongfully convicted." This statement demonstrates that the more severe the crime, the more negative the perception of the exoneree. Edward explained this further: "Some people will only believe what they think. I don't care about the facts I just don't want to be in the company of someone who has been convicted of murder or I think has been convicted of murder or there was some reason why they were convicted of murder." These respondents are saying that an exoneree is viewed to be more dangerous if he or she was wrongly convicted of a more egregious crime, prompting increased social distance by others. Explaining this in more detail, Danielle said:

If you were caught robbing a bank you can come back into society and people aren't going to run you down the street when they see you, but if you were convicted of killing a child they're not going to let their kids out in the yard



whether you are exonerated or not. They're not going to take the chance, they're not going to let you come over and babysit.

Her comment explains that members of the public may prevent interactions between children and an exoneree based on the crime for which he or she was wrongly convicted. These respondents indicated that serious crimes (e.g., murder) are framed differently than other crimes (e.g., robbery) because they are associated with elevated danger. In other words, with the presumption of danger being higher for serious crimes, this increasingly prevents individuals from associating with an exoneree who falls within this particular frame—despite his or her innocence.

**Past criminal record.** Nine interviewees felt that exonerees were further stigmatized and doubted if they had a criminal record prior to their wrongful conviction. Similar to the other themes in this section, interviewees discussed the perceptions of others rather than their own views. Edward exemplified this when he said, “Some people always have the perception that if you were convicted of one crime, you probably did many other [crimes].” This comment framed the exoneree based on the idea that committing one crime predisposes him or her to commit others. That is, if someone assumes that an exoneree’s past criminal record led to his or her wrongful conviction, that exoneree—while innocent of the present crime—will still be considered dangerous or criminal. In addition, these interviewees discussed the idea that exonerees with criminal records tend to have their innocence doubted further, which generates more stigmatization by the public. Bruce described this:

. . . [people] get this feeling where [they think], “Oh yeah because he’s done something wrong he is tainted” and “he’s done something wrong, he’s broken the law [before]. If he’s broken it once, he can break it again. . .” [To them], something that happens once can always happen again.

In this observation, Goffman’s (1963) assertion that people justify discrimination and construct stigmas based on an individual’s perceived danger is apparent. Consequently, if the exoneree had a previous criminal record, he or she may be viewed as having the propensities to commit crimes because he or she already has done so—automatically framing him or her as a prospective recidivist. In this sense, a past criminal history acts as a stigmatizing marker for exonerees. Bruce continued, “[People stigmatize when they say things like], He’s stolen something [before]; he’s got a criminal record. Let’s not talk to him because he’s a negative influence to our lives.” This schematic interpretation of exonerees as criminals—given previous criminal histories—may perpetuate the creation of frames that enables the public to negatively label, as well as avoid contact with, wrongly convicted individuals. In essence, such responses corroborate reports that exonerees with past criminal records have an elevated chance of being stigmatized (e.g., Blume, 2008).

### **Against Stigmatization**

Only two respondents spoke out against stigma and prejudice toward exonerees. The general dialogue was how stigma reduced opportunities for exonerees to move on and live a normal life. Interviewees suggested that a lingering criminal record post-exoneration for the crime they did not commit contributed to this: “First of all, [having this criminal record] affects [exonerees] emotionally and mentally. . . when they get out there, they are judged because of a record. I’m honestly against that” (Heather). This comment suggests that stigmatizing and framing exonerees post-exoneration may lead to problematic outcomes, such as psychological issues from continued prejudice and discrimination. Moreover, it was noted that criminal

reference checks do not differentiate actual convictions from wrongful convictions, encouraging unwarranted stigmas that make reintegration more difficult. As Amy said, “I don’t think it [criminal reference checks] should be like that because they [exonerees] deserve to have a chance at living a normal life too.” Here, interviewees personally spoke out against these stigmas due to the detrimental impact on exonerees’ quality of life and ability to reintegrate—indirectly suggesting that criminal records should be automatically expunged post-exoneration.

## **Conclusion**

Minimal research has examined how the public views wrongful convictions and exonerees (e.g., Bell et al., 2008). Even though our respondents were not directly asked about stigma and wrongful conviction, most of the interviewees spontaneously voiced their views on the topic. Respondents voluntarily discussed how stigma would make it difficult for exonerees to acquire gainful employment, how being incarcerated contaminates exonerees with stigma, how the innocence of exonerees may be doubted, and how others may be concerned about acquiring a courtesy stigma if they interact or befriend an exoneree. Although these issues have been noted by exonerees or previously suggested by researchers (e.g., Clow, Ricciardelli, & Cain, 2012; Vollen & Eggers, 2005; Westervelt & Cook, 2008, 2010), our findings demonstrate that members of the public are also aware of these issues, which has not been noted in the literature presently.

In particular, our findings provide new insights into public knowledge regarding wrongful conviction. Individuals are aware of numerous factors leading to stigma, recognize that stigma manifests in many forms, and most importantly, the public seems to understand the long-term implications of stigma for exonerees. Based on this, the continued lack of government action (e.g., no Canadian legislation to provide compensation, governments failing to offer apologies, false criminal records are not automatically expunged) is surprising.

The majority of interviewees believed that people stigmatized exonerees by discrediting them in light of their wrongful conviction. Our findings suggest that an exoneree’s incarceration elicits stigma. Interviewees applied their negative sentiments toward prisons onto exonerees who have been imprisoned—constructing frames for exonerees originally used for prisoners and offenders. Respondents also brought forth the idea that contact with prison and offenders may negatively change the exoneree, leading people to avoid exonerees as a potential threat or danger in and of themselves. Some respondents also acknowledged that courtesy stigma fears contributed to discriminatory actions against exonerees. For instance, interviewees presented the idea that employers may avoid hiring an exoneree in order to preserve the reputation of their business—suggesting prognostic framing techniques. Finally, in regards to public doubt, the exoneree’s innocence and concerns over their prison experiences—including fears of courtesy stigma—seemed to underlie stigmatization according to interviewees. When discussing doubt, respondents mostly tied the exoneree to the crime for which he or she was wrongly convicted. They felt exonerees were further stigmatized and doubted if they were convicted of more serious crimes like murder or the sexual assault of children, which seems to suggest that societal frames fluctuate based on the danger an individual is thought to represent. In other words, the more serious the conviction, the more dangerous and avoidable the exoneree is believed to be. Overall, the voices in our data can be interpreted to show an interplay between stigma theory and the framing approach.

**Limitations.** Although data saturation was achieved, this study used a small convenient group from the GTA. The employment of interviewees from other cities will be useful to further understand perceptions of wrongful conviction on a more diverse scale. While efforts to expand the group were made (the interviewer visited a variety of coffee shops), the study group is

likely a range of educated, middle-class individuals. For instance, the fact that the interviews were conducted in coffee shops indicates that interviewees had the means to pay for the goods and services offered. It may be interesting to replicate this study in a similar middle-class city in the United States or regions with varying socio-economic statuses and ethnicities. By having viewpoints from multiple demographic groups, this may offer a more well-rounded understanding on how people feel toward the stigmatization of exonerees. However, even though the study was conducted in only one suburban city, interviewees indicated that they resided in a variety of locations across the GTA. Therefore, not all respondents strictly came from the area where the study was conducted, allowing other surrounding locations to be represented. This was a preliminary, exploratory study, and greater research in public perceptions of wrongful conviction is needed.

**Future research.** In identifying how exonerees are stigmatized and the factors that may facilitate their stigmatization, interviewees generally shared similar perspectives. Considering most respondents discussed stigma and framing from the perspective of others, future researchers may wish to directly ask interviewees about their views of stigma in various social situations (e.g., having an exoneree as a neighbour). In addition, researchers may wish to ask respondents if they know anyone who has experienced imprisonment, wrongful conviction, or the criminal justice system in general (e.g., a relative, friend). Interestingly, four respondents spontaneously discussed that they knew a family member or friend who had experienced a wrongful conviction and one went so far as to reveal her experiences with the criminal justice system. Future research may wish to further explore whether this familiarity, or previous knowledge, impacts perceptions of wrongful conviction.

Additionally, some interviewees were more open and willing to discuss their personal biases and stigma toward exonerees and wrongful conviction compared to others. It is possible that because the first author was a graduate student at the time, some interviewees may have felt more comfortable being open and honest given a shared social position and similar age. Conversely, other respondents could have been less upfront (e.g., may have held but not expressed negative opinions of exonerees) during their interviews as a way to appear more socially presentable or knowledgeable for the student-interviewer. This interpretation seems plausible since some interviewees had responses that were indicative of prejudicial attitudes while they explicitly maintained that they themselves were not biased. This reasoning may also explain the contradiction between positive public opinion surveys and the negative experiences reported by exonerees. The public may avoid expressing negative opinions in surveys in order to provide more socially appropriate answers, possibly contributing to positive findings. However, as most interviewees in this study supported exonerees by acknowledging the detriments of stigma, it is also possible that a small portion of the public may hold negative attitudes toward individuals who have been wrongly convicted—interactions with these few prejudiced people may have a more lasting impact on exonerees than neutral or positive encounters. Future researchers may wish to explore this idea further.

**Policy implications.** Ultimately, public awareness is essential to reduce the stigma and discrimination wrongly convicted individuals' experience. Our findings suggest that individuals within a Canadian city are becoming more cognisant of criminal justice issues, like wrongful convictions. Perhaps by informing the public of the repercussions of stigma, people may become better equipped to understand how stigma impacts an exoneree's quality of life post-exoneration, thus continuing this trend. Sharing post-exoneration stories and/or current research findings with people through popular public-mediums (television interviews, classroom guest speakers, social media, etc.) may be one way to increase public knowledge and awareness about wrongful conviction. While few interviewees indicated they were born outside of Canada, we did not directly ask our respondents their origin of birth. Thus, to assess the viability of the proposed applications, future research may also wish to look at the views of

immigrants to Canada in addition to Canadian-born citizens. With this said, researchers (e.g., Angus Reid, 1995; Zalman et al., 2012) have found positive public support for exonerees (e.g., the public feels that the government should increase its wrongful conviction efforts), which is encouraging given this may increase public support for reform, and stimulate public-driven changes within the criminal justice system. For instance, the government may consider implementing new policies to better assist people who have been wrongly convicted or provide more information to the public about wrongful conviction in order to prevent negative stigmas. Our hope is that further research and education will assist the public and governments in becoming more aware of wrongful convictions in general—and the negative implications of stigma specifically—stimulating legislative and policy changes that diminish the negative framing processes directed toward those who have been wrongly convicted.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

"I just want to thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview. I really appreciate your participation because it will help me with my studies."

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

"Before we get started, I'd like to know a little bit about you"

"For instance," **do you live in the Durham Region?**

\* [If yes] "So do I. Which municipality? (Oshawa, Whitby, Ajax, etc.)

\* Do you have a long commute? Where do you live?

[For students only] **Are you currently employed?**

[If yes] What do you do? Do you work in the Durham area? [Ask one and let them talk, then ask the next.]

[For community members only] **Have you attended a post-secondary institution?**  
(University or college)?

\*Follow up: What did you study?

[For students only] **"So, what are you studying?"**

### WRONGFUL CONVICTION QUESTIONS

"Ok, we are going to move onto the wrongful conviction questions now. Remember there are no right or wrong answers; I'm looking for what you honestly believe, if you are uncomfortable with answering anything, please let me know and we can move on. With that being said, let me know if you are ready to begin."

**When you hear the phrase "wrongful conviction" what is the first thing that comes to mind?**

**If you were asked to explain what a wrongful conviction was, what would you say?**

\*[If the definition matches ours] "Yes, a lot of people think that and that is the definition we will be using throughout this study."

\*[If they are close] "Yes, a lot of people think that and for the purposes of this study, we consider wrongful conviction to mean that someone was convicted of a crime that he/she did not commit."

*\*[If the definition is completely off]* “Yes, that’s one possibility, but for the rest of this interview, let’s consider wrongful conviction to mean that someone was convicted of a crime that he/she did not commit.”

**How much do you feel you know about wrongful convictions?**

**In the last month or so, have you heard or seen any stories in the media relating to wrongful convictions? For example, on the news or in the newspaper?**

\* If yes, what was the story generally about?

“With that being said”, **can you think of the name of anyone who has been wrongfully convicted?** “It does not have to be a recent case”

\*What do you think about this case?

\*How do you feel about [insert the name of the wrongly convicted individual]?

\*Would you be comfortable around [him/her]?

\*Do you believe in [his/her] innocence?

\*Do you think people should be exonerated?

\*Do you think only innocent people are exonerated?)

\*[If no] “Well, what percentage of wrongly convicted individuals do you think are innocent?”

*[If they cannot think of anyone]* “Sometimes it is hard to come up with names on the spot. I am going to mention a couple of names and let me know if you have heard anything about these individuals or their cases: Guy Paul Morin, David Milgaard, Steven Truscott, Romeo Phillion, William Mullins-Johnson, Robert Baltovitch. . .” *[Say one name and wait for response, if no, go to next name. Stop once they have heard of one and then ask them the questions above based on that case. Don’t mention more once they have heard of one].*

**Why do you think wrongful convictions happen?**

**Who do you think should take responsibility when a wrongful conviction occurs?**

[Follow up if they don’t answer]: Well, who do you think is at fault?

**Do you think wrongful convictions are more common in Canada or the United States?**

*\*If they suggest a particular country:* Why do you think wrongful convictions are more common there?

**COMPENSATION QUESTIONS**

**How do you generally feel about the Canadian criminal justice system?**

**Do these feelings change when you hear about wrongful convictions?**

\*[Follow-up if necessary] How so?

**Do you think the wrongly convicted should be financially compensated?**

\*Do you think they should be compensated in any other way?

\*Whose responsibility do you think it is to compensate these individuals?

**What percentage of wrongly convicted people do you think are compensated?**

\*How much do you think they typically receive?

\*In your opinion, what do you think should be considered to determine how much money they receive?

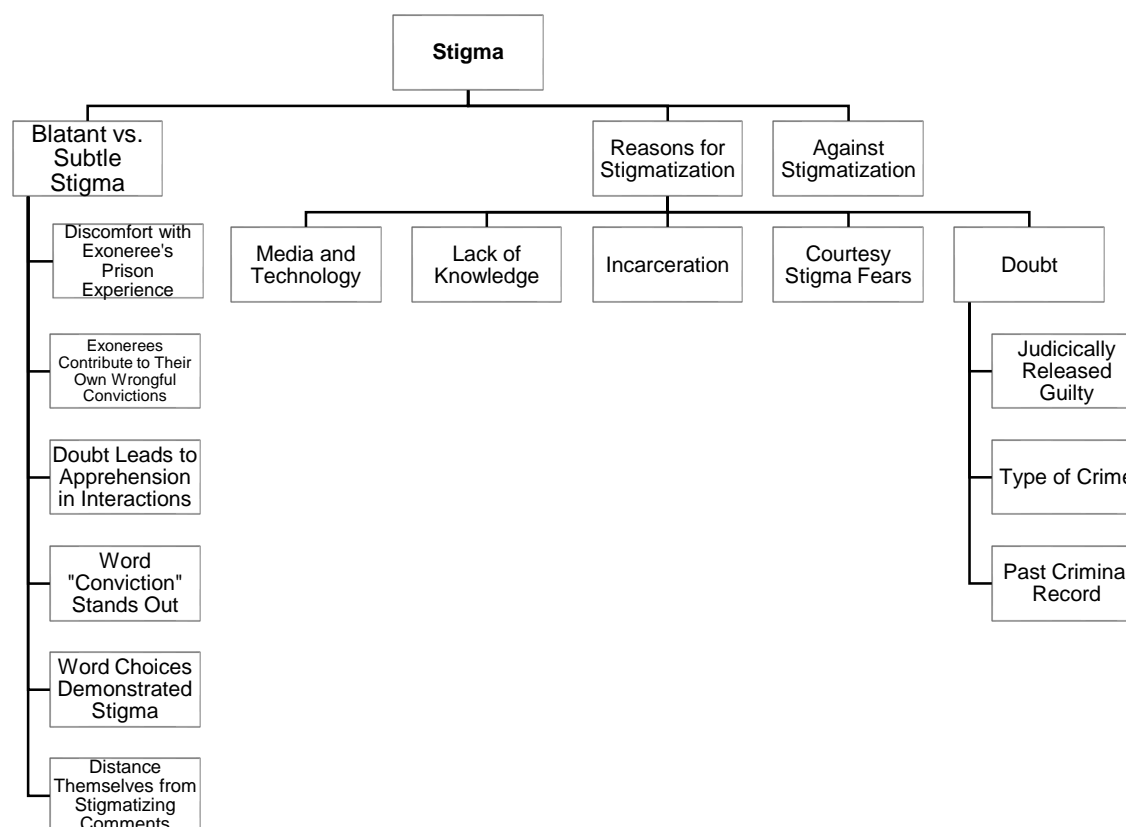
**“Last question” The wrongly convicted often say that no one even apologizes for their wrongful convictions. Do you think they should receive an apology?**

\*[If yes], Who do you think should offer this apology?

“Well, that concludes our interview. I just want to thank you once again. . .you have been so helpful and I appreciate you taking the time out from your day for this interview. If you have any questions afterwards, please feel free to contact me.



## Appendix B: Thematic Diagram



*\*Thematic saturation occurred when further interviews did not reveal additional themes*

### Author Note

Isabella M. Blandisi received her Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Criminology, Justice and Policy Studies and her Master of Arts in Criminology—both from the University of Ontario Institute of Technology. Her Master's thesis looked at public perceptions of wrongful conviction through semi-structured interviews. Blandisi's research interest in wrongful convictions began during her time as a student case reviewer with the Association in Defence of the Wrongly Convicted (AIDWYC). Since then, she has looked to further understand prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, and stigmatization as it relates to the criminal justice system. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: Isabella M. Blandisi at, University of Ontario Institute of Technology, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, 55 Bond St. East, Oshawa, ON, L1G 0A5; E-mail: [isabella.blandisi@uoit.ca](mailto:isabella.blandisi@uoit.ca).

Kimberley A. Clow joined the University of Ontario Institute of Technology in 2004. She holds a PhD in Social Psychology from Western University (formerly the University of Western Ontario) and is an Associate Professor in the Forensic Psychology program. Her research focuses on stereotypes and prejudice. She is particularly interested in how individuals perceive one another, the consequences of those perceptions, and possible ways of altering perceptions. Currently, her main line of research investigates the stigma of wrongful conviction, looking for ways to decrease the stigma that exonerees experience. She may be contacted at Faculty of Social Sciences, Humanities at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 55 Bond St. East, Oshawa, ON, L1G 0A5; Email: [kimberley.clow@uoit.ca](mailto:kimberley.clow@uoit.ca).

Rosemary Ricciardelli is an Assistant Professor and the coordinator of the criminal certification program at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Although involved in a social

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