

Perceptions of False Confessions:  
Reducing Prejudice Toward Exonerees Through the Use of Educational Materials

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## Certificate of Approval

## **Abstract**

Educational campaigns are commonly used for prejudice reduction (Levy Paluck & Green, 2009). We were interested if educational campaigns, such as those used by innocence organizations, were successful in reducing prejudice toward exonerees. In particular, we examined whether prejudice toward an individual who falsely confessed could be reduced through watching educational videos (personal story video and/or fact based video) about false confessions and wrongful conviction. Participants who watched the personal story video rated the exoneree as significantly less responsible for his wrongful conviction than participants who did not watch the personal story video. The two different videos interacted to impact willingness to assist the exoneree and attitudes toward the exoneree. The findings are discussed within the context of Allport's contact hypothesis and explore the implications for exonerees who falsely confess.

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## Perceptions of False Confessions:

### Reducing Prejudice Toward Exonerees Through the Use of Educational Materials

Previous research has found that exonerees feel they are subject to prejudice because of their wrongful conviction (Denov & Campbell, 2005; Westervelt & Cook, 2008). For example, Denov and Campbell (2005) recounted the story of an exoneree who explained that you could not escape the label of a rapist, even if you dramatically changed your appearance, as the label would always be there. Westervelt and Cook (2008) reported instances where an exoneree was accused by the public, after his or her release, of the crime they were exonerated from. At one point Kirk Bloodsworth found “child killer” written in dirt on his truck even after DNA exonerated him from the crime.

The findings from recent experimental research appear to corroborate exonerees’ reports (Clow & Leach, 2009, 2013; Thompson, Molina, & Levett, 2012). For instance, Thompson, Molina, and Levett (2012) found that participants rated an exoneree as less culpable, criminal, and personally responsible for a crime than an ex-convict in their first study, which suggests that participants understood that exonerees were not guilty of the crimes for which they were wrongfully convicted. However, an exoneree was perceived as less intelligent, competitive, confident, warm, and good-natured than an average person in their second study. Thus, participants were not expressing prejudice toward the exoneree as severely as they did against actual offenders, but they were still expressing prejudice toward the exoneree in comparison to other non-criminal citizens. Similarly, Clow and Leach (2013) found that participants rated people in general higher in respect, friendliness, warmth, and laziness than they rated people who had been wrongfully convicted. In addition, participants reported more negative global evaluations of people who had been wrongfully convicted—and they desired significantly more

social distance from them—than from people in general. Thus, participants viewed exonerees more negatively than they viewed other people. Although both studies found that people view actual offenders even more negatively than exonerees, the results suggested that exonerees experience prejudice as well (Clow & Leach, 2013; Thompson et al., 2012).

However, all exonerees may not be perceived similarly. Clow and Leach (2009) manipulated the factor that contributed to a wrongful conviction (false confession, mistaken eyewitness, or jailhouse snitch) to investigate if it influenced the degree of prejudice. In the false confession condition, the exoneree received the lowest ratings of competency and warmth—and the highest ratings of guilt. In addition, participants were especially likely to desire social distance from intimate situations with the exoneree (i.e., were less likely to want the exoneree as a close friend, a dating partner, or marriage partner) when the exoneree had falsely confessed. These findings suggest that exonerees who falsely confess experience more prejudice than those wrongfully convicted due to other reasons. Following up on this work, Savage, Clow, Schuller, and Ricciardelli (2013) investigated whether wrongful conviction factors (eyewitness vs. false confession) influenced perceptions of who is responsible for the wrongful conviction (the exoneree vs. the police). They found that in comparison to an exoneree who was mistakenly identified, an exoneree who falsely confessed was seen as more responsible for his wrongful conviction and participants felt more anger and less pity toward him. Overall, these findings suggest prejudice toward exonerees who falsely confess and a potential lack of understanding of what may lead a person to falsely confess (Clow & Leach, 2009; Savage et al., 2013).

Whether educating individuals about false confessions would improve attitudes toward exonerees (who falsely confessed) is currently unknown. Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) did find that a guest lecture on wrongful conviction given from an exoneree significantly improved

attitudes towards exonerees. Specifically, they found that participants who attended the exoneree's guest lecture reported significantly more positive attitudes towards exonerees after the talk. As well, participants who attended the exoneree's guest lecture agreed more with sympathetic statements about exonerees following the lecture than before the lecture and that those who heard the exoneree speak reported more sympathy toward exonerees than participants who attended a comparable lecture on Aboriginal issues instead.

As exonerees who falsely confessed appear to be particularly susceptible to prejudice (Clow & Leach, 2009; Savage et al., 2013), investigating the impact of education on perceptions of individuals who have falsely confessed seems warranted. Educational materials are a common tool used in prejudice reduction (Levy Paluck & Green, 2009). Allport (1954) defined prejudice as "an avertive or hostile attitude toward a person who belongs to a group, simply because he belongs to that group, and is therefore presumed to have the objectionable qualities ascribed to the group," (p. 7). In addition, Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis is still a leading theory behind prejudice reduction research. Although education is not a specific component of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, per se, one could interpret Allport's approach as using contact to break through misconceptions and to better educate people about prejudiced groups.

Allport (1954) had four optimal contact conditions in order for prejudice reduction to occur: the contact must occur among individuals who are equal in status, the individuals work on a problem or task together and share this as a common goal, the individuals must work together without competition, and there should be some authority that acknowledges and supports this contact. The emphasis of Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis was on face-to-face interaction and co-operation amongst individuals from the in-group (the group in power or more numerically dominant) and the out-group (the group that experiences prejudice or is disadvantaged).



Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 525 studies that tested Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis. They found that intergroup contact typically had a positive impact on reducing prejudice, such that intergroup contact led to lower levels of prejudice towards the out-group members in the study and out-group members of society as a whole (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intergroup contact was also found to reduce prejudice across many types of out-groups, including age, disability status, sexual orientation, and mental health status. As well, it was found that prejudice reduction occurred even when only some of Allport's (1954) optimal contact conditions were met (Lee, Farrell, & Link, 2004; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). In other words, all four optimal conditions were not necessary in order for prejudice reduction to occur.

Lee, Farrell, and Link (2004) found that prejudice towards homeless individuals could be reduced without face-to-face contact. Prejudice towards homeless individuals was shown to decrease when participants had access to informational sources about homelessness, such as television programs and newspaper articles. Moreover, Levy Paluck and Green (2009) found that many multicultural training programs in schools and workplaces generally involve exposure to educational materials, as opposed to the face-to-face contact that was suggested by Allport (1954). Multicultural training programs that do not involve face-to-face interaction have been shown to be effective at reducing prejudice simply through the use of educational materials (Smith, Constantine, Dunn, Dinehart, & Montoya, 2006). For example, educational material that included an expert's opinion was found to reduce racial prejudice (Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). Additionally, including information on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict within high school curriculum led to greater sympathy regarding the conflict (Lustig, 2003).

As educational materials have been shown to be successful in reducing prejudice and biases towards various out-groups (Lustig, 2003; Smith et al., 2006; Stangor et al., 2001), it is

possible that the same techniques may be successful in reducing prejudice towards individuals who falsely confess. Previous research has not investigated if there are differences in prejudice reduction when a person is exposed to a personal story versus fact-based materials. However, researchers have found that when a person is told to focus on vivid elements of a media presentation, the memorability and persuasiveness of the message is reduced (Frey & Eagly, 1993). In contrast, when a person is told to focus on the message, the vividness of the presentation has no impact or persuasiveness (Frey & Eagly, 1993). Thus, it is possible that a personal story may distract people from the message and be less persuasive, similar to the findings of Frey and Eagly (1993). Alternatively, it is possible that exposure to a personal story, in the words of an individual who has been wrongfully convicted, may mimic the face-to-face contact that Allport (1954) considers to be part of the optimal contact conditions, leading to greater attitude change.

The Innocence Project and the Association in Defense of the Wrongly Convicted (AIDWYC) both use educational campaigns in an attempt to reduce prejudice toward wrongfully convicted individuals (AIDWYC, 2013; Innocence Project, 2013a). Currently the Innocence Project has a website and YouTube channel where they display articles and videos on factors that influence the chance of wrongful conviction and cases of wrongful conviction in the United States (Innocence Project, 2013b)—presumably in an attempt to increase awareness and knowledge regarding wrongful conviction. The Innocence Project has a Facebook and Twitter account where they provide links to information on their website (Innocence Project Facebook, n.d. Innocence Project Twitter, n.d.). Similarly, AIDWYC has a website that provides information on the wrongful conviction cases they have represented and the changes they are lobbying to have made to the Canadian legal system (AIDWYC, 2013). AIDWYC also utilizes

social media, in the form of Facebook, to provide links to articles and resources (AIDWYC, n.d.). However, it is currently unknown if these types of educational campaigns are successful in increasing awareness and reducing prejudice toward exonerees.

### **Current Study**

We designed the current study to examine whether educational sources, such as videos available on innocence associations' websites on wrongful conviction and video interviews with wrongful conviction exonerees, are effective in reducing prejudice towards wrongful conviction exonerees. Specifically, we examined perceptions of an exoneree who falsely confessed, as past research has suggested particularly negative views toward these exonerees (Clow & Leach, 2009; Savage et al., 2013). Participants had their opinions of confessions and interrogations tested before being exposed to an article about a fictional exoneree (James Barber) who falsely confessed to a crime but was later exonerated through DNA testing. After reading about James Barber, participants viewed (1) a video discussing the facts about false confessions, (2) an exoneree's personal story about falsely confessing, (3) both facts and personal story, or (4) no video at all. Finally, participants' perceptions of James Barber (the fictional exoneree in the article) and their overall attitudes toward exonerees were tested.

We assessed participants' perceptions of confessions and interrogations at the beginning of the study to ensure that all participants (regardless of education condition) began the study with similar reactions regarding confessions. Past research has found that exonerees who falsely confess are perceived as responsible for their situation and people respond to them with overall more negative attitudes, more anger, and less pity than other exonerees (Savage et al., 2013). In addition, past research has found that education improves attitudes toward exonerees in general (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012). Thus, if the videos effectively educated participants about false

confessions specifically, then we would expect perceptions of these exonerees to improve. Based on previous research on prejudice reduction (Lee et al., 2004), we predicted that exposure to the video conditions would reduce negative views of James Barber. Evidence for this would be found if participants who viewed the fact video or the personal story video provided lower ratings of responsibility (for his wrongful conviction), less anger, and more positive attitudes toward James Barber. Moreover, we predicted that participants who viewed both videos—receiving the most education—would provide the lowest responsibility and anger ratings and the most favourable attitudes. As we expected the personal story video to approximate the face-to-face interaction that other theorists have found important (e.g., Allport, 1954), we predicted that participants would report lower responsibility and anger ratings and more favourable attitudes after watching the personal story video than the fact video. We hypothesized similar findings regarding pity and willingness to assist James Barber as well. Lustig (2003) found that when high school students were educated about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict they expressed more sympathy, in written essays, toward the persons involved in the conflict. Based on this research, we predicted that participants would feel more pity toward James Barber and be more willing to help him when they watched both videos, followed by the personal story video, and finally the fact video. Thus, we predicted a main effect of fact video, a main effect of personal story video, and an interaction effect of fact video x personal story video on ratings of responsibility for the wrongful conviction, anger, attitudes toward James Barber, pity, and willingness to help exonerees.

We also included participant gender as a predictor variable in all analyses as past research has found gender difference that might be relevant to the current study (e.g., MacGeorge, 2003; Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012). For example, participants in MacGeorge's (2003) study read

scenarios of help-seeking individuals where gender of the help-seeker, the problem the individual sought help for, and previous efforts by the individual were manipulated. MacGeorge (2003) found that male participants expressed more anger towards the men seeking help—regardless of the situation—and female participants expressed more sympathy toward help-seeking individuals than male participants. Moreover, Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) found that female participants expressed more pity toward exonerees than male participants after hearing an exoneree give a guest lecture. Therefore, we predicted main effects of gender on anger and pity ratings, with male participants reporting higher ratings of anger toward James Barber than female participants and female participants expressing more pity toward James Barber than male participants. Finally, Savage et al. (2013) found that female participants were more likely to offer assistance to exonerees than male participants. Thus, we also predicted a similar main effect of gender in the current study.

## Method

### Participants

One-hundred and eighty-three undergraduate students (107 females, 73 males, and 3 non-answers) from a university in Southern Ontario, Canada were recruited as part of a convenience sample to participate in this research for partial course credit. Ages ranged from 16 to 44 ( $M = 20.20$ ,  $SD = 3.76$ ). The most commonly indicated race or ethnicity was Caucasian ( $n = 75$ , 44.4%), followed by South Asian ( $n = 28$ , 16.6%), Arab or West Indian ( $n = 19$ , 11.2%), and Black ( $n = 18$ , 10.7%).

### Materials

**False confession article.** The false confession article was modified slightly from past research (Savage et al., 2013). The article described how James Barber falsely confessed and was

wrongfully convicted of a sexual assault and spent seven years in prison before his innocence was proven through DNA testing (see Appendix A). Minor additions were incorporated into the article to address some questions participants had raised in pilot testing. Specifically, we added a sentence to explain why James Barber was in the same neighbourhood as the crime (“Barber was in the neighbourhood visiting a friend.”) and a few sentences to explain why the DNA evidence was tested post-conviction rather than at trial (“Only after many years of petitioning, an innocence project took on Barber’s case and insisted on post-conviction DNA testing. The existence of the DNA evidence was not known to Barber or his original defense lawyer. It was not tested until the innocence project discovered it existed.”).

**Videos.** The videos were brief, publically available video clips from the Innocence Project’s website. Participants either viewed a fact based video clip, a personal story based video clip, both videos, or no videos. The fact based video was a three minute clip (see Appendix B for web link) that provided information on the prevalence of false confessions leading to wrongful conviction in the United States and confession contamination (when the confessor is provided with the details of the crime). The Innocence Project’s suggestions for best practices in interrogations are provided by Brandon Garrett, Professor of Law at the University of Virginia School of Law and author of *Convicting the Innocent*. The information is provided orally and visually throughout the clip.

The personal story based video was a five minute video that provided viewers with the personal false confession story of Chris Ochoa (see Appendix B for web link). Ochoa spoke of how he was convicted of a murder and rape and served 12 years before he was exonerated. Ochoa describes his motivations for falsely confessing: his mother was ill and investigators were pressuring her to convince her son to confess by saying that Chris would receive the death

penalty if he did not co-operate. The video clip also involved Ochoa speaking about how he is often questioned as to why someone would falsely confess and that he felt interrogations should be videotaped to reduce false confessions. Although Ochoa's own confession was audio recorded—the entire interrogation was not recorded.

Free, publically available Sudoku puzzles (see Appendix B for web link) were provided to participants in some conditions to ensure that participants were cognitively busy for the same amount of time across conditions. Specifically, participants in the fact based and personal story based conditions completed Sudoku puzzles after they watched the video. Participants in the control condition completed Sudoku puzzles for eight minutes, but participants watching both videos did not complete any Sudoku puzzles.

**Pre-test questionnaire.** All participants completed the Confession Attitudes Scale as a pre-test measure to assess their opinions of confessions and false confessions (Wrightsmann & Engelbrecht, 2004). This scale was comprised of 18 questions, on a five point likert-scale (1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*), with possible scores ranging from 18-90. Lower scores indicate beliefs that confessions to police are always true and higher scores indicate beliefs that innocent people may falsely confess. The internal consistency with the current sample was low ( $\alpha = .42$ ). The pre-test questionnaire was publically available in a published book, but it was not possible to locate any published research that had used the questionnaire. Thus, the reliability and validity of the scale more generally is currently unknown.

**Post-test questionnaire.** Five dependent variables were measured to assess perceptions of James Barber (the fictional exoneree who falsely confessed): James Barber's responsibility for the wrongful conviction, anger towards James Barber, feelings of pity for James Barber, willingness to assist James Barber, and attitude ratings for James Barber. These items were

based on Weiner's (1993) past research investigating individuals' perceived responsibility for their illnesses. The items were modified from past research to replace the illnesses with wrongful conviction, as has been done successfully in other wrongful conviction research (Clow & Leach, 2013; Savage et al., 2013). Specifically, to evaluate perceptions of responsibility, participants were asked to what extent they felt "James Barber is responsible for his wrongful conviction" (1 = *Not at all responsible* to 7 = *Very responsible*). In order to assess feelings of anger, participants were asked to what extent "I feel anger towards James Barber" (1 = *None* to 7 = *A great deal*). To evaluate feelings of pity, participants were asked to what extent "I feel pity toward James Barber" (1 = *None* to 7 = *A great deal*). To assess willingness to help, participants were asked to what extent "I am willing to assist James Barber" (1 = *Totally unwilling* to 7 = *Willing*). As well, participants were offered the option to sign a petition asking for mandatory compensation for wrongful conviction exonerees.

To assess attitudes toward James Barber, participants were given the Attitude Thermometer and asked to provide a number from 0 to 100 (0 = *Extremely unfavourable* and 100 = *Extremely favourable*). The thermometer was labelled in increments of 10 degrees (e.g. 10 = *Very unfavourable*) increasing in how favourable a person feels until it reached 100. Students were told they could pick any number between 0 and 100 (i.e., they could pick a number that was not on the thermometer, such as 27). This measure has been found to have high test-retest reliability (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993). As well, previous research has used it successfully to measure attitudes toward exonerees (Clow & Leach, 2013).

## **Procedure**

This study was one of a series of studies that received research ethics board approval as part of a larger project investigating attitudes toward exonerees and the Canadian criminal justice



system (see Appendix C). Participants were run individually or in small groups (2-6). After reading and signing the consent form, the group was randomly assigned to one of four conditions: fact based video, personal story based video, both videos, or control (no videos). Participants completed a pre-test confession scale, read an article about a fictional exoneree named James Barber, and then watched the video clip(s) assigned to their condition. The video clips were projected onto a wall so that the participants watched as a group. If participants were in the control condition, they skipped the video clip phase and moved to the next step in the process, which was the time delay task of completing Sudoku puzzles (control condition completed Sudoku puzzles for eight minutes). Once participants finished watching the fact video and/or the personal story video, they moved on to the time delay task (five minutes for fact video; three minutes for personal story video). Next, participants were presented with the post-test survey booklet that contained the manipulation checks, dependent variables of interest, and other seemingly relevant questions (so that the variables of interest were not immediately obvious to the participants). The article was not removed while participants filled out the post-test survey. Participants were instructed that if they had any questions or needed clarification to ask the research assistant. Upon completion of the post-survey test booklets, participants were told that there was a petition (by the lab entrance) that would be sent to the House of Commons asking for mandatory compensation of exonerees. Participants were instructed that they had the option to sign the petition but that it was not mandatory. Finally, participants were thanked for their participation and debriefed.

## **Results**

No extreme scores or outliers were detected. A total of 6 participants were excluded from analyses because they failed to answer the close-ended comprehension question correctly:

was James Barber innocent? This resulted in a final sample of 183 participants. In general, participants provided low ratings of James Barber's responsibility for the wrongful conviction, they did not report much anger toward James Barber, but they did respond with high ratings of pity and willingness to assist James Barber. Moreover, the overall average attitude thermometer ratings for James Barber were on the positive side of the scale. See Table 1 for means and standard deviations on all dependent variables.

A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to determine if there were differences in pre-test confession attitude scores across conditions (control, both video, fact video, personal story video). As expected, no significant differences were found,  $F(3, 182) = 1.53, p = .208$ . Overall, participants' scores on the scale indicated that they came to the study with a general belief that confessions to police are always true ( $M = 49.3, SD = 5.85$ ).

The remaining analyses focused on the following predictions:

- Hypothesis 1: Participants who viewed the fact video or personal story video would provide lower responsibility and anger ratings, overall more favourable attitude ratings, and feel more pity toward James Barber and be more willing to help him.
- Hypothesis 2: Participants who viewed both videos would provide the lowest ratings of responsibility and anger, the most favourable attitude ratings, and feel more pity toward James Barber and be more willing to help him because they received the most education.
- Hypothesis 3: Participants would report lower responsibility and anger ratings, more favourable attitudes, and feel more pity toward James Barber and be more willing to help him after watching the personal story video than the fact video.

- Hypothesis 4: Male participants would report higher ratings of anger toward James Barber than female participants and female participants would express more pity toward James Barber and be more likely to offer to assist James Barber than male participants.

A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) x 2 (fact video: present vs. absent) x 2 (personal story video: present vs. absent) ANOVA was conducted on participants' ratings of James Barber's responsibility. The predicted main effect of personal story was significant,  $F(1, 171) = 8.35, p = .004, \eta p^2 = .047$ . Participants who did not view the personal story video ( $M = 3.61, SD = 1.83$ ) rated James Barber as more responsible for his wrongful conviction than participants who did view the personal story video ( $M = 2.85, SD = 1.68$ ). There were no other significant findings.

A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) x 2 (fact video: present vs. absent) x 2 (personal story video: present vs. absent) ANOVA was conducted on participants' ratings of anger towards James Barber. There were no significant findings.

A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) x 2 (fact video: present vs. absent) x 2 (personal story video: present vs. absent) ANOVA was conducted on participants' ratings of pity towards James Barber. There were no significant findings.

A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) x 2 (fact video: present vs. absent) x 2 (personal story video: present vs. absent) ANOVA was conducted on participants' willingness to assist James Barber. The predicted main effect of gender was found,  $F(1, 171) = 4.09, p = .045, \eta p^2 = .023$ , such that female participants indicated a higher willingness to assist James Barber ( $M = 5.39, SD = 1.31$ ) than did male participants ( $M = 5.01, SD = 1.59$ ). An unexpected gender x fact video interaction was significant,  $F(1, 171) = 8.93, p = .003, \eta p^2 = .050$  (see Figure 1).

Bonferroni post-hoc tests did not find any significant differences; however, the pattern of the means suggests that male participants presented with the fact video were more willing to assist James Barber than male participants who were not exposed to facts, whereas female participants were generally willing to assist James Barber regardless of their exposure to the fact video. The predicted fact video x personal story video interaction effect was found,  $F(1, 171) = 5.38, p = .022, \eta p^2 = .031$  (see Figure 2). Planned comparisons were performed and there was a marginally significant difference, such that participants who viewed both videos ( $M = 5.49, SD = 1.23$ ) were more willing to assist James Barber than participants who viewed only the personal story video ( $M = 4.90, SD = 1.60; t = 1.987, p = .048$ ). There were no other significant findings.

A 2 (participant gender: male vs. female) x 2 (fact video: present vs. absent) x 2 (personal story video: present vs. absent) ANOVA was conducted on participants' attitudes toward James Barber. An unexpected main effect of gender was found,  $F(1, 172) = 4.32, p = .039, \eta p^2 = .025$ . Female participants ( $M = 73.07, SD = 17.95$ ) reported significantly more positive attitudes toward James Barber than did male participants ( $M = 66.71, SD = 21.10$ ). The predicted fact video x personal story video interaction effect was found,  $F(1, 172) = 4.61, p = .033, \eta p^2 = .026$  (see Figure3). Planned comparisons were performed and the difference between participants who viewed the personal story ( $M = 69.72, SD = 17.25$ ) and participants who viewed the fact video ( $M = 65.83, SD = 20.79$ ) was approaching significance ( $t = 2.062, p = .040$ ), such that participants reported more positive attitudes after watching the personal story video. No other comparisons were significant. There were no other significant findings.

In addition, a chi-square was performed to see if participants in the four different conditions (both videos, fact video only, personal story video only, control condition) were more or less likely to choose to sign the petition requesting mandatory compensation for wrongful

conviction exonerees. There were no significant findings,  $\chi^2(3, 181) = 0.683, p = .88$ , possibly because most participants—regardless of condition—chose to sign the petition ( $n = 144, 79.6\%$ ).

### **Discussion**

How exonerees are perceived by the public can impact their reintegration (Denov & Campbell, 2005; Westervelt & Cook, 2008, Westervelt & Cook, 2010). If people view exonerees negatively, they may be less likely to consider them for employment or to rent properties to them, and employment and housing are two important factors in successful reintegration (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Westervelt and Cook (2010) found that exonerees reported prejudicial experiences after their release from prison. For example, Shabka Brown had to live with his post-conviction defense attorney following his release as he was not given time to find housing prior to his release. Sabrina Butler struggled to find employment after her release and, in one instance, she was filling out the paperwork for a grocery store position when the manager recognized her and fired her on the spot (Westervelt & Cook, 2010).

Educational materials are commonly used to reduce prejudice toward a number of out-groups (Levy Paluck & Green, 2009). Previous research has found overall prejudice reduction when individuals are exposed to media informing them about disadvantaged groups (Lee et al, 2004). Moreover, Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) found that a guest lecture from an exoneree improved overall attitudes towards exonerees. The current study tested whether videos (facts from an expert or a personal story from an exoneree) could successfully reduce prejudice toward an exoneree who falsely confessed. Our results suggest that educational materials, in the form of videos, may successfully reduce prejudice toward exonerees who have falsely confessed—though not always how we predicted. Specifically, we found a significant main effect of the personal story video on ratings of James Barber’s responsibility, such that participants who

viewed the personal story video provided significantly lower ratings of responsibility for James Barber than participants who did not view the personal story video. However, participants' ratings of James Barber's responsibility were not significantly impacted by viewing the fact video or both videos. Thus, watching Chris Ochoa speak about his personal experience of falsely confessing seemed to lead participants to view another supposed exoneree who falsely confessed as less responsible for his wrongful conviction, whereas learning facts about false confession or a combination of both facts and a personal story did not seem to similarly influence people. The lack of a significant effect of facts on participants' ratings of James Barber's responsibility, anger toward James Barber, feelings of pity toward James Barber, and willingness to assist James Barber suggests that participants were more receptive to the information when it was provided by an exoneree than when it was provided by an expert. These results seem to suggest that a modified version of Allport's (1954) social contact occurred in the personal story condition, resulting in prejudice reduction (Lee et al., 2004), but it is currently unclear why these effects did not persist in the both video condition.

Previous research has shown that when participants are told by an expert that their prejudice is not normal for their peer group there is a reduction in prejudice (Stangor et al., 2001). As well, providing educational materials that contain facts is the basis of many successful multicultural prejudice reduction programs (Smith et al., 2006). However, in the current study, participants who were presented with facts did not provide significantly lower ratings of responsibility or anger, or significantly higher ratings of pity and willingness to help James Barber, which contradicts previous research (Smith et al., 2006; Stangor et al., 2001). This may indicate that participants had issues with how the facts were delivered to them. Further research is necessary to determine the generalizability of these findings and to determine whether

participants prefer personal stories to fact based videos or if they simply did not respond well to the particular fact based video used in this study.

MacGeorge (2003) found that women reported more sympathy than men toward a help-seeking individual (an ill individual who was described as seeking help in scenarios presented in the study). As well, Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) found that women reported more sympathy than men toward exonerees. In the current study, these results were not replicated. However, women were generally more willing to assist James Barber than were men, which corresponds with past research (Savage et al., 2013). Moreover, women reported more positive attitude ratings of exonerees than men, which has previously not been discovered in past research (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012; Savage et al., 2013). Further research seems warranted to determine the reliability and generalizability of gender differences in attitudes toward exonerees. For example, did the gender differences in this study arise due to the particular materials used or is there a more pervasive tendency for women to view exonerees—possibly false confessors in particular—more positively than do men?

Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) found that education improved overall attitudes towards exonerees. Similarly, the current study's results found that education improved participants' attitudes toward James Barber. Participants who viewed the personal story video appeared to report more positive ratings of James Barber than participants who viewed the fact video. The results suggest that a modified version of Allport's (1954) face-to-face interaction occurred when participants viewed the personal story video, in that hearing Chris Ochoa speak improved overall attitudes toward James Barber in comparison to viewing just the fact video alone. However, the post-hoc tests on this interaction only approached significance, suggesting that further research is necessary to determine the reliability of these findings.

## **Limitations and future research**

In the current study, we found a limited impact of education on perceptions of exonerees. Based on past research findings that education reduces prejudice (Levy Paluck & Green, 2009; Lee et al., 2004)—and other research that found education to improve attitudes toward exonerees in particular (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012)—future research in this area seems warranted. Perhaps different stimuli and different designs would allow for the education component to have a greater impact. For example, the pre-test in the current study differed from the post-test in an effort to avoid sensitizing participants to the topic of the study. If the exact same measure was used pre- and post-, there was a concern that participants would provide different ratings in the post-test portion because of an understanding of what the study was testing and not because of an actual reduction in prejudice. Future researchers may wish to investigate if using the same measure but implementing a longer time-delay (e.g., a few weeks) would lead to different findings.

Different materials may similarly lead to different findings. For example, participants did not respond the same to the fact based video as the personal story video when considering James Barber's responsibility. It is possible that this finding is due to the different styles of these videos (facts vs. personal story), but it is also possible that participants may simply have reacted negatively to the particular fact based video. Using different videos would determine whether the findings are particular to the videos used in this study or due to the different styles of videos.

In addition, the specific article that participants read about the fictional exoneree may have impacted the findings. The article, based on a previous study by Savage et al. (2013), was designed to portray high police procedural bias. High bias was implied using key phrases about the police procedure in James Barber's case. Specifically, participants read:



Not following best practices, Barber was interrogated for 10 hours. In a final effort to get a confession, the police lied and said that Barber's fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime even though no fingerprint evidence was found.

Possibly, participants in all conditions felt generally sympathetic toward James Barber because the police were not following best practices. In future research, manipulation of police bias could be investigated to see if education has a greater impact on attitudes toward exonerees when participants do not readily have the police to blame for the wrongful conviction.

One of Allport's (1954) four optimal contact conditions is that contact must occur between individuals that are equal in status. However, in the current study the participants, who were undergraduate students, may not have felt equal to the individuals delivering the information in the video clips. In the fact video, the information provider was a lawyer and participants may have felt they were being lectured by a person in authority. In the personal story video, the information was provided by an exoneree and it is possible that factors in the exoneree's personal story made him less equal in the view of participants. Future research would benefit from exploring if prejudice reduction occurs when the same information is provided to participants by an equal, such as an undergraduate student. Moreover, we did not meet the other three optimal conditions of Allport's (1954) social contact hypothesis: the individuals work on a problem or task together and share this as a common goal, the individuals must work together without competition, and there should be some authority that acknowledges and supports this contact. Future research may wish to test Allport's contact hypothesis more directly.

Finally, it is possible that the video clips used were not educational. The video clips were selected from the Innocence Project (2013) website but we did not assess their educational quality or empirically test whether participants demonstrated greater knowledge regarding false

confessions after the videos than before. Future research would benefit from an assessment of whether participants found the videos to be educational. Moreover, future research investigating additional video clips seems warranted before any solid conclusions about education and attitudes toward individuals who falsely confess can be made.

### **Conclusion**

The current research suggests that educational videos may reduce prejudice toward exonerees who falsely confess. A personal story video was more successful than a fact video in reducing ratings of James Barber's responsibility for his wrongful conviction and improving overall attitudes towards exonerees. However, this is concerning as the Innocence Project's "Getting It Right" campaign specifically uses the same fact video we studied to educate people about the causes of false confessions. Greater research on the impact of educational materials on attitudes toward exonerees seems necessary. A better understanding of how educational materials influence people's perceptions of exonerees will assist in designing educational campaigns that effectively reduce prejudice toward different exonerees among diverse audiences.

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## Appendix A

### False Confession Article

#### James Barber Freed After 7 Years

On April 17, 2006, after having spent nearly 7 years in prison for a crime he did not commit, James Barber walked out of prison a free man. Back in 1999, a woman was sleeping alone in her apartment when a man broke in through a window and sexually assaulted her. Two neighbours had testified that they saw Barber's car in the neighbourhood the night of the attack. Barber was in the neighbourhood visiting a friend. As part of their investigation, police searched for people who were in the surrounding area and their focus turned to James Barber.

"...Not following best practices, Barber was interrogated for 10 hours...."

Police interrogated Barber and questioned his whereabouts the night of the attack. Not following best practices, Barber was interrogated for 10 hours. In a final effort to get a confession, the police lied and said that Barber's fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime even though no fingerprint evidence was found. Barber confessed to the crime. He recalls that he was tired and scared and just wanted to say what the police wanted to hear so that they would let him go home. Barber recanted his confession the next day. Barber was then tried before a jury in June 1999 and based primarily on his false confession he was convicted of sexual assault and sentenced to life in prison.

#### Proclaimed Innocence

Mr. Barber told reporters that the wrongful conviction has taken a serious toll on his life. His health deteriorated in prison and the wrongful conviction severed many of his relationships with friends and family. Even the community he is returning to has changed dramatically over the last decade.

"...In a final effort to get a confession, the police lied and said that Barber's fingerprints were found at the scene of the crime even though no fingerprint evidence was found...."

In prison, he constantly proclaimed his innocence, yet no one was willing to listen. Only after many years of petitioning, an innocence project took on Barber's case and insisted on post-conviction DNA testing. The existence of the DNA evidence was not known to Barber or his original defense lawyer. It was not tested until the innocence project discovered it existed. The DNA test excluded Barber as the perpetrator of the crime and concluded that the DNA samples from the rape kit and the DNA found at the crime scene did not belong to Barber. As a result, the Crown did not have enough evidence to proceed and withdrew all charges against Barber. Before

being released, Barber spent almost 7 years incarcerated while the true perpetrator remained at large.

Barber is trying to pick up the pieces of his life and is now advocating for justice reform. “The criminal justice system has to change. No one should go through what I went through.”

Appendix B  
Web Links

Fact Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEBm0xwjxYU>

Personal Story Video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xJlsxCGw9w>

Sudoku Puzzles: <http://www.puzzles.ca/sudoku.html>



## Appendix C Research Ethics Board Approval



**RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD  
OFFICE OF RESEARCH SERVICES**

**Date:** January 21, 2011

**To:** Kimberley Clow (PI), Regina Schuller (Co-PI)

**From:** Raymond Cox, REB Chair

**REB File #:** 10-069

**Project Title:** Wrongful Conviction and the Canadian Criminal Justice System

**DECISION:** APPROVED

**START DATE:** January 21, 2011

**EXPIRY:** January 21, 2012

The University Of Ontario Institute Of Technology Research Ethics Board has reviewed and approved the above research proposal. The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS) and the UOIT Research Ethics Policy and Procedures.

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB.

Always quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

Please familiarize yourself with the following forms as they may become of use to you.

- > **Change Request Form:** any changes or modifications (i.e. adding a Co-PI or a change in methodology) must be approved by the REB through the completion of a change request form before implemented.
- > **Adverse or unexpected Events Form:** events must be reported to the REB within 72 hours after the event occurred with an indication of how these events affect (in the view of the Principal Investigator) the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol. (i.e. un-anticipated or un-mitigated physical, social or psychological harm to a participant).
- > **Research Project Completion Form:** must be completed when the research study has completed.
- > **Renewal Request Form:** any project that exceeds the original approval period must receive approval by the REB through the completion of a Renewal Request Form before the expiry date has passed.

All Form: can be found at [http://research.uoit.ca/EN/main/231307/Research\\_Forms.html](http://research.uoit.ca/EN/main/231307/Research_Forms.html)

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**Date:** January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013

**To:** Kimberley Clow (PI), Regina Schuller (Co-PI)

**From:** Margaret Rofaiel, Ethics & Compliance Officer

**REB File #:** 10-069

**Project Title:** Wrongful Conviction and the Canadian Criminal Justice System

**DECISION:** RE-APPROVED

**RENEWAL DATE:** January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2013

**RENEWED EXPIRY:** January 21<sup>st</sup>, 2014

The University Of Ontario Institute Of Technology Research Ethics Board has reviewed and re-approved the above research proposal. The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the Research Ethics Board to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and the UOIT Research Ethics Policy and Procedures.

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and approved by the REB.

Always quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

Please familiarize yourself with the following forms as they may become of use to you.

- > **Change Request Form:** any changes or modifications (i.e. adding a Co-PI or a change in methodology) must be approved by the REB through the completion of a change request form before implemented.
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- > **Renewal Request Form:** any project that exceeds the original approval period must receive approval by the REB through the completion of a Renewal Request Form before the expiry date has passed.

All Forms can be found at <http://research.uoit.ca/faculty/policies-procedures-forms.php>.

Margaret Rofaiel Ethics & Compliance Officer <a href="mailto:compliance@uoit.ca">compliance@uoit.ca</a>
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*Table 1.* Dependent variable descriptive statistics.

Dependent Variable	Overall			Male		Female			
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
James Barber's Responsibility	182	3.25	1.79	73	3.36	0.21	106	3.13	0.17
Anger Toward James Barber	183	2.09	1.5	73	2.19	0.18	107	2.00	0.14
Pity Toward James Barber	183	5.43	1.46	73	5.2	0.17	107	5.62	0.14
Willingness to Assist James Barber	182	5.21	1.44	73	4.95	0.17	106	5.38	0.14
Attitude Thermometer	183	70.27	19.54	73	66.86	2.29	107	72.99	1.87

Figure 1. Mean ratings of willingness to assist James Barber by participant gender and fact video.

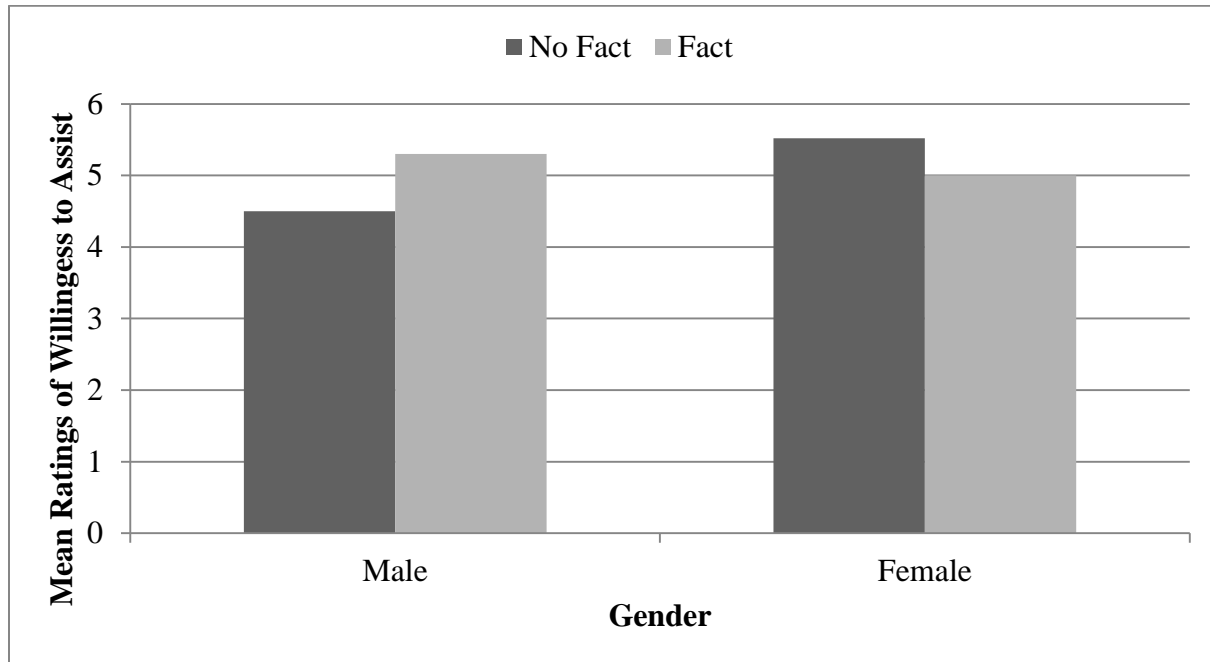


Figure 2. Mean ratings of willingness to assist James Barber by fact video and personal story video.

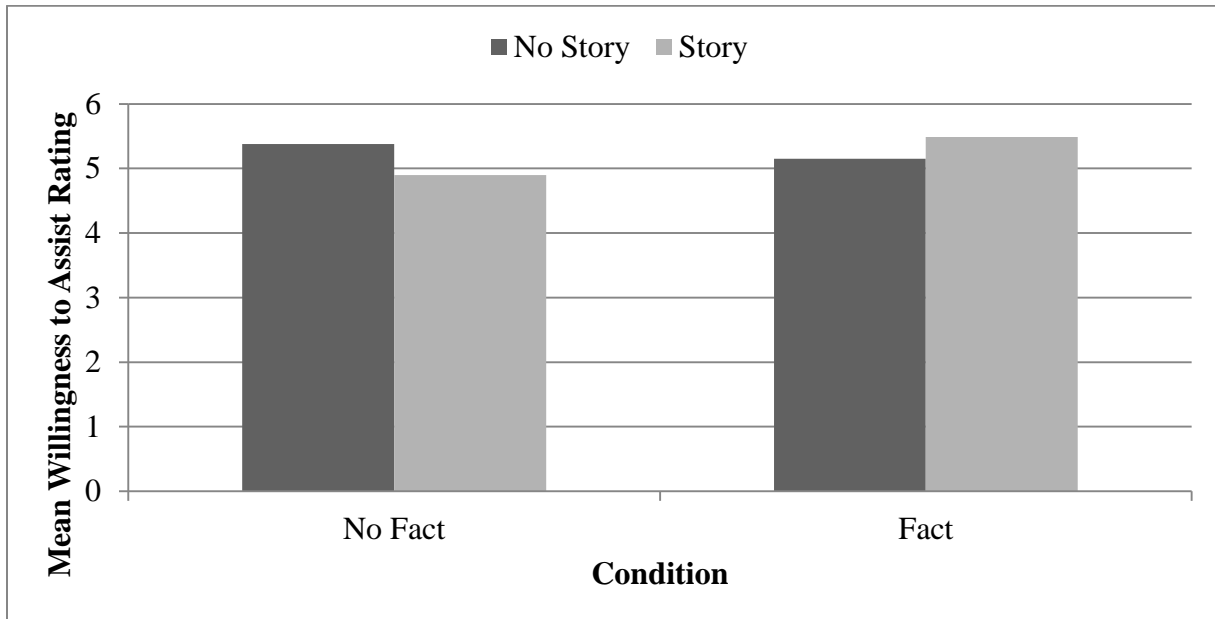


Figure 3. Mean attitude ratings by fact video and personal story video.

