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The Stigma of Wrongful Conviction Differs for White and Black Exonerees

Lakia Faison[1], Laura Smalarz[1], Stephanie Madon[2], and Kimberley A. Clow[3]
[1] School of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Arizona State University
[2] Department of Psychology, Iowa State University
[3] Social Sciences and Humanities, Ontario Tech University

Objective: Black people are disproportionately targeted and disadvantaged in the criminal legal system. We tested whether Black exonerees are similarly disadvantaged by the stigma of wrongful conviction. ***Hypotheses:*** In Experiment 1, we predicted that the stigma of wrongful conviction would be greater for Black than White exonerees. After finding the opposite pattern, we conducted two experiments to investigate the psychological underpinnings of this counterintuitive effect—specifically, whether it was driven by attempts to appear unprejudiced and/or beliefs regarding the legal system bias that Black and White exonerees face. ***Method:*** In Experiment 1, we unobtrusively measured non-Black participants' behavioral reactions to an anticipated meeting with a Black or White exoneree or businessman. In Experiment 2, participants completed measures that assessed their motivation to appear unprejudiced and then, in a separate session, evaluated a Black or White exoneree and reported their beliefs about the legal system bias faced by the exoneree. Experiment 3 was a partial replication of Experiment 2. In Experiments 2 and 3, we examined data from both non-Black and Black participants. ***Results:*** Non-Black participants in Experiment 1 stigmatized the White exoneree, $d = -0.31$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [−0.72, 0.10], but not the Black exoneree, $d = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.83]. Experiments 2 and 3 replicated this finding, showing that the effect was mediated by the belief that Black exonerees faced greater legal system bias than White exonerees (Experiment 2: $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.33]; Experiment 3: $B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.55]). Our results also suggested that Black individuals react more favorably to Black than White exonerees, potentially because of their beliefs regarding legal system bias. ***Conclusions:*** People may react more favorably to Black than White exonerees because of the belief that Black exonerees face greater injustices within the legal system.

Public Significance Statement
The public is becoming increasingly aware of the many ways in which the legal system is biased against Black people, and this awareness may influence their reactions to Black and White individuals who have been wrongfully convicted and exonerated (*exonerees*). We found evidence that university students (Black and non-Black alike) respond more positively to Black than White exonerees. This effect may be driven by a desire to avoid perpetuating racial biases against individuals who have been wronged by the criminal legal system.

Keywords: race, wrongful conviction, stigma, exonerees, bias

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Lakia Faison https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4992-8195
Laura Smalarz https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2435-7843
Kimberley A. Clow https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4306-8956
Lakia Faison is now available at the Department of Criminology, Law and Society, George Mason University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lakia Faison, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, George Mason University, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030, United States. Email: lfaison@gmu.edu

> No matter what happens to you, you are constantly put under this eye of distrust that you can never shake … . It never, ever ends. It never ends. It never ends. It never will be ended.
>
> —Kirk Bloodsworth (quoted in Rimer, 2000)

To date, 3,302 people have had their wrongful convictions overturned after spending a combined total of 28,461 years in prison—an average of 8.6 years each (National Registry of Exonerations, 2022). Unfortunately, many exonerees report that their wrongful convictions continue to negatively affect them long after they have been exonerated and released. Kirk Bloodsworth—the first exonerated death row inmate (Innocence Project, 2022)—has described his life after exoneration as laden with financial and social struggles. Because people feared him, he had difficulty obtaining housing, employment, and even groceries without being derided by landlords, employers, and other shoppers (Rimer, 2000). Ken Wyniemko, who was exonerated in 2003 after serving more than 8 years in prison for sexual assault, described his experience after being released as like "walking around with a scarlet letter" (Roberts & Stanton, 2007, para. 20). Jerry Miller, who was exonerated after completing a 24-year prison sentence for the brutal rape and kidnapping of a Chicago woman, said "I thought prison was bad. But (outside) I was like the scum of the earth" (Johnson, 2009, para. 12).

The experiences of Bloodsworth, Wyniemko, and Miller are not uncommon among exonerees. Numerous anecdotal reports converge on the conclusion that exonerees are characterized by a flawed and devalued social identity consistent with a social stigma (e.g., Rimer, 2000; Westervelt & Cook, 2008), and experimental research supports this idea (see Faison & Smalarz, 2020, for a review). Indeed, people evaluate the character of exonerees less favorably than the character of people without prior convictions (Clow & Leach, 2015; Thompson et al., 2011) and report less willingness to be in the proximity of exonerees (Clow & Leach, 2015). Moreover, employers and hiring professionals consider exonerated job applicants to be less intelligent, less articulate, less competent, and unworthy of the same starting wages compared with applicants who have no prior convictions (Kukucka et al., 2020). The stigma of wrongful conviction affects not only people's perceptions of exonerees but also their behavior toward exonerees as well. Employers are less likely to respond to job inquiries when the inquirer is an exoneree than when an inquirer makes no mention of a prior conviction (Clow, 2017). Likewise, landlords are less likely to respond to housing inquiries from exonerated individuals than to inquiries from individuals with no prior convictions (Kukucka et al., 2021; Zannella et al., 2020). Thus, many experiments using varying methodologies provide empirical support for exonerees' anecdotal claims that wrongful conviction constitutes a social stigma.

Comparatively little research, however, has examined whether the stigma of wrongful conviction differs for White and Black exonerees. This is a conspicuous gap in the literature given that people of color are disproportionately represented among the wrongfully convicted. Although Black people comprise less than 14% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019), 33% of incarcerated individuals (Gramlich, 2019) and 53% of exonerated individuals are Black (National Registry of Exonerations, 2022). The overrepresentation of Black people among incarcerated and exonerated people is at least partially attributable to racial discrimination that occurs within the legal system (see Hinton et al., 2018, for a review). Compared with White people, Black people are more likely to be deemed suspicious by laypeople (Lowe et al., 2017) and officers (Alpert et al., 2005), are disproportionately stopped and frisked (e.g., Gelman et al., 2007) and arrested (e.g., Kochel et al., 2011; Mitchell & Caudy, 2015), are more likely to fall victim to investigative misconduct (e.g., police hiding evidence of innocence; Gross et al., 2020), and are subjected to harsher punishment by judges (e.g., Burch, 2015; Mustard, 2001; Sutton, 2013) and (in some cases) jurors (Sommers & Ellsworth, 2003). The negative effects of racial discrimination on Black individuals' experiences in the legal system appear to persist long after their judicial involvement ceases. For example, previously incarcerated Black people have a harder time obtaining employment (e.g., Moses, 2014; Pager, 2003) and housing (e.g., Equal Rights Center, 2016) than previously incarcerated White people.

We theorized that this anti-Black racial discrimination, which permeates the legal system and society at large, might compound the effects of the stigma of wrongful conviction for Black exonerees. Put differently, because Black people (Crocker et al., 1998; Goffman, 1963) and wrongfully convicted people (see Faison & Smalarz, 2020, for a review) are both stigmatized social groups, Black exonerees must contend with not one but two social stigmas. Thus, we predicted that the stigma of wrongful conviction, in conjunction with the stigma of being Black, might yield an additive detrimental effect on people's reactions to Black exonerees, leading people to stigmatize Black exonerees to a greater extent than White exonerees.

Prior Research on Race and the Stigma of Wrongful Conviction

To date, four published studies have investigated people's reactions to White and Black exonerees, but for several reasons, it is difficult to draw conclusions from the sum of their results. Karaffa et al. (2017) found no difference in reactions to Black and White exonerees; however, this finding is difficult to interpret because no manipulation check was reported that could attest to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the race manipulation. Howard (2019) found that people reacted more negatively to Black than to White exonerees, but only one photo of a Black person and one photo of a White person were used to manipulate the exoneree's race, making it difficult to rule out the possibility that the unique qualities of the individuals depicted in the photos, rather than race per se, caused the observed race effect (see Wells & Windschitl, 1999, regarding the importance of stimulus sampling).

The other two studies avoided these methodological limitations but produced contradictory results. Specifically, Zannella et al. (2020) found no difference in the extent to which Black and White exonerees were stigmatized by their wrongful conviction when attempting to rent an apartment, and Scherr et al. (2018) found some evidence that White exonerees were more disadvantaged by their wrongful conviction than were Black exonerees. These discrepant patterns of results may stem from methodological differences between the studies. Whereas participants in Scherr and colleagues' research knew that they were participating in a study (and that their behavior was being observed), participants in Zannella and colleagues' research responded to what they believed were genuine housing inquiries from prospective renters. Recent evidence suggests that pro-Black responding is more likely to occur when participants are under experimenter surveillance than when they are not (Evans et al., 2003) and that naturalistic research—in which the participants are unaware that their behavior is being observed—is more likely to yield evidence of anti-Black racial

prejudice than laboratory research conducted with participants' awareness (Smalarz et al., 2023). Therefore, in the current research, we used both unobtrusive behavioral measures of stigmatization and more traditional self-report measures to assess whether these methodological features underlie differential findings regarding the stigma of wrongful conviction for Black and White exonerees.

Overview of the Present Research

Given the state of the literature on perceptions of Black and White exonerees, our overarching goal in this research was to clarify the relationship between an exoneree's race and the stigma of wrongful conviction. In light of research showing that people are more likely to stigmatize members of out-groups than members of in-groups (Balliet et al., 2014), our first experiment tested the hypothesis that the stigma of wrongful conviction more adversely impacts non-Black people's reactions to Black than White exonerees. In our subsequent experiments, we assessed the replicability of effects observed in Experiment 1, investigated potential psychological mechanisms underlying the effects, and additionally explored Black individuals' reactions to Black and White exonerees. Across these experiments, we used both behavioral (Experiment 1) and self-report (Experiments 1, 2, and 3) measures and ensured the validity of our race manipulations with manipulation checks (Experiments 1, 2, and 3) and stimulus sampling (Experiments 2 and 3; Wells & Windschitl, 1999).

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we used a novel experimental paradigm to unobtrusively measure behavioral responses to a Black or a White exoneree or nonexoneree (i.e., a businessman). Social psychology has a long history of using unobtrusive behavioral measures of racial discrimination, such as measuring the distance participants put between their own chair and the chairs of prospective conversation partners who were either White or Black (Goff et al., 2008), asking participants to choose a room in which to watch a movie where the other attendee was either White or Black (Batson et al., 1986), and giving students the opportunity to select a partner from a sign-up sheet ostensibly filled out by other students and that signaled the students' racial group membership (Jost et al., 2002; for reviews, see Crosby et al., 1980 and Kellar & Hall, 2022). In the current research, we employed a paradigm involving an anticipated in-person interaction, which coincides with exonerees' reports that they struggle with social interactions after being released (e.g., Grounds, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2008). Specifically, we led participants to believe that they were participating in a program designed to help new residents integrate into the community and that they would meet with a new resident during the study session. We manipulated the race (Black or White) and exoneration status (exoneree or businessman) of the supposed resident and measured participants' behavioral reactions to and self-reported feelings about meeting with the resident.

Method

Participants

We initially conducted a power analysis using *G*Power* (Faul et al., 2007), which indicated that a minimum of 199 participants was necessary to detect a small- to medium-sized interaction effect between resident status and resident race with at least 80% power. We recruited 225 undergraduates at a large midwestern university and excluded data from 27 participants, as described below. Therefore, we conducted the main analyses on the final sample of 198 participants, most of whom were women (106 women, 92 men), White (160 White, 10 Asian, one Native American, 13 non-Black mixed race, 14 unreported), and young adults (age: $M = 19.75$ years, $SD = 2.68$, range = 18–45). After the data collection was complete, we learned that the *pwr2ppl* R package (Aberson, 2022) is a superior method for a priori power analyses, and we conducted the power analysis once again, this time using the effects observed in our final data as parameter estimates. The analysis indicated that a minimum of 226 participants would have been required to achieve 80% power to detect the two-way interaction effect. This suggests that our sample size was slightly underpowered.

Experimental Design

The institutional review board (IRB) at Iowa State University, where the data were collected, approved the experiment (IRB Protocol No. 11-295), which occurred between 2011 and 2013. We randomly assigned participants to four conditions using a 2 (resident race: Black or White) × 2 (resident status: exoneree or businessman) between-subjects design. This resulted in the following condition assignments: Black exoneree: $n = 58$, White exoneree: $n = 53$, Black businessman: $n = 45$, White businessman: $n = 42$. In each condition, we led participants to believe that they were taking part in a program designed to integrate new residents into the local community. Participants expected to meet with a new community resident, unknown to program staff, who had relocated from Florida 2 weeks prior. We manipulated the resident's race using two methods. First, participants in the Black conditions were told that the resident's name was Jamel Williams. We chose the name Jamel because it is a stereotypically Black name that past research has used successfully to manipulate race (e.g., Greenwald et al., 1998). Second, participants in the White conditions were told that the resident's name was James Seigerman, as the experimenter told the participant about their impending meeting with the resident, they held a clipboard that ostensibly contained the resident's application to the community integration program. Affixed to the top of the application was a photo of either a young Black or young White man. The contents of the clipboard were only briefly made visible to the participant so they could discern little more than the resident's race. We used only one photo per race condition.

We manipulated the resident's status by providing participants with background information about the resident. Participants in the exoneree conditions learned that the resident had recently been released from prison and that he was part of the integration program because "even though he was convicted of a pretty serious crime and did spend some time in jail, he was proven to have been innocent and exonerated of the crime." Participants in the businessman conditions learned that the resident had recently been transferred to the area on business and that he was part of the integration program because "even though he's been to Iowa before, he's new to the area."

Measures

Unobtrusive Behavioral Measure. As described in the Procedure section, we obtained the behavioral measure of stigmatization by unobtrusively timing how long the participant waited for the resident to arrive to the laboratory after the experimenter staged an

issue that required them to leave the participant alone to wait for the resident. Shorter wait times indicated greater stigmatization, and we operationalized the stigma of wrongful conviction as the difference in wait times between the exoneree and businessman conditions.

Self-Report Measure. Participants retrospectively indicated their feelings about meeting with the resident along five 7-point bipolar scales with the following anchors: *threatened–comfortable*, *tense–calm*, *anxious–secure*, *scared–safe*, and *distressed–relaxed*. We combined their ratings into a single composite mean measure ($\alpha = .96$, $\omega_u = .96$; see Flora, 2020, for information on α and ω reliability coefficients), with higher scores indicating more positive retrospective feelings about meeting the resident.

Manipulation and Suspicion Checks. Participants completed manipulation checks pertaining to the resident's race ("What was your partner's race? [White, Black, not sure]") and exoneration status ("Which of the following were you told about your partner? [He was recently transferred to the area on business, He was recently exonerated of a crime, I don't remember]") and answered several questions regarding their suspicion and prior knowledge of the experiment (e.g., "Did you know anything about this experiment prior to participating?"). Participants who answered "yes" to the latter question were prompted to provide additional details about what they were told.

Procedure

On arrival to the laboratory, participants provided informed consent and were then presented with the cover story: They were taking part in a community integration program, conducted in partnership with the city, which was designed to help new residents integrate into the community. The experimenter then explained that the first part of the program involved having university students and staff meet briefly with new residents to pilot test activities that may be used in the future. Hence, the participants believed that they would meet a new resident of the community during their session. The experimenter informed the participants that the residents always arrived a few minutes into the session, so that university students and staff could complete preliminary measures, which participants were then instructed to complete on the computer. The measures assessed a variety of individual differences, which we included for exploratory purposes. Because we made no a priori predictions regarding their associations with the dependent measures and our sample did not provide sufficient power to test three-way interactions with these measures, we do not discuss them further.

The experimenter then provided each participant with background information about the resident. Given the cover story, the participant expected the resident to arrive shortly thereafter. The experimenter instructed the participant to complete a filler task on the computer while they awaited the resident's arrival. The experimenter remarked that the resident should be arriving any minute and that the participant should inform the experimenter when they finished. Once the participant was done, the experimenter expressed surprise that the resident had not arrived yet and stated that they could not proceed without him. At that time, the experimenter made a staged phone call to an ostensible office administrator to confirm that Jamel Williams/James Seigerman was scheduled for the session. After confirming his appointment, the experimenter returned to their office for 3 min, after which they emerged and told the participant that a computer malfunction in a neighboring laboratory required the experimenter to leave the participant to wait for the resident alone.

On leaving the laboratory to handle the supposed computer malfunction, the experimenter led the participant to a seating area in the hallway outside of the laboratory and gave the participant an activity packet in a sealed envelope. The experimenter instructed the participant to complete the activity packet with the resident once he arrived and to slide the packet under the door of the laboratory when they finished. Before leaving, the experimenter told the participant that it was unlikely that they would return before the end of the session and instructed the participant to leave if the participant felt like the resident would not arrive.

The amount of time that the participant waited for the resident was surreptitiously timed by a second experimenter (blind to condition) who monitored the participant from an area outside of the participant's line of sight. When the participant began to leave the seating area (or if a preset maximum of 30 min elapsed), the second experimenter stopped the timer and informed the participant that there was no community integration program and that they were never going to meet with a resident. The experimenter told the participant that they would be informed of all the details of the study after answering some additional questions but that, in short, the study was about people's reactions to meeting with different types of people. The participant then reported their feelings toward the prospect of meeting with the resident and responded to a variety of questions related to wrongful convictions. These latter questions assessed broad attitudes and beliefs related to wrongful conviction and not reactions toward the exonerees described in the experiment or effects of an exoneree's race on participants' perceptions. Therefore, they are beyond the scope of the current article and will not be discussed further. Finally, the participant responded to the manipulation check and suspicion questions. Because the suspicion questions were administered after participants were already told that there was no community integration program and they were never going to meet with a resident, we excluded participants on the basis of suspicion only if they reported knowing about the study's true purpose before participating or saw the second experimenter.

Results

Data Cleaning

We excluded data from participants who incorrectly reported the resident's race ($n = 3$) or exoneration status ($n = 5$), noticed the second experimenter ($n = 5$), had knowledge about the experiment prior to participating ($n = 2$), and/or identified as Black or African American ($n = 13$). Both measures were normally distributed, as indicated by skew and kurtosis statistics less than |3|. Neither measure had missing data.

How Long Did Participants Wait for the Resident?

On average, participants waited 17.58 min ($SD = 9.52$, range = 0.00–30.00) for the resident to arrive. A total of 43 participants (21.72%) waited the full 30 min: 12 participants in the Black exoneree condition, 13 participants in the White exoneree condition, five participants in the Black businessman condition, and 13 participants in the White businessman condition.

We analyzed the wait time data with an analysis of variance (ANOVA) in which the independent variables were resident race and resident exoneration status and the dependent variable was the

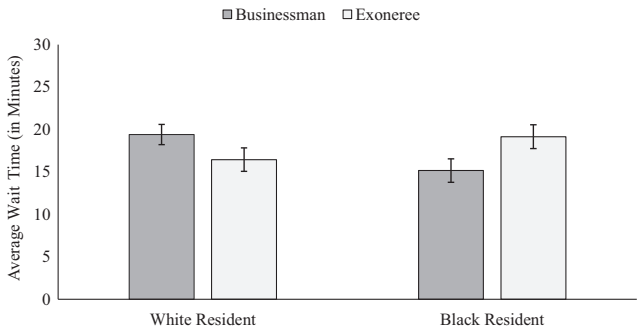
number of minutes that participants waited for the resident. Although there was no main effect of either resident race, $F(1, 194) = 0.07$, $p = .795$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, 95% confidence interval (CI) [.00, .02], or resident exoneration status, $F(1, 194) = 0.24$, $p = .628$, $\eta_p^2 = .00$, 95% CI [.00, .03], there was a significant crossover interaction between these variables, $F(1, 194) = 6.61$, $p = .011$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$, 95% CI [.00, .09] (see Figure 1). An examination of the pattern of the interaction indicated that when participants believed that the resident was White, they tended to wait less time for the exoneree ($M = 16.45$, $SD = 10.11$) than for the businessman ($M = 19.40$, $SD = 9.01$), $t(194) = 1.52$, $p = .131$, $d = -0.31$, 95% CI [−0.72, 0.10], suggesting that the White exoneree may have been stigmatized because of his wrongful conviction. When participants believed that the resident was Black, however, the reverse pattern occurred: Participants waited longer for the Black exoneree ($M = 19.16$, $SD = 9.10$) than for the Black businessman ($M = 15.16$, $SD = 9.38$), $t(194) = -2.13$, $p = .034$, $d = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.04, 0.83]. Although only the latter simple main effect was statistically significant, the significant crossover interaction indicates that the effect of the resident's exoneration status on participants' wait time differed significantly as a function of the resident's race. To more directly compare reactions to the Black and White exonerees, we conducted an additional contrast test between the wait time for the Black and the White exonerees. The effect was not statistically significant, though the pattern of wait times suggested that participants waited longer for the Black exoneree than for the White exoneree, $t(194) = -1.51$, $p = .133$, $d = 0.28$, 95% CI [−0.09, 0.66].

How Did Participants Feel About Meeting the Resident?

We analyzed the composite measure of participants' retrospective feelings about meeting the resident using an ANOVA in which the independent variables were resident race and resident exoneration status. On average, participants reported feeling neutral to positive about meeting with the resident ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 1.47$). There was a significant main effect of resident status; specifically, participants reported feeling more positively about meeting with the resident when he was a businessman ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.40$) than when he was an exoneree ($M = 4.10$, $SD = 1.46$), $F(1, 194) = 10.66$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .05$, 95% CI [.01, .12]. Neither the main effect of resident race, $F(1, 194) = 3.71$, $p = .056$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, 95% CI [.00, .07], nor the Resident Race × Exoneration Status interaction was significant, $F(1, 194) = 3.84$, $p = .051$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$, 95% CI [.00, .07].

Figure 1

The Effect of the Resident's Race (Black vs. White) and Exoneration Status (Businessman vs. Exoneree) on Non-Black Participants' Wait Times in Experiment 1



Note. Error bars denote standard errors.

Discussion

Our first experiment tested whether the stigma of wrongful conviction differentially impacts non-Black individuals' reactions to Black and White exonerees. A significant crossover interaction between resident race and resident exoneration status on the amount of time participants waited for the resident suggested that it does, but not in the way we had predicted. Whereas participants who expected to meet with a White resident tended to wait longer for the businessman than the exoneree, participants who expected to meet with a Black resident waited longer for the exoneree than the businessman. These patterns are broadly consistent with findings from Scherr et al. (2018), who found evidence of greater stigmatization of a White exoneree compared with a Black exoneree. However, we hesitate to confidently draw this conclusion, given that our direct comparison of participants' wait times for the Black and White exonerees yielded a nonsignificant effect. Moreover, participants' responses to the traditional self-report measures suggested that participants' tendency to stigmatize the exoneree did not differ as a function of the exoneree's race. It is possible that having participants provide their feelings about meeting with the resident only after they learned that there was in fact no resident watered down the effects of our experimental manipulations.

In our second experiment, we further investigated participants' reactions to Black and White exonerees and had two primary goals. First, we sought to replicate the tentative finding that non-Black people stigmatized the Black exoneree less than they stigmatized the White exoneree. Second, we investigated two mechanisms that might underlie this effect. One possibility is that participants modified their behavior when they expected to meet with a Black exoneree in an attempt to appear unprejudiced (e.g., LaCosse & Plant, 2020; Plant & Devine, 1998; Plant et al., 2010). Alternatively, participants' reactions to the Black exoneree may have been genuine and driven by the perception that Black people face greater bias in the legal system than White people (e.g., Shaw et al., 2021). We discuss both possibilities in the sections that follow.

Efforts to Appear Unprejudiced

Expressions of racial bias have been socially taboo since the latter half of the 20th century (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Crandall et al., 2002). In the current social climate, appearing racially biased comes with the risk of negative social repercussions, such as social rejection and loss of employment or professional opportunity (e.g., Heeb, 2021; Mosquera, 2015; Prinzivalli, 2018). To avoid appearing racially prejudiced, people may attempt to control or modify their behaviors in an effort to correct for their actual or perceived biases toward people of color (e.g., Plant & Devine, 1998; Plant et al., 2010).

The *flexible-corrections model* of bias correction provides a possible account of the patterns observed in Experiment 1 (Wegener & Petty, 1995). According to this model, people rely on naive theories about the strength and direction of their own biases. However, people's attempts to correct for their biases can sometimes overshoot the level of actual bias, leading to

overcorrection (Wegener & Petty, 1995; see also Aberson & Ettlin, 2004). According to this idea, participants in Experiment 1 who expected to meet with a Black exoneree may have overcorrected for their racial biases. In Experiment 2, we included two measures of the tendency to modify behaviors to appear unprejudiced: internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998) and self-monitoring (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986).

Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice. People vary in the extent to which they are motivated to respond without prejudice, as well as in their motivations for doing so (Dunton & Fazio, 1997; Plant & Devine, 1998). Plant and Devine (1998) theorized that people may be motivated to respond without prejudice for external or internal reasons. People who are externally motivated to respond without prejudice aim to avoid the social rejection that comes with openly expressing racial prejudices, whereas people who are internally motivated to respond without prejudice aim to uphold personally important, unprejudiced values and beliefs (Plant & Devine, 1998). Some research suggests that internal motivation to respond without prejudice, in particular, may be associated with racial bias overcorrection. Indeed, people who are highly internally motivated to respond without prejudice self-report more favorable responses to Black than White people (e.g., Crosby & Monin, 2007) despite having less favorable unconscious responses to Black than White people (e.g., Lloyd et al., 2017). External motivation to respond without prejudice, on the other hand, may not be as strongly associated with racial bias overcorrection. Indeed, there is reason to believe that, despite their best efforts, highly externally motivated people may fail to completely correct for all of their racial biases (Butz & Plant, 2009). However, other research suggests that internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice interact to influence people's bias-correction efforts (e.g., Lloyd et al., 2017). We predicted that if reactions to Black exonerees are driven by efforts to appear unprejudiced, greater internal and/or external motivation to respond without prejudice would be associated with more favorable reactions to Black than White exonerees.

Self-Monitoring. Self-monitoring describes people's tendency and aptitude to regulate their behavior in response to social cues (Snyder, 1987). People with high self-monitoring tendencies strategically tailor their behaviors to conform to situational standards of appropriateness, whereas people with low self-monitoring tendencies act in accordance with their own values and beliefs, regardless of social expectations. In contemporary U.S. society, behaving in overtly racially prejudiced ways is socially taboo (e.g., Augoustinos & Every, 2007; Crandall et al., 2002), as most recently evidenced by the tendency for people caught expressing racially prejudiced views to be "canceled": deplatformed, outcast, and/or fired (e.g., Heeb, 2021; Mosquera, 2015; Prinzivalli, 2018). Consequently, people with high self-monitoring tendencies may be particularly likely to overcorrect for their biases against Black exonerees. Following this argument, we predicted that if reactions to Black exonerees are driven by efforts to appear unprejudiced, greater self-monitoring tendencies would be associated with more favorable reactions to Black than White exonerees.

Perceptions of Legal System Bias Against Black and White Exonerees

Another possible interpretation of the findings from Experiment 1 is that participants' favorable reactions to the Black exoneree were genuine and reflected perceptions of legal system bias faced by the exoneree. People appear to be increasingly aware of the extent to which Black individuals face racial bias, especially in legal settings (e.g., Smalarz et al., 2023). In 2007, for example, a majority (74%) of White people believed that the legal system was egalitarian in its treatment of Black and White individuals (Kohut et al., 2007). However, in recent years, only a minority of White people (39%) continue to hold this belief (DeSilver et al., 2020).

Given increased awareness of the challenges Black people face within the legal system, people may now be more critical of legal system officials' treatment of Black people (e.g., Kahn & Martin, 2016; Shaw et al., 2021). Therefore, it is possible that people's favorable reactions to Black exonerees stem from their perceptions of the legal system's bias against Black people. Specifically, people might attribute the wrongful conviction of a Black individual to injustices committed by the legal system. In contrast, people might attribute the wrongful conviction of a White individual to causes other than legal system bias (e.g., actual guilt or involvement in immoral or criminal activities). To the extent that perceptions of legal system bias underlie reactions to exonerees, people's beliefs about legal system bias should mediate the relationship between the exoneree's race and perceptions of the exoneree. That is, people should perceive greater legal system bias against Black exonerees than White exonerees, and this perception should predict more favorable reactions toward the Black than the White exonerees.

Although the focus of Experiments 2 and 3 was non-Black people's stigmatization of Black and White exonerees, we also explored Black people's reactions to Black and White exonerees. We believed it was important to do so given that Black individuals may play an especially crucial role in providing support after Black exonerees are released from prison. However, we made no a priori predictions regarding how Black individuals would respond to Black and White exonerees.

Experiment 2

The purpose of Experiment 2 was twofold. First, we aimed to replicate the tentative finding from Experiment 1 that the stigma of wrongful conviction is greater for White than for Black exonerees. To that end, we examined participants' perceptions of Black versus White exonerees' personal characteristics and likelihood of being guilty of the crime of which they were wrongfully convicted. We also assessed participants' willingness to be in social proximity with, and donate money to, Black versus White exonerees, which served as proxies for actual behaviors (e.g., Corrigan et al., 2001; Pavetich & Stathi, 2021). Second, Experiment 2 tested the extent to which people's favorable reactions to Black exonerees may be driven by racial bias overcorrection or beliefs regarding legal system bias faced by Black and White exonerees.

We conducted Experiment 2 in two phases. In the first phase, participants completed measures of motivation to respond without prejudice (Plant & Devine, 1998) and self-monitoring (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). In the second phase, ostensibly unrelated, phase, participants evaluated a Black or White exoneree and rated their perceptions of legal system bias faced by the exoneree. The experiment was approved by the IRB at Arizona State University, where the data were collected (IRB Protocol No. 00011034), and it was preregistered on Open Science Framework prior to data collection, which took place from February to November 2020.

Method

Participants

We again initially conducted a power analysis using *G*Power* (Faul et al., 2007) to determine the necessary sample size to detect a small- to medium-sized interaction effect between exoneree race and the individual differences measures (Cohen's $f = .14$) with at least 80% power. The analysis indicated that 403 participants were required. We recruited 442 undergraduate students from Arizona State University. The study was conducted online, and participants received course credit in exchange for participating. We excluded data from participants who did not complete the experiment ($n = 9$), failed the manipulation check ($n = 9$), and/or failed the attention check ($n = 36$). We examined responses from participants who reported being Black or African American ($n = 22$) in separate analyses. Specifically, to maximize statistical power for our small sample of Black participants, we combined the data from Black participants in Experiments 2 and 3, which was a partial replication of Experiment 2. Therefore, the final non-Black Experiment 2 sample included 368 participants, most of whom were women (279 women, 86 men, two nonbinary, one agender), White (182 White, 35 Asian, 90 Hispanic/Latinx, two Native American/Alaskan Native, 45 non-Black mixed race, 14 other), and young adults (age: $M = 23.30$ years, $SD = 6.87$, range = 18–58).

As with Experiment 1, we retrospectively conducted a power analysis with the *pwr2ppl* R package (Aberson, 2022), using the effects observed in our final data as parameter estimates. The analyses indicated that a minimum of 800 participants were needed to detect the two-way interaction effects, 39,500 participants were needed to detect the three-way interaction effect, and 131 participants were needed to detect a significant indirect effect with at least 80% power. Therefore, our sample size provided insufficient power for tests of moderation by the individual differences measures but yielded sufficient power for the mediation analysis.

Experimental Materials

Using materials developed by Hart and Kassin (2015; also see Ort et al., 2020), we constructed vignettes that provided background information about a man named James Wilson: He lives alone in a one-bedroom apartment, is average in height and weight, grew up in a house with two parents and a younger brother, attended and graduated from a public high school where he played football, and works in freelance construction. Presented alongside this vignette was a photo, ostensibly of Wilson, which we used to manipulate Wilson's race. For stimulus-sampling purposes (Wells & Windschitl, 1999), the photo depicted one of 12 men, six of whom were White, six of whom were Black, and all of whom are actual exonerees. These photos are presented in the online Supplemental Materials. The photos were not pilot tested but were previously used by Hart and Kassin (2015) to successfully manipulate race.

After reading the background information about Wilson, participants read additional information that described the nature of Wilson's conviction and exoneration: Wilson was accused of sexually assaulting and murdering a teenage girl, convicted and sentenced to 46 years in prison on the basis of eyewitness identification, and exonerated 10 years into his sentence following the discovery of DNA evidence that conclusively excluded him and matched another man who was a violent felon currently in state prison for an unrelated crime (see Appendix, for the text of the vignette).

Measures

Unless stated otherwise, no data were missing for any measures and all data were normally distributed, as indicated by skew and kurtosis statistics less than |3|.

Motivation to Respond Without Prejudice. Participants completed Plant and Devine's (1998) Internal Motivation Scale (IMS) and External Motivation Scale (EMS), each of which contains five items measured on 9-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 9 (*strongly agree*). Participants' responses to the items in each scale were averaged so that higher scores indicated greater internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice. The two scales have been shown to have sufficient reliability in previous research (IMS: αs = .81–.85; EMS: αs = .76–.80; Plant & Devine, 1998) and in the present study (IMS: $\alpha = .85$, $\omega_u = .85$; EMS: $\alpha = .78$, $\omega_u = .77$). However, in the present study, IMS scores were slightly nonnormally distributed, skew = −2.11 and kurtosis = 5.75. In an attempt to remedy this, we identified and removed five outliers (>3 *SD* from the mean); removing the outliers improved the skew and kurtosis (skew = −1.49, kurtosis = 1.46). No other modifications were made.

Participants were, on average, highly internally motivated to respond without prejudice ($M = 8.17$, $SD = 1.07$, range = 4.80–9.00) and low in external motivation to respond without prejudice ($M = 3.95$, $SD = 1.89$, range = 1.00–9.00).

Self-Monitoring. Participants completed Snyder and Gangestad's (1986) Self-Monitoring Scale, which contains 18 true/false items. Responses were coded 1 when they were consistent with high self-monitoring, 0 when they were consistent with low self-monitoring, and then summed. Higher scores correspond to a greater tendency to self-monitor. The Self-Monitoring Scale has been shown to have sufficient reliability in previous research ($\alpha = .70$; Snyder & Gangestad, 1986) and in the present study ($\alpha = .74$, $\omega_{u\text{-cat}} = .75$). Participants were, on average, low in self-monitoring ($M = 8.74$, $SD = 3.45$, range = 0.00–17.00).

Perceptions of the Exoneree's Guilt. We assessed participants' perceptions of the exoneree's guilt using the following question on a sliding scale from 0% to 100%: "In your opinion, what is the likelihood (from 0% to 100%) that James Wilson committed the crime?"

Evaluations of the Exoneree's Character. Participants rated the exoneree on 12 character attributes, three of which were negatively valanced (dangerous, violent, unpredictable) and nine of which were positively valanced (friendly, intelligent, social, good, mentally stable, trustworthy, warm, strong, moral). Participants provided these ratings using 10-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very*). We created separate composite scales for the negative attributes ($\alpha = .76$, $\omega_u = .77$) and the positive attributes ($\alpha = .92$, $\omega_u = .92$) by averaging across participants' ratings. Higher scores correspond to more negative and more positive evaluations of the exoneree, respectively.

Social Proximity to the Exoneree. To measure willingness to be in close social proximity to the exoneree, we asked participants to respond to the following two questions on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very*): "If you could, how likely would you be to hire James Wilson for a job?" and "If you could,

how likely would you be to welcome James Wilson into your home?" Responses were averaged so that higher scores indicated greater willingness to be in close social proximity to the exonerees ($\alpha = .86$, $\omega_u = .86$).

Willingness to Donate to the Exoneree. To assess willingness to donate to the exoneree, we asked participants to respond to the following question on a sliding scale from 0 to 100: "If a fund were to be created to assist James Wilson, would you be willing to make a contribution—and if so, how much (in dollars)?"

Perceptions of Legal System Bias Against the Exoneree. To measure the extent to which participants perceived the legal system to have been biased against the exoneree, we asked them to respond to five items on a 10-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 10 (*very*): "James Wilson was responsible for his wrongful conviction" (reverse-scored), "The police investigation of James Wilson was fair" (reverse-scored), "James Wilson was treated fairly during his trial" (reverse-scored), "The police unfairly targeted James Wilson," and "The investigation and trial were biased against James Wilson from the start." The items were averaged to create a composite measure of perceived legal system bias. Higher scores on this measure indicated greater perceptions of legal system bias against the exoneree ($\alpha = .65$, $\omega_u = .69$).

Composite Measure. Following our preregistered analysis plan, we created a composite measure of reactions to the exonerees to use as the outcome variable in our moderation and mediation analyses. We computed this measure by averaging the positive characteristics, reverse-coded negative characteristics, and social proximity items. Higher composite measure scores indicate more favorable reactions toward the exoneree ($\alpha = .91$, $\omega_h = .77$).

Manipulation and Attention Checks. As a manipulation check, participants answered the question, "What was James Wilson's race?" by choosing one of the following options: "White," "Black or African American," "Asian," "Hispanic or Latino." The attention check question asked, "How was James Wilson exonerated?" Participants responded by choosing one of the following options: "using DNA evidence," "the eyewitness recanted," "another person's confession," "none of the above."

Missing Data. Because participants had the option to skip questions during the first phase of the experiment, there were missing responses to the IMS, EMS, and Self-Monitoring Scale. For example, 9.24% of participants did not respond to any of the IMS items, 16.30% did not respond to any of the EMS items, and 1.90% did not respond to any of the Self-Monitoring Scale items. Data from these participants were excluded from the analyses involving the individual differences variables. For all other participants, we computed mean scores on these measures on the basis of available responses.

Procedure

The study was conducted online in two phases. In the first phase, which occurred as part of a research participation "prescreen" at the institution where the data were collected, students completed a variety of online survey questions related to the present research, as well as unrelated research, on registering for the research participation system. In this phase, participants provided demographic information and completed the motivation to respond without racial prejudice scales (Plant & Devine, 1998) and the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder & Gangestad, 1986). All participants who completed the first phase were eligible to participate in the second phase, which they could sign up for through the research participation system.

In the second phase, participants read that the purpose of the experiment was to gain a better understanding of how people evaluate others and that they were going to read about a man named James Wilson. Participants read the background information, accompanied by one of 12 photographs (six Black men: $n = 194$, six White men: $n = 174$; see the online Supplemental Materials, for the photographs) and then read about the crime, investigation, trial, and eventual exoneration of James Wilson. Participants then responded to questions about their perceptions of James Wilson's character and the likelihood that he was guilty, their willingness to be in close social proximity to him, the amount of money they would be willing to donate to him, and the degree to which they believed that the legal system was biased against him. Participants then completed the attention and manipulation check questions, provided demographic information (gender, age, race/ethnicity), and read a debriefing statement, which explained that the information gathered in the experiment would improve our understanding of how exonerees are perceived and the underlying mechanisms of those perceptions. Participants were also encouraged to visit the Innocence Project's website to learn about the plight of exonerees.

Results

Do Non-Black People React More Favorably to Black Than to White Exonerees?

To test the hypothesis that non-Black people react more favorably to Black exonerees than to White exonerees, we conducted independent-samples *t* tests on each of the dependent variables with exoneree race (Black vs. White) as the independent variable. We report adjusted degrees of freedom when Levene's test indicated unequal variances across the race conditions.

The results supported the hypothesis that non-Black people react more favorably to Black exonerees than to White exonerees. Specifically, non-Black participants perceived the exonerees as less likely to be guilty when they were Black ($M = 9.96$, $SD = 16.20$) than when they were White ($M = 14.61$, $SD = 18.16$), $t(348.80) = 2.58$, $p = .010$, $d = -0.27$, 95% CI [−0.48, −0.07]; rated the exonerees' character less negatively when they were Black ($M = 2.84$, $SD = 1.49$) than when they were White ($M = 3.48$, $SD = 1.62$), $t(366) = 3.99$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.42$, 95% CI [−0.63, −0.21]; rated the exonerees' character more positively when they were Black ($M = 6.27$, $SD = 1.55$) than when they were White ($M = 5.07$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(364.13) = -8.08$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$, 95% CI [0.62, 1.05]; indicated greater willingness to be in close social proximity to the exonerees when they were Black ($M = 6.77$, $SD = 2.18$) than when they were White ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 2.15$), $t(366) = -6.37$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.67$, 95% CI [0.46, 0.88]; and were willing to donate more money to the exonerees when they were Black ($M = 28.20$, $SD = 28.86$) than when they were White ($M = 18.91$, $SD = 21.73$), $t(355.58) = -3.51$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.36$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.57].

Mechanisms Underlying More Favorable Reactions to Black Versus White Exonerees

We tested the mechanisms underlying non-Black participants' more favorable reactions toward Black exonerees than White

exonerees using the composite measure. For our mediation analyses, we calculated CIs of the indirect effects using bootstrapping procedures (5,000 bias-corrected samples) and assessed the significance of all findings using 95% CIs.

Attempts to Respond Without Prejudice. We tested whether non-Black participants' motivation to respond without prejudice moderated the tendency to react more favorably to the Black than White exonerees using Model 3 in Hayes's (2021) PROCESS R script, with the exonerees' race as an independent variable; participants' mean-centered IMS scores, mean-centered EMS scores, and their interaction as moderators; and the composite measure of reactions to the exonerees entered as the dependent variable. Full results are reported in Table 1.

Consistent with the analyses reported above, the main effect of exoneree race on the composite measure was significant. None of the other effects were significant (see Table 1). In fact, an examination of the coefficients associated with the effects of EMS scores and the three-way Exoneree Race × IMS × EMS interaction suggest a negligible role of external motivation to respond without prejudice in producing differential reactions to Black and White exonerees. An exception emerged for the two-way Exoneree Race × IMS interaction, however, $B = 0.25$, $SE = 0.13$, $p = .054$, 95% CI [−0.00, 0.50]. Even though this interaction was not statistically significant, we conducted a follow-up analysis of participants' responses to Black and White exonerees across varying levels of internal motivation in order to explore patterns that our sample may have provided insufficient power to detect. These analyses are presented in the online Supplemental Materials.

We next tested whether non-Black participants' self-monitoring moderated the tendency to react more favorably to the Black than White exonerees using Model 1 in Hayes's (2021) PROCESS R script, with the exonerees' race as an independent variable, participants' mean-centered self-monitoring scores as a moderator, and the composite measure as the dependent variable. Consistent with our previous analyses, results revealed a significant main effect of the exonerees' race on the composite measure, with participants reacting more favorably to Black than White exonerees, $B = 1.12$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.85, 1.38]. Neither the main effect of self-monitoring, $B = -0.00$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .905$, 95% CI [−0.06, 0.05], nor the interaction between self-monitoring and exoneree race was significant, $B = -0.00$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .941$, 95% CI [−0.08, 0.07], and an inspection of the coefficients associated with self-monitoring effects suggested that this phenomenon played a negligible role in producing differential reactions to Black and White exonerees.

Table 1

Experiment 2: Effects of Exonerees' Race on Composite Reaction Scores Among Non-Black Participants, as Moderated by Internal Motivation Scale (IMS) and External Motivation Scale (EMS) Scores

Effect	*B*	*SE*	*p*	95% CI
Exoneree race	1.12	0.14	.000	[0.85, 1.39]
IMS	−0.01	0.09	.905	[−0.20, 0.17]
EMS	−0.02	0.05	.692	[−0.13, 0.08]
Exoneree Race × IMS	0.25	0.13	.054	[−0.00, 0.50]
Exoneree Race × EMS	−0.02	0.08	.777	[−0.17, 0.13]
IMS × EMS	0.02	0.06	.742	[−0.09, 0.13]
Exoneree Race × IMS × EMS	−0.04	0.08	.661	[−0.19, 0.12]

Note. *SE* = standard error; CI = confidence interval. Exoneree race was coded 0 for White and 1 for Black. Greater composite reaction scores indicate more favorable reactions.

Perceptions of Legal System Bias. We tested whether non-Black participants perceived greater legal system bias against the exonerees when they were Black than when they were White using an independent-samples *t* test. The independent variable was the exonerees' race (Black vs. White), and the dependent variable was non-Black participants' perceptions of legal system bias. Consistent with the notion that people perceive greater legal system bias against Black people than White people, results showed that participants reported greater legal system bias against the Black exonerees ($M = 8.39$, $SD = 1.36$) than the White exonerees ($M = 7.64$, $SD = 1.47$), $t(366) = -5.10$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.53$, 95% CI [0.33, 0.74].

We also assessed whether non-Black participants' perceptions of greater legal system bias against the Black than the White exonerees may have stemmed from efforts to appear unprejudiced. Specifically, in separate analyses, we tested whether motivation to respond without prejudice or self-monitoring moderated the effect of exoneree race on perceptions of legal system bias. We report the results of this analysis in our online Supplemental Materials. In short, there was no evidence that either internal or external motivation to respond without prejudice or self-monitoring was associated with differential perceptions of legal system bias faced by Black and White exonerees.

Next, we tested the possibility that perceptions of legal system bias against the exonerees mediated the relationship between the exoneree's race and reactions to the exoneree. We used Model 4 in Hayes's (2021) PROCESS R script, with the exonerees' race as the independent variable, perceptions of legal system bias as the mediator, and the composite measure of perceptions of the exonerees as the dependent variable.

Results were consistent with the hypothesis that perceptions of legal system bias underlie differential responses to Black and White exonerees, showing that participants' perceptions of legal system bias significantly mediated the relationship between the exoneree's race and reactions to the exoneree. Specifically, participants perceived greater legal system bias against the Black exonerees than against the White exonerees, $B = 0.75$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.46, 1.04], and greater perceptions of legal system bias were associated with more favorable reactions to the exonerees, $B = 0.28$, $SE = 0.05$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.37]. The total indirect effect for this path was significant, $B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.33]. The direct effect of exonerees' race on participants' reactions was significant both when analyses controlled for the indirect effect of beliefs in legal system bias, $B = 0.91$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.65, 1.17], and when they did not, $B = 1.12$, $SE = 0.13$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.85, 1.38].

Discussion

Consistent with the behavioral findings from Experiment 1, results showed that non-Black participants in Experiment 2 reacted more favorably to Black than to White exonerees. Specifically, non-Black participants rated the Black exonerees higher on positive characteristics and lower on negative characteristics, and they considered them to be less guilty than the White exonerees. They

also reported greater willingness to be in close social proximity with and greater willingness to donate money to the Black exonerees than the White exonerees. We found clear evidence that these findings are related to differences in beliefs regarding the legal system biases that Black and White exonerees face. Specifically, Black exonerees are considered to have faced greater legal system bias than White exonerees, and this tendency is associated with more positive reactions to Black exonerees than to White exonerees. The fact that the direct effect of exoneree race on reactions to the exonerees remained significant when analyses controlled for the indirect effect of perceived legal system bias suggests that there are likely additional mechanisms, beyond perceptions of legal system bias, that drive more favorable reactions toward Black exonerees than toward White exonerees. It remains to be seen what those other mechanisms are, as our research did not reveal any other significant driving factors. Indeed, there were no significant relationships between reactions to the exonerees and internal or external motivation to respond without prejudice or self-monitoring. Moreover, an examination of the coefficients associated with several of the interactions suggested that these null effects were unlikely to be a result of insufficient power.

A limitation of the current experiment is that we measured the dependent variable (reactions to the exonerees) prior to the mediating variable (perceptions of legal system bias against the exonerees). We did this because we were concerned that the participants' responses to the dependent variable would be distorted if they responded to the mediating variable prior to the dependent variable. However, by presenting the dependent variable before the mediating variable, we failed to establish that perceptions of legal system bias against the exonerees preceded reactions to the exonerees. Although this limitation does not invalidate our interpretation of the results (see Chaudoin et al., 2021), we wanted to ensure that our independent variable (the exoneree's race) predicted the mediator and that the mediator predicted the outcome. Accordingly, we conducted Experiment 3, a partial replication of Experiment 2, in which we measured beliefs about legal system bias before we measured reactions to the exonerees.

Experiment 3

Method

We conducted an a priori power analysis with a Monte Carlo simulation for mediation models (Schoemann et al., 2017) using the effects observed in Experiment 2 as parameter estimates. The analysis indicated that a minimum of 180 participants were required to detect the indirect effect of legal system bias on reactions to the exoneree with at least 95% power. We recruited 257 undergraduate students from Arizona State University during the Spring 2021 academic semester. The study was conducted online, and participants received course credit for participating. We excluded data from participants who did not complete the experiment ($n = 7$) or failed the manipulation check ($n = 8$) or attention check ($n = 18$). As in Experiment 2, participants who reported being Black or African American ($n = 16$) were examined in separate analyses, which we present after the results for non-Black participants. Therefore, the final sample of non-Black participants included 210 students, most of whom were women (144 women, 64 men, two nonbinary), White (123 White, 20 Asian, 36 non-White Hispanic/Latinx, one Native American/Alaskan Native, one Pacific Islander/Native Hawaiian, 21 non-Black multiracial, eight other), and young adults (age: $M = 21.64$ years, $SD = 4.76$, range = 18–54).

As in Experiments 1 and 2, we also conducted a retrospective power analysis using the *pwr2ppl* R package (Aberson, 2022) and the effects observed in our final data as parameter estimates. The results suggested that at least 133 participants were necessary to detect an indirect effect using PROCESS Model 4 mediation analyses with one mediator with at least 95% power. Thus, Experiment 3 had sufficient power to detect the hypothesized effects.

Experiment 3 was identical to Experiment 2 except that it measured the mediating variable, perceptions of legal system bias, prior to the dependent variable, perceptions of the exonerees (Black $n = 104$, White $n = 106$). We did not collect data on self-monitoring or internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice, as our primary goal was to replicate the results of our mediation analysis involving perceptions of legal system bias. For the dependent measures, no data were missing and all were normally distributed; the measures themselves were reliable (positive characteristics ratings: $\alpha = .90$, $\omega_u = .90$; negative characteristics ratings: $\alpha = .79$, $\omega_u = .79$; social proximity: $\alpha = .82$, $\omega_u = .83$; legal system bias: $\alpha = .78$, $\omega_u = .80$). The experiment was approved by the IRB at Arizona State University, where the data were collected in March 2021 (IRB Protocol No. 00011034).

Results

Consistent with the results of Experiments 1 and 2, results showed that non-Black participants reacted more favorably to the Black exonerees than to the White exonerees. Independent-samples t tests (with Levene's corrections when homogeneity of variance could not be assumed) revealed that non-Black participants perceived the exonerees as less likely to be guilty when they were Black ($M = 11.77$, $SD = 16.45$) than when they were White ($M = 21.16$, $SD = 21.47$), $t(196.52) = 3.56$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.49$, 95% CI [−0.77, −0.22]; rated the exonerees' character less negatively when they were Black ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.44$) than when they were White ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.57$), $t(208) = 3.62$, $p < .001$, $d = -0.50$, 95% CI [−0.78, −0.23]; rated the exonerees' character more positively when they were Black ($M = 6.01$, $SD = 1.34$) than when they were White ($M = 4.92$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(208) = -6.25$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.87$, 95% CI [0.58, 1.15]; indicated greater willingness to be in close social proximity to the exonerees when they were Black ($M = 6.87$, $SD = 2.11$) than when they were White ($M = 5.08$, $SD = 1.81$), $t(208) = -6.61$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.92$, 95% CI [0.63, 1.20]; and were willing to donate more money to the exonerees when they were Black ($M = 23.00$, $SD = 26.34$) than when they were White ($M = 13.22$, $SD = 18.42$), $t(182.87) = -3.09$, $p = .002$, $d = 0.43$, 95% CI [0.16, 0.70].

Despite collecting the measure of perceived legal system bias prior to collecting the other dependent measures, non-Black participants still reported believing that the exonerees were more likely to have been subjected to legal system bias when they were Black ($M = 8.12$, $SD = 1.51$) than when where White ($M = 6.98$, $SD = 1.80$), $t(202.81) = -4.95$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.69$, 95% CI [0.41, 0.96]. Furthermore, as in Experiment 2, perceptions of legal system bias significantly mediated the tendency to react more favorably to the Black exonerees than the White exonerees. Specifically, non-Black participants perceived greater legal system bias against the

Black exonerees than against the White exonerees, $B = 1.13$, $SE = 0.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.68, 1.59], and greater perceptions of legal system bias were associated with more favorable reactions to the exonerees, $B = 0.31$, $SE = 0.04$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.23, 0.39]. The total indirect effect for this path was again significant, $B = 0.35$, $SE = 0.09$, 95% CI [0.19, 0.55]. Also as observed in Experiment 2, the direct effect of the exonerees' race on non-Black participants' reactions to the exoneree was significant both when analyses controlled for the indirect effect of beliefs in legal system bias, $B = 0.76$, $SE = 0.15$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.47, 1.05], and when they did not, $B = 1.11$, $SE = 0.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.80, 1.42].

Exploratory Analyses of Black Participants' Reactions to Black and White Exonerees

We conducted exploratory analyses to examine Black participants' reactions to Black and White exonerees in Experiments 2 and 3 ($n = 38$). Because of the small size of the sample, we focused on reporting data descriptively rather than conducting inferential analyses. Most of the Black participants were women (23 women, 14 men, one nonbinary) and approximately 24 years old (age: $M = 24.11$, $SD = 8.44$, range = 18.00–56.00). Twenty of the Black participants were in the White exoneree condition and 18 were in the Black exoneree condition.

We first examined whether Black participants reacted differently to Black and White exonerees. Paralleling the results observed for non-Black participants, findings revealed that Black participants perceived the exonerees as less likely to be guilty when they were Black ($M = 5.89$, $SD = 7.39$) than when they White ($M = 17.90$, $SD = 17.41$); rated the exonerees' character less negatively when they were Black ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.38$) than when they were White ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 1.69$); rated the exonerees' character more positively when they were Black ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.31$) than when they were White ($M = 5.00$, $SD = 1.18$); indicated greater willingness to be in close social proximity to the exonerees when they were Black ($M = 7.00$, $SD = 2.26$) than when they were White ($M = 5.13$, $SD = 2.16$); and were willing to donate more money to the exonerees when they were Black ($M = 51.83$, $SD = 38.61$) than when they were White ($M = 14.75$, $SD = 18.72$).

We next examined the potential role of perceptions of legal system bias in producing Black participants' more favorable reactions to Black than to White exonerees. Black participants believed that Black exonerees were slightly more likely to have been subjected to legal system bias ($M = 8.67$, $SD = 1.10$) than were White exonerees ($M = 8.12$, $SD = 1.85$). We examined the correlations between reactions to Black and White exonerees and Black participants' perceptions of legal system bias and found that reactions became increasingly favorable as perceptions of legal system bias increased ($r = .31$, $p = .059$, $n = 38$). These findings tentatively suggest that perceptions of legal system bias may influence Black, as well as non-Black, people's reactions to Black and White exonerees.

Discussion of Experiment 3 and Exploratory Analyses

The purpose of Experiment 3 was to replicate the mediational process observed in Experiment 2 while measuring the mediator before the outcome variable. The results of Experiment 3 replicated the results of Experiment 2. Specifically, non-Black participants responded more favorably to the Black than to the White exonerees, and beliefs regarding the extent to which the exonerees face legal system bias partially mediated this effect. Exploratory analyses of data from Black participants in Experiments 2 and 3 suggested that Black participants also responded more favorably to Black than White exonerees and that this tendency was likewise related to perceptions of legal system bias.

General Discussion

Our goal in this research was to clarify the relationship between an exoneree's race and the stigma of wrongful conviction. Across three experiments using an unobtrusive behavioral measure and a variety of self-report measures, our research yielded two primary findings: People respond more favorably to Black exonerees than to White exonerees, and this tendency is related to beliefs regarding legal system biases against Black individuals. These findings converge with the results of prior research suggesting that the stigma of wrongful conviction more adversely affects White than Black exonerees (Scherr et al., 2018). Importantly, the present research suggests that this phenomenon affects both behavioral and self-reported reactions to exonerees.

We propose one potential explanation for the link between people's reactions to exonerees and their perceptions of the legal system bias faced by exonerees. Perhaps these effects are driven by attributions that people make about Black and White exonerees based on inferences about the cause of their wrongful convictions. To the extent that people believe that Black individuals are more likely to fall victim to race-related biases within the legal system than are White individuals (DeSilver et al., 2020), a Black exoneree's wrongful conviction can be readily attributed to systemic racial bias, whereas a White exoneree's wrongful conviction cannot. Consequently, people may be more prone to making negative dispositional inferences about White than about Black exonerees because of the perception that there is an insufficient situational explanation for White exonerees' wrongful conviction. Consider, for example, perceptions of responsibility: Because White exonerees' wrongful convictions are less readily attributed to legal system bias, people may be more likely to assume that they are responsible for their wrongful conviction. This would be meaningful because people react more negatively toward people whom they believe are responsible for their own harm (Weiner, 1993). In fact, research has shown that people consider exonerees who falsely confessed to be more responsible for their wrongful convictions than exonerees who were wrongfully convicted because of false eyewitness identification, and people react less favorably to false confessors than to individuals who were mistakenly identified (Kukucka & Evelo, 2019; Savage et al., 2018). To the extent that people's perceptions of greater legal system bias against Black than against White exonerees lead people to perceive White exonerees as bearing more personal responsibility than Black exonerees for their wrongful convictions, this could account for greater negative reactions to White than to Black exonerees.

Practical Implications

Given the ubiquity of the Black Lives Matter movement as well as news stories, viral videos, and true crime media that depict harm being done to Black people by agents of the legal system, it should be no surprise that the general public is becoming increasingly

aware of racial bias in the legal system (e.g., Kahn & Martin, 2016). Our findings suggest that people may aim to avoid perpetuating those same biases in their evaluations of Experiments 2 and 3 and interactions with Experiment 1 exonerees (note that data collection for this experiment began 2 years before the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, Howard University School of Law, 2018, and ended shortly after the movement officially began).

Ironically, efforts to avoid perpetuating racial inequality appear to result in unequal perceptions and treatment of White and Black exonerees—both of whom have suffered injustices. Although exonerees of all races face undue discrimination, as well as insufficient social and economic support (see Faison & Smalarz, 2020), the present research suggests that these issues may be especially pronounced for White exonerees. The public's decreased willingness to provide financial and/or social support to exonerees may make it more difficult for exonerees to establish economic and housing security and social support on release from prison. In fact, research has shown that unstable housing or homelessness (e.g., Lutze et al., 2014; Roman & Travis, 2006), unstable or lack of employment (e.g., Ramakers et al., 2017; Siwach, 2018), and poor or lacking social support (e.g., Orrick et al., 2011) are associated with an increased risk of recidivism. Therefore, it is in the public's and the legal system's best interest to provide support to both Black and White exonerees.

Potentially, people's reactions to Black and White exonerees may become more egalitarian if the legal system improves to a point at which it can no longer be assumed that Black people are unduly harmed by it. To promote equal treatment of Black and White exonerees, we should continue advocating for improvements to the legal system that erode the institutionalized racism that perpetuates the overrepresentation of Black people in the incarcerated and exonerated populations (Gramlich, 2019; National Registry of Exonerations, 2022; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019) and exacerbates the challenges that previously incarcerated Black people face on release from prison. Indeed, relative to previously incarcerated White people, previously incarcerated Black people are more likely to experience homelessness on release from prison (Blackman, 2022). This likely extends to employment and access to reentry services, though, to our knowledge, no thorough quantitative investigation of reentry outcomes by exoneree race has been published.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the present research warrant discussion. First, the generalizability of our findings may be limited by some aspects of our research methodology. Because all our participants reacted to male targets, the results of the present research may not extend to exonerees who are not men or to those who are not Black or White, because the stigma of wrongful conviction likely differs for exonerees of different genders and races (see Bettens & Warren, 2021). Therefore, in future studies, researchers should examine the differential effects of the stigma of wrongful conviction for exonerees of different genders and races and aim to go beyond the standard gender (men vs. women) and racial (Black vs. White) binaries while doing so.

Our use of undergraduate student samples may also limit the generalizability of our research. Students tend to be younger than the general population, are subject to unique collegiate experiences, are of higher socioeconomic status, and are part of a unique subculture compared with nonstudent populations (see Payne & Chappell, 2008; Stroebe et al., 2018). Perhaps most relevant to the current research is the possibility that undergraduate students are more sensitive to issues concerning racial bias compared with the population at large (Wodtke, 2012) and tend to be more critical of the legal system (e.g., Hamm et al., 2018; Toch & Maguire, 2014). On the other hand, older people—and especially those who are not Black—are less sensitive to racial issues that impact the criminal legal system and have more positive perceptions of the legal system (e.g., Horowitz et al., 2019). Perhaps older people would be less willing to endorse the idea that Black exonerees face greater legal system bias than White exonerees, and, in turn, they may react less favorably to Black exonerees than White exonerees. Notably, however, we replicated the pattern of more favorable responding to Black than to White exonerees across two different geographical regions (i.e., rural Midwest and metropolitan Southwest), and Scherr et al. (2018) found similar results with participants recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk, who tended to significantly differ from college students in terms of social attitudes (Weigold & Weigold, 2022) and who were, on average, a decade older than participants in our research. Nevertheless, in future studies, research on the relationship between exonerees' race and the stigma of wrongful conviction should make efforts to recruit samples of a wider age range to capture these potential generational differences.

A second limitation of the current research involves our use of mediation analyses to investigate whether the tendency for non-Black participants to respond more favorably to Black than to White exonerees was driven by differences in beliefs regarding legal system biases. Because we did not directly manipulate participants' perceptions of legal system bias, we cannot conclude that participants' beliefs regarding the injustices faced by the exonerees within the legal system *caused* participants' more favorable responses to Black than White exonerees. Instead, our research presented an initial investigation of potential underpinnings of people's tendency to respond more favorably to Black than to White exonerees. In future studies, researchers should experimentally assess whether manipulating information about legal system bias faced by exonerees influences people's reactions to the exonerees. Furthermore, the fact that the direct effect of exoneree race remained significant even after analyses controlled for participants' perceptions of legal system bias suggests a role of other, additional mechanisms that may underlie differential reactions to Black and White exonerees. In future studies, researchers should investigate these potential mechanisms and, in doing so, should consider refining the measure of perceived legal system bias used in our experiments, which produced varied degrees of scale reliability.

A third limitation of the present research stems from the fact that many of our findings are based on self-report measures, which are sensitive to changes in context, question format, and wording (see Schwarz, 1999); are susceptible to distortion; and do not always translate into actual behaviors (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). Although we also cannot definitively rule out the possibility that the results produced in Experiments 2 and 3 would not occur if they were observed in a more naturalistic context, the results of Experiment 1, which relied on unobtrusive measures of actual behavior, suggest that the results of Experiments 2 and 3 would translate to actual behaviors. Indeed, just as participants in Experiments 2 and 3 self-reported that they would be less willing to be in close social proximity with White than with Black exonerees, participants in

Experiment 1 tended to wait less time for the White exoneree than the Black exoneree. Nonetheless, future research should expand behavioral investigations of the stigma experienced by Black and White exonerees upon reentry using outcomes such as access to employment, health services, and social reintegration.

A related concern about the use of self-report measures is that non-Black people who do not want to appear prejudiced may be unwilling to report that they try to appear unprejudiced for external reasons (i.e., the EMS) and prone to exaggerating the extent to which their personal values and beliefs inform their tendencies to behave without prejudice (i.e., the IMS). Although such issues are endemic to the use of self-report measures rather than unique to the present research, these issues complicate the interpretation of the null effects of internal and external motivation to respond without prejudice. In future studies, researchers should aim to create and use versions of these measures that are less vulnerable to social desirability biases. Future researchers might also examine reactions to Black and White exonerees in different social contexts. For example, some social contexts encourage the expression of racially prejudiced views and/or behaviors (e.g., Keum & Miller, 2018). People with high self-monitoring tendencies or high external motivation to respond without prejudice may be more willing to express racial prejudice in prejudice-permissive contexts and less willing to do so in prejudice-disapproving contexts (e.g., Crandall et al., 2002; Klein et al., 2004). Future researchers could also include indirect or implicit measures of racial prejudice so as to avoid the aforementioned complications of self-report measures while gaining an understanding of how people's underlying racial prejudices might influence these processes.

A final concern about the present research is that the sample sizes for our first two experiments provided insufficient power to detect the hypothesized effects. Nevertheless, our experiments yielded consistent evidence that people react more negatively to White than to Black exonerees and that these reactions are related to perceptions of legal system bias faced by White and Black exonerees, lending confidence to the conclusions drawn in the present work. Experiment 3, which had sufficient power to test our mediational analysis, further confirmed these findings. Future research should nonetheless follow up on the effects observed here, especially as they pertain to potential prejudice-correction efforts across more diverse samples and social contexts that encourage versus proscribe expressions of racial prejudice.

Conclusion

The current research makes several important contributions to the literature on the stigma of wrongful conviction. First, our findings converge with those of previous research by demonstrating that wrongful conviction constitutes a social stigma. Second, our experiments reveal that the stigma of wrongful conviction varies as a function of an exoneree's race. Participants in our research consistently reacted more favorably to Black exonerees than to White exonerees, and this phenomenon did not appear to be merely the result of efforts to appear nonprejudiced. Rather, participants' reactions may have been driven by an awareness that Black exonerees are more likely to have faced injustices within the legal system than are White exonerees. It remains to be seen whether that effect is influenced by negative dispositional inferences (e.g., Scherr et al., 2018), attributions of responsibility (e.g., Savage et al., 2018; Weiner, 1993), or other factors. Critically, exonerees of all races have faced injustice in the legal system; otherwise, they would not have been wrongfully convicted. Continued research on this important topic will help draw attention to the plight of Black and White exonerees alike and, hopefully, facilitate their acceptance into society after their release from custody.

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Appendix

Vignette About James Wilson's Wrongful Conviction (Adapted From Hart & Kassin, 2015; Also see Ort et al., 2020)

On November 10, 2000, 16-year-old Mary Summers did not return home from her job at McDonald's. Her parents were worried and called the police. When officers arrived at the McDonald's, they found Summers lying dead on the floor near the restrooms. The medical examiner determined that Summers had been stabbed. Vaginal swabs taken during the autopsy indicated that she had also been sexually assaulted. Local police were under great pressure to solve the crime.

A suspect by the name of James Wilson was apprehended after he was spotted loitering on the street corner just a few short blocks away. When police approached, he appeared nervous and would not make eye contact, causing further suspicion. When asked where he was during the approximate time of the crime, he had no alibi. All he said was that he was home alone. Wilson was brought into the police station, photographed, and placed in a lineup alongside five other young men. An eyewitness who saw a man flee from the restaurant at about the time that the crime occurred viewed the lineup and positively and with confidence picked Wilson as the individual she saw. Wilson was arrested right after this eyewitness identification.

One year later, Wilson was tried in state court and convicted by a jury of sexual assault and homicide. He was sentenced to 46 years in prison. Wilson's attorney appealed the conviction on the grounds that he was denied a fair trial because the evidence used against him was unreliable and should have been excluded. After 10 years, Wilson's attorney won the appeal thanks to the discovery of new evidence: DNA testing of hair and saliva found on the victim conclusively excluded Wilson. Wilson's conviction was overturned. He was exonerated and released. In fact, the DNA samples taken from the victim matched another man—a violent felon who is currently in state prison for another crime.

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