

Innocence Framing and Public Trust in Police

by

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Honors Thesis

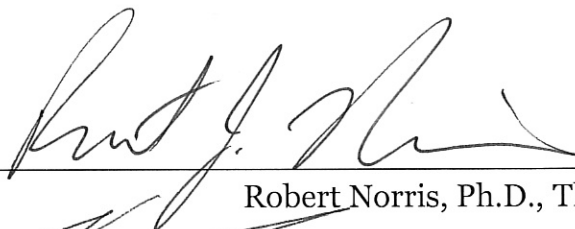
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Abstract

Since the late 1980s, wrongful convictions, exonerations, and the accompanying innocence movement have gradually gained prominence as important contemporary issues facing the modern American justice system. Research has documented the rise of the “innocence frame” in media discourse. Yet, little is known about the innocence frame’s effect on public opinion. Framing information in separate, distinct ways may yield different results. In this paper, I compare the impact of thematic and episodic framing of wrongful conviction information for trust in police. Providing factual numbers on exonerations gives respondents opportunity to view wrongful convictions as an institutional, systematic issue, and erodes trust in police. Regarding the episodic frame, providing information in the form of a narrative will evoke empathy, but not create a feeling of systematic blame. I further discuss the implications of my findings for wrongful convictions, framing theory, and trust in police.

The number of exonerations of wrongfully convicted Americans exceeds 2,200 since 1989 (National Registry of Exonerations n.d.). Due to the severity of the issue, public discourse on the subject has increased, leading to policy reforms at both the federal and state level (Norris et al. 2017; Zalman 2006). As wrongful conviction gained relevance as a criminal justice issue, scholars have begun to exam it. This has led to the discoveries of “innocence frame” (Baumgartner, Defoe, and Boydston 2008) and the rise of the “innocence movement” (Norris 2017). Along with academic attention, this issue has gained fame through popular media. *Serial*, the most downloaded podcast of all time, and the Netflix series *Making a Murderer*, have both offered strong narratives of non-fiction characters and their blurred innocence.

Little is known about the effects of the “innocence frame” and information on wrongful convictions has on public opinion. Nearly all work related to the topic measures public attitudes on the effects wrongful conviction information has on death penalty support (e.g. Bobo and Johnson 2004; Lambert et al. 2011; Peffley and Hurwitz 2007; Unnever and Cullen 2005), most of which are inconclusive. It is reasonable to think that wrongful conviction information could impact opinions on criminal justice issues other than capital punishment. The previous research also fails to explore different ways wrongful conviction information is framed or communicated to the public.

By drawing on framing theory, I aim to fill a gap in previous research. There are voluminous amounts of literature outlining various frames and their effects. This research has focused primarily on the features of a message creating its frame (Druckman 2001; Druckman and Chong 2007) and who is receiving the message (Acreneaux 2012). My study uses differing frames in presenting wrongful conviction information to test the effects of specific frames on public opinion.

More specifically, I focus on how wrongful conviction information impacts trust in police. I argue that information on wrongful convictions may influence public trust in police, but it is contingent on how the information is framed. By presenting innocence information in narrative form, numerical form, or a combination of both, I am able to evaluate the impact wrongful conviction information has on trust in police.

Wrongful Convictions and Public Opinion

Wrongful conviction is not a new issue. The potential to be wrongfully convicted has existed since the development of the United States' legal system. While the issue is centuries old, public support and demand for proper justice for those wrongfully convicted has vastly increased in the past 30 years with the rise of the "innocence movement" (Norris 2017).

Organizations such as The Innocence Project have emerged to overturn wrongful convictions and implement policies which will prevent more from reoccurring in the future (Norris 2017).

The actual number of wrongful convictions in the United States will never be known, though experts have created estimates. About 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States. Through compiling the estimates of wrongful convictions by scholars since the late 1980s, Zalman (2012) found that most estimates for non-capital offenses ranged from .0027% to 3%, claiming that a rate of 1% is the best estimate available. Having only 1 out of every 100 people incarcerated be factually innocent may be an acceptable rate of error, but due to the massive size of the United States' criminal justice system, it would mean that there are approximately 20,000 innocent people currently incarcerated.

The most scientific estimate of wrongful convictions comes from a recent study published by the National Academy of Sciences, which analyzed all capital punishment sentences from 1973 to 2004 and estimated that 4.1% of those found guilty may have been

innocent (Gross, O'Brien, Hu, and Kennedy 2014). The active number of wrongful convictions for both capital and non-capital crimes today is conservatively estimated to be 2,000 per year (Zalman 2012).

Along with prevalence estimates, scholars have sought for the cause of wrongful convictions. A primary reason for exonerations gaining prevalence since the late 1980s is the advancement in DNA and forensic sciences, and how widely used they became in criminal cases (Garret 2009). However, forensic science may also create wrongful convictions (Cole 2012). Garret (2009) wrote on the faultiness of forensic evidence, and how in recent years many forensic practices considered to be infallible have proven to create unreliable evidence. Additionally, other policing practices lead to wrongful convictions. Cole (2012) outlined the many steps in evidence gathering that may lead to wrongful convictions. For example, eyewitness testimony may be inaccurate. According to The Innocence Project, of the first 325 DNA exonerations, 235 (72.3%) involved eyewitness misidentification (Norris et al. 2017). Another issue stems from plea bargaining and innocent suspects confessing to crimes they did not commit (Huff 2008). Both of these issues may be supported by police misconduct, often due to “tunnel vision” by the police, desiring a specific suspect to be guilty (Covey 2013).

The rising awareness of wrongful convictions has led governments, particularly at the state level, to adopt and revise policies to lessen the chance of wrongful conviction. One procedure, which 18 states have addressed, is eyewitness identification (Norris et al. 2017). Of the states that have adopted new policy, 15 laws have come directly from legislatures (Norris et al. 2017). The laws vary, but several have established special task forces to examine all eyewitness procedures, whereas others (e.g., Wisconsin and Virginia) have forced police departments to adopt written procedures on how they conduct eyewitness investigations (Norris

et al. 2017). Another area of evidence gathering, where legal provisions have been adopted at both a federal and state level, is the use of forensic sciences. According to the National Registry of Exonerations, 23.9% of the first 2,175 cases ($n = 521$ as of February 2018) included “false or misleading forensic evidence” (National Registry of Exonerations n.d.). Many errors come from analysts providing misleading testimony in the court room, along with misconduct in the laboratory (Cole 2005). In response to this issue, the Department of Justice created the National Commission on Forensic Sciences (NCFS) (Department of Justice 2015). Their role is to accredit laboratories and assure that all forensic practices are carried out properly. All federal laboratories were reviewed and given accreditation, and the NCFS is still working with non-federal labs to accredit those working at the state and local level (Department of Justice 2015). Police led interrogations have also faced reforms. According to the National Registry of Exonerations, 12.4% of the first 2,175 ($n = 269$ as of February 2018) cases included a false confession (National Registry of Exonerations n.d.). People often falsely confess due to stress-inducing police tactics (Kassin et al. 2010). Today, 25 states and the District of Columbia have adopted policy requiring certain types of felony cases to have their interrogations recorded with both audio and video (Norris et al. 2017).

While research is abundant on the causes of wrongful convictions and related reforms, research on public opinion on the topic remains scarce. One study used data collected from residents in the state of Michigan to gauge public knowledge of wrongful convictions (Zalman et al. 2012). An important question the study asked regarded whether or not wrongful conviction in the United States was a large enough issue to require major legal reforms (Zalman et al. 2012). Of the 704 respondents, 404 (57.4%) said yes and supported legal changes or reforms,

suggesting that without specific information on the topic, the public has little tolerance for wrongful convictions.

Of the other existing studies, most revolve around innocence and public opinion on capital punishment (Baumgartner et al. 2008; Bobo and Johnson 2004; Lambert, et al. 2008; Peffley and Hurwitz 2007). Baumgartner and colleagues (2008) arguably created the most important work on the topic, designing their study around the use of aggregate data suggesting that the rise of the “innocence frame” has driven the reduction in support for the death penalty. At the individual level, Bobo and Johnson (2004) conducted a study recording how people view political candidates who support or oppose capital punishment after being presented wrongful conviction data, finding the information had no impact on respondents. Peffley and Hurwitz (2007) found that race was a large factor in public opinion surrounding the death penalty, finding that black respondents were more likely to be swayed in their opinions on the death penalty when presented wrongful conviction information than white respondents.

This leaves much to be discovered surrounding wrongful convictions and public opinion. If wrongful conviction information can lower public support for capital punishment (Lambert et al. 2008), what other issues may be affected?

In two recent studies done by Ricciardelli and colleagues (2009) and Clow and colleagues (2012), it was found that information on wrongful convictions does create a feeling of empathy in respondents. Not only did respondents support monetary compensation for exonerees, they also claimed to have lost faith in the criminal justice system. By demanding government compensation, the respondents acknowledge that the wrongful conviction is due to inept investigation practices by criminal justice officials.

This research suggests that there are other issues which wrongful conviction information may impact public opinion. Given how police practices may lead to wrongful convictions, it is worth asking: could increasing awareness on wrongful convictions possibly lead the public to question police practices? Police investigation is the first step that may lead to a wrongful conviction. Therefore, wrongful conviction information may create a feeling of unease in the public regarding many criminal justice officials, specifically impacting public trust in police.

Trust in Police

Having a positive public view of police and the legitimacy of law enforcement is essential to having a citizen base that is compliant. Policing often entails getting people to comply with orders, and requires officers to get individuals to do things that they normally would not do independently (Mastrofski, Snipes, and Supina 1996). To trust police is to view them as legitimate figures of authority; the amount of compliance police receive from a population may be a strong indicator of the level to which the public trusts police (Mastrofski, Snipes, and Supina 1996). Many factors contribute to the public perception of police. Various studies outline how diversity in the United States plays a major role in police perception; things such as race, socioeconomic status, and community factors strongly influence trust in law enforcement (MacDonald and Stokes 2006; Schuman et al. 1997; Weitzer and Tuch 1999).

Of the factors that divide opinion on trust in police, race is one of the most researched with an abundance of information available on the topic. In today's political climate, there is an apparent divide between police officers and the African American community. According to Gallup's 2015 "Trust in Institutions" survey series, 54% of Americans have a great deal of confidence in police, but there is a divide in opinion from African American and white Americans. About two-thirds of white respondents claimed to have trust in police while only

one-third of African Americans did. This reflects findings from earlier research; it was found that more than 70% of African Americans thought that there was a racial disparity in policing, whereas less than 40% of white Americans had the same beliefs (Weitzer and Tuch 1999). Race may be the single biggest factor in predicting one's level of trust in police. According to Macdonald and Stokes (2006), after surveying 3,003 United States citizens from various neighborhoods, they found that being African American is the single biggest predictor in having lower trust in police, much more so than one's socioeconomic status or level of civic engagement. In fact, multiple studies suggest that upper and middle class African Americans are more dissatisfied with police than lower income African Americans (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Ostrom and Whitaker 1974; Weitzer and Tuch 1999). Feagin and Sikes (1994) suggest that this is due to middle and upper class African Americans feel that they have struggled for their place in society, and that their treatment from police officers should be less biased.

According to Dunham and Alpert (1988), being a minority does not necessarily mean that one is to be more skeptical of police. Studying five neighborhoods in Miami, Dunham and Alpert recorded that African Americans in both a lower class and middle-upper class neighborhood had unfavorable views of police demeanor and discretion, whereas those interviewed in predominantly Cuban and white neighborhoods had mainly positive views on police. This study suggests that the black population has a unique view on police compared to other minority groups in the United States.

African Americans perceive police as unfair, feeling that they are often victims of excessive use of police force (Flanagan and Vaughn 1996). The phrase "excessive use of force" is broad in definition and can mean many things. If the phrase is interpreted to mean lethal force, one could look to the number of fatal police shootings. The *Washington Post* began

investigating police shootings in 2015 becoming the first organization to record the number of fatal police shootings annually. Of the 987 fatal shootings by police in 2017, African Americans accounted for 23% ($n = 223$) of the victims; of those 223 victims, 20 (8.9%) were unarmed (*Washington Post* n.d.). White Americans accounted for 46% of victims ($n = 457$), 30 (6.6%) of whom were unarmed. While African Americans only make up 23% of the victims, it is important to note that according to the 2016 U.S. census, they only make up 13.3% of the general population whereas whites make up 76.9%.

Another factor associated with perception of police is socioeconomic status. Socioeconomic status and opinion on police varies between races (MacDonald and Stokes 2006; Feagin and Sikes 1994). As mentioned before, as African Americans move up in class, they become more critical of policing practices within their racial group (Feagin and Sikes 1994). For whites in America, it is the opposite. Macdonald and Stokes (2006) found that white participants who made less than \$30,000 per year were much less likely to trust police than those who had more capital.

Other new avenues have emerged to make information on police conduct easily accessible. Social media is one of the newest platforms for citizens to gain access to information on policing practices. With much of the population having social media and quick access to cameras on cellphones, the frequency of videos documenting police engaging in questionable or illegal behavior has become much more prevalent in the news media (Tyler 2017). Social media as a tool allows for people who have not been exposed to police officers' use of force (e.g., those living in low-crime, high-income neighborhoods) to witness some common practices first-hand (Tyler 2017). This recent practice is also beneficial to police (Tyler 2017). Other research has

found that, since the rise of social media, the use of coercion and intimidation are much less common due to the fear of being filmed (Tyler 2017).

Any issue revolving around criminal justice may alter public opinion. Things such as police misconduct or excessive use of force may lower public support for trust in police, but only if the public is made aware of the issue. Police investigation is the first step of many which may lead to wrongful convictions. By presenting individuals with wrongful conviction information, it may create a feeling of unease in the public regarding trust in police. By finding the correct way to frame this information, one can potentially shift public opinion.

Framing Theory

Scholars have employed the use of framing as a tool to measure how and what information can affect an individual's view on a subject, as well as how vulnerable that individual is to having their opinion altered (Druckman 2001). Framing can influence attitudes for a multitude of issues. These include welfare reform (Nelson and Oxley 1999), social security (Winter 2006), and capital punishment (Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston 2008).

Framing can be utilized as an influential tool for public opinion, but it is well known that not all frames are equally as persuasive. Factors that influence a frame's persuasiveness lend to what is known as a frame's strength (Chong and Druckman 2007). A frame gains strength based on several factors, including prior exposure to the message (Chong and Druckman 2010). This creates the idea that when implementing framing theory it is important to be aware of individual factors that may shape responses.

Frame strength should generally increase persuasiveness. An important part of framing is how a frame is catered to its audience. A major gap in framing research exists in measuring what specific properties of frames lend it strength (Busby, Flynn, and Druckman 2016). Two

common frame types many studies rely on are episodic and thematic. Episodic framing uses human interest stories, personal accounts, and case studies to evoke emotional reactions (Busby, Flynn, and Druckman 2016). This type of frame is frequently used by media organizations when presenting stories (Iyengar 1991). Thematic frames use numbers and statistics in order to put political issues into a general context (Iyengar 1991). These two frames are often studied together in an effort to determine when each frame can be more effective in influencing opinion (e.g. Aaroe 2011; Chong and Druckman 2007).

One example of a study that attempts to create distinction between the two frames is Aaroe's (2011) study on frame strength in reference to the episodic or thematic presentation of information regarding immigrant marriage laws in Denmark. Aaroe (2011) presents the episodic information as a narrative about an immigrant woman, who is able to evade an arranged marriage due to Danish law. His thematic frame consisted of patterns found in marriages throughout the country and not simply one individual's sole story. He found that emotional levels play a vital role in framing. Those who reported higher emotional levels when presented the information were more influenced by episodic framing, whereas those who reported low to no emotional response were more influenced by thematic frames. This study suggests that episodic frames can be more influential than thematic ones, if the frame is able to evoke an emotional response from the respondent.

As mentioned previously, a frame is often perceived as strong or weak based on the influence it has on its target population. Chong and Druckman (2007) summarize this idea, describing any weak frame as typically unpersuasive, while strong frames are compelling. In order to consider a frame strong, researchers measure whether or not a frame has changed any specific political attitude. In this study, I examine whether episodic and thematic wrongful

conviction frames reduce people's trust in police. To utilize an episodic frame, I communicate a specific individual's case and all that it entailed. This story conveys how an innocent person came to be investigated, sentenced to death, exonerated, and the following consequences of being incarcerated. This wrongful conviction narrative will remain consistent with the episodic frames commonly used by media organizations (Semetko and Valkenburg 2000).

The thematic frame will include the numbers of total wrongful convictions and known exonerations. By placing a numerical value on the issue, it allows for a broader look at the criminal justice system, allowing for individuals to reference the issue in relation to the current societal context (Busby et al. forthcoming). Based on framing theory, I have developed hypotheses on the strength of episodic versus thematic framing for trust in police. I have developed two separate hypotheses based on the potential effects of the different types of frames.

Thematic Frame:

Consistent with previous research, I expect that placing information in a numerical, thematic frame will have a stronger effect on respondents trust in police as a whole. Thematic frames provide information in broader context, pushing respondents to attribute blame to societal or governmental issues (Iyenger 1991). Referencing wrongful conviction information by sheer numbers will expose respondents to the magnitude of the issue; offering the idea that wrongful convictions stem systemic failures. With trust in police being an institutional topic, this frame should create a shift in opinion. By thematically framing the information, I hypothesize that a thematic frame presenting numbers will decrease trust in police at the individual level.

H1: The presentation of wrongful conviction numbers will erode trust in police.

Episodic Frame:

Using episodic framing to influence public attitudes toward systematic issues may present a weaker frame. An episodic frame can often lead people to identify and empathize with the narrative's character (de Graaf et al. 2011). The frame's narrow focus causes individuals to blame individuals rather than groups or institutions. Given that trust in police is viewed as a large, systemic issue, a frame that focuses on one story of one individual is unlikely to impact respondents. Trust in police is an institutional issue and will most likely be viewed as such. With this information, I hypothesize that a narrative presented on an individual being wrongfully convicted will have no effect on one's trust in police.

H2: The narrative will have no effect on the trust in police.

Research Design

To test my hypotheses I implemented a survey experiment. This study compares the effects of the thematic and episodic framing of wrongful conviction information on public opinion towards trust in police. To test whether presenting innocence information reduces trust in police, I designed a four-condition survey experiment. All respondents were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: no frame (i.e. control group), a narrative frame, a numbers frame, or a combined (narrative and numbers) frame. In doing so, I am able to assess the effects of thematic and episodic frames on trust in police.

Sample, Stimuli, and Measures

This study was implemented in March 2017 by *Survey Sampling International* (SSI). SSI gathers an opt-in group of respondents while using a sample created to mirror the diversity in the adult population of the United States. The sample included 1,830 respondents.

In a manner consistent with thematic framing (Aaroe 2011), I use numerical values in my thematic presentation of wrongful conviction information. Along with the values, I included a

statement regarding how wrongful convictions can relate to public safety concerns. The thematic treatment message stated:

According to the National Registry of Exonerations, more than 2,000 people were found to be innocent after being convicted for a crime they did not commit since 1989. More than 155 of these people were sentenced to death for crimes they did not commit, but were later found to be innocent. Additionally, there may be as many as 100,000 innocent people currently in prisons across the United States for crimes they did not commit.

An official from the National Institute of Justice said, “These numbers show that not only have thousands of people been wrongfully jailed, but that just as many criminals remain free, roaming the streets. Every year a person spent wrongfully incarcerated also represents a year in which the actual perpetrator remained at-large.”

The next treatment group was used to test the effect of an episodic frame. Several goals were established with using an episodic frame. The wrongful conviction narrative needed to be brief and realistic, but strong enough to “transport” readers into the narrative and evoke sympathy. Due to criminal justice opinions being strongly influenced by race, it was important to use a racially ambiguous name. It was also important for the readers to be convinced that the person was fully innocent. To do this, it is stated that the exoneration was made based off of DNA evidence and that the real killer was ultimately identified. The narrative was based loosely the true story of Kirk Bloodsworth. The narrative stated:

In 2002, Michael Williams, a U. S. military veteran, was arrested for murder. The only evidence against Williams included two child witnesses who claimed to have seen him near the crime scene, a pair of shoes that could have fit him, and marks on the victim’s body that might have come from those shoes. Yet, Williams had several alibi witnesses who said that he was with other people on the day of the crime. Williams was convicted and sentenced to death. He spent almost nine years in prison, during which he was assaulted numerous times. While incarcerated he became estranged from his wife and two children.

Michael Williams came within 12 hours of his execution. He ordered his last meal, was measured for his burial suit, and his parents made arrangements for his funeral. Shortly before the scheduled execution, DNA testing proved that Williams was not the offender and he was released from prison. After his release, Williams encountered harassment from his community, had difficulty finding employment, struggled financially, and was homeless for a period of time. He continues to struggle to adjust to life after his wrongful conviction.

The final treatment group received a combination of both the narrative and the numbers in a single message.

To test my hypotheses I asked “How much trust do you have in police officers to treat people fairly?” The answers ranged from “None at all” to “A great deal.” Like other related work, I asked respondents to identify race, ideology, education, age, gender, exposure to the podcast *Serial* or documentary *Making a Murderer*, and level of income.

Results

The results of the study are shown in Table 1. All of the results are based on ordinary least squares regression (OLS).

Table 1: Trust in Police Results

	(1) Trust Police	(2) Trust Police
Numbers	-0.125* (0.0725)	-0.135** (0.0671)
Narrative	-0.0915 (0.0726)	-0.0623 (0.0672)
Numbers + Narrative	-0.141* (0.0727)	-0.106 (0.0671)
Race: Black		-0.640*** (0.0789)
Race: Other		-0.250*** (0.0884)
Ideology		0.198*** (0.0141)
Education		0.0641*** (0.0183)
Age		0.0677*** (0.0208)

Female		-0.00645 (0.0486)
Income		0.0107 (0.00796)
Documentary/Podcast		-0.0679 (0.0499)
Constant	3.326*** (0.0511)	2.067*** (0.132)
Observations	1,830	1,742
R-squared	0.002	0.197

Standard errors in parentheses
Two-tailed tests of significance: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

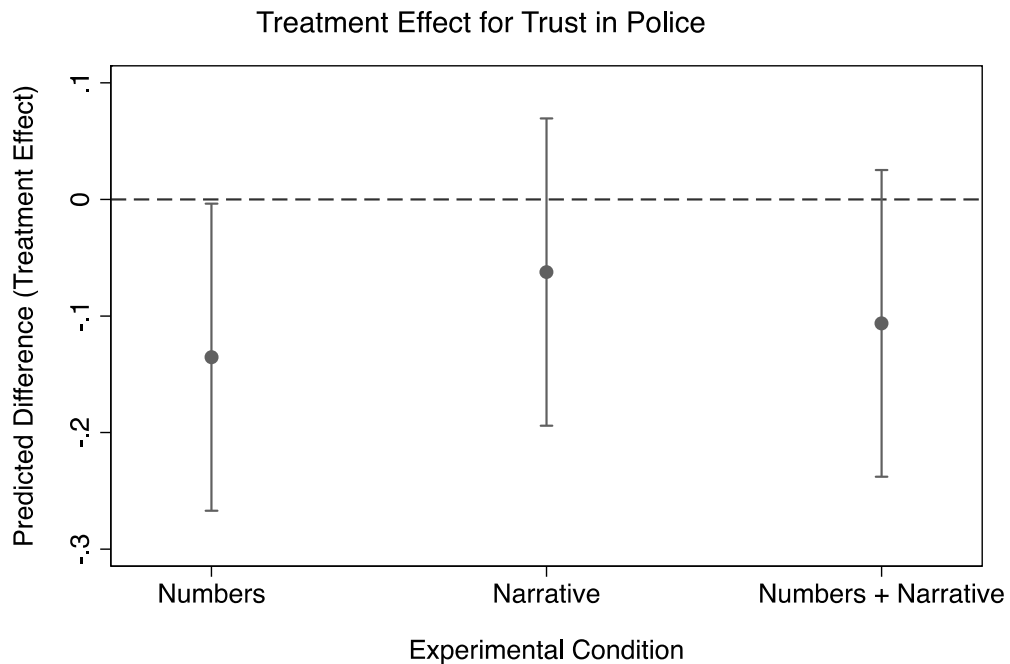
Based on previous research, I controlled for known predictors of trust in police. Race is a strong predictor in one's level of trust in police. As expected, relative to whites, respondents who were racial minorities are significantly less trusting of police. It is important to note that consistent with previous studies (Alpert and Dunham 1988), black citizens distrust police at a proportionally higher level than other minority groups. This difference is presented in the second column of Table 1. Other than race, other controlled predictors of level in trust in police were not as prominent, but still were consistent with previous research. The next strongest predictor was political ideology. Those who reported as being liberal were less trusting in police than those who have reported being conservative. Continuing, the results show that as education increases, so does trust in police. The next predictor is income level. For this experiment, the shift based on income level was not statistically significant and shows no effect. The results also suggest that the older respondent have significantly higher levels of trust in police than younger respondents. Females demonstrated that they were slightly less trusting in police than males, but this effect is not significant. The last control variable is perhaps the most interesting

due to there being nearly no research on the topic. Respondents who had reported watching *Making a Murderer* or listening to the podcast *Serial* reported slightly lower levels of trust in police. However, the effect of these documentaries is not statistically significant, and the shift in opinion is so miniscule that it suggests the two shows had no effect. These findings suggest that there is nothing particularly unusual about this sample, making them ideal to assess the effects of my study.

Thematic Frame

Beginning with discussion on the use of thematic framing effects for trust in police attitudes, I hypothesized that a thematic frame of wrongful conviction information would reduce citizens' trust in police (H1). The results for this are provided in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Figure 1: Treatment Effect for Trust in Police



Note: This figure shows the change in predicted levels of trust in police holding other variables constant. Negative values indicate a reduction in trust in police. The vertical line represents 95% confidence intervals. The figure is based on the regression results of table 1.

Controlling for individual characteristics, information on wrongful convictions presented in a thematic frame has a significant impact on attitudes toward trust in police. As hypothesized, the thematic frame significantly eroded trust in police compared to the control group ($p < 0.05$). While it did significantly shift opinion, it only shifted 0.13 on a 5 scale. Thus, the thematic frame may influence opinion on individuals' attitudes toward systematic issues, but this wrongful conviction data may not be the best source of information to influence trust in police.

Episodic Frame

In regard to the episodic frame, I hypothesized that it would have no effect on public opinion on trust in police (H2). The results are provided in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Unlike the thematic frame, the results from those given the narrative were not statistically or substantively significant. Episodic frames are often used to transport readers into the story. The narrative given to respondents gave an account about one individual who was wronged by poor circumstances which led the system to fail him. In his story there is nothing to suggest the police are to blame, therefore, as expected, respondents did not blame policing institutions as a whole.

Thematic and Episodic Frame

Combining both episodic and thematic framing of innocence information led to results that appeared to closely mirror the effects of the thematic frame alone, but these results were not statistically significant. Due to the narrative's minimal effects, I theorize that any changes that occurred in opinion were due to the numerical data presented.

Conclusion

My analysis reveals that the way wrongful conviction information is framed impacts the level of effect that the information has on public trust in police. Using this survey experiment, I was able to evaluate the differing effects of thematic and episodic frames. Both frames behaved as predicted. The episodic frame did little to suggest that wrongful conviction is a widespread issue, rooted in poor systematic practices. As such, the episodic frame did not reduce trust in police. The results suggest that the thematic frame can shift trust in police, but the effects are minimal. The results for the thematic frame were statistically significant, but substantively small. The shift in opinion created was very minimal. However, although the shift was small, the thematic frame's effects were greater than those of the episodic frame. This leads me to conclude that thematic framing may be the best option for eroding trust in police. In particular, a thematic frame containing more information relevant to police practices may potentially create larger shifts in opinion. .

While no major shift in opinion occurred, this study explored the timely topic of wrongful convictions. The rhetoric behind the innocence movement has made wrongful convictions one of the most critical systematic issues in the American justice system. In the past few decades, research on the topic has become increasingly abundant. Absent from this research are studies on the effects information on the topic has on public opinion. The public now has access to an abundant amount of numerical information and narratives on wrongful convictions through the media. Documentaries, podcasts, and biographical stories of those who have been wrongfully convicted and exonerated have increased in popularity, creating a much larger societal awareness of the issue. In recent years, research has linked wrongful convictions to decline in support for the death penalty (Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston 2008), but beyond that, little has been tested on the topic's effects on other issues.

Public opinion on wrongful convictions will have impact on public policy. The criminal justice system is often centered in public discourse regarding civil rights, mass incarceration, race, poverty, and equality (Alexander 2012). In America, policy can be affected by public opinion. Norris and colleagues (2017) have discussed how in the past few decades, with the rise of the innocence movement, innocence related reforms have been passed by agencies at all levels of government, including at least 40 state governments. Public responses to this information are pivotal to practical policy change.

The framing effects shown in this study may not have been impressive in regards to altering public opinion, but they were impressive in providing a foundation in future studies on this topic to come. It is important to note this study relied on vague wrongful conviction statistics and a minimal narrative about an exoneree, hoping that that alone would alter opinion on trust in police. These frames could have been easily strengthened. Information directly related to wrongful convictions and trust in police is available and could be used in future studies (i.e. According to the National Registry of Exonerations, 52% of all known wrongful convictions involved official misconduct). By adding information relevant to police practices, the frames could have had a more prominent effect. With this, I am suggesting that my study is a prelude to more extensive research to come. By providing specific frames geared toward specific criminal justice issues, wrongful conviction information could be used as a tool to create shifts in public opinion.

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