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## Narrative Study of the New England Innocence Project

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# NARRATIVE STUDY OF THE NEW ENGLAND INNOCENCE PROJECT

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## Abstract

There is a large body of research related to uncovering the causes behind wrongful convictions (Cerrano, Gould, Hail-Jares, & Leo, 2014; Pinard, 2010). There is a scant amount of research focused on the people and agencies helping to overturn wrongful convictions. This narrative study explored the experiences of staff at a small New England non profit agency that assists wrongfully convicted individuals in proving their innocence. This study explores the stories through interviews with interns, lawyers and other staff at the agency to understand their work with policy and with individuals in the criminal justice system. The purpose of this qualitative narrative is to uncover the lived experiences of the people doing the work behind overturning wrongful convictions.

## Introduction

Co-researchers interviewed six staff from the New England Innocence Project. The staff was comprised of an intake intern, a legal intern, a communications person, a staff attorney, a case director, and an executive director. These six individuals come from a variety of backgrounds but have come together to work on an important social issue, which is wrongful convictions.

## Question

What are the lived experiences of people working on wrongful conviction cases?

## Methods

- Connect with New England Innocence Project to gain permission to interview the staff on their lived experiences
- Interview the six staff on site.
- Transcribe each interview.
- Analyze the interviews using narrative method through the lenses of conflict theory and systems theory.
- In using a qualitative research method gleaning out common themes throughout the research process allowed for the researchers to find common themes that emerged through each individual interviewee.
- There was considerable attention to macro contexts as the researchers make connections between life experiences shared in personal narratives and larger social structures involving social privileges and hidden injustices.

“I know it sounds crazy, but I think some people in the system have a very hard time stomaching the idea that the system is that flawed.”

-Quote from the Staff Attorney



“NEIP congratulates John Grega in a victory that has been nearly 20 years in the making; the state of Vermont has dismissed the charges against Mr. Grega in the case of his wife’s murder, a crime he has always maintained that he did not commit. On August 22, 2012, Mr. Grega was released from prison when DNA evidence excluded him as the source of the major contributor of DNA in the most relevant sample. Now, almost exactly a year later, Mr. Grega can breathe a sigh of relief as the state has dismissed the charges against him. Mr. Grega was convicted in 1995 of killing his wife while they were on a family vacation with their 2 ½ year old son in West Dover, Vermont. Mr. Grega had no criminal record and no history of violence or mental illness, but police soon focused on him as a suspect in his wife’s murder. There were no witnesses to the crime and no physical evidence introduced at trial; Mr. Grega was convicted on circumstantial evidence alone and was the first person in Vermont’s history to receive a sentence of life in prison without the possibility of parole. He now also has the distinction of being the first person in Vermont’s history to be released based on DNA evidence obtained under Vermont’s DNA access law. Read the Notice of Dismissal here. The state is retesting existing evidence that had previously excluded John Grega, and hopes to enter the results into CODIS, the national DNA database, in an effort to find Christine Grega’s true killer. It’s important to note that while this is a huge victory for John Grega, his family, and supporters, the state has dismissed the case without prejudice, leaving the possibility of future litigation against Mr. Grega. It is an unfortunate reminder that in wrongful convictions, DNA exclusions and dismissals are rarely the end of the road. Thanks to the efforts of Goodwin Procter LLP and local Vermont counsel, Ian Carleton, Mr. Grega is one step closer to enjoying his hard fought for freedom. Goodwin Procter took on the case as a member of NEIP’s pro bono network, and we are proud to call the firm one of our biggest continual supporters.”

Retrieved from: <http://www.newenglandinnocence.org/innocence-blog/2016/5/18/one-year-after-release-case-against-john-grega-dismissed>

“I mean you can get dragged down. You know it’s a parade of human misery. You could, if you let it, get to you. I think partly the adrenaline from fighting helps me. I like a good fight.”

Quote from Case Director

## Results

The results from this narrative analysis will generate significant findings. Conflict theory and systems theory serves as a resource for interpretation for these spoken narratives. The results are all strongly representative of the thematic approach they were drawn from the interviews that examine primarily what content a narrative communicates rather than precisely how a narrative is structured to make points to a desired audience.

## Discussion

The current literature focuses heavily on uncovering the causes of wrongful convictions. There was a lack of literature involving the experiences of people doing the work to resolve these cases. At the intersection was the top 5 causes of wrongful convictions, as the top 5 we discovered in the literature were also explained by the interviewees.

- Through the interviews, it was clear that there is a need for structural change in the criminal justice system which could be addressed through foundational policy changes.
- Future work could extend this line of inquiry by examining how individuals stories of resistance how actually generate collective action in social movements.

## Acknowledgements

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## References

Gould, J. B., Carrano, J., Leo, R.A., & Hail-Jares, K. (2014). Predicting Erroneous Convictions. *Iowa Law Review*, 99(2), 471-522.  
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