Example of essay on exoneration paper: the case of ronald cotton

Law, Criminal Justice

Profiling is the recording and analysis of a person's psychological behavioral characteristics in order to assess or predict their capabilities in a certain sphere or to assist in identifying a particular subgroup of people (Merriam Webster Online). This process is done according to a person's age, culture, gender, race, occupation, and others. In criminal justice, police and psychologists develop a criminal's profile by carefully studying the evidence gathered. Criminal investigators say that a criminal exhibits certain characteristics during the crime, and this can be observed through the evidence found in the crime scene (Penven). In the case of mistaken identity involving Ronald Cotton in 1985, profiling led the police to him when the victim, Jennifer Thompson-Cannino, identified her attacker to be African-American and perfectly matches the physical characteristics of Ronald Cotton. Profiling, along with the eyewitness acount of the victims sent Cotton to jail where he stayed for 11 years until his innocence was proven.

Jennifer Thompson was a 22-year old college student at Elon University in Burlington, North Carolina. An achiever, she envisioned herself getting a GPA of 4. 0 and marrying her boyfriend after graduating from college. However, all these changed when on the night of July 29, 1984, an assailant broke into her home and brutally raped her with a knife pointing on her neck. Despite being scared of getting killed, she managed to remain calm and tried to remember as much as she could about her assailant. Luckily, after she was raped, the man went out after taking her money and other belongings. Jennifer went to the police station to report the crime. Unbeknownst to her, another woman in the same neighborhood was also raped just an hour after she was raped. She gave every detail that she could remember to complete

the composite sketch. Through criminal profiling, the police came up with a collection of photos that match the descriptions provided by Jennifer, and Ronald Cotton was one of them. After having some problems with the law involving sexual assault and other petty crimes, Cotton was profiled based on his age and race. Upon learning that he was being suspected of the crime, Cotton submitted himself to the police and he was lined-up in front of Jennifer. He was unaware that Jennifer had already picked his picture, and when he was seen by Jennifer in the lineup, she positively identified him. Police pursued to prove Cotton's guilt, and evidence found in his house further incriminated him of the crime: a flashlight that according to Jennifer resembled the one used by the assailant, and the rubber from Cotton's tennis shoes that was also found at the other crime scene (innocenceprojetc. org). During the trial, Jennifer identified him with 100% certainty that it was Ronald Cotton who assaulted her. Her testimony had Cotton convicted for first degree burglary and first degree sexual assault and was sentenced to prison for life. Cotton was devastated, but Jennifer was relieved. She firmly believed that she was putting the right man behind bars and he would be unable to attack another woman again (Thompson).

Because of an appeal, the North Carolina Supreme Court overturned the 1985 conviction as the other victim another man from the lineup and the trial court did not recognize and allow this evidence to be heard by the jury (innocenceprojetc. org). However, in 1987, Cotton was once again tried because the other victim decided that Cotton was also her assailant. Before the trial, an inmate talked about a new prisoner whose case bore similarities with that of cotton. The new prisoner, Bobby Poole, started bragging about

raping two women and got away with it as another man was accused of it. The way he described the event made Cotton realize that he was describing the same case that got him into prison. However, the superior court judge did not allow for this information to be presented as evidence and in the end, Cotton was convicted of both rapes. He was sentenced to serve for life and fifty-four years.

In 1994, Cotton learned of a new method of forensic investigation. DNA testing was already available, and Cotton saw this as an opportunity to try once again to prove his innocence. Two new lawyers were assigned to represent Cotton and they filed a motion for DNA testing which was granted in 1994. A year after the appeal was made, the Burlington Police Department submitted all the evidence that contained the assailant's semen for DNA testing. Although the samples from the other victim were already too deteriorated, the samples from the other victim were not. The results showed that the samples did not match to Cotton, and at the request of his lawyers, the results were sent to the State Bureau of Investigation's DNA database. There the results were compared to DNA patterns of convicted violent felons in all of North Carolina's prisons, and true enough, it matched Bobby Poole's DNA, the man who previously confessed to the crime (innocenceprojetc. org). On June 30, 1995, Cotton was officially released from prison, and in the same year, the governor of North Carolina pardoned Cotton and made him elegible to receive $5, 000 as compensation for being wrongfully imprisoned for ten years-and-a-half.

The case of Ronald Cotton brought to the attention of the criminal justice the scientific reliability of using eyewitness acounts in trying a case. The National

Academy of Sciences issued a report and recommendation for the improvement of police identification procedures, as well as how the courts should handle eyewitness evidence (Forensic Resources). The report included factors that affect the accuracy of eyewitness identification process, and this includes viewing conditions, duress, elevated emotions, and biases (Forensic Resources). In the case of Jennifer Thompson, it is highly probable that her elevated emotions clouded her judgment and affected her visual perception. Other factors that are also identified to affect the accuracy of eyewitness identification are type of line-up used, selection of fillers, blind administration, and communications with witness before and after identifications (Forensic Resources). These factors are not known to the jury and should be controlled by the justice system.

Innocence Project is a national litigation and national public policy organization (innocence project) which aims to help exonerate people who are wrongfully convicted through DNA testing. They also aim to help reform the criminal justice system in order to prevent future injustices. In the case of Ronald Cotton, several mistakes were committed by the criminal justice system. One of which was when it refused to accept the confession of Bobby Poole about committing crimes of a similar nature with that which had Ronald Cotton imprisoned. It was also a mistake that they did not allow the jury to hear the evidence that the second victim did not pick Cotton from the pictures that were presented to her. According to the prosecution, it was unecessary to do so because for one, one of the victims already identified the assailant through photo identification and police lineup. It was also argued that the flashlight found in Cotton's house resembled the one that

the assailant used, and lastly, the rubber from cotton's tennis shoes matched the ones found in the second crime scene. These errors proved to be highly faulty and it was a shortcoming on the justice system's side to let these happen. As a result, an innocent man was wrongfully convicted.

No amount of money could compensate for the years that Cotton spent in prison as during those years, he lost his youth and the opportunity to build a life. However, Cotton remained positive and is now an active supporter of the Innocence Project. After two years, Ronald Cotton and Jennifer Thompson met, and Jennifer Thompson asked for forgiveness. Miraculously, Cotton forgave her andthe two became friends. Together they traveled to give talks and educate people about the reality of the justice system and the other issues surrounding mistaken identities.

This case gave way to new studies to be made based on the weight given to eyewitness identification. Eyewitnesses can be mistaken in their identification, as proven by the story Picking Cotton. These days, DNA testing proves to be a more credible and valid evidence in cases. According to a report by Innocence Project, over 230 people have been exonerated through DNA testing in the United States, with 75% of those wrongful convictions involving eyewitness misidentification (innocenceproject. org).

Apart from the exoneration of Ronald Cotton, it is also worth recognizing the strength and humility that the victim, Jennifer Thompson exhibited throughout the case. With the strong resolve to put the assailant behind bars, she did waht she could do given the situation and stood by her belief and conviction. There was no sense of doubt in her testimonies about Ronald Cotton being her assailant, and she even idnetified him in court twice despite

seeing Bobby Poole. She may have put an innocent man to prison, but when she learned of her error, she did not hesitate to ask for forgiveness. Moreover, she also used the same strong will and stubborness to fight errors in the criminal justice system and continue to educate people about the dangers of providing wrong eyewitness accounts. Today, Jennifer Thompson is an advocate for criminal justice reform.

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