

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In The Supreme Court

APPEAL FROM BARNWELL COUNTY
Court of General Sessions

Doyet A. Early, III, Circuit Court Judge

Opinion No. 2017-UP-065 (S.C. Ct. App. filed February 1, 2017)
Appellate Case No. 2017-000990

RECEIVED
APR 24 2017
S.C. SUPREME COURT

The State, Respondent/Petitioner,

v.

Stephon Robinson, Petitioner/Respondent.

**RESPONDENT/ PETITIONER'S PETITION
FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI**

ALAN WILSON
Attorney General

J. BENJAMIN APLIN
Senior Assistant Deputy Attorney General

J. STROM THURMOND, JR.
Solicitor, Second Judicial Circuit

ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT/PETITIONER

Other Counsel of Record:

Laura R. Baer, Appellate Defender
South Carolina Commission on Indigent Defense
Post Office Box 11589
Columbia, SC 29211-1589
(803) 734-1343
Attorney for Respondent

INDEX

	Page
Question Presented.....	1
Statement of the Case.....	2
Statement of Facts.....	3
Certiorari.....	11
Argument:	
Although the Court of Appeals properly affirmed Appellant’s convictions after finding any error in admitting his prior convictions for impeachment was harmless, it nevertheless erred in first concluding that “the circuit court erred in applying two of the five <u>Colf</u> factors - the impeachment value of the prior convictions and the centrality of the credibility issue,” because the trial court properly admitted Appellant’s prior convictions after properly applying all five of the <u>Colf</u> factors in weighing the probative value against the prejudicial effect of admission.	12
Conclusion	23

QUESTION PRESENTED

Although the Court of Appeals properly affirmed Appellant's convictions after finding any error in admitting his prior convictions for impeachment was harmless, did it err in first concluding that "the circuit court erred in applying two of the five Colf factors - the impeachment value of the prior convictions and the centrality of the credibility issue," where the trial court properly admitted Appellant's prior convictions after properly applying all five of the Colf factors in weighing the probative value against the prejudicial effect of admission?

STATEMENT OF THE CASE

Petitioner/Respondent (Robinson) was indicted at the October 2011 term of the grand jury for Barnwell County for first-degree burglary (2011-GS-06-245) and possession of a weapon during a violent crime (PWDVC) (2011-GS-06-246). He was represented by Glen Walters, Esquire. On November 1-2, 2011, Robinson proceeded to trial by jury pursuant to which he was found guilty as charged. He was sentenced by the Honorable Doyet A. Early, III, to twenty (20) years' imprisonment for first-degree burglary and five (5) years' concurrent imprisonment for PWDVC. Robinson timely filed a notice of intent to appeal his conviction and sentence and subsequently submitted a brief in support of his appeal to the Court of Appeals. He was represented in the appeal by Appellate Defenders Dayne C. Phillips and Carmen V. Ganjehsani of the South Carolina Office of Indigent Defense. Respondent/Petitioner (the State) filed a brief in response and in an unpublished opinion dated February 19, 2014, the Court of Appeals remanded Robinson's case to the trial court to "hold a hearing and carefully balance the probative value of his prior convictions for impeachment purposes against their prejudicial effect." State v. Robinson, Op. No. 2014-UP-068 (S.C. Ct. App. filed Feb. 19, 2014). The Court of Appeals held: "If the trial court finds the prejudicial impact of the prior convictions outweighs their impeachment value, the trial court shall order a new trial. Otherwise, subject to further appellate review, the convictions and sentences are affirmed."

On June 9, 2014, a remand hearing was convened in Aiken County¹ before Judge Early. Robinson was present and was represented by Ms. Ganjehsani, and the State was represented by Assistant Solicitor David W. Miller of the Second Circuit Solicitor's Office. (R.p.202). After hearing arguments from both parties, the trial court took the matter under advisement. (R.p.221).

¹ For purposes of the hearing, the parties agreed to waive venue and have the matter heard in Aiken County. (R.p.224).

In an order dated November 10, 2014, the trial court found “that the probative value of the introduction of [Robinson’s] prior record outweighed any prejudice to him under Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE” and therefore concluded he was not entitled to a new trial. (R.p.231).

Robinson timely filed a notice of intent to appeal his convictions and sentences and the parties submitted briefs addressing the issue raised by Robinson on appeal. On February 1, 2017, the Court of Appeals issued an unpublished opinion finding the trial court erred, but affirming Robinson’s convictions on harmless error grounds. State v. Robinson, Op. No. 2017-UP-065 (S.C. Ct. App. filed February 1, 2017). (J.App.p.1-p.3). On February 13, 2017, Robinson submitted a Petition for Rehearing asking the Court of Appeals to withdraw its opinion and reverse his conviction. (J.App.p.4-p.20). On February 16, 2016, the State filed a cross-petition for rehearing asking the Court of Appeals to rehear the matter and issue an order affirming Robinson’s convictions and sentence on grounds that there was no error. (J.App.p.21-p.41). In an order filed March 23, 2017, the Court of Appeals denied both petitions for rehearing. (J.App.p.43).

Statement of Facts

Trial: November 1-2, 2011

On Sunday, February 20, 2011, Eddie Williams was home lying in bed, getting ready to watch a NASCAR race on television. He thought he heard a car outside so he got up and looked out. Williams saw a familiar white car and recognized Robinson as he got out and knocked on the door. Williams explained that Robinson had been to his house before to play video games with Williams’ nephew and at least one or two times had been in the same white car when he visited. Williams said he knows Robinson’s parents and his grandmother and had known Robinson when Robinson was a kid. Williams did not answer the door because he knew these

were friends of his nephew and were probably not there to see him. Upon getting no response at the door, Robinson returned to the car and drove away. After the car left, Williams fixed a drink and a sandwich and returned to his bedroom to watch the race. About ten minutes later, Williams again heard a car but did not get up to look outside. Suddenly he heard his front door being kicked in. (R.p.98, line 5-p.103, line 11).

Williams grabbed a .357 revolver from his nightstand and got up to confront the intruder, but he slipped and fell briefly as he was making his way down the hall. When Williams looked up, he was face-to-face with Robinson and started to shoot because he was scared. As Robinson turned to run, Williams saw a gun in Robinson's hand and saw Robinson fire a shot into the ceiling. Williams then saw Robinson's brother, Reginald Felder, and a third man who had also entered the house as the three intruders turned and ran outside. Williams grabbed a shotgun and followed the three men out to his front porch to make sure they were not going to come back. He fired the shotgun into the air as the car drove away and then called the police. (R.p.103, line 12-p.107, line 5). Williams was able to positively identify Robinson and Felder as two of the three intruders in two separate photo line-ups prepared by the police. (R.p.107, line 6-p.109, line 22). Williams subsequently made an in-court identification of Robinson as the man who entered his home on February 20, 2011, and fired a shot. (R.p.109, line 23-p.110, line 9). He testified there was no doubt that Robinson is the man who came into his house that day. (R.p.121, line 24-p.122, line 1).

Shelly Leanna Gunnels testified she had an on-and-off relationship with Robinson for almost seven years. She said that during their relationship Robinson sometimes used her car, and he was allowed to use it whenever he wanted. Gunnels identified her car as the one in a photo taken by Investigator Jeff Croft. (State's Exhibit #11). She said Robinson borrowed her car on

February 19, 2011, and returned it the next afternoon, on February 20, 2011. (R.p.94, line 7-p.97, line 7).

After the State rested, the trial court questioned Robinson in regard to his right to testify. The solicitor told the court that Robinson had a prior record, including convictions for “strong armed robbery”² and burglary. The trial court advised Robinson as follows:

You’ve gotten convictions in the past for burglary and strong armed robbery. If I determine that these prior crimes can be testified or introduced to attack your credibility or believability, if I decide that the probative value outweighs the prejudicial effect of it, I will tell the jury if I do allow that in that they can only consider those as dealing with your credibility and it can’t be used in determining whether or not you’re guilty in this case.

So if you testify, perhaps those prior record [sic] can come in and you will be subjected to cross-examination.

(R.p.124, line 16-p.125, line 7) (emphasis added). The trial court went on to tell Robinson:

“You understand that if you do testify, that you will be subjected to cross-examination and perhaps the armed robbery coming in as part of a prior record for impeachment purposes, in order to attack your credibility? You understand that?” Robinson replied: “Yes, sir.” Robinson subsequently decided he would take the stand and testify. (R.p.125, line 24-p.126, line 25).

The solicitor told the trial court he specifically intended to use four convictions to impeach Robinson: a 2009 second-degree burglary, a 2009 attempted armed robbery, and two 2007 Georgia convictions for breaking into an automobile. Robinson objected to all four arguing, “I believe the prejudicial value of allowing that outweighs the probative value.”

Specifically in regard to the prior burglary conviction he added: “[U]nder the circumstances, he’s

² Common law or “strong-arm” robbery was codified as “common law robbery” in Section 16-11-325 of the South Carolina Code with an effective date of January 1, 1994. This offense is sometimes referred to as “strong armed robbery” despite the fact that the absence of being “armed” is what typically distinguishes it from “armed robbery.” See e.g., *State v. Rosemond*, 356 S.C. 426, 589 S.E.2d 757 (2003). It appears the parties and the trial judge refer to Robinson’s prior conviction as one for “strong armed robbery”; however, there is no dispute that Robinson was in fact convicted of “strong-arm” or common law robbery in 2009. (See Brief of Appellant).

currently charged with a burglary offense and the jurors may conclude that once a burglar, always a burglar.” (R.p.127, line 7-p.128, line 14). The solicitor noted that the court would be giving a limiting instruction as to the impeachment use of the prior convictions, and offered to refer to the prior burglary conviction merely as a felony conviction that carried more than a year. (R.p.128, line 16-p.129, line 5). Ultimately, the trial court ruled:

I find that they come within the statute and I will - - in order to preclude any prejudicial value, I will make you refer to the burglary as you just stated, a felony, which carries a penalty in excess of one year and you will be allowed to use the others for impeachment purposes.

(R.p.129, lines 6-11) (emphasis added).

Robinson then testified in his own defense. He claimed he was home the day of the burglary and only left once to return the car he had borrowed from Gunnels. Robinson admitted he had been to Williams’ house many times in the past but denied having anything to do with kicking in the door, brandishing a weapon, or attempting to take anything from the home.

(R.p.130, line 12-p.132, line 5). On cross-examination, the solicitor challenged Robinson’s claims that he was not involved in the burglary. He also sought to impeach Robinson with his prior record as follows:

Q: Are you the same Stephon Robinson that was convicted of strong armed robbery in 2009?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: And you’re the same Stephon Robinson that had another felony conviction in 2009 that carried more than a year, aren’t you?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: And you’re the same Stephon Robinson that in 2007 had two convictions for breaking and entering automobiles with the intent to commit a felony or theft?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: But you want this jury to believe that you don't know anything about this?

A: Yes, sir, because for one, I plead guilty to all of my charges and take my responsibility because I know I was guilty of those charges. And two, that was back in my past when I did stupid things to get a little money to do things because I didn't have. But my parents recently passed away and we got insurance money and all kind of money back off that and I have no reason to kick in this man's door. Nothing.

Q: Let me ask you this, in 2007, was your brother with you whenever you broke into the cars?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Did he plead guilty to his charges?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: And in 2009, with the strong armed robbery, was your brother with you then?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: Who else was with you?

A: No one.

Q: You and your brother?

A: Yes, sir.

Q: And that other felony charge from 2009, was your brother with you then?

A: No, sir.

Q: He wasn't?

A: No, sir. You talking about the burglary, right?

Q: The charge that you pled guilty to in 2009, the felony charge that carried more than a year.

A: Yes, sir, yes, sir.

Q: Was your brother with you on that?

A: No, sir.

Q: Okay. So in three out of the four times when you committed a crime, your brother was with you?

A: Yes, sir.

(R.p.136, line 22-p.138, line 17). Robinson did not make any objections during the solicitor's cross-examination.

Robison also called his cousin, Jamal Wallace, and his brother, Felder, to testify on his behalf. On cross-examination, Felder acknowledged a 2007 Georgia conviction for breaking into motor vehicles but claimed he did not actually do it. He testified Robinson was doing community service at the time of the Georgia crimes and also did not actually break into any motor vehicles. Felder, however, confirmed a 2009 conviction for strong-arm robbery and said Robinson was with him when the robbery happened. (R.p.146, line 11-p.149, line 7). Robinson did not object during the solicitor's cross-examination of Felder.

During his closing argument, the solicitor commented in part: "Credibility. It all comes down to credibility," and proceeded to address the credibility of each defense witness in order. Specifically, the Solicitor said:

Now, let's talk about the defendant. He got on the stand. He admits to having the vehicle. Just a coincidence though that he has a vehicle, the same vehicle that's named by Mr. Williams. Just a coincidence that he's with his brother, Reginald Felder, and his cousin Jamal Wallace. What motive do they have to lie? Every motive. Jamal Wallace takes the stand. Obviously, he wasn't there because if he's going to tell you the truth, he'd be facing charges as well. And then Mr. Felder gets up here, his brother. He admits, maybe the only thing he told the truth on, I don't know, about the crimes he committed in the past. I got some mixed testimony. He went back and forth on what he did do and what he didn't do. He was convicted of crimes that he says he was wrongfully convicted of. He's facing these same charges. Obviously, he has motivation to lie.

(R.p.173, line 16-p.174, line 6) (emphasis added).

The trial judge then charged the jury on the law, including standard charges on the presumption of innocence, the State's burden of proof, reasonable doubt, the roles of the judge and jury, the duty to assess the credibility of witnesses, and the crimes and the elements of those crimes. The judge gave the following charge on prior convictions:

You also heard in this case evidence that the defendant had been, in the past, convicted of crimes other than the one for which he is now on trial. This evidence may be considered by you if you conclude it's true only in deciding whether the defendant's testimony is believable or credible and for no other purpose. You must not consider the defendant's prior record as any evidence of the defendant's guilt of the charge we are trying here today.

(R.p.180, lines 17-24). The jury found Robinson guilty of both charges. After hearing from Robinson in mitigation, the trial court sentenced him to twenty (20) years' imprisonment for first-degree burglary and five (5) years' concurrent imprisonment for PWDVC.

Hearing on Remand: June 9, 2014

The trial court convened a remand hearing on June 9, 2014. It did not involve the presentation of testimony or other evidence and instead was limited to the trial judge hearing arguments from the parties regarding the admissibility of Robinson's prior convictions for impeachment pursuant to Rule 609(a), SCRE. First, Robinson addressed the five factors set forth in Colf and argued those factors went against admission because they showed the probative value of Robinson's prior convictions were outweighed by their prejudicial effect. Relying on Howard,³ Black,⁴ and Bryant,⁵ he contended the prior convictions did not have any impeachment value whatsoever because the crimes are not probative of truthfulness. Robinson then argued admission was inescapably prejudicial because, although not identical, the crimes were very

³ State v. Howard, 396 S.C. 173, 720 S.E.2d 511 (Ct. App. 2011).

⁴ State v. Black, 400 S.C. 10, 732 S.E.2d 880 (2012).

⁵ State v. Bryant, 369 S.C. 511, 633 S.E.2d 152 (2006).

similar where they shared a “common thread” of “theft” or “taking of property.” He noted credibility was very important to the case because there was no physical evidence linking him to the crime and argued that under these circumstances it was particularly prejudicial to admit prior convictions that have nothing to do with credibility. (R.p.207-p.211; p.219-p.221).

In response, the solicitor agreed credibility was important to the case but noted the distinction between the automatic admission of prior convictions as crimes involving dishonesty or false statement under Rule 609(a)(2), and the discretionary admission of all other prior convictions under Rule 609(a)(1). He argued the cases relied upon by Robinson dealt with Rule 609(a)(2) and therefore were not directly applicable. The solicitor further noted that Colf dealt with crimes that were more than ten years old which, pursuant to Rule 609(b), SCRE, involved a different standard for admission than at issue here. He then addressed each of the Colf factors, arguing the prior convictions were significantly different from the ones for which Robinson was being tried, and that they were highly probative of veracity. (R.p.211-p.219).

At the conclusion of the hearing Judge Early took the matter under advisement and on November 10, 2014, he issued an eight-page written order making detailed findings in regard to each of the five Colf factors. (R. p.227-p.231). Based on those findings, the trial court concluded: “that the probative value of the introduction of the Defendant’s prior record outweighed any prejudice to him under Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE, in this matter.” The trial court ordered that Robinson’s motion for a new trial be denied. (R. p.231).

Robinson timely filed a notice of intent to appeal and on February 1, 2017, the Court of Appeals issued an unpublished opinion finding the trial court erred in applying two of the five Colf factors and admitting the prior convictions, but still affirming Robinson’s convictions on harmless error grounds. State v. Robinson, Op. No. 2017-UP-065 (S.C. Ct. App. filed February

1, 2017). (J.App.p.1-p.3). Both parties submitted petitions for rehearing and in an order filed March 23, 2017, the Court of Appeals denied the petitions. (J.App.p.43). On April 21, 2017, Robinson submitted a petition for a writ of certiorari. This petition for a writ of certiorari on behalf of the State now follows.

CERTIORARI

The State submits there are special and important reasons for this Court to exercise its discretion to grant certiorari and to review the decision of the Court of Appeals in this matter pursuant to Rule 242(b), SCACR. Although the State ultimately was the prevailing party when the Court of Appeals affirmed on the basis of harmless error, the State nevertheless seeks certiorari on grounds that the Court of Appeals misapprehended or overlooked several crucial points raised by the parties that bear directly upon its conclusion that “the circuit court erred in applying two of the five Colf factors—the impeachment value of the prior convictions and the centrality of the credibility issue.” Specifically, the State submits the Court of Appeals misapprehended the reach of prior precedent from this Court in concluding that: (1) “The circuit court erred in finding Robinson’s prior convictions had impeachment value because our courts have found prior convictions for robbery, burglary, and theft are not probative of truthfulness,” and (2) “Despite correctly recognizing that credibility was central to the case, the circuit court erred in finding this factor weighed in favor of admitting Robinson’s prior convictions because our courts are hesitant to admit evidence of prior convictions when credibility is central to the case.”

First, the State submits that while prior convictions for robbery, burglary, and theft are not crimes of dishonesty under Rule 609(a)(2), SCRE, they still can be probative of truthfulness under Rule 609(a)(1) and, therefore, the trial court properly admitted Robinson’s prior

convictions after conducting a balancing test by weighing probative value against prejudicial effect. Second, the State submits the trial court properly found the fifth Colf factor did weigh in favor of admitting Robinson's prior convictions. For these reasons, the State respectfully asks this Court to grant this petition for a writ of certiorari, affirm the Court of Appeals as modified, and issue an opinion affirming Robinson's convictions on the ground that the trial court properly applied the Colf factors when weighing the probative value against the prejudicial effect of admitting Robinson's prior convictions for impeachment purposes pursuant to Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE.

ARGUMENT

Although the Court of Appeals properly affirmed Appellant's convictions after finding any error in admitting his prior convictions for impeachment was harmless, it nevertheless erred in first concluding that "the circuit court erred in applying two of the five Colf factors - the impeachment value of the prior convictions and the centrality of the credibility issue," because the trial court properly admitted Appellant's prior convictions after properly applying all five of the Colf factors in weighing the probative value against the prejudicial effect of admission.

In his appeal to the Court of Appeals, Robinson argued the trial court erred in finding that the probative value of the admission of his prior convictions for strong arm robbery and breaking and entering into automobiles outweighed the prejudice to him under Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE. The State disagreed and argued the trial court acted well within its broad discretion in admitting the convictions after conducting a careful balancing of the factors set forth in Colf, as directed by this Court. In its unpublished opinion, the Court of Appeals found that in admitting some of Robinson's convictions for impeachment purposes, the trial court erred in applying two of the Colf factors, but ultimately concluded the error was harmless and affirmed Robinson's convictions. The State continues to stand by its argument that the trial court properly admitted

Robinson's prior convictions and therefore, this Court should grant certiorari and should affirm the Court of Appeals as modified by affirming the trial court on grounds that there was no error.

Standard of Review

The admission or exclusion of evidence is left to the sound discretion of the trial court, whose decision will not be reversed on appeal absent an abuse of discretion. State v. Morris, 376 S.C. 189, 205-06, 656 S.E.2d 359, 368 (2008); State v. Howard, 396 S.C. 173, 177, 720 S.E.2d 511, 514 (Ct. App. 2011); State v. Swafford, 375 S.C. 637, 640, 654 S.E.2d 297, 299 (Ct. App. 2007). An abuse of discretion occurs when the ruling is based on an error of law or a factual conclusion that is without evidentiary support. State v. Meggett, 398 S.C. 516, 523, 728 S.E.2d 492, 496 (Ct. App. 2012); Howard at 178, 720 S.E.2d at 514. To warrant reversal based on the admission or exclusion of evidence, the complaining party must prove both the error of the ruling and the resulting prejudice. Vaught v. A.O. Hardee & Sons, Inc., 366 S.C. 475, 480, 623 S.E.2d 373, 375 (2005); Howard at 178, 720 S.E.2d at 514.

Rule 609, SCRE

Pursuant to Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE, prior convictions punishable by more than one year's imprisonment "shall be admitted" for impeaching the credibility of a defendant who testifies if "the court determines that the probative value of admitting this evidence outweighs its prejudicial effect to the accused." This Court has approved the five-factor analysis generally employed by the federal courts for weighing the probative value for impeachment of prior convictions against the prejudice to the accused. Colf at 627, 525 S.E.2d at 248. Prior convictions similar to the one for which the defendant is being tried are not automatically inadmissible; instead, "[t]rial courts must weigh the probative value of the prior convictions against their prejudicial effect to the accused and determine, in their discretion, whether to admit

the evidence.” Green v. State, 338 S.C. 428, 433, 527 S.E.2d 98, 101 (2000). The following factors, along with any other relevant factors, should be considered by the trial court: (1) the impeachment value of the prior crime; (2) the point in time of the conviction and the witness’s subsequent history; (3) the similarity between the past crime and the charged crime; (4) the importance of the defendant’s testimony; and (5) the centrality of the credibility issue. Colf at 627, 525 S.E.2d at 248.

The parties agree that Robinson’s prior convictions for strong-arm robbery and breaking and entering motor vehicles fit squarely within the time limits for admission of impeachment evidence under the Rules of Evidence. Rule 609 provides:

Evidence of a conviction under this rule is not admissible if a period of more than ten years has elapsed since the date of conviction or of the release of the witness from the confinement imposed for that conviction, whichever is the later date, unless the court determines, in the interests of justice, that the probative value of the conviction supported by specific facts and circumstances substantially outweighs its prejudicial effect.

Rule 609(b), SCRE. Robinson’s trial took place on November 1-2, 2011. His prior convictions for strong-arm robbery and for breaking and entering automobiles were in 2009 and 2007, respectively. Because these convictions were within five years of trial, they fall within the ten-year time limit provided by Rule 609(b), SCRE, and therefore were properly admitted to impeach Robinson if the court determined the probative value outweighed the prejudicial effect.

Here, even before the appeal and subsequent remand to the lower court, the trial judge was cognizant of the requirement that he balance the probative value of admitting the prior convictions against the prejudicial effect to Robinson. Indeed, when addressing Robinson’s right to testify and the possible impact of the prior convictions the judge specifically advised Robinson that the court would have to decide whether “the probative value outweighs the prejudicial effect of it.” (R.p.124, line 16-p.125, line 7). The judge then listened to Robinson’s claim that, “I

believe the prejudicial value of allowing that outweighs the probative value,” (R.p.128, lines 4-9) before ruling:

I find that they come within the statute and I will - - in order to preclude any prejudicial value, I will make you refer to the burglary as you just stated, a felony, which carries a penalty in excess of one year and you will be allowed to use the others for impeachment purposes.

(R.p.129, lines 6-11) (emphasis added). Although the trial judge apparently believed he had sufficiently made the determination required by Rule 609(a)(1) for admission of the prior convictions, the Court of Appeals disagreed and remanded for the trial court to conduct a more “meaningful analysis.” That meaningful analysis was then conducted by the trial court in conjunction with the June 9, 2014 remand hearing.

Colf Factors

The record before this Court now includes the trial court’s specific consideration of each of the Colf factors in making its decision under Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE. In regard to the prior convictions still at issue in this appeal, the trial court acted well within its discretion in concluding they were properly admitted after conducting a careful balancing of the factors set forth in Colf.

Impeachment Value of Prior Convictions

Even before remand, the focus of the trial court’s original inquiry involved the first Colf factor, “the impeachment value of the prior crime.” By: (1) finding the crimes “come within the statute,” (2) limiting the State’s reference to the prior burglary conviction, and (3) finding the solicitor would be “allowed to use the others for impeachment purposes” (R.p.129, lines 6-11) (emphasis added), the trial court necessarily concluded that the convictions had impeachment value before they were admitted. That conclusion was more fully vetted on remand and was subsequently explained in the November 10, 2014 Order.

Relying on Howard, Black, Bryant, and State v. Broadnax, 414 S.C. 468, 779 S.E.2d 789 (2015), Robinson argued the remand court’s “impeachment value analysis” is “lacking and unsupported.” He contended “the remand court failed to connect what about his prior convictions were probative of his credibility” and argues the trial judge improperly generalized its analysis in concluding the mere fact of having prior convictions would impact his credibility. Robinson argues that as in Howard, the trial court improperly focused on his character rather than the impeachment value of his prior crimes. (Brief of Appellant, p.13-p.16). The State disagreed and submitted it is precisely the generalized impact on credibility which is contemplated by Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE. Robinson seemed to suggest that because his prior convictions are not crimes of “dishonesty or false statement” under Rule 609(a)(2), they cannot be probative of truthfulness. He argued they should not have been admitted and implies that any balancing test attempted by the trial court would have been futile. The Court of Appeals seems to have adopted Robinson’s reasoning, also relying on Howard, Black, and Bryant to conclude “prior convictions for robbery, burglary, and theft are not probative of truthfulness.” However, the State submits Robinson and the Court of Appeals both misapprehend and misconstrue the reach of the cases upon which they rely.

Here, the trial court found: “Simply put, convictions for breaking into motor vehicles and strong-arm robbery don’t imply that the accused was an armed burglar, as was alleged in this case, but they do imply that the accused is not someone to be trusted – that he might not be credible.” (R, p.228). Thus, unlike in Howard, the trial court’s focus was on Robinson’s credibility rather than his character. Also unlike in Howard, the trial court in this case was comparing prior crimes that were not identical to the crime for which Robinson was on trial, rendering their relative impeachment value higher.

In Black, this Court’s analysis centered on the higher standard in Rule 609(b) pertaining to admission of remote convictions rather than the standard in Rule 609(a)(1) pertaining to convictions within ten years. Black, 400 S.C. at 18, 732 S.E.2d at 885. Although there was an extensive discussion regarding the impeachment value of prior convictions, that discussion must be taken in the context of the statutory presumption against the admission of remote convictions unless the trial court finds the probative value “substantially outweighs” its prejudicial effect. Indeed, in Black this Court noted that even though a conviction for a crime of violence is not particularly probative of the specific trait of truthfulness, its impeachment value is merely “limited.” Id. at 23, 732 S.E.2d at 887. The Court did not hold the impeachment value was nonexistent.

In Broadnax this Court’s holding was focused on Rule 609(a)(2) and how it functioned to preclude the trial court from exercising discretion over the admission of prior crimes of dishonesty or false statement for impeachment. The Court held: “We take this opportunity to overrule Al-Amin, and reaffirm the rule as formulated in Bryant that armed robbery is not a crime of dishonesty or false statement for purposes of impeachment under Rule 609(a)(2).” Broadnax at 476, 779 S.E.2d at 793 (emphasis added). The Court took issue with the alternative view noting that: “Under Al-Amin’s and the concurrence’s rationale, the exception contained in Rule 609(a)(2), which permits the automatic admission of certain prior convictions, swallows the rule contained in Rule 609(a)(1), in which discretion regarding the admission of prior convictions rests with the trial judge.” Id. The Court concluded that “a rule that places discretion with the trial judge is even more desirable” because “we think the trial judge is the best arbiter of whether a very prejudicial piece of evidence should be admitted in this situation – unless of course the prior crime specifically relates to a defendant’s penchant to tell the truth on

the witness stand.” Id. at 478, 779 S.E.2d at 794. The Court emphasized: “Importantly, our holding today does not preclude the admission of prior convictions for armed robbery; rather, it merely enables a trial judge to conduct a balancing test pursuant to Rule 609(a)(1) when the State seeks prior convictions for armed robbery to impeach a criminal defendant’s testimony.” Id.

In Bryant, this Court stated in dicta that “a conviction for robbery, burglary, theft, and drug possession, beyond the basic crime itself, is not probative of truthfulness.” Bryant at 517, 633 S.E.2d at 156. Yet, under the parameter set forth in Black and Broadnax, the conclusion that a particular crime is not one that “involved dishonesty” for purposes of Rule 609(a)(2) analysis, cannot possibly equate to that crime being “not probative of truthfulness” for purposes of Rule 609(a)(1) analysis. Indeed, such an interpretation is belied by the existence of the very rule under interpretation and by the detailed analysis in Broadnax itself. The Rule is titled “Impeachment by Evidence of Conviction of a Crime” and is generally described as being, “for the purpose of attacking the credibility of a witness.” Rule 609(a), SCRE. It provides separate rules for the admissibility of crimes that “involve dishonesty,” Rule 609(a)(2), and all other crimes, Rule 609(a)(1). Thus, the Rule itself stands for the proposition that a criminal conviction, standing alone, has some probative value in regard to credibility. If, as Robinson argues and the Court of Appeals concluded, a crime is only probative of truthfulness if it is a crime that “involves dishonesty,” then when a crime is not a crime of dishonesty, it could NEVER be admitted under Rule 609(a)(1). This is because, if the crime is “not probative of truthfulness,” its probative value would NEVER outweigh its prejudicial effect. Thus, the Court of Appeals’ ruling eviscerates the Rule and only allows impeachment with crimes of dishonesty or false statement. As a result, the judicial limitations on the exception contained in Rule 609(a)(2) would swallow the rule contained in Rule 609(a)(1) in its entirety. This was clearly

not the result contemplated by this Court in Bryant, where, after finding Bryant's prior firearms convictions "do not involve dishonesty," the Court nevertheless stated "their probative value should have been weighed against their prejudicial effect." Bryant at 517, 633 S.E.2d at 156. In Broadnax, this Court further clarified this interpretation. In other words, a balancing test pursuant to Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE, is always proper, even where the prior conviction and the current charge are identical. Here, the crimes were not identical. The trial court conducted a balancing test by weighing probative value against prejudicial effect and properly admitted the prior convictions. The Court of Appeals erred in concluding otherwise. This Court should grant certiorari and affirm the Court of Appeals as modified on grounds there was no error in the trial court's analysis of the impeachment value of the prior crimes.

Importance of Robinson's Testimony and Centrality of Credibility

In a case dependent on the credibility of the victim, the credibility of Appellant, and the State's burden of proof, both the fourth Colf factor, "the importance of the defendant's testimony," and the fifth Colf factor, "the centrality of the credibility issue," were necessarily implicated in the trial court's decision to admit Robinson's prior convictions. These factors were in fact highlighted by the parties in arguments throughout the trial. The trial court clearly weighed both the importance of Robinson's testimony and the centrality of credibility in arriving at the well-supported conclusion that Robinson's prior convictions should be admitted for impeachment purposes.

In determining otherwise, the Court of Appeals relied on Green v. State, 338 S.C. 428, 527 S.E.2d 98 (2000), and concluded: "[T]he circuit court erred in finding this factor weighed in favor of admitting Robinson's prior convictions because our courts are hesitant to admit evidence of prior convictions when credibility is central to the case." However, the State

respectfully submits the Court of Appeals misapprehended the application of the fifth Colf factor based on single line from a post-conviction relief case which must be considered in the specific context in which it was stated. In Green, this Court concluded:

In the instant case, evidence in the record supports the PCR court's ruling that respondent was prejudiced by defense counsel's failure to argue the prejudicial effect of the convictions outweighed their probative value. Respondent was impeached with evidence of two convictions for possession of cocaine that were four and five years old. His credibility was critical, as the jury had to choose between his version of events and that of the SLED agents.

Green at 434, 527 S.E.2d at 101. Yet in making this observation, the Green Court was addressing a novel and very specific set of circumstances. It explained: "We have not previously addressed whether the probative value of a prior conviction, similar to the crime charged, not involving dishonesty or false statement, outweighs its prejudicial effect, where credibility is critical." Green at 432-33, 527 S.E.2d at 100-01. In this context, it is clear this Court was concerned with the similarity between the past crimes and the charged crimes, and the prejudice that could result. Thus, despite the observation that "credibility is critical" the Court concluded Green was prejudiced by counsel's failure to argue that the prejudice of the prior crimes outweighed probative value. This, however, was due to the stark similarity between the past crime and the charged crime, not because credibility was a key issue.

Under the South Carolina Rules of Evidence, the entire point of admitting prior convictions is for impeachment. See Rule 609, SCRE ("Impeachment by Evidence of Other Crime"). Thus, the more "central" credibility is to a particular case, the more probative a piece of impeachment evidence becomes. By comparison, the prejudicial effect of admitting a prior conviction stems from the danger the jury will treat it as improper character or propensity evidence rather than as related to credibility. Indeed, the trial courts typically charge juries on this precise point when prior crimes are admitted. Here, for example, the trial court told the jury:

You also heard in this case evidence that the defendant had been, in the past, convicted of crimes other than the one for which he is now on trial. This evidence may be considered by you if you conclude it's true only in deciding whether the defendant's testimony is believable or credible and for no other purpose. You must not consider the defendant's prior record as any evidence of the defendant's guilt of the charge we are trying here today.

(R.p.180, lines 17-24). In Green, this Court's acknowledgement that "credibility was critical, as the jury had to choose between his version of events and that of the SLED agents" does not suggest, as the Court of Appeals concluded, that "our courts are hesitant to admit evidence of prior convictions when credibility is central to the case." Rather, the State submits it merely stands for the proposition that the prejudice from the similarity between the past crime and the crime charged can be so significant that it may outweigh the countervailing probative impact resulting from credibility being central to the case. Consequently, the trial court properly found the fifth Colf factor weighed in favor of admitting Robinson's prior convictions, and that finding should have been affirmed by the Court of Appeals.

In Robinson's case, the trial court considered the appropriate Colf factors on remand and determined that the probative value of the prior convictions for impeachment purposes outweighed the prejudice to the accused. This is all that was required under Rule 609(a)(1), SCRE. Accordingly, where the trial court considered the appropriate factors and ruled that the prior convictions were more probative than prejudicial, the court did not abuse its discretion, and under the standard of review, its ruling should be upheld.

Conclusion

For all of these reasons, the State submits the Court of Appeals misapprehended or overlooked several crucial points raised by the parties which bear directly upon its conclusion that: "the circuit court erred in applying two of the five Colf factors—the impeachment value of the prior convictions and the centrality of the credibility issue." The State respectfully asks this

Court to grant certiorari and issue an opinion affirming the Court of Appeals as modified by affirming Appellant's convictions on grounds that there was no error because the trial court properly considered all five of the Colf factors in weighing the probative value against the prejudicial effect of admitting Appellant's prior convictions.

CONCLUSION


For all of the foregoing reasons, Respondent/Petitioner respectfully requests that this Court grant its petition for a writ of certiorari and issue an order affirming the decision of the Court of Appeals as modify by affirming Respondent's convictions and sentence on grounds that the trial court properly admitted Robinson's prior convictions for impeachment after properly considering all five Colf factors and concluding the probative value outweighed the prejudicial effect of admitting those prior convictions. If the Court grants the State's petition for a writ of certiorari, Respondent/Petitioner would request permission under the rules to fully brief the issues contained herein.

Respectfully submitted,

ALAN WILSON
Attorney General

J. BENJAMIN APLIN
Senior Assistant Deputy Attorney General

J. STROM THURMOND, JR.
Solicitor, Second Judicial Circuit

BY: 

J. Benjamin Aplin
S.C. Bar No. 8729

Office of the Attorney General
Post Office Box 11549
Columbia, SC 29211-1549
(803) 734-3727

ATTORNEYS FOR RESPONDENT/PETITIONER

Columbia, South Carolina
April 24, 2017

THE STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA
In The Supreme Court

APPEAL FROM BARNWELL COUNTY
Court of General Sessions

Doyet A. Early, III, Circuit Court Judge

Opinion No. 2017-UP-065 (S.C. Ct. App. filed February 1, 2017)
Appellate Case No. 2017-000990

The State, Respondent/Petitioner,

v.

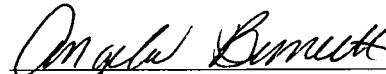
Stephon Robinson, Petitioner/Respondent.

PROOF OF SERVICE

I, Angela Bennett, Executive Legal Assistant, hereby certify that I have served the within *Respondent/Petitioner's Petition for a Writ of Certiorari*, dated April 24, 2017, on Petitioner/Respondent by depositing two copies of the Petition in the United States mail, postage prepaid, addressed to his attorney of record:

Laura R. Baer, Appellate Defender
South Carolina Commission on Indigent Defense
Post Office Box 11589
Columbia, SC 29211-1589

I further certified that all parties required by Rule to be served have been served. This 24th day of April, 2017.



Angela Bennett
Executive Legal Assistant

Office of the Attorney General
Post Office Box 11549
Columbia, SC 29211-1549
(803) 734-3727