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# Exploring Educational Pathways: Reintegration of the Formerly Incarcerated through the Academy

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Exploring Educational Pathways: Reintegration of the Formerly Incarcerated through the  
Academy

By  
Grant Tietjen

A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Sociology

Under the Supervision of Professor L. Janelle Dance and Professor Helen A. Moore

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2013

Exploring Educational Pathways: Reintegration of the Formerly Incarcerated through the  
Academy

Grant Tietjen, Ph.D.  
University of Nebraska, 2013

Advisors: L. Janelle Dance and Helen A. Moore

The overarching research issue that will be addressed in this study is: what are the pathways and experiences formerly incarcerated people face when trying to acquire and/or use higher educational credentials (for example, Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees)? Another important question this study will examine is how ex-convicts successfully access academically focused higher education. There are many compelling reasons why this topic should be studied. While much research has been produced in regards to convicts and education, very little research has examined ex-inmates' access to and utilization of academia. This study defines academia as attainment of graduate degrees or professional credentials with a focus on the expectations of working within academia, either in a teaching or research capacity. A common theme presented by participants in this study was: academia as a door to opportunity that had been left open to the formerly incarcerated. Another driving concept presented in the qualitative responses collected in this study is that access to social capital creates access to academic human capital. While research supports that formerly incarcerated people tend to possess and have access to very little human capital due to structural issues of social inequality, this research presents a societal frame in which this group successfully gains human capital. Focusing on the interaction of social and human capital within this study

provides valuable insight into the scholarship of how such concepts can provide educational benefit the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated.

DEDICATION

To the formerly incarcerated women and men who shared their experiences with me.

Your words and lives matter.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The process of constructing a qualitative dissertation is a long and arduous one. The brainstorming of ideas, committing the ideas to a proposal, accessing of participants, arranging interviews, fascinating discussions with respondents, transcribing of interviews, coding of data, writing up results, discussion, and finalizing chapters takes many months, and in some cases, years. Though out this process, I received immeasurable support, encouragement, relief, and help from a very special and very eclectic group, comprised of friends, professional acquaintances, family, and loved ones.

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and comments, while also attempting to mold me as a conscientious and earnest scholar should stand a testament to your steadfast dedication to your students, especially a student as trying as myself. Helen, the magnitude of your assistance to me over the past six years of graduate school is a debt that I will never be able to repay. I cannot recount the number of times that you took time out of your busy days to patiently answer my research questions and address any number of my graduate student concerns. Your willingness to mentor me and serve as an advisor on both my Master's thesis, and Dissertation, providing valuable feedback and helpful revisions, and thought and insight you provided will serve as a valuable template which I hope to emulate in my own career as a scholar. Hugh, it has been quite a journey! I am honored that my dissertation is the last graduate student committee that you will serve on. I have had the pleasure of working with you on research, taking courses, having stimulating conversation, and having you serve on both my Master's and Dissertation committees, over a time span of nearly 20 years. The immense wisdom you have imparted on me will always be remembered. In addition, your willingness to share your vast repertoire of life experiences through interesting stories will always be fondly remembered by me. Your encouragement, help, and friendship have created a rewarding graduate school experience for me, and I wish you much future happiness. Pete, thank you for providing input on my dissertation and sitting in on my committee. Your feedback and questions in regards to my defense were thought provoking and I hope to implement such ideas into future research.

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Exploring Educational Pathways: Reintegration of the Formerly Incarcerated through the  
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# **Exploring Educational Pathways: Reintegration of the Formerly Incarcerated through the Academy**

## **Chapter 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### *Statement of the problem*

The overarching research issue that will be addressed in this dissertation is: what are the pathways and experiences ex-convicts face when trying to acquire and/or use higher educational credentials (for example, Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees)? There are many compelling reasons why this topic should be studied. While much research has been produced in regard to convicts and education (Austin, 1997; Boudin 1995; Owens 2009, Ubah & Robinson, 2003; Wade, 2007; Welsh, 2002), very little research has examined ex-inmates' access to and utilization of academia. This study defines academia as attainment of graduate or professional degrees (e.g. Juris Doctor) with a focus on the expectation of working within academia, either in a teaching or research capacity. An important question this study will examine is how ex-convicts successfully access academically focused higher education, while constructing a research base from which to examine the experiences of all facets of ex-convict educational experiences, including successes and those who were unsuccessful.

Further, for ex-convicts, there are unique obstacles such as negative convict stereotypes, denial of access to academic or grant funding, or background checks that block entry or make entry into academically focused higher education more difficult to access. Upon re-entry into society, ex-offenders are presented with a myriad of problems. The cost of post-secondary and vocational education is high and ever-increasing, while the great majority of ex-offenders come from low socio-economic

backgrounds and have difficulty affording such expenses. Enabling ex-convicts to successfully access higher education, and then put the education “to good use” through gainful employment is of benefit to the whole of society. Uneducated ex-offenders have higher rates of recidivism compared to those with college diplomas, and, according to Pettit and Western (2004) cost society more to re-incarcerate than to educate. In some cases, ex-convicts have contributed to the growth of scholarship in the field of criminology from an “insider” perspective. This enables them to learn life skills, pay taxes, and provide for their families.

This study will include ex-convicts from the entire socio-economic spectrum, thus the experiences of working class or poor ex-convicts who enter higher education will be juxtaposed against the experiences of those who are more affluent ex-convicts, for example white-collar ex-convicts. Also, certain types of crime (drug related) disallow inmates from obtaining federal financial aid, which is of vital importance to educational access for people of lower SES backgrounds. The paperwork involved in regaining such financial aid (if possible) is complex and daunting. Many employers are less than eager to employ ex-offenders overall, while others will only employ ex-offenders after screening for certain criteria such as the type of crime committed or how long it has been since release from prison (Albright and Denq 1996).

### *Highest Incarceration rates in the world*

The issues of higher education and ex-convict access become clearer when the sheer magnitude of incarceration within the United States is examined. The United States is the world leader in number of people incarcerated, both in actual numbers and in

inmates per capita, with 2.3 million people in either jails and prisons (Bureau of Justice Statistics; 2010). Common explanations for the drastic increase in the prison population by popular media are the “get tough on crime” political platforms, three strikes laws, and the ongoing war on drugs declared by President Nixon in 1971 (Grey 2001). It must be noted that the war on drugs and the prison population explosion in the United States really began to expand during the Reagan administration of the early 1980s. China and Russia rank second and third, with 1.5 million and 870,000 people incarcerated respectively.

The U.S. has four times the world average of inmates on a per capita basis. Estimates place the current U.S. ex-convict population at around 12 million (Uggen, Thompson, and Manza 2000), or about 8% of the U.S. workforce. As a nation, the U.S. has less than five percent of the world’s population, but over twenty three percent of the world’s incarcerated people (Hartney 2006). Every year in the United States, correctional facilities (state and federal prisons) release 600,000 inmates back onto the streets. In 1980, the United States incarcerated 139 inmates per 100,000 people, while in 2009, this figure increased to 502, an increase of over 360% (BJS 2010). Currently, 7.2 million people are under the supervision of the American criminal justice system, including parole and probation (BJS 2010). Thus, within the crowded American political justice climate, more and more ex-convicts are re-entering society, some with a desire to further their education within the academic sphere.

It must be noted that there are glaring racial discrepancies between the general population and prison population in the United States. The 2010 U.S. census places the non-Hispanic white population at about 65%, African Americans at 13%, and Hispanics

at 14% of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau. 2011). Within the U.S. prison system, African Americans account for more than 30% of the total population, more than double their percentage of the general population, while white and Hispanic rates of incarceration correspond closely to their actual population percentages (BJS 2010). Rates of incarceration for African Americans are eight times higher than those of whites (Pettit and Western 2004). Additionally, there is an educational gap between African American and the general population (Bali and Alvarez 2003) associated with lasting effects of historical oppression, which carries over into the criminal justice system. This study will contribute to an understanding of how these populations persevere into higher levels of education as ex-convicts of color.

#### *Ex-convicts difficulties with educational access*

American ex-convicts have experienced a criminal justice system (and possess a social stigma) that disallows easy or affordable access for those interested in higher education within correctional facilities. If educational access within prison were more accessible, access after incarceration could be facilitated. Yet ex-convicts face unique obstacles to obtaining higher education, including difficulties<sup>1</sup> when attempting to access and utilize academically focused higher education.

Vacca (2004: 300) speaks to the reasons for the failure of education within the prison system, specifically:

“factors that are essential to the success or failure of prison education programs are prison overcrowding and inadequate funding for teaching personnel, supplies and equipment.”

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g., criminal background checks that delay or prevent entry into educational institutions, denial or delayed state and/or federal educational funds, bias on the part of academic or professional hiring committees and/or individual faculty or associates within departments and/or institutions

Reiman (2007) argues that prisons in the United States are massively overcrowded due to the war on drugs, and thus educational programs potentially suffer. Prisons do not provide inmates with adequately trained staff, quality programs, or up to date learning materials (Welsh 2002). In 1994, under the Clinton administration, the Omnibus Crime bill eliminated the primary source of educational funding available to inmates, thus lowering or eliminating the ability of the poor to access college credits, courses, and college degrees while incarcerated (Welsh, 2002). It could be postulated that inmates from more affluent backgrounds would be less affected by these financial obstacles because of greater amounts of social and economic capital at entry to and upon release from prison. Overcrowding has further limited and/or reduced prison budgets as the United States reaches the distinction of holding the largest prison population per capita and in real numbers in the world (BJS, 2006).

There are notable educational discrepancies between the American general population and the incarcerated population. Among incarcerated inmates (state, federal, jail, and probationers), 41.3% lack a high school diploma, compared to 18.4% of the general population. Of the general population, 48.4% of the population has some form of postsecondary education, while only 12.7% of the total incarcerated population has participated in postsecondary education. In state prisons approximately 25% of the inmates in 1997 had taken basic educational/high school equivalent courses, while about 13% had taken college classes. In federal prisons, about 12.9% of inmates had taken college classes in 1997, while college courses were offered in more than 80% of federal prisons in 2000 and more than 65% of federal prisons in 1995. Thus, a notable discrepancy between the number of inmates taking college courses in federal prison and

federal prisons with available courses (67% in 2000) is noted. Worthy of mention is that Federal prisons (80.5% offer college courses) offer more postsecondary educational opportunities than do state prisons (26.7%). Much of the lack of access to college education can be attributed to the elimination of Pell Grants to state and federal prisoners in 1994. In 1993, forty-three states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons possessed college programs. Yet, by 1997, two thirds of those programs were eliminated from U.S. corrections, in a prison system where 80% of prisoners could not afford their own attorney (Herivel and Wright 2003).

This project provides data and analysis to assist criminal justice and educational communities in how to deal with the unique problems faced by ex-inmates who are attempting to access higher education and work within the academic world. Most of the comparisons are of ex-offender academics to ex-offenders from different class backgrounds that pursued other non-academic endeavors. The insight provided by ex-convicts within the academic, criminal justice and social fields provides a fresh perspective for disciplines that often misinterpret or disregard the voices of those within the system itself (Greene et al. 2006, Richards and Jones 2004, Ross and Richards 2003). Because of a dearth of information on how ex-inmates access and use higher education, a two phase qualitative methods approach first using in-depth interviews, and secondly life histories (Caughey 2007, Creswell 2007, Denzin and Lincoln 2005, Strauss and Corbin 1998) offers a unique opportunity to access this population. The data will include in-depth interviews and life histories of ex-convicts currently employed as instructors and professors in colleges and universities and ex-convicts enrolled in undergraduate courses with aspirations of continuing on to attain graduate level and/or professional credentials.



Enabling ex-convicts to successfully access higher education and then put the education to good use through gainful employment is of great benefit to the whole of society (Gerber, J., and Fritsch, E. J. 1995, Harr, D. 1999, Stevens and Ward 1997; Vacca 2004). Uneducated ex-offenders have higher rates of recidivism (Vacca 2004), and as previously mentioned, according to Pettit and Western (2004) cost society more to re-incarcerate than to educate. At a base level, educated inmates become productive members of society, which benefits society overall. This enables them to learn life skills, pay taxes, and provide for their families.

#### *Necessary Research*

The United States has the largest prison population in the world (BJS 2010), with seven out of ten of the undereducated, economically disadvantaged released prisoners recidivating and returning to prison several times (Visher and Travis 2003). Thus, this study examines obstacles ex-convicts face when trying to acquire and/or use higher educational credentials (for example, Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees). This is necessary in order to understand the ex-convict educational experience. A further advantage of this study is that the actual voices of ex-convicts are the centerpiece of this research. Using qualitative interview process, ex-convicts themselves construct their own body of knowledge about attainment and usage of higher educational credentials.

## Chapter 2

### CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND LITERATURE REVIEW

#### THEORY

Three theories comprise the conceptual model of this study (*Figure 1*): The convict perspective, social stigma, and social and human capital. The convict perspective (Greene et al. 2006, Richards and Jones 2004, Ross and Richards 2003) examines the society and criminal justice through the eyes of convicts and ex-convicts. Through this perspective, the voices of individuals who have experienced the inside of correctional facilities as “residents,” voices that are often not admitted into academic discourse, are assuming a direct role in building academic scholarship.

The second component, social stigma (Goffman 1963, Link et al. 1989, Shih 2004) is defined as a spoiled identity or a characteristic that an individual (ex-convict in present study) possesses that is devalued by society. This conceptual component frames and explains the social identity that ex-offenders are forced to assume because they have been convicted of a felony and served time in a correctional facility.

The third components within this study, human (Becker 1993, Coleman 1988) and social capital (Lin 1999, 2001) are included to explain how ex-offenders use available resources and capital to improve their life chances through access to and utilization of academic education upon release from prison. Such social capital resources can be defined as social networks (family, friends, and acquaintances with useful knowledge) and human capital of educational credentials, and life skills.

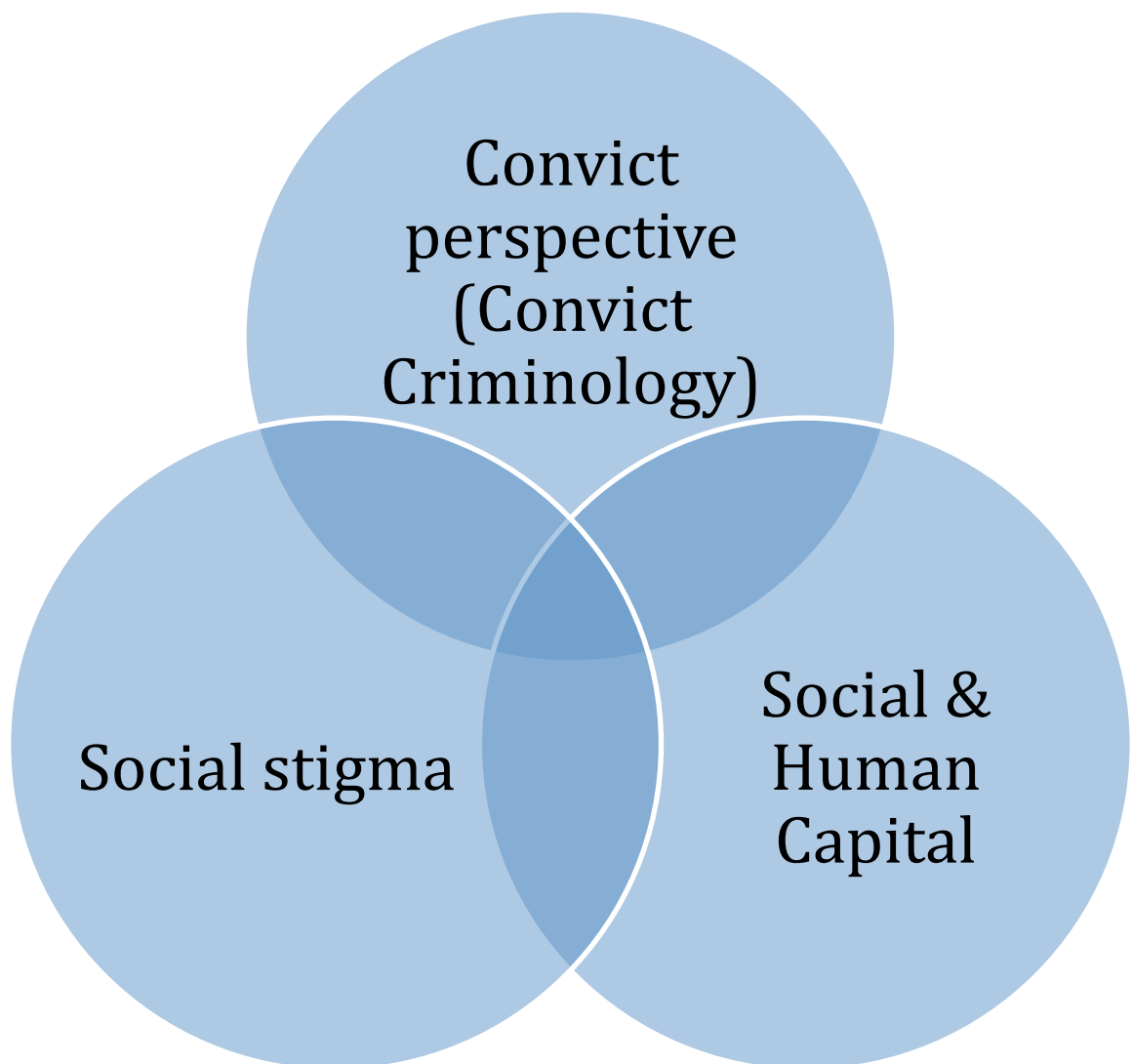
These three theoretical frames reveal how the convict insider perspective, social stigma, and social/human capital interrelate. Through accessing social capital and human

capital, formerly incarcerated academics are enabled to use their inside perspective on the criminal justice system to overcome the social stigma of a felony conviction.

*Figure 1*

**CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

*\*Formerly incarcerated criminological academics access human/social capital, are able to apply convict insider perspective of criminal justice system to their scholarship, and use such experience/education to overcome social stigma.*



### *Convict Perspective and Criminology*

This study recognizes the expertise of ex-inmates in regard to navigating the educational system. Unlike many penological perspectives that use the research of “experts” who often have limited or brief contact with the correctional system and unspoiled identities, this study will use the insider knowledge and insight of men and women who have spent significant portions of their lives (ranging from 6 months to 20 years) within the United States correctional system. The *convict perspective* (Richards and Jones 2004, Ross and Richards 2003) brings convict experiences to the front stage of the research process by “listening to prisoners and taking seriously their comments—for instance, about removing legal and policy restrictions that complicate reentry” (Greene et al. 2006:2). Richards and Ross (2004) describe the convict perspective as being premised upon convicts experiences with imprisonment using ethnographic/observational research methods to give voice to men and women who have spent time within the confines of correctional facilities. This criminological vantage point examines criminal justice issues and problems from the perspective of convicts and ex-convicts.

The Convict Criminology (Ross and Richards 2003) branch of criminology emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Richards and Ross (2001) explain that the Convict Criminology (Con-Crim) branch of criminology was born of several factors, including a dysfunctional prison system that was failing in its purpose, and the advent of critical criminology in the 1970s. Additional factors that brought about the creation of the Con-Crim discipline were: the missing component of the pre-convict criminology insider perspective, being the academic approach (as opposed to more journalistic or activist approaches), and the recognition of the value of qualitative research within

criminology (with a focus on ethnography). Con-Crim uniquely recognizes the weak links within U.S. correctional system, such as lack of funding for educational programs, over-crowding, and punishment centered policies that ignore rehabilitation (Ross and Richards 2003). The insider perspective of criminological research recognizes that the majority of ex-inmates are not evil, crazed, depraved individuals as depicted within the media, but normal individuals who have done something relatively minor, perhaps even a lot of ill-conceived acts (Ross and Richards 2003: xix) and are thus negatively labeled by society. Yet, the same society turns a blind eye when the majority of “non-convict or non-criminal” employees participate in minor pilfering of company supplies. Thus, inmates and ex-inmates are not unique because of the crimes for which they were convicted, but instead because of their race, class, and worldviews that are the product of their social environments (Ross and Richards 2003). Con-crim states that ex-convicts are not a criminal label, such as a robber, a drug dealer, or burglar. Ex-convicts are human beings affected and shaped by social structural issues, personal problems, and human feelings, just like any other member of society. Sociological research indicates that social structural issues such as middle class economic capital, access to college education, strong family support structures, and belonging to the right “race” (usually white) and religion (usually Protestant) often work together to create a general status quo middle class American individual. Similarly, belonging to certain “races” (often minority or marginalized racial groups), lacking economic and educational resources, and not possessing dominant forms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) often work together to create a general picture of the American prisoner.

Richards and Ross (2003: 10) state that “Convict criminology is issue based, and not necessarily structured by the traditional disciplinary divisions assumed by criminology, criminal justice, or corrections.” Conventional abstract criminological and criminal justice research that ignores convict voices, Richards explains, results in fragmented research that does not necessarily attempt to rectify any of the myriad problems and/or issues that plague today’s criminal justice system. Such research is the traditional form of criminal justice research, yet it is often abstract and distant from the real social problems within criminal justice. Convict criminology within the convict perspective seeks to access the lived experience of individuals directly affected by the criminal justice system and corrections. Through accessing the actual voices of ex-convicts both within and outside of higher education, convict criminology attempts to construct a bridge of understanding and commonality between “conventional” society and the ex-convict. Many ex-convict academics (Jones 1999, Ross et al. 2010, Ross and Richards 2003, Terry 2000) state that there is basically no difference in personality or life style between ex-convicts (generally with a focus on ex-convicts in education) and the rest of society, arguing that such dichotomies, comparisons, and stereotypes should be eliminated from social discourse.

### *Stigmatized Identities*

Stigma is often defined as a spoiled identity or a characteristic that one possesses that is devalued by society. Goffman (1963) referred to stigma as, “an attribute that is deeply discrediting.” Link and Phelan (2001) re-examine the concept of stigma in the twenty-first century, as the concept had come under criticism for being ambiguously

defined and too focused on the individual. Thus, stigma is expanded to include four components to more clearly elucidate the concept. This definition of stigma includes labeling and the process of stereotyping. I will focus on two of these components. First, stigmatized individuals are placed in “us and them” categories to differentiate good from bad, and secondly, this definition includes a consideration of discrimination on the part of the powerful against the powerless (Link and Phelan 2001). Link et al. (1989) wrote that ex-offenders manage their identity using a variety of stigma management methods: secrecy, withdrawal, and preventive telling. Stigmatized individuals who use the secrecy method keep their identity hidden from others, and go to great efforts to conceal their status if at all possible. Withdrawal involves avoiding contact with others not aware of stigma, and such individuals prefer to be with others with stigma, and/or those who accept it. The preventive telling method involves avoiding disapproval by telling others before the “secret” is exposed. The primary focus is to educate and inform before the issue becomes a problem that creates more problems for the ex-offender.

When pursuing an education, and/or in the process of social reintegration, ex-offenders must contend with the social phenomena of stigma. While not an obvious social stigma, such as a physical deformity or illegal profession, ex-offenders often must “reveal” their identities at some point in the educational process (Ross and Richards 2003, Ross et al. 2010). Many ex-offenders must apply for financial aid during the graduate school application process and/or during the process of gaining an educationally-based internship. During this process, questions about criminal records may present themselves. The phenomenon of stigma has far-reaching implications for the ex-offender, often extending far beyond the educational process, yet for purposes of

this study, the discussion of stigma will focus on how stigma interacts with the ex-offenders' educational process.

Serving a prison sentence has “both direct and indirect consequences” (Richards and Jones 2004). Sykes (1958) speaks of the direct consequences of prison, which are quite obvious and striking, such as loss of freedom, personal possessions, heterosexual relationships, privacy, and the feeling of personal safety and wellbeing. Prisoners lose everything important to themselves, including wives or husbands, children, personal property, jobs, and homes. Thus, when ex-convicts are released from their correctional facility, many have few if any possessions. They have severely limited financial means, and any skills or education they may have acquired while incarcerated are often minimal and inadequate for finding employment outside of prisons.

Indirect consequences are described as often not being obvious to ex-convicts until their prison sentence has been served. Such consequences often involve loss of civil and legal rights, and psychological damage incurred from the process of incarceration. Prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as a result of their incarceration (Goff et al. 2007) has been shown to be higher in prison populations. Goffman (1961) discusses the negative process of institutionalization that occurs when inmates are housed in total institutions for long periods of time. Clemmer (1940) in earlier research mentions the process of prisonization, a similar process that occurs when prisoners are confined within prison walls for long periods of time, under the total control of the prison. Such prisoners become acclimated to the total institutional setting to survive, and lose their ability to function in the outside world. Wiggington (2002: 164) states that “the routine was the foundation of my institutionalization, along with the dismantling of my decision



making ability. . . I rely on the system so much now that I do not want to leave a place of incarceration.” Some research indicates that inmates do not believe that incarceration has any deterrent effect. Instead, they viewed prisons as criminal universities where inmates go to essentially learn more about more types of crime. Research was found that correctional facilities serve to institutionalize inmates rather than rehabilitate them (Kolstad 1996).

Prisoners are often left financially destitute when released, and subsequently have a difficult time finding employment and shelter because of their records. Often, ex-convicts are ushered into correctional halfway houses and/or strict paroles with a bewildering array of rules and regulations, and often expected to pay rent, restitution, and multiple expenses when in such facilities.

While many researchers (Lee and Craft 2002; Winnick and Bodkin 2008) view stigma as a draining process that would limit or reduce ex-offenders access to social and human capital, Shih (2004) examines stigma management from a proactive stance. Individuals who are proactive in their stigma management strategies tend to view the process of overcoming a stigmatized identity as an empowering and rejuvenating process. Such individuals view stigma as an unjust label and seek to overcome this process through addressing the issue head on. Thus, taking an empowerment stance towards stigma means doing something about it. Shih (2004) states that, “many stigmatized individuals cite that they gain strength and learn valuable life lessons in confronting adversities caused by stigma.”

Much other research indicates that institutionalization has a damaging effect upon inmates, limiting their abilities to function in “outside” society (Ross and Richards 2003,

Visher and Travis 2003), and, while most prisoners do acclimate to the prison environment through institutionalization, the initial adjustment to prison life is difficult for the majority of this group (Adams 1992). Visher and Travis (2003) point out that the experiences convicts encounter while incarcerated can potentially affect their ability to function successfully when reentering society. Link and Phelan (2001) explain that stigmatizing circumstances affect many facets of an individual's social sphere, and consequently can affect involvement in criminal behaviors, income, and overall life chances. Shivy et al. (2007) report that ex-convicts are aware of the social stigma associated with a felony conviction. Also, those who work with ex-offenders through the criminal justice system need to counsel ex-convicts about restructuring their social networks, thus accessing more positive social capital, which in turn reduces their stigmatized image from the perspective of potential employers.

Kelly (2010) points out the existence of a reentry industry that takes advantage of the stigmatized identities of ex-convicts. Such organizations represent themselves as organizations providing viable employment for ex-convicts, operating with minimal or no oversight or regulation, yet receiving millions of dollars in federal and private grants. The reentry industry puts ex-convicts through "extensive training programs" that yield minimal if any results, often placing ex-convicts in the worst menial positions available. Ex-convicts could have access to these positions without having undergone such programs' "training" regimens. Thus, a profit is being generated from the stigmatized identities of ex-convicts.

Human capital is “embodied in the skills and knowledge acquired by an individual”(Coleman 1988). The social actor benefits from the knowledge capital contained within their head that creates access to constructive/positive opportunities. Such capital is often developed in an educational context in schools and institutions of higher learning. The possession of greater, more powerful human capital among individuals often results in the creation of greater economic success for the group in question.

Social capital in general, focuses on networks of social connections, such as friends, family, professional relationships, and acquaintances. Coleman (1988:98) defines social capital as:

Social capital is defined by its function. It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors-whether persons or corporate actors-within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible.

Thus, social capital is a beneficial form of capital that can be comprised of corporations functioning as actors or individual persons. Yet, in this research, Coleman focuses on the person. Yet, unlike other forms of capital, Coleman (1988:98) explains the key element of social capital exists entirely,

“...in the structure of relations between actors and among actors.”

Thus, social capital is not entirely comprised of the actors themselves or the products of their interactions, but in the network structures that exist between the actors, and the benefits that accrue because of this. Coleman also explains that a unique characteristic of social capital is that it possesses a public good aspect. Additionally, Lin (1999, 2000) explains that social inequality is replicated through differential access to social capital.

Some literature suggests a relationship between social and human capital.

Coleman (1988), in a study of levels of social capital, and the subsequent effect on high school dropout rates, found that there was a relationship between lower levels of social capital and increased probability of dropping out of high school. Thus, social capital and human capital are related from the perspective that access to more positive social capital can lead to further access to positive human capital (Brown and Ross 2010). Rehabilitative programs for ex-convicts that primarily focus on human capital (e.g., job skills, education), while neglecting social capital (e.g., providing important social connections for ex-convicts) often experience low success rates. Brown and Ross (2010) state that around 80% of jobs are never advertised. Consequently, many jobs are only discovered through word of mouth, and personal knowledge of such opportunities, stressing the importance of social connections in allowing ex-convicts to utilize their human capital. Such a relationship has multiple implications for ex-offenders, who from the point of entry into the system until their eventual release back into society face social stigmas that often limit opportunities to acquire positive social/human capital (Winnick and Bodkin 2008, 2009). Visser (2007:95) states, "A prison term reduces human capital, as a result, for instance, of lost connections, to potential employers, diminished work skills, and reduction in life skills..." Further, the social and human capital that many ex-offenders do possess is often socially de-valued and thus has limited potential to improve life chances. Winnick and Bodkin (2008) found that most inmates are strongly aware that upon reentry into society they will face many difficulties due to their stigmatized identity. Inmates expressed knowledge of society's devaluation of them as human beings

their skills, and the negative effect that an ex-offender status would have on their employment prospects.

The concept of social capital has received much attention in the disciplines of sociology and criminology in recent years (Coleman 1988, Howser et. al. 1983; Portes 1998, Lin 2001). Also, the homophily principle partially explains why people in the same population group (such as class or ethnic minority) generally possess the same levels of access to social capital (e.g., the poor associate with other poor people), as people tend to associate with people similar to themselves (Lin 1999). Through such relationships, individuals, in this case, ex-convicts are affected by such relationships. Having connections to other individuals who possess power and/or status can create unique opportunities, thus benefitting the ex-convicts in question. Conversely, the lack of relationships to others with power and/or status results in a lack of opportunities/benefits for the ex-offender in question. In certain circumstances, a social connection (with a specific individual) can provide contact with an entirely different social network, thus opening up an entirely new opportunity set (Cornwell and Cornwell 2008). Groups that have increased access to expert and specialized knowledge tend to have more advantages than groups that do not. Cornwell and Cornwell (2008) explain that differential access to expert and specialized knowledge through social networks is often divided along racial and class lines. For instance, over the past two decades, white and upper class access to expert and specialized knowledge has remained the same or increased, while it has decreased drastically for members of racial/ethnic minorities.

It must be mentioned that, generally, no matter how social support is provided, whether government programs, counselors employed by the criminal justice system, or

personal friendships, it tends to lower participation in criminal behavior (Cullen 1994). During the process of incarceration, prisoners are ostracized from society, and consequently their social networks are greatly reduced (Visher 2007). Once released, ex-convicts must attempt to successfully re-integrate into society, yet this task becomes more difficult because of loss of social contact while incarcerated. Being separated from society for long periods of time often alters the ex-convict's world view, creating an institutionalized mentality (Clemmer 1940, Goffman 1961, Wiggington 2002) that is ill-equipped to navigate in contemporary society's fast paced environment.

Formerly incarcerated women face different challenges than their more numerous male counterparts (Reisig et al. 2002). When released from prison, women must often take primary responsibility for their children, which also functions as a form of social capital for the children in formerly incarcerated women's families. In Reisig et al.'s (2002) sample of 402 women with felony record, 81% had one or more children. Women with children often have smaller support networks, and consequently less access to social capital, thus placing formerly incarcerated women at a disadvantage when attempting to overcome the obstacles of social stigma (related to a felony conviction) and issues of access to higher education. Issues that women inmates and formerly incarcerated women academics experience will be further addressed in the results and discussion chapters of this dissertation.

Social capital as a form of social support provided for the formerly incarcerated can function to reduce the effects of the prisoners' pre-incarceration backgrounds (Hostetler and Pratt 2010). Social support also assists in reforming prison induced emotions of hostility experienced by ex-convicts. Orrick et al. (2011) state that when

both public and private (e.g. mentorship) social support is provided to post-incarcerated drug offenders (the most common conviction within this dissertation, 13 of 30 respondents were convicted of drug related crimes), the rate of reconviction may decrease, thus emphasizing the public good aspect (Coleman 1988) noted above.

### *Isolationist and Segregationist Forms of Social Capital*

Some recent literature on social capital has warned against the overuse of social capital as a theoretical concept, at least in certain contexts. Portes (1998) states that social capital has become somewhat of a panacea for all social problems, yet social capital is a far more complex concept in both theory and application. While the possession of dominant social capital can be a valuable asset to those who possess it, certain situations exist when social capital is not a valuable asset (Bolin et. al. 2004; Putnam 2007), such as social capital in low income or disorganized areas. The time spent trying to acquire the social support (i.e., deviant peer groups) available in these areas can detract from time spent on more pro-social/beneficial forms of social capital (i.e., pro-social role models or mentors).

Part of building social capital involves bridging to another/other social network(s). This activity is vital to forming relationships that allow social groups/individuals to prosper and grow through access to new opportunities. Yet, some forms of social capital discourage forming bridging relationships to other communities, and encourage a closed community or group. For example, within certain neighborhoods, people may not wish to associate with others from outside of their

community, thus discouraging bridge building. This may limit access to favorable opportunities outside the community/neighborhood, and may result in social deterioration (Portes 1998).

Different groups use different social capital frameworks. Dominant groups most likely access the most conventional capital, and thus are likely to receive the most benefit. The social capital accessible to less dominant and/or oppressed groups is likely to result in less successful legitimate outcomes (Portes 1998). Some scholars have accused social capital of being a white, middle class concept (Portes 1998, Putnam 2007). Under this definition of social capital, only the dominant societal group would benefit from social capital. Thus, if society perceives that only white middle class culture is capable of possessing credible power, status, and knowledge, then many groups would be excluded. For purposes of this study, the focal group being excluded by more dominant forms of social capital would be ex-offenders.

## EX-CONVICTS: EXPERIENCES AND EDUCATION

### *Convicts and Ex-Convicts in America*

Every year, across the United States, 600,000 ex-convicts are released from jails and prisons (BJS 2010), and after 3 years almost 7 out of 10 of those ex-convicts have been rearrested (Visher and Travis 2003) and 50% will be sent back to the correctional system. While incarcerated, more than 50% of inmates will receive some form of correctional education such as basic education, GED, vocational and college courses (BJS 2003). The most common form of correctional education is the vocational track, which received 31.6% state and federal inmate participation in 1997, followed closely by



GED/high school courses, at 23.2% participation in state and federal prison in 1997 (BJS 2003). It is apparent that some inmates are receiving some forms of education while incarcerated, yet the rate of recidivism is still high. A unique trait of the prison population is that the population is constantly changing as new inmates are processed in, and other inmates finish their sentences. Thus, the problem of recidivism is large in scale indicating potential problems within the American criminal justice system. An interesting question for future scholarship posed from this discussion is whether further academic education, outside of prison could potentially reduce rates of recidivism.

Ex-convicts must support themselves financially, take care of families and children, find jobs, serve out parole or supervised releases (federal ex-convicts), and complete probation programs, thus avoiding a return to their former residences behind bars. All of these tasks must be accomplished, even while the majority of ex-convicts come from backgrounds of poverty, substandard public education, and dysfunctional families (Reiman 2007; Petersilia 2003).

Ex-convicts also face the issue of disfranchisement laws that limit or bar voting rights at various stages in their progress through the criminal justice system. Petersilia (2009: 130) reports that, “every state but two had disfranchisement laws that deprived felons of the right to vote while serving a prison or jail sentence for a felony offense.” Of the 50 states in the U.S., 34 prevent ex-convicts from voting while on probation, parole, and/or both (Uggen et al. 2002). Such laws have serious implications, because currently 4.7 million Americans, thus about 2.1 percent of the adult voting population (Manza, Uggen, and Britton 2001) are unable to vote because of their felony status (Alexander 2012, Petersilia 2009). Another powerful statistic indicates that in Florida and Alabama,

one third of black men are disfranchised for life due to felony status (Petersilia 2009), which would have swayed the 2000 vote in favor of Al Gore over George Bush if felons would had able to vote, and would have had powerful effects on many other recent elections (Uggen and Manza 2001). Such laws also limit what ex-convicts can do at a community level where their valuable insight would be an asset. Examples of this situation include ex-convicts being excluded from activities such as, “volunteering, coaching in youth sports, working in food banks, assisting the elderly” (Petersilia 2003: 133). Petersilia (2003) explains that some studies suggest that volunteer activities and civil engagement may actually reduce offending.

### *Background Checks*

A common obstacle to success that many ex-convicts experience upon release from prison is pervasive background checks on the part of potential employers (Blumstein and Nakamura 2009, Lam and Harcourt 2003). A background check that returns with a felony criminal conviction can often eliminate ex-convicts from the hiring process. Such a situation creates a dilemma in which the ex-convict cannot outrun his or her criminal background. This situation exists even if the convict’s debt (often a prison sentence) has been paid to society, and they are actively seeking to reintegrate unto society and become productive citizens. Employers have various reasons for conducting such background checks, including insurance liability and worries that the ex-convict will reoffend while working at their place of employment, thus damaging the employer’s image and/or reputation.

Lam and Harcourt (2003) pointed out that employers actively discriminate against ex-convicts, even in the face of empirical evidence that most offenders stop offending in their 20s and 30s. Their research argues that ex-offenders have the right to conceal their criminal records for most crimes of lesser severity after a certain period of time, and thus have equal consideration for employment as non-offenders. Yet, the issue becomes more complex when the rights of employers are taken into consideration. The question is whether the right of employers to use their own capital as they choose conflicts with the rights of ex-offenders to have equal access to employment in a ex-offender biased job market.

#### *Value of Education to Ex-convicts*

Education is a broad term, which can reference general lifelong education, as in the knowledge individuals accumulate during the everyday course of existence, or in more formal terms such as a college degree. This discussion will focus on the latter of those educational concepts. Ex-convicts enter prison with lower levels of education than the national average (Pettit and Western 2004, Ross and Richards 2003, Reiman and Leighton 2009) and often leave “*correctional*” facilities in nearly the same state. As Elrod and Brooks (2000) point out, inmates often spend their time sitting around with little to do except learn how to do time. When such inmates are released, they generally find themselves in the same disadvantaged social situations that they were in prior to incarceration. Moeller et al. (2004) found that students involved in correctional education viewed education as having a strong influence on improving their life chances.

Palmer (2012), speaking to the benefits of college degree programs within prisons, states, “it seems completion of the post-secondary program is the key to reducing recidivism.” The key factor is the prisoner’s ability to attain a useful degree and/or certificate, this providing a sense of accomplishment, and the opportunity to access useful human capital that can meaningfully improve life chances when released from prison, as 93% of prisoners will eventually go home at some point (Petersilia 2003). Presently, 7% of the United States prison population is enrolled in post-secondary programs, this being the highest rate of enrollment since the elimination of Federal Pell Grants to prisoners in 1994, as noted in Chapter 1. Yet, rates of post-secondary educational enrollment in prisons have still not reached the levels (double digit percentages) that were available before 1994, even though, on a brighter note, educational opportunities within prisons have been increasing in recent years (Palmer 2012). In addition, a study by O’Neill et al. (2007) explains that the type of correctional facility that a prisoner is confined in can affect educational success. Inmates in lower security boot-camp settings often were more successful with GED completion in small group learning community settings than prisoners in higher security medium and maximum security prisons. Suggestions were made to provide more educational resources to implement small group educational models to inmates in higher security prisons, thus potentially mediating the educational discrepancies that exist between such institutions.

When examining issues of poverty and race among prison inmates, Raphael (2012:198) presents a powerful statement:

For all groups, the least educated have the highest incarceration rates. However, these rates are particularly high for black high school dropouts (19 percent compared with 5 percent for white male high school dropouts and 4.1 percent for Hispanic male high school dropouts).

Such groups have been the targets of multiple forms of oppression. Thus, presenting the idea that creating programs/policy that provide greater educational opportunities would be greatly beneficial to groups that have not only been targeted by a class and race biased criminal justice system, but have also been historically disadvantaged by classism and racism. The literature strongly supports the benefits of both secondary and post-secondary education (the focus of this research) to both incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people. The challenge is to present and effectively disseminate such positive knowledge to policy makers and the general public.

#### *Educational Pathways of ex-convicts*

To examine the social and economic forces that affect ex-convicts who are attempting to navigate the educational system, I will first elucidate how the United States approaches the issues of Criminal Justice and Education through budgetary expenditures. Sheldon (in Palumbo 2009: 213) states that BJS statistics indicate that, “between 1977 and 2003 money spent on prisons went up by 1,173 percent, while money spent on education went up by 505 percent.” At the same time, this country exists in one of the worst historical periods of social inequality, with 1% of the population owning 48% of all financial wealth such as bonds, stocks, savings (Sheldon in Palumbo 2009), and the next 19 percent has about the same amount and the bottom 80% of the population fights for the remaining 4 percent of wealth in the United States. The economic inequality situation in the United States is actually more financially unequal than it was 100 years ago, which has led some politicians to actually question the validity of democracy (Sheldon in Palumbo 2009: 215). The often poor, disproportionately racial minority, disfranchised

ex-convict seeking education must find room within the current social and economic sphere in which to gain an education and subsequently improve their life chances.

The next issue that I will discuss will be whether education actually benefits ex-convicts. Current criminal justice policy does not place correctional education at the forefront of criminal justice policy, instead emphasizing punishment over rehabilitative measures (Herivel and Wright 2003, Reiman and Leighton 2009, Sheldon 2007).

Petersilia (2009: 34) discusses the declining emphasis is higher education programs within prisons, pointing out that in 1990 there were over 350 higher education programs within American prisons, yet by 1997, there were only 8, due to the fact that the federal government eliminated Pell Grants (educational grants given to disadvantaged groups) to inmates. The Clinton administration stated that they did not want to appear to be giving special privileges and wasting tax payer dollars on inmates, yet the grants were not supported by tax-payer generated revenue, and inmates used less than one tenth of one percent of the Pell Grant budget. Of the little research that does exist on the subject of benefits of prison based education, results indicate that for every dollar spent on educational programs within prisons, two taxpayer dollars are saved in reducing recidivism rates (Schmidt 2002).

Yet, further support for “in-prison” educational programs has been slow to change. The grants, which previously provided funds for inmates to pay for in-prison higher education programs are no longer there, and consequently, the college programs are no longer there. Currently, if inmates want to access higher education while in prison, they must provide their own funds (Petersilia 2009), and, because the inmate population generally comes from a lower SES, few inmates have the funds to provide for

their educations within (or outside of) prison. Subsequently, many inmates' have to wait until reentry into society to begin their journeys through higher education.

While the general attitude towards higher education is that it is a privilege that should be withheld from people who have criminal records, there are some state supported initiatives that promote higher education to ex-convicts (Linton 2010). The Second Chance Act seeks to provide educational opportunities for ex-convicts, creating some funding to generate opportunities for ex-convicts, yet funding is limited, providing \$187 million dollars for a multi-billion dollar problem (\$214 billion spent on Criminal Justice in US in 2005-06 while only \$60 billion was spent on education (BJS 2006)). The prison population has lower mean educational levels than that of the general population (BJS 2003). Thus, of the 600,000 ex-convicts per year being released from U.S. prisons, 75% of state inmates and 59% of federal inmates did not complete high school, compared to 18% of the general population. Higher educational attainment was even lower among ex-convicts, with only 11% of state inmates and 24% of federal inmates attending some college. Pettit and Western (2004), using educational attainment as a class proxy, indicate class and racial inequality is the rule within the U.S. prison system. Their research indicates that 3% of the white population and 20% of the African American population can expect to spend time in prison by their early 30s. This is analogous to studies that indicate that poverty and racial minority status are highly associated with one another (Massey and Denton 1993, Oliver and Shapiro 1995).

Thus, the problem of lack of educational opportunities for ex-convicts upon release remains prevalent. Yet, there is a new educational movement among ex-convicts. Through the advent of Convict Criminology (Ross and Richards 2003), a growing group

of ex-convict scholars, professors who are attempting to change the lens through which the disciplines of Criminology and Criminal Justice view the world. Convict Criminology harnesses the intellectual insight and experience of individuals who have actually been inside the prison system. Jones (2003), an ex-con and professor of criminology, uses auto-ethnography to discuss how his identity as an ex-convict interacts with his career as a college professor. Jones indicates that incarceration often creates an institutional dependency amongst inmates. This process, which Goffman (1961) often refers to as institutionalization, destroys convicts' conception of the outside world, and reconstructs their existence according to the socially confining reality of the total institution. Further, ex-convicts find everyday processes difficult upon reentering society, making more complex processes such as obtaining a college education much more difficult. Navigating the college selection and enrollment process can seem quite foreign to individuals who have spent several years in a total institution that controls their every movement and decision. Jones indicated that he was not an average ex-offender, as his sentence was short (under a year), thus he was perhaps not as institutionalized as inmates who had served longer sentences. Yet, during the academic position hiring process, Jones admitted that perhaps his felony status played some role in initial and ensuing difficulties he encountered. Navigating one's felony status was a situation experienced by many ex-convicts. A study of the academic hiring process for ex-convicts (Ross et al. 2010) found that when ex-convict academics applied for an academic position, some resistance and bias was present on the part of hiring committees, yet early disclosure of their past experiences resulted in far less bias and resistance which potentially improved chances of attaining a position. Ross was quick to point out that the



ex-con academics did not attain every job they applied for in the study, and that the small sample size (N=7) warranted more research, but the process was improved, and most eventually found employment.

Terry (2003:115), a scholar and ex-convict, points out that completing graduate schools and attaining an academic post is often difficult for ex-convicts due to the damaging effects of the prison experiences, stating, “success stories of my own prison cohort are few and far between.” Austin and Irwin (2001) point out that ex-convicts who cannot access a positive opportunity to improve their life chances often fall into their previous deviant lifestyles such as substance abuse, alcoholism and crime.

## SUMMARY

This chapter has examined the conceptual and theoretical frameworks used to examine ex-offenders, including the convict perspective, stigma, and human and social capital. The convict-centered perspective illuminates the social constructionist theoretical world view, bringing the voices of ex-convicts into center stage, constructing knowledge about the unique pathways that ex-convicts experience in order to gain and utilize academic education.

The ex-convicts' exposure to society's perceptions of felons/inmates is captured through the examination of stigma (Goffman 1963). A spoiled identity can block or create difficulties in the acquisition of social and human capital, thus limiting the life chances of ex-convicts. Consequently, an examination of how stigma and social and human capital interact through the direct lens of ex-convicts will allow for the construction of a convict centered knowledge base, an area of knowledge often

overlooked by the criminological academy. Social and Human capital are the resources, both purely social and educational, that ex-convicts can potentially access while navigating through the process of higher education. This study will focus on how ex-convicts use of social capital (social networks, powerful acquaintances, supportive friends and family) and with their use of human capital (academic education, and their acquired credentials).

### Chapter 3

## MODERN UNITED STATES CORRECTIONS BACKGROUND

### **Introduction: Journey from Rehabilitation to the prison State**

This chapter discusses the development of the United States prison system from the progressive criminal justice (CJ) policies of the 1960s and 1970s to the current punitive, “tough on crime” model of prison justice policies. It must be noted that to discuss the United States criminal justice system and all of its 1,821 prisons (BJS 2005) is an ambitious task. Prisons are divided up into many different jurisdictions, types, and districts, such as 50 separate state prison systems, city and county jails, holding facilities, the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and private prisons. Each system possesses many unique characteristics. Also, there is a degree of variance in policy between different types of prisons. Yet, this dissertation will focus on general trends of correctional policy that are influenced by overall trends in the larger institution of the criminal justice system, which encompasses the courts, the legislation which dictates law, judges who interpret the law, law enforcement, the probation system, and the correctional system. In sum total, the U.S. correctional system provides millions of jobs (e.g., 450,000 lawyers in 2008 and 518,200 correctional officers in 2008 (BLS 2012)), and houses 2.3 million incarcerated citizens and oversees 5 million more U.S. citizens on probation or parole, with millions more Americans attempting to lead productive lives while living under the pervasive stigma of the possession of a felony conviction. Consequently, the United States correctional system, being the largest prison system in the world, influences the lives of millions of American citizens, often disproportionately targeting “racial”/ethnic minorities, and the poor.

Irwin (2005:1) states that between 1980 and 2000, “The rate of incarceration zoomed from 100 to over 500 per 100,000.” It must also be noted that as prison rates continued to rise to unprecedented levels, violent and drug crime rates within the United States began to drop after 1995 (BJS 2010). This phenomenon indicates powerful discrepancies between policy and crime rate. Some conclude that the incarceration explosion has been successful in lowering crime rates, yet much research does not support this conclusion (Blumstein and Beck 1999, Gainsborough and Mauer 2000), and will be further discussed in this research.

An important point to consider is what caused the shift from a progressive/rehabilitative correctional model to a prison system that focuses on long-term prison sentences and mass incarceration as the answer to crime. Social structural determinants of crime (poverty, recession, politically motivated crime legislation) have been presented as possible explanations for the transition from a rehabilitative to a punitive criminal justice model. Additionally, controversial research by Martinson (1974) was reputed by the popular media to indicate that the vast majority of criminal justice programs did not work, when in fact only a slight majority did not work (51%), while nearly half of the programs did work. An exploration of why American society supports a CJ model that is focused on harsh discipline with a weak, if non-existent focus upon rehabilitation is necessary. Historical precedent points to harsh and brutal forms of correctional programs/criminal justice as being ineffective, or far less effective than more rehabilitative correctional programs and/or criminal justice models. Examples of this would include displays of brutal public torturing and executions from the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as discussed in Foucault’s work, *To Discipline and Punish* (1977). Such harsh forms of

punishment and criminal justice often foment political and social unrest (such unrest maybe necessary to prompt pro-social change), as the groups that such CJ methods affect react against damaging social consequences created by severe CJ/correctional/punitive policy (Foucault 1977).

### **Progressive – Rehabilitative Era of United States Corrections**

A general definition of the progressive era of United States corrections must be first constructed. Briefly, an early American attempt, the penitentiary model, resulted in the Walnut Street Jail (Neumeyer 1955) in Pennsylvania, founded by Quakers shortly after the American Revolutionary war, in which men were confined in solitary cells with little if any time spent outside the cell (Shelden 2008). The focus of this model was to create an environment where convicts could think introspectively about their wrongs, and begin the road to penitence from a Protestant Christian perspective. Yet, such solitary confinement with little or no social interaction often led to insanity, and the isolationist policies of early prisons was generally abandoned over time.<sup>2</sup> As a result of these developments, the early form of the American penitentiary model had been formed, and a more progressive form of criminal justice was established. Convicts were housed in a highly structured institution (instead of ship hulks, or in draconian conditions such as dungeons, or crude holding facilities), in which improvement of inmates' lives was at least part of the focus of their confinement. Yet, the focus of this study is to examine the shifts in correctional practices during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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<sup>2</sup> Note: solitary confinement is still used in some prisons as a form of discipline for convicts the penitentiary has determined are security risks, yet such practices are quite controversial (Arrigo and Bullock 2008).

Rehabilitation of the criminal is defined as reestablishing the individual as a dynamic and constructive member of society through use of various types of treatments and/or programs (Clear and Cole 2000). A main goal of rehabilitation was to return the criminal to a previous state. This goal is ironic considering that many convicts who are often poor, have never had access to the opportunities provided to middle class society. Thus many convicts have never occupied the social position rehabilitation is attempting to return them to. Sheldon (2008) outlines some of the main developments in the progressive/rehabilitative era of the nineteenth and early twentieth of American prisons, before the more recent punishment centered models of incarceration. Reform centered policies sought a solution to criminality and criminal behavior. One of the initial models of modern correctional reform was inmate self-government in which policy makers set out “to humanize, individualize, and democratize the prison” (Sheldon 2008:168). Governing bodies of prisoners were elected, and were tasked with creating and enforcing regulations, and bringing prisoner complaints to prison administration. This program was discontinued due to political pressure from its opponents . While the program was not successful, Sheldon states that this experiment was a positive development, presenting the idea that prisoners could successfully govern their own affairs.

The next stage of the modern progressive movement (which still exists today to some extent) is referred to as the medical model or medicalization of deviance. Criminal behavior is classified as a disease and/or medical disorder. To accomplish the task of treatment, experts determined that inmates should be held until treatments were complete, and to accomplish this task, indeterminate sentences were created. This resulted in

sentences being carried out until an expert determined that the inmate was successfully treated.

Prior to the twentieth century some states, mainly in the south, used a form of inmate labor known as chain gangs, which were used to accomplish public works tasks. Inmates were chained together and transported outside of their respective correctional facilities to a work site (Anderson and Dyson 2000). Yet, in the twentieth century, forced prison labor in the form of contracted labor and chain gangs was greatly reduced or eliminated. Yet, some forms of prison industry such as Unicore within the Federal Prison system are still in operation. While elimination of forced for profit hard labor within prisons was a progressive development, large amounts of idle time within prisons quickly became a new complication for prison officials, and a detrimental experience for convicts, as time which could potentially be used to improve their plight was (is) being wasted (Elrod and Brooks in Ross and Richards 2003, Sheldon 2008). The final development Sheldon (2008:172) discusses during the progressive era of corrections is the advent of the “big house prison.” Such prisons were large stone structures that held unprecedented numbers of inmates (2000-4000 prisoners), designed to be more organized and humane forms of confinement for inmates. Prisoners were housed in long rows of cells that were often many stories high.

Pratt (2011) states that during most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, prisons and correctional policy was developed by experts, yet more recent correctional programs have been dictated by public and subsequently politically popular decisions, thus excluding research and expert knowledge that often refutes the effectiveness of such haphazard program development within corrections. Compared to the correctional developments preceding

the 1970s, the American prison presence has become enormous (Irwin 2005, Pratt 2011, Ross and Richards 2003, Ristad 2008), transforming American society into what some would refer to as a prison state (Useem and Piehl 2008).

Pratt (2011) uses Norbert Elias's (2000 [1939]) theory of the civilizing process to explain the development of the progressive era in corrections in the Anglophone world. More scientific models of treatment were applied to prisons, attempting to improve the lives of inmates through useful programs that improved prisoners lives. The addition of arts and activities designed to expose inmates (who were often poor, and lacking in formal education) to culture and enlightening experiences were popular in correctional settings, and were regarded as calming and beneficial experiences for the inhabitants of prisons.

Many prison reformers and politicians from the late nineteenth century to the first five to six decades of the twentieth century saw improvement of prison conditions as indicative of a moral and just society, and societies in which prison conditions were brutal and inhumane as a mark of barbarism. Winston Churchill (Bohm 1987:380) stated, "the mood and temper of the public in regard to the treatment of crime and criminals is one of the most unfailing tests of the civilization of any country" and Dostoyevsky (1862) remarked, "The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons." The prison reform movement began with western societies, in Europe and America, and had a diffusive effect upon the rest of global society (Gibson 2011). Ironically the progressive movement reversed itself in America too.

Irwin (2005:31) comments further on the development of the "big house" prison model, discussing developments of the progressive era, in which "most excessively brutal



practices were eliminated.” Yet, many prisons during this era lacked activities for inmates to do. Such developments presented both positive and negative consequences for prison inhabitants. During the reform era, Foucault (1977) and Pratt (2011) indicate that corporal punishment was essentially eliminated from the criminal justice process, with the exception of the death penalty in cases of murder, whereas prior to the early 19<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, the punishment of death was applied to several hundred offenses. The elite/educated classes examined the lower classes infatuation with the commonly held public spectacles of physical torture and concluded that such behavior has uncivilized and barbaric, and consequently systems of punishment such as penitentiaries were developed to handle criminal offenders in a more “humane” and “civilized” manner. Thus, the argument could be presented that prison reform was at least partially generated by classist idealism. Rational thought had a part to play here too, as the idea that “the punishment must fit the crime” also came into vogue in this era (Bentham 1811).

### **The Shift**

A shift in attitude towards a harsher more punitive crime and punishment model occurred in the latter decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Progressive programs began to be eliminated, prison sentences became longer, with less parole or good time given to convicts. Prison populations began to swell in the early 80s, increasing from around 300,000 inmates to 2.3 million inmates in about thirty years, and drug-related convictions accounted for the greatest percentage of this incarceration explosion (Alexander 2012).

Further, the driving force behind the punitive shift in CJ and correctional policy is largely political, ignoring reams of research indicating that policies would not be beneficial, nor were they warranted (Alexander 2012, Irwin 2005, Platt 2001, Pratt 2011). Pratt (2011:233) indicates a shift from policy driven by academic research and expert advisement to criminal justice methods driven by politically manipulated public opinion, stating “policy-making has become more impulsive. Rather than the product of long-term planning and research, it is increasingly likely to be developed in response to exceptional cases that are then seen as ‘the norm.’”

As the prison population drastically increased to unprecedented levels in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, some interesting developments were taking place after the mid 1990s, crime rates were steadily decreasing while, ironically, fear of crime began to drastically increase. While the common sense assumption would be that crime rates were decreasing because of the advent of mass incarceration, research does not support this claim. Platt (2001:139, see also Butterfield 2000) argues that “mainstream criminologists admit that imprisonment and more punitive sentencing accounted for only five to 25% of the decline in crime.” Shelden (2008:179) states that the entire shift in correctional philosophy and the imprisonment binge can be explained with one word: “drugs.” As noted earlier, the “war on drugs” officially declared in the early 1970s under the Nixon administration, really picked up steam during the Reagan era and has continued until present. From 1982 to 2002, the number of inmates in state prisons who were convicted of drug offenses increased by 948%, and the prison population has increased from by over 400% from the early 1980s to present (Shelden 2008).

Within the public sphere, a heightened sense of fear of crime developed, even though crime rates dropped. Alexander (2012) explains that from 1980 to today, the number of inmates in prison or jail for drug offenses has increased from 41,000 to 500,000, a 1,100% increase. Carpenter (2000:149 see also Lynch 2000) explains, “that more than 60 percent of the inmates in federal prisons and 25 percent of the inmates in state prisons are incarcerated for drug offences.” Drug offenders often receive longer sentences than violent offenders (Alexander 2012).

An examination of population demographics quickly reveals that a large proportion of inmates come from working class or poor environments, and are disproportionately comprised of ethnic minorities (primarily African Americans and Hispanics). Alexander (2012:6) states that “The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid.” Vast discrepancies exist between the racial composition of incarcerated drug offenders and the percentage of usage, as four out of every five drug offenders (79%) are African American or Hispanic, while overall, only 13% of African Americans and 9% of Hispanics use drugs (King and Mauer 2002).

Platt (2001) explains that towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, criminal justice and subsequently correctional policy of the United States underwent a drastic conservative shift, “couching its repressive measures in a populist moralism” (Platt 2001: 141). McCormick (2000) points out that most of the massive expansion of the U.S. prison population is a result of shifts in policy especially in regard to drug offenders, citing legislation such as longer sentences, less good time for inmates, three strikes rules, tough on crime bills, and President Clinton’s Omnibus crime control bill (which eliminated Pell

Grants and educational opportunities for inmates). Also, prisons are the largest publicly funded organization in the United States (excepting the advent of privately operated prisons), drawing billions of dollars of financial support and providing jobs for hundreds of thousands of employees.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1970), who spent many years as a prisoner of the Russian gulags of Stalinist Russia, describes a huge prison system comprised of large numbers of facilities spread out across the vast landscape of the Soviet Union. Many comparisons (Christie 2000, Sheldon 2008) can be drawn between this model and the current state of corrections in the United States, in which the American correctional system currently incarcerates far more inmates (2.3 million) than the 1.7 million inmates incarcerated during the height of the Stalinist gulag era in Russia (Getty et. al. 1993).

Similarities between the U.S. prison system and the Stalinist gulag are numerous, such as: large prisons dispersed across a large land mass, affiliated by state or federal regulations determinate upon whether the institution is part of the 50 state correctional systems or federal correctional system. Such a system operates as a mechanism of Foucauldian social control, attempting to isolate the poor, those perceived as socially dangerous (minorities, mentally ill, deviants) apart from society. Novek (2009:377) states, "Foucault argued that the establishment of prisons made it possible for Western societies to isolate small groups of lawbreakers who could be controlled and kept under surveillance for the economic and political profit of elites." This takes on a conflict-centered perspective, in which the powerful are using legislation and the institutions to which such legislation is applied to control certain powerless and troublesome segments of society. Whether Foucault would have compared it to Marxism is debatable. This

philosophy argues that if certain powerless groups were not controlled, they may become self-aware of the socially/politically/economically oppressive conditions in which they find themselves. Consequently, this process would lead to widespread popular dissent considering the majority of most societies are comprised of many poor/powerless and a select few elite, which would be difficult to manage and could potentially result in economic disruptions and revolutionary social disruptions.

### **Punitive Era**

There have been many theories presented as explanations for the punitive shift in correctional policy. Platt (2001) offers a multi-faceted explanation for the development of the current punishment centered correctional model, pointing to an increased focus in policing, privatization of the criminal justice system, an emphasis on incarceration over rehabilitation, an apartheid system of justice (racialized), and criminalization of youth. Alexander (2012) discusses two components that explain the prison population explosion, being “the war on drugs” and the state’s politically popular “get tough on crime” criminal justice policy. Yet, Alexander also reveals a racial component affiliated with the punitive era of criminal justice, as she explains that the American correctional system functions in the same capacity as the Jim Crow laws of the pre-civil rights era deep-South. Jacob and Helms (1999) also highlight the correlation between the levels of spending on corrections and the American public’s levels of perceived racial threat, yet also indicated that increased power of conservative political groups and an increased tax base also led to increases in spending on the U.S. prison system. Jacob and Helms (1996) also find that economic inequality does explain prison admissions. Poor convicts are more likely to be

sent to prison whereas wealthier convicts are likely to receive lesser sentences or alternate sentences such as probation and/or house arrest.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Alexander's (2012) and Shelden's (2008) explanations for the punitive shift in American criminal justice policy center on the war on drugs, tough on crime political policy, and the development of an expansive prison state within the United States. Like Alexander, Shelden's discussion focuses on the drug war and development of the prison state, while Alexander's focus is on the war on drugs and tough on crime criminal justice policy (a criminal justice policy that discriminates against African Americans). The remainder of this chapter will examine the war on drugs, consider the development of America as a prison state, and determine the extent of the Prison Industrial Complex,

### *War on Drugs*

As noted in Chapter 1, the war on drugs in the United States began as a policy of the Nixon administration in the 1970s, yet really began to take shape in the early part of the 1980s during the Reagan administration. Providing an avenue to create policy that was politically popular, the drug related convictions that resulted from the drug war provided the inmate bodies needed to swell the American correctional system (state and federal) to the largest institution of its kind, globally. This created the impression that the state was concerned about and actively fighting crime. Additionally, the institutions that comprise the criminal justice system such as enforcement and corrections are allocated substantial amounts of funding to continue their operations. Grey (2001) reports that 80% of the 162,000 inmates in the state of California (which also incarcerates the largest

number of inmates among the 50 states in U.S.) were drug abusers and nearly 40% were incarcerated directly for drug offences.

In regard to socio-economic class, the war on drugs' focus is unequivocally focused on the poor (Gray 2001, Sheldon 2008). Sheldon (2008: 180) states, "In general, we can conclude that modern prisoners occupy the lowest rungs on the social class ladder, and they always have." The people who are convicted and serve prison sentences for drug crimes are generally those who lack means, both economically and socially, while the famous, wealthy, and powerful generally receive fines and/or probation (Gray 2001). Interestingly, in 1993, one in three state inmates was a drug offender, compared to one in twenty-five inmates in 1960. Courts charged with the legal proceedings necessary to prosecute drug offenders are overburdened with case-loads, often having to place defendants on waiting list dockets. Yet, the local holding facilities that confine defendants awaiting court proceedings are filled far beyond maximum capacity.

Interestingly, the war on drugs has been very successful at increasing the size of the female inmate population in the United States (Shaw 1999), increasing the female inmate population by 888% from 1986 to 1996. Additionally, in the 2000-2009 national inmate population, the female prison population increased more quickly at 2.2% than the male prison population at 1.7% (BJS 2010). Gray (2001) explains that women are generally lower level drug dealers, working for husbands or boyfriends and tend to be swept up in large drug raids. Consequently, incarcerating this specific demographic of drug offenders causes very little damage to the illicit drug market.

*America = Prison State*

While the war on drugs drastically increased the United States prison population, the American prison state provided the criminal justice system with a means of housing “problem” populations. Christie (2000:15), when referring to the powerful/large prison systems that have developed in modern industrialized nations, explains, that while modern Gulag style prison systems will no longer exterminate (referencing Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia), they do, “have the possibility of removing from ordinary social life a major segment of potential trouble-makers for most of those persons’ lives.” With the Cold War over, and external/international military threat less of an issue, the major industrialized nations turned their focus inward to internal threats. Christie explains, the poor and ethnic/racial minorities became the new target. Christie (2000:16) states that, “The major dangers of crime in modern societies are not the crimes, but the fight against them...” In modern society, many types of actions can be considered crimes, such as the use, sale, and distribution of certain types of illicit drugs such as heroin or marijuana, while other drugs which are legal such as alcohol and tobacco cause far more health risks (Gravelle and Zimmerman 1994; CDC 2002, 2004; NIAAA 2000; Viscusi 2002) and social damage than the illegal substances. The addition of thousands of laws determining thousands of behaviors to the legal system by legislators influenced by popular opinion allows for an almost limitless supply of criminal offenders to fill jails and prisons.

Another facet of this phenomenon is that many of the laws target the behavior and actions of the poor and racial minorities while disregarding and/or placing less scrutiny upon the behaviors of the affluent. Davis (2004) points out that current economic practices within the United States shift the focus of the criminal justice system to the



“poor and people of color” (Davis 2004: 67). American corporations, taking advantage of international free trade agreements, are now allowed to move their manufacturing facilities to cheaper foreign labor markets which are generally located in poor developing nations, thus taking millions of American jobs that were formerly accessible to the poor and people of color along with them. Further, Davis explains, when such manufacturing jobs leave in high volume, the communities that were supported by these jobs are left in poverty and disorder, leaving millions of low-income Americans without a viable source of income while living in communities that lack positive economic and subsequently positive social capital. Consequently, as crime rates often tend to rise in relationship to poverty (Dunway et al. 2000, Hagan 1992) and lack of community organization (Elliot et al. 1996, Sampson and Groves 1989, Sampson et al. 1997); the millions of frustrated Americans who lack economic and social opportunities in such communities often become the focus of law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Frustrated citizens who lack opportunity are likely to speak and act out against the oppressive system that initially eliminated and continues to eliminate economic and social opportunity, and as Christie (2000) stated above, the prison system can function as means of removing people that the powerful/state deems to be trouble makers from ordinary society by means of incarceration. It is widely accepted among criminological scholars that the vast majority of the American prison population is comprised of the poor (Uggen and Mana 2002, USDOJ 2000). Also, people of color (specifically African Americans) are greatly over-represented in American correctional facilities (Mauer 1999, Pettit and Western 2004).

Prisons take on the function of detention centers for what the state views as potentially troublesome and/or dangerous classes. Just was as the case with the “war on

drugs”, it is accepted that the poor, people of color, and the mentally ill all are greatly overrepresented within American prisons. Also, wealthy Americans, more likely to be convicted of white-collar crimes, generally receive shorter sentences and serve their time in lower security, relatively open facilities (Harvard Law Review 2009, Perri 2011).

Foucault (1977) explains that modern prisons have developed into a form of subtle control designed to oversee the dangerous segments of society. Social institutions begin to resemble prisons and prisons begin to resemble social institutions in both form and function. In addition, Foucault specifies that modern forms of punishment, specifically the prison, are, instead of becoming more humane, are actually becoming more efficient. Foucault calls this form of control - controlology. The modern correctional system and criminal justice system, according to Foucault, are far more advanced and far reaching than the control methods of previous centuries. The modern correctional and criminal justice system attempts to control all phases of human existence.

### *The Prison Industry*

While the previous section examined how the United States correctional system functions as a place to warehouse human bodies, this section will examine how prison systems can function as a means of generating profit in a capitalist economy. The prison industry is a multi-billion dollar profitable enterprise within the United States. Shelden (2008) attributes the size, scope, and subsequently profitability of the prison system to American style capitalism that focuses on continuously generating profit, placing the motive for profit above any potentially damaging social consequences. For example, in California, prison construction was the number one public works program, having built

20 new prisons from 1984 to 2001, while in that same time period California built only one new University (Gray 2001). Correctional trade journals are full of advertisements for prison and criminal justice related products and services. Prison and correctional facility construction companies market their services, claiming that they can deliver as many prisons as needed as quickly as needed (Christie 2000). Consequently, a profit driven motive for the confinement of human beings for long periods of time is created. According to a Marxist discussion of economics, if a need for incarceration is created, then an additional avenue to generate capital from a commodity has also been actualized, which sets the cycle of commodity = capital = ability to create more commodities = generation of more capital, into motion. Thus, the cycle of accumulation of additional capital (profit motive) explained by Marx in *Das Capital* (1867) essentially begins to operate 'under its own steam.' From this perspective, the process of incarceration shifts from a motive to create a deterrent effect to prevent and/or reduce criminal acts (a pro-social consequence, if true rehabilitation takes place) through the experience of incarceration to a method of generating profit with a capitalist economic framework.

Immediately, a conflict of interest arises between the social function of the criminal justice system and the motivations of privately held interests within the prison industrial complex (PIC). The PIC is defined as, "a burgeoning set of relationships between private corporations, public institutions and individuals that benefit from a common investment in a culture of fear and expulsion and in the growth of the punishment industry" (Sudbury 2005 in do Valle and Spira 2006: 130). The term PIC came from the term, Military Industrial Complex (MIC) that was coined by President Eisenhower when he stepped down from office in 1961 (Smith and Hattery 2010).

Eisenhower noticed a profitable relationship developing between the privately owned military defense industry and the United States government. The state provided private industry with lucrative contracts in order to mass-produce military products during the Cold War era which developed after World War II. A consequence of the Cold War was that both the United States and the former Soviet Union built up massive military arsenals, including stockpiling nuclear weapons. The danger that Eisenhower anticipated was a profit motivated relationship between private business interests and the state premised on military might. A potential outcome was the build up of unnecessarily large stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction during a globally unstable time period. Consequently, powerful corporate entities had vested interests in the continued sale and distribution of products that could potentially lead to global destruction, and unprecedented human suffering and death. Criminologists and other scholars (Davis 2003, Lilly and Deflem 1996, Smith and Hattery 2010) began to discern similarities between the MIC and the rapidly expanding American correctional system, citing a rapid buildup of industry and support services that focused on the business of prison expansion, construction, and maintenance. As stated by Davis (2004), “The vast expansion of the power of capitalist corporations over the lives of people of color and poor people in general has been accompanied by a waning anticapitalist consciousness.” Such businesses and corporations often formed remunerative relationships with the state administrated criminal justice system.

An example of this relationship would be the buildup of the private prison industry, specifically such companies as Corrections Corporation of America and the GEO Group. As an example of the rapid expansion of the private prison industry,

Christie (2000) explains that in 1987 there were 3000 prisoners in private prisons, yet by 1996 this number had expanded to 85,000. Further, a more recent report from the U.S. Bureau of Justice report (2007) stated that private prisons hold 7.2 percent of all prisoners, totaling 111,975 inmates. The concept of the profit gained from prisons is not a modern development. Christie (2000) explains that as early as the late 1700s and early 1800s, Jeremy Bentham designed his now famous Panopticon prison model. Bentham tried to sell this idea to the state, in order to financially benefit from the Panopticon's construction and utilization. Lotke (1996) explains that the expansion of the private prison industry will create an increased demand for bodies to fill empty beds within the newly constructed facilities. Increased demand for prisoners could potentially influence legislators who are being lobbied by the immense financial support provided by private prison corporations, thus creating laws that support harsher/longer sentences and continuing to focus on a punitive criminal justice policy that seeks solely to keep prisoners incarcerated instead of focusing on rehabilitative and/or community centered measures.

As the Cold War ended in 1989, the defense industry began to look for new sources of revenue and one potential source was "The War against Crime" (Christie 2000). A new push began, to develop technologies that help the criminal justice system manage and control individuals under its supervision, correctional officers control prisoners, and police apprehend suspects. Companies and corporations that formerly supplied much of the military equipment needed during the Cold War were uniquely suited to provide such materials. Equipment such as stun guns, rubber bullets, or bean bag bullets and advanced riot gear was developed to provide law enforcement with a

means of subduing suspects and inmates using non-lethal force. While the development of equipment that does not focus on killing people would certainly be considered a positive development, the underlying motives behind the defense industry for such product development was focused on generation of profit within a newly founded market. This market was essentially created by a socially and politically constructed fear of crime at the national level (Shelden 2008). Prisoners and former-prisoners can now be monitored by satellite, sending messages about the individuals' locations. Another technology can also transmit the individual's blood alcohol level (Christie 2000).

Other industries have also recognized the economic potential of the American prison system, such as drug testing services. Such services provide millions of drug tests per year, both within and outside of correctional facilities (Shelden and Brown 2000). Hi-tech computer controlled tracking systems constantly monitor inmate locations within prisons from signals sent from chips within inmate worn wrist bracelets (McFarland et al. 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The United States prison system, from a global perspective, is unique. Most developed, democratic nations have relatively small prison populations, and far smaller criminal justice systems. Yet, the U.S., which has the distinction of being the wealthiest, and supposedly most developed nation on earth, also has the largest criminal justice system and the largest prison population. Consequently, the United States' prison system has become the focus of both internal and international attention, as other nations and individuals with the U.S. attempt to understand how the criminal justice system was

allowed to evolve to its current state (Downes 2006, Vasiliades 2005). The recent economic recession has only brought more focus and criticism upon the criminal justice system as the enormous cost of maintaining a large prison system becomes an ever increasing burden on the public. In addition, an ever increasing portion of the American population (comprised of millions of people) who are either incarcerated, were formerly incarcerated, or are the family members of the incarcerated are beginning to speak out against the damaging effects of serving time and the social stigma that a felony conviction carries. This system only generates more social problems than it attempts to solve, leaving millions of Americans disenfranchised, with few civil rights and little opportunity to support themselves or their families, and families suffer along with the incarcerated. In addition, pursuing education during and post-incarceration can serve as a powerful role model to children of convicts and ex-convicts.

The first three chapters of this dissertation, Introductory, Literature Review/Theory, and Modern United States Corrections have provided important background details. Yet, after the proceeding methodology chapter of this dissertation, the central findings, discussion, policy implications, and conclusions chapters will move from characterizing the problems of the mass incarceration, the stigma of incarceration and how the formerly incarcerated access academic education as a means of improving their life chances, to investigating viable solutions for these problems.

## Chapter 4

# METHODS

### METHODOLOGICAL PARADIGM

The convict perspective presents an excellent fit with a general qualitative research perspective, especially when considering the constructionist research worldview (Creswell 2007). Qualitative research lends itself well to the convict based perspective because of the close involvement (that qualitative research generally requires) with the individuals taking part in the study. Through this perspective, researchers gain a more “up close” perspective on the group being examined (Baca Zinn 1979), which is important in extracting the essence of ex-convicts’ knowledge.

Another important factor to consider when exploring voices from within a group that is inside the issue is the “insider-outsider” group perspective. Baca Zinn (1979) assesses research on racial minorities, examining the implications of researchers belonging to the group that they are studying, such as a member of a racial minority studying their own racial group. This concept brings the *inside perspective* of convict criminology into consideration. Critics of the inside research perspective argue that research insiders are unable to apply the necessary amount of objectivity to their research (Baca Zinn 1979, Edmonds-Cady 2012). Sixsmith et. al. (2003) and Merton (1972:11 discussed by Baca Zinn), outline two views that occupy the polar ends of the insider-outsider research perspective. The insider perspective believes that *only* insiders can accurately represent the knowledge of a specific group, while the outsider perspective argues that *only* outsiders can be truly objective researchers. Jewkes and Letherby (2001) explain that the insider-outsider perspective is quite complex, and can be constantly



shifting position during the research process, with outsiders also acting as insiders and vice versa. A resolution to these extreme views is posed in the form of both insiders and outsiders uniting under the same banner in creating good research.

This study consciously represents the insider perspective of convict criminologists, who strongly represent the convict perspective, as important to the dialogue within criminological research. The actual voices of convicts, offenders, and ex-convicts are ironically often the voices not heard in the discourse of criminal justice research (Ross and Richards 2003). Through the voice of ex-convict academic *insiders*, and the research they espouse, a more accurate representation of the post-incarceration phase of the criminal justice process is fully illuminated.

The overall research approach used for my dissertation is a qualitative research design. Denzin and Lincoln (2011: 3) explain a very basic definition of qualitative research as placing the researcher in actual society, attempting to interpret social phenomena, whose research can potentially change the world. The qualitative sociologist attempts to access research in the participants' natural settings, and uses different tools to interpret research based observations of respondents. The qualitative research design, "honors an inductive style, a focus on individual meaning, and the importance of rendering the complexity of a situation" (Creswell 2007). Qualitative research lends itself well to a new area of inquiry that needs to be explored. The focus of this research is the examination of the pathways of formerly incarcerated people from prison to higher education and how this group reintegrates into society through the academy, an area of study that has received little attention in academia, thus far.

The methodological paradigm used for this study is social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1966, Gergen 2009). Social constructionism focuses on the sociology of knowledge, or how knowledge is socially *constructed*, also referred to as epistemology. Thus, I am interested in how ex-convict academics gather knowledge about their social realities. My questions will be broad in nature, “so that the participants can construct the meaning typically forged in discussions or interactions with other persons” (Crotty 1998).

The process of using the constructionist worldview in qualitative research usually does not start out with a solid foundational social theory in place, but generates structures of meaning as the study progresses. As explained below in the section on grounded theory, this study uses theory abductively in order to capture the broad theoretical underpinnings of the study. Consequently, constructionism lends itself well to my study, because I am in the process of creating a model of meaning in regard to ex-convicts experiences with higher education.

I will now speak to interpretivism, which is often associated with constructionism (Creswell 2007). During the qualitative research process, the investigators must collect the data, and then apply their personal interpretation to the data. Yet, it must be noted that some of the researcher’s own personal biases and subjective worldviews may find their way into the process of interpretation. Further, the interpretation process is subjective in nature. Researchers must be ever mindful of the subjective nature of data interpretation, as part of the process of social constructionism. Being aware of the subjective nature of the work allows researchers to potentially recognize personal biases, and eliminate them, or at least be aware of and identify their existence (Bacca Zinn 1979,

Denzin and Lincoln 2011, Ellingson 2011, Jennings and Callahan 1983). From the constructionist perspective, researchers attempt to interpret social reality through the eyes of the population being examined. This is why the inclusion of the actual voices of the group being examined is vitally important to the process of understanding social structures of meaning.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND SITES

The majority of the interviews conducted during the in-depth interview process were conducted via telephone or while at academic conferences. Some of the participants in this research project were met at a neutral location or in their homes in order to ensure confidentiality during the interview process.

All participants are ex-convicts who have served time in a correctional facility for a felony criminal conviction and who are in some way involved in higher education, such as pursuing a college degree with aspirations of working within academia, and/or presently working in academia. A felony according to Federal law is defined as a crime that is punishable by a sentence of more than a year and a day up to natural life, or death in capital cases (18 USC § 3558). Thus, even though participants may not have served an entire year in prison (due to good time or parole), the crime they have been convicted of is punishable by more than a year in prison. A descriptive table of respondents is provided as Appendix C in the Appendix section (pg 182).

## QUALITATIVE APPROACHES

### *Qualitative Data Theoretical Structure*

The qualitative data, collected from semi-structured in-depth interview transcripts in the first phase of the study and life history observations in the second phase of the study were a way of examining the participants' views. A discussion of how the theories within the conceptual framework (*Figure 1*) function together is stated in literature/theory section in chapter 2. The previously noted theoretical concepts are: 1) The convict perspective (Greene et al. 2006), which focuses primarily on critical criminology (Ross and Richards 2003), 2) Goffman's conception of social stigma (1961), and 3) the concepts of social (Portes 1998) and human capital (Coleman 1988). The above components of the conceptual framework bring together social stigma, convict perspectives, and social networks, using interview transcripts and life history analysis to glean themes, and construct knowledge about the experiences of ex-convicts within academic education.

### *Sampling Methods*

Participants were recruited using the snowball sampling technique (Miles and Huberman 1994). A convenience sample of 30 ex-convicts within higher education was acquired through ex-offender contacts in order to conduct the preliminary phase of this study. Further, pamphlets were placed at various locations, such as coffee shops, institutions of higher learning, and online, in order to recruit further participants.

Participants within this dissertation were all formerly incarcerated ex-convicts involved in academic education, defined as striving towards attainment of graduate degrees or having attained those degrees with a focus of working within academia, either in a

teaching or research capacity or a professional degree (e.g., Juris Doctor). Thus, participants were undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty or professionals.

*Semi-structured, Open-ended interviews and Methods Borrowed from Grounded Theory*

The first phase of this study utilized semi-structured, open-ended interviews (Creswell 2007). Within the course of this research project there were 30 interviews conducted which ranged from 30 minutes to 4 hours in length. The interviews used open-ended questions that were later transcribed and coded according to recurring themes within the dialogue, thus borrowing from the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1998). It must be noted that this research only borrows from grounded theory methodology, and does not use grounded theory methodology as its base methodological approach. Three theories are presented in the conceptual framework used within this study, whereas a pure grounded theory approach would begin from a theory-less approach and attempt to construct a theory based upon the qualitative results (i.e., instead of pulling already known (often large scale) theories, “off the shelf,” attempts to create micro or meso theories based on the thematic analysis of qualitative interview data).

The theoretical method being alluded to here relates to the abductive theoretical approach, rather than inductive or deductive (Beach 1997). Through this method, this study uses general ethnographic techniques that produce information from observations, and participants’ input, and through careful attention to detail, this research will be able to determine themes about ex-convicts experiences within academia and formal education (Burawoy 1991, Willis 2000). Within this process, the previous findings will then be applied to ideas and theories chosen because of their potential applicability to the

findings surmised from our research experiences and observational data (Willis 2000).

The method described above acts as a means to extend previous theories, instead of the creation of new theory as with grounded theoretical methods.

### *Follow-up Life History Interviews*

The second phase of this study is comprised of three subsequent life histories that focus on individuals from the sample who exemplify common research themes. The qualitative life history attempted to capture an individual's entire life, with a strong emphasis placed on seeing the world from the perspective of the person/people being interviewed (Caughey 2006, Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The critical life history approach (Caughey 2006) uses an individual person (per life history) as the unit of analysis. The researcher focuses on both a cultural investigation and understanding of their participant (the focus of the life history), while simultaneously conducting a cultural investigation of themselves. Thus, the key factor to Caughey's critical life history approach is for the researcher to understand the importance of how their own cultural beliefs and traditions influence their interpretations of someone else's life history. It is possible to conduct several life histories over the course of a research project, but the focus is upon the individual in question. The narrative of the history is individually focused, examining the individual's culture or cultures, and promotes personal introspection. For instance, this study accesses multiple cultures that the ex-convict academic must navigate, such as the academy, personal lives, former life styles, and experiences/relationships with the criminal justice system. While following Caughey's methodology in regards to

conducting a life history on specific respondents from my research sample, I did not incorporate the self-investigation of my own cultural traditions into this dissertation.

In addition to Caughey's life history methodology, I incorporated a life history calendar to assist in clarifying the multiple cultures and experiences the ex-convict academic must navigate (Nelson 2010), explaining their experiences with academic education, before, during, and after prison. The life history calendar allowed the participants to focus on the important experiences, turning points, and life phases, and assisted in providing me, as the researcher, with a point of reference for important life events which I could then use to ensure the reliability of my life history findings.

#### INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW AND LOGISTICS OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH

Full approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained, along with written consent of each study participant.<sup>3</sup> This is a two-phase qualitative study as discussed above, in which 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews and three life histories were conducted. Participants consisted of two groups of ex-offender academics, convict criminologists, and ex-convict academics in any discipline outside of criminology. This study recruited participants from as many types of criminal backgrounds as possible (e.g., drug crimes, property crimes, violent crimes). Gender diversity within participants was also a priority within this study, as it should be stated that rates of incarceration are growing faster for female inmates than for male inmates (Blumstein and Beck 1999). Yet it must still be noted that 93.9% convicts (Blumstein and Beck 1999) are male, and subsequently most ex-convicts are male, and subsequently there were more male ex-convict academics than female ex-convict academics in the research sample. African

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix D for a copy of the consent letter.

Americans are disproportionately represented in the U.S. prison system, comprising 39% of U.S. prison population in 2009, while 13% of general population according to the 2010 U.S. Census. Consequently, a focus will be placed on attempting to represent racial groups adequately within the sample according to prison population demographics, yet if it is found that there is a lack of representation among any racial group, this particular phenomenon will be examined. Because of diversity in sentence length among the participant group, an discussion of effects of different lengths of sentence on pathways to academic education is examined in chapter 5.

The participants associated with the convict criminologist (CC) discipline consist of a national convenience sample, as these faculty and students reside throughout the United States, and such interviews may require travel. The group outside of con-crim will be sampled from the Lincoln, Nebraska area, yet interviews may potentially be carried out in other communities in Nebraska, and potentially, in other states if the additional participants are needed due to potential lack of participants in the Nebraska area. The interviews consisted of open-ended questions, or questions that encourage/allowed the participants to give broad and inclusive responses, without placing limitations or boundaries on the response structure. The interview protocol is located under Appendix A. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) state that the use of interviews is conventional within qualitative research. This allows the researcher to capture the “emic” or insider perspective through the actual words of the study participants. The next phase of this study involves three detailed life histories (Caughey 2006) of key individuals (individuals who exemplify specific themes). For this study, the data were collected over the Spring of 2012.



The primary source of data collection within this study was through digital audio recording. Ex-convict academics, both convict criminologists and ex-convicts in higher education in other disciplines were interviewed. Data were stored in a secure location to ensure confidentiality. The interviews were transcribed to a Microsoft Word document, were thematically coded, and then processed using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. After transcription, the interviews were stored on a secure external hard drive inside a locked office. The participants' names were removed from the transcripts and replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and pseudonyms were used for participants when their thematic points were presented within the results section of this study.

A life history calendar approach (Nelson 2010) of data collection was also used during the life history portion of this study. Participants were sent a Word document, as all life history participants were several hundred miles away, to allow participants to more easily differentiate different concepts and life phases, and then send back as an email attachment for purposes of convenience. The life history calendars were stored in a locked cabinet in a locked office, and the participants' assigned pseudonyms were used when their calendar results were discussed within the study write up.

#### CODING, DATA ANALYSIS AND MEMBER CHECKING

When conducting qualitative research, large amounts of data were created, including hundreds of pages of interview transcripts. When analyzing in-depth interviews in the first phase of the study (Caughey 2006, Creswell 2007, Strauss and Corbin 1998), the material was analyzed in order to find recurrent themes, and/ or

prevalent ideas faced by ex-offenders engaged in post-graduate education. The qualitative data were arranged in an orderly fashion in chronological order. Such themes were coded according to recurrence within the transcriptions using MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software. I then wrote memos, and wrote notes in margins, looking for important concepts. In the next phase, referred to as “open coding,” I examined the text for important categories of information and concurrent concepts or themes. These themes were then organized into a table, which contains the most prevalent themes found throughout the interview data, in an organized fashion, which allowed me to categorize their data in an orderly fashion.

In regard to my in-depth interviews data analysis procedure, I borrowed from the detailed grounded theory procedures laid out by Creswell (2007: 156-7).

- Data Managing (Create and organize files for data)
- Reading, memoing (read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes)
- Describing (describe open coding categories)
- Classifying (select one open coding category for central phenomenon in process)
- Interpreting (Engage in selective coding and interrelate the categories to develop “story” or propositions)

The next phase of data analysis focused on life history analysis, which Caughey (2006) describes as individual ethnography. The analysis process that this study used is outlined by Creswell (2007: 156-7).

- Data managing (Create and organize files for data)

- Reading, memoing (Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes)
- Describing (describe the social setting, actors, events; draw picture of the setting)
- Classifying (analyze data for themes and patterned regularities)
- Interpreting (Interpret and make sense of the findings – how the culture works)

As noted above, to assist in clarifying the multiple cultures and experiences that the ex-convict academics must navigate, the participants were asked to draw out a life history calendar (Nelson 2010), explaining their experiences with academic education, before, during, and after prison. The calendars were analyzed for common themes.

This study also involved member checking (Creswell and Plano-Clark 2011: 211), or involving the study participants in the research process in order to improve the study's quality. Through the voices of participants, and allowing the participants to view the research results, the study achieved a higher level of validity. I presented my findings to key members of my qualitative sample and asked them to examine the data and determine if the results are being recorded properly, and if the themes are similar to their own experiences, or something entirely different. I then triangulated by member checking several individuals in case just one or two individuals' opinions of the data would introduce bias into the study.

## STUDY TIMELINE AND PILOT RESEARCH

This study began in the Spring semester of 2012. Initially, I submitted my project outline and protocol to the Institutional Review Board, and the project and protocol was approved by the IRB, in order to begin the research process. The process within this qualitative research project required that the interviews be scheduled, and some required travel, then the interviews were conducted, and then the data transcribed. Data collection for approximately 30 interviews and 3 life histories, and transcription was a time consuming process that took 9 months to complete. Next, the data must was analyzed, written up, and discussed, which took approximately 6 months. Thus, the dissertation process took approximately 15 months to complete. Thus, the date of completion for my entire dissertation is May of 2013 (spring semester).

The process of the preliminary study has resulted in a more refined outline for my research process. This research project underwent a trial run in a qualitative methods seminar, during the course of the spring semester of 2011, as the research protocol was applied to a preliminary group of research participants, in what was referred to as a “mini-research project.” This process, coupled with the proposal construction process was quite helpful in constructing a solid dissertation.

### *Limitations*

This study does possess some limitations. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, the main focus of this study was to provide a rich understanding of a very specialized group of talented academics. Consequently, the focal point of this research through the utilization of in-depth semi-structured interviews was not to reach conclusions that could be generalized to a broad audience, but to provide an in-depth picture of the educational pathways of formerly incarcerated individuals. Because of the

relatively small total population of this hard to reach group, the findings of this research are generally only applied to the sphere that this group exists within (Hatch 2002) and not generalized to the large ex-convict population. The 3 life histories chosen from the in-depth interview sample of 30 were meant to represent some of the most common themes presented within the qualitative sample, yet each of the 3 participants still possessed many intrinsic characteristics that would limit their generalizability within the academic ex-convict population.

As mentioned above, in order to obtain an adequate sample, this study utilized what is referred to a snowball sampling or convenience sampling technique (Miles and Huberman 1994). Because of the relative hidden nature of this population, excepting a few very open members of the CC group, many of the participants in this study would not have been reached by standard random sampling techniques.

Another potential limitation that must be highlighted is the potential for social desirability bias (Williams and Heikes 1993). It is possible that because I was perceived as filling the role of researcher and thus a figure of authority, study participants could potentially alter responses. Additionally, my status as a doctoral candidate near the end of my graduate school process may have had some bearing on participant responses at the undergraduate and lower levels of graduate school, while not affecting participants who were at higher positions than myself. Participants within this research project came from diverse stages in the academic process, from undergrads with academic aspirations to academics with full tenure status.

This research does focus on the success stories, examining a group of individuals who overcame and/or are overcoming multiple social and legal obstacles in order to gain

their educations and often eventually attain high status positions. Thus, the balance of those individuals who did not take the academic/educational route after prison, or who attempted graduate school yet did not succeed is not examined yet could be the topic of future research.

## Chapter 5

### That PhD cuts a lot of stigma!

#### Introduction

*“I didn’t consider myself all that smart – I didn’t think I had an aptitude for college. A lot of people in high school told me I didn’t. I grew up super poor – white trash family. Not so much a negative thing, just poor. Young people react to that differently. I was a trouble maker as a kid; I guess they figured I always would be.” (-Luann)*

The phenomenon that Luann speaks of as a formerly incarcerated person is that of overcoming great adversity in the face of nearly insurmountable odds. Many of the participants within this research have crossed the incredible distance of multiple socially constructed obstacles in order to reach the upper strata of some of society’s higher status academic positions. The path from incarceration to that those that become academics and researchers who possess the highest levels of formal education that society has to offer is a multi-faceted journey. Such individuals come from varying socio-economic statuses, criminal convictions, prison locations, and sentence lengths. Within this chapter, this phenomenon, among many other themes that will be indentified, will be referred to as “force of nature” individuals. Such people stand out among the general population of academics for having not only overcome felony convictions to arrive at academic positions, but also for having moved past the obstacles of virtually no economic capital and holding mostly devalued forms of social capital. In addition, some of the force of nature participants have surmounted resistance from their academic institutions, with limited or no mentorship and/or guidance (yet some force of nature participants did have strong membership), and lack of middle class mannerisms needed to navigate an

academy firmly ensconced in status-quo social values (having to learn such skills on their own), and how to maneuver the confusing academic labyrinth.

This chapter examines themes presented from in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants who share the common characteristics of a felony conviction and involvement in academic pursuits (professors, graduate students, undergraduates with academic aspirations). The themes presented are located under three major perspectives, outlined in chapter one (pg 11), social/human capital, social stigma, and insider perspective. The main research question asked is: what are the pathways and experiences ex-convicts face when trying to acquire and/or use higher educational credentials (for example, Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees)?

#### *General Participant Characteristics*

While, there was a great deal of diversity within this sample (n=30), when examining racial demographics, 23 of 30 (77%) of respondents were white. The average participant was 47 years old, white, male, married or in a relationship, and was either a professor, researcher, graduate student, or undergraduate.

Of the remaining 7 respondents, 4 were African American, one was African, and two participants identified themselves as of mixed race. In regard to gender, the sample was mostly men, with 4 female participants (13%) out of 30 total. Yet this is closely reflective of the gender demographics within United States prison system, comprising nearly 9% of the total of 2.3 million prisoners in state prisons, federal prisons, and jails (BJS 2012). While 24 of the participants were from the United States, 6 were from international locations, 5 being from Europe, and 1 residing in the South Pacific. Twenty



of the 30 participants have children. The average sentence length for this sample was 3.96 years, with sentences ranging from 3 months to 20 years.

*Descriptive Table 1*

| Variable                         | n/%                        |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>AGE</b>                       |                            |
| Range                            | 25-61 yrs                  |
| Average                          | 47.5 yrs                   |
| <b>GENDER</b>                    |                            |
| Women                            | 16.7%<br>5/30 respondents  |
| Men                              | 83.3%<br>25/30 respondents |
| <b>RACE</b>                      |                            |
| White                            | 76.7%<br>23/30 respondents |
| African American                 | 13.3%<br>4/30 respondents  |
| African                          | 3.3%<br>1/30 respondents   |
| Other                            | 6.7%<br>2/30 respondents   |
| <b>EDUCATION</b>                 |                            |
| Some College                     | 26.7%<br>8/30 respondents  |
| Bachelor's Degree                | 10%<br>3/30 respondents    |
| Master's Degree                  | 16.7%<br>5/30 respondents  |
| PhD/EDD                          | 43.3%<br>13/30 respondents |
| Vocational/Professional training | 3.3%<br>1/30 respondent    |
| Mean Annual Income               | \$58,000                   |

### *Themes*

Within this dissertation, there are three theoretical sections as originally identified in Chapter 1 (*Figure 1*): Social and Human Capital, Social Stigma, and Insider Perspective, each with basic themes, and several subthemes. The social and human capital theory section examines the respondents' relationships between mentorship and respondent motivating factors on the journey to finding their academic identity. The stigma theory section explores how the process of incarceration, including sentence length and types of conviction, affected bias and resistance experienced by participants in the academic and professional sphere. The final theory section in this chapter presents the participants' own understanding and interpretation of the insider perspective that informs their scholarship within the academy. It also examines the reciprocal relationship between the construction of convict criminology as a discipline by ex-convict academics, as it concurrently serves to guide these individuals through the rigors of academia.

### **Social and Human Capital Theme**

To reiterate, social capital focuses on social networks that generally provide positive social support for participants, while human capital focuses on educational credentials. You can't let them down, prison is just a misstep, force of nature individuals, found myself in prison, and pre-prison education are the basic themes within the social and human capital broad themes section.

*Table 2: Social and Human Capital Themes*

| <b>Basic themes</b>                                      | <b>Subthemes</b>  |
|--|---|
| “You can’t let them down.”                               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentorship</li> <li>• Anti-mentorship</li> </ul> |
| “prison thing is just sort of the misstep along the way” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Detour</li> </ul>                                |
| Force of nature individuals                              |   |
| Found myself in prison                                   |   |

### “YOU CAN’T LET THEM DOWN”

Guidance through the complexities of higher education was an important concept that could operate either as a gateway to success or a barrier to advancement through academia. As noted by Orrick et al. (2011) and Hochstetler and Pratt (2010), social support mechanisms such as mentorship are a powerful agent in improving the lives of the formerly incarcerated and reducing the chances of recidivism. Accessing individuals within college, academia, or motivating people outside of these contexts proved to be valuable to the process of gaining access to higher education, such as college and graduate schools. The knowledge of who to talk to, connections to administrators or influential faculty. Yet, just providing an extra “push” to succeed and overcome was important for many participants, in regards to providing that extra motivation to keep on striving towards their goals. Mentors took many roles, some being more forceful in their mentees’ lives, actively influencing their mentees to succeed, providing step by step guidance, and monitoring their progress. Other mentors took a more hands off approach yet would provide basic directives and encouragement. Both

provided powerful results, but these tended to be contingent on the personal characteristics of both the mentor and the mentee (participants).

Gary's mentor played a very active role in his life, and saw qualities in Gary that he did not necessarily see in himself. His mentor put his reputation on the line to support Gary's academic progress. Gary explains that such mentorship has a very powerful effect.

...you know because if you have someone like that standing in your corner you can't let them down. –Gary

At one point, Martin, who works in academic and applied criminal justice capacities for an East Coast state university, had actually thrown away his dissertation. He had reached a point at which his progress had stagnated and lost hope in completing the process. Yet, his mentor and chair of his dissertation committee took action.

.... my mentor, my supervising professor, my chair of my dissertation came to my home, knocked on my door and said I haven't seen you at the university, let me tell you something. You don't quit until I tell you you're done. –Martin

In the case of Andrew, he discusses the process of mentorship within academia as he interprets it. His experience was more general, as his mentorship experience was of the more hands off approach. Andrew was nearly done with his graduate education when he was incarcerated, and thus already had a strong working knowledge of the academic environment before he entered prison. Yet, he does explain how his mentorship process functioned.

You find people who could give you answers, people who are willing to mentor you, people who are willing to show you where the resources are and everything that comes into your life and set you on this path and you just walk the path.

Andrew also explained that 12 step drug and alcohol recovery programs post-incarceration served in a mentorship capacity for him. He found guidance and advice

from other members of such organizations that allowed him to remain free of drugs and alcohol, which had been a partial cause of his journey to incarceration.

To summarize, academic mentorship plays a very powerful role in the lives of formerly incarcerated academics. Such individuals were commonly quite grateful for their mentorship experiences, explaining that they could not have completed their graduate education or successfully moved on to academic jobs without the care, concern, and often action taken by an individual(s) who took the time to invest in the well-being of someone else.

### *Anti-mentorship*

Discouragement was a theme that many formerly incarcerated academics also faced. Often, when many participants revealed aspirations of pursuing higher education, authority figures and family members would question the rationality of their actions. When discouraged, participants were told that they were not well suited for higher education, and that there was no future in such pursuits. In some cases, the participants perceived jealousy on the part of their probation officers and/or other correctional officials. In certain cases, the ex-inmate's mentor would partially encourage them, yet didn't fully understand the importance of graduate school.

While most of the participants in the study were formerly incarcerated academics and/or college students, two of the participants served in professional roles as counselors or non-profit administrators who worked with ex-convicts. Ron, one of the 6 international participants in this research and a formerly incarcerated counselor living in Northern Europe, explained that he had aspirations of studying to become a journalist

while serving a 6 year prison sentence. Ron excelled at writing, and was considering taking courses in journalism. Ron discussed what happened when he revealed such plans to his prison counselor:

“One time, I like to read, to write, and I had plans to maybe study to be a journalist, and I told the counselor I got in the prison, listen I have this plan to be a journalist, maybe try to upgrade my grades, and uhhh... maybe go to university. (Counselor says) No – no, that’s nothing for you.”

-Ron

Certain participants reported discouragement from family members who presented their intentions from the perspective of good advice or just being practical. Luann pointed out that while some junior college faculty encouraged her to go further in college, her mother, family, and friends did not share such ideas.

My mom she, she’s always been kinda funny so no she wasn’t too supportive. She was really not supportive of my 1<sup>st</sup> two years, then when I told her I was leaving to go get a bachelors degree she had a fit. It was like you can’t do that. Everybody tried to tell me you can’t do that, get a 4 year degree. -Luann

Jenny had no mentorship at all during prison, adding that family did not support her when she was incarcerated, and admits little desire to return to education immediately after she was released from prison. Within the federal women’s prison Jenny was incarcerated in, there were very few educational opportunities present. Jenny explains that she had lost motivation to learn due to the prison experience.

I didn’t feel capable of going back to school and I had no mentor. –Jenny

In the preceding section, “You can’t let them down,” the participants spoke of mentors to whom they felt a strong sense of obligation. Because of the assistance put forth and encouragement provided by educational mentors, the participants felt a strong sense of obligation and dedication to continue with their educations. Yet, when no mentor was

present, such as in correctional institutions that did not allow access to post-secondary educational opportunities, the participant had no one to let down, while some of the participants had to actively resist the negative mentoring of family and/or authority figures. Consequently, participants in this section spoke of an additional component of resistance in their struggle/continuing struggle through their educational journeys.

“PRISON THING IS JUST SORT OF THE MISSTEP ALONG THE WAY.”

Many of the participants spoke of the prison experience as a “detour” from their academic lives, delaying their attainment of the human capital necessary to become academics. Within this basic theme, the formerly incarcerated participants were interested in learning and reading, and were often quite precocious in their pre prison lives. Many participants spoke of being perceived by their family, friends, and acquaintances as possessing above average intelligence. Some participants had acquired some college or completed degrees before they were incarcerated. Then participants entered a phase in their lives when they engaged in illegal activities that eventually resulted in a felony criminal conviction. This conviction required them to serve time in prison. The participants eventually returned to society, and either continued their education or began the process of attaining higher education.

In certain cases, the participant’s eyes were opened while in prison. Betty discusses what could be equated to the “pains of imprisonment” (Sykes 1958) and the motivational force that it provided. She speaks directly to the detour concept.

it scared me to death. It just, being in prison was such an eye opening experience. I knew the minute I got out that if they would let me out at any recent amount of time, or decent amount of time that I was going to go to school. Cause that was

the plan all along – go to the army then go to college after I got out. And that’s the prison thing is just sort of the misstep along the way. A little detour. –Betty

Andrew explains that he was already enrolled in graduate school when he was incarcerated, thus his experience was very clearly a short detour in which he had to serve out a relatively short sentence before returning to his university to complete his PhD.

I was already on the path so it forced me to set a goal to learn while incarcerated so that I could pick it up after prison.

Many participants who experienced the detour phenomenon explained that they did well in school before they become involved in the behaviors that led to their convictions. They tended to function as naturally intelligent individuals. In regard to the 6 participants who identified as racial minorities, 50% explained that they were recognized as being intelligent/academically proficient before they experienced incarceration, thus in alignment with the detour concept, while the other 50% did not identify with this concept. If examining the proportion of participants who identify with the detour concept from the perspective of race, it appears that approximately half of the white respondents and half of the respondents from disadvantaged minorities would classify as experiencing the detour phenomenon. Thus, it does appear that candidates that are viewed as naturally intelligent were equally represented across minority and white respondents. From a socio-economic perspective, 5 of the 30 participants came from backgrounds of economic disadvantage, and only 1 of five of these individuals identified with the detour concept, while the majority of the “detour” participants were raised in middle class families. Luann, a single mother, raised in an environment of economic disadvantage, identified with the detour concept. During her teen years and in early adulthood, Luann spent a lot of time out on the streets, and become well-known to



local law enforcement who would often target her, thus she spent a large amount of time in juvenile detention. She was unable to continue secondary education, and had to take the GED at 16. Being incarcerated as a juvenile and as an adult, Luann explains that as a minor, she performed very well on her GED exams, with minimal preparation:

...so as soon as I turned 16 the school signed the thing and my mom signed so that I could take my GED. And yah I took my GED right away. I went to study like 1 time and she was like oh you don't need to study and I was actually, when I took it I was 1 point away from getting a scholarship.

### FORCE OF NATURE INDIVIDUALS

The next basic theme presented under the broad Social and Human Capital theme is the phenomenon of “force of nature individuals.” Within the context of this snowball sample (Miles and Huberman 1994), many of the participants being formerly incarcerated academics (within Criminology and Criminal Justice related fields) and professionals have overcome nearly insurmountable odds to attain the highest levels of educational and academic achievement. These educational and occupational attainments represent a feat that even few individuals without the added burden of a felony record achieve. Yet, within this sample specific individuals presented themselves that had overcome more social structural barriers than others. Such individuals have overcome the frustrations and strain (Agnew 1992) of a criminal conviction that (except in rare circumstances) generates multiple obstacles such as limited employment opportunities and income potential and negative social stigma. This process potentially generates severe limitations on the formerly incarcerated individual’s ability to reach status quo definitions of success, resulting in frustration and dissatisfaction with their life chances. Existing in

a criminal justice system that sends 7 of 10 offenders back to prison (Visher and Travis 2003), formerly incarcerated academics are operating against stiff odds.

The force of nature individual often comes from lower socio-economic status and espouses street culture or working class mannerisms that make it more difficult to navigate the middle class social interactions expected in the academy (Bourdieu 1973), and have limited access to positive and/or influential social and human capital.

Luann, currently a college professor at a liberal arts college and mother, explains that she grew up in severe poverty and did not think that she had the ability to attend college. In addition, her high school teachers told her that she was not cut out for college, and should not even attempt it. Luann explains the difficulties experienced in her pre-prison life as highlighted in the quote that opens this chapter;

I didn't consider myself all that smart – I didn't think I had an aptitude for college. A lot of people in high school told me I didn't. I grew up super poor – white trash family. Not so much a negative thing, just poor. Young people react to that differently. I was a troublemaker as a kid; I guess they figured I always would be.

Macon, a tenured professor at a mid-sized university, explains that even though he served more than a decade, after he was released from prison, he still had the fortitude to work construction to save up for doing a senior thesis research project in his undergraduate degree, and then worked for 5 more years attending graduate school. The extreme length of Macon's prison sentence had essentially eliminated all of his connections to social and human capital.

I quit school for 2 years to save enough money to do a real piece of research for my senior seminar and actually dept of youth services in MO took a very substantial chance and allowed me to go in and do a full formative evaluation of their most successful juvenile treatment program. Which actually, technically

was really close to breaking the law letting me do that. But they were so impressed and they took the chance to have me do it. -Macon

...they went to the state legislature and tried to get them to allow me to be hired but they wouldn't so I had to return to construction work and work for another 5 years in construction before I could apply for grad school.

The respondents in this section overcame additional barriers in order to access the highest level of academic attainment. It must be stated that barriers to force of nature participants varied, including both economic disadvantages and sentence length. Such individuals came from many different backgrounds and entered this study with varying levels and forms of social and human capital. Yet, the overarching pattern of force of nature participants is that they overcame extensive social barriers and negative feedback even in comparison to the formidable barriers presented to the non-force of nature respondents. The key component that must be identified is the dynamic that motivated the factor or combination of factors which operated to enable such individuals to attain academic success, instead of giving in to failure as most individuals would.

#### GREW UP/FOUND THEIR INTELLECTUAL SELVES IN PRISON

On their journey to developing human capital, several participants reported that they found their intellectual selves in prison. The prison sentence forcefully removed the convict from “outside” society and placed them in a total institution (Goffman 1961). Participants expressed that this complete separation from the influences of everyday existence in non-carceral society allowed them to think introspectively about their lives, to read extensively, to form strict routines of discipline and develop skills and ideas that “everyday life” would not have allowed for due to its busy and chaotic nature, even in the absence of formal educational opportunities in prison. Respondents either found small

pockets of intellectualism that had flourished on their own within the prison environment or created their own personal pockets of intellectualism while serving time in prison.

Luann explained that she grew up and out of her pre-prison lifestyle, and incarceration provided her with time to think about these issues. She determined that her old lifestyle was no longer working for her and made the decision to change her life course.

I would argue the aging out process man. Basically I fucking grew up and matured. That's as simple as I can make it. We can sit here and psycho analyze shit to the cows come home, but at the end of the day I think it's just a matter of maturity, finally growing up and saying hey man I'm getting too old for this bull shit.

-Luann

David explains that he became an adult while in prison. While David had previously attended college and was legally an adult in years, he expressed that he was quite immature and did not function as an adult. A fairly long prison sentence, David expressed, gave him the time to grow up, and take some time to look at himself.

well there was you could say and don't take this out of context but I essentially became an adult while in prison even though I had 3 years of college behind me even though I was 22 years old...

After incarceration, David went on to attain a PhD in sociology, and is currently working on a Master's Degree in Divinity. Thus, the process of maturation David experienced in prison allowed him to gain the patience needed to attain his educational goals. Yet, it must be noted that David did come from an upper middle class background and consequently, did arguably have access to greater levels of economic capital than the most ex-convicts upon release from prison.

Greg, an advanced graduate student at a large university, discusses the process he went through to pursue education. He expressed that prison gave him the time to reflect

and to consider the direction his life was going in. The negativity of the environment he found himself in coupled with a substantial amount of time to reflect upon his life course provided the motivation necessary to return to education. He found his academic self while incarcerated, a part of his existence that Greg thought he had lost before prison.

Greg discusses his environment and how he arrived at his goal.

Just a fucking depressing environment. Like everybody hates fucking holidays, people were like angry over the holidays. That was around the time I kind of had that epiphany too was around Christmas and New Years. It was just like shitty man, it's depressing. I was just like fuck it I'm going to go back to college. It just stuck in my head, like it's the only thing I could figure out to do that made any sense. Maybe if I do that I'll have a goal and maybe I can pull myself up out of this horrible mess. And so that became my goal and my 1<sup>st</sup> goal was I just wanted to get a bachelors degree.

Martin discusses his struggles with simultaneously attempting to exist in the convict social sphere while moving away from what he perceived as an unproductive/negative lifestyle. He explains that he tried to help his fellow convicts while in prison, offering support and helping them with personal issues, but was at the same time attempting to distance himself from his former lifestyle. Martin wanted something different and found this in learning, as he points out.

How do you walk the fine line between being an acceptable convict and wanting to do something else with your life. I mean never forgot who I was, I never forgot my fellow man. I always did everything I could inside to help them but at the same time, yah I was making major, major changes.

-Martin

The concept of *major changes* that Martin states in the above quote refers to the fine line that an incarcerated inmate must walk between staying within the bounds of convict culture in order to maintain respect, a vital quality to possess in prison, while attempting to simultaneously improve their lives. Martin did not want to appear as if he was putting

on airs, and/or trying to be better than his fellow inmates, yet did understand the value of improving his life through education and learning.

### *Human/Social Capital Summary*

The primary idea emphasized by participants within the social and human capital section is the detour theme. Participants took different pathways, depending on levels of pre-prison educational attainment, yet the driving concept is that the life choices that led them to incarceration temporarily diverted the attainment of the human capital necessary to become academics/professionals. Ex-convict academics who did not have any post-secondary educational attainment before prison had to overcome many more obstacles, over a longer period of time than the participants who had some or substantial pre-prison educational attainment. Also, the question of whether all of the participants in this sample possessed above average intelligence and perhaps had access to resources and capital that the majority of incarcerated people do not have must be examined. In the next basic theme, this research will discuss this topic, as the possession of additional capital and resources possibly assists respondents in overcoming stigma.

### **Social Stigma**

With a felony conviction comes a negative social stigma that many participants reported is permanent in its repercussions. Stigma, as discussed in Chapter 1, is referred to as, “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman 1963). Many participants explained that the ex-convict stigma experience is unique from the perspective that society often perceives that they deserve their stigma. Because society views the individual as entirely willing to commit the criminal act that resulted in their felony

conviction and subsequent prison sentences, society is justified in rendering moral judgments upon the ex-convict. The criminal justice system views convicted criminals as individually responsible for their actions, and does not recognize social structural barriers. Yet, many participants point out that they have desisted from crime, often for years and/or decades, and are statistically no more likely to commit crime than any other citizen, yet their stigma is still maintained by a society that is hesitant to forgive them for past actions or acknowledge that a debt has been paid through sentencing completion.

Within this section, many common themes arose. Participants who were formerly incarcerated people now working as academics spoke of experiences of stigma within their academic experiences, or that the length of their sentence affected how society responded to them. Several participants spoke about societal responses to the different types of criminal convictions, and some reported that the era when they were incarcerated had powerful effects on later outcomes.

#### STIGMA WITHIN ACADEMIA

Many participants expressed that they had experienced varying levels of stigma within the academy, both within graduate school and as faculty. There was a wide range of individual experience here, with some participants receiving little or no stigma while others were the victims of very explicit stigmatization. Some participants experienced stigmatization in the form of being treated differently by specific faculty within their academic departments, while others had difficulties within the hiring process, or the process of attaining tenure.

Table 3: Stigma Themes

| Broad Themes       | Subthemes   |
|--------------------|---|
| Stigma in academia | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Glass ceiling</li> <li>• Permanent jacket</li> <li>• High/low profiles in academia</li> <li>• Once out – always out</li> </ul> |
| Sentence length    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Damages of prison</li> </ul>   |
| Type of crime      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different decades</li> <li>• Change stigma in CJ system?</li> </ul>  |

Macon explains that he was always honest and upfront about his conviction. He served a long sentence and then returned to school, finishing his Bachelor's Degree and eventually attaining a PhD. Yet, when first applying to graduate schools, many departments did not want to look at his application, and would not even respond to him, often literally throwing his application away, as explained below.

in graduate school I applied through a research 1 institution and they didn't even respond to my application. Again I've always been honest. In the leading paragraph I said I served a (decade +) sentence & completed it, was on parole and wanted to go to graduate school. And they put it in file 13 (trash can), didn't respond. –Macon

Luann felt that she had experienced multiple forms of stigma at once. She explains:

*So I think more than anything I kinda feel a double or triple stigma. I got to protect my 'hand is for jail' tattoo that I got when I was 13 years old. Anybody that looks at that that's worked in prisons or jails, they know that's a jail tattoo. That's not a shop tattoo.*

Luann also worries about her social class and gender intersecting with certain stigmatizing effects. She points out that:

I do think that, I worry about how that will affect me professionally in my career, being poor and being a convict criminologist, coming from this background, how I carry myself and being a woman because we know you guys, the men start out a little bit higher than we do.



Andrew points out that when some other faculty in his department found out about his hire, they were resistant. Yet many faculty did support him and used their influence to protect him:

“Once people found out, most disapproved of my hire but some supported and protected me from the naysayers and used their influence and capital to keep me around.”

In the case of David, who was convicted of a sex offense over 20 years ago, the focus of his obstacle is overcoming the massive stigma attached to having to list his name on the sexual offender registry. Within the context of formerly incarcerated academics, sexual offenses function as a stigma within a stigma. David has experienced loss of graduate school assistantships, teaching positions, and potential jobs. Finding employment has been exceptionally difficult for David. Yet, he still attained his PhD, and has a strong record of publication. Because of difficulties finding employment, David who maintains a strong spiritual practice, has returned to graduate school, pursuing a degree in divinity. David, has found some degree of acceptance within religious institutions. Yet, he has managed to continue to attend conferences, conduct scholarly research, pursue education and apply for faculty positions.

## GLASS CEILING

Stigma was also noted in advancement up the academic career ladder, as this is usually a difficult process that could be intensified by the label of “ex-convict.” Some participants noted that ex-convict professors were often kept from advancing in to

administrative positions within academic institutions. Jim, a professor at a medium sized yet well-respected university explains,

and another thing, right now I'm up against it. I call it the glass ceiling. I think most of us w/ criminal records who complete PhD's that we get hired at universities and we get tenured but they may not want us to be department chair.

As a sex offender, David faced more severe stigma than many formerly incarcerated academics, and has difficulty securing employment. He explains that he lost a graduate teaching assistantship because of laws directed at sexual offenders:

Yes, definitely, definitely this is particular because I have the quote unquote sex offender label. I know that I have been denied employment I've lost multiple jobs because first the first job I lost as graduate teaching assistant when the state senate bill (bill that disallowed sex-offenders from receiving any university funding) was signed into law...

Greg, a graduate student convicted of a first time drug offense over a decade ago indicated that sometimes faculty do not possess the language to speak about being formerly incarcerated. When he applied for a Fulbright Grant in graduate school, his committee found the issue of incarceration very difficult to talk about, and there was a sense that people in the room were not comfortable,

You have to meet w/ committees that go over your multidisciplinary committees of faculty from the univ that go over your Fulbright application. Well they, I had told them about it as part of my application. Part of the Fulbright's asks you to disclose, it's full disclosure w/ them. They didn't know how to talk about it. When they were like ...ahhhh, well your uhhhh... experience that you had well, we don't.... I could tell they were uncomfortable w/ it. It made them squirmy and I can, you can pick up a vibe in a room. Almost a stuffiness kind of about it, sort of a pretentiousness that's there, haughty attitude perhaps. I'd like to get angry at them but I think they just didn't possess the, they don't have the ability to; they never ran into a situation like this. I don't think they had ever ran into this situation before.

In some cases, participants reported being very open about their backgrounds, and used this high level of exposure to bring attention to important issues surrounding mass

incarceration and the formerly incarcerated. Other universities exert pressure on their formerly incarcerated faculty, as Jim explains, to maintain a low profile:

“I’m very high profile. It kinda depends on the way a person plays it. I’ve played it very high profile, doing a lot of media but at ‘(Midwestern) University’ they told Prof Smith (pseudonym) to keep it low profile and he has and so he was chair for a while. But that’s what I’m trying to say – universities hire us, we get tenured but they still, they want to have this clean reputation. Cause people send their kids to school there.”

It must be noted that the glass ceiling is a concept that applies at every level of the academy for oppressed groups, including women, minorities, and the formerly incarcerated. Such groups rise through the ranks of the academy, yet reach barriers or “ceilings” which they cannot rise above. In the case of Jim, he has attained the status of full professor, the highest status a professor can attain outside of administration, yet he notes that it is very difficult for ex-convict academics to rise into the administrative sphere in academia.

#### ONCE OUT – ALWAYS OUT

Coming out, and telling others about a previous felony conviction is described as a complex process. Some participants were very open about this and keep a high profile in regards to their ex-convict backgrounds. Participants carefully observed others to determine if it would be appropriate before making the decision to out their ex-convict identity, as Greg explains,

“On outing myself, it depends, in undergraduate I generally kept it to a very close circle of people that I told about my experience and the ones that I told I generally would sort of observe them. They would go through a period of observation. I would vet them I guess you would say and determine if they were trustworthy people that I could confide in. If I made that determination I would tell them and generally they were quite supportive of my actions.”

Jenny explains that she does not bring up her felony conviction in conversation, and only confides in her closest acquaintances,

“No. do I bring it up in casual conversation. No. There are a few students that do know, but they are people that I’m close to.”

Jenny reported that the permanent nature of being formerly incarcerated and having a felony conviction frustrated her. When thinking about telling her children about the process of doing something wrong, Jenny points out:

“Because that's what we are always taught. You do something wrong, you're punished and then it's done, but that's just not the reality of that situation. So how's he's seeing it is pure and the way it's suppose to be. It's the way it's supposed to be. Is it the way it is? Absolutely not.”

Greg further explains that he feels like the permanent nature of being an ex-convict limits his options. He fears that he might not be able to find employment or support his family, even after years in graduate school and nearing completion of his Doctorate,

“Limited access to employment limits ex-offenders options – what kind of job do I get? Where do I go? What do I do? If you can't find a job, you can't support your family, you can't support yourself. It takes away almost your identity as a human being, especially men.”

#### SENTENCE LENGTH HAS EFFECT ON PATHWAYS TO EDUCATION

Several participants discussed the influence that prison sentences had on their pathways to education. Goffman, in his influential work *Asylums* (1961) writes that after several years in a total institution (mental asylums, prisons), many convicts undergo a process of transformation in which they become so accustomed to the routine of the institution that they lose their ability to function outside of such an institution. The rules

and norms of “outside” society become obscure, if not totally lost. When such individuals are released from prison, they are ill-equipped to function when they lose the structure and discipline provided by the institution. This phenomenon can potentially create many difficulties when leaving prison and entering the halls of higher education, where it is often expected that individuals be self-motivated. Yet, in some cases, the length of the sentence provided my respondents with time to form discipline and routine that would later apply to their academic endeavors.

Eric, an academic in Europe who served time in a European prison, emphasizes that the time he spent in prison allowed him to develop focus, which became a valuable asset that he could use in his academic pursuits,

The fact, I wasn't academic so when I was in prison one thing that was really positive you are in a cell, you are in there for quite a long time unless you are working or out for education. I mean education in the prison, not out of the prison. So it gives you a lot of time to focus. So one thing I got really focused. I think when I did my first essay I had ever done for this course it took me about 2 months to do because I didn't have the skills to do it where in prison I actually because of the length of time I actually developed the skills to do the essays and do good work.

Based on his time in prison, Jim believes that it takes about 3 years before the process of institutionalization takes hold, and real social damage begins to occur. He explains:

I think when you go to federal prison that about the 3<sup>rd</sup> year is when you really begin to get institutionalized. You become prison zed, institutionalized, about the 3<sup>rd</sup> year. And I think the longer you stay in prison – if you're there 5 years or 10 years or 15 years the more difficult that is to overcome. Because you forget how to function in civil society. You forget how to talk to children, how to talk to women – you get rougher, your edges get rougher.

Serving a relatively short sentence, within a sample in which the sentences ranged from 9 months to 20 years, Greg explains that while his sentence was somewhat short, it was still long enough to affect him in a profound manner,

it was short enough that, it was long enough that I got the experience of being incarcerated. It really brought home the gravity of the experience, right, the magnitude of it. But the seriousness of it but also short enough that it didn't do as much damage to me psychologically probably, the process of institutionalization or post-traumatic stress syndrome that some inmates can get. I think partially it starts; you are forever changed by it. You're always different; the whole world looks different to you, so different after you get out. -Greg

#### TYPE OF CRIME HAS HEAVY EFFECT ON EDUCATIONAL JOURNEY

Within this sample, there was considerable variance in the educational journey based on the type of crime for which the participant was convicted. The most common charges were drug related, but the sample also included white-collar, violent, and sexual offenders. The high incidence of drug crimes is not surprising considering that much research demonstrates that the war on drugs was behind a large proportion of the American imprisonment binge (Grey 2001). Within this study, the type of crime that participants spoke of as being the most stigmatized was sexual offences, while the least stigmatized crimes were drug crimes and white-collar crimes, with violent and street crimes residing in the middle.

Jim, a drug offender, points out that he did not undergo as much stigma as many other formerly incarcerated academics because of his drug offence, yet he pointed out that some faculty at his institution still stigmatized him due to his past actions,

I didn't suffer as much because it was *just pot*, but there are people that have had this experience both as a grad student and as a professor, some faculty who just never, were always cold to me, always distant.

Martin, who was convicted of a violent offence several decades ago (with no subsequent convictions of any kind), attained his PhD and works as a criminology lecturer at several academic institutions. Yet, he explains that he has great difficulty finding a tenure track academic position due to the powerful stigma associated with the violent crime he was convicted of. Martin explains:

But because it is a violent offense and even though most understand that violent offenders don't reoffend it does make a difference. I think just the idea of someone who has a homicide conviction on faculty is really hairy thing. I mean I get tons of support and I can get all the adjunct work I want, I turn adjunct work away. But there is only so much I can do. I teach the equivalent of a full time load plus I have a full time job plus I have a family.

### *Stigma Summary*

In summary, formerly incarcerated academics encounter social stigma in many formats, sometimes quite overtly, and sometimes stigma can be subtle and barely perceivable. The respondents in this study presented experiences with stigma through resistance met in academia, sentence length's effect on their post-incarceration ability to function in society, and the their type of conviction, as some convictions are perceived more negatively than others. The driving idea is that the attachment of a stigma by society (in the case of the participants' colleagues, some of the most highly educated people within society) denotes the perception of a spoiled identity, a permanent negative mark. Yet, many of the participants in this research have maintained disciplined crime free lifestyles for decades, have produced top-notch research, mentor future colleagues, and are involved in social justice work. Many participants have expressed much frustration in regards to the continuing social disapproval that they encounter. This

would seem to indicate that society believes that their punishment is still not over and creates a situation in which consequences continue for actions that were often committed decades ago.

### **Insider Perspective for CC**

One of the driving themes within this research is the power of the insider perspective (Baca Zinn 1979). This emphasizes that formerly incarcerated academics who work within criminal justice and criminology fields bring a unique insight into their disciplines (Ross et al. 2010). The voices of convicts and ex-convicts are often not recognized in the academic study of crime. Such voices and insight can illuminate issues that would otherwise go unnoticed by researchers and academics who have not had exposure to prison and post-prison situations. The actual internal functions of correctional institutions, and social interactions and networks that exist for convicts during and after incarceration are difficult subjects to access. An insider perspective provides a rare glimpse into such topics.

Participants emphasized several broad themes when discussing their insider perspective, all of these participants being either closely or loosely affiliated with the Convict Criminology (CC) group. This is a gathering of formerly incarcerated academics, as discussed in chapter 1, who work within the disciplines of criminology and criminal justice, focusing on critical and reform centered criminological scholarship. This group works to promote the voices of convicts and ex-convicts within the fields of criminology and criminal justice.



My respondent themes centered on how the insider perspective and the academy interact, how participants interpret the meanings of prison after the passage of time after being released for many years, and/or taking part in higher education, and the idea that prison and the process of higher education have been a steady progression to clearer understandings of the issues surrounding criminal justice and corrections with CC functioning as a guiding force.

*Table 4: Convict/Insider Perspective Themes*

| <b>Broad themes</b>                    | <b>Subthemes</b>   |
|--|--|
| Insider perspective and the academy    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance of Insider/Outsider Perspective</li> <li>• Hidden issues only insiders can see</li> </ul> |
| Perceptions of prison change over time |  |
| Progression to enlightenment           | Convict Criminology as a guide   |

## INSIDER PERSPECTIVE AND THE ACADEMY

### (LACK OF INSIDE VISION IN ACADEMIA)

An issue that many participants alluded to was that academics do not recognize the hidden issues that exist within prisons, issues that only an inmate could see. Macon explains that the discipline of criminology defines convict identity and culture according to a universal application of research that is outdated, lacks depth, and is inaccurate. Convicts are portrayed within research and media as conniving, operating according to a strict convict code, lacking individual personalities, and existing without compunction. Macon emphasizes that this commonly accepted idea about convict culture harming millions of convicts create social distortions and inaccuracies in regard to their personalities. He explains that they are just people, just like anyone else:

It is a fundamental question in prison that everyone deals w/ that no outside researchers recognize cause they don't see the backstage activity that goes on and the discussions that happen off the yard, or in the privacy of cells in the middle of the night, you sit around talking. –Macon

Andrew, a formerly incarcerated criminology professor, points out the value of his insider perspective, as it allows him to explain concepts to students using real life examples,

So as far as connecting things to real life that's one of the big ways that I teach and small groups and really having a good idea of my students and being able to let them know that their story is important in their learning process. Again because we are relational creatures, associative. That's how we understand. – Andrew

Jim expands on the discussion of issue of professors within criminology who attempt to understand and conduct research focused on crime, prisons, and justice without possessing any real life insight into the topic. Some criminological scholars understand that they do not have all of the answers to criminal justice issues yet really want to improve society and help people, and consequently appreciate the unique knowledge and experience that can be lent to scholarship through the real life insights of formerly incarcerated academics. Thus, such scholars of crime often affiliate with the Convict Criminology discipline.

But the people I appreciate the most are those that understand how little they know about the subjects they study. They're smart enough to know how little they know. And that's why they hang out w/ us. Particularly those people who, but the ones that really bother me the most are these arrogant academics who they could just as well be professors of finance or accounting or history or something.

Certain academics are arrogant and believe they are undisputed experts on a subject without even attempting to understand their topics through alternate worldviews. Jim explains that such scholars could have essentially been professors of history or finance yet just randomly chose criminology on a whim, more or less for something to do with

their time. Yet, these are the people who define criminological research/definitions and criminal justice policy.

*Balance of insider/outsider perspective*

When discussing how he implements his carceral experiences into his course instruction, Macon explains that he never attempts to present his experiences as fact or research, but only anecdotal experiences. His primary teaching goal is to present rigorous academic research, yet if appropriate, his life experience can be used to more clearly demonstrate a concept or theoretical premise.

“So from the inside there is a lot of nuances to law and policies that aren’t in the books, aren’t studied because typical academic has no idea that these issues exist.”

In some cases, participants pointed out that other academics and/or students do not understand the importance or usefulness of the insider perspective. Andrew, a criminology professor, discusses the use of his prison experiences to inform his classroom instruction, summing it up in a few simple words:

Yes, but hard to get others to see the power of this.

Andrew felt that such experiences were not respected as important by his academic colleagues and often dismissed as unimportant in the larger academic/research picture.

**PERCEPTIONS OF PRISON CHANGED OVER TIME?**

As criminological academics, many participants pointed out that their perceptions of prison had changed over time after surviving the difficulties and hardships of prison, returning to society, and then often working for years on graduate degrees and attaining

academic posts. Some changes in their perceptions occurred due to the passage of time, while other changes in prison perception occurred due to increased access to often critical scholarly research that helped the participants form new ideas or provide a foundation or model that framed many previously held thoughts and experiences. Some participants expressed that their past perceptions of prison have been significantly altered or restructured over time. Others argued that their views were unchanged, often expressing that they still felt very negatively about prison and its effects on the people confined there.

Among the participants who expressed that their views of prison had changed over time, Jim explained that while he was in prison he hated the correctional officers because he felt that they mistreated and abused fellow prisoners. He now explains that not all guards did this, and because of research experiences in which he has met with and worked with guards, he recognizes that, “they are just people too.” Jim pointed out that he now sees prison as having an equalizing effect on people, equating it to pure communism,

“The interesting thing about prison is it’s like pure Communism. We’ve descended into this where there’s we all wear the same clothes, we all have the same schedule, we all there’s no money. The material differentials are so little and we’re all demented and humiliated by imprisonment. It’s you learn humility and patience in prison – waiting for them to let you out.” -Jim

Jim also uses Solzhenitsyn’s (1973) writings on the Stalin era Russian Prison Gulag to explain how he now visualizes his prison journey,

“But you ascend, you descend into prison and while you’re there you think about the mistakes you’ve made and eventually you ascend, you rise.” –Jim

Aaron, a formerly incarcerated undergraduate student in criminal justice with aspirations of graduate school, felt that he now views prison as an overall positive experience,

“weirdly enough my perception of – I keep looking back at my prison experiences as a kind of positive experience. Weirdly, I think people only tend to remember the good times. So I seem to remember it in a positive light, regarding the education. I can use it to my advantage.”

When discussing how his perceptions of prison had changed over time, Macon’s focus was on academia, explaining that he has lost much respect for many researchers in academia. Macon points out that:

“no, actually my respect for researchers in academia has been dramatically diminished by their lack of perception and understanding.”

-Macon

Andrew’s views of prison did not change over time as he explains,

“No, I always thought that it was a waste of talent and still do. Too many people who should not be there are sentenced to long sentences.”

-Andrew

#### PROGRESSION TO ENLIGHTENMENT

As noted, many participants presented the idea that prison and the process of higher education have been a steady progression to clearer understandings of the issues surrounding criminal justice and corrections. Many members of the convict criminology group within this sample gradually learned how to frame the realities/problems of prisons through their studies in higher education. Such participants learned about realities of inequalities while locked up, that the system is not “fair and balanced,” then learned how to formally express such ideas through advanced education and their own scholarship.

Many participants pointed out that their pre-prison lifestyles often interfered with their making positive life choices and delayed educational attainment and academic accomplishments. Yet, when confined to prison, such individuals explained that they had

time to grow as individuals, taking part in book discussion groups, volunteering, having intellectual conversations, and taking correspondence courses for instance. Greg explains:

“I would have continued to do the same dumb shit. You know how you get caught up in life, life is like getting thrown in the middle of a huge river, like this irresistible force and it just pulls you along often times. Pretty soon 6 years, 9, 10, 20 years have gone by, you’ve done nothing right? So that put that stop in my life, gave me the time to restructure. Gave me time to read. You almost, you live kind of a monastic lifestyle in prison. You have time to sit, time to think. You have lots of time for quiet reflection, time for reading, time for thinking and that for a person like me that thinks really fast has kind of issues w/ slowing my life down or forming, creating adhering to discipline any discipline at all. That was the make or break point for me. If I hadn’t had that experience I would have never formed discipline, I would have never stopped and I would have never had time for introspection at all. You would be working, you would be doing things, trying to fight through your life and so on. So that’s the part that changed or how I see it.” –Greg

Patrick, a formerly incarcerated upper level criminal justice graduate student who received his academic/post-secondary education post-incarceration, explains the value of his education. Earlier in life, in prison as a jailhouse lawyer, and before prison, he had difficulty perceiving racial bias and just thought that minority inmates were just over exaggerating or making up the biased/discriminatory treatment they experienced with prisons and the criminal justice system. Yet, through many years of critical study within academia after prison, Patrick explains,

...I would argue that through educational enlightenment I’m starting to, I’ve begun to understand that a lot of these dudes are telling me the truth. And they were fucked by the system, and the system did railroad them. -Patrick

### *Convict Criminology as a Guide*

Successfully navigating through higher education, including graduate school, can be a difficult process that often requires specialized and/or specific knowledge. Many CC participants perceived the group as functioning as an academic guide or an advisory

role. The CC group has members who are quite active and function as central actors, organizing sessions at conferences, and mentoring new members, while some members assume a more peripheral role. The central members often work with newcomers to the group, offering advice on how to apply for graduate schools, assisting with publishing articles, writing letters of recommendation, helping members attain faculty positions, and giving general career advice.

Andrew pointed out that without the encouragement of the CC group, he would have given up:

“The group motivated me to finish my Ph.D and it took 7 years as they mentored me. I wanted to give up many times.” –Andrew

Some participants pointed out that potential that the CC group had to help them.

“...if I get the opportunity to have this essay revised and made good enough to be published then hell yah, that’s going to make a huge difference to my career.”

When discussing the influence that the CC group had upon him, Greg explains:

“it provided me w/ guidance when I was initially applying for graduate schools and then gave me advice on how to navigate through the system.”

Through the discussion of *Convict Criminology* as a guide, explained in the quote above, Greg also reiterates the power of the mentorship theme. Without the process of mentorship, many ex-convicts fall through the cracks in school, and/or fall victim to anti-mentoring from authority figures and friends/family who do not value the importance of higher education.

### *Convict Criminology Insider Perspective Summary*

Many participants spoke to the unique perspective that being formerly incarcerated brings to the disciplines of criminology and criminal justice, as professors,

teaching assistants, and students. Instructors could provide real life examples informed by academic rigor, of situations relevant to their course instruction, and students had more in-depth understandings of concepts being presented in their courses. Ex-convict professors, such as Roger (*pseudonym*), who is open about his prison background, explained that there were high levels of student interest in their courses,

I'm the prison guy and I have large classes that fill each semester.

Roger starts his courses by asking his students this question:

I start out the first thing I write on the board is 03439-090...and try to figure out what that is.

The number is his federal prison number, a number that is assigned to every federal inmate upon being processed into the system. Incarcerated people must identify themselves by their name and number during daily role call. Roger can access his inside experiences of the federal criminal justice system to assist in explaining concepts to students, yet he was very careful to say that his anecdotal real life exposure to incarceration was not presented as fact, stating:

All I do is work in facts. Straight from literature, straight from justice statistics, straight from the experts on whatever particular facts we are talking about and I tell them right up, my opinion means nothing, you need to look at the reality of the criminal justice system.

Participants reported varying effects in regards to the passage of time after release from prison and their current perceptions of prison. It must be noted that there was a great deal of variance in participants' life experiences. Some participants had been out of prison for decades while some individuals have only been out for a few months, with some participants working as full professors, and some participants still enrolled in undergraduate coursework. Participants within this sample that had been out of prison



the longest and attained more education had developed more clear understandings of their perceptions of prison and how their prison experiences affected them, while participants whom had been released relatively recently expressed many mixed and confused feelings about prison. Yet, many were often painfully aware that *something* about the experience was not *right*.

Many CC participants pointed out that the group functioned as a makeshift network of academic advisors who helped them navigate through higher education, from the undergraduate level to receiving their PhDs, and eventually faculty positions. Yet, it must be noted, that certain members of the group took a more active role in this process than others, while other more peripheral members, who took a more passive role, would offer assistance if asked.

### **Summary**

Within this chapter, the overall unifying theme is that stigma was generally overcome for these respondents, except for the most stigmatized offenses (*sexual offenses*). Of the 12 participants from the sample of 30 (have all been incarcerated for felony convictions) who have attained their PhDs, 10 of them have found tenure track faculty positions or prestigious research positions. Of the remaining two respondents, one teaches as a non-tenure track college instructor, and the final member has had difficulty securing employment due to the stigmatized nature of the crime involved.

Educational experiences vary widely within this sample, with some participants employed as full professors and the remaining participants working in various stages of undergraduate and graduate school, from beginning their Bachelor's degrees to writing

their dissertations. Consequently, there is a wide range of educational pathways. Of the participants still in various stages of the educational process in this sample, most are attempting to attain doctorates in social science/criminology/criminal related fields. The exceptions are studying in counseling, media studies, business administration, and drug/alcohol counseling.

Many participants emphasized that the process of incarceration and subsequent involvement in higher education and academia is perceived as a gradual path to understanding social justice concepts surrounding corrections and criminology. Some participants describe holding initial beliefs in the integrity of the criminal justice system prior to incarceration and gaining academic experience. Yet, their journey through prison and subsequent formal education presented them with critical questions in regard to the U.S. system of justice and corrections as fair and balanced. Through experiencing incarceration, convicts were faced with the harsh realities of prison life, heard stories from other inmates, and observed inequalities first hand. Their observations included vast discrepancies in sentence length between fellow inmates based on race and class, non-violent, virtually harmless people locked up for years for non-violent first time drug offences, and prisons that were overcrowded and lacking in quality educational and counseling programs. According to many participants, post-incarceration formal education provided them with the ability to critically analyze the problematic issues that they encountered in prison. Through formal academic training in sociology and criminal justice, participants were able to conceptualize their ideas and formulate instructional techniques to demonstrate that inequalities and social problems exist within corrections and the criminal justice system. The respondents, being comprised primarily of

academics/researchers, used scientific rigor aided by personal insight when deemed necessary, and thus constructed more comprehensive solutions to the criminological social problems they were focusing on.

## Chapter 6

### FLIPPING IT UPSIDE DOWN

“And most of them know, there’s no turning back.”

~*Jim*

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapter examined the academic journeys of 30 formerly incarcerated people through their participation in in-depth semi-structured interviews. Study respondents presented many topics including overcoming societal bias against ex-convicts, how their time within the criminal justice system affected their research, classroom participation, and instructional styles, and how academic education had altered or not altered their perceptions of incarceration. Yet, within this chapter, a subsample is selected from the previous chapter’s participants, and a more nuanced perspective is presented in the form of the qualitative life history.

Within this in-depth discussion of the arduous pathway from prison to academia and professional positions, a myriad of experiences are examined. Each of the three participants experienced the pathway from prison to academia quite differently. Each participant served time for a different type of crime, including a violent crime, a drug crime, and a white collar crime. Each participant’s crime is perceived differently in regard to public perception, with some crimes being considered harmless and others dangerous and/or risky. Such discrepancies in public perception create differing levels of social stigma as described by the participants. Yet, much emphasis was placed on the motivating force of the prison experience, and a burning desire to right the social injustices that were experienced and/or observed while incarcerated. Respondents were chosen because they represented dominant themes within the course of the study, with an

emphasis being on their ability to turn their lives around, essentially taking the felon status that society would see as a detriment and turning it into a positive experience through the process of higher level education.

Two of three participants in this life history section described their experiences with the criminological subdiscipline of Convict Criminology as a driving force which as greatly assisted their careers. This group of critical criminologists is primarily composed of formerly incarcerated people who are academics, as discussed in Chapter 1, who produce scholarship that recognizes the voice of those who have been or are currently incarcerated. Such research is primarily driven by academic training and scientific rigor (thus is not purely anecdotal opinion), yet is informed by unique insights into the social dynamics of the criminal justice system. Although, it must be emphasized that each participant in this section interacted with the Convict Criminology (CC) group differently, some were close to the core of the group, working in organizing and mentorship capacities, while other members associated with the CC group because of the sense of fellowship it provided with fellow ex-cons who were united in a common cause and/or interested in similar issues.

### *General Characteristics*

Within this life history chapter, the focus is on three participants; Jim, Macon, and Jenny (*pseudonyms*) from the original qualitative interview sample of 30 participants. Jim, who served time for a drug conviction, and Macon, who served time for a violent conviction are both white professors in their mid fifties at Mid-Western universities, and Jenny, who served time for a white-collar conviction, is an African American graduate

student in their mid thirties at an East Coast university. Such participants were selected based on their representation of common and/or important themes represented within this research.

As noted in chapter 4, the methodology used in this chapter is the life history method. Qualitative life histories attempt through interviews, observations, and discussions to capture an individual's entire life, with a strong emphasis placed on viewing the world from the perspective of the individual that we are studying (Caughey 2006, Denzin and Lincoln 2011).

### *Themes*

When examining life history themes, the discussion in this life history (Greene et al. 2006) chapter presents themes unique to the individual participants, Macon, Jim, and Jenny (*pseudonyms*), yet also highlights many common threads of thought.

When focusing on unique themes, Jim discusses the issue of being a state raised child (Abbott 1991), having spent his childhood in an orphanage. Macon emphasizes that prison provided him with many valuable life lessons that would serve as positive attributes in the post-incarceration academic phase of his life. Jenny pointed out that after prison, she flipped her prison experience upside down, turning what society would commonly perceive as a negative experience into a positive by sharing her life-experience with others.

In addition to participant specific life history themes were many common threads. All participants in this chapter were hyper-motivated individuals who were generally successful in every venture that they applied themselves to both before, during, and after

incarceration. All of the participants emphasized that they matured as people through the process of incarceration. The participants discussed that academia was an avenue that the formerly incarcerated could access with the attainment of graduate level education, unlike many professional occupations (ex: medicine, law) that require licensure that excludes individuals with a felony conviction/criminal record.

### **You have to make a choice and you have to live**

Macon, a tenured professor of criminal justice at a mid-western university convicted of a violent crime several decades ago, explains that his decade and a half stint in maximum-security prison forced him to make many life choices. He had to make a choice to live his life according to a sense of purpose, a purpose that materialized gradually over the course of 15 years. Macon explains that he found and reinvented himself, also, emphasizing that not doing so would have led to insanity or death in the unstable environment prison environment that was his forced residence.

### *Power of a long prison sentence*

Within the sample presented in this research, Macon had a relatively long prison sentence (15 years) when compared to the 1-3 year sentences that were common for many of the participants. Such lengthy prison sentences can present many unique struggles to the convict who must serve them. Being divorced from society for such a protracted period of time, incarcerated persons can potentially lose contact with family, external social connections, and become susceptible to the process of prisonization

(Clemmer 1958, Stretesky et. al. 2007) and/or severe institutionalization (Goffman 1961, Kolstad 1996).

Macon points out that in order to survive the day-to-day struggles in prison, you must find a way to overcome the monotony. He states:

Start passing time, you know? Make enough money for cigarettes, whatever you want. I tried not to get too bored and go crazy, get in a rhythm. That's kind of the way it was.

Macon points out that because of his long sentence, and being a young man (21 years old) upon entry into prison, he essentially emotionally and intellectually matured while incarcerated. Yet, he initially faced a steep learning curve, being faced with the stressful and intimidating task of learning prison culture:

I was young. I went in at 21 but I didn't really have a clue, I hadn't been in trouble before or anything. So, you walk in at 21 to a max, it's like, what the hell is going on here.

Because of the length of Macon's sentence, he was provided with a unique opportunity to think about life and his purpose:

I think I mentioned to you before there's some of the brightest people I've ever met were there. Thought about the meaning of existence for decades. You sat and had real conversations about stuff.

Macon emphasized everyday life is so busy and chaotic that most people do not have the time for deep personal introspection. Prison provided him with a unique opportunity to examine his present life in detail and determine what was important to him and what was not, allowing him to clearly define the direction his life would take while in prison, and more importantly, as further discussion will demonstrate, after prison.



The time that incarceration provided Macon with also allowed him the ability to see through many preconceived notions that he held in regard to the criminal justice system. As he explains:

The world was just blinds and bullshit as far as what I was taught about the criminal justice system and justice and all that crap.

The concept of time takes on a whole new meaning within the confines of a maximum-security prison when faced with a long sentence. Macon emphasized that how a convict approaches the passage of time can be a matter of life or death:

I just, I block time. And I did then...if you look at it day by day, it'll kill you. But if you kind of get it into seasons, it was a little more bearable. You can just make your way from one season to the next. That's how I started marking time and still do.

#### *Different culture in maximum-security prison*

One of the most misunderstood components of prison life is that of convict culture. From a more interpersonal prisoner perspective, Macon quickly learned that convict culture taught him to resolve disputes quickly, because of the confined nature of prison. If a problem occurs between inmates then they must resolve it quickly because the close contact of prison will not allow for avoidance of other inmates. From a media based perspective, Hollywood, news, and media present inaccurate and sensationalized representations of convict culture (Ross 2001 in Ross & Richards 2003). Accurate frames for presenting inmates are distorted in order to capture the attention of viewers/readers who consume such media. Thus, the complex and often diverse personalities of individual convicts are replaced with unidimensional violent and/or evil personalities. The often mundane and/or monotonous nature of everyday prison life, with a few randomly interspersed moments of tension or violence, is replaced by images of

constant violence and infinite danger when presented in mass media. Macon explains that a convict's reality was in actuality premised on more practical concepts such as identity:

I don't think a lot of people understand this but...what identity you constructed through yourself, that's all you had.

For Macon, his time in a maximum-security prison had affected how he would subsequently approach his academic work and his philosophical worldview. Thinking about how his academic work was affected by prison culture, Macon emphasizes:

I think the main thing, main respects, my academic works, my philosophical view and my understanding of reality, most of that came to some foundations in maximum security prison and it's never gone through that much change.

#### *Coming of age in prison/Reality construction*

While serving out his sentence, Macon's journey through the process of maturation led him to construct the concepts of right and wrong and what sort of foundational pillars he would choose to build his life upon. This process allowed him to construct his prison reality as he chose. He determined what it was that he would stand for and what it was that he would not allow himself to become involved in, as he explains:

Yeah, we still have ideals and like to believe things and a lot of that time was spent trying to figure out what the hell I believed in. In some respects, you had the walls, it's like well, what would you stand up for? What would you put your life on the line for? Where's the line? What are you going to live for? Where is it we say, no, you can't do that, don't go down that road no matter what...that's not a road you want to go down. You construct reality with whatever you give yourself to.

Macon once again emphasizes the importance of constructing your own reality, as mentioned above, during the process of serving a 15-year prison sentence. Macon

explained that convicts must take a proactive stance in shaping their own experiences while in prison or risk being influenced by many of the negative external forces that exist in prison, and then actively live out their beliefs. In response to the question about finding yourself in prison, Macon responds:

I would say both found yourself and invented yourself. Like I said, there was two choices, it's one or nothing...after a little while I had to construct reality but for it to be real, you had to kind of live it.

### *Intellectual culture within the walls*

A facet of prison life that Macon emphasized as being important to his future academic life experiences was the intellectual culture that he found behind the walls of a maximum-security prison. Macon points out that:

I think I mentioned to you before there's some of the brightest people I've ever met were there.

Macon repeated that he found many intelligent convicts and many convicts that were also talented artists:

There's some...intellectuals and artists I got to know in the walls.

Macon believed that the intellectual culture that he participated in while in prison is often ignored or overlooked by those outside of prison.

### *Eternal Stigma*

Macon spoke extensively to the social phenomenon of stigma that he faced as an academic with a unique past. Because of the criminal conviction that he faced decades ago, he explains that he will always be exposed to more scrutiny than other academics.

While Macon is a high achieving academic who has and continues to publish extensively and is heavily involved in pro-social justice work, Macon indicates that:

In some ways, I never had any doubts but on the other hand, there's a lot of opposition. The opposition never went away.

He explains that the process of permanently applying stigma in the name of justice to formerly incarcerated people and academics has powerful and long-lasting negative effects. Macon explains that the process does not serve society in a useful manner:

...we can't just create these stigmatizing identities and tie them to people and destroy them for the rest of their lives...that's not benefit. It's power, it's propaganda, it's a lot of things but it's not justice.

### **There's no such thing as an ex-felon**

Being a successful, well liked, and productive full professor at a Midwestern university, Jim is quite busy. Jim was convicted of a drug distribution crime several decades ago, and served his sentence in the United States federal prison system. He spends his days instructing courses, mentoring students, mentoring members of the Convict Criminology group, answering emails, letters, and phone calls from around the world, and participating in ex-convict and convict centered social justice work. Yet, Jim always has time to explain his work and life story to others, especially if he feels that his story will somehow help, especially when focusing on fellow ex-convicts.

Jim is very aware of the discrimination that ex-convicts face in their daily lives. Jim has focused much of his academic and life's work on trying to bring attention to the damage that such social bias and stigma does to the lives of ex-cons and their families, and the damage that such discrimination creates for American society in general.

*Coming of age in prison*

Like Macon, Jim expressed that he experienced a process of maturation while in prison. Jim served 3 years in the federal prison system, which is administrated the Federal Bureau of Prisons (FBOP). As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 3, this is the United States national system of prisons, currently comprised of over 217,529 incarcerated citizens (FBOP 2013), with prisons located in multiple states throughout the nation. During his 3 year stint, Jim served time in multiple prisons locations, such as Georgia, Kansas, Illinois, and Wisconsin, as the FBOP moved him from place to place. In regard to growing up behind bars, Jim explains:

Not that it's about age, I think it's what stage of life you're at. I do think a lot of us grew up in prison. We may not want to admit that but I think the time in prison helped us to grow up.

Jim was quick to point out that many ex-con academics do not want to admit that the process of serving time actually helped them to mature, yet the process gave many CCs the time to look at the direction of their lives, and determine that perhaps their old lives were not productive, and that it was time to get to work:

Until we decided we had done enough partying, that we had to get more serious about life and put away our party clothes.

While both Jim and Macon expressed a process of growing up in prison, such processes were experienced quite differently for Jim and Macon. While Macon came to prison with no formal secondary education, Jim had nearly completed a Bachelor's degree at a prestigious university by the time he arrived at prison, and subsequently did complete his BA while in prison. Thus, Jim was much more familiar with dominant middle class forms of academic human capital when he arrived at prison, having already nearly

completed a bachelors degree in sociology at a prestigious Midwestern university. He was able to use this in a positive fashion, as will be discussed in the next section.

*Fight the power – prisoner activist:*

Being active in social justice issues has always been a life priority according to Jim. Before prison Jim had participated in 1960s peace demonstrations and was thus familiar with the concepts of civil disobedience and social protest. Jim continued his activist stance within prison. When a social or institutional wrong was perceived, and Jim perceived that pro-social action could be taken, he did not hesitate to do so.

In one example of this, Jim speaks to a specific interaction he had with prison staff and administration at a Midwestern federal prison, in which convict's basic civil rights were being blatantly violated. As Jim explains:

I got into an altercation with the camp warden, the warden at the camp. Where the warden at the camp...what he had done was, he had ordered the "hacks" to empty the law library. He got mad because so many prisoners were filing BP 13s (prison grievance forms). There were three of us. There was me, there was this Puerto Rican attorney, and then there was this African American school teacher. And the three of us had filed over a hundred BP forms...(laughter)...for other inmates, for all inmates, like myself, who had done years on appeal on what was called "supererogatory bail".

Because Jim had been part of this action, the warden closed down the inmates' law library, which is violation of federal statute (*Bounds v. Smith*, 430 U.S. 817 (1977)), and had Jim thrown into solitary confinement. While in solitary confinement, Jim had another inmate smuggle out a letter to the internal affairs division of the FBOP. Once the letter reached internal affairs, they immediately sent FBI agents to the prison, and had Jim released from solitary. Then, the agents asked prison staff to open the prison law

library, which was empty. Then an inquiry was made as to the warden's whereabouts as stated below:

They asked the clerk in the warden's office "Where's the warden?" And the clerk is an inmate. He looks at me and he says, "He's in a bar in Leavenworth." He's a cowboy. He wore a cowboy hat and he had cowboy boots and he was a drunk. Anyways, they sent a "hack" in town to get the warden. In those days, they didn't have cell phones or anything. They brought the warden back, and when he walked in the office, the BOP guy said to him, "pack up your desk, you're fired. You're done."

This also resulted in the firing or transferring of a majority of the prison's administration.

A few weeks later, Jim got an invitation from the new prison administrator:

I get called to the new warden's office, who's one of the case managers, who's now the acting warden. And he calls me to his office, and he says, "Jim (pseudonym), you've been asking for a transfer..." ....So he says "Jim you've been asking for a transfer?" And I said, "Yes sir." And he said, "Jim, I'll send you anywhere you want to go." He just wanted to get rid of me. So I said I want to go to (another Midwestern state).

Thereafter, Jim was transferred to his home state, where he could be closer to his home and spouse. Jim has continued to take an active role in social and political issues that he feels negatively impact ex-convicts. Through his actions, he is attempting to create more general understanding among the general public and within the criminal justice system about the problems that exist within the current U.S. correctional system. Such actions require a great deal of Jim's time and energy, and he is happy to do so, yet he explains that he hopes to pass this task on to other ex-convict academics in the near future, as he has been doing so for many decades.

*Resistance/jealousy*

In the course of his academic career that followed, Jim pointed out that he had experienced many instances of jealousy and resistance from fellow colleagues. Jim elucidated that society does not expect convicts and ex-convicts to ever succeed. Consequently, when a select few ex-convicts do actually survive the criminal justice system and then successfully navigate through higher education and enter academia, they are sometimes met with suspicion and mistrust on the part of their professional colleagues. Jim presented the irony that many of his colleagues had never interacted with an individual who had been incarcerated before, even though their criminological research focused on issues surrounding the prison system and/or involving convicts and ex-convicts. Often, Jim reveals, jealous co-workers were somewhat unsettled by the insider perspective possessed by formerly incarcerated academics because of their very unique perspective on the criminal justice system, which was often perceived as a threat to some of his colleagues' expertise.

Jim discusses the risks of being open about his experiences of being formerly incarcerated. Keeping a high profile as an ex-convict academic throughout his academic career, Jim has ran into issues of jealousy within the academy as noted earlier. Jim explains that he has to get his ideas out to the public, yet when doing so, he runs certain risks:

To the public domain. So we have to put ourselves out there to do that. Of course, that has dangers, it has risks...one of the risks that I didn't anticipate, was the jealousy that I encountered from my colleagues.

There were instances in which Jim was approached by fellow criminological colleagues who were concerned that because of his openness in regards to his prison experiences and issues surrounding his and others experiences as ex-convicts, such exposure would reflect



negatively upon them. Goffman (1963) referred to this phenomenon as the courtesy stigma in which society attaches a stigma to those who associate with an individual with a known stigmatized identity. This stigma infers that those who associate with stigmatized individuals (e.g. family, friends, spouses) are somehow defective because of this association. Jim's colleagues were afraid of being labeled as fellow criminals because they worked in the same department:

It's ok that you're an ex con and we know that about you...do you have to be so public? You're embarrassing us. They'll think we're all criminals.

Jim places the resistance/jealousy discussion in more general terms, presenting an analogy of an American inner-city ghetto success story. A ghetto resident escapes the poverty and limited opportunities of their social environment only to be met with jealousy and/or rejection:

Let's say you grow up in the ghetto...let's say in America, you grow up in the ghetto, you pay a price for success. It's about...when you go from one social class to another, you lose some of your credit. Success has a price and you don't anticipate that.

Jim uses the inner city analogy to explain that the ex-convict academic loses some of their street credit among other ex-convicts when they move up in social class, while also facing the additional dilemma of moving into alternate status as a scholar in which because of a past criminal conviction they also face the potential of not being fully accepted. Thus, the formerly incarcerated scholar faces a double dilemma in which, having feet planted in two separate realities (even though they have generally left prison/crime life style behind), that of the formerly incarcerated, and that of the scholar, while not being fully accepted in either. The main point that Jim emphasizes here is that

success has a price, and it often comes as a surprise to many formerly incarcerated scholars.

### *State raised children*

Before incarceration, Jim pointed to his experiences growing up in an orphanage. He explained that this situation prepared him for the life in prison from the perspective that he was essentially raised in a state institution, and being in prison was essentially nothing more than a transition from one institution to another. Jim explains that the institutional lifestyle introduced him to the cultural capital that he needed to survive within the prison environment:

I think growing up in an orphanage kept me alive in the penitentiary. Because I grew up in institutions. Orphanages, in a lot of ways, are like prisons. You're subject to the authority of strangers....So when I got to the prison, I knew how to handle myself. I had a lot of social skills. I knew how to make friends, and for the most part how to stay out of trouble.

### *Mentorship/potential of CC*

A common theme for most participants in chapter 4, mentorship, is once again emphasized by Jim in his life history. Jim's focus was on the mentorship potential of Convict Criminology in helping ex-convicts rise from the debilitating stigma of a felony conviction. Many ex-convicts within this group have attained graduate degrees and academic faculty positions. As Jim explains in regard to the grateful parents of one of the CC members:

I had mentored Cooper (pseudonym) all the way from prison through his master's and his Ph.D., to professor. And his mom and dad called me up one night to thank me for helping their son. This meant a lot to me.

The process of constructing CC has been a slow and arduous one. Jim essentially is tasked with both strengthening CC as a criminological discipline while constructing a viable network and support system for current and aspiring formerly incarcerated academics. Jim points out that it is a step by step process in which the unique insight of more experienced CC members assists new members in successfully navigating through the academic process as ex-convicts. Jim emphasizes:

So promoting this idea...all of this is promoting this idea that ex-cons can be successful in academia. And then building the group one at a time. Literally, one at a time. Meeting with people at conferences, having dinner with them, talking to them on the telephone, mentoring them as they progress through their degrees, helping them to overcome a lot of obstacles that most grad students never encounter.

In addition to CC, Jim has also advocated for mentorship of new graduate students within his university's department. Jim points out that those with experience should be assisting those without experience, helping them to access opportunities and follow the proper procedures necessary to be productive and outstanding criminological scholars. As Jim reiterates:

...And I say, "Can you take on this...mentor this person?" And I think the professors should be mentoring the grad students.

### **This is part of the free system we can conquer and reclaim dignity**

Coming from corporate America, Jenny, who identified as other in regards to race, is a graduate student at a prestigious East Coast college who has a unique take on incarceration. Jenny was convicted of a white-collar crime over 10 years ago, and served her sentence in a minimum-security women's federal prison camp. Jenny's sentence of 9

months was relatively short in comparison to some of the other participant's sentences, yet nonetheless it was a life-changing experience for her. Jenny had worked in the corporate world directly out of high school, being employed by a fortune 100 company. She understood upper middleclass mannerisms and possessed much status quo cultural capital. Jenny had been attending a prestigious East Coast university for three years when she was convicted of a white-collar crime, and was familiar with the dynamics and culture of corporate America. Yet, It was not until Jenny was convicted, served her time, and was then released and had children, that she returned to higher education after a 10 year interruption which included incarceration. Jenny completed her Bachelor's and her Master's degree at a prestigious East Coast university in only three years.

Jenny emphasized that higher education represented a social institution that ex-convicts/felons can still conquer. She points out that attaining graduate/professional level degrees is something that most people never accomplish, explaining that, "You're outdoing most of the 'free.' The 'free' being those who were never incarcerated."

*Women convicts are passive (more so than male inmates)*

Gendered differences between men's and women's prisons were an issue that Jenny mentioned multiple times. She explained that issues in men's prisons were much more likely to be resolved and/or addressed quickly because men are more likely to give voice to their concerns, often threatening violence, riots, and/or disorder within the prison if their needs are not met by prison administration. The women's prison environment, Jenny explained, was a unique presentation of the gendered differences between men and women. Yet, while serving time, Jenny noticed that female inmates were quite passive

when it came to problems they encountered while serving time. The women convicts that were less passive were the leaders, as in men's prisons. Jenny explains that her fellow inmates were less likely to complain and/or voice their concerns to prison administration, and far less likely to take violent action and or take matters into their own hands if their issues were not addressed in a timely and/or proper fashion, fearing that they would cause more problems for themselves by doing so. The violence that did occur within her prison occurred quietly, and often "happened much more than anything to gain the attention of the administration." Consequently, many of the difficulties and problems that occur within the women's prison that Jenny was incarcerated in were not addressed promptly.

Jenny compared women inmates' behavior inside prisons to that of women outside of the prison environment:

women inside, are seen pretty much as they are outside. They give into things, they don't fight for very much...all that different stuff. The passive species.

Even when referring to herself, Jenny admitted to espousing the passive behaviors that she attributed to female inmates. In this instance, Jenny attributed the potential existence of her prison sentence to her passive nature, as she feared questioning the actions of her legal counsel:

...what was more interesting, was that when I went into that court that day, I was actually led to believe that I would get not time. And that was from the female prosecutor. But when it came time to actually speak to the judge there, they changed their whole game up. And my lawyer didn't do a good job. If I had made some comment about not being represented properly, or if I wasn't the passive species, in other words, I may not have done any time. But I didn't. I'm like, "let me not hurt my lawyer's feelings."

Jenny explained that there was a different sort of culture in the women's prison, that, while it often did not result in much being accomplished with administration, was

interesting and allowed an avenue for the convicts to express their opinions and frustrations,

There was definitely a more gossipy complaining nature that didn't drive action but definitely more interesting conversation and high level opinionation.

Jenny pointed out that issues in women's prisons were often overlooked, juxtaposing this situation to the importance of women to society outside of prison, pointing out that women are pivotal in constructing societies and nations:

Women's issues in prisons are definitely less monitored and of less interest than men's. This is intriguing because in reality society could exist without men...it cannot without women. An entire group of men cannot build a nation but all you need to change the tide is one woman. Yet they and their issues are regularly overlooked.

*Familial issues are BIG in women's prisons*

Jenny pointed out in discussing her time spent in prison was that issues surrounding the family were of great importance to female inmates. Many of the inmates had children and/or partners outside of prison. Jenny points out:

Their minds were split between major issues in two worlds, inside and out, both of which they were powerless in. This also brought up the cost of communication and how many did work or found creative ways to make money despite the system so they could stay in contact with their families. At \$15 per 20min to half hour call, the prisons deliberately limit the ability for women to communicate with their families or their support systems.

Lots of talk about family, lots of talk about family and stuff like that.

Jenny speaks to a culture of respect for elder prisoners by the younger female inmates, within women's prisons. They are looked up to by the young female convicts as worthy of respect. Jenny discusses respect:

They were storytellers, they were mothers, they were prison sages and crime wizards. There were many reasons, different for every individual why these older women were important.

There's a huge respect for older women. Their all called mothers, they're all very well taken care of. I don't know there's necessarily a cut off for it, but definitely older women are definitely respected. Regardless if they're old and crotchety or not. And yes, you know, they're very familial.

Many of the friends that Jenny made in prison became as important as her real family.

Such women served as fictive kin (Frese and Harrell 2003, White 2004) to Jenny. Fictive kin are acquaintances/friends who are not biologically related to a person, yet still function in a familial capacity. She describes that her biological family did not provide much support for her during her time in prison, and she soon realized the value of her fellow convict friendships. Jenny states:

I also became very aware of the fact that blood for me, does not create a family.

*Turned life upside down (flipped negative of prison into a positive attribute)*

After release from prison, Jenny struggled to find herself again, by working at various low wage jobs, such as in fast food restaurants, and then going into business for herself. Yet, she finally found her way back to higher education, and as she described it, turned her life upside down, turning her prison experiences into lessons learned. She enjoyed the process of learning and came to the realization that:

At some point, I think the only ones who really go back to education, and make something big of it, are the ones that can sort of flip that upside down.

Now the "flip it upside down" philosophy is applied to all facets of Jenny's life. Prison is not perceived by her as a negative experience, but as a beneficial component of her past

that is used to help others, one that adds insight to her academic endeavors. Jenny points out:

So, everything that I've learned now, whether it's from production of a film or cybernetics . I look at it through that experience. A lot of that has to do with I've really come to accept it. Like I said before, I turned it upside down. For me, it's now a positive.

### **COMMON THEMES: WE FOUND A DOOR THAT IS STILL OPEN**

There were three common themes expressed among the life history participants, Macon, Jim, and Jenny. Among these common themes were the “read in prison theme”, the “Hyper-motivated and successful in all ventures theme”, and the “Door to higher-education open for ex-convicts theme.” Macon, Jim, and Jenny were had different sentence lengths, types of crimes committed, social backgrounds, and areas of academic focus. Yet, they did express many common sentiments in regards to actions performed in prison, and pre- and post-prison.

#### *Read in prison*

Macon, Jenny, and Jim all emphasized that reading was an important part of their incarceration experience. Books, and various forms of literature were an important part of their daily prison experience, somewhat as a way to pass time, but also as a means of learning about new subjects and/or areas of interest.

In the course of his lengthy 15-year prison sentence, Macon met many interesting and intriguing fellow convicts who encouraged productive activities like reading. These experiences had a powerful effect on Macon's life, as he emphasizes:



I've met several people like that, maybe influenced me dramatically both in stuff they gave me to read and stuff we talked about...how they viewed what hell's happening around us.

Macon also emphasized that he had already mastered how to consume and analyze readings before he arrived in graduate school. Thus, he was acclimated to combing through large amounts of assigned readings, and consequently developed diligent reading habits. Macon points out:

Yeah...and read materials and interesting things on my own. I was already...15 years of reading, studying in prison...I was used to going through a body of literature with my friends.

Jim points out that formerly incarcerated academics are lucky they liked books. He explained that he had time to read the classics, a feat that few individuals including academics ever have time to accomplish. Reading all of the time was part of Jim's prison routine:

in some ways, how lucky you are that you like books. So I read them...I read more in prison than I did in graduate school. I was always reading. I always had a paperback book in my back pocket. I had a book on the yard, I was always in the library, you know, reading...or in the barbershop...wherever I went, I had a book sitting on the floor in the hallway reading. Whenever I could find a quiet space, I would read. I read a lot of classical literature while I was in prison...and Victor Hugo and Cervantes...I read a lot of stuff that I wouldn't have had...Tolstoy...stuff I wouldn't have had time to read other than being in prison.

Jim points out that his prison reading helped him with accomplishing the often heavy reading loads required in graduate level courses. Unlike other grad students....

In prison, for me, it was getting books read. I have so many weeks or months to read this list of books. And that helped me when I became a grad student because when they give you a syllabus, and they give you all this stuff to read, I read everything on that syllabus.

Jenny organized her reading, reading large numbers of books. She kept records of which books she read....

I kept a full log of all the books I read, and I read a ton of them.

*Hyper-motivated and successful in all ventures*

Another theme that was prevalent among the life history participants was their high level of motivation. The life history participants were not afraid to try new experiences, were self-motivated, and were generally successful at every venture to which they applied themselves. The participants in this section all possessed personal fortitude, and strong work ethics.

In the area of student government, Macon was quite skillful at working with university administration. He became a very active member of student government, being instrumental in passing many pro-student bills:

I was very successful in getting things done for graduate students with the administration.

In addition to being academically gifted, Jenny was quite proficient in business. Because the idea of working for someone else did not appeal to her, Jenny started her own business in the fashion industry, selling accessories for jewelry and acting as a consultant for East Coast jewelry suppliers. Jenny was so successful that she was offered further positions by other business firms, as she explains:

I started my own business. I don't have to answer to anybody if I have my own business. And I did that for quite a while. And then after I went down to (Southern state), I wanted to come back up here and I got an offer to work for an engineering firm.

Performing well academically was common for the life history participants. Macon routinely impressed his instructors with his diligent work ethic and keen intellectual abilities. Because of this, many instructors encouraged Macon to attend graduate school...

That's why a couple of the professors just were astounded by me and really thought I had what it took for program school and stuff. Very self-motivated.

Jim speaks to why members of the CC group are so motivated. Because of their life experiences, being formerly incarcerated people, CC academics have a intense and personal interest in their fields. This unique life experience creates strong careers:

...most of us, most of the convict criminologists, have a sincere, an intense interest in their field of study. Which drives us to do research and publish. It sustains our interest, over the course of our career. And I think for that, we are blessed. We are most fortunate.

Jim explains that possessing the strong work ethic and individual fortitude to overcome a felony conviction is a big accomplishment. Society never expected many of the individuals within the CC group, Jim's primary focus, to attain any level of success. Thus, Jim points out:

...every one, every member of this group, is an individual miracle. Nobody ever expected us, any one of us, to become professors.

### *Door to higher-education open for ex-convicts*

A common thread prevailed in this chapter. Academia and higher education was a door left open to formerly incarcerated people. Whereas many higher paying professions and careers have been rendered inaccessible to ex-convicts due to legal and professional restrictions, academia is still available as long as the necessary degree, usually a doctorate/PhD, is attained. Because the doctoral degree is an educational attainment few

individuals reach, whether they are convicted of a felony offense or not, the life history participants expressed that the social institutions that control this gateway never expected ex-convicts to be capable of accomplishing such goals.

Jenny emphasizes that most of the population never reaches the PhD level of education, thus attaining a doctorate as an ex-convict is a way to overcome the system with the United States. She argues:

This is part of the system we can conquer. That's the point of getting a Ph.D. You can get to the top of something. You're outdoing most of the "free" who've never seen population...getting a Ph.D. That's something that can be accomplished.

Society never expected ex-convicts to be able to attain doctorates, explains

Jim. Once again, Jim points out the power of mentorship. He explains that as long as more experienced formerly incarcerated professors help aspiring ex-con academics, then all ex-con academics can overcome their stigmatized identity:

We have found that there are academics that will help us, we have an ability to...left the door open because nobody ever expected a bunch of dumb ex-cons to become Ph.D.'s. So, you need a license to be a nurse or a doctor or a lawyer or a high school teacher. A license we can't get. But you don't need a license to be a professor.

Macon speaks to his experiences in prison as forcing him to confront existence within a structure of social control, yet more importantly, prison made him aware of the concept of social structures. Yet, because of this insight as a critically aware formerly incarcerated person, he is able to successfully navigate academia with the knowledge that it is essentially just another structure of social control. Thus, his experience has opened an opportunity for him. Macon points out:

It's not individual here. We're all kind of caught in bigger institutional structures. We know that. Prison lets you know, that those structures control your lives. And they do out here as well. I'm more sensitive to it because of that experience, and a

lot of people aren't. We know this is constructed...it's all just made up...but those are the rules and we have to learn how to use them to our best advantage.

### **Summary – “left the door open “**

Several themes were presented in this chapter. The first section focused on themes unique to each of the three participants, Jenny, Macon, and Jim; then shifted to a second section that examines shared themes in these life histories. There are some strong common unifying threads that can be pulled through all of the discussions within this chapter. The first is that academia was an opportunity that was not rendered inaccessible to formerly incarcerated people. The second underlying theme is that these respondents possess of a great degree of self-motivation, they are presented as hyper-motivated individuals. Summaries of the individual life history themes will be presented first followed by a summary of the themes common to all life history participants.

#### *Individual Summaries:*

From the perspective of an academic who was formerly incarcerated, Macon brought many unique perspectives to the table. Because of his relatively long prison sentence, 15 years in contrast to my sample mean of 3.96 years, Macon was faced with the problem of surviving/managing extended time within a maximum-security prison facility. While long prison sentences do present inmates with particular difficulties, Macon described his sentence as both a sentence to be survived and as an opportunity to improve himself as a person. Macon continually referred to his prison sentence as a mechanism for finding himself. In addition, the time spent in prison forced him to reconstruct his reality in order to survive the monotonous, yet potentially dangerous

environment that he found himself in. Macon pointed out that if he had not gone to prison, he would have never been forced to face himself and essentially solve all of his personal issues by himself. Prison functioned to create a situation in which Macon had to face every personal issue head on. As discussed earlier in this chapter, certain issues/problems that Macon faced in prison, such as a lack of personal direction and lack of personal responsibility, he had brought into prison with him. Yet other issues were problems that were faced on a daily basis, such as intra-personal issues between Macon and other inmates. Problems with fellow inmates had to be dealt with immediately and successfully due to the confined nature of Macon's living quarters. If a problem with a fellow inmate was not resolved, there was no way for the two parties to avoid each other, and the issue might increase in intensity until worse problems and often violence ensued. Macon emphasized that much of his future success as an academic was due to the environment he successfully navigated and the life skills he learned behind prison walls.

Macon's story reveals that when the right factors are present (ie. desire to change, willingness to mature, maintaining a structured routine), the prison can function as a means of self-improvement. The time provided by a prison sentence creates a unique experience which can allow for life improvement and formal and general learning of skills and scholarship. This presents the idea that constructing prison environments that encourage such self improvement, in place of the relative void of opportunities presented in most modern prisons, would be beneficial to prisoners in general.

Growing up and attending undergraduate school during the 1960s and 1970s, Jim was familiar with civil disobedience protest, the drug experimentation environment (even though not a regular user himself), and revolutionary/critical thinking. Jim served time

for a federal drug charge, standing up to the federal courts and federal prison system throughout his trial and prison sentence. If Jim perceived that a wrong had been done to him or his fellow inmates, he was quick to take legal/corrective action to address this issue.

Jim remains one of the most active members of the convict criminology (CC) group, and is constantly involved in the process of mentorship with his university students and with new members of the convict criminology group who he felt had potential to succeed as academics. The power and efficacy of mentorship was mentioned many times in my discussions with Jim, who believed that it was the duty of more experienced members of the convict criminology discipline and more experienced academics to work with and advise newer less experienced CC members and students.

Jim's story illuminates the power of human capital (especially pre-incarceration), and the strength of mentorship as a form of social capital. Entering prison with a nearly completed bachelor's degree from a high ranking college, Jim understood the value of education, and was able to utilize his time in prison productively, focusing his energy on reading, finishing his bachelor's degree, and re-applying for graduate school shortly before release from prison. In addition, the value of acquiring and possessing human capital is emphasized here, being an important component in future success. This discussion indicates that there is positive potential for implementation of programs that support higher education within the prison system, and/or create viable pathways to higher education for the formerly incarcerated upon release from prison.

In regard to mentorship, Jim's life experiences are a testament to the positive effects of being mentored and mentoring, both of which Jim experienced. Mentorship is

a powerful theme within this research, being emphasized thematically in both Chapters 4 and 5. It must be noted that Jim's pre-incarceration formal education could have provided him with knowledge of how to find/approach potential mentors, thus increasing his potential of accessing positive mentorship. Yet, such potential increased mentorship access continues to speak to the positive benefits created from higher education, leading to more macro scale societal issues such as reduction of poverty, issues of discrepancies in quality among the United State's public schools, and how such problems would be addressed. In addition, when focusing on prisoners, and the formerly incarcerated, focusing on more access to formal education and incentives to engage in higher education both within prison and post-incarceration would allow access to many additional positive opportunities and lower the risk of returning to prison.

Coming from the business-centered culture of corporate America, Jenny possessed the mannerisms and cultural capital of the middle class. Jenny was convicted of a white-collar crime and carried a relatively short sentence of about a year. Yet this experience shocked Jenny into the realization that social inequality and injustice was a reality, not just a discussion point. Serving her time in a federal women's prison, Jenny's carceral experience was far different from her fellow male former inmates. Jenny expressed that conditions in women's prisons were far worse than in men's prisons, and she believed this was due to women's passive natures in comparison to male inmates. Female inmates were less likely to protest against poor physical conditions or treatment. Jenny also explained that the culture in women's prisons was different from that in prisons for men, women inmates being more likely to form family units and focus on family related issues while incarcerated. Jenny explained that having access to outside



social capital of both deviant and status quo cultural types were important. Additionally, older age was connected to greater levels of status within the women's prison culture.

Once released, Jenny felt like she had lost herself and her identity. Jenny expressed that because of her prison sentence, she had a more critical worldview. Instead of immediately enrolling in school, Jenny went into business for herself, finally being hired on by a firm because of her business abilities. Yet, Jenny was later let go from this position when she attempted to speak out against wrongful practices on the part of her employer. Once employed, Jenny was motivated to return to school. Jenny strongly emphasized that the ex-convicts that can access higher education and have the fortitude to complete their course work and attain their degrees will be able to turn their lives around to a positive direction and overcome the negative consequences of their felony status, essentially "flipping it upside down."

Jenny's story is a testimony to turning what society perceives to be a negative into a positive. The ability to see positive potentials where most individuals would not allowed Jenny the ability to overcome the stigma of her past. This process was somewhat long and arduous for Jenny. She returned to higher education some 10 years after her white-collar conviction. She was still able to view her prison experience through the lens of "how can this issue help others?" Jenny recognized that the male centered United States criminal justice system was failing women, often lacking in policies that considered women's needs (i.e. health care, women more likely to have sole responsibility for children, differing social perceptions of women inmates), and because she served time in a women's prison, she was attempting to develop non-profit programs to address such issues.

*Common Theme Summary:*

To speak to the first common theme mentioned above, each formerly incarcerated academic in this chapter recognized that academia was a viable career option that was available to them, often through the encouragement of a mentor(s), sincere interest in learning, and/or recognizing that few other options for a rewarding career were available to them as ex-convicts. While professional degrees that required specific government or state controlled credentials were often inaccessible to those with a felony conviction, the attainment of a PhD would allow the ex-convict to access academia. Yet, recognition exists among the life history participants that this is an accomplishment that many ex-convicts do not have access to.

The second common theme, possessing a high degree of self-motivation is evident when examining the lives of each life history participant. The participants did not specifically label themselves as self-motivated and/or hyper-motivated, yet a trend of being quite successful in all endeavors that they applied themselves to was evident. Examples of this include Jenny's ability to start her own successful business, Macon's ambitious work within graduate student government, and Jim's level of publications and mentorship involvement with formerly incarcerated and non-formerly incarcerated aspiring scholars. The life history participants expressed that the shared qualities listed above were important, providing them with the encouragement and fortitude with which to access and achieve success within higher levels of academic education.

The common themes, "read in prison theme", the "Hyper-motivated and successful in all ventures theme", and the "Door to higher-education open for ex-convicts theme," present well read, highly motivated individuals who recognized that formal

higher education was a route through which the formerly incarcerated could attain legitimate success. The concept that the life history respondents have illuminated is that education is a route through which the formerly incarcerated can successfully reintegrate into society, even with a felony conviction. This can be gleaned from the common life-history themes, yet few prisoners and/or the formerly incarcerated are aware of this knowledge. Thus, the question that this research presents is how to disseminate such knowledge among prisoners and the formerly incarcerated, and create opportunities to capitalize on such positive educational potential. The following chapter will be comprised of three sections, the first section being discussion of chapters 4 and 5, the second section dealing with policy implications, and third drawing together my conclusions.

## Chapter 7

### DISCUSSION, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

This exploratory qualitative discussion of the pathways of formerly incarcerated people from prison to academia and/or professional positions has yielded a myriad of rich findings and themes. The participants within this research sample overcame or were currently in the process of overcoming the pervasive stigma society places on the formerly incarcerated. Within the qualitative interview section, the 30 interviewees exhibited a diverse array of educational experiences. Some completed some college and/or degrees before they were incarcerated, others began taking college courses in prison, while still others began higher education upon release from prison. There are many variables to take into account. The respondents come from many walks of life, different ethnic/racial backgrounds, differing genders, having been incarcerated during different eras for different types of crimes, and coming from different social and economic strata. Some respondents reported great difficulty in finding secure academic employment when they completed their educational journey because of their backgrounds, while others found employment without any difficulty and/or ex-convict biases.

This chapter will be comprised of three sections: discussion, policy implications, and conclusion. The discussion section will explore the common themes found among the qualitative semi-structured interviews and life histories and how such themes interact with the conceptual framework presented in chapter 2. As you will recall, the framework was comprised of three concepts: 1) Social stigma, 2) Convict perspective, and 3) social and human capital, as well as discussion of more specific ex-convict experiences. The

second section will examine how the themes, concepts, and ideas presented within this study can inform progressive criminal justice policy and how such results speak to the efficacy of current criminal justice policy. The third section will provide a wrap up discussion of meaningful themes and life experiences that the formerly incarcerated academics presented in this research project, a brief overview of study limitations, and potential directions for future research.

## **Discussion**

A portion of this research project discusses the qualitative semi-structured interviews that were conducted from a sample of 30 formerly incarcerated academics ranging from undergraduate students with aspirations of professional/academic careers to full professors and research analysts, as presented in Chapter 4. Most of the thirteen participants who had completed PhDs spoke to the power of the graduate educational experience in assisting them in overcoming what society perceived as a spoiled identity. The remaining participants were in various stages of the academic process. Some were currently taking time off from college to work, while others were nearing completion of their graduate studies. Thus, the themes contained within this discussion are wide ranging, with multiple pathways influenced by a wide array of variables, presenting a panoramic discussion of the academic experience of the formerly incarcerated. Such experiences are presented as four of the most relevant findings, examining how different forms of social and human capital can benefit the formerly incarcerated, the power of the insider perspective, force of nature individuals, and conquering the systems (the door has been left open into the academy for the formerly incarcerated).

*Social & Human Capital and the formerly incarcerated academic*

One of the driving concepts presented in the qualitative responses collected in this study is that access to social capital creates access to human capital, a concept that Coleman (1988) presents. Also, as stated in Chapter 2, Lin (1999, 2000) points out that social inequality is reproduced through differential access to social capital, thus the ability to access such capital is an important determinant to the educational success of the formerly incarcerated. Coleman (1988) discussed three types of social capital, obligations and expectations, information channels, and social norms, yet this discussion will focus on information channels. A finding that this research presented that was not touched upon by Coleman, was the recognition of the potential of mentorship as a powerful form of social capital and primary source for information.

Approximately 90% of the participants spoke of the positive influence of outside assistance from other individuals, six coming in the form of family, professional acquaintances friends. Approximately 80% of interviewees spoke of forming connections with academic faculty at universities and colleges, who then served or continue to serve as powerful motivators and/or mentors who provided them with valuable information in regards to education. Through this contact with academic mentors and connections with scholars, the participants were able to create networks of social capital. The participants were able to translate the information and guidance they received from their academic contacts into scholarly social capital which generates opportunities that would not exist and/or would be very difficult to access without a network of people who are knowledgeable about how to successfully navigate the

academic system. Many academics went out of their way to encourage the participants to continue their work, even though some participants wanted to give up or take a different path. With this encouragement the participants were able to transform the benefits of their social capital into human capital. This supports the work of Brown and Ross (2010), as noted in Chapter 2, which explains that access to positive social capital can lead to additional human capital. The opportunities that participants engaged in led to access to higher education, graduate programs, research projects, and often graduate-level degrees, which in one third of the samples led to doctorates and subsequently academic and/or research positions. Another 17% of the sample were in graduate school or had some graduate school experience, and the remaining 50% were working on their undergraduate degrees with aspirations of graduate/professional level education and academic/professional careers. Thus, the potential for positive effects in regard to such forms of human and social capital is great for the formerly incarcerated who are involved in academia. Yet, there is some variance in experiences based on where the participants are in their academic journeys.

The participants who associated with the convict criminology (CC) discipline comprised of 21 of the 30 participants associated with in this qualitative sample. The CC members represent a relevant example of a social network of mentorship that provides a vital source of information in regard to academia and how to navigate the academy. While the CC affiliated respondents were in various stages of the academic process, with some members having been associated with the discipline from its creation in 1997 (Ross and Richards 2003), and other members finding their way to the discipline more recently, having just been released from prison, all of them were able to utilize the information

provided by other more experienced members of the discipline. Academics who associate with the CC discipline bring courses into prisons on how to access college upon release, and courses on criminology from a convict perspective. The courses discuss how to properly handle the background checks mentioned in Chapter 2, and CC mentors advise newer members of the group on how to write papers, what kind of research to conduct, and how to approach the job interview process. This demonstrates the power of mentorship to aspiring academic ex-convicts' journeys through academia, a process that is often confusing and counter-intuitive to newcomers, providing vital social capital through valuable channels of information.

*Convict Perspective and the formerly incarcerated academic*

The convict perspective (Greene et al. 2006, Richards and Jones 2004, Ross and Richards 2003) presented in Chapter 2 examines society and criminal justice system through the eyes of convicts and ex-convicts. Yet, this dissertation adds valuable nuance to the convict perspective, presenting multiple academic experiences in how the convict perspective is utilized. While some formerly incarcerated academics readily outed themselves to fellow academic peers, students, and their classrooms, others chose to keep their identities confidential, yet still used their inside knowledge of the criminal justice system to inform or add to their research and/or classroom lectures and discussions. Previous research and literature (Greene et. al. 2006, Richards and Jones 2003, Ross and Richards 2003), while accomplishing to important task of presenting the concept of the convict perspective, did not have access to findings that could present multiple perspectives on this valuable concept. This perspective was strongly emphasized as



shaping the identities of many participants within this research sample. Around 80% of the participants explained that their scholarly and instructional work and educational experiences benefitted from their convict/insider perspective (Baca Zinn 1979, Ross and Richards 2003). Many of the interviewees were proud and/or cherished the unique worldview that having an insider perspective on incarceration gave them within their academic spheres. From the perspective of student respondents (graduate and undergraduate), whether they “outed” their status in the classroom or not, they could still interject a very specific form of knowledge into discussions of correctional issues, and many of the participants who still identified as students within this study were not afraid to present their identities to the class or small group. From the perspective of the PhDs who make up nearly half of the thirty participants in this research, the nuance in approaches to the convict perspective presents itself once again, as about three fourths of them felt that their insider perspective helped their classroom instruction and/or informed their research, and the other fourth believed that they should only stick strictly to scholarly references, and leave insider perspective out of their academic experiences. Yet, as research findings in Chapter 4 explain, convicts understand that education has a strong influence on improving their life chances. Thus, if convicts could be allowed to harness the power of the multiple perspectives of their own life experiences, and transform their experiences within the correctional system into a positive attribute within academia, not only would the academy benefit from their unique insight, but additional educational opportunities could be created for ex-convict scholars as a result.

*Force of Nature*

This study introduces the concept of “force of nature” people to CC literature. While CC literature (Richards and Jones 2004, Ross and Richards 2003, Ross et. al. 2010) recognizes individuals who have overcome great obstacles, all of the people within this sample had overcome great odds and numerous obstacles in their academic journeys. The findings of this study as presented in Chapter 5 identified a distinct group of formerly incarcerated scholars who were able to overcome additional obstacles. Such formerly incarcerated people possess intense motivation and a desire to use education as a way to improve their lives and the lives of others, and this research project presented formerly incarcerated scholars who are classified as force of nature people because they came from backgrounds of extreme poverty and/or discrimination, overcame resistance from criminal justice authorities, and/or because of long prison sentences that essentially eliminated much of their social capital over the duration of time. Approximately 20% of the participants fit into this category, as discussed in Chapter 4. When examining the experiences of ex-convicts and convicts in America, it must be noted that even among the larger group of formerly incarcerated academics (still relatively small in comparison to all ex-convicts in U.S.), their post-incarceration life-courses are still quite anomalous. Seven out of ten ex-convicts are re-arrested (Visher and Travis 2003), and the majority of ex-convicts come from backgrounds of poverty, lack of education, and dysfunctional families (Reiman 2007; Petersilia 2009), and they are subject to loss of many state, federal, and civil privileges/rights such as voting rights, volunteering, coaching in youth sports, and work in food banks (Petersilia 2009, Uggen and Manza 2001). Such literature does not suggest accessing academia/higher education in a professional capacity as a means of overcoming such obstacles, and tends to focus on the problems faced by ex-

convicts, with providing an analysis of solutions based on the experiences of the formerly incarcerated. While all participants within this research overcame great obstacles, the force of nature participants demonstrated an unwillingness to accept loss of some social and civil privileges as a means of oppression. Thus, to overcome such obstacles is a difficult task from any perspective, yet to overcome such obstacles when faced with the most extreme social-structural disadvantages is more difficult still. Consequently, based on the findings presented in this dissertation, as noted in Chapter 5, an additional group within the convict criminology literature in regards to formerly incarcerated academics must be recognized.

While questions could be posed as to why such individuals were successful (and such questions should be posed), a potential explanation for such success that was mentioned by some participants was that they had no other choice but to succeed, because failure meant a life of very limited opportunity for success. While, the non-formerly incarcerated graduate student or the formerly incarcerated graduate student from a middle or upper socio-economic class position of privilege would have some insulation against failure if they did not complete graduate school<sup>4</sup>, the ex-convict graduate student who comes from a position of extreme social disadvantage must succeed at all costs or suffer more negative consequences. This does not mean that a discussion should not be had in regard to unique characteristics that such individuals might possess, yet the driving idea is the unique circumstances that these individuals faced may be the important factor in why they experienced success of such magnitude.

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<sup>4</sup> Insulation in the form of access to family wealth and resources, personal wealth and/or resources of their own, middle class mannerisms and cultural capital, and additional opportunities that individuals of disadvantage might not have.

*Jenny “This is Part of the System We can Conquer.”/Open Doors*

Within the findings of this research, a powerful idea presented itself, as many formerly incarcerated scholars explained that the institution of academia was a high status occupational field that was still accessible to the formerly incarcerated, and a door to opportunity had been left open to the formerly incarcerated. While current literature in regard to post-incarceration pathways (Herivel and Wright 2003, Petersilia 2009, Reiman and Leighton 2009, Sheldon 2007) presented in Chapter 2 identifies the positive benefits of education to the presently and formerly incarcerated, very little literature presents the concept of ex-convicts actually accessing and practicing higher education/academia as a profession. To reiterate, an example of the ‘conquering the system’ phenomenon research is presented from the life history discussion with Jenny. Jenny’s correctional experience having served time in a woman’s federal prison was quite different from the majority of the participants in this study. Women comprised 13% of this sample, and comprise 9% of the United States’ prison population (BJS 2012). While Jenny did address a wide array of topics, the two topics she emphasized were: 1) differences between female and male convicts, and 2) the concept of “turning it upside down,” thus transforming the negatives in her life into positives, implying her former experiences with incarceration and current involvement in academia. Jenny spoke to the discrepancies in the potential for activism she observed between men’s and women’s prisons. As discussed in earlier, the drug war has increased the female inmate population by 888% from 1986 to 1996 (Shaw 1999), drug crimes comprising 39% of female federal convictions in 2002 (Sheldon 2008). Women generally work as lower-level drug dealers, thus incarcerating this population generally has little or no effect on the illegal drug trade.

Yet, the damage done to the families the female inmates leave behind on the street is considerable, with 80% of female inmates having children (Shelden 2008) who obviously cannot accompany them to prison. Jenny points out that women inmates were very passive when interacting with prison staff and administration and with other key figures in the criminal justice system, and that they suffer negative consequences because of this. Women inmates were much less likely to protest unfair treatment or poor living conditions within correctional facilities, and Jenny herself admitted that she did not speak up for herself when she felt that her lawyer was not performing his job properly. The prison system serves as another form of gender based social inequality and oppression for women, who experience such oppression both inside and outside of prison (Girshick 1999).

Even though the crime that Jenny served time for was white collar in nature, she explained that she was surrounded by drug offenders and was even forced to take drug programming while incarcerated, even though she had never used drugs. From this experience, Jenny developed a desire to create a non-profit organization to help formerly incarcerated women. She wanted to transform the negative of her prison sentence into a positive, "*flipping it upside down,*" thus using her experiences and insider perspective (Baca Zinn 1979) to improve the lives of others, and overcome both the criminal justice system and the social stigma that the formerly incarcerated are often burdened with. Consequently, her prison experiences, a form of human capital, are being transformed into progressive criminal justice programs that will assist formerly incarcerated women.

*Open Doors*

The door to academia was left open for ex-convicts, allowing access to a professional high status position that few formerly incarcerated people previously thought was attainable. Awareness of an additional pathway to a high status profession for formerly incarcerated people must be presented within corrections, and within the process of probation. The three life history participants mirrored this statement, stating or implying that the task of attaining access to academia is possible for ex-convicts (Jones 2003, Ross and Richards 2003). While the attainment of a PhD/professional degree is possible for the formerly incarcerated as demonstrated from the sample in this study, it is certainly not common, even among the non-felon portion of the general population. Much research supports that ex-convicts as a group have lower levels of education (Sheldon in Palumbo 2009), statistics that are often associated with commonly accepted class and race inequalities that exist in the United States prison system as a whole (Pettit and Western 2004). Also, as stated in Chapter 2, 75% of state inmates and 59% of federal inmates did not complete high school, when compared to 18% of the general population, thus speaking to the fortitude of the participants within this study. It must be noted that all of the life history interviewees had attained high school diplomas before entering prison, yet all were successful at overcoming social stigma and resistance to their academic/professional pursuits because of their status as ex-convicts. Further, what these participants accomplished was to demonstrate that the formerly incarcerated can gain graduate degrees and access dominant forms of human capital and high status careers, even with a felony.

The idea that a pathway to success was left open to ex-convicts is an important common theme that this dissertation presents to literature on post-incarceration pathways. Many barriers to successful access and use of education exist for this group, including prison overcrowding and inadequate funding (Vacca 2004) and lack of skilled staff and/or up to date learning materials (Welsch 2002). Yet, the ability to access the highest level of academic achievement and engage in scholarship as a profession presents the formerly incarcerated academic with a unique opportunity to introduce real progressive transformations to the criminal justice system.

### **Policy Implications**

Based on the results of this qualitative research project and discussions that followed, there are several correctional, and educational policy implications that should be addressed. A felony conviction presents the formerly incarcerated individual with many obstacles, including, “exclusion from employment, education, health care, and transportation” (Love 2006). The aspiring ex-convict academic must not only attempt to navigate through a society that is hostile to the formerly incarcerated, but also confronting barriers in regards to educational access. The pathway of successfully overcoming such barriers is often quite arduous for the participants, yet the real task is to examine what can be gleaned from their experience and then applied to successful rehabilitative criminal justice programs. I will emphasize the following three policy recommendations: creating cycles of success, lowering sentence lengths for drug related crimes, and the creation and implementation of wide-scale programs that would provide mentoring (both within in prisons and within universities) that provide substantial

resources to convicts nearing release from prison on how to access and use post-secondary education.

### *Individual Participant based Policy Implications*

Before elaborating on my three recommendations, I will present some useful recommendations that were also made by participants, as the voice of the formerly incarcerated is emphasized as being of vital importance to the improvement of the criminal justice system. The experience and rich data captured in this unique sample of individuals can be used to create a greater likelihood of educational success upon release from prison for all ex-convicts with educational aspirations. The participants present suggestions such as a greater focus on issues surrounding formerly incarcerated women (*Jenny*), implementing programs into the correctional system that create legitimate pathways for convicts to enter college upon release (*Jim*), implementing policy that fully reintegrates ex-convicts back into society (*Macon*), and counseling for ex-convict students while in college (*Jim*). Other participants present policy suggestions/ideas through their discussions, such as engaging in recovery programs post-incarceration for formerly incarcerated people who suffer from substance abuse issues (*Andrew*), encouraging education as a means of self improvement while incarcerated (*Greg*), and thinking about potentially re-examining the hate legislation which is focused upon sexual offenders, essentially rendering it impossible for such offenders to ever successfully reintegrate into society even after demonstrating substantial efforts at personal reform (*David*).



*Findings Based Policy Implications*

The remainder of this section will focus on policy suggestions based on the qualitative findings presented in Chapters 5 and 6 of this dissertation. Essentially, the most important thrust of creating progressive educational policy for ex-convicts must be centered around creating cycles of success (Moeller, et.al. 2004, Ross and Richards 2003) instead of patterns of failure and recidivism (Pettit and Western 2004) as stated earlier in this chapter. In place of the current sense of impending failure placed on the recently released ex-convict, rehabilitative programs that encourage success (such as opportunities to engage in academic education) and create a cycle of success upon return to society. Through support for such positive programs, the high rates of recidivism and the revolving prison door syndrome that exist in the United States could potentially be greatly reduced.

Another policy implication would be to lower sentence lengths for drug related crimes to more reasonable levels, increasing the life chances for disadvantaged groups. When reflecting on how to create more progressive criminal justice and educational policy for the formerly incarcerated, the discussion must start with more foundational issues such as the United States' get tough on crime trend of increasingly long sentence lengths. Schmitt and Warner (2011) explain that the policy of long sentence lengths that keeps millions of offenders locked up, in large part for drug related crimes, significantly lowers the number of employable men by 1.5 to 1.7%, and such aggressive policies "do not reflect a jump in criminal activity, which has actually been on a steady decline since the early 1990s." Thus, hundreds of thousands of people are being incarcerated premised on the inertia of outdated punitive criminal justice legislation. Poor, less educated, and

minority men are the most heavily impacted by such policy. These are groups that are most in need of the positive benefits of higher education.

In addition, another important policy proposal would be to create wide scale programs that provide mentoring and substantial resources to convicts nearing release from prison on how to access and use post-secondary education. Support for progressive educational policy beneficial to the formerly incarcerated would be generated through demonstration of the economic benefits of wide scale reduction of the prison population and increasing the educated workforce, which would eventually save the American taxpayer money. Such policy could be enforced through federal mandates that require both state and federal prisons to implement and maintain such programs and provide resources to train skilled counselors and educators to staff such programs. This qualitative research does provide support for the positive benefits that education provides for ex-convicts, as the majority of participants who attained graduate degrees were successful in finding academic/research positions. In regards to directly addressing the concept of education and its positive benefits to the general public and to ex-convicts, which is an important component of increasing the potential that policy will be accepted, Berman (2008:19) states that, “increases in educational attainment, rather than increases in imprisonment rates, may be the surest way in modern times to reduce crime rates.” This policy could certainly be applied to ex-convicts, especially a formerly incarcerated group focused on academic pursuits.

### *Strengths*

While limitations within this study must be acknowledged, such as the lack of generalizability of qualitative research, focus on success stories while excluding failures, and potential research desirability bias, this study does possess many strengths. The ability of qualitative interviews and life-histories to provide rich data that allows participants to explain their life experiences and open-ended question responses in detail allowed this research to provide a voice for the formerly incarcerated. In this way, illuminating the experiences of a group that otherwise might not be able to express their ideas in an open public forum.

Finally, this research generates a body of qualitative data that focuses on the unique experiences and successes of a very unique and difficult to access group of students, scholars, and professionals. This research adds to a body of research about the experiences of Convict Criminology and formerly incarcerated scholars/professionals (Richards and Ross 2001, Richards and Jones 2004, Ross and Richards 2003, Ross et al. 2010), creating additional research that will guide future progressive criminal justice policy and promote positive developments in the battle for full social reintegration of ex-convicts upon release from prison.

### *Future Research*

This research is exploratory in nature, and one of the beneficial functions of exploratory study results is the discovery of new avenues for future research. For instance, because of the focus on academic educational paths within this study, future research could possibly examine alternate educational paths that ex-convicts might potentially take outside of higher education, such as vocational education,

apprenticeships, military options, or spiritual training. Such an analysis could create a better understanding of how education in various forms could be advantageous to both the formerly incarcerated and to society. Accepting that not all ex-convicts will be interested in similar forms of education, an investigation of what types of education are desired, and how to promote the benefits of education to ex-convicts would allow scholarship to assist in creating more ex-convict accessible educational programs within educational institutions.

Another future research issue that could be addressed is to examine how graduate level education potentially reduces rates of recidivism for the formerly incarcerated. The exploratory qualitative data produced within this research could serve as scholarly support for a quantitative examination of a larger sample of formerly incarcerated college students and academics. A research design that draws from nationally representative survey samples could access this group. Because of the advent of mass incarceration, millions of people are either incarcerated or were formerly incarcerated, and it is likely that an ever growing number of these individuals are attending colleges, thus investigating this group could illuminate the effects of graduate level education on re-offending.

While mentioned in the limitations section, exploring the failed attempts at graduate/academic endeavors among the formerly incarcerated may provide valuable insight into how to create ex-convict accessible educational programs both within prisons and within institutions of higher learning. This study focuses upon what works in regards to ex-convicts who have successfully pursued academia and/or are still in the process of doing so, research that explores why certain individuals did not complete their educations

or were not allowed to do so can provide valuable information to policy makers and future formerly incarcerated academics. Further future research could provide a more in-depth examination of the educational pathways of women ex-convict academics and international ex-convict academics. Additionally, another important area of future study in our global culture could focus on cross-national research, examining, comparing, and contrasting the educational pathways of the formerly incarcerated in international criminal justice systems. Previous preliminary research in Sweden has presented insight into progressive criminal justice programs that could prove useful in lowering recidivism rates in the United States. Sweden is renowned for low crime rates, small prison population, and humane treatment of inmates. Thus, comparing the educational pathways of Swedish and American formerly incarcerated could provide valuable insight into how to approach improving educational opportunities for such groups.

### **Study Conclusion**

The formerly incarcerated academics, graduate students, undergraduate students, and professionals participating in this research presented their voices, experiences, and perspectives in regard to educational pathways. Such qualitative exploratory content is intended to provide policy makers, scholarship, and the public with rare insight into a population that has experienced and survived the harsh conditions of imprisonment, yet successfully overcame the social stigma and limitations placed on the formerly incarcerated through involvement and/or employment in higher education, academia, and professional pursuits, often placing their research and professional focus on criminological and criminal justice fields. Such inside insight provides criminal justice

policy makers and the criminological academy with some of the missing links within criminological scholarship. The combination of an insider perspective coupled with classic academic training allows formerly incarcerated academics to examine their own life experiences through the lens of scientific rigor. Yet, it must be noted that most formerly incarcerated academics in this study explained that reliable data and scientific research were their primary focus within research and the classroom. Yet, such scholars also valued the additional knowledge/insight that was gleaned from their unique perspectives on incarceration, and expressed that such knowledge added to their efficacy as academics.

While research supports that ex-convicts tend to possess and have access to very little human capital due to structural issues of social inequality (Western 2002), this research presents a societal frame in which this group successfully gains human capital. Focusing on the interaction of social and human capital within this study provides valuable insight into the scholarship of how such concepts can benefit the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. In the qualitative interview discussion section of this chapter, the concept of access to social capital leading to access to human capital in regard to ex-convicts was presented. As discussed in the literature review section, un-educated inmates have higher rates of recidivism (Berman 2008, Pettit and Western 2004), and it costs society far more to incarcerate inmates than to educate them. From a purely economic perspective, ex-offenders who are able to sustain themselves utilizing worthwhile and useful employment are able to pay taxes and participate in the workforce, while contributing to their surrounding communities. From a humanistic perspective, liberally educated inmates have much to add to the breadth of academic knowledge.

To conclude on the positive value of the convict perspective to scholarship,

Macon states,

So from the inside there are a lot of nuances to law and policies that aren't in the books, aren't studied because the typical academic has no idea that these issues exist.

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**APPENDIX A****PHASE 1: IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW PROTOCOL****Background Information (descriptive information):**

I'd like to start out the interview by getting to know a little bit about your background information.

1. What was your age on your last birthday?
2. Do you identify with any racial or ethnic group?
3. What is your current annual income?

Probe: If none, do you have any sources of income, or wealth, or means of financial support?

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

*-If participant is an undergraduate in college:* Do you have aspirations of attending graduate or professional school after you complete your Bachelor's degree?

5. What is the field of study that you are focusing on right now?

*-Have you changed your academic focus over time?*

6. Are you currently employed?

- a. What is your job title / occupation?
- b. Is it part time or full time?
- c. Do you consider yourself underemployed ? (Is your current employment a choice?)

7. What is your current relationship status?

- a. How long have you been in your current relationship status?

- b. Are you currently living with this person?
8. Do you have any children?
- a. If yes, what are their ages, sex?
  - b. Are they from your current relationship?
9. What was the length of time you served in a correctional facility during your most recent sentence?
10. Have you been incarcerated more than one time?
- a.) Sentence lengths for previous sentences?
11. What was the original length of your sentence (before good time or parole)?
- a.) (For multiple sentences) What was the original length of sentence for each sentence you served?
12. Are you currently on parole or probation?
13. What type of crime was it that you served time for?

***Social and Human Capital:***

- 1.) Did you have to get your high school diploma or GED while in prison, before you started college?
- a.) Could you explain if the process of gaining your high school education had any influence on your journey to academic education?
- 2.) Could you explain if you were able to take college classes while in prison?
- a.) ...and after release prison?

- 3.) Could you discuss any credentials and/or certifications you have outside of academic education?

PROBES:

*If yes:* Did these credentials/certifications have any influence on your journey to academic education?

*If no:* Did not having any additional credentials/certifications outside of academic education have any influence on your journey to academic education?

- 4.) Could you discuss if you made any changes in your life-style while in prison or upon release from prison to improve your chances of gaining and/or utilizing academic education?

PROBE:

*If no:* Could you explain why you didn't make any life-style changes?

- 5.) Could you explain if your family, friends, acquaintances, and social connections have helped you access and use higher and academic education?

PROBE: How did the people you knew prior to incarceration or know now make the process of gaining a higher education easier?  
-gaining employment, or an academic position?

- 6.) How do you feel children or lack thereof affects access to and utilization of academic education?

PROBE: Does having/not having children affect your access to individuals or institutions that would assist you in the accessing and using academic education?

- 7.) How does marriage or lack thereof affects access and use of higher education upon release?
- 8.) What is your understanding of how pre-incarceration levels of education affected your current access to, and use of higher education?

PROBE: Did having college education before being incarcerated have any influence upon your decision to pursue higher education after release?

**Stigmatized Identity:**

- 1.) In general during your entire experience in higher education, could you explain whether you felt like you have been treated differently because of your ex-convict status?
- 2.) Could you explain whether your actual sentence length has any affect on your access to or use of higher education upon your release?  
  
-If you also had to serve out a parole/supervised release requirement after incarceration, could you explain if and how parole/supervised release affected your access to or use of higher education upon your release.
- 3.) Could you explain if and how the type of crime you were convicted of has affected your use of and/or access to higher education? If yes, how? If no, why not?
- 4.) *Substance Abuse:*

- a.) Have you had any previous issues with substance abuse (drugs or alcohol) and if yes, could you explain if and how your previous abuse affected your access to, or use of higher education?
- b.) If no, could you explain if and how your lack of previous abuse affected your access to, or use of higher education?

5.) *Class, Gender, Race, Age, Era, and Religion:*

Could you explain if and how social class, your gender, race/ethnicity, religion, time period (era) you were in prison, or age affect your access to and use of academic, after your time spent in prison?

PROBE: Could you explain if you've ever had an experience as an ex-convict in higher education where you felt like you were treated differently because of your economic class, race or ethnicity, gender, or age?

***Convict Perspective on Higher Education:***

- 1.) *(Exploring pathway to aspirations)* Considering your life-experiences as an ex-convict, was there any defining moment or turning point in your life, that created the aspiration to a graduate/professional education (and career, if participant is already working in the field)?

- 2.) How do you think your experiences as an ex-convict influences your experiences in higher education? If yes, how? If no, why not?
  
- 3.) As an ex-convict, could you explain how your life experiences have affected your access to and use of higher education?  
  
PROBE: Having served time in prison, explain whether this experience has given you any unique insights that have had an effect on your access to or use of higher education? If yes, how?
  
- 4.) How have your perceptions of your time spent in prison been affected by your experiences with academic education?  
  
-Could you explain whether your perceptions of prison have changed over time?

CONVICT CRIMINOLOGY AS A CONVICT PERSPECTIVE (Only for participants affiliated with the Convict Criminology group)

- 1.) How did you initially make contact with/find out about Convict Criminology?
  
- 2.) Could you explain how long you been involved with/affiliated with Convict Criminology?
  
- 3.) Could you explain if you feel that Convict Criminology has influenced your access to and use of higher education (How has Con-Crim influenced your academic experience)? If yes, how? If no, why not?
  
- 4.) -Could you explain whether your perceptions of prison have changed over time?



5.) Could you discuss whether or not you feel your personal experiences with incarceration and the criminal justice system are important to your field of study?

-Has personal experience with incarceration/criminal justice system affected your academic focus, methodological choices, theoretical approach, and/or classroom teaching?

WRAP UP:

Any final comments or questions about this interview

**APPENDIX B**

JENNY  
QUALITATIVE LIFE HISTORY

Pathway from Incarceration to Academia/Professional Position

**PRISON**

- Describe the type of prison(s) you were in.
  
- How would you describe your prison camp experience?
  - What were the bad things about women's prison, if any?
  - What were the good things about women's prison, if any?
  
- What (if anything) did prison change about you?
  - What was your first memory/impression about prison?
  
- In what ways did the people around you in prison affect you? (guards/other incarcerated people)
  
- How do you feel about the length of your prison sentence? Could you explain if it enough time to impact your life in any way?
  
- How did you conceptualize the passage of time throughout the duration of your sentence?
  - Could you explain if this conceptualization of time changed?

**AFTER PRISON AND ACADEMIA/PROFESSION***After Prison*

- What was the experience of your release from prison like (after you left the doors)?
  
- What was the process of social re-integration like for you?

*Academia/Profession*

- What experiences led you to higher education? Why do you want to possibly pursue a legal career?  
  
-did you begin your educational process with law school in mind?
  
- What led you to study sociology/media?  
-How has your scholarly work changed over the years?
  
- Can you describe your journey through your post incarceration pathway?
  
- You described not experiencing any stigma based on the incarceration portion of your past. Could you explain whether you feel that you will experience any stigma in the future?
  
- Can you describe your educational journey to the present position of your education?
  
- What are your plans for your future career?

COMMENTS OR QUESTIONS:

JIM  
QUALITATIVE LIFE HISTORY

Pathway from Incarceration to Academia/Professional Position

PRISON

- How would you describe your prison experience?
  - What were the bad things about prison, if any?
  - What were the good things about prison, if any?
- What (if anything) did prison change about you?
  - What was your first memory/impression about prison?
  - Describe the type of prison(s) you were in.
  - In what ways did the people around you in prison affect you? (guards/other incarcerated people)

THE JOURNEY

- Having served 3 years, what was journey through prison like?
- How did you conceptualize the passage of time throughout the duration of your sentence?
  - Did this conceptualization of time change over time?
- What was leaving prison like (before your left through the doors & last few days)?

AFTER PRISON AND ACADEMIA/PROFESSION

*After Prison*

- What was the experience of your release from prison like (after you left the doors)?
- What was the process of social re-integration like for you?

*Academia/Profession*

- What experiences led you to academia as a career?
- did you begin your post-incarceration educational process with academia in mind?
- What is the most rewarding part of your career?
  
- What led you to be involved with convict criminology?

-How has your scholarly work changed over the years?

- You mentioned in a previous discussion that you keep a very high profile as a formerly incarcerated professor/member of Con-Crim. Can you explain the effect this has had on your career?
- Can you describe your journey through academia as a career?
- What are your plans for the future in academia?

COMMENTS OR QUESTIONS:

## MACON QUALITATIVE LIFE HISTORY

### Pathway from Incarceration to Academia/Professional Position

#### PRISON

- How would you describe your prison experience?
  - What were the bad things about prison, if any?
  - What were the good things about prison, if any?
  
- What (if anything) did prison change about you?
  - What was your first memory/impression about prison?
  - Describe the type of prison(s) you were in.
  
  - In what ways did the people around you in prison affect you? (guards/other incarcerated people)

#### THE JOURNEY

- Having served 15 years, what was journey through prison like?
  - How would you segment your incarceration experience, if you were to chapters? (examples: Early Phase, Middle Phase, Late Phase or Learning Segment, Establishment Segment, Going Home Segment)
  
- Could you describe any major milestones and/or defining events throughout the duration of your sentence?
  
- How did you conceptualize the passage of time throughout the duration of your sentence?
  - Did this conceptualization of time change over time?
  
- What was leaving prison like (before your left through the doors & last few days)?

#### AFTER PRISON AND ACADEMIA/PROFESSION

##### *After Prison*

- What was the experience of your release from prison like (after you left the doors)?
- How did you perceive society after 15 years inside a correctional institution?
- What was the process of social re-integration like for you?

*Academia/Profession*

- What experiences led you to academia as a career?  
-did you begin your educational process with academia in mind?
  
- What led you to study criminology?  
  
-How has your scholarly work changed over the years?  
-Working on theoretical scholarship, and qualitative research
  
- Can you describe your educational journey to the end of your education?
  
- Can you describe your journey through academia as a career?
  
- What are your plans for the future in academia?

COMMENTS OR QUESTIONS:

APPENDIX C: *Extended Descriptive Table*

| Pseudonym | Gender | Race/<br>Ethnicity                         | Education                           | Annual<br>Income   | Conviction   | Current<br>Status                           | Discipline/<br>Field                               |
|-----------|--------|--|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--|---|--|
| Macon     | M      | White                                      | 2 PhDs                              | N/A                | 2nd degree homicide  | Assoc Prof                                  | Sociology/CJ                                       |
| Jim       | M      | White                                      | PhD                                 | N/A                | Conspir to dist MJ   | Full Prof                                   | Sociology/Crim/CJ                                  |
| David     | M      | White                                      | PhD                                 | \$10,000           | statutory sexual<br>offense  | Grad Stdnt                                  | Crim and CJ  |
| Gary      | M      | White                                      | PhD                                 | \$140000<br>NZ     | Selling Herion/Juvi<br>was cultivating MJ                                  | Prof  | Sociology  |
| Martin    | M      | White                                      | EDD                                 | \$185,000          | robbery/homicide   | Exec Assist for<br>Juvenile Parole          | Education  |
| Aaron     | M      | White                                      | soph/undergrad                      | No/student         | 1 count affray&bladed<br>weapon  | student                                     | CJ   |
| Betty     | F      | White                                      | MA                                  | \$40,000           | bank robbery   | Researcher for<br>corporation               | sociology  |
| Pete      | M      | White                                      | 1quarter<br>of community<br>college | \$10,000           | white collar - mutual<br>fund mgmt   | shipping<br>supervisor/sales                | horticulture                                       |
| Linda     | F      | Tri-racial<br>(Af-<br>Am/Native/<br>White) | some master's                       | \$8,500            | fraud/forgery/theft of<br>financial instrument                             | N/A   | criminology  |
| Luann     | F      | White                                      | PhD student                         | N/A                | shop lifting   | assist prof                                 | CJ/Crim  |
| Greg      | M      | White                                      | PhD student                         | \$21,000           | conspiracy to<br>distribute<br>Cocaine/amphetamines                        | Teaching<br>Assistant                       | sociology  |
| Eric      | M      | Greek                                      | PhD                                 | \$30,000<br>pounds | possession w/ intent to<br>supply - cocaine                                | Lecturer/Rsch<br>Consultant                 | soci psych   |
| Patrick   | M      | White                                      | MA                                  | \$56,500           | burglary, auto theft,<br>credit card fraud                                 | constructin -<br>rigger                     | sociology  |
| Roger     | M      | White                                      | PhD                                 | \$75,000           | manufacture of<br>marijuana  | associate prof                              | soci/crim  |
| Tom       | M      | White                                      | 2 MA's                              | 15,000<br>pounds   | wounding with a knife,<br>attempted robbery and<br>wounding w/ intent      | free lance<br>journalist                    | criminology  |
| Jenny     | F      | Other                                      | some Masters                        | \$100,000+         | white collar - wire<br>fraud   | non-profit<br>enteprenuer                   | media  |
| Andrew    | M      | African<br>American                        | PhD                                 | \$41,000           | Controlled Substance<br>Sales  | Assistant<br>Professor                      | Sociology  |
| Amber     | F      | Multi-<br>racial                           | Snr/<br>undergraduate               | student<br>loans   | possession of a<br>controlled substance<br>w/ intent to sell               | N/A   | sociology/ethnic/womens<br>studies                 |
| Frank     | M      | Multi-<br>racial                           | PhD                                 | 72,000<br>Euros    | manslaughter   | Post Doc                                    | Criminal Justice                                   |
| Scott     | M      | White                                      | PhD                                 | \$92,000           | manufacturing<br>marijuana   | Full Prof                                   | sociology  |
| Kevin     | M      | White                                      | PhD                                 | \$90,000           | Check kiting   | assist<br>prof/director of<br>CJ dept       | Criminal Justice                                   |
| Will      | M      | White                                      | some Master's                       | \$35,000           | Murder 1   | Social Science<br>Research<br>Consultant    | Social<br>Science/Criminology                      |
| Gerald    | M      | White                                      | PhD & Post<br>Doc                   | \$76,000           | Drug charge - cocaine  | Assistant<br>Professor                      | Criminology/Sociology                              |
| Jack      | M      | White                                      | BS                                  | \$0                | Online enticement & 2<br>counts Distr of<br>Cocaine. 1 count dist<br>of MJ | N/A   | Business Administration                            |
| Todd      | M      | White                                      | Snr/<br>undergraduate               | <\$10,000          | robbery/use of<br>force/endangering<br>public safety                       | Pizza<br>delivery/painter                   | criminology  |
| Shawn     | M      | White                                      | Jnr<br>/undergraduate               | <\$10,000          | felony DWI   | Baker                                       | Business Administration                            |
| Phillip   | M      | White/<br>Hispanic                         | soph/undergrad                      | \$3,500            | Conspiracy to<br>distribute cocaine and<br>meth                            | landscaping                                 | social sciences                                    |
| Luis      | M      | White                                      | PhD                                 | \$106,000          | Delivery of cocaine  | Criminological<br>Researcher                | criminology  |
| 2Dale     | M      | African<br>American                        | Associate's<br>degree               | \$40,000           | robbery  | Community<br>Justice Center<br>Adminstrator | Drug and Alcohol and<br>Youth                      |
| Ron       | M      | White                                      | Counseling<br>Certificate           | N/A                | assault, robbery, drug<br>possession                                       | Counselor/<br>Coordinator                   | TREATMENT<br>COORDINATOR –<br>CONCEPT<br>DEVELOPER |



**APPENDIX D:**  
(Informed Consent Form for IRB project #12311)



**Informed Consent for Participating in a In-depth Semi-structured Interview**  
**Exploring Educational Pathways: A Study of Ex-convict Reintegration**

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in an in-depth interview as a part of a **research** study investigating the obstacles that ex-offenders face when trying to acquire and/or use higher educational credentials (for example, Bachelors, Masters, and Doctoral degrees). You were selected as a possible participant because you identified an ex-convict of at least 19 years of age, have previously served time in prison for felony charges, and are involved in academia, either in graduate school or have aspirations towards graduate school. Please read this form and ask any questions that you may have about this study.

**Purpose of Study:**

The **purpose** of this study is: what obstacles do ex-convicts face when trying to acquire and/or use higher educational credentials. There are many compelling reasons as to why this topic should be studied. While much research has been produced in regards to convicts and education, very little research has examined ex-inmates' access to and utilization of academia.

**Description of Study Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this interview, you can expect to participate in a onetime audio recorded in-depth interview, and if necessary, a follow-up interview to clarify what was discussed in the first interview. The interview process will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. A subset of those who complete the in-depth interviews will be selected with their permission to participate in a life-history interview.

**Risks to Being in Study:**

The risks associated with participating in this study are minimal. No serious medical or psychological problems should occur as a result of this research. One possible risk is that you will share information that is confidential. However, you will always have the right to retract any statements that you would prefer to remove from the record at anytime during the research process.

**Benefits of Being in Study:**

There are no direct benefits to participating in this study; however, participation does offer you the opportunity to express the issues you feel face ex-convicts who are pursuing academic education. Your information can potentially be used to help ex-convicts better access and utilize higher academic education.

**Confidentiality and Privacy of Data:**

The researchers will keep records of this study confidential to the extent allowed by law. If you do not feel comfortable answering specific questions for any reason, you do not need to answer. In order to maintain confidentiality, the researcher will take the following precautionary measures:

- *Research records will be kept in a locked file in the office of the Principal Investigator.*
- *All audio recordings will be erased following transcription.*
- *The individually collected data will be destroyed after the study is completed.*

Access to the records, including transcripts and audio recordings, will be limited to the researchers; however, please note that regulatory agencies and the Institutional Review Board may review the research records.

In any sort of report we may publish, whether it be for a journal publication or professional presentation, we will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. All names of participants will be changed in any reports.

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:**

**Your participation is completely voluntary.** If you choose not to participate, it will not affect your current or future relations with the University any organization you are currently affiliated with. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time, for whatever reason. To end your participation, you may simply leave the interview.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, or to report any concerns, please contact the UNL Institutional Review Board at 402-472-6965.”

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to any questions I had. I give my consent to participate in this interview. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

**Signatures/Dates:**

By initialing, I hereby consent to the audio recording of this interview. \_\_\_\_\_

Participant or Legal Representative Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**Contacts and Questions:**

The primary researcher conducting this study is Grant Tietjen. For questions or more information concerning this study you may contact him at:

|                                  |                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Grant Tietjen                    |                         |
| Department of Sociology          | phone: (402) 805 2622   |
| University of Nebraska – Lincoln | email: gtietjen@unl.edu |

**Copy of Consent Form:**

You will be given a copy of this consent form and one will be kept in our records file for future reference. You may also contact the faculty mentor of this project, Dr. Helen Moore:

Helen Moore

Department of Sociology      phone: (402) 472 - 3631  
University of Nebraska – Lincoln    email: [hmoore1@unl.edu](mailto:hmoore1@unl.edu)