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Journeys in Social Stigma: The Lives of Formerly Incarcerated Felons in Higher Education

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Abstract

While inmates are the subject of many outlets of popular media and research, this population is rarely, however, studied in any depth. Most forms of media overlook the rehabilitative efforts made by inmates. This study attempts to evaluate education as a form of rehabilitation and identify the struggles faced by inmates while trying to finish their degrees on a traditional college campus. This study does this by focusing on the stigma, both real and perceived, that former inmates battle and how they find ways to alleviate the harmful effects of stigma caused by former incarceration.

Introduction

The world of inmates is one that is hard to understand without experiencing it firsthand. The stigma, real or perceived, which inmates encounter once released is enough to keep many from developing social, professional or educational ties and seeking life enhancing opportunities. Stigma, caused by both criminal history and financial barriers, force many to find alternative ways to adapt to the world to fit in and be successful (Harrison, 2004).

This study used qualitative interviews of formerly incarcerated felons to discern how those who started rehabilitative education in prison continued these efforts on a college campus after their release and how they managed their social stigma. The interviews provide insight on how this population is affected by and handles the stigma placed upon them. The insights shared by the subjects are used as a way to understand how individuals within this population feel about themselves and how they perceive others feel about them based upon their past. This study also uses sociological theories to explain how others' actions affect this population. This combination allows for a

more complete understanding of human behavior and social interactions with this population.

It is important to note that many universities have these formerly incarcerated felons as students on campus, and many people, both fellow students and faculty alike, have no idea of who they are. By not knowing about these students' past, the students, faculty and university staff are unable to help these individuals adapt, succeed and deal with the pressures of their past and their own rehabilitative efforts. Also, when the university community learns to accept this population, they can then see that former inmates can contribute to the community and are not to be feared. This change in attitude could help stigmatized individuals to be successful in college and therefore reduce their chances of recidivism (Harrison, 2004).

Theories of Stigma

Defining Stigma

Erving Goffman (1963) wrote extensively about stigma and social identity (p. 1). His theories provide insight into the effects of stigma. He also provides his readers with a useful definition to utilize while investigating this topic. Goffman defines the term "stigma" as "...the situation of the individual who is disqualified from social acceptance (p. 1)." He breaks down stigma into three different types: "physical deformity, blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will and tribal (p. 4)." The one relevant to our study is that of "blemishes." This includes social defects dealing with personality, mental disorder, imprisonment and homosexuality (p. 4). Social identity and aspects of information control are linked with the concept of stigma also.

Goffman (1963) defines "social information" as "...the information the individual directly conveys about himself." He describes "social identity" as "...when a stranger comes into our presence, then first appearances are likely to enable us to anticipate his category and attributes (p. 2)." There is also a "virtual identity" that is assumed upon an initial introduction. The last identity used by Goffman was "actual social identity," which are individuals' true characteristics (p. 20). It is easy to see that there can be a discrepancy between the virtual and actual identities of an individual.

Goffman (1963) also explores the concept of hidden identity. This hidden identity relates, for example, to former inmates divulging only desirable information about themselves because of possible consequences and rejection. Gardner (1991) also explored this concept. He stated that "... part of what

members of some stigmatized groups will come to fear is that subtly or boldly, they will be accused of not meriting presence in public places at all (p. 225)."

Effects of Stigma

There is evidence of the link between stigma and low self-esteem. Self-esteem issues result from negative reactions to and feeling towards the individuals (Crocker, 1991). Negative reactions have less effect on individuals if the evaluator (i.e., the person making the social judgment about another) is known to be biased. This enables the stigmatized individuals to attribute the bias to prejudice and not to themselves. Also, these effects can be generalized to self-concept. One study proved one consequence that stems from belonging to a stigmatized group was "diminished self-concept" (Crocker, 1989, p. 2). This damaged self-concept is the result of negative interaction with others and how those others view the individual. It is easy to see how negative reactions can negatively affect both self-esteem and self-concept.

There is also a strong relationship between stigma and depression. This link only depends on an individual's perceived stigma, not stigma that is latent, hidden or suppressed. This link also grows exponentially with time. In this way, the stigmatized group is limited and faces negative reactions. The individual's self-perception is damaged and depression ensues (Mickelson, 2001). This same study showed a link between stigma and distress.

Coping with Stigma

Gardner (1991) identifies two specific ways that stigmatized individuals deal with the effects of stigma. One is presentation bravado, in which the individual is in a place of importance and not hiding their stigma (p. 257). In the second way, the individual will attempt to blend into the rest of the group in an attempt to reduce the effects of stigmatization (p. 259). This can apply to actions as simple as concealing a tattoo that was received while in prison. Grandfield (1991) used this same theory to examine how working class students adapted to campus life at an Ivy League School. Most hid their stigma, having not come from affluent families, from fellow students to try and fit in with the other students.

Crocker identifies another way in which stigmatized individuals may cope with stress. Stigmatized individuals may negate or deemphasize the differences between them and the advantaged majority that they compare themselves with (Crocker, 1989). By devaluing these harmful differences, the stigmatized individual is able to view themselves as being equal to the other groups. They

may also emphasize differences in which the stigmatized are viewed in a more positive manner.

Dual Meanings and Different Definitions

Stigmatized individuals also interpret reactions differently than the non-stigmatized. Positive feedback can be interpreted as both negative and positive by a stigmatized individual (Crocker, 1991). Behaviors can be interpreted as negative when the individual believes the evaluator to be covering up his/her own prejudice. It can also be seen as positive if the individual believes that the evaluator rated them positively despite their stigma (Crocker, 1991). It is interesting to see how the interpretation of similar events can have such different outcomes.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Crocker (1989) supports the theory of the self-fulfilling prophecy as a way for the stigmatized to cope with poor treatment. In this theory, an evaluator has negative feelings toward a group. The evaluator acts on these negative beliefs and treats the stigmatized group differently. The stigmatized group's behaviors then become consistent with the way they are being treated (Crocker, 1989). This is relevant in the studied population as well. Some on a college campus have negative attitudes towards formerly incarcerated inmates. Some of the negativity may come from fear of the unknown, stereotypes, or even moral judgments of the inmate for having received free education while in prison. As a result, this population may be treated differently than the rest of the student population and eventually begin behaving in ways congruent with the treatment by others. This is especially damaging as it eventually reinforces the beliefs of the evaluators and onlookers (Lefley, 1989).

Diffusing Blame

In the research conducted by Crocker (1989), it was shown that some stigmatized individuals actually disclose their past and stigma with the anticipation of failure. This disclosure gives the individuals an opportunity to blame poor treatment and poor outcomes on the stigma and not on their own potential shortfalls. This means of self-protection allows the blame to fall on the individual's group membership and not on the person themselves. Crocker's (1989) research also shows that children who were stigmatized, based on issues of race or religion, had self-esteem equal to those that were not stigmatized since the stigmatization could possibly be blamed on a prejudice toward the group.

Research Questions

This research utilizes all of the aforementioned theories in analyzing stigmatization, the fear of stigmatization and the effects of stigmatization. The following research questions were examined within the research:

Research Question 1: What fear of stigmatization, if any, did the subjects experience when starting classes on a college campus.

Research Question 2: Under what circumstances would the subjects choose to disclose or not disclose their prior incarceration or probation status.

Research Question 3: In what ways did the subjects attempt to socially manage their self-perceived stigma (e.g. tattoos).

Research Question 4: What associations did the subjects maintain with other formerly incarcerated felons on campus.

Research Question 5: How did the subjects explain stigma management techniques in their chosen career field.

Methods

This study involved 4 participants. It is important to note that finding potential subjects proved difficult due, in part, to the fact that there are few former inmates attending college who might trust researchers and also the fact that some may fear discovery of their stigmatizing characteristics. To qualify for the interviews, the participants must have been incarcerated in the Indiana Department of Corrections, taken part in Ball State's Correctional Prison Education Program, been released before obtaining their degree, and continued their education on campus after release.

The initial participant was an individual known to the researcher as a previously incarcerated individual who attended classes at Ball State University. This individual gave the researcher additional names of individuals who started their college education while incarcerated. The sampling method, then, was a snowball technique.

The interviews were qualitative and semi-structured in nature. The researcher prepared a questionnaire to start the interview process and to ensure that important questions were asked of all the participants. However, the researcher

also went beyond the questionnaire by asking additional question to verify answers or simply explore a topic in more depth. The questions were designed to determine how the individuals adapted to college life on campus based upon their stigma, specifically regarding hiding their stigma, academic achievements and social interactions both inside and outside prison.

To ensure confidentiality, at no point was a participants' name associated with any specific tape or transcript. The participants are referred to below only as P1, P2, P3 and P4. The informed consent forms were the only documents containing participants' names and these were never kept with the transcripts or tapes.

Findings and Discussions

After the interviews were completed, the transcripts were studied and analyzed to identify common themes. They were also analyzed to determine pertinent answers to the research questions. The following is a summary of both analyses:

Research Question 1: What fear of stigmatization, if any, did the subjects experience when starting classes on a college campus.

Yes. ... I was used to sitting in class with a group of people who were my age or older, some younger but not much. Now I was going into a classroom where some of the professors were younger than me and it was uh... uh... that seemed to me to be a very negative thing. It took me a while to get over that. (P1)

It's just basically a general fear of someone finding out and then a lot of people finding out and just being singled out. (P1)

Well because I think people make uh... judgments at that point... and uh... and not all. Some people are very egalitarian in their attitudes regardless of where somebody has been, but perhaps others uh... uh... are very prejudicial and... there is not much that can be done to change that... (P2)

Yes. Definitely. (P3)

Yeah, there was a little bit of intimidation... I think that the first week that I really went to class. It was such a huge transition. Um... and not just because of the prison education things but because of the whole thing. (P4)

You know it's stigmatizing in the aspect that you know that there is this line out there and if you cross that line you are going to loose everything and you are back in. As far as the educational process well I wanted to keep that you know it. It was stigmatizing as far as education goes. (P4)

Many sources, including these participants, agree that stigmatization of this population is inevitable. They also are in agreement that both unconscious and conscious efforts are made to keep the stigma secret. "As well as discouraging honest disclosure of feelings and experiences, being constantly judged can lead to frustration and even anger toward the community of professionals... (Green p. 200)." This stigma makes individuals fear the consequences of disclosure and the possibility of other discovering the stigma.

Aside from associates stigmatizing the individual, this stigma may also be felt both internally and externally by those surrounding the individual (Falk, p. 313). This concern for their friends and family may lead to an additional fear of meeting new people and starting new experiences, such as starting college on campus. These new experiences may lead to increased chances of the discovery of their stigmatization.

Research Question 2: Under what circumstances would the subjects choose to disclose or not disclose their prior incarceration or probation status.

I am pretty open with it when it comes to people at work. Yeah. I am... but I am usually selective. I tend to try to feel the person out first. ... There have been reactions from people that have been negative towards me to where we'll be hanging out and have no problem. Then they'll find out and then tend to not hang around. (P1)

I was trying not to... was trying to fit in with people around but not so close that I had to tell people. I... um... that I don't want to stick out. ... Just being around... the... trying not to be different, single myself out or set myself away from people. So, I wanted to try to interact with groups. But I didn't want to interact so much to where I was asked questions about personal life or my back ground, why I am in school now. (P1)

It varied from circumstance to circumstance. I tended to be fairly open about it in any of the counseling psych classes that I took... People tend to be forthright

about (it). With the adult and community ed people, it was kind of different uh... it tended to come out at one time or another in the course of things there. ... There were times that uh... that I wish I hadn't disclosed any of it. (P2)

I didn't talk to anyone about that (being in prison) or confide in them. ... I was always... was ashamed that I had been in prison and uh... I didn't think that I had accomplished a heck of a feat, which was getting through it. (P3)

The problem was just the anxiety of sharing that and other than that... other than my roommate, I didn't share it with too many people though... but one or two instructors that I developed a relationship with uh... you know... that I thought maybe it would help our relationship if I somehow let them know. (P4)

This shows that the visibility of the stigma impacts how an individual will view themselves and choose to disclose this stigma. If an individual has a concealable stigma, they are able to hide this stigma from certain people and be selective in revealing it (Goffman, 1963; Frable, 1990). Also, they are less likely to face prejudice and harmful interactions (Crocker, 1989). However, the individual is more likely to focus and reflect on their stigmatizing condition when attempting to hide it and be concerned with remembering all the lies they are forced to tell (Smart, 1999).

This group of individuals reported lower self-esteem, more anxiety, and had a more negative self-perception than those with a visible stigmatizing condition (Frable, 1998). This combination of problems could lead to a division of attention for the stigmatized individual, in a preoccupation with stigmatizing condition or added stress. The possibility of others also being stigmatized for the subject's condition may also lead to additional considerations when deciding when and if it is appropriate to disclose the stigma.

Research Question 3: In what ways did the subjects attempt to socially manage⁶ their self-perceived stigma (e.g. tattoos).

Yes... I hope to have a professional job, a suit and tie kind of thing, but I have a small t-shirt that I will put on to make a point that there will be no tattoos beyond that t-shirt. ... I want to look more professional and I feel that... you know... having tattoos on my arms doesn't convey to some employers isn't professional. And they sit there and say ok, he is a convicted felon and has tattoos. (P1)

I've got one on my bicep that originally said cocaine years ago and then it had a pot leaf on top of that that looked more like a cactus. And so to cover up the cactus... I thought... ok. A martial arts tattoo would be less embarrassing to my kids than a drug tattoo and so then I got a dragon to cover that up... Yes (I try to conceal it)... I wouldn't like it if I hadn't been in prison. Um... yeah, I am sure that there is some cross current of feeling and association there you know uh... with regards to your inquiry about stigma... (P2)

Yeah. I have tattoos. Um... and they are visible. ... There is some stigmatization on that. Um... I wish I hadn't got them. ... Sometimes I consciously make an effort to cover them up, not as much as I used to. ... I think mine are fairly good. Um... I don't know that they would be easily recognized as 'jailhouse' tattoos. They might. I don't know. (P4)

As these quotes show, this population believes there to be stigma with the appearance of tattoos and their association with incarceration. This is supported by Caplan (2000):

Thus the tattoo has been taken to mark off entire civilizations from their barbarian or savage neighbors, to declare a convict's criminality, whether by branding him as a punishment or because he has inverted this penal practice by acquiring voluntary tattoos (thereby ironically marking himself); and more generally to inscribe various kinds of group membership, often in opposition to a dominant culture (p. xiv).

All also mentioned that they feel the need to conceal the tattoos on various occasions, especially in the presence of specific populations groups, such as college administrators or future employers.

On the other hand, current research and several of these participants acknowledge that the stigmatization of tattoos is fading. Caplan (2000) uses the term 'tattoo renaissance' (p. xi) to refer to this phenomenon, in which tattoos are becoming more commonplace and less disgracing.

Research Question 4: What associations did the subjects maintain with other formerly incarcerated felons on campus.

It depends on what my feelings were towards that person when I was locked up. ... I may wait and see if an opportunity would come available. If not, then I would

probably look in the B-Book or find a way to track them down through school. ... I am not going to set him out in front of the girl. (P1)

I'd say it w... would actually be situational. It would depend on you know... I work with you. You are a colleague. Uh... certainly I... wouldn't think twice about it if we ran into someone in the hallway... about them making any reference to something like that. Um... if I were with someone... an employee of the university particularly uh... who was unfamiliar with all of that then uh... yeah certainly I would have reservations. (P2)

You know... cause I didn't feel like that was anybody's business but mine and if I wanted to know, I would tell them... you know. (about someone approaching him/her while on campus) (P3)

Yes. Um... I am not going to reveal something about somebody else that they don't want revealed. If they are alone, then I can go up to them and talk to them and say... I remember you... weren't you in with so and so you know... (P4)

I have not been in that position where I might reveal something to somebody else that they might not want done or put them in any type of compromising position. (P4)

It is evident in these quotes that there is a lot of thought and premeditation that goes into continuing relations with other formerly incarcerated inmates on campus. A continued relationship between these individuals may put both at an increased risk of stigmatization. Also, if one individual's stigmatization is known, others on campus may make assumptions about anyone that associates with that individual, therefore opening him/her up to be stigmatized also.

This population also has very legitimate concerns regarding other people who may be accompanying the fellow stigmatized individual during an interaction. Most of our subjects felt that they would only be and are only comfortable approaching the fellow stigmatized individual when he/she is alone. This would prevent any possibility of disclosing any information that was intended to be kept secret.

Research Question 5: How did the subjects explain stigma management techniques in their chosen career field.

I pled guilty, left, was gone for five years, came back under different management. Was supposed to go through three interviews. I went through one that lasted five hours long. And it was all about prison. So, he already knew I was a convicted felon. (P1)

It's a moral dilemma. Do you say... no... because I am afraid I might not get this job if they know but they might find out that I lied. You are guilty that is going to lead to other things where it will be an important length? Yeah. You had better disclose. (P2)

Well you know, there are so many factors that come into play. Are you going to want the job down the road or are they going to find out no matter what you do anyway?... Then I would say probably don't disclose, you know just go ahead, just get the job and worry about the rest later. Is it something able to really benefit from my college education. (P3)

I had heard before that if they asked you about it, you were supposed to admit to it and usually... usually always excluded me from the job market. I graduated in 2001. I have never had a job to that... where I was of providing incorrect information on an application, in which case you are obviously not rehabilitated. I don't know that I was ever rehabilitated. The whole situation... it was something that I would totally not do unless I was backed into a corner and had to. (P4)

This series offers some insight into the issues this group may face in the job market. Two of the quotes show the internal struggle they face on whether or not to disclose and the possible consequences of each. Another speaks of stigmatization prior to starting the job. The last focuses on the exclusion from the job market based on felon status.

These issues are especially important for their implication on this population's ability to provide for themselves financially, therefore avoid illegal temptations. "Ex-offenders return to the community with limited financial resources but many financial needs. ...Ex-offender may return to crime to resolve their financial needs (Rose, 2002, p. 187)." This important point was also made by Falk (2001), "... crimes that pay more and pay it faster than any employment available to an unskilled worker (p. 315)." Education in prison and on campus may provide these individuals with better opportunities for employment upon release. Therefore, successful completion of education, both inside and out, is critical despite the stigma they may face.

Policy Recommendations

Support groups

Stigmatized individuals, such as formerly incarcerated felons, may feel depressed and hopeless when they compare themselves with members of an advantaged majority. When a stigmatized individual compares themselves with other members of their same stigmatized group, their self-esteem is protected and shielded from any negative feelings. They can relate to these other members of the disadvantaged group. It is proposed that this is because of their physical proximity to one another, similarity to one another and finally due to the desire to protect themselves (Crocker, 1989). Also, these support groups are an important and critical method of lifting stigmatized individual's self-esteem and mood (Frale, 1998; Taylor, 1986). This effect can be provided with support groups formed of like individuals.

Several of the participants echoed a need for support groups for this population. "It probably would have helped my transition" (P4). "To have somebody to relate to, because a lot of it was the fact that my background is so much different from all of these other people here" P4. "That first semester sucks. It's a hard one. ... Once someone sees somebody do it, you can see a change in them" (P1).

On the other hand, there is some opposition to the idea of support groups. This practice may single out this population even more than they may already be by adding additional stipulations to their release. However, without a similar group to compare themselves with, an individual may face feelings of social isolation and negative self-perceptions (Frale, 1998).

Assistance teams

Some states have actually formed "transition teams" (Hartwell, 2004, p. 89) to aide in the transition for stigmatized groups, in this case incarcerated mentally-ill inmates. These teams try to prevent recidivism and help with the reintegration process. This is another viable option for post-incarceration assistance for this population as they need assistance in adjusting to new surrounding and financial help. One study participant said, "My stuff was still at the Muncie bus station... you know... little stuff that I had in boxes. I walked into a dorm with literally the clothes on my back and a little bit of money in my pocket and I go into the dorms. I don't have sheets. I don't have a blanket." Assistance teams could supply support with even simple things such as the basic essentials needed when starting out alone for the first time, such as sheets, blankets, towels, etc.

Discussion and Conclusion

An important result of this study may be the fact that participants' are given the opportunity to define and understand their own actions. After thinking about and answering the researchers' questions, the participants may realize how they truly act in their attempts to hide their stigmatization. By acknowledging this, the participants may then benefit by understanding and reevaluating their own reactions and causes of their actions. This research may also open the doors for the participants to change their behaviors about stigmatization and open up to others. Also, the finished result of this project may also benefit the participants by giving issues important to them the attention that they deserve.

The participants may also benefit if the findings of this research encourage changes in how college campuses provide services and support for this population. It also acknowledges the unique problems that this population faces, such as parole dates, court dates, no license, etc. For example P4 describes his experience as, "I mean my God. It has been... it has been almost 15 years since I have got out. You know... and it has been almost 20 years since my last conviction and the time had come to put it behind us." Another, P2, says, "You know... it's not my job to educate anybody on what the possibilities are, a problem of mine is to change people's attitudes." The college campus is also given a chance to see beyond the myths of prison and to see this population as the people that they truly are on the inside.

The important thing to remember and utilize from this research is that a stigmatized individual must receive a constant and steady amount of support in order to succeed. A lack in external support can directly lead to depression and failure of the stigmatized individual (Mickelson, 2001). Genuine support from within the individuals' family is crucial to their happiness and success (Mickelson, 2001).

This population, and others like it, require specialized programs to address each of the individual's needs (Scott, 1997). This type of support could come in the form of on campus support groups or possibly advisors specifically assigned to particular members of this population. These advisors would be specially trained and advised of the specific needs that this group faces. Both of these, either used together or on their own, could help to ease the transition and the effects of stigmatization.

Study Strengths

This research provides insight into the world of a population that is usually given negative attention. The study allows for opinions of those who have actually felt the effects of this type of stigmatization to speak out so that others

can fully understand their concerns and problems with adjustment onto a college campus.

Study Weaknesses

There was one main weakness in this study. This notable weakness was the limited number of participants available. Many other participants were contacted about participating in this research, however, only the aforementioned four agreed. The researchers struggled with obtaining current and correct phone numbers and addresses for the other possible participants. Also, some declined the interview and showed a concern with their stigma having been discovered. More participants would have allowed for a greater range of experiences with stigmatization and techniques for coping with the effects of stigmatization.

Suggestions for Future Researchers

As this research was being completed, it became clear that one group in this population had been overlooked: currently incarcerated felons attending higher education classes in prison. It may be beneficial in the future to study this group and their anticipated stigma on campus as they prepare for this transition. It would be beneficial to compare the anticipated stigma with the actual stigma felt once arriving on campus.

Also, several participants mentioned developmental issues that result from incarceration. These incarceration issues include things such as educational problems, social problems and relational problems. Relational problems were the most common theme mentioned by these participants. The participants believed that the lack of personal relationships during incarceration made them ill-prepared to handle relationships on campus and in their personal life once released. This would be a beneficial topic for further research.

The authors acknowledge that the findings of this study may be limited based on the small number of research participants. The small number of research subjects is a function, however, of the nature of this study and the delicate issues and topics it addressed pertaining to social stigma. When subjects, who are attempting to "turn their lives around," are asked to admit to a felony conviction and discuss the nature of that experience as it is applicable to their current situation certainly may produce anxiety and discomfort. We conclude that this was a key reason that presumably lead many potential subjects to decline. It is the authors' hope that this research, then, might not only guide future inquiries theoretically (e.g., social stigma) but also methodologically through a recognition of

the difficulties one might encounter when attempting to access this rather rare and somewhat apprehensive population.

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Biographical Sketches

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BRYAN D. BYERS, Ph.D., is Professor of Criminal Justice and Criminology at Ball State University where he has been since 1995. He has eight published books and over 25 journal articles. He has taught on college campuses as well as in correctional institutions.