

# Education in Prison and the Self-Stigma: Empowerment Continuum

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## **Abstract**

A criminal conviction results in consequences that extend beyond incarceration. Self-stigmatization is a negative consequence that many formerly individuals experience. It manifests in low self-esteem and personal barriers to reentry. This study explores higher education programs in prison as a moderator of self-stigma. Using qualitative interviews, this study investigated the perceptions of formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in higher education in prison in regard to the ways in which incarceration and education affected their self-stigma. Results indicate that incarceration influences self-stigma, but education enhances a sense of empowerment and motivation to resist the negative effects of self-stigma. Reducing the stigmatization of formerly incarcerated individuals is important because if they view themselves positively, it can improve their reentry and life trajectory.

## **Keywords**

education, incarceration, self-stigma, empowerment, prison

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## **Introduction**

Stigmatization due to criminal justice involvement can occur even after an arrest, but stigma most profoundly affects those who have felony convictions and have served time in prison. The stigma resulting from a felony conviction can be seen in barriers to reentry following release from prison. Access to housing and employment, attainment of financial resources, and relationships with family members and significant others suffer for many formerly incarcerated individuals returning to society (Winnick & Bodkin, 2009). In addition, individuals who have been incarcerated often have less education, vocational skills, and more limited social networks compared with those who have never been incarcerated, which compounds the effects of criminal stigma (Morani, Wikoff, Linhorst, & Bratton, 2011).

The stigma of a criminal record often leads to social exclusion, particularly for formerly incarcerated individuals. Society ascribes negative attributes upon this population, which makes it difficult for them to reintegrate into the community as social equals. Research has addressed the stigma that individuals with a criminal conviction experience, but not enough research has considered approaches for attenuating this stigma. This study focuses on higher education in prison as one of several resources that moderates the self-stigma associated with a criminal conviction.

## **Education in Prisons**

There has been social and political ambivalence toward education programs in prisons, particularly over the past 50 years. In the 1960s, policy makers, correctional officials, and the public mostly supported education programs in prisons (Ryan, 1995). Federal Pell grants funded education programs in prison for about 30 years until the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 terminated funding for education programs in prison. By this time, there was a lot of public support for getting tough on crime and dismantling federal funding for education programs in prisons, which made it easier for policy makers to pass this legislation. Even recently, a considerable segment of the public still opposes the allocation of public funding for education programs in prison (Contardo & Tolbert, 2008). Political priorities focusing on getting tough on crime and negative public opinion about incarcerated individuals receiving nearly free college education explains why government funding for higher education programs in jails and prisons was short lived and continues to be a controversial issue.

Education programs are beneficial because individuals serving time in prison tend to have some of the most pronounced educational deficits. A

survey by the National Center for Education Statistics (2002) found that nearly 50% of incarcerated individuals had not earned a high school diploma or GED compared with 23% of the total population. A college education is even rarer for individuals who are currently or have ever been incarcerated. Of those who are incarcerated, only 17% have completed at least some post-secondary education courses compared with more than 50% of the general public (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008).

Education in correctional settings can offer many benefits. Participation in education programs during incarceration keeps individuals occupied in productive tasks, requires the learning of complex material that promotes social awareness, and encourages the development of problem-solving skills. Prison facilities benefit from education programs because those who participate in them can develop the ability to respond to conflicts verbally and intellectually rather than with physical aggression (O'Neil, 1990). Participation in education programs during incarceration is also associated with fewer disciplinary violations (Gerber & Fritsch, 1995). Education improves the employment prospects for the formerly incarcerated, and those who participate in education programs while they are incarcerated are more likely to get involved with education following their release (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Gerber & Fritsch, 1995; Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000). Education may also affect the stigmatization of a criminal conviction, which is the focus of this study.

Policy makers and the general public, who have a considerable influence on the existence and extent of education programs in prisons, appear to be primarily concerned with the effect that education in prison has on recidivism (Wilson et al., 2000). Programs are considered effective if they significantly decrease recidivism. Prior research has discussed the effects that education in prison has on recidivism. Formerly incarcerated individuals with college degrees are less likely to recidivate than formerly incarcerated individuals without college degrees (Gray, 2010). A meta-analysis of high-quality studies found that formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in education programs in prison were 43% less likely to recidivate compared with those who did not participate in education programs while they were incarcerated (Davis et al., 2013). Another meta-analysis considered education in comparison with other programs in prisons. This study found that compared with participation in vocation and work programs in prisons, individuals who participated in the education programs had the greatest reduction in recidivism (Wilson et al., 2000). Although scholars agree that education in prison reduces the likelihood that the formerly incarcerated individuals will commit subsequent crimes, there is disagreement about the size of this reduction. There is also criticism that participant selection bias may distort the effects of

education in prison; those who participate in education programs while incarcerated tend to have characteristics that are associated with life success following their release (Gaes, 2008).

Few studies have explored the benefits of education in prison beyond its effect on recidivism. Of the research that has addressed these benefits, others include improved psychological well-being, enhanced commitment to social and communal activities, and higher wages (Wilson et al., 2000). A study of individuals in an education program in a Canadian prison found that participation in the program was associated with high satisfaction, an improved skill of perceiving problems, and an increased ability to communicate with others (Linden, Perry, Ayers, & Parlett, 1984). Although studies have explored how education affects other social stigmas (e.g., mental illness; HIV/AIDS), research has yet to explore the effects of education in prison on the postrelease stigma associated with a criminal record.

## **Criminal Stigma**

A conviction for a crime results in long-lasting consequences. Stigma is a contributing factor to the negative consequences individuals deal with following a criminal conviction. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as an attribute or behavior that is socially discrediting. The general public tends to perceive individuals with a conviction differently than those who have no criminal history and discredit them because of the social stigma attached to criminal behavior (Goffman, 1963). Many people impute deviance and antisocial behavior on individuals with a criminal record and designate them as “othered” and not suitable for participation in mainstream societal life (LeBel, 2011). Behavioral reactions follow in the form of avoidance, expressions of fear and discomfort, and discrimination (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008).

The experience of stigma depends on the visibility of the stigmatized characteristic. Stigmatized features can be either discredited, which are visibly apparent characteristics such as deformity or obesity, or discreditable, which are not visible or innate but refer to deviations from acceptable social behavior (e.g., criminal status, addiction). Goffman's (1963) seminal theorizing of stigma has since been expanded upon and further conceptualized (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Link & Phelan, 2001; Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2013). This study draws from the conceptualization of Luoma and colleagues' (2007) categorization of three types of stigma: self-stigma, perceived stigma, and enacted stigma. Perceived stigma is negative societal attitudes that the public holds toward a stigmatized group, and enacted stigma is the direct experience of discrimination due to membership in a stigmatized group, which may surface in the form of social and interpersonal rejection, avoidance, or denial of

employment, housing, or other resources (Evans & Porter, 2015; Luoma et al., 2007; Pager, 2003). Individuals with a criminal conviction experience stigmatization through societal reactions as well as their own self-perceptions, which is referred to as self-stigma and is the focus of this research. It refers to the negative thoughts that individuals have about themselves as a result of their identification with a stigmatized group and their behavioral reactions that follow (Luoma et al., 2007). Individuals may feel ashamed of their stigmatized attribute and as a result experience lower self-esteem, lower self-efficacy, and avoid social encounters (Corrigan & Watson, 2002; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008).

Labeling theory informs the process of stigmatization following a criminal conviction. According to labeling theorists, public disapproval of the criminal label alters the self-conceptions of these individuals and induces them to perceive themselves as deviant (Becker, 1963; Lemmert, 1972). The criminal justice system labels them and general public responds in a way that separates individuals who have been convicted of a crime from those who have not. Separation denotes difference, which is reflected in the terms used to describe this group: offender, convict, felon, deviant, and criminal. Oftentimes the prefix “ex” is attached to these words to indicate past involvement, but the connotations of these words are clear: Ex-offenders are less desirable in social contexts.

Society reduces the social opportunities of individuals with a conviction. The conviction becomes a salient characteristic in their lives and affects interactions with people they encounter after they have been labeled (Uggen, Manza, & Behrens, 2004). The degree to which they experience self-stigma may prevent them from ever pursuing their goals, but even if they do they have difficulty attaining a good job, finding a suitable place to live, and forming new relationships (Morani et al., 2011). The result of this social exclusion is that the label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; individuals who have been labeled are more likely to act in a manner that is consistent with the label. According to the theory, those with a criminal conviction have a greater likelihood of re-offending (Lemmert, 1972). However, original labeling theorists were criticized for viewing the process of stigmatization as a cause and effect process. More recent theorists, specifically Link and Phelan (2001), have pointed out the greater risk of adverse consequences resulting from labels, but that other factors, such as stigma management and available community support, also play a role.

There are many negative consequences of self-stigma, but empowerment is a positive parallel phenomenon that motivates some stigmatized individuals to challenge existing stereotypes and pursue their life goals. Corrigan, Larson, and Ruesch (2009) theorize a self-stigma continuum in which low self-esteem and self-efficacy are at one end and empowerment is at the other.

The continuum indicates that stigmatized individuals respond to self-stigma with low self-esteem, which limits their quality of life and hope for the future, or a sense of empowerment, which encourages them to challenge the stigma and hold positive perceptions of themselves (Corrigan et al., 2009). Empowerment includes different dimensions, such as self-esteem, powerlessness, community activism, righteous anger, and optimism about the future (Rogers, Chamberlin, Ellison, & Crean, 1997). Individuals who are educated about stigma are more likely to be empowered to reduce self-stigma. Its ability to improve the self-esteem and optimism of stigmatized individuals indicates that empowerment is an important mediator between self-stigma and goal-related behaviors (Mittal, Sullivan, Chekuri, Allee, & Corrigan, 2012).

The degree of stigmatization that individuals internalize is important because it affects their ability to reintegrate into society following a conviction and incarceration. The more they feel like an outcast, the less likely they are to pursue social opportunities that could improve their life standing. Previous research has explored the stigma that the formerly incarcerated experience (LeBel, 2011, 2012), but minimal research has considered how education received during incarceration affects the experience of stigma and the degree to which stigmatized individuals are empowered to challenge it. The current study is exploratory analysis of the self-stigma—empowerment continuum (Corrigan et al., 2009) from the perspective of formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in higher education while they were incarcerated. The research question driving the study is how does participation in higher education in prison affect the self-stigmatization and the degree to which formerly incarcerated individuals are empowered to resist it? Based on prior research, education appears to have important benefits for those who participate in education programs while in prison. Quantifiably, education yields college credits and for some, associate's, bachelor's, or even master's degrees that enhance their reintegration prospects. It also builds knowledge that for many engenders a desire for self-reflection and understanding. Because this is an exploratory study, we did not proceed with specific hypotheses. We attempt to investigate this research question using a qualitative research design.

## **Method**

### *Sample*

We recruited a purposive sample of  $N = 18$  formerly incarcerated individuals who had previously participated in a higher education program in prison to

participate in in-depth interviews exploring the effects that education has had on the extent to which they self-stigmatize since their reentry. A privately funded organization that coordinates a college education program for men and women and also provides reentry support and life skills training following their release from prison assisted with the recruitment of respondents for this study. Interested individuals were informed about this study through an announcement during the bimonthly alumni gathering and asked to contact the research team to ask any questions and schedule an interview time. More than 20 individuals contacted the research team, and we were able to schedule interviews with 18 of them.

Respondents were incarcerated in prisons across New York State, which is where they all currently reside since their release from incarceration. Respondents ranged in age from 23 to 56. The majority earned a bachelor's degree while they were incarcerated, two earned an associate's degree, and one respondent earned 20 credits during a sentence that was short compared with most respondents. Respondents served an average of 17 years in prison (standard deviation = 7.05), ranging from 3 years to 31 years. All respondents but two were released in the past 5 years. The average length of time they have been back in society is 4 years (standard deviation = 5.65). For a list of sample descriptives, see Table 1.

### *Instrument*

This study used qualitative interviewing because this methodology allows respondents to express their personal experiences in detail. To inform the interview questions and identify pertinent topics to address, we convened a focus group of six participants who had previously participated in higher education programs while they were incarcerated. The focus group was recruited from the same organization that coordinates the education in prison and reentry programs. They were not compensated but were provided a meal during their participation. Five of the six focus group respondents also participated in the subsequent interview portion of the study. The focus group allowed the research team to introduce topics to the group and record notes about the group's discussion and points of emphasis. The personal experiences, thoughts, and sentiments the group members stated were used to create a semistructured questionnaire that guided interviews with respondents. Categories of questions considered the effect of higher education in prison on their lives, the extent to which education has influenced their self-perceptions, their ways of thinking, and their worldviews, the personal benefits of education both in prison and since their release, how education has affected their relationship with family members, changes in their social circles,

**Table 1.** Sample Descriptives.

Number of respondents	18
Sex	
Male	18 (100%)
Race	
Black	8 (44%)
Latino	5 (28%)
White	5 (28%)
Age	
Range	23-56 years
Median	45 years
Length of incarceration	
Range	3-31 years
Average length	17 years ( <i>SD</i> = 7.05)
Highest degree earned while incarcerated	
None	1 (5%)
Associate's	3 (17%)
Bachelor's	7 (39%)
Master's	7 (39%)
Employment status	
Employed	13 (72%)
Unemployed/looking for work	5 (28%) <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>One respondent was offered a job the morning of our interview.

employment, and housing since their release, perceptions of their stigmatization, and their outlook on the future. See the Appendix for the full list of question items. To minimize the potential for discomfort, we never asked respondents about their offense history.

### Procedure

Respondents were given the option of participating in in-person interviews or being interviewed over the phone. Interview sites included offices and conference rooms where privacy could be maintained. Interviews lasted between 45 min and 2 hr. Some respondents had a lot more information about their life experiences that they wanted to convey than others, which extended their interview time. Respondents were all asked the same questions, although the semistructured nature of the study meant that some respondents were asked occasional follow-up questions when pertinent. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. This study was approved by an institutional review



board and was conducted in accordance with federal guidelines for the ethical treatment of human subjects. Participation was voluntary and respondents were informed that they could withdraw their consent at any point during the interview. Respondents signed a consent form to indicate their willingness to participate and were given pseudonyms to protect their identities and maintain their confidentiality. Respondents received \$20 for their participation.

### *Data Analysis*

Data analysis started during transcription and continued throughout data coding. Grounded theory was utilized to identify themes and concepts that participants conveyed (Charmaz, 1983). The research team color coded themes to organize the data (Carney, Joiner, & Tragou, 1997). The data for this study were categorized by their association with two ends of the theoretical continuum of self-stigma: On one end are internalized feelings of self-stigma that are manifested through low self-esteem and low self-efficacy; on the other end of the continuum are feelings of empowerment to reduce the effects of self-stigma and confidence in one's abilities, which lessens the impact of self-stigma (Corrigan et al., 2009; Corrigan & Watson, 2002).

## **Results**

The interview data indicate that respondents' prior incarceration has self-stigmatizing consequences and their participation in higher education during incarceration is empowering and attenuates self-stigma. This analysis draws from Corrigan and Watson's (2002) conceptualization of self-stigma and the degree to which people in a stigmatized group self-stigmatize. Depending on the person as well as the situation, some succumb to their stigmatized status and have a lower self-esteem or experience depression while others respond with indignation and are empowered to maintain a positive self-esteem despite their stigmatized status (Corrigan et al., 2009). This analysis explores how a criminal record and education received in prison influence the self-stigmatization and empowerment that individuals who have returned to society from prison experience. Respondents were given pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

### *Self-Stigma*

Lengthy periods of incarceration inevitably compel individuals to reflect on their lives and the choices they made that led to their confinement. Nearly every respondent went through some period of self-reflection and has taken a

critical look at his past to understand how it led to the point of their incarceration. It was the experience of confinement that most affected how they viewed themselves, particularly during the early years of their incarceration. Prior to starting their respective education programs during incarceration, most underwent psychological hardships, depression, and/or a sense of failure. These negative perspectives and sentiments are magnified by the solitude of isolation in a prison cell. Frank served a 31-year sentence before his release in 2013. He is 53 years old and earned bachelor's degrees in behavioral science and organizational management while he was in prison. Frank spoke about the feelings he had about himself while he was incarcerated:

When I started my sentence I felt that everybody was against me and I had a very low self-esteem and I didn't have anybody. I had a death wish if you want to put it like that. I believed that I didn't have a future and whatever I did everyday that's another day that went by.

Shame was a powerful emotion that many respondents expressed suffering as they navigated early prison life, and it damaged their self-esteem to that point that several respondents felt like disappointments not only to themselves but to their families. Seth earned a bachelor's in organizational management and a master's degree in professional studies while serving a 16-year prison sentence. He was 16 when he entered prison and is now a 47-year-old with a rewarding career at a nonprofit. He described the devastation he experienced when he first began serving his sentence and the realization of the people in his life who were also affected by his incarceration:

There was no self-confidence before [my education]. I thought my life was over. Not only was it over, but I had ruined it for my friends and family. I did not just go down in flames, I took everyone with me. When you go to prison, there is just so much collateral damage going on that it's tough, you know?

Many respondents while serving their sentences projected failure onto themselves. Their beliefs were that most of their family and significant others on the outside also viewed them as failures. This belief explains in part why many respondents felt a near total loss of self-confidence. Neo, a 47-year-old who received his bachelor's degree in organizational management during his 12 years in prison, talked about his psychological inability to communicate with others, particularly correctional officers and administrators in the prison, because of their higher status:

Really early on I think in my bid I had almost zero confidence in being able to articulate myself in front of a sergeant or captain. Especially when you're

younger and you don't have education on your side, you are easily intimidated by people in uniform.

With low self-esteem and self-confidence, the majority of respondents lived through much idle time in which they did not pursue activities and opportunities available to them. Only later in their sentences did they begin to exert themselves toward education.

Many continued to feel shame and hopelessness even after their release from prison. Jim is a 36-year-old who earned a bachelor's in behavioral science while serving a 10-year sentence. He had been out for just under 1 year at the time of his interview and was able to find employment in social services. Jim felt the weight of his criminal record, and it affected his willingness to create relationships with those in his community:

I came out when I was still young and I was stigmatized in a certain way on how people looked at me . . . As far in my community as where I live, I just don't interact with anybody and I'm always on guard.

Several respondents conveyed that their negative self-perceptions were so salient that they felt like they would be exposed in society for having a criminal record. Tim earned a bachelor's in behavior science while spending 25 years in prison, rising to the top of his class by the time of his graduation. He also earned a master's degree in seminary and is now 52 years old and works in nonprofit. Tim discussed his concern about a perceived lack of privacy about his past: "When I first came out I felt that everybody was gonna know, like there would be like writing on my forehead. 'Oh he's just got out of prison,' you know, and everyone is going to know that." Frank expressed similar sentiments:

At the beginning when I first got out, I feared that everyone was looking at me. You're always going to live with that fear, which is what is making you think the trust others have for you is something that you can do nothing about.

That he feels untrustworthy in the eyes of others is an indication of how the prison experience altered Frank's self-conception. The transition from prison to society made him acutely aware of his stigma. Other respondents spoke of their persistent thoughts about their ex-offender status. Jasper, a 45-year-old who earned a bachelor's in behavioral science while he was incarcerated for more than 22 years and currently works odd jobs, spoke about the awareness of his status:

I think about [my label of ex-offender] pretty much on a daily basis, like when I am doing work for people. For instance, I had a job in a woman's house who

is the wife of a corrections officer. I have always thought about what if I go into a house to do a job and they recognize me and they freak out. I am kind of paranoid in a sense that someone is going to recognize me and see me as the ex-convict and not the man I am today.

All respondents mentioned negative thoughts about themselves or psychological harm resulting from their experience of being convicted and incarcerated. Some dealt with lower self-esteem, less self-confidence, a belief that significant others are mistrusting or suspicious of them, and feeling helpless about the future. Jasper had only been out of prison for a few months prior to his interview for this study. He summarized the sentiments of the majority of respondents when he said, "I feel like a teenager who does not really know what to do with his life yet. It might sound sad, but that's where I find myself today."

### *Empowerment*

Almost without exception, the experience and enduring burden of incarceration had detrimental effects on the self-concepts of respondents. However, all of the formerly incarcerated respondents who participated in higher education while they were inside recognized the empowerment that education provided them. They knew before starting the program that to get in, they had to demonstrate good conduct, endure a long waitlist, and upon starting the program put forth considerable effort to maintain good grades and continue in the program until their completion. By accepting this challenge and committing to working almost daily on their studies, their views of themselves gradually changed. They started to think of themselves less often as inmates and more as students. Dean, now 43, earned three degrees during 22 years in prison—an associate's degree, a bachelor's degree, and a master's in urban industry. In the 5 years he has been out Dean has careers in social services and nonprofit. He discussed how his participation in the education program a few years into his sentence sparked a change in how he saw himself:

The perspective of myself didn't really change until I started going to school. You know for the first five years I was still dealing drugs in prison and I started realizing this life is not for me, so I would say it was through education that I was able to now view myself differently.

Twelve other respondents directly reiterated Dean's recollection that participation in the education program served as a major turning point in their lives. Eli, a 23-year-old who spent 3 years in prison, earned 20 credits toward a

liberal arts degree and is currently working toward completing his college degree on the outside, mentioned that education and regular exposure to other motivated students initiated his self-change:

I felt dumb because I said, “Why couldn’t I just do that out in the streets? Why did I have to go three years for me to finally decide it’s time for me to get out from this place and do something productive?” And so I was really down on myself when I first came in, but I picked up from there, and that feeling changed swiftly as I got involved with education and people that were also involved in higher education with me.

Part of this change through education involved a self-analysis and a critical look back on their past. This critical perspective has enabled most to mitigate the shame and embarrassment that they felt after initially entering prison. Sid, a 43-year-old who served more than 7 years and earned his associate’s degree in science while he was incarcerated, spoke about how his educational experience gave him the ability to self-reflect more impartially:

Education has changed the way that I think because it’s given me a better look at myself, and when I can look at myself and I can face who I am and actually look at who I am objectively, I see flaws and good points and everything else.

Sid continued that his experiences in the education program also encouraged him to reflect on, process, and eventually accept his former self and his life prior to incarceration and grow because of it:

Education helped me to understand that all I was, was not something that I had to be ashamed of. No, that was who I was, and I accept responsibility for who I was. I can say, “okay, here, that’s who I was, I did these things, now who I am is something different.”

There was discussion about the criminal label and how it has affected their transition back to society. Education encouraged respondents to critically consider how the general public views people with a criminal record, especially as their release dates grew nearer. This consideration helped them to separate societal views about “criminals” from their own self-views. Although there was widespread acknowledgment that criminal records have made their lives more difficult in some way since their release, every respondent expressed how education has empowered them to resist the criminal label and the stigma that comes with it. Seth discussed his belief in the meaningless of the terms used to describe people with his background:

I'll tell you the truth, those facts, language and terminology I have never given a shit about. I have watched the language change from formerly incarcerated people to offenders. I don't care if you call me ex-con; that shit has always meant nothing to me. In fact, what I always thought was that once you get past the labels and what people call you, you're going to be in such a better position to not worry about what people think. I have realized that people are affected by it, but I haven't really given a shit.

Nine respondents directly mentioned how their educational experience contributed to a reduction in the shame they were conditioned to feel while serving their sentences in prison. With less perceived shame, they felt more comfortable being open about their past. Trey, a 49-year-old who spent 20 years in prison and earned bachelor's and MBA degrees expressed how his awareness of the criminal label and the societal implications of the label have enabled him to minimize its power in his own life. This understanding gives him the capacity to negate the damaging effects of the label on his self-esteem, and so he feels comfortable maintaining honesty with others about his past:

I don't really worry about [the criminal label], you know, I'm not trying to hide what I did. Both times I went to prison it was in the newspaper so it was impossible that I had any way out, so I just embrace it. Like I'm sure for some people it's a stigma but to me that's on them, not really me. They have to deal with that.

Sid also talked about how leaving prison with a college degree, and more importantly with an ability to critically analyze different situations, facilitated his belief in the importance of being honest about his past. As a result of his understanding, he does not feel shame about his past or about the ex-offender label:

[The label] doesn't affect me anymore because the label now helps me to say, "Hey look, this is who I was and this is who I am now." I'm not ashamed of who I was and who I've become. I will tell my number. I will share my experience because it's nothing that I want to hide. I'm happy for who I was because I know how to balance that with who I am now. I want you to know who I was and I want you to see the power that education has to transform and take something and mold something different out of what people thought I was.

It takes them a conscious effort to deflect the self-shame that usually accompanies incarceration. A necessary step is to confront the label, attempt to understand it from an objective perspective, and then move past it. Jim was in

prison on two separate occasions and spoke about the difference between the first and second time he was released. The first time he came out of prison, his tacit acceptance of the criminal label and his preoccupation with it made his life more difficult and it negatively affected his self-esteem. The second time, he made a conscious effort to resist the label and its effects: "This time when I was released I chose not to use that label as crutch because that has held me down in the past. So I don't really think about it anymore." If it is not critically confronted and examined, the criminal label strips them of their ability to define who they are; they become society's conceptualization of an ex-offender. Resisting the label is a step toward empowerment. Dean went even further, redefining his own identity and nullifying the effect of the criminal label on himself: "I don't embrace [the criminal label] because I don't view myself as a criminal, so to me it's not my label." He elaborated further:

I'm me, and you're going to accept me for whom I am and my past or you're not. I don't worry about what other people think about me because if you get a chance to get to know me then you will see that I'm definitely nowhere near what the definition of a criminal is. I committed a crime, yes, without a doubt took my responsibility for it, done my time. Now I'm a human being. That's my label. I'm a human being. Everything else that's your problem, not mine.

Respondents by and large spoke about how participation in the education program was a positive experience that helped them develop a stronger work ethic, study routines, and critical thinking skills. In terms of their personality and their outlook on life, most spoke about the gradual improvements in their self-esteem, self-confidence, and their thoughts about others' perceptions of them that education facilitated. Neo described it succinctly when he said, "Education boosts your self-esteem." Others expanded on this. Stu, a 43-year-old, who earned his associate's degree, bachelor's degree, and master's degree in professional studies while he served a 25-year prison sentence, reflected on the impact that higher education has had on his self-confidence:

The more that you continue on your academic path, the more confidence you build and with more confidence you are able to communicate more effectively with other people. And so you're just more willing to talk with other people despite the differences in culture or background. I can talk with a deputy of security at a prison and feel that I am equal.

Nine respondents indicated that education was a social equalizer for them. It gave them a sense that they could more fully participate in society and a confidence to engage in social circles that they may not have otherwise been able to. Tim spoke about this:

[The education has] allowed me to move in circles that I probably wouldn't have been able to do before, um, because again the confidence part where I feel that hey, I can speak to anyone about anything so I'm okay with that, and so it gave me that confidence to be able to do that. So if I go into a church and I'm speaking to the congregation that's fine, if I go into a prison and I'm speaking to the guys inside that's fine, if I go to a college and I'm speaking to professors or I speak to students that's fine, it doesn't matter where I'm speaking because the education has allowed me to number one get my foot in that door, and number two be comfortable enough to be able to deal with these different situations.

During the course of the interviews respondents consistently mentioned the importance of social support for their reintegration. There were stories about the dark days through the early years of their sentences during which visits and contact from family and friends were infrequent. To make their situations more difficult, many felt that correctional officers and prison administrators reinforced their frustration, isolation, and sense of hopelessness because of how they looked at and treated them. Respondents' attempts to make positive changes in their lives seemed to go mostly unnoticed among their families and friends. They overwhelmingly acknowledged the difficulty of not just changing to be a better person but of demonstrating to others that they have made positive strides in their lives. The education program changed this because it gave them a tangible goal. Completion of a college degree would be a clear sign to their families and significant others of their progress and accomplishments. Neo noticed how others, even correctional officers, started to acknowledge him positively after he began his educational pursuits in prison:

Off the top of my head I would say the advantages that [participation in the education program] gave me were interacting with staff and correction officers. They looked at you in a different light, as far as looking at [inmates] as a general mass of precaution. So by participating in a college program, they looked at you more humanely, in more of a humane manner.

Other respondents conveyed positive reactions from the people around them since returning to their communities. Most of them did not directly attribute this to their participation in the education program, but they often mentioned their education in the context of the ways in which society currently views them. Stu said:

The people who I interacted with who know that I did complete a college program while I was in prison, they were very impressed and so even though



they probably did not have any negative views towards me as a person being released from prison, I think that it still did give them a better or more positive impression of me.

Family members were a common topic that respondents discussed. Because of their contact with parents, siblings, and children inside prison and since their release, respondents, either consciously or unconsciously, looked to their families as a source of feedback about themselves. The majority of respondents felt that their family members viewed them more positively as they progressed through the education program because of the enhanced sense of self-confidence it gave them, because it revealed their devotion to pursuing the challenging task of earning a college degree, and because nearly every respondent was the first person in his family to achieve a college degree. Jim mentioned how his educational accomplishments changed the way his family felt about him:

They are definitely proud of me. My family was definitely happy that I got the education and used it to get a job. Everybody was happy back home. I've been out since the beginning of this year so it's been nine and a half months since I've been out. They are definitely proud of me for getting the education and using it.

## Discussion

This study explored the parallel experiences of incarceration and participation in higher education and how both affect self-perceptions along the self-stigma—empowerment continuum. In-depth interviews provided insight into the effects that incarceration has on self-stigma as well as the empowering effects of education. The findings of this study reinforce those of self-stigma research; stigmatized persons who view the stereotypes of stigmatized groups as legitimate (i.e., criminals are dangerous and cannot be rehabilitated) tend to experience more severe self-stigma, while those who do not subscribe to the stereotypes are more likely to be indifferent to or resist self-stigma (Corrigan et al., 2009). The interview data indicate that prison life and the transition to becoming an inmate damage self-esteem and self-confidence, and that education encourages a critical perspective that can challenge the stigma of a criminal label.

Incarceration has consequences for the formerly incarcerated long after their release. This study suggests that the experience of incarceration has psychological effects—reduced self-esteem, hopelessness about the future, and a sense that others look down on people who have been incarcerated. The

self-stigma that formerly incarcerated individuals face is problematic because for the individual it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Schomerus et al., 2011). Those who define their identities as criminal are more likely to act consistent with criminal behavior. Self-stigma is magnified following release by laws that limit their access to public benefits, deny them the right to vote, prevent them from entering certain professions, and require them to report their criminal history on job, housing, and school applications.

The prevailing sentiment in this study among formerly incarcerated individuals is that education attenuates the impact of the criminal label on their self-perspectives. The experience of educational accomplishments, and for many of them, the receipt of a college degree, enables them to reorient their labeled identities from formerly incarcerated individuals toward positive social roles—college graduate, employee, parent, productive member of the community. This suggests that education programs in prisons provide participants with a sense of empowerment that helps to counteract the negative effects of self-stigma that often result from a criminal conviction and incarceration.

The interviews reflected the value placed on education, particularly after release from prison when they are forced to find a place to live and build a new life. The value they place on education supports prior survey research on individuals reentering society following their release from prison. In that survey study, the majority of formerly incarcerated individuals served through a reentry program listed education as their primary reentry need. They also listed financial assistance, driver's license, job training, and employment as other needs (Visser & Lattimore, 2007). Educational deficits among the incarcerated and reentry populations are important to address, but they are not the only obstacles that make reentry difficult for the formerly incarcerated. This population tends to have fewer skills and lesser job prospects than people who have never been incarcerated (Bonta & Andrews, 2003). Education is an important component but it is not the entire solution to the social and individual circumstances that influence criminal behavior; education alone cannot repair the barriers created by a conviction and incarceration, but it is a valuable tool that can help the formerly incarcerated beyond the provision of knowledge. By reducing self-stigma and enhancing self-esteem and self-confidence, education can help individuals to surmount social and personal deficits and pursue goals without the internal barriers that self-stigma creates. The educational experience motivates the pursuit of positive opportunities and the desire to be a contributing member of their communities.

This study does not contend that education is the answer to the problem of self-stigma. Education is an essential component that triggers awareness of

the stigma, understanding of its impact, and positive change in the self-perceptions of stigmatized individuals, but their social networks also influence these perspectives. Supportive family members and friends as well as fellow graduates who have similar life experiences provide them with positive reinforcement, a sense of community and belonging, and accountability, all of which shape the ways in which they view the world. Other factors also influence to degree to which formerly incarcerated individuals self-stigmatize or feel empowered to resist stigma: how long they spent in prison, their willingness to critically self-reflect on their past, and the quality and frequency of their engagement with family members, friends, inmates, and correctional staff have laid the foundation for the impact that education has had and will continue to have on their views of themselves.

This study also does not contend that education is the definitive solution for successful reintegration. This was an exploratory study of the scope of effects that education has on self-stigma. Respondents touched on other benefits of education, such as the accumulation of knowledge, a greater chance to attain employment following release, motivation to develop and strive for goals, time management skills, and a sense of responsibility, all of which are useful tools for reintegration. However, education programs are one of several potentially effective components of rehabilitation in prison. Other interventions that could produce positive changes include vocational, therapeutic, policies that facilitate contact between people in prison and their loved ones on the outside, and programs that put those who have earned seniority and respect in mentorship roles.

### *Policy Implications*

The findings of this study are encouraging of policies that support higher education programs in prisons, specifically those that are degree granting. Higher education imbues a knowledge and sense of critical thinking that is beneficial to rehabilitation and to the process of understanding and attenuating the negative effects of a criminal record, specifically in regard to self-stigma. To improve reentry, the stigma of criminality must be diminished in broader society. The reduction of stigmatization can be accomplished through changes to laws and policies that limit the opportunities of individuals with a criminal history. The federal government has taken an important step toward this with the re-introduction of Pell Grants to fund education in prison. However, some colleges have policies that prevent the admission of applicants who have a criminal record. This is problematic for individuals with a criminal record and particularly those who begin but are not able to finish their degrees while they are incarcerated. A survey of nearly 300 colleges and

universities across the country found that two thirds collect criminal history information on applicants, but not all of them use this information in admissions decisions (Center for Community Alternatives, 2010). A similar study found that 35% of institutions surveyed denied admission to at least one applicant due to their criminal history (Pierce, Runyan, & Bangdiwala, 2014). Denying applicants with a criminal record does not increase public safety on college campuses and it exacerbates racial disparities because Blacks and Latinos have significantly higher rates of incarceration relative to Whites (Center for Community Alternatives, 2010). For these reasons, advocates have proposed banning the box on college applications to prevent admissions departments from having access to biasing criminal history information. The vast majority of people in prison will eventually leave, and requiring them to report their criminal history on college applications stigmatizes them, extending their punishment beyond their sentences.

Cost-effectiveness and public safety are general concerns of policy makers and the public when it comes to devoting resources to the rehabilitation and education of those who are incarcerated. Education programs in prisons are cost-effective and prevent crime in addition to reducing recidivism (Karpowitz & Kenner, 1995). For a modest investment, education programs in prisons can produce cost-effective results. In fact, to achieve cost-effectiveness, education programs only need to reduce the 3-year incarceration rate by 2.6% (Davis et al., 2013). This means that if 3% of formerly incarcerated individuals do not commit a new offense following their release, the investment in education in prison has paid off. Studies have shown that participants in higher education in prison have a considerably reduced recidivism rate compared with control groups, which justifies this investment (Kim & Clark, 2013).

### *Limitations*

This study is not without limitations. The primary limitations of the study are that all respondents were male and all had participated in education programs in New York State prisons. Responses may have been more diverse had this study been able to include the perspectives of females. However, the organization that assisted with recruitment had considerably more males than females who regularly engaged with the reentry network, and the few females who were interested were unable to be scheduled for interviews. Also, had the study included participants from higher education programs in prisons in other states, there may have been more variation in responses depending on the educational and life experiences of participants. Although there are certainly similarities in the experiences of higher education programs in prisons,

there are likely differences informed by physical and political geographic disparities. This makes the educational experience difficult to normalize (MacKenzie, 2008). Relatedly, the majority of the sample had been released from prison within the last 5 years. A longer duration following release may provide greater insight into the experiences with and thoughts about self-stigma and empowerment. Another limitation is that the sample size of 18 might be considered small. However, for exploratory research the sample size produced enough information to reach saturation, which indicates that no new themes would likely emerge from any further interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). Given that the sample for this study was relatively homogeneous, saturation can be achieved with fewer interviews than for studies that use samples with greater diversity.

Future research should continue to explore the effects of higher education programs in prison on the formerly incarcerated beyond measurements of recidivism. Outcomes should encompass employment, the pursuit of further education, and psychological changes, including self-esteem, confidence, and self-efficacy. Studies could use a comparison group of similar inmates who are not enrolled in a higher education program to provide an indication of the extent to which education in prison affects the outcomes of participants. Prison is an institution of total control and the prison environment is not conducive to preparing people for life outside of the institution. Education is a start toward preparing them, but more research is needed.

## **Appendix**

### *Question Categories*

#### *Background*

1. Age
2. Degree
3. Year released
4. Length of time incarcerated
5. Why did you start the education program?
6. What were your expectations of the program going in?
7. What immediate effects did participation have on your privileges/activities/status/respect?
8. How have you used your education since you came out?
9. How has being incarcerated affected your life?
10. How has education affected your life?
11. What skills has education helped you develop or improve?

12. How has your worldview changed since receiving the education?
13. How do the benefits of education differ from those of vocational programs?
14. Describe the effect of education on your life in a word, phrase, or sentence.

#### *Psychological and personal effects of education*

15. How did you view yourself prior to incarceration? While incarcerated (pre-education)? Since you left the education program?
16. How did your teachers motivate you?
17. Describe your relationship with your professors.
18. Describe your self-confidence before you started the education program. How has it changed since finishing the program?
19. What effect did your education have on your willingness to meet others/network/engage socially?
20. What effect did your education have on your willingness to pursue opportunities?
21. How has education changed the way you think?
22. Has education affected the way you deal with conflicts? If so, how?
23. Describe who you are as a person with a college education?

#### *Family*

24. What does your family think of you since you graduated the program?
25. How has your relationship changed since your graduation from the program?
26. How has education affected the trust between you and your family?
27. How has education affected the respect you receive from family?
28. Were you the first in your immediate family to graduate college? If so, do your family members talk about this with you? How will this affect future generations in your family?

#### *Reentry*

29. Did education give you any advantages when you came out? If so explain?
30. How do you fit into your community since you came out?
31. Describe your social circles. How have they changed from before your incarceration to now? How do you feel about former friends?
32. Discuss your relationships with classmates from the program? How often do you keep in touch? What do you communicate about?

33. What jobs did you have before incarceration? What jobs have you had since you got out? How has education helped?
34. Have you faced any difficulties getting housing? Explain.
35. How do you experience the criminal label?
  - a. How often do you think about your label?
  - b. In what situations are you reminded of it?
  - c. Which affects your life more—your criminal history or your education? Explain?
36. How has education affected your social status?
37. What policies would you recommend to improve rehabilitation in prison?

### *Outlook on the future*

38. Looking back on your life before incarceration, what were your future plans?
39. What are your goals for the future in terms of:
  - a. Employment
  - b. Money
  - c. Education
  - d. Family
40. How have you or would you use your experience to affect others?

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