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Experience of Stigma Post Incarceration: A Qualitative Study

Abstract

Background: Minimal attention has been given to the perspectives and experiences of individuals post incarceration regarding stigma and its impact on reintegration and occupational engagement. This research aimed to understand how stigma is experienced among individuals who were formerly incarcerated and its influence on occupational engagement, specifically social participation, work, and school occupations. This research also examined the role of occupational therapy as an intervention in addressing stigma from the perspectives of individuals who were formerly incarcerated to inform practice and mitigate the influence of stigma.

Method: Interviews were conducted with 10 participants of a work rehabilitation program for people who had previously been incarcerated. A thematic analysis was performed to identify major themes. Themes were organized into concept maps related to stigma as experienced by those who were formerly incarcerated.

Results: Four overarching themes emerged. These themes, internal and external perceptions, and family and community systems, served to enable as well as disable the impact of stigma on daily life post incarceration.

Conclusion: The themes presented increased the understanding of stigma as experienced by individuals who were formerly incarcerated and supported the need for further research and occupational therapy programming specifically aimed at minimizing the impact of stigma.

Comments

This study was approved by the university's institutional review board and completed in partial fulfillment of the university's occupational therapy postprofessional doctorate program. No conflicts of interest are declared.

This study was completed in partial fulfillment of the first author's postprofessional OTD at Thomas Jefferson University.

Keywords

community reentry, formerly incarcerated, labeling theory

Cover Page Footnote

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More than 600,000 people are released annually from state and federal prisons in the United States (Bronson & Carson, 2019), and nearly 95% of Americans under the jurisdiction of county jails or state or federal prisons return to their communities (Muhlhausen, n.d.). Yet recidivism rates calculated by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Alper et al., 2018) estimated that 68% of formerly incarcerated individuals were rearrested within 3 years from their release, while 79% were rearrested within 6 years, and 83% were rearrested within 9 years. In the introduction to *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander (2010) states that an individual's "release from prison does not represent the beginning of freedom but instead a cruel new phase of stigmatization and control" (p. 57). This phase is informed by public policies that contribute to occupational marginalization, a concept defined as the inability to make choices and decisions about daily occupational participation (Serrata Malfitano et al., 2016). Occupational marginalization for formerly incarcerated individuals is often related to the evident stigmatization in education, housing, and employment.

Individuals may experience anticipated stigma prior to their release from prison. An evaluation of an occupational therapy program at a minimum-security prison, the Indianapolis Re-entry Educational Facility, revealed that participants who had been incarcerated for 10 years or more had severe anxiety about attaining housing and meaningful employment on release (Crabtree et al., 2016). These anxieties may exacerbate existing mental health concerns. Self-reported data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Bronson & Berzofsky, 2017) revealed that approximately 1 in 7 people incarcerated in state and federal prisons (14%) and 1 in 4 people in local jails (26%) met the threshold for serious psychological distress (SPD). Furthermore, Moore et al. (2016) recognized that anticipating stigma prior to release from prison was positively correlated with perceived stigma on release in formerly incarcerated people. Results found that perceived stigma, in turn, adversely affected community adjustment (Moore et al., 2016).

The pervasiveness of perceived stigma and its potential influence on community adjustment is thus described in *The New Jim Crow*:

Today, when those labeled criminals return to their communities, they are often met with scorn and contempt, not just by employers, welfare workers, and housing officials, but also by their own neighbors, teachers, and even members of their own families. (Alexander, 2010, p. 308)

Formerly incarcerated people may experience internalized stigma because of this coalescence of perceived stigma and community antipathy (Moore et al., 2018). Data demonstrates that when individuals experience internalized stigma, they are apt to avoid environments where they expect to encounter it (Moore et al., 2016). This correlation may contribute to the social withdrawal of formerly incarcerated people, in which their internalized stigma decreases the likelihood of pursuing employment and leisure occupations in their communities (Moore et al., 2016).

Possessing a record of criminal justice involvement presents a significant barrier to obtaining employment on release from prison. Formerly incarcerated people are unemployed at a rate nearly 5 times higher than the general population (Coulette & Kopf, 2018). Because of an expansion of online, state-level databases, it is now considered common practice for an employer to conduct a criminal background check before reviewing an applicant's materials (Stacey & Cohen, 2017). Employer preferences to hire applicants without criminal backgrounds generally do not violate federal law (Stacey

& Cohen, 2017). This bias, arising from stigmatizing perceptions of formerly incarcerated people, makes it increasingly difficult for one to escape the effects of a criminal record when seeking employment. Private landlords and public programs also adopt the same principles as employers when it comes to housing. According to the Vera Institute of Justice (2016), over six million people in the United States have a criminal record that localities often use as a basis to restrict access to housing. Obtaining housing is further complicated by other factors, including the scarcity of affordable housing, legal barriers, discrimination against formerly incarcerated individuals, and strict eligibility requirements for federally subsidized housing (James, 2015).

In addition, formerly incarcerated individuals are often held back from educational opportunities, which makes it difficult to earn credentials that are crucial for successful community reintegration. Recent data from the National Former Prisoner Survey revealed that more than half of individuals who are incarcerated hold a high school diploma or GED only and a quarter have no credentials at all (Coulette, 2018). Poor education or the lack of education has been correlated with a high risk of recidivism (Crabtree et al., 2016). For instance, at the Indiana Department of Corrections (IDOC), offenders who did not have a high school diploma or GED were more likely to return to custody despite gender or race (Lockwood et al., 2012).

Furthermore, the characteristics correlated with an individual's likelihood to be incarcerated also pose barriers to their community integration. People of color, who are overrepresented in the criminal justice system, experience disparities in income, employment, housing access, and education that make reintegration into their communities difficult (Tyler & Brockmann, 2017). According to The Sentencing Project's Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System (2018), the likelihood of incarceration for African American adults is 5.9 times greater than that of White adults, while Hispanic adults are 3.1 times more likely to be incarcerated than White adults. Furthermore, in the first year following their release from prison, White people had a 40% rate of recidivism compared to Hispanic and African American individuals who had rates of 47% and 46%, respectively (Bronson & Carson, 2019).

Occupational therapy (OT) has a unique lens for exploring the externalized and internalized stigma that formerly incarcerated people experience during community integration. The Model of Human Occupation (MOHO) provides the framework for developing interview and focus group questions and for synthesizing postinterview qualitative data. Insight into a formerly incarcerated person's lived experience is crucial when understanding how their perceptions of externalized and internalized stigma influence perceived occupational competence. An OT perspective may address how a formerly incarcerated person's perception of internalized stigma reinforces barriers to community reintegration through emphasis on maladaptive habituation and performance capacity that arises from externalized stigma (Crist et al., 2005; Kielhofner et al., 1980). OT can impart knowledge of how to mitigate the effects of externalized and internalized stigma that formerly incarcerated people experience with the aim of facilitating successful reintegration post incarceration.

Method

The primary aim of the study was to learn how internalized stigma is experienced from the perspective of formerly incarcerated people and how their experience of externalized stigma potentially influences their occupational engagement on community reentry. A secondary aim was to explore the

role of OT as an intervention in addressing formerly incarcerated individuals' internalized stigma. The first two authors orchestrated a qualitative inquiry design approach to inform the continued development of an established OT program in a nonprofit work rehabilitation setting serving populations who are vulnerable because of serious mental illness, physical or mental disability, and a history of criminal justice involvement. The project was conducted in a satellite facility of the organization dedicated to solely employing individuals who have been incarcerated. The program provides practical work experience to help formerly incarcerated adults transition into employment.

The first author conducted 10 in-depth individual interviews with the program participants. The individual interviews consisted of open-ended and semi-structured questions and lasted between 45 and 75 min. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The initial thematic analysis of the transcribed interview data was completed using NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software. Member checking was employed to ensure accuracy of the individual interview transcribed data (DePoy & Gitlin, 2015). Field notes on nonverbal communication were taken during and after each individual interview and focus group. Field notes were examined for concordance or discordance with data analysis and interpretation of findings. Ten of the participants completed the individual in-depth interviews, at which time saturation was achieved. Four of the 10 participants agreed to participate in a voluntary postinterview focus group to employ member checking of data. Only two participants participated in the focus group in its entirety, while two participants left approximately halfway through the session (see Tables 1 and 2 for demographics and characteristics of the 10 participants).

The focus group was conducted to confirm the interpretation and findings of the collective interviews. The focus group lasted approximately 75 min and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Field notes were taken by the first author on the participants' nonverbal communication during the initial in-depth interviews and focus group. All data were de-identified. Several standard methods were implemented to establish trustworthiness and enhance the rigor of this study, including conducting a focus group for member checking, peer debriefing among study investigators, and triangulation of several sources of data to confirm findings (Creswell, 2007; DePoy & Gitlin, 2015; Law & MacDermid, 2008; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Portney & Watkins, 2009). Triangulation of data occurred through interviews with two supervisors employed by the organization. The supervisors worked with the residents daily. The supervisors were asked to provide their own opinions and descriptions on how the participants at the organization experienced supports and barriers to reintegration. Initial findings were presented to the supervisors, and they were provided an opportunity to agree or disagree with the initial themes. It should be noted that both supervisors were also formerly incarcerated.

The program served as a collaborative fieldwork model site with one university's department of occupational therapy in the Northeastern US. The OT program in the work rehabilitation program provided customized individual and/or group interventions focused on returning participants to typical activities, such as productive employment and family and community life. The OT program focused its interventions on areas such as effective communication skills, health and wellness, employment, GED and higher education, and relapse prevention. This study was designed to further inform the OT program by gaining insight into how internalized stigma is experienced by an individual who has been

incarcerated and how their experience of externalized stigma may influence their efforts to resume roles relating to education and employment as well as participation in family and community activities.

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Race	Ethnicity	Age	Highest Educational Level
1	F	African-American	Non-hispanic	54	High School
2	F	African-American	Non-hispanic	35	High School
3	F	African-American	Non-hispanic	58	11 th grade/GED
4	F	Caucasian	Non-hispanic	57	High School
5	F	African-American	Non-hispanic	58	GED
6	F	African-American	Non-hispanic	48	11 th grade
7	F	African-American	Non-hispanic	29	High School
8	F	Caucasian	Non-hispanic	26	11 th grade
9	M	Caucasian	Non-hispanic	39	11 th grade
10	F	Caucasian	Hispanic	49	High School

Table 2
Other Participant Characteristics

Participant	Pre-incarceration Employment	Number of Times Incarcerated	Length of Time Incarcerated	Criminal Offense	Approx. Length of Time Since Release	Approx. Length of Time at Work Rehabilitation Program
1	Maintenance	2 times	3.5 years	Aggravated Assault	17 years	16 years
2	Food Industry, Customer Service	3-5 times	Never longer than 1 month	Disorderly conduct (fighting), possession and selling drugs	5 years	9 months
3	Food and Service Industry, Retail, and healthcare aide	3 times	5 years; 1 year; 4 months	Selling drugs, Assault	6 months	1 year
4	Self-employed in construction business and real estate	1 time	2.5 years	Prescription drug fraud & forgery	1.5 years	5 months
5	Home health nursing aide	3 times	4.5 years, 18 months, 2 years	Aggravated assault, terroristic threats, involuntary manslaughter	7 years	3 months
6	Caregiver and food industry	10 times	About 3 years	Selling drugs	4 months	4 months (1.5 years total, started working 2013 w break for jail)
7	Daycare	3 times	5 months	Aggravated assault, possession of a gun, and tampering with police evidence	2 years	5 months
8	Exotic dancer and student	1 time	13.5 months	Aggravated assault	7.5 years	10 months
9	Dishwasher	1 time	19 years	Murder	2 years	14 months
10	Nursing Assistant	2 times	3 months, 2 months	Drug Possession	8 months	5-6 months

Participant Criteria

The participants in this project were 18 years of age and older, as required for hiring in the work organization. The participants were required to be fluent in English and have a history of incarceration. No other parameters for employment existed. Convenience and purposive sampling were used to

identify potential participants regarding knowledge and experiences related to stigma to ensure the participants would be appropriate informants (Portney, 2020). This study received full approval by the institutional review board at the sponsoring university. A written agreement to conduct the study was also obtained from the president of the organization where the study took place. All of the participants verbalized an interest to voluntarily participate in the study and provided written informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity measures were upheld throughout the study.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was performed to identify major themes related to stigma and community integration as experienced by the formerly incarcerated individuals. NVivo 11 qualitative data analysis software was used to assist with data organization and analysis. Data analysis consisted of initially reviewing transcriptions from the interviews and focus group and identifying significant quotes that facilitated an understanding of their experiences. Similar quotes and ideas were grouped into categories or meaning units and reduced into broader themes describing common experiences and understanding of stigma (i.e., what and how experiences occurred) (Creswell, 2007). Accuracy of qualitative themes was validated through the triangulation of sources that include a literature review, member checking, and peer debriefing (DePoy & Gitlin, 2015). Once themes were finalized, conceptual maps (see Figures 1 and 2) were created to illustrate relationships among themes and subthemes.

Results

The findings are primarily based on 10 individual in-depth interviews and one focus group. Information gleaned from the literature review supported the results. During both the member checking focus group and the triangulation interviews with the supervisors, the participants agreed with most themes presented unless the individual did not experience a specific situation themselves. When a participant did not identify with a theme, the participant explained their belief that everyone has a unique and individual experience and acknowledged that the theme presented was a real possibility.

Themes and Subthemes for Enabling and Disabling Stigma

From the themes that emerged in the content data analysis, two concept maps were developed to illustrate the differences and similarities among the themes and subthemes: enabling stigma (see Figure 1) and disabling stigma (see Figure 2). The enabling stigma map displays themes where internalized stigma persists and supports the continuation of externalized stigma, while the disabling stigma map displays areas that emerged through the formerly incarcerated individuals' experiences that were more positive and are hypothesized to contribute to disabling internalized stigma or preventing externalized stigma from negatively impacting them. Four main themes emerged from the content data analysis: internal perceptions, external perceptions, family systems, and community systems. Internal perceptions describe how the participants personally and internally viewed factors that enable internalized stigma to continue, specific to work. External perceptions relate to how the participants perceived factors related to external circumstances or situations, specific to work. Family systems relate to families both with and without a culture of criminal justice involvement. Community systems involve friends, neighborhoods, and community programs. There is potential for overlap between these four main themes, as illustrated by the bidirectional arrows.

The content data analysis revealed that in each of the four main themes distinct sub-themes emerged that illuminate the main themes. Certain sub-themes are reflected across multiple major themes in and between both the enabling stigma and the disabling stigma concept maps (see Figures 1 and 2).

Figure 1
Enabling Stigma

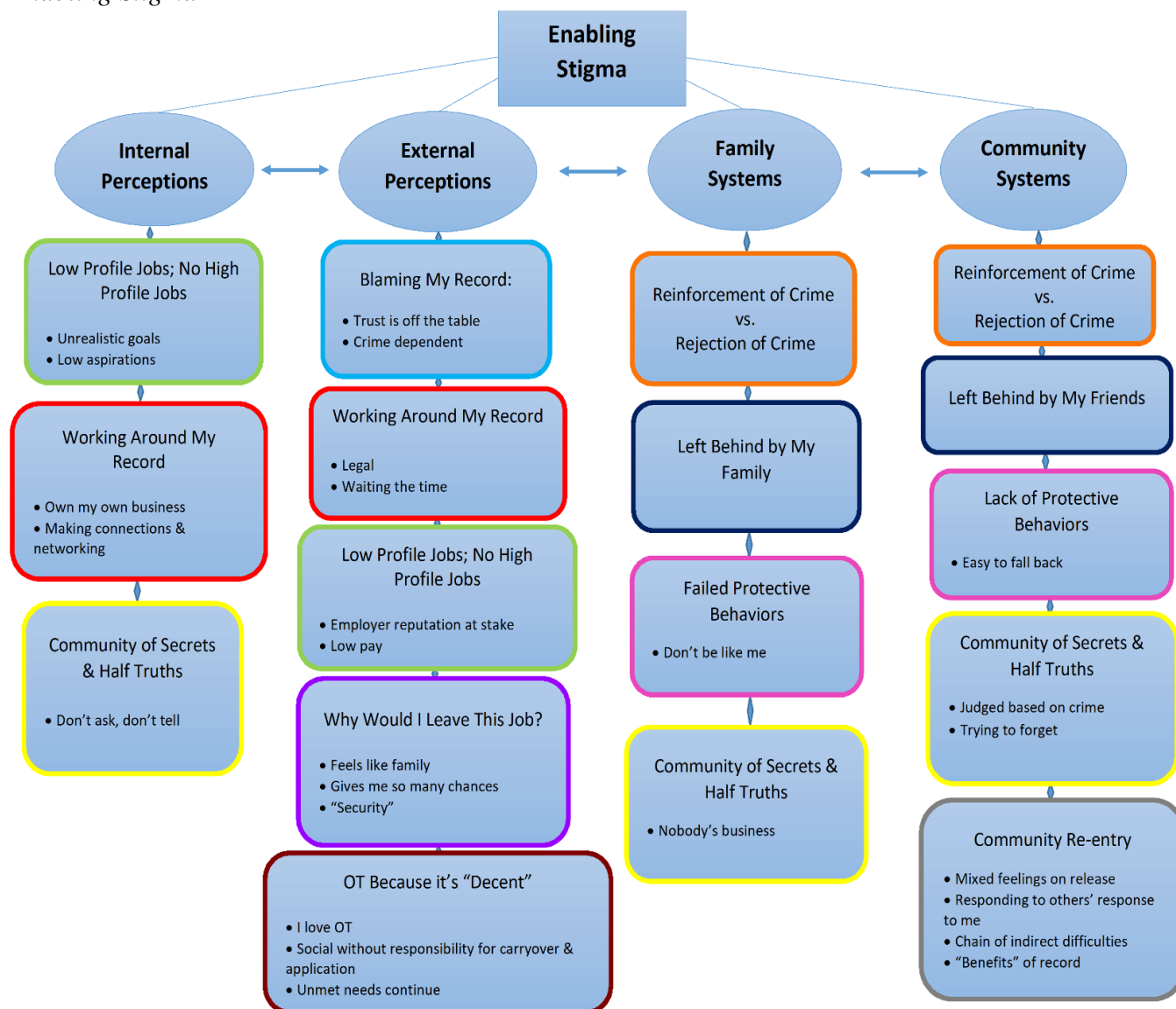
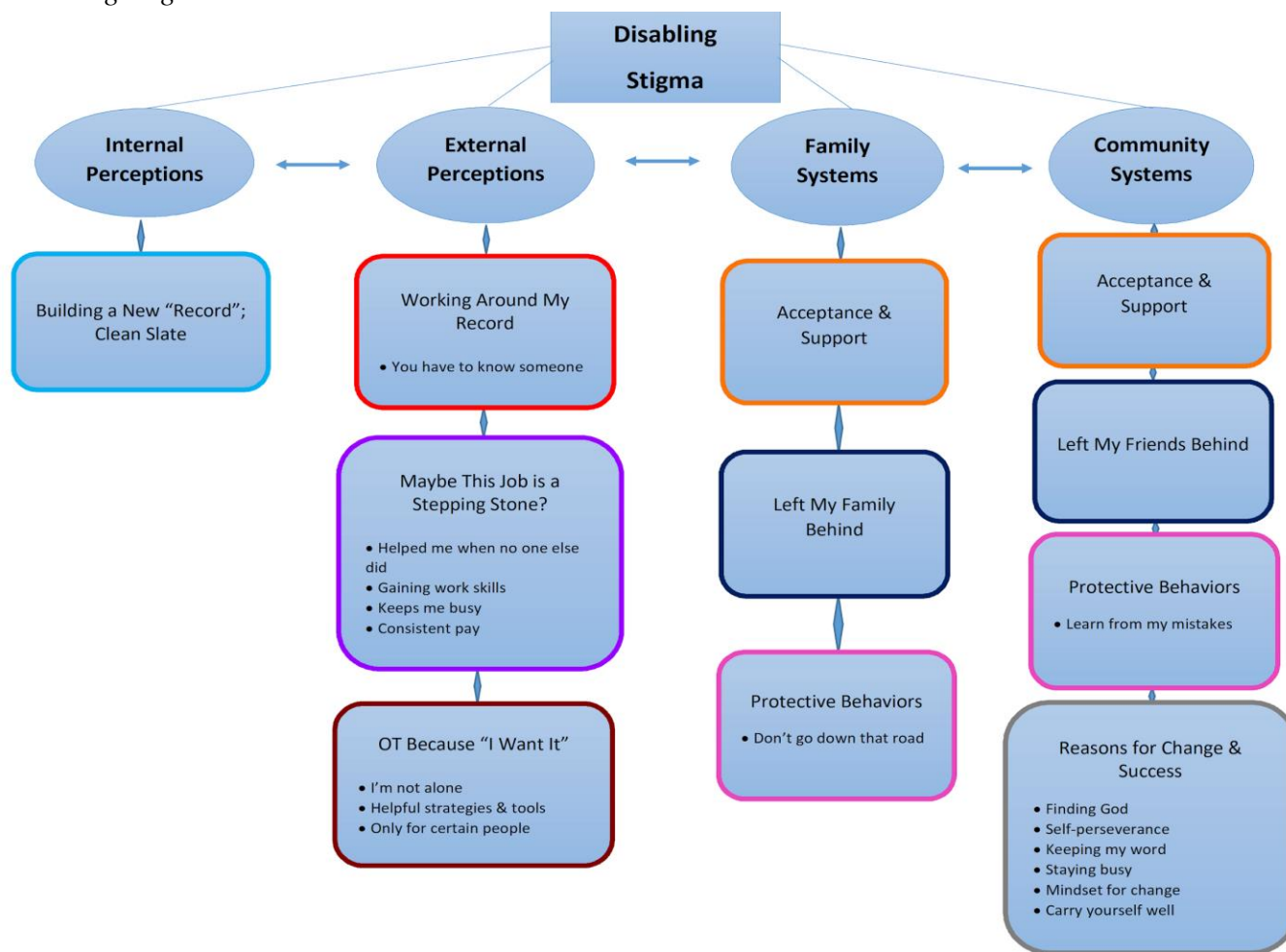


Figure 2
Disabling Stigma



Internal Perceptions: Enabling and Disabling Stigma

The participants described several self-perceptions related to work that contributed to continuing internalized stigma. They believed that they would only be able to obtain low profile jobs and that employers of high-profile jobs would never hire them. The participants' apparent low aspirations for career goals, or occasionally having unrealistic career goals, defined this sub-theme:

I didn't need to go to jail. I didn't need to have this criminal record that I have now that instead of, um, you know, getting paid \$18 an hour, I'm getting paid \$7.25 an hour. You know what I mean? So, I did it to myself. You know? If I, what you do in your life, whether it's now or before, it's gonna affect you in the long run in your life. (S10)

Several of the participants expressed the idea of gaining employment by working around their records, either through owning their own business or through networking and making personal connections with people so that their criminal justice involvement is less of a barrier. S02 stated, "But this is gonna be my own business, nobody is gonna be checking it (my record)."

Another sub-theme, community of secrets and half-truths, related to the belief that if a potential employer did not ask about criminal justice involvement, the participants would not share their histories in hopes that their employer would never run a background check:

That was the thing. They (former employer) didn't ask me how long since (release). . . you ain't asked me, then I don't tell you. Yes! Yes, because I'm not gonna put it down because sometimes they don't do background check. (S03)

The sub-theme above also describes an unspoken rule among the participants themselves as co-workers: They do not ask about each other's criminal justice system involvement because there is no need to relive it.

One sub-theme emerged that potentially could help break down externalized stigma in terms of employment: the idea of building a new record and starting a clean slate. Several of the participants believed that if they prove they are good workers and try to rebuild their lives, then a potential employer might give them a chance. S01 stated, "Or they might say, well they did put 15 years in a job. You know, maybe, they, uh, I could see the potential that they have really been sincere about rebuilding their life."

External Perceptions: Enabling and Disabling Stigma

The participants described several perceptions contributing to externalized stigma related to employment. The participants attribute records of their criminal justice involvement for their difficulties in obtaining employment. Their perceived stigma fuels thoughts such as "who's going to hire me, an ex-felon?" because of beliefs that no one trusts people who have been incarcerated. In addition, the participants noted that employment prospects may be limited based on how specific job duties relate to their sentence. For instance, individuals who were apprehended for theft would not be considered for a job that involves handling money.

Okay me, it might be drugs. You, it might be, um, theft, stealing or robbery or murder. They, they view you differently. It all depends on the case that you did. You working with money. So, if you had a habit, a drug habit, they probably wouldn't want to put you on cashier, or if they put you there they watch you more. (S03)

Regardless of the specific reason for criminal justice system involvement, the participants expressed the feeling that having any type of record, or even socializing with other individuals who had been incarcerated, would mean that perceived stigma would render them unemployable. One participant described this as "association brings assimilation." Despite this, the participants noted ways that they can overcome the perceived stigma of previous incarceration. They believed that they could work around their records through legal means, specifically by getting records expunged. They also noted that some cities have "ban the box" laws, which prohibit questions regarding prior involvement in the criminal justice system from the initial employment application. The participants believed that they would have a better chance at being hired if they could apply for jobs and complete the first interview without being asked about their criminal histories.

What I wanna do, what I still need to do is, um, if a job has an outdated application, cause, you know, the law banned the box now, they really aren't supposed to ask you anything in the first interview and I think it's maybe towards the second or third interview that like, then they can ask you. So, if you're going to a job where it's just one shot interview, you don't, you shouldn't have to put that down on the application. So, if their application aren't updated, the best thing to do is to call and ask them for updated application based on ban the box. So, there's a lot of jobs that are only one interview. And then if you go to the second interview, then they can, so they can ask about it. But if you only are one shot deal, one shot interview, you should be able to get that job based on ban the box. (S01)

In addition, the participants believed that if they waited a certain amount of years after their release from prison, their felonies could be removed from their record and employers would be more willing to hire them. The belief of only being able to obtain low profile jobs was also an external perception; the participants felt that they would only ever have a chance of being hired in positions with low-level responsibilities or that would not risk the reputation of the company:

Like a low profile, something like this (work rehabilitation program). Yeah, like [this place]. Underpaid basically is what I'm saying. A place that's gonna pay, ain't gonna hire nobody if you get all this, um, credit and, you know, thing behind your back and I just got housekeeping and 8 felonies. I'm not . . . I probably won't even hire me. (S07)

The work rehabilitation setting, as well as the OT program seated in the organization, intended to serve only as a path to facilitate successful reintegration, but the participants discussed ways that the program prevented them from moving forward, thereby enabling internalized stigma. The participants expressed a common thought, why would I leave this job? (work rehabilitation program) because it represents family in that it consists of a community of formerly incarcerated individuals working in a setting where they can all be themselves. S09 stated: "I think the one good thing about, uh, the great thing about being at [this place] is you know, they don't care you're an ex offender."

In addition, there was a sense of security since the program provided leniency and flexibility that other employers might not accommodate regarding days off for court dates and personal needs, lateness, and the provision of second chances after being terminated. S02 stated, "Cause why would I leave here right now? Like, I mean, this, this job helps you. No other job gonna help you. And I, like . . . to me this is the best job."

The participants described the OT program as "decent," explaining that they liked having the therapist and students on site because they enjoyed their presence. The participants expressed appreciation for the OT program for its social stimulation but noted that it had limits in its ability to provide enough information for their employment needs. For instance, the OT program did not provide enough education on specific skills unique to the participants' interests or information on community programs for necessities and activities. Some expressed the opinion that they were unlikely to apply the skills that they learned from the OT program:

Maybe, I don't know. Like, we do anger management, stress management, so it could help some people, I don't know. Me personally, um, (pause) I really, I just really be by myself or with my

nieces or nephews or sisters and stuff. Like I don't, like since after my accident I don't really be around people. (S02)

Others acknowledged the benefits of OT toward helping them move forward, but only when “I want it,” thus acknowledging that OT may only be beneficial for people when they are ready and desire change:

When it comes down to OT, whenever you have someone bringing things to help rebuild your life, you have to really want it. Something good can be placed before you, but you have to want it. You have to be the one to come say yes, can I be a part of this. I have to want it. (S01)

Certain participants viewed the OT program as providing a critical support system and a safe outlet for opening up about their feelings:

They just, they just show me that . . . don't give up. You know what I mean, like, I'm not by myself. It's like, that I'm not alone. You know, a lot of people you might not be around people that been through the same, you know, category that you in but I'm just not alone. (S06)

Family Systems: Enabling and Disabling Stigma

Family systems also appear to contribute to externalized stigma, including families with a culture of criminal justice system involvement who reinforce criminal justice involvement without judgment, and families without a culture of criminal justice involvement who reject the participants' involvement and view them as an embarrassment to the family. Some of the participants' families have left them behind and do not speak to them anymore because of their history:

Well, they look down at me now. Because you know they, no one, like I said no one in my family ever went through anything like this. My family are all like, you know, very good people. Ehhh, I feel kind of like an outcast in my family. I don't see anybody really. I hardly talk to them. (S04)

The participants also described a sub-theme of failed protective behaviors, meaning that although they grew up in a family that had been impacted by the criminal justice system, they tried to conceal their own participation in activities from family members, such as younger siblings, cousins, nieces, and/or nephews. However, the family members they intended to protect often ended up involved, repeating the actions they themselves strived to hide.

Like, when I was younger, like I said I used to hate my mom because she was on drugs and stuff. But now I don't, and I talk to her, I mean we don't have a great relationship but I talk to her and I forgive her and stuff. And sometimes I be, like, and I'm happy you was on drugs because like some of my friends they snorting or doing coke or crack, like its young people out here doing crack, like younger than me, like 18, 20, they crackheads already. Like, that's crazy. My mom did that for me. Like I was saying, I didn't want my sisters to see the things that I was doing. My mom did that for me. And yeah, I smoked weed. I started smoking weed like (pause) like 9 years old. You know, and then, like, that's how I started selling weed. You know, my uncle, one time they found it in the house. They made me give it back. And my family didn't want me involved in that stuff. (S02)

Lastly, the sub-theme of community of secrets and half-truths emerged in family systems. The participants expressed feeling that their criminal history is no ones' business and is a source of embarrassment for them; some said that they hide the truth about it so that their kids will view them as a positive role model. Some aspects of the participants' family systems may help disable internalized stigma, including having families that accept and support the participants regardless of their crime or their families' experiences with the criminal justice system. Families provided acceptance and support by understanding what the participant was going through, by having had the same experiences, by not turning their backs on them during the tough times because of the belief that people will change when ready, or by providing tough love, such as by not supporting participants financially. In addition, some of the participants actively decided to leave their families behind or to stay away from them because being around their family might lead them to re-engage in behaviors that led to their incarcerations:

Well, I think the, um, the hardest part, for me, I don't know about other people, the hardest part for me was to stay away from my people I grew up with. That knew me as that person. Cause I always came right back. (S05)

Family systems were also described in terms of protective behaviors that helped the participants stay on a good path through encouragement or shared related experiences.

Community Systems: Enabling and Disabling Stigma

Very similar to families, two types of community systems also contributed to stigma: communities with a culture of criminal justice involvement that reinforce criminal justice involvement without judgment "because everyone has a record," and communities without a culture of criminal justice involvement that reject the participants' involvement and, therefore, impede the participants from making new friends who do not have histories of criminal justice involvement. Some of the participants' friends have left them behind and do not speak to them anymore. The participants expressed that this is because their former friends view them as boring now, or feel that the participants think they are better than them as they are trying to get clean and rebuild their lives. S03 said, "Yeah they thought they, they used to say 'you think you better than us since you don't get high or do sell drugs no more.' I said, 'no I don't.'"

The participants also described a sub-theme of failed protective behaviors when growing up in a community of criminal justice involvement as it was easy to fall back into their old ways because of the temptation and encouragement from friends and communities involved in the criminal justice system. In addition, the sub-theme of community of secrets and half-truths emerged again in community systems. The participants believed that criminal history was no one's business, but they were also trying to forget their incarceration experiences, so they did not want to talk about them with their peers or friends. Most significantly, the participants did not want to talk about their histories because they believed that their peers and friends, even those who also have past involvement in the criminal justice system, would judge them.

Yeah. Cause you view different people, different categories, what they did, you put em in categories in jail. So, I'd rather just, you know, keep that part of my past secret. I tell em that I went to jail for murder, but I don't let em in, okay. If you're a child molester and you go to jail,

oh my god. If you're a, uh (very soft spoken), if you killed someone like your child or something like that. A lot of people won't take chances with ya. And when they get mad at you, first thing they do is throw that right in your face. Because I'd have even harder time, you do. If you're a rapist or a child molester, it's VERY hard in the community, to be anywhere. (S09)

Difficulties regarding community reentry also contributed to internalized stigma, including mixed feelings of happiness and worry about having freedom and returning with nothing on release from prison. The participants described feeling and knowing when they were being judged and feeling hurt or angry and wanting to respond negatively to others' behavior toward them:

And like, sometimes, like if you dressed with all black on, and it's in the winter time and you got your hood, there's somebody looking at you, and then they see you, so they just start clutching their pocketbooks or something, to me that make me want to do something to you because, then I feel better, because why did you just, why did you just judge me and I wasn't even thinking about you? (S02).

Although the participants do not credit other difficulties of reintegration directly to having a record, there are indirect difficulties resulting. For example, as they were unable to find a job or a job that pays well, they experienced difficulties affording transportation and housing. Certain aspects of the participants' community systems may serve as factors that disable internalized stigma, including having friends or community programs that accept and support the participants regardless of their sentence. The participants reported surrounding themselves with new "positive people" who support them and give advice based on their own similar experiences. Some of the participants also reported having the same preincarceration friends who now accept the participants' new lifestyles and, therefore, keep their activities away from the participant(s). In addition, some of the participants had actively decided to leave their friends and communities behind or to stay away from them, as being around old friends and neighborhoods would potentially "lead them down the wrong path":

I told them, I said, you're my friend in here. When I leave out of here, I don't want to know nobody in jail, cause now I'm not saying that I was better than them, but what it came down to, the point of writing people when I left jail, no. Because I'm trying to start my new life. (S09)

Community systems were also described in terms of protective behaviors that helped the participants stay on a good path as they expressed a desire to give back and promote change in their communities through sharing their stories. Lastly, many of the participants said that finding reasons for change and maintaining success was critical. Reasons included practicing a religious faith; self-perseverance; keeping promises to others; staying busy, and therefore out of trouble; and having the mindset for change so that people do not judge them based on their actions or appearance. S09 stated, "You have to be ready, if you're not, you're never going to be ready. So, you might as well just get in that revolving door, stay there. Not even come out, not even come back out."

Discussion

This study found evidence that stigma, both externalized and internalized, is a multilevel construct, spanning across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural systems that also creates

disparities in occupational performance (Cook et al., 2014). Although the terms stigma and community reintegration did not resonate with all of the participants, they all described experiences related to externalized and internalized stigma. Of note, they reported experiencing stigma as both an internal and external phenomena (Dinos et al., 2004; Jacobson & Greenley, 2001; see Figures 1 and 2). This study specifically focused on the participants' reintegration experiences and their interpretations of these experiences. The participants' perceptions of stigmas could be organized into both internalized perceptions and externalized perceptions related to exogenous factors, as illustrated in two of the main themes on the concept maps (see Figures 1 and 2). Sub-themes revealed overlap between internalized and externalized perceptions of stigma, with internalized stigma leading to external restrictions in occupations for formerly incarcerated people (Jacobson & Greenley, 2001; Krupa, 2008).

Stigma made reintegration difficult as it caused the participants to feel devalued, and this devaluation led to social distancing and to limitations in valued work, family, and social roles (Dinos et al., 2004; Goffman, 1963; Jacobson & Greenley, 2001; Krupa, 2008). The participants experienced devaluation in the loss of their roles in their own family and with friends, whether initiated by themselves or by others. It is interesting that the participants encountered externalized stigma from people impacted by the criminal justice system who made assumptions about the participant's work, family, and community based on their own histories. This prejudice reinforces a cycle of stigma that reduces participation in healthy occupations. The participants expressed the belief that they would never achieve a respected, higher paying job and would only be able to obtain low paying jobs. Krupa (2008) supports the premise that experiencing stigma can "compromise the individual's and the identified group's sense of integrity, status, worth and potential" (p. 199), possibly explaining the distrust and dishonesty that persist even in participants' own networks.

Lastly, our research shows that even when the outcomes of stigma are positive or neutral in nature, the consequences still promote the continuation of stigma (Pescosolido & Markin, 2015). For instance, although the participants felt they were limited to working in low paying jobs and expressed low aspirations of better work in the future, they did not express negative feelings about the role of stigma in limiting their employment options. In addition, certain experiences could be categorized as positive outcomes from stigma. This perspective is illustrated by the sense of belonging and acceptance that the formerly incarcerated individuals expressed finding in the work rehabilitation program, reinforced by their apparent desire to continue participating in the program.

Implications for OT

This study improved our understanding of externalized and internalized stigma and its impact on occupational participation during reintegration as lived by formerly incarcerated people. The findings provide valuable information necessary for consideration in future research and OT programming. The findings can ultimately be used to help formerly incarcerated people move away from situations that enable externalized stigma (see Figure 1) and toward situations that potentially disable or minimize internalized stigma (see Figure 2). In addition, this study also provides an understanding of some of the more positive factors or experiences that potentially minimize the impact of stigma. This improved understanding should be considered for future OT programming aimed at reducing stigma and facilitating successful reintegration.

For the formerly incarcerated individuals in this study, the most prominent issues of stigma surrounded lack of trust in and outside of their social circles, judgment that people who have been involved in the criminal justice system are all bad and do not have the capacity for change, belief that people who have been incarcerated deserve the consequences for their actions, and assumptions of incompetence related to employment. This information will aid in building OT's potential role in addressing the impact of stigma and facilitating successful reintegration. Finally, this study defines priorities for future research and OT programming focused on the reintegration of formerly incarcerated people.

Limitations

While several methods were used to enhance the rigor of this study, member checking was a limitation. A focus group was originally planned to confirm the interpretation and findings with participants. Only four of the 10 participants, however, agreed to participate, and only two of these four completed the member checking focus group. This may have influenced data interpretation and possibly imposed potential bias in the results. Another consideration is potential limitations of the perceptions that formerly incarcerated individuals had of OT as an intervention for addressing their externalized and internalized stigma. Although individual and focus group interviews sought to fully achieve this objective, the participants did not share substantial information about their perspective on OT intervention. The participants had difficulty defining OT and how its services impact them beyond the interventions to which they were exposed. It may be that the participants' appreciation for engaging in the program limited constructive feedback that might have been interpreted negatively. In addition, the participants in this project received OT services at varying levels. Some received intensive one-on-one interventions, while others received intermittent (as needed) consultation to group services. This difference in exposure to OT services could have impacted their understanding of the interventions being provided. Furthermore, the participants' potential difficulties recognizing the need to "graduate" from the program and find outside employment may be barriers to community reintegration. An inability to recognize one's needs and motivation to participate in such a program should be considered for future OT programming and research in this area. Although this study provides rich, qualitative information of formerly incarcerated people's experiences with stigma and reintegration, the results may not be transferable to the larger population.

Conclusion

Approximately 600,000 Americans are released from prison each year, nearly all of whom return to their communities (Bronson & Carson, 2019). However, disparities in income, employment, housing access, and education that increase the likelihood of an individual's criminal justice system involvement also impede successful reintegration (James, 2015). These disparities, evident in public policies and practices that stigmatize formerly incarcerated people, are potentially compounded for people of color, especially African Americans and Hispanics, who not only already experience inequities in these societal domains, but also are overrepresented in rates of incarceration and recidivism (The Sentencing Project, 2016). These externalized sources of stigma can lead to social withdrawal and occupational marginalization (Serrata Malfitano et al., 2016) as well as internalized "shame and stigma of prison label" (Alexander, 2010, p. 40). The confluence of the perceived stigma produced from these forces may increase the risk of recidivism (James, 2015).

To address externalized and internalized stigma experienced by formerly incarcerated people, this study explored how an OT program could provide empowerment through practical work experience and social interaction through a peer community. The analysis of findings gleaned from individual and focus group interviews confirmed much of the recent literature on stigma, particularly that formerly incarcerated people experience the phenomena of stigma in a specific and individual manner that, in turn, shapes their daily experiences and may impair or facilitate successful reintegration. The results of this study explored the underpinnings of stigma as experienced by a formerly incarcerated person. Thematic analysis revealed that the presence of both externalized and internalized stigma impacts the person but also society at the individual, family, and community level. The results of this study may also be used to influence future OT programming aimed at promoting successful reintegration while striving to minimize the impact of perceived stigma as experienced by formerly incarcerated individuals.

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