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REENTRY FOR REGISTERED SEX OFFENDERS: NAVIGATING STIGMA POST-RELEASE

by

Emily Nicole Friedman

A thesis submitted to the Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Criminal Justice

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Certificate of Approval

The thesis of Emily Nicole Friedman is approved: Date

Dr. Michael Hallett	____________________	December 6, 2023
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Dr. Alicia Sitren	______________________	December 6, 2023

Dedication

I dedicate this to my mom and stepdad, Tracey and Garry Woodard.

Mom, you have inspired me my whole life and I have never doubted following my own dreams because watching you do it gave me the courage to do so too. Thank you for not just being my mom but also my best friend, biggest supporter, and confidant.

G, I wish you could be here to celebrate this milestone with me. I know you would be so proud of the woman I have become, and I couldn't have done it without you. I miss you every day.

Love, Emo.

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Abstract

Registered sex offenders (RSOs) experience extreme stigmatization and monitoring even after they are released from incarceration. This is due, in part, to sex offender registries which perpetuate high levels of stigma and can contribute to false narratives about reoffending, victimization, and the homogeneity of sex offenders. As a result of societal level stigma, RSOs often struggle to locate and maintain employment, secure suitable housing, and establish positive, prosocial relationships. This current study utilized a qualitative approach using in-depth interviews with eight RSOs to explore how offenders experience and navigate this stigma during reentry. Findings support the notion that RSOs experience and anticipate high levels of stigma which contributes to a self-perception of the sex offender status as a master label for the offender himself. Participants also illuminated stigma-management techniques of preventative telling and withdrawal as ways of coping with this and identified experiences that helped them adapt to their marginalization.

Introduction

Despite a much lower recidivism rate than other types of offenders, sex offenders consistently receive the greatest sanctions and stigma post-release (Evans & Cubellis, 2014; Przybylski, 2015). Nonetheless, with a recidivism rate of 49% in a three-year period, sex offenders have a lower recidivism rate as compared to the aggregated recidivism rate of 68% for all offenders (Alper & Durose, 2019; Alper et al., 2018; Adkins et al., 2000; Stucky & Ottensmann, 2016). In both cases, recidivism is quantified by a rearrest for *any* offense, however, it is worth noting that in a nine-year follow-up period, only 7.7% of offenders who were originally arrested for rape or sexual assault were rearrested for a similar sex charge (Alper & Durose, 2019). In other words, the vast majority of people who have been convicted of a sex charge do not get rearrested on another sex charge once they are released.

While there are numerous offenses that get classified into the category of sex offender, sex offenders can be broadly grouped in four groups: child sexual abusers, rapists, female offenders, and Internet sexual offenders (Simons, 2015). While it is generally agreed upon by researchers that the rate of sexual offending is higher than what is reported (Przybylski, 2015), individuals with previous contact with police are most likely to be arrested, charged, and prosecuted (Larcombe, 2012). Additionally, offenses against victims that are further away from what could be considered "potentially appropriate sexual partners," such as child victims, unknown female victims, and male victims, are more likely to result in prosecution (Larcombe, 2012). While there is a natural concern about underreporting in recidivism rates, the feared "sex predator" that abducts and offends against stranger children repeatedly, a pervasive but inaccurate narrative since the late 1900s, is most likely to be arrested and prosecuted for their

offenses (Larcombe, 2012; Wacquant, 2009).

Considering the sanctions placed on offenders who have committed sex crimes, there is seemingly a disconnect between the reality of types of offenders along with their likelihood of reoffending and the prevalent stigma surrounding these offenders. It is important to note that research has consistently indicated that the low level of recidivism for sex offenders is not due to the registry or the community consequences of the registry (e.g., Adkins et al., 2000; Stucky & Ottensmann, 2016). Yet the creation of sex offender registries and misinformation about sex offenders has created a sort of moral panic and strict ostracization of the population even once they are released. This can lead to difficulty in obtaining housing, employment, and maintaining stable prosocial relationships, which has the potential to impact aspects of their identity such as their self-esteem, self-worth, and the way they "see and relate to themselves" (Hamilton, 2017, p. 14).

The purpose of this study is to explore how registered sex offenders (RSOs) experience stigma post-release and how they navigate that stigma in both their daily interactions and in terms of self-concept. The current study explores the following research questions:

1. To what extent do registered sex offenders experience stigma relating to their status?
2. How do registered sex offenders navigate stigma relating to their status internally while in the community?
3. Does the way a registered sex offender navigates stigma impact their ability to reintegrate back into society?

To this end, the current study expands on the limited research about the collateral consequences of the sex offender registry and to better understand the internal narrative process that occurs

within offenders as a result of the stigma they face.

By understanding how men experience and cope with the direct and indirect implications of sex offender registries and associated stigma of their conviction, there is both an opportunity to give voice to those who have already "served their time" despite their enduring persecution, and illuminate the negative implications perpetuated by this stigma. It should be noted that this investigation is not intended to trivialize experiences of the victims, as victims of sex crimes experience severe trauma that must be acknowledged and addressed (Wasco, 2003). Ultimately, however, by understanding how the current culture of stigmatization and ostracization may impede successful reintegration for a group of offenders, there is the opportunity to understand the contextual barriers for sex offenders as they aim to become productive members of society.

Literature Review

Regular barriers in registered sex offender's (RSO) life post-release includes obtaining housing, maintaining prosocial relationships, especially within their extended family, and securing employment (e.g., Evans & Cubellis, 2014; Levenson & Cotter, 2005a; Tewksbury, 2005). What is unique about people convicted of a sex offense is the *extreme* stigma that permeates their lives post-conviction. This may create external and internal roadblocks that other offenders do not experience at the same intensity, or at all, specifically during reentry. These differences may be most notable while seeking and holding employment which could alter the existence and process of this "signal" traditionally seen in other offenders, along with establishing prosocial relationships in the community post-release.

The stigma and surveillance that are catalyzed by a sex offense conviction creates a pervasive fear in the offender's daily life (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). In this way, these individuals face an enduring punishment that continues even after their release from incarceration (Evans & Cubellis, 2014). Social and structural stigma via social exclusion and discrimination from institutions through restrictive policies such as housing and employment limitations reinforce "sex offender" as a master label which must be managed in some way by the labeled in their daily life (Edwards & Hensley, 2001). How they do this can have serious consequences on recidivism risk.

This chapter will examine the unique function of sex offender registries and the stigma that these registries perpetuate. Next, it will explore the heterogeneity of sex offenders as a group. Then, it will examine the present research regarding RSOs and employment and RSOs and housing. Finally, it will acknowledge existing support for modified labeling theory and reintegrative shaming when studying this population; however, this study does utilize and

recognize the importance of grounded theory in an exploratory, qualitative study such as this one.

Sex Offender Registries

Historically, the stigma and perceived threat of sex offending has persisted, with a surge of moral panic in the late 1900's as a campaign about dangerous "sex predators" flooded society (Wacquant, 2009). This swelling of panic worked in tandem with newly proposed sex offender registrations and notification (SORN) systems, each one feeding into the other to justify their mutual existence. Shawn and Tewksbury (2018) theorize that sex offender registries were born out of inaccurate and anecdotal beliefs that sex offenders are more likely to recidivate compared to other offenders. And while arrests for sex offenses have steadily increased since the 1990's, as has the length of time a person spends incarcerated for that offense (Padfield, 2015), interpretative data refutes the notion that there has been a particular increase in sexual offending during this time (Wacquant, 2009).

Additionally, research consistently indicates that sex offenders reoffend at a much lower rate when compared to other types of offenders, though evidence does not point to sex offender registries being related in these results (Adkins et al., 2000; Alper & Durose, 2019; Sandler et al., 2008; Stucky & Ottensmann, 2016). For example, an analysis of New York's sex offender registration and notifications laws found "no significant impact on rates of total sexual offending, rape, or child molestation, whether viewed as a whole or in terms of offenses committed by first-time sex offenders or those committed by previously convicted sex offenders (i.e., repeat offenders)" as a result of the implemented SORN laws (Sandler et al., 2008, p. 297).

The Creation of SORN

Following the abduction of an eleven-year-old boy, the Jacob Wetterling Crimes Against

Children and Sexually Violent Offender Registration Act was proposed in 1993. This law created a sex offender registry in every state, mandating that anybody who has perpetrated a crime against a child, perpetrated a violent sexual offense, or has been deemed a "sexually violent predator" be registered (Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009, p. 680). Three years later, as a result of seven-year old's Megan Kanka's disappearance, an amendment known as Megan's Law was added to the Jacob Wetterling Act that instilled a notification system that requires community notifications if a registered sex offender moves into the area (Schiavone & Jeglic, 2009). States have since implemented this in various ways for different levels of offenders, utilizing both active notifications, such as meetings and flyers, and passive notifications. Passive notification systems generally refer to an online registry for community members to access if they so choose (Logan, 2017).

In 2006, the Adam Walsh Child Protection and Safety Act was enacted. This Act classifies offenders into risk tiers and requires minimum registration lengths and regular address updates (Adam Walsh Act, 2006); it also created the national database for sex offenders and made failure to register a felony (Adam Walsh Act, 2006). All of this has coalesced to create the existence of sex offender registries as they are known today. Though they vary based on state guidelines, most state registry sites provide personal characteristics about the offender, including address of employment (35%), notable physical characteristics such as scars or tattoos (61%), and all but three provide a specific residential address for the offender (Brewster et al., 2012). The existence of sex offender registries as public information eliminates privacy and anonymity for this type of offender, even after release from incarceration. There is no other group of offenders upon whom such an enduring and inescapable label is imposed.

Effects of SORN

Despite the massive institution that has been created around sex offender registries there is little evidence that they actually deter sex crimes. While the point of sex offender registries was originally to spread community awareness and therefore increase informal social controls (Bailey & Klein, 2018), it has made registered sex offenders the target of severe ostracization, stigma, and harassment which can lead to feelings of isolation, increasing an offender's risk of reoffending (Bailey & Klein, 2018; Evans & Cubellis, 2014; Levenson & Cotter, 2005a; Tewksbury, 2005). Bailey & Klein (2018) found that lifetime registration was a significant predictor for greater feelings of isolation in registered sex offenders, meaning that level of severity in sanctions may have a relationship to greater negative feelings. Registries also contribute to a false narrative about perpetrator-offender relationships like the frequency of stranger victimization and the homogeneity of sex offenders as a group (Sample & Bray, 2006; Wacquant, 2009). Both of these perpetuate stereotypes that are dangerous to the public at large and the registered offender themself and are detailed more in the following sections.

Sex Offenders as a Heterogenous Group

The stigma that sex offenders face as a result of their deviant label could be partially related to the inaccurate assumption of sex offenders as a homogenous group of offenders. Both socially and formally, sex offenders are often treated as a one-dimensional group of offenders who exclusively seek out stranger children to abuse (Sample & Bray, 2006). However, sex offender registries are constituted of a myriad of offenders, including those who have only ever offended against adults. Robertiello and Terry (2007) divide sex offenders into four categories; rapists, child molesters, female sex offenders, and juvenile offenders (Robertiello & Terry, 2007). More recently, many have added a category to include Internet sexual offenders as well (Simmons, 2015). However, Robertiello & Terry (2007) warn against viewing these typologies

as mutually exclusive as sex offenders exist on a continuum in which the reasons, explanations, and motivations for sexual offending can vary significantly based on where an individual falls in that continuum. Consequently, the treatment and management of sex offenders should reflect the same diversity of the individuals within that category, yet the blanket approach currently ascribed to sex offenders fails to address important differences between these offenders, contributing to the misguided notion about level of dangerousness and offending behavior.

While one could expect that people who do have child victims may experience stigma more frequently than other types of sex offenders, due to their offenses evoking the most fear and disgust (Kernsmith et al., 2009), research shows that the treatment of registered sex offenders in employment prospects does not seem to be nuanced in relation to victim type. For example, Tewksbury (2005) found that the rate of losing a job because of a person's registration was very similar for offenders who report child victims and offenders who do not report child victims, with offenders with child victims reporting it only 0.2% more frequently. Similarly, the rate of reporting a denial of promotion due to registered status is very similar for offenders with child victims and no child victims, with it occurring only 3% more often for offenders with child victims (Tewksbury, 2005).

Oftentimes, registered sex offenders may try to distance themselves from each other, delineating the differences between the truly "bad ones" and the "low-level ones," in which they can group themselves into the latter of the two (Tewksbury & Lees, 2007). By redefining what it *actually* means to be a sex offender, a person may be attempting to counter the effect that the shamed label has on their self-perception (Evans & Cubellis, 2014), but findings by Bensel and Sample (2016) indicate that most individuals convicted of a sex offense still recognize their collective identity as a "group" which is solely dictated by their status as a register sex offender.

In other words, even registered sex offenders that might make attempts to separate their own offense from other types of offending still ultimately see their position in society as the "other."

Employment

Consistently, employment is found to have a strong relationship to reduced recidivism for offenders of all types (Harrison & Schehr, 2004; Nally et al., 2014; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014) which makes the struggle sex offenders experience in obtaining and maintaining employment a salient concern. While recent findings have indicated that employment actually signals a turning point towards desistance rather than functioning as a catalyst for desistance itself (Bushway & Apel, 2012; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014), *continued* employment that offers stability may further reduce the likelihood of recidivism for offenders post-hiring (Ramakers et al., 2017; Skardhamar & Savolainen, 2014). In other words, employment may serve as both a desistance signal *and* a continued protective factor enabling successful reintegration for offenders generally. While there is expansive and nuanced research that analyzes the relationship between employment and desistance for offenders generally, there is far less known about the relationship between employment and the process of desistance for registered sex offenders specifically.

Current research indicates that like other offenders, employment does also reduce recidivism for people convicted of a sex offense. Findings by Kruttschnitt et al. (2000) found that with treatment, employment successfully reduced reoffending in people convicted of a sex offense. Similarly, Hanson & Harris (2000) found that offenders are more likely to be rearrested for another sex offense when unemployed. In a five year follow up study by Nally et al. (2014), employment and education level were the two largest predictors of recidivism for the small part of the participating cohort who were convicted of sex offenses. There is also support that shows

employment as an important factor in reducing reoffending for juvenile sex offenders (van den Berg et al., 2014). All in, the current research points to employment as an important factor in the desistance process for registered sex offenders, however, obtaining and maintaining employment may be particularly difficult for this group creating varied implications about how it serves to facilitate reintegration and works as a “signal” for desistance.

Logistically, due to formal restrictions, such as not being permitted to be around minors and electronic monitoring, and informal factors, such as stigma and fear of liability, the employment process can be an arduous journey for sex offenders returning to the community that results in them frequently being under- and unemployed. The search for a job was found to be related with the highest level of stress in a study done by Tewksbury and Zgoba (2010) as 42% of their participants reported significant difficulties with employment. Even if an offender was gainfully employed before their conviction, many sex offenders reentering the community were unable to return to their previous place of employment due to restrictions relating to their conviction, nor could they obtain a position of similar status and salary post-release (Brown et al., 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). This was especially true for highly educated offenders, who are even less likely to receive training/education during incarceration compared to their less educated counterparts (Brown et al., 2007).

A study done by Bensel & Sample (2017) found that people convicted of a sex offense earned half of their prior salary following their conviction, the *average* income being $35,321 post-release, nearly a quarter lower than the median income for all men in America in 2017 (Fontenot et al., 2018). To add to this, people convicted of a sex offense are more likely to live in areas with concentrated social disorganization (Mustaine et al., 2006) which could hinder employment prospects and since registered sex offenders are more likely to be under electronic

monitoring, their ability to perform their job duties may be restricted even further (Kras et al., 2018). As such, many sex offenders must accept low-level and poor paying jobs in order to fulfill parole or probation requirements (Robbers, 2009).

When applying to these new employment prospects, offenders often experience shame, nervousness, and embarrassment about disclosing their offense to potential employers (Brown et al., 2007) believing that they will be devalued and/or discriminated against as a result (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012). Tewksbury (2005) found that 43% of registered sex offenders report loss of a job as a result of their registered status and 23% report a loss of promotion. Similarly, Robbers (2009) found about half of their respondents reported job loss due to their status. Robbers (2009) found that the stigma of being labeled a sex offender was the most challenging part of reentry due to the effect it has on employment opportunities. Sex offenders report that once the employer finds out they have been convicted of a sex offense, they're almost always excluded from the application process (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Due to this, some offenders report lying about and/or sanitizing their offense(s) after repetitive rejection from potential employers in hopes of obtaining a position (Robbers, 2009).

But even so, Brown et al. (2007) found that nearly half of the employers they surveyed in their study would not even consider hiring a person convicted of a sex offense *regardless* of the charge and the circumstances. They further determined that this decision is informed by both moral (holding beliefs such as the one that sex offenders don't deserve to work) and practical reasons (liability concerns) (Brown et al., 2007). In other words, there *are* significant, external, and uncontrollable barriers that registered sex offenders experience in their employment search, regardless of their offending charge, that other offenders may not experience to the same degree.

In response to the difficulties they face, familial and friend relationships may serve as an important connection for finding employment (Brown et al., 2007), however, due to the social alienation that many sex offenders experience after their arrest and conviction, the social networks that a person has post release could be significantly limited (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Some offenders opt to self-employ or start their own business to not have to face these hurdles, but this generally takes significant financial and time investments which is not truly feasible for many (Brown et al., 2007; Tewksbury & Lees, 2006).

Housing

Many RSOs also struggle to find suitable housing after release from incarceration due to both formal barriers such as proximity restrictions as well as informal stigma from landlords. Gaines (2009) reported that two-thirds of interviewed sexual predators struggled to find affordable housing since registration notification processes began in their area. Similarly, Levenson (2008) found that 65% of registered sex offenders reported difficulty in finding a place to live. Further, RSOs are often restricted from government subsidized housing as well creating additional hurdles in this process (Socia, 2011). This is worrisome as not only is homelessness associated with recidivism, but continuous rejection by prospective housing establishments may be extremely disheartening for offenders during reentry, increasing feelings of stigma and isolation (Grossi, 2017; Levenson & Cotter, 2005b).

Formal Restrictions

In addition to the struggles that all types of offenders typically face in locating sustainable housing after release “due to lack of sufficient funds, lack of social support, and lack of transportation” (Grossi, 2017, p. 61), the conditions of registry often restrict where an RSO can live, not allowing them to live near schools, parks, or other places that children frequent

(Levenson & Cotter, 2005b). This can exacerbate the existing, inherent struggles that exist during reentry and make it extremely difficult to find a suitable home to reside. Levenson & Cotter (2005b) found that a quarter of RSOs from their study could not return to their former residence because of proximity restrictions and half could not stay with supportive family members because of them.

These restrictions force RSOs to live further away from employment opportunities, support systems, and treatment services, and public transportation (Levenson, 2008; Levenson & Cotter, 2005b). Many RSOs report that these restrictions create an illusion of safety but are impractical and inconsequential as offenders often purposefully do not offend in close proximity to their home, and motivated offenders will find victims regardless of residency restrictions (Levenson & Cotter, 2005b). In fact, residency restrictions fail to show a statistically significant alteration in the recidivism rate for RSOs (Huebner et al., 2014). Additionally, Levenson (2008) found that offenders report that residency restrictions and their collateral consequences have serious negative impacts on their mental health.

Informal Restrictions

Even if an RSO finds a location that abides by legal requirements that are mandated by their registration and/or parole, many landlords run criminal background checks on applicants which frequently disqualifies an RSO from renting. Tewksbury (2005) found that more than a third of RSOs in their study were denied housing due to their status. This may be even further exacerbated for men and individuals with young child victims, as another study found that only 34% of the time did a person with a child molestation charge get an offer from a landlord to *view* a rental apartment versus 48% of individuals with a statutory rape charge (Evans & Porter, 2015). In this study, Evans & Porter (2015) also shared insight about how landlords responded

when they were informed that the caller had to share their charge of molestation as condition of parole. They explained that many of the landlords expressed shock, and some were “appalled,” and others even laughed, likely due to surprise and/or discomfort (p. 31). While some landlords did thank the caller for the honesty, the majority of the time, the inquiry was denied (Evans & Porter, 2015).

Similarly, Kunstler and Tsai (2020) found that only 8% of landlords would be “open to housing someone who had been convicted of a sex offense” (p. 30). While an additional 36% said they would consider it based on the conditions of the offense, combined this is only 44% meaning that less than half would even consider housing a sex offender (Kunstler & Tsai, 2020). Concerns about safety and the presence of children on the property were the most commonly cited reasons for not renting to a RSO (Kunstler & Tsai, 2020). These informal restrictions can make it extraordinarily difficult for RSOs to find housing and when they do, it is often in areas of higher social disorganization, including high crime rates and lower rates of informal social control which could contribute to higher rates of recidivism (Gordon, 2013).

Theoretical Framework

This section will review the relevant theoretical framework that exists in the current research on stigma and RSOs. Proposed by Braithwaite (1989), disintegrative shaming has led to modified labeling theory (Link et al., 1989) which explores the internalization of and response to a societal level treatment in the offender himself. This framework will be explored further in this section.

Disintegrative and Reintegrative Shaming

Braithwaite (1989) proposed shaming as a form of social control, specifying reintegrative shaming and disintegrative shaming as opposite and distinct functions from one another within

that framework. Where reintegrative shaming welcomes an offender back into society after their punishment is over, disintegrative shaming is when an offender continues to be shunned from society even after their punishment is complete (Braithwaite, 1989). The ultimate result of the latter is the creation of an "out-group" of proclaimed deviants that are not accepted by others (Braithwaite, 1989). The creation of an out-group, or "othering" of the negatively labeled group, becomes the basis for stigma. Disintegrative shaming has been found to be permanently destructive to one's self esteem (Robbers, 2009) and sex offenders experience disintegrative shaming at a higher degree than any other group of offenders (Huebner et al., 2019).

The intensive and public labeling process that is facilitated through the sex offender registry creates an "othering" of sex offenders that consequently results in extreme stigma, existing both socially and structurally. Social stigma is exemplified through social exclusion where a person is, "labeled, negatively stereotyped, excluded, discriminated against, and low in social status and power" (Major & O'Brien, 2005, p. 411). This could manifest in ways such as job denial, losing friends or family, rejection from housing, or being harassed by others. This is worsened by the "moral deviate script" that is ascribed to individuals convicted of a sex offense which attributes their behavior to an unchangeable characteristic (Huebner et al., 2019). Conversely, structural stigma is facilitated by discrimination from institutions, such as the criminal justice system, through restrictive policies that worsen the effects of social stigma (Sandbukt, 2021). Structural stigma is seen in policies such as the previously discussed residence restrictions.

Both structural and social stigma significantly impede the reentry process, though Sandbukt (2021) found that even without structural stigma, social stigma facilitated feelings of stress and anxiousness. Largely due to the amount of stigma and ostracization they feel post-

conviction, registered sex offenders report extremely high levels of stress, isolation, fear, and loneliness (e.g., Levenson & Cotter, 2005a; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury, 2005; Tewksbury & Zgoba, 2010). In Sandbukt's (2021) study of registered sex offenders in Norway, the stress and anxiousness experienced by former offenders caused them to withdraw as the most common method of stigma management. The withdrawal allows them to not have to face negative responses to stigma, which supports Link and colleagues (1989) modified labeling theory, laid out in the next section.

Modified Labeling Theory – The Imposition and Adoption of a "Master Status"

Modified labeling theory "focus[es] on the consequences of labeling rather than on the factors that lead to it" (Link et al., 1989, p. 402). Link et al. (1989) theorize that a person's opportunities will be negatively affected by the stigma a label creates even if there is not direct discrimination (Link et al., 1989). The beginning of this process is the internalization of devaluation and discrimination that is faced by the labeled person socially. Then, when a person is officially labeled through direct contact with an institution (such as the criminal justice system) those internalized feelings now take on a new meaning for the self.

As a result of these perceived and feared feelings of discrimination, a person will respond to their stigmatized status through three possible responses (Link et al., 1989). The first is secrecy in which the person keeps their stigmatized label concealed from those around them, including those close to them or potential employers (Mingus & Birchfield, 2012). The next is withdrawal, where the individual does not engage with traditional parts of society and only interacts with those that already know about the stigmatized part of their identity and still accepts them (Mingus & Birchfield, 2012). The third response is education (also known as preventative telling) where a person informs and educates people about the situation "in an attempt to ward

off a negative reaction" (Mingus & Birchfield, 2012, p. 99). All these responses have possible negative repercussions and can cultivate behaviors or emotions that can make a person vulnerable to reoffending.

Link et al. (1989) propose that it is not the stigmatized label itself that causes secondary deviance, but rather a person's *response* to the label that constrains them from participating in activities that may assist in reintegration (Mingus & Burchfield, 2012). In other words, due to the *anticipated fear of stigmatization,* the management techniques of secrecy, withdrawal, and education can ultimately cause a labeled person to avoid activities that are related to desistance, such as forging prosocial relationships and applying for housing or employment. While secrecy and withdrawal may be effective short-term management strategies, the effects of these coping mechanisms can ultimately lead to negative impacts on a person's social network and employment prospects. Due to subsequent isolation and stress, this has the potential to contribute to reoffending behaviors (Evans & Cubellis, 2014; Mingus & Burchfield, 2012). Education, or preventative telling, while considered to be the most "effective" long-term solution, can result in direct discrimination which may further reinforce negative opinions about oneself.

Due to the barriers registered sex offenders experience while searching for employment and housing, the process may serve as a salient reminder about the person's sex offender status. This might contribute to increased feelings of isolation and higher levels of stress and could inform which of the stigma management methods they use as a response. As mentioned previously, Robbers (2009) reports that many of the participants in her study admitted to lying about their status after continuous rejection following their disclosure. In other words, secrecy may be a secondary response after education "fails," that could lead to greater negative repercussions for reintegration.

In interviews with registered sex offenders, Evans & Cubellis (2012) found that in addition to the traditional coping mechanisms proposed in modified labeling theory (secrecy, withdrawal, and education), sex offenders also dealt with stigma through denial of the label and grouping themselves socially with individuals with a similar label. While denial, like withdrawal and secrecy, may serve as an effective stigma management strategy temporarily, it cannot be fully accomplished since their sex offender status is publicly available. Ultimately, the stigma cannot truly be properly managed leading to eventual detrimental impacts on their prosocial relationships and behaviors (Evans & Cubellis, 2012).

Regardless of management strategy, however, the “registered sex offender” label typically becomes the master status in post-conviction interactions (Edwards & Hensley, 2001), central to their core identity due to the pervasive and inescapable nature of the label in modern society (Evans & Cubellis, 2012; Tewksbury, 2012). RSOs *must* manage this label and their resulting self-perspective in some way. As such, the type of response that a registered sex offender uses to manage their deviant label may serve as an important factor in their likelihood of reoffending. Ultimately, the internal response to a stigmatized label could actually serve as catalyst for criminogenic factors, as it cuts off possible prosocial networks and behaviors through withdrawal and/or secrecy. Successful management of the stigmatized label, however, may lead to the establishment and sustainment of prosocial relationships, suitable housing and gainful employment for registered sex offenders, all of which serve as protectors against reoffending.

Methods

This chapter will review the methodology utilized in this study which aims to explore how men convicted of a sex offense navigate their stigmatized label of "sex offender" during reentry. First, the research questions and variables of interest will be laid out. Then the theoretical framework, population, and setting will be identified, followed by an explanation of data collection and data analysis. Finally, the limitations of this study will be discussed.

Research Questions and Variables of Interest

While there is a modest but growing body of existing research that examines the collateral consequences of the sex offender registry (see for example Kras et al., 2018; Levenson, 2008; Tewksbury & Lee, 2006), there is still a deficit when it comes to the lived experiences of these consequences as well as the way these consequences are navigated by RSOs internally. The prevalence of shaming, either reintegrative or disintegrative, the latter being directly related to stigma, is a key part of understanding the internal processes deployed by RSOs. Along with the lived experiences of shame and stigma, these internal navigation strategies deserve attention and consideration in order to better understand both the offenders themselves and factors that may increase a person's propensity to reoffending.

This study seeks to better understand that process and the lived experiences of these men through in-depth interviews with eight RSOs. As such, the following variables of interest were considered in the interview guide (see Appendix A for full interview guide):

- Background of participant
- Criminal history
- Employment (current and former)
- Stigma

- Religious background
- Desire to desist
- Future orientation

The purpose of exploring these variables of interest was to gain insight into the state of the participants' lives and their experiences but also their internal thought processes, feelings, and responses toward these experiences.

Theoretical Framework

The grounded theory perspective guided the methodological approach to this study. This is defined as the "discovery of theory from data – systematically obtained and analyzed in social research" in which theory is generated out of the data itself (Glaser & Strauss, 1967 as cited in Urquhart, 2013, p. 5). This framework is commonly applied to exploratory, qualitative studies due to its compatibility with inductive reasoning, as grounded theory calls for the researcher to avoid preconceived notions and instead allow the data to guide theoretical understandings (Urquhart, 2013). By utilizing grounded theory in the data analysis process, the lived experiences of the participants were prioritized, allowing patterns to emerge organically through analysis of the data. While theoretical approaches derived from existing literature play a role in all empirical research, a grounded approach allows for the researcher to move between theory and data in an ongoing exchange, rather than relying on an a priori hypothesis or claim. It also allows respondents to share their own reality instead of imposing a paradigm upon their experience. As such, a literature review was conducted both prior to data collection and subsequently integrated throughout as it informed analysis and findings.

Frame analysis, an approach of analyzing data that considers the participants' social construction of their own reality, was also utilized in this study. Goffman's (1974)

conceptualization of frame analysis relates to the definitions given to a particular situation as a way of making sense of an event or circumstance, and ultimately guiding subsequent behavior. This applies to the present study in that through a dual communication process the interviewed RSO's identity interacts with the societal-level beliefs about sex offenders to create an internal narrative about the self. Considering this study is seeking to better understand how the coping of societal-level stigma affects RSOs, understanding the frame by which the labeled individual guides their perception and behavior is critical.

Sample

This study is derived from eight semi-structured in-depth interviews with men who were convicted of sex offenses and, at the time of the interview, were on the sex offender registry in a southeastern metropolitan area in the United States. Seven out of the eight reported that they were on lifetime registration, and one was on 25-year registration. All eight had been released from confinement for at least 6 months and reported that they had never been arrested or convicted of a sex offense prior to their referring charge. It is important to note this population of registered sex offenders are particularly difficult to access due to issues such as anticipated stigma and lack of anonymity (Tewksbury & Lees, 2006). Due to severe sanctions for RSOs in the state that the interviews took place, these issues may be further exacerbated for this population.

The participants in this study were all involved in a faith-based reentry program, known in this study as "Hope for Reentry," and it is through this program that they were accessed by the researcher. Hope for Reentry is a voluntary program that offers transitional housing, employment assistance, clothing, medical assistance, and substance abuse support for offenders post-release. All eight men in this study were either current or former participants of the employment program

TABLE 1: PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

	Frequency	Percentage
Number of participants	8	100%
Race		
White	6	75%
Black	2	25%
Mean age	57 years	
Marital status		
Married	2	25%
Single	6	75%
Living arrangement		
With roommates/halfway facility	5	62.5%
With parents	2	25%
With partner	1	12.5%
Work status		
Actively working	3	37.5%
Not working	5	62.5%
Education		
At least some college	4	50%
No college	4	50%

at Hope for Reentry.

In this study, participants' ages ranged from 36 to 73, with an average age of 57 years. Considering the well-established age-crime curve which demonstrates the variation of offending over age, peaking in the late teen years and decreasing with age (see for example Lussier & Healey, 2009; Shulman et al., 2013; Sweeten et al., 2013), it is worth noting that for the men in this study, age may serve as a protective factor during reentry. Of the 8 participants, six were white and two were black. Though the program is a Christian faith-based program, it offers services to people of all religions. Seven of the men reported their religion as some type of Christianity, and one reported that he was a former Christian, but at the time of the interview ascribed to beliefs of universal consciousness. Five of the participants reported living with roommates in some capacity, most often other offenders returning to society. Two reported living with parent(s) and one with their partner (see Table 1).

TABLE 2: EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF PARTICIPANTS

Name	Age	Race	Employment
Louis	64	White	Manual labor
Benjamin	73	White	Unemployed
Pat	62	White	Unemployed
Allen	61	White	Restorative services
Thomas	73	White	Unemployed
Brandon	36	Black	Service industry & recruitment
Joshua	50	Black	Unemployed
Michael	38	White	Unemployed

The majority of the men (62.5%) were not actively working at the time of their interview though all but one had pursued employment since their release. The one who had not yet sought out employment intended to begin looking for work after addressing some health concerns. Of the three who were actively employed at the time of the interview, one worked in manual labor, one worked in restorative services, and one worked two jobs - one in the service industry and one as a recruiter (see Table 2). Though participants were not queried about government benefits or assistance, five of the men mentioned receiving some kind of government benefit (such as social security) or government assistance (such as disability) throughout the course of their interviews.

Recruitment

Through existing networks, the researcher was able to establish a relationship with the president of Hope for Reentry, who served as the key gatekeeper and liaison between the researcher and participants. In this role, the gatekeeper would reach out to participants who met the criteria of an active RSO who had used their employment services during reentry, ask them if they would be interested in participating in an interview about their experiences as an RSO during reentry and informed them that their participation was voluntary. Possible participants were informed that their participation, or lack thereof, would have no impact on their relationship with the organization itself, as outlined in the approved recruitment script (see Appendix C). If

the individual agreed to participate, an interview was scheduled in coordination with the researcher's availability. Due to the size of the organization, many participants did not have a direct relationship with the president, which typically mitigated potential coercion that his position may have exerted upon individuals to participate. Many of the men expressed a genuine desire to help with the research either to benefit the researcher or to support other RSOs throughout their interviews.

Data Collection

Interviews took place between June and October of 2023. They were conducted at the reentry program's office in a private conference room and lasted from one hour and seven minutes to two hours and four minutes. The utilization of in-depth interviews allows a topic to be explored more openly and better inform possible theories during data analysis (Esterberg, 2002). In-depth interviews also allow traditionally marginalized or silenced communities to share their experiences in more detail than they may otherwise be accustomed to (Esterberg, 2002). This makes it a compatible approach with the utilized frameworks of grounded theory and frame analysis.

Participants were asked a range of open-ended questions (see Appendix A) covering the topics of current/former programming, current/former employment, their faith, their relationship with others professionally and personally, and their offense history which tied into the variables of interest mentioned previously. The topics covered in the interviews were designed to better understand the perspectives of each participant, their lived experiences, and any collateral effects of their registration. Participants were not probed for details regarding their referring sex offense charge; however, all eight men directly or indirectly disclosed their charge and most shared at least some details of their offense and/or court proceedings. Of the eight, two participants denied

culpability in reference to their crime, and claimed that they were wrongfully convicted. The remaining six men expressed varying levels of remorse for their offense(s). Participants were offered $20 as a token of appreciation for their time, though two of the men refused to accept it. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. Transcripts were de-identified and pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants. Original audio recordings were deleted after transcription.

IRB Approval

This research was approved by the University of North Florida Institutional Review Board (see Appendix D). All procedures followed federal guidelines for the protection of human subjects. Participants were informed that the interview was voluntary, and they could terminate their participation at any time. Written consent was obtained by all participants and steps were taken to ensure confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were analyzed with a three-step process set forth by Glaser (1978; as cited in Urquhart, 2013). First, line-by-line open coding was used to identify themes in the transcribed interviews, with the researcher remaining open to the data as it emerged and avoiding pre-established codes (Esterberg, 2002; Urquhart, 2013). Analytic coding as outlined by Urquhart (2013) was utilized to acknowledge the meaning behind each participant's responses and not just the overt content. During this process, patterns and commonalities began to emerge in the data.

Next, selective coding was used to group together the overarching themes derived from the open coding (Urquhart, 2013). This process involved identifying participants' quotes (i.e. data strands) that supported these themes. Since utilizing grounded theory inherently leads to the

existence of a myriad codes in the open coding process, part of the process of selective coding was focusing on the themes as they related to the variables of interest, including stigma in employment, housing, and personal relationships, personal feelings as a result of these factors, and management strategies. This was a reiterative and reflective procedure during which themes developed over time. Finally, theoretical coding was used to establish relationships between the categories finalized during selective coding. Themes about lived experiences of stigma, anticipation of stigma, self-perception, disclosure of status, withdrawal, and protective factors emerged, all of which will be detailed in the following chapter.

Limitations

Based on this researcher's identity and visual appearance as a young (mid-20s) white, conventionally "feminine" woman known to be a graduate student at a local university, it is possible that this positionality impacted both the participants' responses and this researcher's interpretation of the data in ways that may not fully be known. For example, before, during and after the interview process participants occasionally made comments that derived from assumptions about this researcher's identity that may have impacted the nature of their responses to interview questions.

For example, offhand or anecdotal participant commentary indicated that participants often viewed the researcher as a "straight passing," cis woman, and whether based on this assumption or not, often "performed" masculinity in ways that were characterized by homophobic, transphobic, or sexist comments. This is consistent with Malamuth & Thornhill (1994), who find that men who have committed sex crimes are likely to possess a characteristic called "hostile masculinity," characterized by a desire to control and dominate women, deriving from a lack of empathy and a perspective of women and constructs of femininity as "less than."

Further, at times, men addressed the researcher using "pet names" such as "honey" or "sweetheart." These diminutive terms were not addressed directly by the researcher and may have been indicative of how the participants' viewed the researcher and could have impacted how they responded to questions, particularly those that challenged conventional notions of masculinity by raising issues of shame or humiliation.

Ultimately, assumptions about the researcher's identity, whether accurate or inaccurate, may have affected the ways participants interacted with the researcher during the interview. Also, even though rapport with the participants was established, this researcher had to grapple with various emotions while conducting the research. As such, it could have affected interpretations of the data in ways that are not able to be fully addressed by the researcher. Additionally, while this sample size of eight participants is appropriate for exploratory research such as this, especially considering the accessibility of the population, these results are not generalizable.

Findings

This chapter lays out the findings from the current study. Four major themes emerged about the reentry process for RSOs. The first theme is that RSOs do experience high levels of stigma due to their status and they also anticipate high levels of stigma. Second, the experienced and anticipated stigma reinforces their registered sex offender status as a master label that saturates all aspects of their identity and often negatively impacts their mental health and self-perception. Third, this permeating stigma catalyzes a response most often categorized by either withdrawal or preventative telling, both of which are used as a stigma management technique by the RSO in an attempt to mitigate those feelings of stigma. Finally, RSOs detailed experiences they had that helped them adapt to stigma and served as protective factors during their reentry. These themes are detailed below.

Stigma

Ultimately, participants acknowledged and affirmed the belief that they experience high levels of stigma, both formal and informal, due to their offense and their status as an RSO. This manifested as both real experiences and as anticipated stigma. Both of these affirm the master status of RSO and prioritize this status as the dominating factor in their lives. Many of the men expressed a desire to be "treated like anyone else," but that was often not the reality among many of their interactions. Allen characterized RSOs as "modern day lepers" and Michael likened the experience of being marked as an RSO to that of a "scarlet letter." All of the men expressed sentiments of being seen and treated as "different" by at least some people due to their status and worried about others treating them a similar way. This section will explore the ways in which the men in this study experienced and anticipated this stigma.

Experiences of Stigma

All of the men detailed being rejected or ostracized in some way because of their offense. This occurred by their families, by individuals, both professionally and personally, and in group settings such as religious organizations, their former community of employment, and reentry programs. Louis told of how he was uninvited to a family event:

> *Well, my family pretty well knows and they've pretty much accepted, accepted me. Uh, some of them haven't. One of the things that happened last Father's Day was they were going to have a Father's Day at my brother in law's house and we were all invited — we were invited. Then I was uninvited.*

Louis goes on to explain that he was uninvited because his offense was against his stepdaughter and some people in his family did not want to have him at an event celebrating the fathers in the family. Many of the men also explained that since they were convicted of their sex offense, their relationship with their children had been aggravated and/or ruined entirely. While some of the men still maintained relationships with their child(ren) and some did not have children at all, four participants expressed that they did not have the relationship they wanted with at least one child at least in part because of their offense.

It was also common for the men to report rejection from jobs due to their status. Many detailed being unable to get jobs after their release, especially in their former field, and/or they reported doing jobs they were overqualified for post-release. Michael, who was unemployed at the time of the interview but had held three jobs since his release and recounted submitting around "100 applications," shared his frustrations after being released from a job after they ran a background check while he was doing onboarding paperwork:

> *. . . I mean, I have a bachelor's degree, I'm obviously intelligent. I have a work history, you know, that's quite extensive and I'm getting rejected the opportunity to wash dishes in*

some back room at a restaurant somewhere it's like, how is this a problem for you guys? I don't understand.

Brandon also expressed how he’s gotten denied from jobs he explicitly knows he was qualified for and expressed that he believed it was due to his status as an RSO. At the time of the interview, Brandon had two jobs, both of which were aware of his offense, but was restricted in the responsibilities he could perform at one because his parole provisions prohibited him from interacting with children in any capacity while at work. These types of restrictions are not uncommon and can at times be used as a reason why a company will withhold positions from RSOs.

Some of the men shared experiences of not being allowed in churches formally or of being informally ostracized due to their offense. Michael explained that he legally cannot go to the church he likes because there is a childcare facility attached to it, which he cannot be within 300 feet of based on the conditions of his registration. Benjamin recalled a time when a church told him he had an “unforgivable blemish” on his soul and that he was not welcomed in the community and Allen was told “we no longer want people like you in our church” by his former congregation. Brandon detailed getting ostracized from his community after he was charged and a time when a person made a video about him and his charge:

There was one person that actually put out a. . . a vlog. Yeah, a video vlog on YouTube about me. . . Yeah. And I saw it. And let me tell you, that is the hardest thing to watch. I mean it, it, it was gut wrenching to watch. It was the equivalent of somebody taking a knife, stabbing me in the stomach and slowly pulling the knife up to my heart, cause that's how it felt. It felt like the pain was in my stomach and reaching for my heart.

Half of the men struggled to find suitable housing after they were released. For example,

Thomas and Pat were both rejected from housing through reentry programs because of their offenses. Pat also reported getting denied lots by trailer parks, multiple apartment complexes, and financial institutions when he attempted to purchase a home. When he tried to move in with a supportive friend, he was less than 20 feet inside of the residency restrictions that were conditions of his registration and was told that he had to vacate the location within 10 days.

In total, the men experience stigma, both formally and informally, through numerous avenues and often express hurt because of this ostracization. The stigma they experience is directly related to their status and associated offense. Many of the men shared that they did not think they would experience the same intensity of ostracization if they were not registered as a sex offender. They often remarked that being out in the community is harder than being incarcerated in some ways because of the levels of stigma they face from so many avenues. Louis put it succinctly saying, “We have a stigma automatically tagged to us for the rest of our lives. It never goes away. It never changes. We're never done. I'm doing time every day. . .”

Anticipated Stigma

In addition to the real-life experiences with stigma that these men experience, they frequently anticipated that they would experience stigma. This was particularly true when looking for jobs and meeting new people. This anticipated stigma creates high levels of anxiety in these men because while they expect a negative reaction, there is also a degree of uncertainty in the interactions.

Brandon recounted the worry of ever returning to his former employment industry which is a tight-knit community:

> *I've always had this fear that as I'm doing this again, when is it going to come out that “Hey, that person is a labeled.” It's hard because you're always in your head thinking . .*

. that we have to watch every single move that we make, which really we should do anyways, but from a standpoint of fear, it makes it really rough cause you feel like everything you're doing, you're, you're getting some sort of anxiety rise out of.

Thomas expressed similar feelings about returning to his career as a night auditor, explaining, "A hotel's not going to hire me. Stop to think, who comes in the hotels? . . . They're not going to open themselves up. Plain and simple." Joshua shared that he had not even looked for a job since his release from prison because he was so sure that his charge would impact the likelihood of him getting hired. This anticipated fear of stigma regularly stopped these men from pursuing endeavors that are often necessary for lasting self-sufficiency.

It was also common for participants to express worry about the stigma they would be subjected to when getting to know or meeting new people. Michael described it as "the label that follows me wherever, knowing that anyone at any time can look me up in a registry." The "dread of the reveal" is often something that the men reported remains in the back of their minds during any interaction they have. Another participant, Louis, explains that while he gets along with a coworker who knows that he went to prison, the coworker does not know what his offense was. Louis expresses worry about their relationship changing for the worse if the coworker found out before Louis was ready to disclose it, remarking, "But what would he really think if I told him I am a sex offender and I have a victim who was my stepdaughter?"

Ultimately, the men who participated in this study expressed genuine worry about the stigma they believed they would face in certain interactions. This anticipated stigma and the associated anxiety that accompanies it often frequently controlled their daily narrative and was always in the back of their mind. Their registered status is inescapable because of public nature of the registry itself, and there is an acknowledgment that they were unable ignore their existence

of a labeled RSO in many of their interactions.

Master Label

The repeated experiences of stigma and ostracism and the anxiety surrounding the anticipated experiences fundamentally reinforced the label of RSO as the master label among study participants. It ultimately became what guided their identities, as they were regularly getting the message that their status was the determining factor in their interactions. The label is given power by society that is then reified by the power that the individual ascribes to it in response. Michael talked about this:

> *But that's — that's really my battle is just proving that I'm an actual human being still because they don't want me to think that. They want me to think that I'll never change, I'll never get better, I'll never heal and I'll never be a productive member of society again. That's — that's really what I'm up against.*

It was frequently acknowledged by the participants that the way other people viewed them had a significant impact on the way they viewed themselves, despite attempts to mitigate these feelings. They would attempt to separate themselves from this label and remove the power that the label held over their life, but the overwhelming existence of stigma in the RSO's life often makes this extraordinarily difficult to do.

As a result of this stigma and the resulting master status of RSO, many of the men reported high levels of anxiety and depression. Many identified suicidal thoughts and suicidal ideation. Brandon shared the following feelings about his time immediately after release from incarceration:

> *I just didn't feel human anymore. I felt like I was just a cold slab of metal in the corner. And it was very hard. And I was stressed out, full of anxiety, always thinking something's*

around the corner, trying to get me. It was just — it was insane.

In all, the overwhelming presence of their label as a controlling factor of their life had detrimental impacts on their mental health which may further exacerbate the collateral consequences from the stigma management techniques detailed in the next section.

Stigma Management Techniques

There were two main strategies used to respond to the stigma RSOs faced from society: withdrawal and preventative telling. While many of the men did report withdrawal as a stigma-management strategy at times, the overwhelming approach was preventative telling. Even though it was less common, men also reported withdrawing to prevent negative responses towards their existence. These are detailed further below.

Given that these findings do align with some of the existing literature about modified labeling theory (Link et al., 1989), it is important to note that in this study, some techniques were less frequent than others. For example, rarely did participants shared secrecy as a technique. Similarly, none of the men shared an approach of deception as a stigma-management technique (see Robbers, 2009). Since Robbers (2009) found that deception response was most prevalent when preventative telling continuously failed to mitigate experiences of stigma/discrimination, this could be related to the relatively shorter length of time that many of the participants had been released from prison. Additionally, participants may be less likely to share instances of deception as disclosure, especially to employers, is often a mandate under conditions of their parole and/or registration. Regardless, many of the men did express that lying is counterproductive in fighting stigma.

Preventative Telling

The majority of men interviewed expressed their belief in the importance of disclosing

their status in several venues, especially when it came to applying for jobs. Link et al. (1989) defines this disclosure as preventative telling. While this was a condition of their registration and/or parole for them, they frequently expressed sentiments regarding the importance of honesty. Louis expressed this, saying, “Honesty is the right way, but honesty is scary.” The men often told of their perspective that being forthcoming with their offense is the “right” thing to do, Thomas explained, “And if I don't share the truth, I'm wrong.” Some also described preventative telling as a method of self-preservation as well. For example, Allen expressed that once he tells someone about his offense, it’s “out of his hands.” This may reduce the anxiety that participants felt in relation to anticipated stigma. By removing the uncertainty of the person discovering their status, they were able to take back control of their own narrative and disclose on their own terms.

Many men in this study also reported that they received positive reactions to being forthright about their offense. For example, Brandon shared his experience, “And I've told several people... there hasn't really been any issues.” He went on to explain that he once told a romantic partner about his offense, and she was accepting and non-judgmental about it, which he believed would give him confidence to tell other romantic prospects and continue to pursue that avenue of his life.

Thomas told of a time when he disclosed his offense to a man who had been incarcerated for murdering two sex offenders. In response, the man thanked him for telling the truth and they continued to have a copacetic relationship in the time they knew each other. These positive experiences are likely to reinforce this decision to disclose their status. The decision to disclose, however, was not universal for all people in their life. Many took the time to “feel people out” before telling them, believing that certain signals or “vibes” implied a lack of acceptance which would make them more hesitant to disclose their offense/status. When asked about the specifics

of these signals, however, the men were unable to put into words what they meant, other than the person sharing overt discriminatory sentiments about sex offenders or merely a gut feeling.

Withdrawal

The men also reported that, at times, they withdrew from society to cope with the stigma they faced. They often felt like keeping to themselves was the best way to avoid negative reactions. This included not seeking employment and not participating in traditional parts of society. Many remarked on situations they went out of their way to avoid, usually involving large crowds or events with children involved. They mentioned that this was a way of protecting themselves from several responses including stigma, false accusations, and at times, temptation. Many expressed sentiments about fears of being accused of something, especially the two men who denied their offense ever taking place, though it was a perspective shared by some of the other participants as well.

Often, the men shared a hesitation or outright refusal to participate in "normal" activities from which they used to derive enjoyment like going to eating/drinking establishments, going to the park, and dating. Pat shared the following:

> *I stay to [my]self a lot. You know where I used to would go out to a bar, a new restaurant, and do something. I —no — I go to my familiar places and stay there. And I find that just strange now. That's why I call the "new me" and the "old me." The new me does what's comfortable, the old me didn't give a damn about comfort. He'd go walk in and own the place. And it's like the old story about you walking into a bar, can I get in? Well, you walk in like you own it and you can get in, so you know. . . But I can't own it anymore.*

This perspective was shared by the men who *wanted* to participate as a "regular" member of

society but had lost the confidence to do so because of the overwhelming fear they faced about negative repercussions. Naturally, this approach cuts off possibilities for prosocial protective factors such as employment, supportive services, and platonic and romantic relationships, since decreased involvement in public life reduces those opportunities, even as it decreases the feared negative repercussions. The men who expressed experience with withdrawal also were more likely to become defensive when asked about how they felt about their feelings regarding negative treatment. That defensiveness may also signal a self-protective measure that reflects similar sentiments that determine the likelihood of an offender withdrawing.

Protective Factors

The men in this study attributed their ability to adapt to stigma to two main factors: support systems and their religious faith. Both of these served as important prosocial and accepting avenues that alleviated the stigma that they often face in other facets of their life and encouraged reintegration. This supports the notion of reintegrative shaming as a successful technique to spur desistance. Notably, both support systems and faith are built on the basis of honesty that derives from the tenets of preventative telling.

A “circle of support” is a critical part of reintegrative shaming, which is a largely under-researched area. This serves as an alternative to the disintegrative shaming that has proven unsuccessful despite its intense utilization toward RSOs (McAlinden, 2005). While a “circle of support” may be utilized through formal government agencies in other countries like Canada (Hannem & Petrunik, 2007), the “communities” of support (support systems and religious faith) that the participants of this study shared often mirrored similar tenets of acceptance and care for the offender. This section will detail the men's perspectives about how these function as protective factors against reoffending.

Support Systems

Many of the men had support systems that they credited as a part of their desistance and/or successful reintegration. These relationships often existed on the basis of honesty that is the fundamental tenant of preventative telling and are constituted of people who look past the offender's label of sex offender, despite being aware of it, and see them as a person. Louis spoke of the people in his life who have helped him with tangible needs like obtaining a job and a car during reentry, saying:

> *So, these are people that I've been introduced to that that didn't ask any questions [about my offense] and, and said well, what are you looking for? How much money do you have to spend? What can you afford to do and that. These are people that, that helped me. Not because of what they did, as much as they didn't ask me [about my offense]. They didn't judge me, they said, you need help, this is what I have. Will this help you?*

Not only did Louis credit the support of these people as beneficial, but he found the fact that they did not judge him as even more notable. This stigma-free relationship, he goes on to explain, served as an important factor in his ability to desist from crime, because he saw that people were willing to look beyond his past actions.

Four of the men mentioned their immediate families (biological or by marriage), especially parents, who served as safe, non-judgmental places for them to land and a source of tangible support, such as providing a place to live or financial help. Brandon explained:

> *. . . my dad even says it to this day, I don't know how anyone could make it coming out of prison, being on probation, without some sort of financial or emotional support. So I am, I don't know, I don't want to use the word lucky or blessed, but just honored to be able to have that. It's, it's amazing because if I didn't, I don't know if I'd be back in. I have no*

idea.

Similarly, Michael expressed a similar sentiment about his parents, disclosing, "if I didn't have support, you know, I don't know. You know, I probably just would have reoffended to be honest, because I would, I would have nowhere to go." Michael and Brandon are also the youngest participants in the study, both in their 30s, with relatively close relationships to their parents that they both described as generally positive, though older participants also shared similar experiences.

Additionally, multiple men noted close friends as a significant factor in their successful reintegration and many shared the importance of communities of like-minded people such as HFR itself, religious in-reach prison programs, or recovery programs like Celebrate Recovery. They often described these organizations as a sort of "family" that allowed them to relate to people from shared backgrounds who they felt did not judge them.

Faith

The men frequently expressed the importance of their personal faith in their journey since release. This often was explained through sentiments like "giving it to God" (Benjamin) and "[only] living for me and my Father" (Joshua). Pat remarked, "I don't know how I'd have done it without faith." They often expressed that if it had not been for their commitment to God and their personal faith, they would have given up or not been able to get through the negative experiences they have had since their conviction.

Their commitment to their faith also served as a protective factor against stigma. Thomas remarked that God's grace was something that he could not expect from any man, but he would always have it from God even when he didn't deserve it. This imbued him with a sense of peace that he did not believe that he could receive from another source. Joshua explained that he did

not let it upset him when a person did not want to associate with him after finding out about his offense, he remarked, “I don't live for you anyway.” This allows the men to separate themselves from the stigma they encounter in their daily life as they view their purpose as something greater because of their faith.

Additionally, the community of faith that the men in this study frequently expressed that they found after their conviction provided both an accepting circle of people and a path toward social capital that helped negate feelings of shame and isolation. Thomas shared the following:

> *The bubble, these people, I'm, I'm in a bubble with ‘em. I'm being discipled. I'm being loved. I'm being people of God. “Hey, Thomas, how you doing today? What are you — what's — what you been thinking about?” . . . Am I sitting here and telling you I'm beyond temptation of what took me to prison? No, ma'am. I'm not going to lie to you. Because if I said, “Yeah, I'm being honest” — no, I'm not. If you don't think it's it, it, it, it's sitting right up here. I'm one click away from going back to prison. One click away.*

Thomas shared that he had been convicted of child pornography and when asked how he resisted the temptation he referred to, he shared that it was the religious network (i.e. “the bubble”) he had fostered with other ex-offenders, as well as non-offenders, who participated in a Christian prison in-reach program. This group served as a space for him to build a social network that was aware of his offense and was still imbued with acceptance.

Overview

In all, the participants of this study revealed the prevalence of stigma as a prominent factor in their lives, both in real experiences and anticipated ones. As such, the label of “sex offender” became the master label throughout their lives. The men in this study pointed to preventative telling and withdrawal as their most common stigma management techniques and

reported that support systems and their religious faith served as protective factors against reoffending. The lived experiences of these men reveal meaningful implications regarding desistance and the importance of reducing stigma and increasing social networks for RSOs reentering the community. These findings support the need to move towards a reintegrative shaming approach in society that considers RSOs worthy and capable of change. With a restorative approach, there is an opportunity to provide a greater pathway for RSOs to become productive members of society.

Conclusion

This study examined the narratives of eight RSOs about their experiences during reentry, exploring topics relating to employment, stigma, religion, desire to desist, and future goals. As this is a difficult population to access, this study adds to the limited body of research regarding the lived experience of reentry for sex offenders. The findings revealed that RSOs experience severe stigma even after release from incarceration, and that this has the ability to catalyze detrimental effects on their self-perception. The stigma exists both in everyday experiences and also in anticipation of new interactions. Most notably, participants shared that they experienced and anticipated high levels of stigma when searching for jobs, and anticipated stigma most markedly when meeting new people. This process had a significant impact on their self-perception. It also interacted with their ability to successfully reintegrate back into society; as they reported withdrawing from society at times, cutting off prosocial avenues of reintegration, consistent with existing research (Link et al., 1989). Often, however, former offenders in this study frequently utilized preventative telling as a way to manage the stigma and reduce the anxiety related to that anticipated stigma. When this was successful, the men were able to establish relationships that were built on factors other than their offense history.

The findings of this study point to the importance of prosocial relationships built on honesty, often achieved through preventative telling, as an important protective factor against reoffending. In the case of this study, this was successfully facilitated through support systems via friends, family, and like-minded people and through the religious faith of participants. The nature of these relationships created an environment of acceptance of the labeled individual that enforced the belief that they were more than their offense history. By others viewing them through this lens, it gave them the ability to view themselves in a similar light, encouraging

desistence. Through a frame analysis perspective, it is the belief from other people that they are worthy of reintegration that reflects this perception back onto the participants (Goffman, 1974).

This study supports the idea that acceptance and reintegrative shaming is critical to reintegrating RSOs back into society. Since the sex offender registry has been shown to increase feelings of stigmatization (Tewksbury, 2005), it seems that altering the reentry process to something more sustainable for people convicted of a sex offense is a critical first step to decreasing stigma and further lowering reoffending and recidivism for RSOs. The findings of this study, in conjunction with the existing literature that show SORN systems as ineffective in reducing reoffending, emphasize the need for this (e.g. Adkins, Huff, Stageberg, 2000; Stucky & Ottensmann, 2016). Respondents affirmed the value of social support of faith groups, friends, family, and employers as being key to their desistance. Ultimately, this study finds that the most successful way to mitigate reoffending in sex offenders is through positive, accepting prosocial relationships. This can be facilitated through a number of avenues such as gainful employment, familial support, positive friendships, and offender programming.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The state of residency for participants is an important factor to consider in this study. The sanctions in place for sex offenders in the state in which this study took place are severe as compared to other locations. Since lifetime registration and more restrictive sanctions have been shown to increase feelings of isolation, it is not surprising that participants reported withdrawal as a stigma-management strategy at times (Bailey & Klein, 2018). The persecutorial culture of the state is likely to influence both the formal and informal response from the community in which the registered individual exists, which becomes increasingly reflective of the RSO’s self-perception.

Additionally, the men who agreed to participate in this study may be characteristically different compared to other RSOs simply by virtue of their willingness to come forward and be interviewed. Finally, while only men were interviewed in this study, the experiences of female registered sex offenders may differ. Female RSOs are an extremely under-researched population and the impact of stigma as it relates to successful reintegration for women is something that should be considered in future research (Tewksbury, 2004).

Concluding Thoughts

Considering the controversiality of sanctions and treatment for sex offenses (Bumby & Maddox, 1999), it cannot be understated how salient desistance narratives and understanding the lived experiences of the collateral consequences of current sanctions are. Evidence-based responses are critical in generating and sustaining a healthy and safe society and this study adds to the body of research that demonstrates the harmful impacts of a disintegrative shaming approach via SORN systems, which ultimately contribute to a "moral deviate script" about sex offenders and fail to reduce recidivism in any meaningful way (Bailey & Klein, 2018; Evans & Cubellis, 2014; Huebner et al., 2019; Levenson & Cotter, 2005a; Tewksbury, 2005). Additionally, the stigma these men experienced also had serious personal impacts on their mental health and self-perception which makes understanding and addressing these issues not just pertinent from a social perspective, but also the right thing to do from a humanitarian perspective. These findings indicate the importance of circles of support in desistance narratives that derive from a place of honesty, acceptance, and looking beyond a person's offense history. While naturally the offender themself must take steps to catalyze this relationship, there is a need for these communities to exist in formal and informal avenues in order for these relationships to be possible for individuals during reentry.

Appendix A

Guiding Questions

Introduction:

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself?
    a. How old are you? What's your race/ethnicity?
    b. Where did you grow up and what was the neighborhood like?
    c. Have you ever been married?
    d. Do you have a partner now?
    e. Do you have any children? Do you get to see them?
    f. What is your highest level of education? Have you ever been to any kind of trade school?
2. What kinds of jobs did you have before your first sex offense charge?
    a. How old were you when you had your first job and what were you doing?
    b. What job did you have (if any) at the time of your arrest?

Offense:

1. How old were you during your first arrest?
    a. What were you arrested for?
2. Can you tell me about the charge that you were incarcerated for when you got involved with HFR?
3. How long were you incarcerated for?
    a. Was this your first offense of this nature?
4. Have you sought out any other employment assistance programs? [If yes] What was your experience with them?
    a. How does that differ from HFR?

Employment:

1. Are you currently working?
    a. Where?
    b. What is your position and what do you do?
    c. How long have you been working there?
    d. What do you think of it?
2. Is employment a condition of your probation (if applicable)?
3. What other jobs have you held since your release, if any?
4. Did HFR help you find employment after your release? If so, what did that look like?
    a. Would you say HFR influenced your ability to locate employment?
5. How would you describe your relationships with your superior(s)?
6. How would you describe your relationships with your co-workers(s)?
7. Would you say your relationship with/perception of employment currently compares to your relationship/perception that you had before being convicted of a sex offense?
8. Would you say it's more difficult to get a job being a registered sex offender compared to another type of offender?
    a. Why?

b. [If yes] What impact does that have on you?

Stigma:

1. Do you think people see you differently after learning about your sex offender status? Why or why not?
2. How do you determine if or how to disclose your offending history to potential employers?
    a. Have you ever not told the truth during an interview or on an application?
    b. At what point in the process do you share your status?
3. Do you think you have been denied any jobs due to your offending history?
    a. Why do you think that?
    b. Could you explain to me how you feel about that?
    c. How does this compare to what you thought your employment would look like before you were released?
4. How do you think your employment status would look if you had never been convicted of a sex offense?
5. Do your coworkers know about your offense?
    a. (if no) Do you think your relationship with them would change if they did?
    b. (if yes) How do you think this affects your relationship with them, if at all?
6. Do you think you're treated fairly in society?

Faith Based:

1. Can you tell me about your personal journey with your faith and religion throughout your life?
2. Did you seek HFR out due to its status as a faith-based program?
3. Does your faith affect how you navigate the stigma relating to your RSO status?
    a. If so, how?

Desistance:

1. Has having a job (or not having a job) impacted your self-image either positively or negatively? Why do you think that is?
2. How do you feel having this job/not having this job has influenced your life?
3. Do you believe that your employment status has influenced your likelihood of reoffending in the future?
    a. (If yes) How so?
        i. What other factors have contributed to this?
    b. (If no) What would you say have been the greatest influences then?
4. Have you lost a job since your release?
    a. (If yes) How did you cope with that?
    b. (if no) How do you think that would impact your life?
5. Do you plan on staying at this job for the foreseeable future?
    a. (If no) What are your plans instead?
6. Do you have any hopes for what your life is going to look like in 5 years?
7. Would you say you live your life differently compared to someone who had never

been convicted of a sex offense? Why or why not?

Looking Forward/Closing:

1. Is there anything you would like to add or comment on that you think I missed during our interview?

Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

My name is Emily Friedman and I am a student at the University of North Florida. I am conducting a research study as part of my graduate thesis project and your assistance in this project is greatly appreciated. The goal of this study is to learn how to better understand how ex-offenders with prior convictions for sex crimes achieve gainful employment.

Sometimes the questions you will be asked may bring up painful memories. You are free not to answer any question that is painful or embarrassing to you. Many find it helpful to talk about their experiences. However, if you feel uncomfortable, you are encouraged to meet with a case manager or a counselor at this facility. Participation is voluntary and there are no penalties for deciding not to participate, skipping questions, or withdrawing your participation at any time. You may choose not to participate in this research without negatively impacting your relationship with this facility.

If you partake in the research, you will participate in an audio-recorded interview which is estimated to take up to two hours. Your responses will be confidential and only authorized research personnel will have access to your responses. After your recorded interview is transcribed (written out) your name and other identifying information will be removed or changed to protect your identity. Your real name will never be used. In addition to $20 to compensate you for your time, others may also benefit from the results of this study.

Please feel free to ask any questions before the interview begins or at any time during the interview. If you have any questions regarding this research project please contact the faculty advisor, Dr. Michael Hallett, (904) 620-1644 or mhallett@unf.edu. If you have any questions regarding the University of North Florida's procedures regarding rights of the subject please contact: UNF IRB Chairperson, UNF Institutional Review Board, (904) 620-2498 or irb@unf.edu.

Your consent: I understand the basic procedure of this study and am aware that I may discontinue participation at any time. I hereby consent to participate in an interview of up to two hours that focuses on my experience during reentry as someone convicted of a sex offense. I understand that this study involves audio-recording the discussion. Neither my name nor my personal information will be associated with the audio-recording. Only the research study personnel will listen to the recording. No employees of this facility will have access to the recording. I understand that my interview will be transcribed and that the audio-recording will be destroyed, and that only authorized research personnel may have access to this transcript.

Thank you for your consideration!

I _______________________________________ (print name) attest that I am at least 18 years of age and agree to take part in this research study.

____   ______________________
Signature   Date

Appendix C

Recruitment Script

I wanted to invite you to participate in a voluntary, confidential interview with a student from the University of North Florida, Emily Friedman, for her master's thesis. She is interested in hearing about the experiences of people who have been convicted of sex offenses and their employment journey after release from prison. The interview will last 1-2 hours and will be audio-recorded. Interviews will take place at the Hope for Reentry conference room. To compensate you for your time, participants will receive $20 at the time of the interview. The interview is totally confidential – nothing will be associated with your name and the audio-recording will be destroyed later. It's completely up to you if you want to participate in the interview. Whatever you decide, it has no relationship to your participation in the Hope for Reentry program. Are you interested?

[If not interested, no problem/thank you]
[If interested – make arrangements]

Appendix D

IRB Approval Memo[1]

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
1 UNF Drive
Jacksonville, FL 32224-2665
904-620-2455 FAX 904-620-2457
Equal Opportunity/Equal Access/Affirmative Action Institution

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM

UNF IRB Number: 2052877-3
Approval Date: 05-19-2023
Processed on behalf of UNF's IRB

DATE: May 19, 2023

TO: Ms. Emily Friedman

VIA: Dr. Michael Hallett
Criminology and Criminal Justice

FROM: Dr. Jennifer Wesely, Chairperson
On behalf of the UNF Institutional Review Board

RE: Review of New Project by the UNF Institutional Review Board
IRB#2052877-3 "Navigating Internalized Stigma: Employment for Registered Sex Offenders"

This is to advise you that your above-referenced study underwent "Expedited" review on behalf of the UNF Institutional Review Board and has been approved under categories 6 and 7.

This approval applies to your study in the form and content as submitted to the IRB for review. Any modifications to the approved procedures or documents must be submitted to the IRB for review prior to implementation, including personnel changes. To submit an amendment to your approved protocol, please complete an **Amendment Request Document** and upload it along with any updated materials affected by the changes via a new package in IRBNet. For additional guidance on submitting an amendment, please contact an IRB administrator.

Please be advised that any subject complaints, unanticipated problems, or adverse events that occur are to be reported to the IRB as soon as practicable, but no later than 3 business days following the occurrence. Please use the **Event Report Form** to submit information about such events.

Upon completion of this study, please submit a **Closure Report Form** within a new package in IRBNet. Please maintain copies of all research-related materials for a minimum of 3 years following study closure. These records include the IRB-approved protocol, approval memo, questionnaires, survey instruments, consent forms, and all IRB correspondence.

Should you have questions regarding this determination, please contact the Research Integrity unit of the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs by emailing IRB@unf.edu or calling (904) 620-2455.

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[1] Dr. Jennifer Wesely was not a member of the thesis committee at the time of IRB approval. Once Dr. Wesely joined the thesis committee, she was recused from further IRB decision-making related to this project.

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