

# **“It’s Not a Conversation Starter.” Or is it?: Stigma Management Strategies of the Formerly Incarcerated in Personal and Occupational Settings**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mass incarceration and its ill effects remains a major social problem in the United States. Those exiting the criminal justice system reenter society with the label of ex-convict, a label that is permanent, highly stigmatized in American society, and has serious potential ramifications for successful reintegration, including: access to employment, higher education, and housing; acceptance in their communities; and successful personal relationships. The purpose of this study was to explore (1) anticipated stigma, (2) actual experienced stigma, and (3) the stigma management strategies that formerly incarcerated individuals employed in their personal and occupational lives. Drawing from a modified labeling theory (MLT) approach, we conducted in-depth interviews with 17 men and women who had been formerly incarcerated for felony offenses. Our findings revealed that the formerly incarcerated continue to experience stigma, often expected that they would, and utilized tactics (e.g. preventative telling, secrecy, and withdraw) consistent with MLT. Additionally, our findings revealed that these strategies are not static and participants altered their strategies throughout their life course and based upon social and economic contexts.

## **Introduction**

The United States currently has the largest prison population and incarceration rate of any nation. The level of incarceration had grown tremendously since the 1970s, though in recent years, the rate has somewhat declined (Gramlich, 2018). At year end in 2018, there were nearly 2.3 million prisoners held in prisons and jails (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019) and nearly 4.5 million adults were under community supervision (Jones, 2018). These numbers correspond with an overall reduction in the crime rate (Robertson, 2019). Such trends highlight the vast number of individuals who face disruption due to contact with the criminal justice system and who will reenter society having experienced incarceration. It is important to examine the conditions that must be present in order to have a successful reintegration.

Those exiting the criminal justice system reenter society with the label of "ex-convict," a label that is both permanent and highly stigmatized in American society (Irwin, 2005). This stigmatized status has serious potential ramifications for successful reintegration into society; these include but are not limited to: formation and maintenance of significant relationships with friends, family, or romantic partners; living situations; educational prospects; and employment opportunities within the sanctioned labor market. In many parts of the country, there are legal barriers to

employment that severely limit occupational options for formerly incarcerated (FI) persons and there has been a push for increased monitoring through background checks in the hiring process (Graffam et al., 2005; Harris & Keller, 2005). Although there are laws in place in some jurisdictions to prevent work place hiring discrimination based on one's criminal record, such as "ban-the-box" initiatives (Griffith & Jones-Young, 2017), cases of illegal hiring discrimination are difficult to monitor and prove (Kucharczyk, 2017). FI persons are often perceived by potential employers to lack the necessary skills needed to be productive workers (Graffman et al., 2008) or that they lack the values or trustworthiness of an ideal worker. These factors leave FI persons particularly vulnerable during a time of economic recession when employment discrimination can decrease their chances of securing well-paying jobs and limit their earnings potential.

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the ways in FI individuals cope with and negotiate their stigmatized status in both their social and occupational spheres. Specifically, we examined (1) anticipated stigma, (2) actual experienced stigma, and (3) the stigma management strategies that these individuals employed upon reentry.

## **Theoretical perspectives**

### **Stigma**

For every status that one can possibly have, there are socially constructed meanings that determine how the individual occupying said status should behave and be perceived. Though we all occupy multiple statuses simultaneously and identify in different ways based on the importance and salience of each status within situational contexts (Stryker, 1980), there are certain statuses that come to define what we are above all others. In the case of statuses that have come to be culturally defined as deviant or negative, they have the power of suppressing all other statuses and identities and effectively shape how others perceive us. Goffman (1963) argued that once one is labeled a deviant, or takes on a deviant status, they have effectively acquired a "spoiled identity." Carrying a spoiled identity limits opportunities, constrains social network ties, and can negatively influence both one's social identity and self-concept.

Early symbolic interactionists explained that through social interaction, we learn and internalize the expected roles that are attached to each of our statuses and what each of them mean within our society. Through this process, Mead (1934) theorized that

people develop and take on the generalized other—a process by which they are able to take on the role of the society as a whole and predict how others will react and interpret their actions and status positions. When one becomes entrenched in a deviant status, they are able to conceive and anticipate how others will now react to them. For this reason, we expect that people who were formerly incarcerated will have conceptions about how they will be perceived based on societal expectations and values and will anticipate stigma because of their criminal status.

Researchers studying the effects of stigma, and the various stigma management strategies one can employ, have examined statuses ranging from drug users (Adler, 1992; Becker, 1963) to nude beach enthusiasts (Douglas et al., 1977) to belly dancers (Kraus, 2010). Not all stigma, however, is treated in the same way or has the same reaction from observers. Depending on the cultural conceptions of each deviant status, different reactions will be expected. For instance, although all FI individuals experience some form of stigma, it is reasonable to expect that this stigma may be mitigated by the crime for which they were convicted. Felony drug users may receive very different reactions from observers than violent criminals or sex offenders depending on cultural perceptions of those specific crimes, the danger society associates with such offenses, and the moral underpinnings of specific criminal offences.

## **Labeling theory**

Labeling theory has a long history within criminology and deviance literature. It has mainly been used to explain the existence of deviant behavior, positing that the act of labeling, in and of itself, can cause deviance (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1971). Early labeling theorists, such as Tannenbaum (1938), took note of the importance of the social audience in determining deviant behavior. Tannenbaum argued that once a person was “tagged” as a deviant, criminality became a self-fulfilling prophecy because the individuals internalize the negative evaluation and adjust their behavior to fall in line with expectations. Lemert (1951) built upon these notions to examine how negative social reactions resulted in secondary deviance.

Modern labeling theory, framed in the symbolic interactionist school of thought, has been perhaps most attributed to Howard Becker. Becker (1963) argued that the process of labeling actions and actors as deviant could lead to deviance amplification through a series of intervening mechanisms. These mechanisms include a shift in identity, social exclusion, and increased involvement with deviant others (Barrick, 2017). Furthermore, Becker argued that the application of deviant labels was

differentially applied to the less powerful resulting in the perpetuation of structural inequalities. For FI people, the application of the label "convict" leads to social exclusion, a change in their identity, and reduced opportunities due to employers' culturally specific negative perceptions of the formerly incarcerated.

### Modified Labeling Theory

In the face of growing critiques, new approaches to labeling theory were taken (Bernburg, 2019). Link and colleagues (1989), building off of the work of Scheff (1966) developed a MLT approach. Where labeling theory viewed secondary deviance as being the direct result of the labeling process (Becker, 1963), MLT conceptualized it as being an indirect consequence of coping and stigma management strategies. What is key about the modified labeling approach is the assertion that stigmatized persons are aware of their stigma and actively and deliberately work to manage their status (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008).

Stigma management strategies fall into three main categories under the MLT model (Link et al., 1989). The first management strategy is secrecy. Those who acquire a stigmatized status may choose to hide or conceal the status from others in order to protect their previous self-concept and avoid the negative reactions that their status would bring. The second strategy is withdrawal in which the person avoids contact with others who do not share the same stigmatized status or who are not accepting of it. Finally, one can engage in preventative telling (education). With this strategy, one attempts to avoid disapproval from others by divulging their status before it becomes exposed. The goal is to take control of the situation and present the stigmatized status in a way that lessens or alleviates threat of rejection.

One issue with the MLT approach is that it does not necessarily account for motivations for utilizing each of the stigma management strategies. As Goffman (1963) explained, the deviant is faced with a dilemma on whether or not to disclose their identity, to whom they will disclose, and in what contexts. With this in mind, other analyses of stigma management have integrated MLT and identity theory (Burke & Tully, 1977; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980) in order to explore the motivations for using each stigma management strategy. Lee and Craft (2002) explored motivations for telling among persons infected with the herpes virus. Through in-depth interviews and observations at a herpes support group, they found that people were motivated to tell others about their disease in order to preserve both their social relationships and their own self-concepts. Preventative telling strategies allowed these people to self-verify and, ultimately, preserve intimate relationships.

Building off of the work of Lee and Craft (2002), Winnick and Bodkin (2008) incorporated MLT with an identity framework to examine the anticipated stigma management strategies of incarcerated men in Ohio. They found that most men anticipated that they would face stigma and negative reactions upon their release, especially from potential employers. However, they did not endorse secretive or withdrawal strategies and instead reported that they would be more likely to use preventative telling strategies. In their additional analysis of the same sample, the researchers discovered that there were racial differences in the anticipated strategies (Winnick & Bodkin, 2009). White men were much more likely to report using secrecy as their stigma management strategy to protect the value of their privileged identities, while formerly incarcerated African Americans' stigma management issues were more complex due to the effects of racism. While privilege was afforded to White FI men, the negative impacts of racism and common racist stereotypes attached to African American men outweighed the stigma incurred from a felony conviction. Thus, being targeted for discrimination was considered more normative, and management of the formerly incarcerated status was not viewed as necessary. Similarly, in a longitudinal analysis, Moore and colleagues (2016) found that "perceived stigma predicted worse community adjustment through anticipated stigma, and this varied by race" (p. 196). Incarcerated African American men had already faced racism prior to prison and were therefore more prepared to face the stigma of having a criminal record upon their return to society than were Caucasian men, who had faced less significant stigma previous to incarceration.

Hunger and Tomiyama (2018) used MLT to explain the powerful influence that stigmatization can incur on members of stigmatized groups. MLT explains that although people who are members of a stigmatized group may not necessarily have experienced a direct act of physical discrimination, the mere fear of being targeted predicted greater likelihood that the group member's behavior would develop in unhealthy directions and would engender powerful and long-lasting negative impacts on their lives.

Finally, studies have found that formal labeling significantly increases future delinquency (Kavish et al., 2016). Using longitudinal data, Bernburg, Krohn, and Rivera (2006) examined how contact with the criminal justice system and being labeled a juvenile delinquent predicted future deviance. They found that those who experienced intervention from the juvenile justice system were significantly more likely to engage in serious delinquency in future periods. They conclude that official

labeling can trigger a process that results in increased criminal involvement that it is especially problematic if the labeling occurs during critical periods of the life course.

## **Re-entry and the labor market**

One of the most documented negative outcomes of a felony conviction is the impact that criminal records have, through collateral consequences (Alexander, 201; Love et al., 2013), on the employment process (Harding, 2003; Western & Sorois, 2018; Western et al., 2001). For instance, incarceration has a more negative impact on employment prospects than failing to graduate high school (Western & Becket, 1999). Further, African Americans and Hispanics earn less than whites when re-entering the post-incarceration job market (Western & Sorois, 2018). Adding to the obstructions faced by FI people, there are several jobs that they are legally barred from obtaining and criminal background checks have the effect of severely limiting their ability to achieve gainful employment in numerous employment sectors (Harris & Keller, 2005). In a working economics paper, Mueller-Smith (2014) discovered that the impacts of incarceration lead to increased difficulty securing employment, loss of job skills, decreased post-release earning potential, and increased probability of recidivism.

Research also points to causal mechanisms than can explain poor labor market outcomes for FI persons, which include stigma, legal barriers, and the corrosive effects of incarceration on job skills (Western et al., 2001). Employer focused research has reported an unwillingness to hire FI persons. For example, one study found that Washington D.C. employers were far less likely to hire job candidates with a criminal record after running background checks, and used such checks to exclude people with criminal records from job searches (Duane et al., 2017). Additionally, Holzer et. al. (2004a; 2004b) found that 40% of employers in their sample were unwilling to hire someone who had been incarcerated for jobs that require a college education. Even when progressive efforts have been made to overcome restrictions on FI people, employer efforts towards discrimination persist. For example, in ban-the-box areas, young low-skilled Black and Hispanic men were less likely to be hired (Doleac & Hansen, 2016). In a vignette study of employers, Black and White male candidates with and without criminal records were sent out to seek employment with the same credentials to see if they would get the same callback rates (Pager & Quillan, 2005). Those with a criminal record were less likely to get a call back overall, but White men with a criminal record were still more likely to get a call back than Black men without one. When factoring in type of crime on the hiring process, Lukies, Graffam, and

Shinkfield (2011) point out that employers are less likely to hire FI job candidates convicted of specific offenses such as violent and drug convictions.

Yet, there is research that examines factors that increase the likelihood of post-carcer employment. Increased levels of education and government incentives were found to increase employers willingness to hire FI people, despite an initial unwillingness to hire FI workers (Albright & Denq, 1996). FI individuals who completed training programs are also viewed more favorably (Graffam et al., 2004). Similarly, others have argued that rapport building becomes crucial for FI persons seeking employment (Pager et al., 2009). Other studies, such as Harding (2003), have examined how FI people present their backgrounds to employers and found that they utilized three main strategies: choosing not to disclose, which closed off high-wage positions, full disclosure, which required a confident presentation, and conditional disclosure in which the employee had to prove themselves to their employer. While the stigma of incarceration has an adverse impact on employability, it can also have a damaging effect on interpersonal relationships.

### **Interpersonal relationships and stigma**

The mark of stigma on the lives of those who society so labels has far reaching consequences in the wider social sphere of professional and public interactions (often with strangers or distant acquaintances). Yet, this phenomenon also reaches into the inner circles of the lives of stigmatized people. For example, when looking at romantic relationships, Doyle and Molix (2014) explain that stigma may have deleterious impacts on marginalized and oppressed populations, stating, "the constant need for self-protection due to threats to social identity can damage self-image for members of devalued groups, leading them to feel less comfortable in their close relationships with intimate others" (2014, p. 608). When examining the stigma attached to a sexually transmitted infection, genital herpes, Lee and Craft (2002), point out that respondents use the stigma management strategies of MLT to preserve interpersonal relationships. If the individual had begun to receive more of what they perceived as negative feedback from their stigmatized identity, they more aggressively sought positive affirmation, although if they had not told their romantic partner yet, then they were placed in the dilemma of whether to engage in preventative telling or remain in secrecy. That placed a great deal of strain on the relationship.

Other intrapersonal relationship research has examined means of resisting stigmatization. For example, Smith and Bishop (2019) pointed out that (1) if people have a sense of significance in their lives, (2) take some life risks, (3) have access to



information about their stigma, and (4) have developed well-formed arguments against those who would stigmatize them, they are more impervious to being stigmatized. Thus, individuals formed healthy strategies to overcome the limitations that stigma placed on interpersonal relationship development. Considering the stigmatization of gay and bisexual men (GBM) living in rural communities, Cain et al. (2017) found that their study participants' mental health was negatively impacted by low social support from peers, and marginalization from the surrounding population. They did not subscribe to heteronormative definitions of sexuality strongly espoused in the rural environment. It was suggested that such negative and stigmatizing dynamics might be overcome by social support, and increased inclusion from the surrounding community that would potentially allow GBM to form strong relationships with their communities. Thus, stigma potentially burdens personal relationships, often placing those impacted in difficult dilemmas that require careful navigation around sensitive issues. Strategies for interacting with others, support from surrounding communities, and inclusion can potentially overcome some of these difficulties.

## **Methods**

To explore the motivations for and adoption of stigma management strategies, we conducted in-depth interviews with 17 men and women who were previously incarcerated for a felony offense. All participants were released at the time of the interview, but some were still on probation or parole. Interviews were semi-structured and ranged from forty to ninety minutes in length. The primary focus of the study was on perceptions of stigma and stigma management. The interview guide was focused both on questions about experiences during incarceration and after release, and how they anticipated close friends, relatives, and people in their community would perceive them. We specifically asked questions about how they presented their criminal record to potential employers and romantic partners and why they used the strategies that they did. Interviews were conducted in a location of the participant's choosing—some being in their own home, a local coffee shop, or the home of one of the interviewers. Interviews were conducted by one of the authors, and, in some cases, both authors were present during the interview process. Though perhaps atypical, interviews with both authors present created a small group conversation type dynamic that we feel contributed to a richer interview experience.

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. Flyers were distributed to local social service agencies, community centers, churches, self-help groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous, local businesses, and educational groups focused on criminal justice and

criminology. Our flyer was also shared on social media (such as Facebook). We also employed snowball methods, asking if participants could pass our information on to others who they thought might be interested in participating. Though problematic in terms of sampling diversity, it is common for those who share such a stigmatized status to form social networks because of the drive to limit contact to others who share the stigmatized status or are considered "wise" (Goffman, 1963). All interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2015. The majority of the participants resided in the Midwest at the time of the interview, though two participants lived on the west coast, and one resided in the south. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The study was approved by the university IRB.

Data analysis was a collaborative and reflective process. Both authors read and coded a sample of interviews and then met to discuss their codes during what Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) refer to as "open coding." The authors discussed the codes and settled on a coding scheme. Each author was then given a set of transcripts to code individually, and they met regularly to discuss emerging themes and to review each other's coding process

It is important for researchers to recognize their own personal biography when conducting research as their unique experiences work to shape how they conceptualize the research design and interact with the research participants (Naples, 2003). One author entered this project having virtually no contact with the criminal justice system; the other having extensive contact, being formerly incarcerated himself. One an outsider—the other an insider. This gave each of the authors a different perspective and interpretation throughout the research process. It is important to recognize the benefits that each of these statuses has on the relationship and rapport with the participants. Although the outsider author had less experience with prison culture and vernacular that could diminish credibility, his demeanor as being "wise" and non-judgmental may have increased the level of rapport. On the other hand, the insider was well versed and "in the know." This gave him a sense of connection with the participants as he traded stories and related to their experiences. We feel having this dynamic has allowed us to capitalize on the benefits of being both an outsider and an insider in the research process, which speaks to the importance and usefulness of collaboration between "non-cons" and convict criminologists in criminological research (Aresti & Darke, 2016).

## Sample Characteristics

We present demographic characteristics for our sample in Table 1. All participants have been given a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. The sample consisted of 12 men and 5 women who were previously convicted and served time for a felony. The crimes committed were varied and included: assault, sex offenses, felony DUI / DWI, conspiracy to distribute, forgery, grand theft auto, burglary, and fraud. However, the majority of the crimes (53%) were alcohol or drug crimes, including possession with intent to distribute and felony DUI. Roughly half of our participants were either on probation (18%) or parole (35%) with the remaining participants having completed all aspects of their sentence. The length of time served ranged from two months to 10.5 years. Participants ranged from 22 to 61 years of age with a mean age of 39. The sample was predominately White with 10 participants identifying as White, 3 as Hispanic / Latino, 3 as Black, and one woman identified as multiracial Native American. There was a wide range of income levels ranging from no income to about \$55,000 per year. Of those who reported having income, the mean was \$26,000. Employment overall appeared tenuous among a large portion of our sample. Seven participants reported being unemployed at the time of the interview and two reported they were employed part-time. The remaining 8 participants were employed full-time. In terms of educational attainment, 7 had either a high school diploma or a GED, 2 had an Associate's degree, 1 had a Bachelor's degree, 2 had a Master's degree, 2 had a PhD, 1 had a technical degree, and 2 were currently pursuing a college degree. The sample was more educated than one might expect with many of the participants having obtained their degrees following their incarceration. The majority of the participants were currently not in a relationship with 11 reporting they were single, 4 reporting they were dating someone, and 2 reporting they were married.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics

Name	Age	Race	Employment	Income	Education	Offense	Time Served	Parole / Probation
James	32	Hispanic	Full Time	\$25,000	GED	Assault w/ deadly weapon	5 yrs	-

George	37	White	Part Time	\$22,000	PhD	Conspiracy to distribute	2 yrs	-
Eric	22	White	Unemployed	\$0	High School	Grand Theft Auto	2 yrs	Probation
Justin	41	White	Unemployed	\$10,000	PhD	Statutory sexual offense	6 yrs 3 ms	Parole
Kevin	35	White	Unemployed	\$0	GED	Felony DWI	2 ms	Probation
Amanda	50	White	Full Time	\$40,000	MA Degree	Bank Robbery	6 ms	Parole
Nathan	33	White	Full Time	\$50,000	Tech School	Felony Drug	1 yr 10 ms	-
Max	33	White	Full Time	\$26,000	AA Degree	Felony DWI	1 yr 9 ms	-
Jesse	26	Hispanic	Full Time	\$24,000	AA Degree	Possession w/ intent to deliver	3 yrs 4 ms	Parole
Tyler	48	White	Full Time	\$56,500	MA Degree	Burglary, Grand Theft Auto, Fraud	3 yrs	Parole
Mike	29	Black	Full Time	\$30,000	GED	First Degree Assault	10.5 yrs	Parole

Emily	41	White	Part Time	\$12,000	GED	Prescription Fraud	3 yrs	-
Clara	61	B/NA/W	Unemployed	\$8,500	BA Degree	Fraud/Forgery/Theft	4.5 yrs	Parole
Misty	49	Black	Unemployed	\$10,000	High School	Felony Forgery	6 ms	-
Alyssa	53	MR	Unemployed	\$0	In college	Felony Drug	9 ms	-
Timothy	32	W/H	Unemployed	\$0	Some College	Felony Drug	2 yrs 9 ms	Probation
Shane	43	H	Full Time	\$0	In college	Forgery; Felony Drug	2 yrs 6 ms	-

*Note:* Clara identified as Black, Native American, and White. Alyssa identified as Multi-Racial.

## Findings

Several themes emerged in terms of anticipated stigma, experienced stigma, and stigma management strategies. Most of our participants utilized more than one strategy to manage their status, which often changed over time or was situationally dependent. We begin by discussing the expectations that our participants had for how they might be perceived or treated upon being released and then discuss the stigma management strategies that they employed.

### Anticipated stigma

There are numerous cultural stereotypes of those with a criminal record in terms of the type of person they are and how they will behave. Often these stereotypes include assumptions that those with a criminal record will be dangerous, violent, or cannot be trusted. Faced with these cultural conceptions, our participants discussed how they expected people to react to them upon release and how their actual experiences matched up with their expectations. All of our participants expected to encounter some

form of negative reaction or rejection, but differed in the degree to which this expectation was salient. For some, it was clearly at the forefront while others said they tried not to think about it, did not give it much thought, or said that they did not care what others thought of them at all.

In the first group, anticipated stigma was salient. Participants in this group discussed how they expected people in their lives to treat them differently, avoid them, fear them, or generally think negatively about them because of their criminal past. Acutely aware of the way the formerly incarcerated are portrayed in the media, these participants worried that these negative stereotypes would be applied to them. For instance, Shane noted:

When you tell people you went to prison they automatically assume things because of stuff that are in the media and in the newspaper, [which] plays up the dramatic element and the heinous nature of particular criminals, so the public has an idea of the type of individual that goes to prison. And the reality of the type of person that goes to prison is very different from that perception.

Similarly, James felt that people would “look down on” on him as if he were “no good.” He went on to note:

And what I thought is just like people would just look at me as a criminal. Like they would be scared to come by me and to trust me, you know. Yeah, that’s how I thought people would be and a lot of people were like that. When they found out I had been in prison, they tend to look at you differently.

These negative reactions were situated in a cultural context that presents those with a criminal record as dangerous and immoral. All of our participants had at least one story in which they felt that they did experience at least some form of negative treatment—even if it was not as bad or prominent as they had expected. These negative reactions ranged from dirty and judgmental looks to outright rejection. As George noted, it was not as bad as he expected, but reactions really depended on where he was and what company he kept. He recalled:

I thought it would be pretty negative. I think I thought it would be far worse than it actually was. I mean, it just depended on where I was at when I was released you know, it would determine what type of perception or reception I would get from people

Finally, many of those who expected a negative reaction also felt that they could dispel those negative reactions in part by working hard to avoid internalizing them. For example, Amanda grew up in a smaller town with less “anonymity” and knew that her community was going to view her negatively. She recalled:

I knew that everybody already knew about me, so there was no hiding from it here ... I was all about changing whatever perceptions were about me and prove them wrong. And since that happened, that's been my goal all the time. Mostly proving it to my family, but then after all the years it was proving it to me.

For Amanda, the anticipated negative reactions of her family and community shaped how she would later approach managing her status. For her, anticipation of stigma provided the motivation to improve herself and form a more positive self-image through rejection of the negative stereotypes.

A somewhat unexpected finding related to anticipated stigma was that several of the men in our sample discussed being concerned that people would think they were either raped or engaged in anal sex while incarcerated. For instance, Timothy realized that people gossiped about him: “When I got out I heard some stuff like I was sexually assaulted. I was raped. People were saying I was raped in jail. People say I turned fag since I'd been in jail.” Similarly, Nathan noted that aside from people thinking that the formerly incarcerated are “bad people” they are also engaging in homosexual sex: “You know how everybody thinks anyone who goes in there is doing butt sex or whatever or people just like look down on you or think of you as a bad person.” This is a unique type of stigma attached to formerly incarcerated men, especially those who were incarcerated for long periods of time. Where being an offender may be linked to masculinity in some respects, their masculinity becomes threatened through incarceration—not only in limiting employment prospects and their ability to provide, but also in terms of their sexuality. None of the women in our sample mentioned feeling that people would assume they engaged in sexual activity with other women while incarcerated.

The second group of participants acknowledged that there would likely be negative reactions, but those expectations were not salient. These participants reported that they either did not think much about how people would perceive their status or did not really care. For example, Max was not particularly concerned with how he was going to be viewed, but this seemed to be primarily because he had a supportive family to return to and would be less affected by a discriminatory job market. Here he discusses

how he realized his experience was different from the often "revolving door" experienced by many other inmates:

I don't think I really gave it a whole lot of thought. I think I also had the benefit of going home to a family business and I hadn't burned all my bridges yet. You know seeing a lot of guys in there that they had been locked up their whole lives in and out. In and out. They kind of lost all they had after that. ... It is definitely an endless revolving door.

Max's situation was more unique in that he had a family business to return to where he would not be faced with trying to secure employment, so it makes sense that the fear of negative reactions would be less salient for him. What appeared more common was for participants to report that they did not care what people thought of them and felt that people who cared for them would not change their perceptions. As Eric noted, "If you were my friend then, you know, you're going to care for me [now]." Several participants felt that they were still the same person and expected things to return to the way they were before they were incarcerated. As Kevin noted: "I wasn't any different in my own eyes, so I didn't expect anyone else to treat me any different. I haven't been treated any different. When I get my degree and go and apply for jobs then maybe that will change, but for now I haven't been treated any differently." Similarly, Nathan said he "expected things to be like what they were before I left. If they were my friends it shouldn't matter. It wasn't as bad as I assumed I guess. [People could] gossip behind your back, but I don't really care what people think a whole lot."

In sum, the participants in our sample all had some degree of anticipated stigma. They were all well aware of the negative cultural perceptions of the formerly incarcerated. Even those who reported that they did not give it much thought or felt that the people who really cared would treat them the same still appeared aware that they would likely experience negative reactions at some point. Where they differed was in the degree to which anticipated stigma was salient in their lives. When comparing their anticipated stigma to their actual experienced stigma, we found that all of our participants reported experiencing some amount of negative treatment after release. However, for many, they reported that it was not as bad as they were expecting because they either had supportive friends and family, were able to achieve employment, or some combination of these. This demonstrates the importance of social support, career opportunities, and educational opportunities to preserve a strong and positive self-image. In the next section, we explore how our participants navigated the labor market and intimate relationships and managed their status as formerly incarcerated persons.



## Stigma management strategies

The stigma management strategies exhibited by the individuals in our sample were consistent with those found in previous studies employing the modified labeling theory approach. Preventative telling and secrecy were the most commonly used with most of our participants utilizing these two strategies at various times of their life. Withdrawal was less commonly used. Important to note is that nearly all of our participants employed multiple strategies situationally, or modified their strategies throughout their life course. The combinations of reported strategies are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Reported stigma management strategies

Participant	Secrecy	Withdrawal	Preventative telling
James	X		X
George	X	X	X
Eric	X		X
Justin			X
Kevin			X
Amanda	X		
Nathan	X	X	
Max			X
Jesse	X		X
Tyler	X		X
Mike	X	X	X
Emily	X	X	X
Clara	X		X
Misty	X		X

Alyssa	X		X
Timothy		X	X
Shane	X		X

## Secrecy

Those using a secretive strategy declined to tell people about their status mainly out of fear of rejection or a feeling of shame about their status. They are well aware of the conceptions that society has about the formerly incarcerated and worked to maintain a positive social identity by limiting awareness of their criminal past or by keeping it on a “need to know basis.” Our participants used secrecy in both their personal lives, often to protect new intimate relationships, and when trying to seek employment, especially when they had faced difficulty in finding a job. Nathan exemplifies the use of secrecy in intimate relationships and noted that since he was “not proud of it” and “more ashamed” he typically “[doesn’t] tell anybody.” He elaborated:

It’s not a conversation starter. I never told anyone who didn’t ask. I don’t lie about it, but I don’t offer it up to anyone. Nobody’s gonna think any better of you, that’s for sure. No matter what, it’s not a positive, so there’s no reason why I would tell anyone.

His status is a source of shame that he feels will likely bring rejection upon disclosure. He is selective with who he tells and appears to only disclose when absolutely necessary. When he does feel the need to tell, like when he begins to get serious with a woman, he is calculated in his strategy ensuring that the risk of rejection is low. Here, he describes telling a girlfriend, of whom he hoped to get more serious, about his status:

My girlfriends always end up knowing just because it’s part of who I am. I don’t tell her for a while. Make sure she’s hooked before I unleash that one ... my ex-girlfriend told me she loved me before I told her that I went to prison. I kind of usually make sure that’s the way it happens, in that order.

Nathan also discussed using secrecy to manage stigma in his personal relationships and only told people he became close to: “If I know you and I feel that you are somebody that’s genuine, then maybe I will tell you. But normally I conduct business with people. I look at people like potential clients. I don’t look for friends.”

Several of the participants used secrecy in order to manage stigma and barriers within the employment process. Nearly all of our participants recalled situations in which they faced some level of employment discrimination whether legal or otherwise. Both the fear of rejection and actual experiences of losing out on jobs because of their criminal record led some to resort to keeping it secret from potential employers. For example, knowing that employers would often view him unfavorably if they discovered that he had a felony conviction, James employed secrecy to eliminate that barrier. As he recounted:

On job applications when they would ask if you have ever been incarcerated, I would put no. And they would bring it up in interviews if you've ever been convicted of a crime and I would say, 'no'. Because I knew once they found out then my chances of getting hired—it wasn't going to happen.

Shane sometimes decided not to tell potential employers if he felt they did not need to know or if it was not important for the type of work he would be doing.

There are jobs where I don't personally think it matters, so I don't tell them. I might be doing a contract job where I'm doing some sort of installation in someone's home, its short-term work. In general, my default is that they need to know if for no other reason than I don't want it coming back on me somewhere down the line.

Opting to not disclose their criminal record was risky. A background check revealing past criminal convictions could lead to a revocation of a job offer, or revelation of an undisclosed criminal record once hired could lead to termination of employment without any further recourse. Although several participants took this chance, it was perhaps easier for those who served shorter sentences and had less employment gaps to explain. This extra complication is exemplified by Clara. Clara lived in the Midwestern town where the crime she was convicted of took place, and thus she felt particularly exposed and vulnerable to public stigma. To manage this situation during a job interview, she utilized secrecy and provided her potential employer with a substitute explanation for her gap of employment by saying she had just gotten divorced and that her ex-husband had been the primary breadwinner. In Clara's case, this explanation was accepted as a legitimate reason for having a gap in employment. It is probable that her gender played an important role in the success of this tactic as the men in our sample had more difficulty explaining gaps in employment.

Other participants managed stigma through secrecy in a more comprehensive fashion and applied it to all facets of their lives. Amanda emphasized that her crime happened decades ago, and that the criminal mindset was “not part of [her life] anymore.” She expressed that there was no need for telling anyone about her past because it served no purpose; thus, she strictly adhered to the secrecy management strategy. She went on to explain that her crime, bank robbery, was too stigmatized for her to talk about publicly and believed she would be completely rejected if she revealed too much. Consequently, she kept this information secret, pointing out:

I would never tell anybody just because it was on the books as robbery, but the guy I was with had a gun. You just can't justify that to anybody. I mean even if you are a firearms fan, you can't agree with somebody doing like that with a gun. It's wrong. And even though I was there, I wasn't holding it, I just don't tell people.

Amanda was hyper-aware that the severity and amount of stigma that FI people face correlates with the public's perception of the type of crime for which they were convicted. For example, an individual convicted of a white-collar crime might face relatively little social stigma in comparison to someone convicted of violent crimes. Across all of our participants, the majority used secrecy in varying social settings, and to serve multiple functions, such as gaining employment, forging relationships, and as an overall personal guideline they strictly adhered to.

## Withdrawal

In Goffman's (1963) terminology, those who have a stigmatized status will seek to only associate with those who share their status or who are understanding and accepting of the stigmatized status. To protect themselves from rejection, and to avoid negative reactions, stigmatized persons may choose to limit the amount of interaction they have with “conventional others” or with those who are not accepting. This strategy appeared to be the least commonly utilized among the participants in our sample with only five people having utilized it on a long-term basis. Although many participants shared similar stories about being more “cautious” about who they told and when, they did not seem to limit their contact in the ways that these five participants did. Timothy and Emily exemplify this strategy. When Timothy was first released from prison, he limited his interactions with others and was often “standoffish.”

Well when I first got out, I could definitely tell that people were like standoffish towards me or whatever. I could definitely sense a lot of people didn't want to talk

to me, and I was kind of standoffish too, because I didn't know how they were going to receive me.

Timothy noted that it took him over two years before he was comfortable enough to associate freely with others. Eventually, he was able to come to self-acceptance and use his story as a positive part of his identity in much the same way as described by Maruna's (2001) concept of "making good." He then changed his management strategy to one of preventative telling. Unlike Timothy, Emily appeared to maintain a form of withdrawal for a longer period of time. She was incarcerated for forgery and drug related charges, which plays into her use of withdrawal as a coping strategy to both avoid stigma and to "stay out of trouble." Here, she explains her fears:

I'm more cautious about everything. Even the people I'm around. I don't trust really anybody. I'm scared I'm going to get in trouble for something. Every day, I'm like, "Am I doing something wrong?" I went to Walmart with a friend of mine and she was like, "I'm going to take this mascara." I was like not with me you're not. Then I walked right out the door because I don't know what somebody else is going to do to get me in trouble when I don't have nothing to do with it. So, I really don't really hang out with anybody because I don't know what they're doing. It's still hard for me

Generally, participants in this study that utilized withdrawal to grapple with the uncertainty of how they would be socially received. By avoiding people who were outside of their social circles, they limited the possibility of rejection or other negative interactions due to their criminal status. All participants who practiced withdrawal, used it alongside other stigma management practices.

### Preventative telling

Preventative telling is characterized mainly by the preemptive nature of the management strategy. Participants who employed this strategy wanted to be open from the start so that they would not have to worry about rejection should they become attached or close to a person. Preventative telling also provides the advantage of allowing the FI person to take control of the information and present their criminal record in the best possible way. Timothy explained the importance of being open and honest about his past in order to have a healthy relationship.

I think I'm open about it ... I think it helps to be honest with people you come in contact with, that you're in relationships with ... with relationships now whether it's just like friendships or girlfriends or whatever it's like I don't know, It's kinda,

It's a big, not a, not a huge deal, but definitely a contributing factor to the person I am today ..., I think that you need to bring that shit out in the open so people can realize that not everybody who has been to jail has been, you know, is that hardcore.

Similarly, Max came to see this as part of his identity and as an important part of the man he had become. Here, Max explains why it is important to tell others about who he is:

Max: I don't really keep any secrets, so I live a pretty open life. So, not all people are like that, but I'm not ashamed of who I am and what I've done. It's part of my character, so I'm okay with it.

Interviewer: How do you decide whether or not to tell people about it or not?

Max: If they ask, I'm going to tell them ... If I meet someone on the street, I'm not gonna be like, "guess what?" But if they ask, I'm not going to beat around the bush. Yeah, I'm a felon. Big whoop. ... The most recent girl that I'm talking to just learned today. It was no big deal. Someone like that, they need to know who you really are if you want to have a healthy relationship. You know, you got to tell them. You don't hide it until late on and be like, "By the way," you know, because that's stupid.

In the labor market context, being open about past events was also a way to manage the impressions of potential employers and to demonstrate honesty. George, who was seeking an academic appointment felt it was crucial to be upfront about his criminal history:

I was upfront about it in the interview because I felt that it was vitally important that I be in control of the situation and how the information was presented to them. It would be far worse if I hid it and then they had to find it out later and then they would be the ones that would be in control of how they interpreted that information. I felt if I could present it to them, then it would allow me to opportunity to present it, frame it, how I would like to have it framed. Then how they were going to interpret that would be up to them.

Another aspect of preventative telling is the goal of educating others so that they do not make the same mistakes that the FI individual has made. For instance, Kevin discussed how he used his experience to educate others: "I speak openly about it. I

guess, not as often as I can, but if I think it warrants it. If I can help somebody not end up there. ... I don't think there's anybody that I wouldn't tell."

While many participants engaged in preventative telling to improve their social standing and preemptively reduce the formation of stigma surrounding the pejorative "ex-con" stereotype, in the unique case of Justin, he was legally required to use preventative telling because of a sex-crime conviction. Justin points out that he is very deliberate and, "wants to be transparent" about it, noting that every place is going to do a background check on him because "[his] name is on the sex offender registry." Yet, unlike the situations presented by other participants in this study who realized some benefit from preventative telling, Justin often experienced greater stigmatization after telling. As sex crimes are more heavily stigmatized and are culturally less forgivable than drug crimes, for instance, there was virtually no chance that he could reveal his status and show he was a changed man. It appeared that there was no redemption story in his future or for other people who engaged in sex crimes or more heavily stigmatized offenses. Similarly, James, who was convicted of a gang related assault crime, found that his domestic violence charge was the offense that closed more doors for him when pursuing various employment opportunities.

In sum, many of the people in this sample utilized preventative telling strategies as a way to manage their status, often as a way to gain control of their narrative and reduce the chances of experiencing rejection once they had gotten their hopes up for a job or a potential romantic relationship. Although this strategy came with initial risk, it eliminated the fear that they would someday be outed and face potential dismissal. Finally, several people who initially employed withdraw or secrecy upon their release came to utilize more preventative telling styles over time.

## **Employment of stigma management strategies**

There were several important caveats to how our participants employed the major stigma management strategies. Utilization of the various strategies often appeared contingent on the situation. Furthermore, many participants discussed shifting their primary strategies over time, especially in regards to attaining and maintaining employment.

### **Conditional and situational**

Many of the study participants indicated that they employed various strategies depending on the situation or that it was based on the type of social dynamic at hand. They gauged and estimated how their audience might receive being informed about

their criminal past and then proceeded accordingly, often based on utility. For instance, George spoke to using secrecy in some interactions, and preventative telling in others:

In everyday interactions it's not appropriate to disclose [my criminal history]. It doesn't have some sort of purpose. If it serves some sort of useful purpose, that's when I would disclose it or if it's somebody that I wanted to—felt strongly about or wanted to be close to or was a good friend of mine and just thought they would accept me for that, I would tell them about it. I mean, probably.

He went on to note that he “could see disclosing at some point”, but it would need “to be approached with a lot of thought.” In this example, George determined what conditions warranted that he use secrecy. Because he had recently accepted a job offer for a faculty position, and was still learning the conditions of this new environment, he felt increased sensitivity to how his faculty peers and students would react to his status.

Mike presents a good example of situational stigma management strategies, as he alluded to using all three strategies based on the specifics of the situation. For example, Mike has been upfront with some potential employers hoping they would give him a job, while he tends not to tell people about his criminal history until he is comfortable with them, and only if it comes up organically in conversation. Yet, in the community where he lives, Mike explained that it is somewhat normative for folks to have criminal records. For this reason, he does not really worry how people see him, and he can withdraw back into this community to feel more socially accepted. In one instance, while pursuing a job in sales, he decided it was not necessary to disclose and noted: “Especially with sales, as long as you perform, they don't give a damn what you done did.” Mike determined that it was his performance that mattered most to this employer, and that his felony record was not important.

Similar to Mike, Clara assessed each situation before employing a specific tactic. Sometimes she would be blunt and upfront about her record, and other times she would withhold information. Post-incarceration, she returned to a neighborhood where possession of a felony conviction was common and her criminal history had become public knowledge. Because of these factors, she was able to employ various strategies in this neighborhood context and would disclose only when she felt it was necessary. It must be noted that using the various stigma management strategies in a situational capacity has not always provided her with success because her life has been wrought with many structural and socioeconomic disadvantages. Clara told us about a situation in which she incorrectly assessed the situation, and used the wrong strategy:



I really think I'd have done better if I had used a gun or if I had killed somebody because when you're a fraud and a forger and paper crimes and stuff, I think employers are very careful about what positions they put you in. I used to work at the [city transit company] and I didn't tell them when I got the job because you know they weren't checking and when I looked nice and all of that and I was actually in procurement. Now imagine that. I worked for the Director of Procurement and I handled petty cash. And somebody [who knew my criminal history] came in after being out there cleaning out the buses, "Hey Clara! Blah blah blah." It wasn't four months and I was unemployed.

This situational use of secrecy as a stigma management strategy no longer worked for Clara, and because of this development, she changed to other methods over time and began telling her potential employers about her criminal record at the start.

### Shift over time

Another subtheme several participants engaged in when using stigma management strategies was shifting the usage of specific strategies over time. As life progressed, the need for using different strategies became more salient. When first released from prison, Jesse often boasted about "doing time," because it gave him status. He recalled: "Especially being involved in a gang. When you go to certain prisons, when you get out, you automatically get a certain level of respect. Wow, guys look up to you." However, with the passage of time, Jesse felt that he matured, came to the realization that he had to "turn some of the [criminal] views away" in order to "stay out of trouble," and that he needed to be a better role model for his younger siblings. He became less boisterous and more secretive about his status and kept it on a need to know basis. Jesse concluded that, "Depending on the situation, with certain people I am more cautious; in certain situations I'm less cautious. I guess all around I've become more cautious."

Emily also expressed that she had altered how she managed stigma from secrecy to preventative telling. This was primarily due to losing job opportunities when her undisclosed felony convictions showed up during background checks. Here she recounts how her shift to preventative telling helped land her a job. "Because before I wouldn't be honest, 'no I haven't been convicted of anything'. But honesty is the best policy and I told her the truth and she hired me like that (snapped fingers)." Similarly, Clara, who said that she "lied on all [her] job applications" went on to note how she was also forced to shift to preventative telling because of changes in the technological landscape. In the pre-internet era, she used to engage in secrecy, but now her

background information is more easily accessible online. When navigating the current job market, Clara describes the situation:

I didn't use to tell people until the electronic age started doing a check on backgrounds for jobs. ... But, now with the electronic age, if someone wants to know something about you, they can google you. So I find that in most of the settings I'm in, I go ahead and let it out.

While Clara changed strategies due to technological advances, George explains that life experience has taught him to use preventative telling more effectively. "I can present [my past criminal justice experiences] more positively now. I've learned how to —instead of just telling people I know how to present myself in a positive, I know how to frame the situation." Instead of just blurting out information about his criminal justice experiences in a haphazard and random manner, George explains his background in a measured capacity meant to illicit more productive and beneficial social outcomes. Participants cited dynamics such as increased wisdom due to life experience, developing a desire to be more honest, and advances in technology as reasons for shifting their stigma management strategies. In the next section, the subtheme of employment as a focus of engaging stigma management is presented.

### Employment focus

The most prevalent caveat to the use of these stigma management strategies was the focus on employment. Within our sample, eleven out of seventeen participants cited employment when discussing reasons why they utilized their particular strategy. Some participants varied the types of stigma management techniques they used during the job application and interview process. As Mike recalled, "Initially I told the truth and the lady was like are you serious, like you don't look like you've been in prison. Because I like you, I want to give you a chance. With that I told the truth, but at [another company] I lied." Dishonesty usually stemmed from either fears of rejection or having actually lost out on job opportunities because of their criminal record. As Max explained, "I do have some fear that when I apply for jobs it might cause trouble. A lot of places won't hire a felon. I mean, they just won't do it." Similarly, Timothy recalled his own experience of not being able to get a job because of his formerly incarcerated status. Even when it was clear that the employer was really interested in hiring him, the revelation of the felony charges destroyed his prospects.

I tried to apply for a job at [a phone company], but they're like, "You can't work here because you have a felony." And then ... I applied for a job online, and went

to the phone interview, and then went to a second phone interview and on the second interview I told them about my legal status, and he's like, "Oh sorry [you] can't, can't, can't work here if you have a felony." ... I was pretty devastated. So, then I went and sold cars.

Similarly, Mike focused on managing his future employer's impression of him. He promoted this process through demonstrating that he was sincere and really meant to turn his life around. He noted, "You know it's just a way—you gotta let them know. You gotta let them understand that you know, you want to change, that you want this job."

Participants in this sample demonstrated that employment was a space in which stigma management was often necessary. Differences in choice of employment focused stigma strategies varied, usually involving secrecy or preventative telling that were based on the type of job the participant was applying for, judgments about whether to be honest with employer or not, and personal belief systems.

Within this study, the stigma management strategies associated with modified labeling theory (e.g. preventative telling, withdrawal, and secrecy) were firmly represented within our participants' responses. Preventative telling was the most commonly used strategy, followed by secrecy, and then withdrawal. Additionally, three subthemes within the primary stigma management strategies were identified. Employment focus was the most frequently occurring subtheme, followed by conditional and situational telling, and the then shifting of strategies over time. Finally, we found that the majority of our participants employed multiple strategies over their life course.

## Discussion

The rates of incarceration in the United States are the highest in the world, and the experience of incarceration has numerous negative consequences (Love et al., 2013). Formerly incarcerated individuals are legally barred from certain sectors of the labor market (Harris & Keller, 2005) and employers show a general unwillingness to hire those with a criminal record (Harding, 2003; Pager & Quillian, 2005, Pager et al., 2009). The majority of our participants anticipated facing stigma and experienced some level of diminished employment opportunity. Similar to literature that focuses on returning incarcerated & formerly incarcerated people's perceptions of stigma (LeBel, 2008, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Ray et al., 2016), the anticipated stigma of our participants played an important role in how they ultimately approached employment and shaped how they managed their personal lives in general. Similar to Maruna's (2001) concept of "making good," in which FI people developed prosocial identities for themselves

through corrective narratives so that they could account for and comprehend their deviant backgrounds, the participants in this study used stigma management strategies to grapple with and control societal perceptions of their pasts. Such strategies can accomplish the task of explaining why participants are, "not like that anymore" (Maruna, 2001, pp. 7), to both employers and to society in general.

Aside from employment opportunities, this study also sought to explore the stigma management strategies of FI individuals within their personal lives. Our findings corroborate past research using MLT and expand upon it by highlighting how stigmatized persons employ these management strategies situationally and alter their approaches over their life course. We further uncovered motivations for the specific management strategies, how they change based on the relationship, and how they evolved over time. For instance, these participants had different motivations and strategies for telling potential romantic partners as opposed to coworkers or friends. Additionally, as was seen with the majority of participants in this study, application of management strategies to daily life often involves the use of multiple situationally based strategies. Furthermore, utilization of said strategies often evolve as they become more experienced with managing their status and learn which strategies are more effective.

Prior research has been mixed on how many management strategies stigmatized persons employ. Link et al. (1989) indicated a more static use of individual stigma management strategies, while other studies have focused only on a specific type of management strategy (Glass et al., 2013; Hunter et al., 2017). Our findings lend support to research that has indicated that people may employ multiple strategies based on social context (Lee & Craft, 2002; Mingus & Burchfield, 2012; Ray & Dollar, 2014). Our participants utilized different strategies situationally and altered their strategies over their life course as social contexts shifted and necessitated different approaches. Our research also builds upon the body of work examining incarcerated and criminal justice impacted populations. For instance, Winnick and Bodkin (2008) use MLT to examine currently incarcerated populations, Ray and Dollar (2014) use MLT to examine shame and stigma within mental health courts, and Mingus and Burchfield (2012) use MLT to examine formerly incarcerated sex offenders' fears of societal discrimination and devaluation upon reentry. Yet, to our knowledge, our research is the first study to examine how formerly incarcerated adults from non-specific offense categories engage with all three strategies of MLT (secrecy, withdrawal, and preventative telling) to manage stigma in personal and employment settings during the process of societal reintegration. Additionally, our research

highlights how formerly incarcerated people contextually utilize multiple stigma management strategies to adapt to evolving social structural forces. Of our participants, thirteen of seventeen (76%) situationally or conditionally shifted or alternated use of secrecy, preventative telling, and withdrawal strategies during their daily interactions and over the course of time based on multiple factors. For example, employment situations and personal interactions with friends, loved ones, and formal and casual acquaintances motivated shifts in how participants managed their individual criminal justice related stigmas. Many participants indicated that a powerful determining factor in deciding to self-disclose is whether revealing such information would be useful or not. In these situations, such sensitive information was not provided carelessly, or as random topics of casual conversations, but to serve as practical actions. Useful purposes for disclosure ranged from providing educational information to rectify biased or incorrect perceptions, being honest with a romantic interest, or attempting to provide background context for potential employers. Also, some participants even self-disclosed their past criminal justice system contact with the intent to help others with similar experiences. In a study discussing how FI individuals seek reconciliation with society through helping other FI people in a phenomenon coined, "wounded healers," LeBel, Richie, and Maruna (2015) point out that those who openly use their system-contacted backgrounds to help others were more resistant to the negative impacts of stigma, and were also able to advocate for fellow FI people.

When making the decision to withhold or avoid disclosure of their criminal justice experiences through secrecy and withdrawal strategies, many participants were similarly motivated by pragmatism. Examples of such motivations included attempting to avoid discrimination, attempting to circumvent the collateral consequences of a criminal record, and disclosure not adding anything relevant to the social interaction in which they were engaged.

Some individuals sought the support of professional, academic, and informal peer groups with similar stigmatized identities as a form of protection because they felt the wider sphere of employment, or society in general, were judgmental of them.

Another important dynamic revealed by our data was how stigmatized individuals manage their stigma over time. Some changes were voluntary while others were forced due to changes in the sociocultural structure. While many participants certainly did cite greater accumulated life experiences as a motivation for why they began to change their strategies, several other factors were salient. For instance, the advent of the internet and increased public access to personal information made it more difficult

for participants to engage in secrecy. In order to control the narrative about their criminal history, rather than have it discovered via a Google search or background check, many participants preemptively disclosed to necessary parties. This forced dynamic sometimes functioned to further reinforce the extended online punishment phenomenon of digital degradation (Lageson & Maruna 2017) for those with felony convictions. In sum, participants cited dynamics such as increased wisdom due to life experience, developing a desire to be more honest, and advances in technology as reasons for shifting their stigma management strategies. Consistent with prior research on management strategies and motivations (Lee & Craft, 2002; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008), four of seventeen (24%) total participants in this study only utilize and adhere to a singular strategy, as outlined in MLT as means of preserving who they are and to avoid rejection. Participants described motivations for self-disclosure and secrecy, which included desire for honesty in personal relationships, being able to control their narrative by telling their own story, avoiding judgement, and adherence to a moral code.

Previous quantitative research has noted racial effects in the type of stigma management strategies used by formerly incarcerated men (Winnick & Bodkin, 2008; 2009), with Whites being more likely to perceive more social stigma associated with a criminal record and use secrecy. Alternately, African Americans perceived less stigma from criminal convictions, as they were already burdened by their societal experiences as victims of the longstanding stigmatization associated with the phenomenon of racism. While not the primary focus of the present analysis, it should be noted that our qualitative findings indicated another issue, being a discrepancy between singular and multiple management strategy usage when examining race within our sample. All participants within the 41% of the sample who did not identify as white (3 Black participants, 2 Hispanic, 1 participant identified as Bi-Racial, and 1 participant identified as Multi-Racial) used multiple strategies, while 40% of White participants reported singular strategy usage. Although our race outcomes diverged from previous MLT research, our findings are in alignment with prior studies that indicate individuals experience this issue differently based on such factors as race, economic status, and level of educational attainment (Fretwell, 2019; Link & Phelan, 2001; Tyler & Brockman, 2017).

While there is a body of research that indicates that public perceptions of people convicted of crimes are influenced by the type or severity of criminal conviction (Ali et al., 2017; Denver et al., 2017; Horstman et al., 2019; King & Roberts, 2017; Moore et al., 2016; Sanders et al., 2017), there is a need for further research that examines

stigma management patterns amongst the formerly-incarcerated based on the varying levels of public stigmatization attached to specific crimes. Drug crimes are common and generally perceived as less severe than convictions for violent and sexual crimes. While also common and generally misunderstood, violent crimes are often perceived as more severe than drug, white-collar, and common "street" crimes (Grossi, 2017). Sexual crimes, considered the most stigmatized of all crime typologies (Cubellis et al., 2019; Tewksbury, 2012), possess a unique status for being highly stigmatized by both the public and the formerly and currently-incarcerated population. Therefore, the type of crime participants were convicted of may influence social perceptions of their character, trustworthiness, and demeanor and subsequently alter their stigma management strategy patterns. How these strategies are employed could favorably or adversely affect life-course outcomes.

There are some limitations to this study that should be noted. The sample is small and thus not generalizable to all formerly incarcerated populations nor to those outside the Midwest and Western regions of the United States. It should also be noted that the level of education achieved by the participants in our sample was greater than the average of the justice affected population as a whole. This may be a product of the recruitment strategies that largely relied on snowball sampling and connections to local groups affiliated with education and other programs for advancing opportunities for formerly incarcerated and justice impacted persons. Although we cannot speak to this in our current analysis, there may be important variations in stigma management strategies based on educational attainment. Additionally, the range of crimes was limited and it is possible that violent or sex crimes likely will yield a different kind of stigma and, therefore, perhaps very different strategies for managing that stigma. We also did not have complete information about how long each person had been out of prison, which could potentially influence their management of stigma. Finally, there may also be further racial differences that were not apparent in our limited data. Prior research has shown that African American offenders may be perceived more negatively than white offenders (Pager & Quillian, 2005; Pager et al., 2009). Despite these limitations, our research builds upon prior work examining stigma management and highlights how a life course approach to understanding this process is prudent.

Our work also has several policy implications. Given the continued employment barriers experienced by our participants, their narratives lend credence to ban-the-box initiatives as well as other programs and policies that support and encourage employers to hire formerly incarcerated people, such as tax incentives and work placement programs. Their experiences also highlight the importance of education and

job training programs for justice impacted populations. The recent removal of the drug conviction question from the federal financial aid application (FAFSA) and reinstatement of Pell grants for incarcerated people have been positive changes. Finally, an expansion of resources for ongoing engagement in therapeutic based strategies for managing the formerly incarcerated status and identity would be beneficial for both personal and professional interactions. Future research should explore a wider range of stigmatized identities and how changing social and economic contexts, as well as differing life stages, influence the adoption and employment of stigma management strategies.

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## **Reviews**