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Exploring the impact of training on equitable access to employment: A gendered perspective of work release programs

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ABSTRACT

Obtaining job relevant skills while incarcerated is an important component to overcoming the stigma of a criminal history when seeking employment. Using a focus group research design, we explored occupational roles and feelings of preparedness among men and women housed in work release facilities. We found: 1) women perceived their training to be of less value as compared to their male counterparts, 2) women and men perceived differences related to their receipt of employment assistance, 3) women and men differed in explanations of prior work experience, and 4) perceptual differences appeared to be affected by the frequency of incarceration.

KEY WORDS

criminal history, selection, gender, training, diversity

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the United States over 6.6 million individuals were under some form of correctional supervision (e.g., prison, jail, probation, parole) (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018), with over 1.5 million, or about 1 in 38 adults, incarcerated at yearend 2016 (Carson, 2018). Demographic correctional data confirms higher percentages of arrest and incarceration of Black and Latino men as compared to White men (Carson, 2018). Data also confirms that lower educational attainment levels are also common, with approximately 41% of the correctional population possessing less than a high school degree (Harlow, 2003). Considering the above, criminal history is common and the demographic characteristics of race and class are prominent when understanding individuals who possess a criminal history. However, another relevant demographic characteristic that may often be overlooked is that of sex. Women have now become the fastest growing jail population in the United States (Swavola, Riley & Subramanian 2016), and the female incarceration rate has increased by approximately 700% over the past 30 years (Cowan, 2019). Despite this increase, many of the reasons for it are largely unknown, as research, practices, and initiatives have traditionally focused on the needs of male prisoners (Swavola et al., 2016). This has resulted in a limited understanding of the female experience while in prison, as well as the re-integration and employment process post-release.

Several studies have pointed to the important role that pre-release employment resources play in determining individual success in obtaining employment post-release (Gillis & Andrews, 2005; Griffiths, Dandurand & Murdoch, 2007; Nally, Lockwood & Ho, 2011). More recently, however, there has been increasing interest in understanding the experiences of incarcerated and soon-to-be released women. For example, studies have examined participation rates among incarcerated women in prison programming (Crittenden & Koons-Witt, 2017), evaluated the existence of different gendered-based needs with respect to reentry strategies (Spjeldnes, Jung & Yamatani, 2014) in addition to empirical assessments of how gender and race in prison impact designated working assignments (Crittenden, Koons-Witt & Kaminski, 2018). What these studies converge on is the central

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notion that women have different needs and values when compared to their male counterparts (Freudenberg, 2006). However, relatively little is known about how these gender differences manifest in the context of work-release programs.

This is critical since a considerable amount of employment programming focuses on the development of skills important to prison industries (e.g., construction, manufacturing), is work that traditionally employs men. As Richmond (2014) notes, "it may be that the types of industries and skills obtained [through these programs]...are more applicable to the kinds of employment male offenders can obtain upon release from prison and thus make them more competitive than female inmates in the labor market" (p. 741). Thus, ascertaining the perceived benefits of prison employment programming (e.g., work release) among currently incarcerated men and women participating in such training programs is not only vital to the development of effective vocational policy and work-force development programming, but may also aid in our understanding of facilitative factors necessary for finding and maintaining employment. This understanding of potential differences as related to sex is important considering that the majority of all individuals with a criminal history will return to the community and likely seek entry into the workforce (Carson, 2018; Hughes & Wilson, 2019).

Within the context of the workplace, theories such as social role theory suggest that men and women may be perceived differently, and that these perceived gender roles may be consistent within society's current division of labor (Eagly, 1987). Despite the progress of women in the labor force, perceptions persist in the labor market resulting in gendered occupations. For example, occupations such as home health aides are generally regarded as female occupations, which may contribute to women occupying 89% of these roles. Conversely, occupations such as concrete finishers are generally regarded as male occupations, which likely contributes to men occupying 100% of these roles (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019)[1]. These differences are of particular importance as we consider the employment patterns and unemployment rates of formerly incarcerated individuals. While the United States' unemployment rate is 4.0% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019), the unemployment rate for those with a criminal record can range between 18.4% to 43.6% (Couloute & Kopf, 2018). These percentage differentials may be attributable to various factors such as the stigma of a criminal history, gendered perceptions of work, and the employment preparation available to individuals while housed in correctional facilities.

Although employment and vocational training while incarcerated has been shown to be of substantial benefit for participants, only one in every six correctional facilities offer some form of vocational training (Stephan, 2008). When training is available, portions of the evaluation may not fully consider its effect, specifically, the types of occupations the participants are likely to pursue. For instance, while carpentry, construction, and auto mechanics are common types of employment training available in a correctional facility (Lahm, 2000), these are also occupations and fields that are considerably male dominated, as women comprise 2.2%, 3.4%, 2.1% respectively (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019). Thus, while employment training in these aforementioned areas may be offered to both sexes, men may disproportionately have access to training in occupations they are more likely to pursue. This presents an interesting conundrum. Although women with a criminal history may be perceived with greater warmth by hiring managers during an employment process (Jones Young & Powell, 2015), men may have an advantage when pursuing employment opportunities due to the relevant training received during incarceration. This possibility highlights the continued importance of exploring organizational experiences of individuals from an intersectionality perspective (Holvino, 2010), in this case, gender and criminal history.

This study seeks to understand the perceptions of readiness of men and women as they prepare for their job search after release from incarceration. Research suggests that some employers are willing to hire individuals with a criminal history (Griffith & Young, 2017; Society for Human Resource Management, 2018, 2019). However, scholars have encouraged an increased understanding from the applicant or individual perspective of those with a criminal history (Young & Ryan, 2019; Griffith, Rade, & Anazodo, 2019), as a way to gain greater insight into their experiences. Participation in a pre-employment program can significantly benefit hard to employ individuals, by increasing self-efficacy and reducing psychological distress (Matt, Bellardita, Fischer & Silverman, 2006), which can be particularly beneficial for organizations. The men and women in our study were exposed to similar training protocols. Thus, in accordance with social role theory, we explore how the men and women interpreted and assigned value to their training experiences. This exploration also considers equity theory, such that providing access to the same training may not necessarily yield the same outcome or opportunity when individuals are of a different sex. Although individuals who are incarcerated do not have a constitutional right to employment programs (Laddy, 1995), having women trained in employment areas they are least likely to pursue upon release from incarceration is problematic. In short, further exploration of this topic is warranted.

[1] These occupations were selected as examples since they are positions that individuals with a criminal history could likely obtain.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Research studies have consistently pointed to concrete differences between men and women in the employment context. Social role theory suggests that individuals associate certain behaviors with a particular gender and then ascribe these beliefs to the social roles men and women should adopt (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Early research on gender differences suggested that men are more agentic (e.g., assertive) and women are more communal (e.g., concerned about others) (Bakan, 1966). Subsequent research found that men engaged in more aggressive behavior (Eagly & Steffen, 1986) while women engaged in more helping behavior (Eagly & Crowley, 1986). Although differences in these gendered behaviors may be limited, they are consistent with individuals' perceptions of male and female behavior (Eagly & Wood, 1991). Subsequent research continues to confirm these stereotypes (e.g., Koenig & Eagly, 2014; Lippa, 2010), which is interesting considering the large number of women who now occupy the workplace.

Building on the above, certain gendered stereotypes are often associated with criminal history. Words typically associated with violence such as aggressive and dangerous (Dixon & Maddux, 2005), have been used to describe individuals with a criminal history. Maclin and Herrera (2006) suggest that individuals tend to draw from certain mental representations of a criminal, likely resulting in a general consensus about the appearance of "criminals" (e.g., Valla, Ceci & Williams, 2011). Crime has thus been described as "symbolically masculine" with masculinity even described as a motive for crime (see Herrington & Nee, 2005). This supposed physical appearance of a "criminal" was further supported in a study conducted by MacLin and Herrera (2006), when participants were asked to identify "the first 10 things you think of when you hear the word criminal?" (p. 200), the only demographic characteristic that emerged was "male". This finding suggests that not only do people have a negative impression of individuals with a criminal history, but they also have a gendered stereotype. However, with women now comprising seven percent of the incarcerated population (Carson, 2018) correctional facilities and their contracted employment partners may not have fully considered nor prepared for the typical occupational differences found between men and women in the workforce. This is particularly relevant in this context considering the numerous workforce limitations encountered by those with a criminal history.

2.1 EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS

Employment training for those with a criminal history is critical considering the numerous barriers--both direct and indirect--that will affect individuals after receipt of a criminal record. These barriers, often referred to as collateral consequences, include important elements that can prevent an individual from having a productive life such as restrictions on employment, voting, housing, custody, and educational assistance (National Inventory of the Collateral Consequences of Conviction, 2019). Thus, while a period of incarceration is finite, individuals must navigate these consequences long after a period of conviction ends (Forman, 2017). The result is that the stigma of a criminal history often interferes with individuals and their ability to pursue opportunities throughout their lifetime. Within the context of employment, these consequences are particularly detrimental, as they can significantly limit the types of occupations individuals can reasonably pursue after receiving a criminal history. According to the National Inventory of Collateral Consequences and Convictions (2019), there are over 15,000 occupational license restrictions on individuals with a criminal history. Many occupations are likely fields of interest, such as a barber or make-up artist, both of which are licensed occupations in many states, and thereby inaccessible to individuals with a criminal history. As such, employment opportunities for individuals with a criminal history are often not dictated by interest, but rather by what is permissible.

If occupational restrictions are not explicit, other indirect consequences can also affect employment and result in negative effects. For instance, prohibiting the reinstatement of a driver's license (Aiken, 2016), which may occur for individuals convicted of driving or non-driving related offenses. The inability to obtain a driver's license can prevent a person from not only driving, but also possessing official identification, both of which can be prohibitive to securing and maintaining employment. Lack of access to educational funding assistance reinforces the lower levels of education and contributes to an inability to pursue advanced educational opportunities (Couloute, 2018). Housing restrictions may result in housing instability, which is also highly correlated with lack of employment (Desmond & Gershenson, 2016). Therefore, while these aforementioned restrictions may not be directly related to employment, these collateral consequences can interfere with an individual's ability to find and maintain employment after release from incarceration.

If individuals are able to successfully navigate the numerous collateral consequences and engage in the employment process, they frequently must contend with a background check. While legislation such as Ban the Box is useful in delaying consideration of a criminal background in employment decision making, this legislation is only applicable in certain jurisdictions and still applies to a majority of public rather than private employers (Avery, 2019). While this legislative context may have prompted some hiring managers to increase their willingness to hire (Griffith & Young, 2017), many employers continue to deny employment when criminal history information

becomes known. Denial of employment often relates to negative employer perceptions of individuals with a criminal history, such as untrustworthy or more likely to interact poorly with others (Holzer, Raphael & Stoll, 2004). Other reasons relate to beliefs that consumers will be uncomfortable or organizational concerns of liability (Kurlychek, Bushway & Denver, 2019). Taken together, this population of individuals is at a significant disadvantage when entering the employment process.

2.2 EMPLOYMENT TRAINING AND CRIMINAL HISTORY

While employment training may not address all of the aforementioned barriers, it can signal to employers a high level of relevant skills and knowledge, or person-job fit (Edwards, 1991).

Training within correctional facilities may present employers with a unique opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge of individuals prior to actually hiring them. Individuals are often motivated to participate in employment or vocational training while incarcerated, and these programs are often successful because they are outside of the typical prison routine (Vacca, 2004). Therefore, vocational training while incarcerated has been shown to be of substantial benefit for the participants. First, in a study by Gordon and Weldon (2003), individuals who participated in a vocational training program had a recidivism rate (i.e., rate of return to incarceration) of 8.75%, which is exponentially better than the 77% five-year average (National Institute of Justice, 2014). Second, for those with a criminal history, completing an employment reentry program is often viewed favorably by employers (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Thus, incarcerated individuals who participated in job training have often found this to be a helpful way to mitigate their negative stigma during the employment process (Pager, 2003).

Despite the numerous benefits of employment training in correctional facilities, potential inherent biases must also be considered. As discussed, because various occupations are restricted to those with a criminal history (Le et al., 2012; Quinton, 2017), training available through correctional facilities may be limited to industries and occupations that typically hire individuals with a criminal history (i.e., construction, manufacturing; Holzer, Raphael & Stoll, 2003). While logical, because these industries are also typically male dominated, which presents an interesting conundrum for women. Although women with a criminal history can certainly enter and thrive in male-dominated occupations, and the proportion of women in these industries is increasing, women may still be at an inherent disadvantage when looking for work in these industries. Furthermore, certain female-dominated industries tend to be fundamentally averse towards hiring individuals with a criminal history (e.g., certified nursing assistant) (National Inventory of Collateral Consequences of Conviction, 2019). Based on the above, our research question was:

What are individuals' perceptions of their training and preparedness as they prepare for release from incarceration and re-entry to the workforce?

3 METHODS

To examine the perspective of individuals as they prepare for re-entry into the workforce, we conducted four focus groups within two single-sex (e.g., male and female) work release correctional facilities located within one county in the Mid-Atlantic United States. Focus groups were selected as our methodology because we expected participants to feel more comfort sharing their perspective among others who share common characteristics (Kreuger & Casey, 2015). This was a particularly important consideration because incarcerated individuals are categorized as a vulnerable population (U.S. Department of Human and Health Services, 2019), which meant the researchers did not want to make participants feel pressure to participate. Additionally, focus groups allow participants to interact with each other as well as opt whether or not to respond to all of the questions (Silverman, 2017). Taken together, these factors may have increased the participants' willingness to speak freely and communicate honestly.

3.1 RESEARCH SETTING[2]

These specific correctional facilities were selected for a few reasons. First, both facilities are located within the same county of the state, which limits geographical variance. Geographic location is important as every state has different occupational restrictions for those with a criminal history. Additionally, geographic location can also affect the actual facilities, as different processes and procedures for managing and evaluating facilities and individuals housed within them is common. These facilities had the same Warden, or organizational leader, which likely results in a higher level of consistency between facilities. This was demonstrated to the researchers in

[2] As data collection within a correctional facility is unique for a management study, we provide additional detail.

various unobtrusive ways such as the similarity of the check-in process and instructions given to correctional staff about our study.

Second, these facilities offered employment training and other programs to individuals housed within their facilities. This provided us with a reasonable expectation that individuals may have participated in some type of training during their period of incarceration. The employment training available at these facilities was often a short-term program focused on learning a particular trade or skill (e.g., auto repair, forklift). Considering the variation of entry and exit dates of the individuals housed within the work release facilities, short-term training options were described as common. Third, work release facilities allow individuals to leave the correctional facility for a period of time to participate in employment. After the hours of employment are completed, individuals return to the work release facility. This provides individuals with a point of differentiation from those who are housed in a typical jail or prison, where individuals are housed 24 hours per day.

3.2 DATA COLLECTION

In both the male and female facilities our focus groups were conducted in private rooms without the presence of a correctional officer. This provided more privacy for the participants and allowed all participants the ability to speak freely about their experiences. After the officer left the room we explained the purpose of the study, provided consent forms, and responded to questions. We also reminded participants that they could decline to respond to any questions, which was a particularly important step, considering the vulnerable nature of the population. After receiving signed consent forms, individuals were given a short background and demographic survey to complete. We did receive a few questions related to some of the words, and one of the men disclosed that he had a limited reading level. These interactions reinforced our decision to primarily rely upon a qualitative method (i.e., focus groups) as this same individual who had difficulty completing the survey was able to verbally communicate his thoughts with clarity.

At the conclusion of the first focus group in each facility the officer would return to escort the participants out of the room. This break provided the researchers with an opportunity to de-brief and prepare for the second group. De-briefing after a focus group is an important part of the data analysis, as it allows the researchers to "compare notes, share highlights, and consider what others on the team have observed or heard" (Krueger & Casey, 2015: 146). When the officers returned they entered with the second group of participants. The same process outlined above occurred at both facilities and for each focus group.

3.3 SAMPLE

The final sample consisted of 34 participants, with 19 men and 15 women. As we requested separate focus groups for first-time and repeat-offenders, our sample was almost split, with 15 participants categorized as first-time offenders and 19 as repeat offenders. Our male focus groups had 9 men who were categorized as first-time offenders and 10 men who were categorized as repeat-offenders. Our female focus groups had 6 women who were categorized as first-time offenders and and 9 as repeat-offenders. Thus, our focus group sizes were consistent with the average size of focus groups, which can range between 5 to 10 people (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

The average age was 34.4 (SD=10.26). The racial composition for the total sample was 50% White, 44% Black, and 6% Latino. Considering the differences in racial percentage representation between incarcerated men and women, such that White women outnumber Black women whereas the reverse is true for men[3] (Carson, 2018), we also note that the racial composition by sex. For women the focus groups were 66.77% White and 33.3% Black and for men they were 36.8% White, 52.6% Black, and 10.5% Latino. Thus, the racial composition of our sample was consistent with national statistics.

The types of offenses ranged from drug possession to first-degree attempted murder, and we provide additional detail about the offense history of the sample in Table 1. Although the offenses ranged significantly, the offenses were generally categorized as felonies, which can significantly and negatively affect the ability to secure employment. Despite the current offense histories of the participants, 62% of participants were employed prior to their incarceration. However, the percentage differed significantly by sex and offense history. Seventy-four percent of men were employed prior to their incarceration compared with 47% of women. When comparing men and women with repeat offenses, the percentage was even more dramatic, with 80% to 33%, respectively. Moreover, while some occupations, such as "self-employed" existed for men and women, overwhelmingly, the occupational history provided aligned with the traditional male and female dominated occupations. Some examples for men included automotive service technician, concrete finisher, and laborer, as compared to women

[3] As shown in a 2016 report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the racial composition of incarcerated individuals was 30.6% White, 34.9% Black, and 21.1% Latino for men and 47.5% White, 19.8% Black, and 16.2% Latina for women (Carson 2018).

who indicated home health aide, certified nursing assistant, and house cleaner. Additional occupations are provided in Table 2. As shown in Appendix A, the focus group questions captured participant experiences while at the work release facility, including job searching, training, and working while incarcerated.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

We adopted a constant comparative data analysis process, to identify patterns in the data and determine relationships between different variables (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Our de-brief after each focus group allowed us to compare our notes prior to conducting the next focus group. After reviewing all notes, all audio files were electronically transmitted to a professional transcription service in a password-protected folder. The transcribed focus group files were uploaded to NVivo 11.4.1 for analysis by the three researchers. We reviewed the audio and transcribed interview files separately to determine initial codes. Next, we engaged in coding together to reduce the various concepts into themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These themes were then considered within the framework of larger theories.

While statements were from one individual, analysis of data from a focus group is slightly different than analysis of an individual interview, as we were also cognizant of additional factors when analyzing our data. As the focus group context is not ideal to explore an individual perspective (Mason, 2018), our analysis considered the interaction and dynamics between individuals within each focus group. Meaning, we considered not only the individual participant's response, but also how it may have affected other responses. For instance, in the focus group of repeat female offenders, two women interjected as another woman was trying to give a portrayal of the daily schedule:

Woman 1: …we come down and eat and from one -
Woman 2: 12.30 or one.
Woman 3: Yeah; from 12.30 to one we're outside from -
Woman 2: Not every day; if it rains.
Woman 3: Don't be so - we go outside from one to three or we have a group from one to 3.45 unless we go outside for yard.

This example of an interjection from multiple participants seemed to provide a check and balance, such that the second and third women wanted to make sure that we had the correct information about their daily schedule and did not provide one biased perspective. Occurrences such as these were common, and increased the confidence that the researchers were in receipt in reliable information.

Second, while understanding the frequency of a concept was important, we also focused on the extensiveness and repetition of comments (Krueger & Casey, 2015). Thus, we considered how many different people wanted to discuss the same topic or how many times the same person went back to his or her original point. This may have occurred because multiple people had a similar experience or because a participant wanted to emphasize a particular point. As an example, in the first-time, male offender group, one participant initially mentioned a difficulty obtaining his ID: "I think I have a job but it's kind of difficult for because I haven't got an ID yet in all these months I've been here…" Although another participant followed this comment and also described his frustration about the lack of an ID, the conversation began to progress away from that topic. However, about halfway through the discussion the first participant reverted back to the topic of the lack of identification, ""Oh, [Name], you're the ideal client, can we help you get your ID? Social security?" I'm like, "Oh, great." "By the time you get the work release it will all be there." I didn't get nothing." While it is possible that this participant would have continued to speak extensively about his lack of identification in an individual interview, the other focus group participants again shifted the conversation to other topics of interest.

Another difference was to also consider the intensity (i.e., level of passion expressed by the participant when providing a response) or specificity (i.e., level of detail provided by the participants) and how that may have been affected by another participant's comment. For instance, while all of the repeat male offenders stated their release date, some provided more detail than others and some displayed visible emotion, which changed the dynamic and tone of the room. As one man discussed his excitement about his upcoming release, his voice began to shift and he started to cry as he expressed his simultaneous trepidation:

The only thing that could stop me is one thing - to go back to using drugs because I'm a come to jail. I fucked up every time. I can't just - you know what I mean - I'd be functioning - like I'd do something, I'd do some drugs, I'd go hard and I'd just stay on binges and don't come home. My wife cries. I'm coming to jail. For years; every time. I'm done with this shit.

After this, the tone of the room shifted, and the next gentleman to speak was quite brief. In short, we had to consider not only the words and tone of the respondent, but also how it affected the other individuals in the room. We have provided some additional examples in Table 3.

4 FINDINGS

Four themes emerged and seemed to influence perceptions about readiness for the workforce after release such as: 1) perceived value of participant training and education, 2) gendered experience related to employment assistance, 3) gendered explanations of prior work experience, and 4) differences depending upon participant incarceration history.

Perceived value of participant training and education. Both male and female work release facilities offered training, however, the men spoke more extensively about the available training and its benefits. As one of the first-time male participants shared, "they have been bringing a lot of stuff to the table for basic training on a certain, different types of trades." While you may not receive all of the training needed for a particular job, he explained its usefulness:

> *... it was a 60-hour class and basically, what it did was get your foot in the door to like place this - doing like oil changes and stuff like that. So, say I was to get released today and I didn't have a 60 hours basic and I went to Jiffy Lube or somewhere like that... with that 60-hour certificate they look at like, 'you know what, maybe we should hire this guy besides this guy who doesn't have it. He already knows how to change tires...'*

Another participant shared that while he is most interested in construction, he still attended the class on small engine repair. Other participants mentioned a class for ground keeping and computer literacy. Although all participants did not participate in every available course, the male participants generally considered these training courses to be useful to their future pursuit of employment. Some also mentioned how these trainings could help them should they desire to pursue an additional certificate upon their release. An aspect of particular note is the type of occupations the men described.

Social role theory asserts that gender role beliefs pervade social settings, such as the work environment (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Therefore, the type of occupation that individuals assert as applicable or useful may depend on whether that occupation is in line with social expectations for that specific gender. When speaking about the training offered within the institution, the males in this study highlighted a few key aspects of the training that shed some light on how this type of training may be seen as useful for them. The training was described as applicable to trades and requiring certification. Skills such as the ability to do "oil changes" and "small engine repair" were emphasized and businesses such as "Jiffy Lube" were referenced.

Similar or the same types of training existed for the women at the female correctional facility as well, and many women participated. One of the female participants who participated in numerous courses shared, "[I received my] Red Cross first aid certification, I got my OSHA safety training, ten-hour construction course..." Others shared that there was a flooring class and a forklift class coming up. While training opportunities were available for women and many participated, the perceived usefulness or value of the classes seemed to differ among the women. As one woman stated, "There is not a lot that the system gives you as far as marketable skills for employment." Although many of the women seemed to agree with the above statement, they also often continued to participate in various trainings. When asked about this disconnect one woman, repeat categorized participant said, "... having classes to go to every day is a lot better than, say, sitting in a jail cell all day long without nothing." This statement aligns with prior research that suggests individuals who are incarcerated will participate in training simply because it is a departure from the normal routine (Vacca, 2004), not necessarily because they perceive a value.

When the women were asked about the prevalence of male-dominated training, the responses were mixed. Although one woman who has her flagging license[4] seemed to get a bit defensive and stated that, "women have done a lot of men work, restoration and flooring," the majority of women seemed to gravitate toward a preference for female dominated or gender neutral occupations. When asked about the likelihood of finding employment in a male dominated occupation one repeat female participant said, "I've always wondered that. Do they even hire women?" Another woman stated, "I've never seen a forklift driver as a woman." This response may highlight the complex situation of women with a criminal history, as the occupations that are typically available for those with a criminal history may conflict with the stereotypical role of women in our society.

Social role theorists suggest that men and women internalize gender roles, which then become gender identities. In line with these gender identities, individuals tend to ascribe to vocations, activities, and interests that are typically associated with a certain gender (Kugler, Reif, Kaschner & Brodbeck, 2018). When discussing their future job pursuits, the majority of the female participants mentioned an interest in majority female (e.g., cosmetology, service providers; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018) or gender neutral (e.g., food service) occupations, which was also consistent with their work history prior to their period of incarceration. Research on concepts such as tokenism suggest that while efforts have been made to create more inclusive mental models for women in male dominated industries, they may feel singled out, less interested, or less comfortable than they would in female dominated or more gender neutral spaces (e.g., Kanter, 1977). Not surprisingly, despite the strides of women in a variety of

[4] Flagging is a construction related occupation where the individual safely directs traffic around a construction zone.

workplaces, careers in certain male-oriented industries have remained elusive for women (Ericksen & Schultheiss, 2009).

Gendered experience related to employment assistance. Many of the women also explained differences they perceived between the male and female correctional facilities as related to work and job pursuits. Some of the women explained that while transportation is readily available from the male work release facility to take the men to and from work, that is not the case at the female facility. As one of the first-time female participants explained:

…the bus comes here so minimally that we can't catch the bus to get to work on time... So we have to depend on our families or friends that have their own lives… we have to have a personal chauffeur 24/7.

Although many of the men also commented on the unreliability of the public transportation system, none stated that they were unable to catch a bus from their facility.

When asked about the usefulness of the staff, one of the repeat male participants shared that, "They help with job placement, that sort of thing and at the same time I'm utilizing what they have there…" One of the first-time men stated, "I'm just excited and I've got a good head start because I had help… with help from the job counselor here I'm fully employed right now." However, the female perspective was quite different. As one of the first-time females stated, "I got no help with that whatsoever. And a lot of times when employers call up here they're so rude with them that they say forget it and don't want to hire us anymore."

These findings align with legitimacy in corrections perspective, where individuals' satisfaction with a particular program may be influenced by how they were treated, or procedural justice (Elisha et al., 2017). Another important factor to consider in conjunction with the above, is the social context, which may be particularly relevant when identifying gender behavioral differences (Eagly & Wood, 2013). From this perspective, differences in female and male responsiveness to training may be a product of their perceptions of social support offered in the social context. Although the women described their reliance on the support from family members and friends for transportation, the general undertone suggests that the women did not feel supported with the necessary resources (i.e., transportation) to facilitate their participation in employment opportunities. By contrast, the men in this study perceived that they were socially supported by the appropriate resources to facilitate their employment endeavors. From a role theory perspective (Eagly & Wood, 2013) these perceptions of support may influence an individual's interpretation of behavioral expectations.

Some women continued to express frustration when discussing access to gender neutral training opportunities as well. As one female, first-time participant shared her frustration trying to access a food related training:

The problem with what I want to do is I have to apply to the Department of Labor in order to get a grant to pay for this food bank class. The Department of Labor has no grants available, there is no funding until like November which means I'm going to miss that window of opportunity.

However, the men seemed to speak positively of a food training opportunity. As two of the first-time men discussed:

"I was going to check out the culinary arts because I'd like to try and get into cooking and things of that nature. …as far as this culinary arts, from what they were explaining, it's more or less like steps that you go through. At the end they help you find employment." [Man 1]

"They'll place you in a restaurant; the restaurant, if you're lucky they'll keep you." [Man 2]

As the flow of information can be inconsistent in correctional facilities, it was not surprising to hear individuals describe the same program in a different manner. What was of note was that the men seemed to have the more accurate information. This resulted in the men describing the program much more positively, as if it were accessible to them, as compared to the women, who seemed to describe it in terms of obstacles.

Gendered explanations of prior work experience. Research on gender differences and stereotypes suggests that men and women may have slight differences in communication (e.g., Davis, Capobianco & Kraus, 2010; Leaper & Robnett, 2011; Newman, Groom, Handleman & Pennebaker, 2008). While some of these differences are small, the ability to assertively communicate your skills may be particularly important within the context of the organizational selection process. This skill may take on additional importance when evaluating an applicant who possesses a detrimental stigma, such as a criminal history.

Our survey responses indicated that both the men and women had a variety of work experience prior to their period of incarceration, but that the majority aligned with gendered occupations. Beyond this, we also found differences in how the men and women spoke about their prior employment. A meta-analysis by Leaper and Robnett (2011) found that while the effect sizes were small, there was a significant difference in the likelihood of women using more tentative language. Our findings were consistent, as the men and women also seemed to speak about their prior work history differently, often apparent in their word usage and tone.

The men seemed to speak more assertively about their work history during the focus groups. As one of the first-time men assertively stated, "I've worked in the kitchen for ten years so I don't really see a problem finding a job." A first-time woman stated, "I have done a few things, but the thing that interests me the most is [that] I am certified in AIDS testing and counseling." Although this woman completed some college and possessed certifications, her delivery may make her seem less confident or competent. This perception is consistent with the theory advanced by Jones Young and Powell (2015), suggesting the women with a criminal history may be perceived as warm, but not necessarily competent during the hiring process.

A further example of this difference may be reflected in the type of detail provided by the men and women about their work history. Many of the men were able to provide clear specifics related to the previous employment such as the length of time, prior training, or tasks involved. As an example, we compared statements between a female and male offender who had substantial work experience. Below is the statement from the male offender:

"I have a trade. I've been in the same company for 25 years; I started when I was 16 as an iron worker, structural steel fitter, making handrails and ornamental iron. I had a side hustle with [company name] fabricating [motor mounts] for the helicopters motors because they have to rebuild them every 5,000 hours."

Below is a statement from the female offender:

"…my work would be a hairstylist entrepreneur and I also train race horses… And I have for over 20 years… and I've done hair since I was 14 and I'm 43… When I return I will work for my parents who own 30 race horses and I will work in a family owned beauty salon."

The male offender was able to succinctly and specifically describe his prior work history. While the female offender did also provide her work history, she only did so with completeness after she was prompted with numerous questions to gain clarity on her experience. This prompting for more information may explain why, the correctional facility staff told the researchers that they questioned her work history. The inability for some female offenders to speak confidently and specifically about their prior work history is problematic, particularly considering that they will already need to overcome the detrimental stigma of a criminal history.

Participant incarceration history. In general, all participants were eager to be released, however, the men and women who were categorized as first-time offenders appeared more confident and hopeful as compared to those categorized as repeat offenders. As one man categorized as a first-time offender explained, "I'm really not like apprehensive or kind of scared to go out there in society. I just more or less can't wait." A woman categorized as a first-time offender shared a similar hopeful attitude when discussing her release, "My release date I hope will be within one month to definitely three months. I have an appeal that I'm looking forward to winning." These responses substantially differed from those categorized with repeat offenses. When asked about their upcoming releases one woman shared, "I feel nervous about release… Going back into society. I know nothing has changed; it has just got worse." A man with multiple offenses stated that he was, "truly nervous about being released," went on to explain,

"I'm a little anxious, nervous more than anything though because I don't really know what to expect out there as far as family and society." The nervousness of release for some of the repeat offenders was compounded because of the low level of comfort with technology, something they may have limited exposure to considering their numerous times in incarceration. As one man shared, "...I have no trouble working. I said I can work my butt off but don't stick me on the computer, nothing like that." These differences in attitudes may translate to how individuals approach their job search and reentry into the workforce upon release.

Many of the women with first-time offenses articulated a clear, positive plan upon their release such as, "My plans when I get out in January is go home, find another place so I can have my kids back all in the same house. Once I get that situated, go back to school for human services that I started but I never got to complete at [college]." However, some may be unaware of the challenges awaiting them. For instance, one woman remarked, "I have my license to do nails so I'll probably just go back and do that." However, since cosmetology is restricted in many states for those with a felony conviction, it is possible that women with multiple convictions were already aware of the effect their criminal history may have on their employment prospects. As such, women with multiple offenses seemed more aligned with this comment, "I'm pretty nervous about going back to work because it's been like four years since I've been [un]employed." This seemed to be true even for those who may have had work history in a particular area. As one woman stated:

> *For pretty much 40 years I have always not had a record so it never stopped me, I was doing CNA work, doing nursing work. So now I have a record so that's going to be hard on me to go back maybe in that field because nobody might not want me because of my shoplifting charges.*

While participants categorized with first-time offenses may be viewed as having higher levels of motivation, the motivation of those with multiple offenses may be affected by job search difficulties experienced after a prior release from incarceration. Despite the gender role differences and perceptions related to training and employment

opportunities while incarcerated, participant incarceration history may neutralize the effect of gender. This is an important finding since even in gender charged environments such as prisons, there may be instances where individual experience in a particular social context supersedes the gendered effects within.

5 DISCUSSION

While we acknowledge that numerous factors may affect perceptions of training within a correctional facility, our research suggests that while incarcerated men and women may have access to the same types of training, their perceptions of the training—and thereby their perceptions of preparedness for return to the workforce—may differ significantly depending on the perceived value of the training as well as the support received while completing it. Moreover, men may be more likely to make direct connections between the available training and relevance to their job search considering the occupations they are most likely to enter upon release. These differences may result in women perceiving their training while incarcerated to be less useful as compared to their male counterparts. The gendered perception of usefulness of training may be particularly detrimental to a population that already considers their employment options to be limited. While training is not the only factor related to securing employment upon release, it may further contribute to the low levels of employment (Couloute & Kopf, 2018) and low paying jobs (Lahm, 2000) that individuals with a criminal history—and women in particular—are likely to secure upon release.

5.1 RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

While this study focused on individuals housed in work release correctional facilities, we assert that the gendered perceptions found in this study may have larger implications within our management literature. From an equity theory perspective, we must consider if equity means offering the same training opportunity or offering an opportunity that may result in the same outcome. In effect, in what contexts may distributive justice outweigh procedural justice? While individuals may strive for an egalitarian society, many occupations and industries remain segregated by gender (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Following a procedural justice perspective, men and women would receive the same training. From an alternate perspective, offering different training opportunities may result in higher levels of employment for both genders, but it may also maintain the status quo related to gendered occupations and wage inequities. These questions are particularly important because training has been found to be an important element in the ability to secure employment and earn higher wages upon release from incarceration (Duwe, 2015; Jung & LaLonde, 2019). However, as the population of women with a criminal history continues to increase, we encourage researchers to continue to explore this dilemma related to training, employment, and perceptions of gender equity.

Second, our findings support the continued exploration of gender differences in the workplace, and highlight the need to consider how these differences may be further exacerbated within marginalized populations. Research has asserted that gender differences exist and persist in various organizational processes, such as negotiation (e.g., Leibbrandt & List, 2014). While assertive communication may assist women combat some of these differences (Amanatullah & Morris, 2010), women who are members of a marginalized population may be less likely to engage in this type of behavior. Future research should delve into this divide more specifically, as additional studies may allow us to understand some of the nuances of why these differences persist and how individuals can combat these differences.

5.2 PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

As the female correctional population continues to grow, human resources professionals may be able to assist correctional facilities review their available training and consider including training that will provide women with access to occupations that may be more gender-neutral. Although women may currently be better positioned to secure employment after release from a work release facility as compared to their male counterparts (Duwe, 2015), these findings may be apt to change considering the influx of women with a criminal history (Swavola et al., 2016). Additionally, participation and completion of a workforce training can increase earnings for the women upon their release (Jung & LaLonde, 2019). As such, offering a variety of training opportunities may ensure positive outcomes (e.g., lower levels of recidivism, higher levels of employment, higher levels of employment training completion) for formerly incarcerated women as they pursue employment after release.

Second, we encourage human resource professionals to partner with work release correctional facilities to gain access to an underutilized, but motivated workforce. As noted by SHRM (2019), in their "Getting Back to Work" campaign, it is important for organizations to commit to hiring individuals with a criminal history. Many individuals are seeking employment and experience prior to release. While the conditions of employment may be

restrictive, those who are able to secure employment while incarcerated may have a high level of continuance commitment and a low level of turnover, both of which are advantageous for employers. Upon release from incarceration, employers may find this group of employees possesses a significant amount of firm-specific human capital and high levels of commitment, making them an asset for an organization.

Third, we encourage human resource professionals to partner with correctional facilities to offer training that can develop some of the "soft skills" or generic human capital that employers expect. In a study by Robles (2012) integrity, communication, and courtesy were rated among the top three soft skills perceived to be "extremely important" by employers. As noted in our findings, communication differences were found between the men and women in our sample. Some employment training does incorporate things such as a life skills training (Jung & LaLonde, 2019), which may consider some of the aforementioned skills. However, we believe HR can better serve as a bridge to assist in explicitly incorporating some of the skills that employers may prioritize within an employment training.

Finally, a focus on identifying the elements that individuals attribute to successful work release programs, particularly for women, has the added benefit of preparing them for overall better job placements. Studies have found that women may secure employment at faster rates than men (Duwe, 2015). Additionally, women who completed a particular training had a higher likelihood of securing employment and higher wages as compared to those who had not (Jung & LaLonde, 2019). Thus, it is plausible that understanding the context of work-release programs may help to develop more effective programming that could catalyze a host of positive work outcomes for future potential employers (e.g. performance, retention, turnover, etc.). In the case of recruitment, for example, this research has implications for organizations seeking to fill staffing voids with ready-to-succeed applicants. The effectiveness of these programs on preparing new hires has critically important implications for organizations looking to meet important recruitment and hiring goals.

5.3 LIMITATIONS

Despite the strengths of our study, we still consider our limitations, such as our use of focus groups and the limited access to participants after the focus groups were conducted. Focus groups have distinct advantages, such as allowing individuals to engage with others who share a similar experience. This was particularly important considering that the researchers had limited time with the participants due to limited access to the facilities. Thus, while individual interviews may have also provided insight into our research question, we would have access to an even smaller number of individuals, and likely also a limited time frame considering the constraints of the correctional facility. Nonetheless, focus groups are subject to group dynamics, such as dominating members and groupthink. The researchers did thank participants for sharing and would encourage more participation by stating "anyone else?", which often did result in more responses from those who may have not previously contributed. However, considering the vulnerable status of the population the researchers were also careful not to make the participants feel as if they had to participate. Second, while it would have been ideal to conduct member checks directly with the focus group participants to confirm the emergent themes, the incarcerated status of the sample participants meant this step was excluded from our analysis. Instead, the findings were shared with a Department of Corrections staff member who was knowledgeable about the male and female experiences in both facilities. Lastly, we acknowledge that no single factor can generally explain any relationship in full. This is one reason why we encourage more research within the area of women, criminal history, and employment.

6 CONCLUSION

As individuals prepare for release from a correctional facility and re-entry to the workforce, they may significantly benefit from exposure to employment training. In addition to relevance and job market demands, other factors for consideration may need to be gender and the likelihood of employment within a particular occupation or industry. Considering these additional factors may be the difference between individuals remaining marginalized by their stigmatizing demographic attribute—criminal history.

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APPENDIX A – FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Please describe in as much detail as you can, how you feel about your upcoming release.
2. What do you think about, or how do you feel, when you think about searching for employment after your release?
3. How prepared do you feel to search for jobs?
4. What is your plan for employment after your release?
5. What types of challenges do you expect to encounter as you search for work?
6. How would you describe your level of confidence in finding employment after returning home?
7. What other types of life experiences, training, or skills have you had that you think would be attractive to employers?
8. How do you think your educational experience prepared you for the workplace?
9. Please describe in as much detail as you can, the type of training that you received while incarcerated and through this current program.
10. Why do you think employers may thing this training is useful?
11. What other concerns do you have as you look for employment?
12. What would you say is most important for employers to know about job applicants with a criminal history?
13. Are there any additional comments you would like to share with us at this time?

Table 1. Prior employment and offense history

Prior employment[5]

	Employment history – First-time	Employment history – Repeat
Men	Dishwasher, cook assistant, barber school, warehouse, behavioral therapist, concrete finisher, mechanic, small business owner	Roofing, Automotive service technician, mechanic, busser, iron worker, self-employed (2), carpenter, laborer, truck loader
Woman	Cook, Home health aide, Self employed, Hostess/customer service, house cleaner, emergency restoration	Cook, Cashier, CNA

Table 2. Prior employment and offense history

Offense history

	Types of offenses – First-time	Types of offenses – Repeat
Men	Theft, 2nd degree murder, robbery, drug dealing (3), gun possession (4), assault (1), counterfeiting, conspiracy (2), receipt of stolen property, burglary, drug possession, 1st degree attempted murder	Shoplifting, theft (3), robbery (2), assault (3), possession of burglary tools, conspiracy, burglary (2), criminal trespass, drug dealing (5), gun possession (3), driving w/ suspended license, drug possession, receipt of stolen property
Woman	Disorderly conduct, drug possession (2), drug dealing, theft, assault (2), robbery (2)	Theft (3), assault (2), DUI (2), burglary (3), shoplifting (4), breaking and entering, racketeering, credit card fraud, forgery, drug dealing, failure to pay fines, probation violation, drug paraphernalia (2), conspiracy, drug possession, menacing, possession of burglary tools

[5] The number of individuals from each category who indicated prior employment were as follows: first-time, men - 6; first-time women - 5, repeat men - 8; repeat women – 2.

Table 3. Example focus group analysis and individual comments

Men, First-time categorized

Interpretation of employment assistance	
Extensiveness / Repetition	Man 1: "I really don't know her that well so I can't speak what I think – she kind of speaks up and tries – she's open for people calling in about jobs and stuff. I think she's probably doing a good job." Man 2: "Yeah; she knows how to talk to them for us, you know what I mean?" Man 3: "So they won't give you the bottom of the barrel jobs that the Mexicans don't even get, you know what I'm saying?"

Women, Repeat categorized

Effect of criminal history during employment search	
Intensity	"I went to an interview one time at IHOP and the guy was looking over my application and everything was going good, and then he got to where it showed a gap… so he was like, "What is this big gap? Why was there such a big gap?" and I was like, "Well, I was incarcerated" and he was like, "All right," and his whole mood completely changed and he was like, "All right, well, it was nice meeting you and all. If I need you I'll give you a call." Like wow; I'm not going to hear from him."
Effect on other participants	After this statement, the researcher tried to probe for other experiences, but the room became quiet and no one else wanted to share. To help get the conversation started again, the researcher had to shift to another topic.

Men, Repeat categorized

Effect of criminal history during employment search	
Intensity	Man 1: "This past year – in May I turned 39 and I stepped back and I thought about it and I was like, "Wow, I completely threw away 20 years of my life; 20 years." Incarcerated on and off because I've been here about 20 years and it's saddened me. It saddened me to the point where I think I've laid in a bed for like two days straight; I didn't want to eat or nothing, I was just – you know what I mean? I didn't like myself. I just wasted 20 years."
Effect on other participants	The room became quieter after this participant completed his full statement. After this comment the moderator had to interject and ask the question again if the participant was currently employed.

Women, First-time categorized

Effectiveness of work release program	
Extensiveness / Repetition	*Researcher: What percentage of people of the whole total work release program is employed?* Woman 1: Two. Woman 2: We've got two bag lunches going out. Woman 3: Like not 2 percent; two people, okay. *[Additional discussion…]* Woman 4: Two people have a job right now. Woman 5: There are a lot – like there could be so many more employed...