"I'M NOT AS BAD AS I SEEM TO BE": UNDERSTANDING THE IDENTITIES OF
FEMALE EX-OFFENDERS

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ABSTRACT

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This study investigated the identities of women who have been in prison. Prison rates and the effects of incarceration are serious social problems in this country today. Women now represent the fastest growing prisoner population in the United States. Women who are currently incarcerated or who have experienced life in prison are a silenced population in our country. Once a woman has been given the label of *prisoner*, her stories, life, and experiences are no longer valuable in normative society: she is, essentially, invisible.

This study focused on issues of identity and how women who have been incarcerated discussed their experiences and the ways those experiences impacted their lives. A theoretical framework based on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969; Fisher & Strauss, 1978) and feminist standpoint (Harding, 1987; Harding, 2004) was used to investigate the lives of women who have lived behind bars. Eleven women living in one of two transitional programs in Ohio were the participants in this study. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Lindlof, & Taylor, 2002) and ethnography were the methods used to gain a deeper level of analysis regarding the experiences of the research participants. This study revealed that although incarceration may define who

these women are to society, it does not define them personally. Prison affected their

lives, but it did not define them. A disconnect between how this group of women

perceives society's view of them and how they view themselves was apparent.

Negativity was the one theme revealed regarding how ex-offenders perceive society's

view of them. Themes associated with the identities of the ex-offenders participating in

this study were: survivors, women of God, and women who felt unloved in their lives.

Transitional programming was described as being an important element in regaining a

productive life after incarceration. Support, employment programming, and consistent

accountability for women ex-offenders were recommendations provided for transitional

programs. The purpose of this study was not to generalize the identities and

experiences of female offenders, but instead to understand better how these women

express their own identities in a world that often places identifying labels on them.

This dissertation is dedicated to my ma and dad who believed in me when I didn't believe

in myself, and to the many women who have spent part of their lives behind bars and are

now living for a better day.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Where It All Began

During the spring of 1988, at the ripe age of nine, my family and I took a trip to San Francisco, California. The trip included a lot of first time experiences for me. It was my first time flying on an airplane, my first time traveling to the West coast, my first time missing my end-of-year examinations and my first time being inside the walls of a prison-not just any prison, but Alcatraz. At nine, I did not yet know the impact the tour of Alcatraz would have on my life. I recall many memories from my childhood, but one of my most vivid memories is the tour of Alcatraz that my family and I took that spring.

Alcatraz was originally built as a military prison in the late 1800's, but in 1934 it was converted to a federal penitentiary. This federal penitentiary sits on a foggy island in the San Francisco Bay, and from 1934-1963 it housed the worst behaved male criminals in the United States. Many years after the closing of Alcatraz, this prison became a tourist attraction. My first memories of my family's tour of Alcatraz begin with the boat ride.

The San Francisco Bay is often foggy and windy. The tour boat takes us on a fifteen to twenty minute boat ride from the piers of Fisherman's Wharf to the island of Alcatraz. This short journey is taking me from a boisterous city of people and laughter, to a desolate island where only the remains of a large, drab concrete building stand. Once off the boat and into the only cell house open for tours, feelings of sadness, despair and

isolation set in. I begin to understand that this is where many men lived and some died. The building is made of concrete and it is gray and cracking. The men who lived here, lived alone in nine feet by nine feet cell blocks that were enclosed with thick sliding metal doors that were cold to the touch. As I walk through the cell house, with head phones on my young head, listening to the tour guide on cassette tape, I am in awe of the living conditions endured by the prisoners who were sentenced here. This tour guided us through an entire cell house, a furnished cell, the recreation yard and the dining facility. The tour lasted approximately 45 minutes but has remained vividly etched in my memory for 20 years.

It is hard to describe how I feel about Alcatraz and the thoughts that have come to mind, but over the years I have been drawn to learn more about Alcatraz as well as prisons in general. At nine, I was amazed and befuddled at the reality that men lived on this island, in this cold building, in a life that was seemingly removed from the rest of civilization. The bewilderment I felt as a small girl led me to be curious about what the people who lived in this type of environment were like. Prisons, like Alcatraz, are designed to isolate prisoners from the rest of the world. Their lives behind bars seem mysterious and foreign, but before being sentenced to prison, all prisoners lived in the outside world just like me. There are hundreds of thousands of people who live in prison in the United States, and to me, they seem to be an invisible group in this society. My experiences behind the walls of Alcatraz piqued my interests as a small girl as to what

kind of person lives in this type of invisible world. At nine, I didn't understand society's social, cultural, and political dimensions that influence all of our lives. All I knew then was that life inside prison appeared to be very different from anything I had ever been exposed to in my young life. As I crossed the San Francisco Bay with my mom and dad to return to San Francisco, I could not stop looking at Alcatraz and wondering what life over there must have been like for all of those men. And now, as I think about Alcatraz and any other prison, I still wonder what a prisoner's life is like and if their world behind bars is as mysterious, desolate, and chilling as was my tour inside Alcatraz.

CHAPTER I: WOMEN EX-OFFENDERS AND THE BEGINNING OF A STUDY

My trip to Alcatraz at the age of nine started what was to become a lifetime of curiosity and wonderment about the men and women who live in this country's prisons. As I have become more inquisitive about the lives of prisoners, I have learned that there is a great deal left unknown about the men and women who have lived behind bars. Through education and research, I have come to understand that prison, and the entire prison industrial complex, is a complicated system that affects our society in multiple ways. People who are sentenced to prison are often solely identified as prisoners; however, they have many layers of identity that are formed and molded based on their lives before, during, and after their incarceration. Our society is facing the realities of a growing prison population, but little research is conducted regarding the lives of actual prisoners. This study is one small glimpse into the lives of several women who have experienced life behind bars.

Prison rates and the effects of incarceration are a serious social problem in this country today. Incarceration rates have increased dramatically in this country over the past 30 years. In the past decade, incarceration rates have increased three-fold (Bloom & Chesney-Lind, 2000). As of 2005, this country incarcerates more individuals than any other country in the world (Bureau of Justice Statistics, United States Department of Justice, 2006). This study is in

response to the current trends occurring in the prison population in the United

States. What was once a considered a problem for men, as males make up the

largest population of prisoners, is now a fast-growing problem for women.

Women represent the fastest growing prisoner population in this country, with

the female prisoner population more than doubling from 1990-2001. This

statistic means that nearly one out of every 109 adult women in the United States

is under some form of correctional supervision (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006).

Furthermore, women comprised approximately 23 percent of the nations

probationers and 12 percent of the parolees by the end of 2004. The issue of

women living behind bars is not an isolated concern for our society but instead is

one that affects many areas of family and community life. Women who have

been in prison are often mothers, victims of abuse, and primary financial

supporters for their families (Fletcher, Rolison, & Moon, 1993). These women

experience oppressions that are not inflicted upon men or non-offending women

in our larger culture.

Women who are currently incarcerated or who have experienced life in

prison are a silenced population in our country. Our society holds many

opinions about individuals who commit crimes and individuals who are

sentenced to prison. Although these opinions exist, the larger culture often does

not want to hear about the lived experiences of our nation's prisoners. Women

who have lived behind bars are part of a unique culture within our society that goes unnoticed, due to their marginalized status. Once a woman has been given the label of *prisoner,* her stories, life, and experiences are no longer valuable in normative society: she is, essentially, invisible.

Purpose of the Study

In order for communication scholars and the larger society to understand more clearly the lives of women prisoners, women who have been incarcerated must have their voices heard. To ignore their stories is to continue society's "master narrative" (Fryer, 2006, p. 545). In this master narrative, women who have been incarcerated are stereotypically labeled and discarded as deviants, criminals, and outcasts. The direct stories of these women, as told by the women themselves, have the ability to disrupt the master narrative. These direct stories allow others to understand more clearly what has led these women to a life of crime, what effects incarceration has had on them, and how institutional and societal changes may be possible. These women are mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, neighbors, and friends, and they deserve to have their voices heard. An analysis of these women's personal stories may reveal their experiences and knowledge, thereby enabling various forms of social change. This study focuses on issues of identity and how women who have been incarcerated discuss their experiences and the ways those experiences have impacted their lives.

Women who have been incarcerated often must navigate complex social, economic, and cultural concerns that are expressed in the statistics regarding female offenders. Although, it is easy to dismiss prisoners as invisible and insignificant to the larger social framework, it is important to remember that at least 95 percent of prisoners at state prisons will reenter our communities and neighborhoods (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). Unfortunately, a large percentage of ex-offenders who re-enter society will return to prison-a phenomenon known as recidivism. Some researchers feel that recidivism is measured by the rate of re-incarceration (Lowenkamp, Holsinger, & Latessa, 2001). Others deem someone a recidivist if one or more of the following occurs: there is a violation of supervision, re-arrest, reconviction, or a revocation of community supervision (Reisig, Holtfreter, & Morash, 2006). If we consider recidivism to be measured by the rate of re-incarceration, then the recidivism rate in the United States is approximately 80 percent (Maruna & LeBel, 2003). Although this statistic reflects data pertaining to male and female prisoners, it is none the less evident that women are part of the recidivating population and therefore warrant separate study. Fortunately, some scholars have already started the inquiry into issues specifically related to female prisoners.

Research Questions

Stevens (1998) argues that prison is a "breathing ground for societal

decay" (p. 201). In his study, Stevens found that the majority of women who

have been incarcerated for non-violent offenses may, upon release from prison,

commit violent crimes due to their experiences behind bars. Stevens emphasizes

the negative impacts prison may have on those who live behind bars and the

ramifications for a society that has a large number of prisoners. Specifically,

while Stevens' study emphasizes the violence that may result from incarceration,

Geiger and Fischer extended Stevens' discussion to include issues of identity and

self-esteem. Geiger and Fischer (2003) found that Israeli female offenders face

struggles related to self-esteem and that many offenders lack self-confidence

because of their identities as female prisoners. With these thoughts in mind, it is

important to ask questions regarding the effects incarceration has on female

offenders, as well as how female offenders construct their identities. Knowing

these aforementioned details may provide scholars and prison programmers

with essential information that can be used to make positive changes for women

ex-offenders, their families, and the larger community. With these concerns in

mind, my study centers on the following research questions regarding female ex-

offenders in the United States:

RQ1: What life experiences do female ex-offenders cite as having

contributed to their convictions?

RQ2: How does incarceration affect the lives of female ex-offenders?

RQ3: How do female ex-offenders discuss (or communicate) their

identities as women?

RQ4: How do female ex-offenders reconcile their self-perceptions with the

labels commonly attributed to female prisoners by society?

RQ5: What are the needs of female ex-offenders after incarceration?

Overview of the Study

To answer the above-mentioned research questions, I draw from a

theoretical framework that traces back to symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969;

Fisher & Strauss, 1978; Lewis & Smith, 1980; Mead, 1934). For the purposes of

this study, I briefly discuss symbolic interactionism in order to connect this

historic theoretical strain of research with my current use of feminist standpoint

(Collins, 1990; Harding, 1987; Harding, 2004; Tong, 1989). Eleven women who

live at one of two transitional facilities in Ohio are the participants in this study.

Nine research participants reside in a faith-based transitional facility, and two

research participants live in a facility for women who have been incarcerated and

have a substance abuse addiction. I use semi-structured, in-depth interviews to

gain a deeper level of analysis regarding the experiences of the research

participants. McCracken's (1988) concept of interviewing is useful because it

emphasizes understanding people's lives historically and in specific context. This style of interviewing is appropriate when cultural categories, assumptions, and themes are objects of investigation, and when total immersion of the studied scene is impractical or impossible. Because total immersion is not practical at my dissertation site, this interviewing tactic is important.

Ethnography (Goodall, 2000) is another research method utilized in this study. This method of research is used to think reflexively about the relationship between knowledge and how knowledge is produced (Thomas, 2003). Ethnography is valuable to my study because it provides a larger picture of the environment surrounding the women interviewed in this study.

Feminist methodology guides the use of the methods and data analysis in this dissertation. Naturalistic forms of feminist research are beneficial because they do not over generalize subjects and also because this method views research subjects as knowledge holders who must be respected. Feminist methodologies also enable the researcher to seek out women in oppressive conditions. The research process may then aid the participants, as they become agents in their own lives. Identity and the cultural communication processes of women living in these group facilities are emphasized. I draw from the tenets of grounded theory (Dey, 1999; Strauss, & Corbin, 1998) for analyzing the interviews conducted. This mode of analysis is used to seek primary categories that exist in a data set.

The purpose of this study is not to generalize the identities and experiences of

female offenders, but instead to understand better how these women express

their own identities in a world that often places identifying labels on them. The

research methods grounding this study provide useful frameworks for

understanding various aspects of female prisoners' experiences.

<div align="center">Definition of Culture</div>

The term *culture* is used throughout this study. Women who have been

incarcerated and more specifically, women living in a re-entry facility, constitute

their own culture. Culture takes on many different meanings, but for the

purpose of this study, Ting-Toomey's (2005), Geertz's (1973) and Phillipsen's

(2002) ways of defining culture will be used. Culture, as it pertains to this study,

is the learned and shared "system of meaning" (Ting-Toomey, 2005, p. 71) that is

seen amongst the women ex-offenders who live in transitional living facilities.

This shared sense of meaning is depicted in the historical knowledge bases and

attitudes shared amongst this co-culture (Geertz, 1973). Common norms and

values amongst this group are communicated through shared symbols, as well as

by how these women establish, sustain, and negotiate their community's

standards (Phillipsen, 2002).

Arguably, women offenders constitute a culture within themselves;

however, I will use Orbe's (1998) term *co-culture* to refer to this group of women.

Orbe states that a co-culture is comprised of a smaller, non-dominant group

within the dominant cultural framework. Members of co-cultures have

independent personalities and characteristics; however, their involvement and

communication with the dominant culture is usually consistent across group

members. The women in this study are part of a non-dominant group that has

shared experiences that lead them to interact with dominant groups in similar

ways.

<center>Importance of the Study</center>

This study is important for many reasons. Research in the field of

communication has neglected to focus on the lives of prisoners, and the female

prisoner population has received even less attention. Communication scholars

have focused their research on issues such as rhetoric surrounding the death

penalty in this country (Hartnett, 1998; Hartnett & Larson, 2006), prisoners,

prisons, and the use of media or technology (Barnett, 2003; Jackson, 2005;

Lindlof, 1986; Novek, 2005), communication education in prison (Valentine,

1998), and the personal narratives of male prisoners (Corey, 1996). Little

communication research has focused on the voices and experiences of women

prisoners and their participation in a unique co-culture.

The fast-growing female prisoner population is another reason research is

needed in this area.   The female prisoner population is much smaller than the

population of male prisoners; however, female prisoners have unique experiences and needs that must be addressed. Historically, the study of women prisoners has been scarce (Fletcher, Shaver, & Moon, 1993; Morash & Schramm, 2002; Morris, 1987; Rafter, 1990; & Spender, 1981). Theories regarding male prisoners have been applied to the female prisoner population, leaving the concerns of female prisoners virtually unnoticed. Historically researchers have assumed that the sociological and criminological theories that apply to male prisoners are also applicable to their female counterparts (Leonard, 1982).

Scholarship that has been conducted pertaining to female prisoners has tended to focus on female institutions (Rafter, 1992; Freedman, 1981), female criminality (Pollock-Byrne, 1990), female prisoner characteristics and demographics (Fletcher, Shaver, & Moon, 1993), female prisoners as mothers (Baunach, 1985; Gilfus, 1992), and societal conditions affecting the growing female prisoner population (Bloom, Chesney-Lind, & Owens, 1994). Greer (2000) furthers this notion by stating that previous research "provides a wealth of information related to the description of typical female inmates and treatment issues related to their incarceration" (p. 444). However, there is still an absence of research that is dedicated to understanding the personal experiences of female offenders and how those experiences shape their realities, interactions, and identities.

It is important to understand the self-described identity of the female prisoner in order to assist in reducing female recidivism rates. Multiple studies have shown that female offenders who re-enter society after prison are faced with many challenges, some of which pertain to motherhood (Harm, 1992; Snell, 1994; Greene, Haney, & Hurtado 2000; & Mumola, 2000), physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Fletcher, Rolison, & Moon, 1993; McDaniels-Wilson, 1998), substance abuse (Kissman & Torres, 2004; Schiele, 1998), and poverty (Daly, 1994; & Holtfreter, Reisig, & Morash, 2004). Researchers know that these are the realities of many women who have been in prison. However, scholars have yet to focus their efforts on the direct stories of the women who have lived these experiences.

This study is also necessary because it focuses on the larger cultural issue of being a woman who has been labeled a prisoner in contemporary U.S. society. Female prisoners face challenges because of societal oppressions of being female and added oppressions for being a female prisoner. Society has created a normative idea about what a woman is and should be, and female prisoners often do not fit the social stereotype of woman (Watterson, 1996). This study reveals how women offenders make sense of their identities as women in the larger culture and what it means to be part of a co-culture of women prisoners.

Women ex-offenders are a co-culture of women who have been largely ignored in our society, despite continuous increases in female incarceration rates. This study will help to bring female ex-offenders' voices into a conversation where they have previously been unheard and may therefore provide an initial step toward bringing this once invisible population into public view and consideration.

Gaining a greater understanding of how female ex-offenders describe themselves may have implications for social change. Research data collected from this study will be used to provide social scientists and other scholars with information about women prisoners and their conceptualization of identity. In addition, this study also has practical applications. Social change is an important element to feminist scholarship. In the future, this study may be used to aid female prisoner programming, transitional programming for women ex-offenders, and possibly social, political, and cultural changes surrounding the growing population of female prisoners. This study is important for academic scholarship, and equally importantly, it may benefit women who have been incarcerated.

CHAPTER II: A LOOK AT FEMALE OFFENDERS AND THE SELF USING

FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORY

As mentioned previously, the issues surrounding women and prison are complex and widespread. Women who have been incarcerated and then re-enter our society face unique challenges that affect their personal lives, their families, and the lives of the people living in their communities. This is a concern that has been studied through the use of multiple approaches, but the study of women ex-offenders' identities has received little attention. The literature explored here represents scholarship not only from the communication discipline, but also from criminology, sociology, and feminist theory. Hecht (1993) notes, "that there are alternative ways of knowing that are continually juxtaposed and played off each other and/or blended together. There are many vehicles at our disposal for experiencing our social world" (p. 76). This literature review utilizes three vehicles to illuminate the effects of incarceration on the female ex-offender's identity. Scholarship in the following three areas is examined: (1) the current state of female prisoners in Ohio and the larger United States, (2) the use of symbolic interactionism in exploring the realities of female ex-offenders, and (3) feminist standpoint theory's principles that support the notion that women's experiences are a basis for knowledge.

Female Prisoners in the United States

The rate of female incarceration has grown exponentially over the past 20 years. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports in its most recent data collection that the number of women under the jurisdiction of state or federal prison authorities increased 4.8 percent from 2005, while the number of incarcerated men rose only 2.7 percent (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2006). This shows that females are being incarcerated at a rate that is nearly two times faster than their male counterparts. Female offenders comprise a small percentage of this nation's prisoners, but we must consider why their incarceration rates have more than doubled in recent history. Each state in the United States has varying statistics regarding female offenders, but this study will focus on the specific issues relevant to Ohio's female prisoner population.

In 2007, the Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction housed almost 50,000 prisoners in their state prisons (Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, October 2007 Facts, 2007). Female offenders comprised nearly eight percent of Ohio's prisoner population. The female and male prisoner populations had continued to grow at approximately the same rates until 2004, when the female incarceration rates were more than that of male incarceration rates. Since 2004, the women inmate population has been growing faster than the male inmate population (JFA Institute, 2006). On average, female prisoners

are 35 years of age, are housed at one of three female penal institutions, and spend an average sentence of two and half years in prison.

The description of typical Ohio female offenders varies from the description of female offenders in general. The women entering Ohio prisons in 2004 were most often white women from rural and suburban areas of Ohio, 83 percent had a drug problem, 42 percent claimed that drugs were involved in their crime, 60 percent were educated and had a high school diploma or GED, and 67 percent had no prior prison experience (drc.ohio.gov). This study highlighted that women offenders in Ohio commit crimes that revolve around drug use and property crimes and that despite the lack of services and programs for these female offenders, their recidivism rates are less than that of the male rate. Even considering these conclusions, recidivism remains a problem in the state of Ohio and across the United States.

Beginning in 2002, Ohio focused its efforts on offender rehabilitation and re-entry. The Ohio Plan for Productive Offender Reentry and Recidivism Reduction was formed (The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 2007). The mission of this initiative is a holistic and systematic approach that seeks to reduce the likelihood of additional criminal behavior. Beginning at sentencing and extending beyond release, reentry will assess, identify, and link offenders with services specific to their needs. This will be accomplished through

associations with community partners, families, justice professionals, and victims

of crime (The Ohio Department of Rehabilitation and Correction, 2007).

The motto this mission carries is "Going Home to Stay." This plan for re-

entry was one of the first plans of its kind in the United States. While

incarceration rates and recidivism rates were dramatically rising, it is clear that

the government in the state of Ohio recognized that there was a problem and

"Going Home to Stay" is their effort to address this issue.

Women ex-offenders face unique challenges when re-entering

communities after time spent in prison. As a group, they are often shunned and

judged, making it difficult to find housing, jobs, and other necessary support. Ex-

offenders need assistance to face the "social realities" of their situation and to

face the "daunting social obstacles when transitioning into free society"

(Kenemore, & Roldan, 2005, p. 18). These women have committed a variety of

crimes and some may lead lifestyles that are considered different from normative

society. As a society, there are general attitudes we hold toward this group of

women. A review of the literature reveals that women have different stories and

reasons for committing crimes; however, women ex-offenders often have similar

needs as a group when it comes to re-entering society after incarceration. Since

things like food, shelter, clothing, and employment play a significant role in

constructing identity, the degree to which women in transitional programs have

access to these resources plays an important role in their personal well-being. Facets of their identities are formed in regards to the needs they have or do not have met when leaving prison walls. The current literature concerning female ex-offenders' needs is beneficial because it offers insight into the lives of these women.

In order to consider the problems faced by female prisoners in a gender-specific manner, we must first describe a picture of the typical female inmate. There are dangers and problems with generalizing about any group of people; however, these generalizations can help researchers understand how to best assist these women and the needs they possess.

Stuart and Brice-Baker (2004) make several generalizations about female offenders. First, more than half of all women in prison are under the age of 30, they are not high school graduates, and they are usually an ethnic minority. As previously mentioned, this differs from the typical female ex-offender in Ohio, as she typically has a high school diploma and is of Caucasian descent (drc.ohio.gov). Oftentimes these women have lived with violent men and/or are survivors of sexual abuse and are single, widowed, or divorced women with children. Fletcher, Dixon, and Moon (1993) go on to confirm this female offender profile when they provide a description of the typical female inmate: "woman of color" between the ages of 25 and 29 and a single parent. In these researchers'

conceptions, the typical female offender was physically abused between the ages of five and fourteen, was using drugs by the ages of 13 or 14, was a high school dropout, possessed an unstable work history, a long criminal history beginning at an early age, and would participate in treatment programs if they were available (Fletcher, Dixon, & Moon, 1993). With this description in mind, the needs and problems of female offenders may be further explored.

Upon societal re-entry, women have particular reasons for re-offending and particular needs that must be met. One of the major issues and concerns for these women is their history of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. As stated earlier, most female inmates were first abused between the ages of 5 and 14, and this abuse was most often sexual abuse perpetrated by a male member of the immediate family (Fletcher, Rolison and Moon, 1993). In a study of women incarcerated in the Ohio prison system, approximately 95 percent of the 436-person sample reported a history of either physical or sexual abuse (McDaniels-Wilson, 1998).

The experience of abuse among female inmates is of particular importance for recidivism rates. Benda and Pallone (2005) found in a five-year follow-up study of women exiting boot-camp that women who had experienced sexual and physical abuse before the age of 18 and in the past two years were at greater risk of recidivating. Another point regarding physical abuse and recidivism is that

women who have a history of abuse are more likely than other female prisoners to have mental illnesses such as depression, which can be correlated with higher recidivism rates (Stuart & Brice-Baker, 2004).

Physical abuse is not the only concern women leaving prison must deal with; substance abuse is another major issue for many in this co-culture. Fletcher, Rolison and Moon's (1993) description of the typical female inmate noted substance abuse as a part of these women's lives. Most female inmates begin using drugs or alcohol by the time they are 13 or 14 years old. Most women offenders have used alcohol no less than one or two times a month before their incarceration. The average female inmate also used cocaine, speed, and/or marijuana on a daily basis before entering prison, many attributing their drug abuse to a desire to feel better. Researchers have noted that the rise in female imprisonment is related in large part to U.S. drug control policies that have been implemented since the late 1980s and early 1990's (Schram, Koons-Witt, Williams, & McShane, 2006). Greenfield and Snell (1999) found that violent and property offenses by females have been decreasing while drug-related offenses have been on the rise. This increase in drug crimes by women is a gender issue. Men's substance abuse tends to decrease in adulthood, whereas women's abuse rates rise during their adult years (Stuart, & Brice-Baker, 2004).

As of a decade ago, seventy-five percent of the women living behind bars were mothers who had been imprisoned for illicit drug use, drug trafficking, or shoplifting (Schiele, 1998). More recently, Kissman and Torres (2004) conducted a study that focused on female inmates who were mothers and their incidences of substance abuse. Substance abuse and recidivism have been closely linked (Owen, 1998; Benda, 2005). In a study by Schram et. al. (2006) 38 percent of the women surveyed reported needing assistance with their substance abuse addiction. In Kissman's (1999) study regarding female mother offenders and drug use, the women reported that the primary motivation for substance abuse treatment was out of concern for their children. It was also noted in this study that substance abuse treatment in prison and during re-entry should be gender specific in order to meet the familial and emotional needs of women.

Vigilante, Flynn, Affleck, Stunkle, Merriman, Flanigan, et. al. (1999) conducted a study on a female-only substance abuse treatment program. This study revealed that inmates with substance abuse problems who receive pre-release treatment were less likely to exhibit a rapid return to prison than those who did not receive pre-release treatment. Furthermore, inmates who were able to form trusting, therapeutic relationships that offered continued support in their post-prison lives, reduced their rates of drug-related crimes after release. Women who participated in this program had a 12 percent reduction in the 12-month

recidivism rate and a 13.5 percent reduction in the three-month recidivism rate

(Vigilante, et. al., 1999). It is clear that gender-specific substance abuse treatment

programs are effective, and it is therefore essential that more of these types of

programs be implemented, especially since women offenders rarely seek

treatment after re-entering society. Greenfield and Snell (1999) found that only 20

percent of women who self-identify as substance abusers seek treatment upon

release from prison. It is important that female offenders with substance abuse

problems receive treatment while incarcerated and that they continue treatment

as they integrate back into their communities. Since these women often

encounter hardship, supportive relationships, and healthy strategies for coping

with the challenges of re-entry are essential for ensuring success. Unfortunately,

many women prisoners report turning to drug related activity because of

overwhelming economic struggles.

One of the profound differences between crimes committed by men and

women is that women often commit crimes in order to cope with poverty (Daly,

1994). Daly describes these types of women offenders as being "economically

motivated" (p. 48). Some of the women committing crimes for economic reasons

are financially strained due to a lack of employment, while others hold full-time

jobs. Fletcher, Rolison and Moon (1993) reflect on the job history of the typical

female offender, stating that the average members of this population have

previous experience working as clerks in the area of sales and services. More specifically, they found that 54 percent of female inmates have held between one and three jobs during the year before their incarceration; 60 percent received welfare before incarceration; and 65 percent identified themselves as capable of performing service-oriented or clerical jobs.

Economics plays a pivotal role in recidivism. Studies indicate that poor women are more likely than non-poor women to violate probation or parole while under community supervision (Holtfreter, Reisig, & Morash, 2004). Unfortunately, there is little programming available for women to pursue regarding skills training and employment advice. When female offenders are released from prison without the needed education or job skills, they have a higher risk of recidivism (Schram, et. al., 2006). Additionally, many women offenders have the added stress of gaining economic stability so that they may take proper care of their families.

Approximately four out of five incarcerated women are mothers (Harm, 1992), and two thirds of these women have children under the age of 18 (Snell, 1994). Women who live behind bars have the unfortunate experience of being separated from their children. According to Greene, Haney, and Hurtado (2000) 70 percent of the mothers behind bars were their children's primary care givers before incarceration. While the mothers are in prison, children of female state

prison inmates are often cared for by a grandparent (52.9%), the other parent (28.0%), or some other relative (25.7%) (Mumola, 2000).

Female prisoners who are mothers have the added pressure of worrying about their children and living with limited contact while they are in prison. There is also a stigma associated with being an imprisoned mother. Many incarcerated mothers are labeled "bad mothers," which is often a painful experience for this group of women (Burkhardt, 1976). A study conducted by Mumola (2000) reported that 78 percent of mothers behind bars report weekly contact with their children; however, only 24 percent of female inmates report contact through personal visits. More specifically, on a more local level, 54 percent of mothers living in state facilities reported never having a personal visit with their children during their incarceration (Mumola, 1999).

Motherhood is an important concern for many women upon their release from prison. In Greene, Haney, and Hurtado's (2000) study of mothers behind bars, female inmates revealed through interviews the desperation of wanting to be united with their children. These women reported being, "good mothers and were determined to overcome the consequences of their traumatic experience and eventually provide homes for their children" (p. 15). The study went on to highlight the importance of female re-entry programs focusing on motherhood, citing the cycles of pain that were experienced by the mother and how these

pains are being passed on to their own children (Greene, Haney, & Hurtado, 2000). With re-entry in mind, learning to be a good mother can also help reduce recidivism. O'Brien (2001) found that the transition back into society is made smoother when women develop a positive, strong relationship with their children upon leaving prison.

The literature regarding women and their experiences with prison is rich, but not extensive; furthermore, it leads to a need for inquiring about the impacts these women's incarceration has had on their personal identities. From the review above, it is obvious that some of the major concerns regarding women entering society after incarceration are physical abuse, substance abuse, economic and housing struggles, and reuniting with their children. These are the problems most expansively identified in the literature. There are other issues as well, such as employment, mental health, and discrimination. Kenemore, and Roldan (2006) state that basic needs such as shelter, food, and employment are often denied to offenders. Women ex-offenders are often faced with realities that include the obstacles mentioned above. It is important to understand how these women make sense of their realities so that the essence of who they are can be explored.

Exploring Reality through Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism (SI) is an approach to research that considers the real. In 1937 Blumer coined the term symbolic interactionism to broadly mean an organizing system of thought (Blumer, 1969). This perspective focuses on the actual experiences of interpersonal interaction as the primary way of thinking about social organization. An interactionist perspective argues that social and individual phenomena can never be studied in isolation; rather, social and individual factors must be considered in tandem. (Thomas, 1951). Another central component to SI, especially in the works of Blumer and Thomas, is the notion that individuals are cognitively free from social control (Thomas, 1951), meaning that agency may be placed with the individual.

At the root of symbolic interaction lies the relationship between the individual and other individuals, the individual and society, and the individual and specific context. Cooley (1962) states that the "self and society are twin-born, we know one as immediately as we know the other, and the notion of a separate and independent ego is an illusion" (p. 5). For example, the societal problem of a growing female prisoner population is an issue faced in a larger cultural framework as well as on personal, individual levels. SI can be used in multiple traditions to explore many social and interpersonal phenomena.

Theory traditionally is used to explain and or predict phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Some scholars choose to use SI as a theory, but I consider SI to be a theoretical *perspective*. Joseph Gusfield, a former sociology graduate student from the Chicago School, and current researcher, states that SI "is not today a theory in the sense of a body of thought providing substantive generalizations or abstracted propositions about some social activity. There are no substantive predictions or explanations to which it confidently leads" (Gusfield, 2003, p. 121). This is a rearticulation of what Blumer stated on page one in *The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism* in 1969. Blumer refers to SI as an "approach" or a "position" for study (1969, p. 1), and Gusfield now uses the words "perspective" or "way of seeing" to conceptualize SI (Gusfield, 2003, p. 121).

Although symbolic interaction is an incredibly vast theoretical perspective, there are major tenets or assumptions that underline this way of thinking. SI emerged out of pragmatism-a framework that values the natural and individual elements of society. The elements of natural and individual that are relevant to SI are *context* and *self*. Dewey asserted that "society is of course but the relations of individuals to one another in this form and that. And all relations are interactions, not fixed molds" (Dewey, 1948, p. 436). This stresses the importance of specific interactions among individuals at specific times in a specific context. Symbolic interactionists interpret meaning in the situations

from which the interaction takes place, and meaning cannot be made outside that interaction and beyond the interactants (Rock, 1979). In other words, meaning is context-based.

There are three strategies that guide meaning-making for symbolic interactionists. First, "contextualised meaning cannot be appraised from outside the situation" (Rock, 1979, p. 84). This stresses the importance of context during an interaction. Second, "interactionists are variously exercised with the description of contents" (p. 85). Although SI does not emphasize systematic theory and generalizations, these theorists do place importance on a formalized description of the interaction and examine the rich detail about the social life of that being observed or understood. Third, SI understands that the world is dynamic and that thought and meaning shift throughout time, place and context (Mannheim, 1953). All of these strategies emphasize the importance of capturing and understanding the interaction and what is going on socially and contextually at the time of interaction. While context is central to the SI perspective, the individual constitutes as much or greater importance within this theoretical tradition.

Mead's (1934) concept of self in behavioral psychology has been used often in SI. Mead says the self is made up of a system of "habituated responses to an indefinitely large set of potential significant gestures, which may be made

within the perspective of the social group to which the individual possesses such a 'self' belongs" (p. 142). For Mead and other interactionists, the self does not exist outside of the social group in which one is engaged. Society structures the self, and not vice versa. Because self is made and constituted through its interactions with others, the self cannot by its nature create society. Mead (1934) continues to note that the "structure of the self expresses or reflects the general behavior pattern of this social group" (p. 164). Mead's notion of self represents one approach to SI, however, there are opposing perspectives to this position that I will discuss later.

Social control and socialization are also major tenets of SI. When it comes to socialization, Mead and Blumer see this concept differently. For Mead, an individual who is socialized into many social groups has a "greater capacity for innovative thoughts" and expressions because that individual has multiple opportunities to interact with multiple others, which allows for more than one world perspective (1934, p. 262). Social institutions do not have to be inflexible and rigid, but instead can foster individuality. According to Mead, social institutions in their very existence are a result of social attitudes and these social attitudes are what help individuals evolve into mature individual personalities. Since the self is a result of group or social interaction without social attitude and social institutions the full self would not be possible. A mature social self is a self

that internalizes social attitudes and social processes, which allows for individual agency. An understanding of the social attitude in a particular context enables the self to promote democratic forms of social organization, social change, and a shift in the social process. This means, that for Mead, social institutions are not "institutions [that] straightjacket individuals into social robots" but instead allow for change and individual agency (Lewis & Smith, 1980, p. 143).

Blumer thinks of socialization differently from Mead; however, individual agency is possible in Blumer's conception. He notes that socialization "sets conditions" for individuals' actions. Social structure is a "tool to be used" or an obstacle to be avoided in the process of constructing one's actions" (Blumer, 1969, p. 75). Here social processes are considered and Blumer's framework therefore acknowledges that an individual can make personal adjustments depending on the outcome of the interaction. In other words, for Blumer, the individual "never merges his or her identity with the social group" (Lewis & Smith, 1980, p. 173). This conception of socialization differs from that of Mead, who argues that individual identities can mold into a group identity.

During the process of socialization, social participants become engaged in what SI theorists refer to as the interactive process. The interactive process is of central importance to SI, since this is the location of meaning making activities. Individuals' personally constructed attitudes toward "things" impact their

actions toward and reactions to those "things." For example, a diamond ring on a woman's left ring finger is a simple object that carries multiple meanings for the woman wearing the ring and the individuals with whom she interacts. The ring may be a sign of class, commitment, lifestyle, etc. Blumer states that "individuals act towards things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them" (Blumer, 1969). Blumer says meaning is made for "me, " (in contrast to Mead's conception of meaning being constructed for the "we") and he goes on to argue that meaning is found in interpretation (Lewis & Smith, 1980, p. 174). In the interpretation process, one individual interprets another's behavior and evaluates what that behavior was intended to communicate and the effects that behavior has for the performer, as well the interpreter. If interpretation and meaning are the foundational elements of SI, it is conceivable that SI would be exposed to scholarly critique.

The first major limitation of the SI perspective deals with the notion of interpretation. As a researcher working from a SI framework, thick, detailed descriptions are important to fully understanding the culture being questioned. Clifford Geertz (1973) asserts that "it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described" (p. 14). These thick descriptions are then open to interpretation by the researcher. Researchers can make inaccurate interpretations, and what was maybe a mistake on the part of the

interactant may be interpreted as intentional by the researcher. When studying

interaction, the researcher must consider his/her own attitude, knowledge,

beliefs, and context. Some SI researchers discuss taking the role of the "other;"

however, Gusfield (2003) says we can only assume the role of the other and this

will in turn limit our interpretations. Since SI's main goal is to interpret the

social organizations and cultures among us, situating the self and acknowledging

the self in research is pertinent.

The second critique often seen in SI literature concerns the notion of

structure (Gusfield, 2003; Rock, 1979). Because SI focuses a great deal on culture,

social organization, and interaction, structure is not something to which SI

adheres. SI is centered around process and often ignores the consistencies that

are evident in many social structures. The SI perspective is against

generalizations and stereotypes; rather, its goal is to make sense of meaning-

making activities in their specific contexts. This perspective runs counter to many

methodological approaches in sociology, as many sociologists are looking for

patterns and norms among various groups of people. Durkheim, a pioneer of

sociology, noted that there are indeed "social facts" that are part of a society, as

well as fluid and changing components (Durkheim, 1951). Gusfield (2003) states

that in his research he must notice the structures that exist within cultures, for

without this acknowledgement a study cannot fully capture and/or understand the meaning of interactions within the studied group.

A final critique of the SI framework is traced historically and over time in this area of study. SI has made many changes over the years since Blumer coined the term in 1937 (Rock, 1979). These changes, some would argue, have not been systematic and continuous. Rock (1979) notes that the weak supervision of this theoretical perspective has allowed some problems to be forgotten or ignored. Since SI opposes systems and generalizations, the order that is present in many perspectives has been lost on SI over time. The SI tradition is a perspective that revolved around a great deal of oral tradition (Kuhn, 1972). There is an abundance of talk and tradition associated with the Chicago School and SI; unfortunately, many papers and documents were left unpublished. This oral aspect of the SI perspective is unusual in sociology and leaves future researchers with a sense of disorder at times. This chaotic nature of SI seemingly fits the writing style and premises of symbolic interactionists, but it does pose problems for thinking about a coherent body of literature that is used as a theoretical perspective.

A Feminist Approach to the Study of Female Ex-Offenders

Feminist theory is not one theory but many theories or perspectives (Tong, 1989). Feminist theory, as a perspective, attempts to describe the oppression of

women, explain its causes and consequences, and prescribe strategies for change or social reform. A feminist perspective highlights women's issues from a standpoint that remains invisible to traditional social science approaches (Hesse-Biber, 2007). This perspective regarding the experiences and oppression of women opens new angles of inquiry and allows for new research questions. Many feminists argue that traditional social science methods cannot adequately explore the daily lives of women. Some feminists state that the epistemologies of traditional social science do not view women as "agents of knowledge" and instead view men as the subjects and individuals with voices (Harding, 1997). "Feminists use a variety of qualitative styles, but share the assumptions held generally by qualitative or interpretative researchers that interpretative human actions, whether found in women's reports of experience or in the cultural products of reports of experience, can be the focus of research" (Olesen, 1994, p. 158). Since feminist theory is interested in the actual lived experiences of women, often times it is recommended or suggested that women researchers conduct this type of work. Women researchers doing women's work can produce a different type of knowledge and offer a different perspective from traditional research that is often dominated by males.

The feminist theory approach to research views subjects as knowledgeable participants who create, sustain, and maintain meaning based on their shared

experiences. Knowledge is found locally, within the research subject's experience; therefore, outside researchers and observers cannot speak *for* their research participants. Several activities are fundamental to feminist research: looking for how knowledge and power are built, exploring the actual experiences of women, learning how meaning is made, and searching for social reform throughout their research process**.** Many feminist theorists work with vulnerable and marginalized populations in order to bring voices to those who are silenced**.** In essence, uncovering these voices works to foreground individual identities that have traditionally existed on the margins.

Identity, in fact, is a major focus of feminist theory. As was previously mentioned, the focus of feminist research lies in meaning making and actual experiences. Through actual experiences, individuals form their identities. Hekman (1999) notes that in feminist theory, identity is seen as specific "marker" that can describe an individual's life at any given moment. Identity is seen as mostly fluid and as a quality that changes with a person's experiences and their specific situations. Life experiences provide individuals with standpoints from which to view the world and interpret their own realities. One approach to studying identity through a feminist lens is by employing standpoint theory.

Broadly, standpoint theories are interested in the engagement between individuals and groups (Hartsock, 1983). There are assumptions underlining this

theory that propose that there are perspectives in this society where the real

relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible"

(p. 285). These levels of visible and invisible realities can depict the "surface"

appearances of interactions as well as "indicate the logic by means of which the

appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality" (p. 285). In other words,

what may be dismissed as superficial representations may actually be reflexive of

more complex ontological realities of identity.

One cannot discuss standpoint theory without acknowledging the role

power plays in social interactions. Standpoint recognizes that power operates

between and within communities and groups, but the dominant group's power

can define for others what subordinate communities are in society. Societal

forces socially situate prisoners who have been incarcerated as a marginalized

group. The experiences, or standpoints, of this group are shaped by society's

attitudes and beliefs about who these individuals are, and how society should

interact with them. Standpoint theory provides researchers with a framework for

interpreting power relationships in social interactions.

While this framework provided by standpoint theory is an important step

to bringing marginalized social relationships into social view, it falls short of

focusing on the specific properties of gender as they relate to power. Feminist

standpoint is an attempt to fill this gap in traditional standpoint theory. Feminist

standpoint is very similar to the standpoint described above, however; now women are being situated in a societal structure that places them as inferior because of their status as women. Feminist standpoint allows women to be grouped because of their common experiences of oppression. Nancy Hartsock created feminist standpoint theory in the 1970s through the 1980s (Harding, 2004). Sandra Harding worked closely with Hartsock during these years, and it is Harding, in fact, who has published many of the theoretical discoveries that Hartstock developed. The role of this theory is to explicate relations of power that are gendered in particular ways. Feminist standpoint argues that "women occupy a subordinate position in a patriarchal culture that is structured by power relations, and that this position is qualitatively different from men's" (Winter, 1999, p. 35). This approach to standpoint was created with four goals in mind: to further explain the relationship between androcentric (male dominated) institutions and the production of androcentric knowledge, to highlight the research being done in the social sciences and biology that overtly utilized feminist politics, to provide a guide for future research, and to provide a resource of empowerment to marginalized populations. Standpoint focuses on the actual lived experiences of women and the meanings these women make out of their social interactions.

There are four themes in feminist standpoint research (Harding, 1987). First, power and knowledge are internally linked. This means that lived experiences, social interactions, and social location influence what individuals can and cannot know. Second, the ruler and ruled are often opposed. Third, the perceptions of the oppressor will most often be made real; meaning that society supports what is in the best interest of the dominant group. Fourth, when standpoint is achieved, liberation can occur. Each of these themes is concerned with the production of knowledge and how knowledge production is assessed and valuable or invaluable.

In order to assess the themes outlined by a feminist standpoint framework, women must be self-reflexive as members of a marginalized group. It is important to recognize that being a part of a marginalized group in itself does not guarantee a possession of standpoint. (Harding, 2004). Rather, a self or group analysis and reflection must be done for standpoint to be achieved. Furthermore, recognizing the existence of the group is insufficient; individuals must acknowledge collective oppressions among group members. It is the recognition of one's experiences and the meaning one has for those experiences that can enable social change.

Additionally, feminist standpoint values everyday lived experiences. By sharing individual experiences, group members can gain insight into their own

experiences, as well as the common oppressions shared by group members. This is what occurred during the women's movement in the 1970s when women came together in conscious raising groups and shared their individual stories. Their collective stories produced knowledge and a means for social change.

Feminist standpoint views the subject as knowledgeable and resists the methodological controls set forth by traditional social sciences. Humanistic research methods are used to understand women's standpoints. Feminist standpoint criticizes traditional social science for not recognizing its role in knowledge production. To recognize the role of knowledge production on the part of the researcher, the researcher must situate oneself in the research process.

Another quality of feminist standpoint theory includes recognizing that women, as a group, share the common experience of disadvantage in relation to men. This subordinate position places women at a standpoint where they are knowledgeable about male supremacy. Women ex-offenders often have been in past interpersonal relationships with men that have proven dysfunctional (Fletcher, Rolison and Moon, 1993). Oppressed groups have the unique position of understanding their lives as oppressed, while simultaneously knowing the life of the oppressor. This type of dual understanding allows women and other marginalized groups to possess some form of agency.

This agency can be referred to as "constrained agency" (p. 37). Winters (1999) describes how constrained agency "simultaneously grants women agency and recognizes that that agency occurs within restraints" (p. 37). This type of agency is important for the participants in this study because it recognizes that these women are marginalized beings in this society, however; they are not wholly determined by that external societal status.

Feminist standpoint is concerned with the notion of "stranger" and a status of "outsider within" (Pels, 1996). The idea of stranger, as it is referred to here, means a relationship exists within an element of society while concurrently being on the outside of society. For example, women play a major role in our society in family life, labor force, and other areas. Therefore, they are very much a part of society, while at the same time they remain marginalized because they are women. Women who have been in prison relate to a similar type of marginalized position. Some of the women who have been incarcerated may be oppressed more at certain times than at others. This type of "double vision" allows for these women to know the realities of being oppressed in multiple ways, while also, on occasion, being a part of the oppressed group.

The last aspect of feminist standpoint detailed here deals with two differing stances on feminist standpoint epistemology. Collins (1990) views feminist standpoint as a relational identity. Identity is tied to that of a group or

community. From this perspective, shared experiences bond women and produce an identity that cannot be separated from the group. The second epistemological standpoint values the individual identity (Smith, 1992). From this stance, identity is fluid and contextual. A woman can have different layers of identity at different points in time. Identity shifts across time, space, and groups. This conceptualization of identity is important to the current study because the identities of female ex-offenders may be layered and revealed in strategic behaviors through tactical communication processes.

<p style="text-align:center">Concluding Narrative</p>

Current issues studied in the research regarding female offenders, symbolic interaction, and feminist approaches to research inform this study. These perspectives work in tandem to provide an overarching lens to the study of identity among women who have been incarcerated. Symbolic interaction is important in understanding identity because of its focus on social interaction. In this study it is used to provide a historical lens to how identity is questioned and investigated in the current research project. Feminist research provides a guide for exploring the issues and identities of women in a manner that may not have been possible with traditional research approaches. I will now briefly discuss how each of these frameworks will benefit my study of incarcerated women. Women do not enter prison as blank slates, rather, they bring with them a

multitude of life experiences, just as those who eventually leave the prison walls will take with them prison-based experiences. All of these stages of life impact the ways in which these women interact within the given culture and social organizations. Using the SI perspective, I can better understand and make meanings of this complex network of individual experiences. By gaining knowledge about female ex-offenders' interpretations of experiences, the identities of these women may be revealed. Additionally, a symbolic interactionist's framework provides me with an approach to exploring the interpretations of female ex-offenders' realities, thus illuminating how women who have been incarcerated negotiate their role in this society. Symbolic interactionism is suitable for investigating the knowledge, or standpoint, possessed by this group of oppressed women offenders in the hopes that this knowledge-building process will reveal to women their own agency.

My use of symbolic interaction in this study is complemented by the feminist standpoint approach. Feminist standpoint focuses on the knowledge that has been gained by women who have experienced oppression. Since oppression is actualized in social interactions, feminist standpoint requires that women with common oppressions be self-reflexive of their interactions in order to realize that agency and change are possible. Self-reflexivity is important for the participants of this study, because these women exist on the margins of

dominant society and therefore may not recognize their own oppressions, as well as their own agency.

The focus of this study is to learn more about the female ex-offender as an identity and how that identity is enacted and self-described. In learning more about how prison has impacted the lives of women ex-offenders, this study can contribute to the communication literature regarding identity, and perhaps, most importantly, offer insight to programs for ex-offenders. Such insights may aid programs and facilities in developing strategies for helping this population complete a smoother and more productive transition back into their communities. Here, women ex-offenders are asked questions about who they are and how they situate themselves in a culture that often negatively stereotypes women who have been incarcerated. These women get to share their own stories in their own words.

CHAPTER III: UNVEILING HER WORDS AND THEIR MEANINGS USING

INTERVIEWS AND GROUNDED THEORY

Supported by interpretative and feminist perspectives, this study is an

exploration and analysis of women living in two transitional facilities in Ohio.

More specifically, this study emphasizes the identities of women who have been

incarcerated. Ethnography and semi-structured in-depth interviews are

conducted with the women living in these facilities in order to understand better

how these women's identities have been affected as a result of imprisonment.

This study will begin with the following questions:

RQ1: What life experiences do these female ex-offenders cite as having

contributed to their convictions?

RQ2: How does incarceration affect the lives of female ex-offenders?

RQ3: How do female ex-offenders discuss (or communicate) their

identities as women?

RQ4: How do female ex-offenders reconcile their self-perceptions with the

labels commonly attributed to female prisoners by society?

RQ5: What are the needs of female ex-offenders after incarceration?

Eleven in-depth interviews and ethnographic field notes comprise the

information-gathering strategies of this study. After transcribing the interviews,

the methods of grounded theory are used to analyze the information gathered

(Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

<div align="center">Interviewing</div>

Qualitative, and more specifically, naturalistic forms of information

gathering are utilized in this study. Naturalistic modes of research may be more

suitable than other forms of research inquiry when the focus of the study is to

gain an increased understanding of questions about power, culture, and

interpretation (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Furthermore, naturalistic inquiry is a

reflexive process on the part of the researcher and the research participant. This

mode of inquiry is suitable for interpretative and feminist approaches to research

because value is placed on the context, culture, and interactions of individuals or

groups, while preserving "situated accounts of human experiences" (p. 57).

Interviewing is one method that allows researchers to dialogue with individual

participants about their particular experiences and interactions.

In order to gain a deeper analysis of the layers of identities held by the

women participating in this study, semi-structured in-depth interviews are used.

McCracken's (1988) long interview serves as a guide for constructing the

questionnaire and conducting the interview process. The long interview is

beneficial when a researcher is investigating cultural assumptions, themes, or

categories, and when complete immersion into the location of study is not

possible. In this study, it is not possible that I, as a researcher, can completely immerse myself in the worlds of the study participants; therefore, the study of women ex-offenders' cultures and identities can be explored through the techniques of interviewing. This method of inquiry involves a dialogue between the researcher and an individual respondent, who ideally is chosen from a diverse pool of participants. The importance of diverse standpoints and the intersections of race, class, gender in the interviewee sample set forth by McCracken work in tandem with the fundamentals of feminist research (Olesen, 1994). While it may not be possible in this research setting to represent all voices within the diverse prison population, this study values the diverse standpoints offered by those who do participate.

The long interview (McCracken, 1988) is a valuable qualitative research method that proposes that the researcher use prior knowledge and experiences to explore patterns and themes and to elicit responses from the research participants in an unobtrusive manner. When using the long interview as a guide to inquiry, the researcher wants the respondent to feel comfortable and open. McCracken notes that a good rapport that includes trust between the researcher and interviewee is important; however, a distance should be maintained to ensure that the researcher can think critically about the questions asked and responses given, and so that mundane aspects of the respondents'

lives and culture may be further examined. It is the interviewer's responsibility to set the tone and provide direction for the interview. A questionnaire guide is used to achieve this direction. There are four functions of a questionnaire. First, the questionnaire enables the researcher to cover all of the desired terrain in the interview, in the same order, with all respondents. Second, it provides an overall scope of the direction the interview will take. Third, the questionnaire enables the researcher to prepare questions that prompt critical thinking about the respondents' narratives and ensure that a distance between the interviewer and interviewee is maintained. Fourth, the questionnaire helps the researcher to focus their attention on the interviewees' responses at all times. This study recognizes that paraphrasing on the part of the interviewer can miss important elements of the interviewee's story and this can lead to a misinterpretation in meaning. In response, this study employs the use of audio-tapes to ensure that all aspects of the interview process are captured.

Four steps of inquiry that oversee the entire process from start to finish guide the long interview. The first step that was completed involved completing an exhaustive literature review. The literature review aids in the construction of the interview questionnaire. The second step of inquiry involves a self-analysis of the researcher in relation to the research process. The researcher must consider what prior knowledge they have about the topic being explored, what their

attitudes and beliefs are about the topic, how their relationship with the subjects will impact the interview, and what role they will play in knowledge production. This process is consistent with a feminist approach to research. Steps one and two enable the researcher to begin step three, the construction of the interview questionnaire.

The interview questionnaire consists of three types of questions that guide the actual interview, all of which are included in this study. The first sets of questions included are the "grand tour" questions. These questions are large, overarching questions that broadly inquire about major topics or areas. A grand tour question may motivate an interviewee to begin telling her story and the interview process may proceed from there. The second type of questions included in this style of interviewing are the floating prompts. These are smaller questions that may include non-verbals, which lead the interviewee to continue with her story. The last type of questions constructed on the questionnaire is planned prompts. These questions may possibly be used after the grand tour questions if the interviewee is having difficulty answering questions in the interview.

The long interview entails four basic steps that are adhered to in this study (McCracken, 1988). First, the researcher must begin the interview with a warm welcome to ensure that the interviewee is comfortable telling her story.

Nonverbals such as eye contact, posture, dress, and/or facial expressions may be used to ease the interviewee's apprehension. After the initial welcoming, the interviewer proceeds to the second basic step that includes asking biographical questions. The biographical questions serve to begin the interview at a surface level, which can then lead to more complex, deeper questions. Biographical questions provide the researcher with important information while simultaneously helping to put the interviewee at ease. Once the biographical questions are completed, the third step begins the heart of the interview, the grand tour questions. Planned and floating prompts may be used in this stage to elicit more responses from the respondent. The third step coincides with the fourth step of the interview process, which is to be an attentive researcher who is listening for assumptions that may be present in the interviewee's responses. These assumptions should be further questioned and analyzed so that the researcher may gain a greater understanding of the interviewee's story. The final stage of this process involves closing the interview. The researcher must be respectful, thanking the respondent for her time and assistance, while also leaving the opportunity open that further communication may be necessary for clarification, as well as accurate representations and interpretations.

In interpretative qualitative research, it is important to maintain quality throughout the interview. McCracken (1988) provides suggestions that can aid in

the quality of the interview process. The researcher should be thorough in her

data analysis, meaning that the audience is left with minimal assumptions, and

the data analysis should be organized and logical. Additionally, the researcher

should make the interview process externally consistent by asking each

respondent the same questions in the same order. Lastly, the researcher should

pose questions and thoughts for future research. These steps help to ensure that

the qualitative research process is systematic and remain dedicated to the stories

shared by the interview respondents. Utilizing McCracken's guides for

questionnaire construction, the interview process, and quality interviews will

enable the data to be analyzed using the procedures set forth by grounded

theory.

<div align="center">Analyzing Data Using Grounded Theory</div>

As mentioned previously, this study involves understanding the identities

of women who have been incarcerated using an interpretive and feminist

approach. As Crooks (2001) points out, grounded theory is unique in its

sensitivity to research participants: "Grounded theory is a respectful

methodology in which the participants' views are sought, listened to, and

valued" (p.17). In this methodology, theory derives from categories and themes

that emerge through data collection. Grounded theory is defined as a theory that

is derived from a set of data that was systematically gathered and analyzed and is a valuable methodology when using interpretive and feminist perspectives.

Developed in the 1960s by sociologists Glaser and Strauss, this qualitative approach to methodology was born out of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism (Charmaz, 2006). Glaser and Strauss developed grounded theory while working together, but in later years, the two split to pursue individual research interests. In the early 1990s, Strauss and Corbin published *Basics of Qualitative Research (1993),* which was an attempt to explain more easily Strauss's views regarding the basics of grounded theory (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) explain that the strength of grounded theory is that it produces theories that derive directly from data, which results in theories that more closely reflect reality. Grounded theory is relevant for data analysis in this study because meaning and interpretation are significant elements to this approach, and it is through meaning making and the interpretation of experiences that identity is created.

Symbolic interactionists believe that meaning is created through social interaction (Blumer, 1969). Grounded theory provides a way to think about studying how meaning is made and better understanding how individuals interpret their social worlds. Grounded theory seeks to interpret the meanings that are placed on social interactions. Glaser once said, "Reality exists in the

data." Strauss and Corbin later corrected this and stated that "reality cannot actually exist—it can only be interpreted" (Dey, 1999). Grounded theory works to find those interpretations.

A grounded theory methodology uses fieldwork to find basic forms of social life. It places a high value on its research subjects and seeks to be faithful to their experiences. Grounded theory values multiple interpretations of meaning and therefore is structured around a theory-building process that requires interpretation at multiple stages. There are four steps in the grounded theory process outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). Step one involves open-coding. This process begins as soon as any data or information has been gathered in the research process. At this stage each utterance and/or phenomenon is studied in isolation. The utterance is given a temporary label. In step two, there is a deeper analysis of the data. The first set of labels is studied in relationship to one another and the researcher looks for themes to emerge. These themes are collapsed into categories. This would be the end of data analysis in a single research study. Grounded theory, however, is interested in creating new theories derived from data collection so researchers would proceed to steps three and four. Step three includes conducting a series of multiple empirical studies concerned with the same phenomenon. Here substantive theories can be made. Step four is the final step that synthesizes all the individual research studies and

substantive theories to create a formal theory. Grounded theory is therefore an approach for the study of identity formation in the context of social processes.

There are numerous studies in the communication discipline that use grounded theory methodology. In 2003, Chen and Isa conducted a study that sought to uncover meanings "embedded in the feelings and reflections of visiting Japanese students' accounts of their daily activities in the United States" (p. 75). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 college students who were attending a private university located in a major Japanese city, and who were visiting a university in the United States. Using the process of grounded theory set forth by Strauss and Corbin (1998), these researchers found seven themes that were related to the learning of cultures through intercultural interactions. With these themes in mind, these authors proposed a grounded theory model for cultural learning.

In another study published in the communication discipline, researchers used grounded theory to explore late-adolescents' responses to "parents' direct requests for information about a topic that the adolescent was trying to avoid" (Mazur & Hubbard, 2004). Open-ended questions were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, and through this process, 12 topic avoidant responses were revealed.

More recently, Becker and Stamp (2005) used a grounded theory approach to examine "impression management and misrepresentation in chat rooms from the vantage point of ten chat room participants" (p. 243). Through the use of grounded theory, these authors were able to create a model that revealed the motivations for impression management, the strategies used while in the chat rooms, and the goals that were achieved through the impression management process. These authors argue that grounded theory provided a framework to represent the "chat room participants' experiences in a meaningful and coherent way" (Becker & Stamp, 2005, p. 243).

The goal of this study coincides with the argument made above by Becker and Stamp (2005). It is important that the experiences of female ex-offenders be represented as accurately as possible. Several layers of identity are often personal constructs for individuals. Grounded theory can provide a mode of data analysis that values these personal representations. For instance, Harter, Berquist, Titsworth, Novak, and Brokaw (2005) conducted a research study that examined the stigma and identity construction of the "hidden homeless" (p. 305). Narratives were collected through in-depth interviews with educators and case managers at programs for youths without homes, and focus groups were conducted with the youth participants. Grounded theory was used to conduct an analysis of the information collected because it offered the researchers an

opportunity to systematically analyze the data, identify themes among the responses, and integrate the voices of the diverse participants throughout the results.

Similarly, Lee (2006) conducted another study in the communication discipline that employed a grounded theory approach for the exploration of identity. Here, intercultural friendships were examined to determine the strategies that shape the construction of relational identity. Turning-points in the relationship process were the focus of this study. Forty-five interviews were conducted with individuals who described themselves as being in an intercultural dyad. The use of grounded theory revealed seven types of activities that were related to the construction of relational identity. These major categories are important, the author argues, for advancing "our understanding of the development and maintenance in intercultural friendships" (Lee, 2006, p. 3).

Each of the articles briefly mentioned above are communication studies that utilize the process of grounded theory for gaining insight into a specific group of participants' thoughts, attitudes, and/or feelings about a particular phenomenon. The studies described highlight the value that is gained by using a grounded theory approach. Each of the studies reviewed demonstrated that qualitative methods, supported by a grounded theory methodological framework, are beneficial to the study of communication. The study proposed

here reflects these notions; however, discussing how feminist scholarship supports a grounded theory methodology can further this argument.

Keddy, Sims, and Stern (1996) argue that grounded theory lends itself to feminist research. These authors note that feminist scholarship is "creative and evolving" (Keddy, Sims, & Stern, 1996. p. 450); hence doing new ways of science, such as a grounded theory methodology, is valuable. Feminist researchers are interested in deep, complex issues surrounding women, and grounded theory allows for a "complex analysis to complex questions" (p. 450). The original thoughts of Glaser and Strauss regarding grounded theory were that this methodology could provide fluid and constant comparisons of data; however, over recent years users of this methodological process have analyzed data in a linear progression. Feminist scholars, using grounded theory, can adhere to Glaser and Strauss's original notion of an untidy and nonlinear mode of data analysis. Keddy, Sims, and Stern (1996) describe the fluidity of grounded theory as being as "messy as preparing a gourmet meal, where all the parts need to come together at the end" (p. 450). Kirby and McKenna (1989) agree that grounded theory is useful for feminist research practices. These authors refer to pieces of data as "bibbits" that can be cut into separate pieces of information and then data may be analyzed from multiple directions, considering various factors and a linear progression is no longer the result.

Clarke (2007) notes that grounded theory is implicitly feminist in the following ways: it is interested in meaning and interpretation, it does not believe in universal truths, interpretations must be situated contextually, it views identity as being socially constructed through social interactions, and it is open to meaning being interpreted in multiple ways, using multiple methods. Each of the qualities listed here by Clark reflect the characteristics that were discussed separately in the previous sections on symbolic interactionism, feminist research, and grounded theory.

A continuation of the argument is found in Kushner and Morrow's (2003) essay regarding the triangulation between grounded theory, feminist theory, and critical theory. These authors contend that the symbolic interactionist approach that coincides with grounded theory does not offer "any specific guidelines with respect to research priorities, theoretical presuppositions, or normative standpoints" (Kushner & Morrow, 2003, p. 37). Furthermore, an interactionist's perspective alone is not suitable for inquiring about issues of power, alienation or domination. Instead, grounded theory, broadened to include the assumptions inherent in feminist research, may allow structural influences and social processes to be explored through a lens that engages the interests of feminist theorists. Grounded theory currently purports that: research should be useful to participants; participants are agents of knowledge; research methods should be

non-oppressive; and reflexivity is important on the part of the researcher. Each of these elements of grounded theory is in tandem with the fundamentals of feminist inquiry.

There are current published feminist works that use grounded theory. For example, Merritt-Gray and Wuest (1995) conducted a study that focused on a group of women who were leaving abusive relationships. Feminist and symbolic interactionist perspectives supported these authors' theoretical and methodological assumptions. Interpretations of the participants' experiences in social processes, the acknowledgment of individual agency, and the influences of social structures were all discussed in this study.

In another study where symbolic interactionism and feminist perspectives were apparent in the research, Kushner and Harrison (2002) developed a grounded theory of finding a balance in personal and family health decisions that integrated various contexts of women employed in working class conditions. Here, the authors focused on the social roles of the individual participants, and how meaning was created for participants, while simultaneously emphasizing social institutions of motherhood, being a *good* worker, and health. Symbolic interactionism, grounded theory, and feminist assumptions were all present in this study.

It is argued in this study that symbolic interaction, grounded theory, and feminist research methods complement one another in a research study. Examples and arguments were provided above. This current study uses symbolic interactionism as a way to understand the lived realities of female ex-offenders residing in transitional facilities. Feminist standpoint complements symbolic interactionism by acknowledging that there are: common oppressions among groups of women, social structures that constrain and influence experiences, and responsibilities as a researcher to be reflexive in the research processes. Grounded theory, as detailed above, offers a mode of data analysis that can aid in revealing the common themes of identity present among the participants' stories, while also providing an opportunity for the diverse voices of the research participants to be heard.

Description of the Study

In order to complete the study proposed here, there are multiple steps and processes that must be completed. I have described the rationale, theoretical framework, and methodology; now I will detail the steps I completed in order to gather and analyze data for this study.

Who Am I in This Study?

Feminist methodologies, which are used in this study, call for the researcher to think reflexively about who they are in their role in the study and

what assumptions they bring concerning the people and issues involved in the research process (Harding, 1997, Harding 2004). "To be reflexive is to have an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living in the moment" (Hertz, 1997, p. viii). Hertz summarizes the notion of reflexivity by examining two thoughts: " what I know" and "how I know it" (p. viii). In my role as a researcher who is working with women ex-offenders, a population that I had virtually no prior physical contact with, I knew that I had assumptions about this group of women based on my cultural experiences, media influences, and initial research in this area.

I remember being very nervous the first time I arrived at each program site where I was to begin my research. Was I going to stand out from everyone else at this site? Were my soon-to-be research participants going to think of me as just one more person trying to exploit them? Was I going to be viewed as a naïve, young, white, middle class, educated woman who had no idea about the types of lives many of these women had led? All of these questions, and many more were running through my head. Reinharz (1997) says that when we, as researchers, show up in the field we bring a variety of selves. In her own study, Reinharz identified approximately 20 different selves that were revealed throughout the duration of one research project (1997). I know that for myself, I thought I was showing up solely as a researcher, but through the duration of this

project, I found that I had multiple selves. I was a friend when chatting with Lindsey about in-door tanning, I was a daughter-figure when discussing with Sharon how her own daughter (who was the same age as me) was trying to come visit her for the first time since mom left prison. I was someone just simply trying to understand what life is like being thrust back into society after serving a long prison sentence when I learned from Gwynn each week taking her to and from work. I now see that I was a student, friend, researcher, outsider, insider, voyeur, and many more selves throughout this process.

Reinharz (1997) goes on to discuss that most of our selves that appear during the research process can be categorized into three different groups: "research based selves," who we are when listening, gathering field notes, learning to gain entry into a research site and learning to leave the field. We are also "brought selves": this includes the baggage and identifiers that we bring with us into the field. For example, I brought with me being an only-child, a Christian, a white woman, a student, an American, and many other identifiers that I can use to describe me. In addition to the research self and brought self, we are finally "situationally created selves." This self is who we are in the moment of research. This self is temporary and flexible depending on where we are, who surrounds us, and what we are engaged in at a particular time. In my experience with this current research study the situationally created selves are what I

constantly return to in my own thought process in order to determine how I gained entry into two very protected and closed off worlds, how I built relationships with several of my research participants, and how I balanced my research self and brought self.

Who I am in this study is an ongoing learning process. The more I think about how I see the world, why I asked the research questions I asked, and how I came to the conclusions drawn from the respondents' interview questions the more befuddled I become. I now realize that as much as I focus on who I am in this study, there is a whole other construction of self based on who I am not. In relationship to the participants in this study, I am not a recovering addict, I am not a survivor of sexual, physical or emotional abuse, I am not an ex-offender, I am not a victim of domestic violence, and I am not someone who society often shuns and negatively stereotypes. As much as I must consider who I am in this research process, I am now beginning to consider who I am not, and for the purpose of providing a space for the voice of women ex-offenders this too adds to the perplexity of understanding what is revealed and what isn't, what voice is heard, and whose voice isn't. The search and reflexivity involved as a researcher is complex and ongoing. It is something that I will continue to build on as I continue my work with this group of women, however; there are many aspects of this project that are more concrete and have been completed in order to get

this research accomplished. I will start from the beginning with generating my research topic.

<div align="center">Narrowing a Topic and Finding Two Dissertation Sites</div>

My topic was learning about the experiences of women who have been incarcerated. I then narrowed this topic to focus on how female ex-offenders perceive their identities. After my topic had been narrowed, I began the arduous task of finding possible research sites. I conducted extensive research regarding transitional housing for women ex-offenders in the state in which I lived. As a doctoral student, it was important that I was within driving distance from the university to my dissertation sites. After a great deal of digging on the Internet and sending out multiple letters to program directors, I secured meetings with two transitional housing programs.

Hope's House, a program for women with substance abuse addiction is located in northern Ohio and housed approximately 10 women during my time there. These women came to Hope House after hearing about this program on the streets, after leaving another substance abuse treatment program, or after learning about this program while incarcerated. Each program participant must submit an application to be considered for joining the program, and then a program director conducts a one-on-one interview with each possible participant to determine if Hope's House is a right fit for the needs of the applicant. The

focus of Hope's House is to aid women with substance abuse addictions, however, I wanted to conduct research there because most of the women in the program had been incarcerated at some time in their lives.

Hope's House is located in an old home in the downtown, urban district of a city in Ohio. The area where this program is located appears to be aging and run-down. The house itself is a large old home with many rooms, a kitchen, living room, and two bathrooms. The formal living and dining rooms of this house have been turned into the Hope's House staffs' offices. The home is dark, with old, dark, wood paneling, and the furniture in the house is mismatched, and appears to have been pieced together from donations. When entering the house, the front door is always locked and a sign is posted on the door stating that no fire arms are allowed. Anyone entering the house must first ring a doorbell, and a program resident or staff person will come to the door to determine if one can enter the home. The house is inconspicuous as a treatment or re-entry program, as there are no signs posted on the exterior stating that this is Hope's House. The house appears to be just another residential home on the street in this old, diminishing neighborhood.

In this program the women spend most of their days in classes learning about themselves and recovery. I sent an initial letter via email and postal mail to the program director expressing my interests in learning from the women in

their program. After a one hour meeting it was decided that I could conduct my

research there. I spent one day a week for 11 weeks visiting the program,

attending group meetings, hanging around the house with the women, and

finally during the last two weeks interviewing two of the residents. Only two

residents were interviewed in this program because only two of them had

recently been incarcerated.   Although I physically spent a great deal of time at

Hope's House I often felt that I was an outsider and that I never fully gained

entry into the community. This feeling of not fitting in at Hope's House is in

stark contrast to my feeling of acceptance at Faith's House.

The second program where I conducted research for this project was at

Faith's House, a faith-based transitional program for women leaving prisons in

Ohio. The women enter Faith's House immediately after living the walls of

prison. While they are incarcerated, the possible program participants must

attend the Faith's House bible study conducted in the prison by the director of

Faith's House. After attending the bible study for at least three months before

exiting prison, the offender can submit an application to enter Faith's House

upon her release and then it will be determined if she will be admitted to the re-

entry program. It is important to note that Faith's House has never had to turn

one woman away from entering the program. The only pre-requisites for

receiving admission is to attend bible study in prison, pray that this is the right

path for you, and complete an application. There has always been room at the program for any woman who has completed the pre-requisites and decided that Faith's House is right for her.

Faith's House is located in an urban area of central Ohio and has its offices located in an area church. Faith's House is comprised of several buildings. There are two residential houses, where the program participants live, and there is a church where the Faith's House director's office is located and where several Faith' House meetings are held. The neighborhood where Faith's House is situated is in a close-knit community in a poverty-stricken area of the city. I was warned by many of the church staffers to never leave valuable items in my car and to always lock my car doors and be on alert when walking from the parking lot to the church doors.

The church and two Faith's House residential homes are located within one block of one another. The two houses appear to be regular residential homes, with no signs or other indications provided that these are homes for women ex-offenders. Both of the houses are very old, but the church and volunteers for Faith's House have worked hard to keep the houses in good condition. Approximately four to five program residents, and one resident program coordinator reside in each house at any given time. The doors of each house have a keypad lock system so that the women living in each house can enter and

exit without a key, but guests and others must be greeted at the door. Both of the Faith's House homes have a very comfortable atmosphere. Many of the residents that I spoke with mentioned that these program houses were in fact their homes.

At the time of my research, Faith's House had nine women participating in their program. This program is designed to help women ex-offenders succeed in the areas of spiritual formation, substance abuse recovery, employment, life skills, and financial freedom.   After sending the director a letter requesting permission to discuss the possibility of conducting my research at Faith's House, I had a meeting with her and she granted me access into their community.

I spent one day each week for 15 weeks at Faith's House. My days at Faith's House were spent taking the Faith's House women to and from work and on other errands that required transportation. I taught one program resident to use a computer after being incarcerated for 16 years. I had the rare privilege of attending their weekly community meeting where the women vulnerably and openly discussed their feelings and experiences of the past week. I also aided the director with administrative tasks because this positioned me to learn more about the program's operations and dealings with the women residents. During my time at Faith's House I often felt I was a part of their community. The program director made a great effort to put me in constant contact with the

program residents and to teach me all that she could about how their program operated and the daily lives of the women in Faith's House.

After about 12 weeks of spending time with the residents, I began asking the women if they would let me interview them. All of the women who were currently in the program except two granted me an interview, and two women who had completed the Faith's House program participated in interviews. I felt that I had gained a trusting rapport with the residents by this time.

Although each program director provided me with the opportunity to conduct my research at their programs, I still had to handle my initial entry into each program with sensitivity. Each program director introduced me to the participants at a time when all of the women residents were present. The facility directors and I explained to the potential participants that I was conducting a research study. I explained that as a doctoral student I would be volunteering and requesting interviews with the women who live in the programs' housing. During my time of observing and volunteering, I took a great deal of ethnographic field notes of my observations. At this stage in the study, I did not need written consent from the participants; therefore, I did not directly quote or provide any attribution to the data collected during this time.

As it came time to conduct my interviews, I casually asked the program residents at both programs if they would be willing to participate in a one-on-

one, audio-taped, semi-structured, in-depth interview. I asked each research

participant separately at a time when I felt that my relationship with them had

reached an honest and open stage.

All eleven interviews were conducted at the program facilities in a place

that was quiet and private. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes in

length and was audio-tape recorded. The participants were read aloud a consent

form and each participant gave written consent before any interviews were

conducted. Each interview participant was given the option of using no name

during the interview, using a pseudonym, or using their real names during the

interview process and the written research. All of the research participants

requested to have their real first names used in this study.

During the interviews I used a list of interview questions that were

approved by the Human Subjects Research Board (see Appendix A). This list of

questions served as a guide for the interview process; however, additional

questions were asked when needed.

Once all of the interviews were completed, I transcribed the interview

tapes and began data analysis using the coding processes outlined by grounded

theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Initial coding of the interviewees' answers

began immediately and was followed by a more in-depth analysis. This process

of data analysis included identifying themes that were present among the

responses provided by the interviewees. The themes and categories that emerged

provided a better understanding about the identities of women who have been

incarcerated and how they negotiate their layers of identity (Hecht, 1993).

    I present the findings from the data analysis in Chapter 4 of this

dissertation. The participants in this study have the opportunity to review my

findings to determine if their stories are represented and interpreted in an

appropriate manner. The findings of this study are not only important for future

academic scholarship but may also assist in developing strategies that aid

women ex-offenders in transitioning successfully back into their communities.

CHAPTER IV: WHAT SHE REALLY SAID: A DATA ANALYSIS

The findings of this study are based on interviews conducted with eleven female ex-offenders and ethnographic notes taken during my time spent at each of my dissertation sites. This study was designed to gain a better understanding of the identities of female ex-offenders in the United States. Based on the guidelines of grounded theory (as were discussed previously), I have analyzed the data collected for this study and determined common themes that are present in the answers provided by the research participants. Although grounded theory and ethnography are methodologies that are messy and appear to be unsystematic, fluid and permeable categories can be derived from the data. The following pages will systematically address each research question and the themes related to each particular question. The final themes discussed here are apparent only after several layers of data coding that first involved coding at a surface level, followed by a deeper analysis of categories, that are now collapsed into the final themes described below.

Life Experiences that Lead to Prison

One of the first steps to understanding the lives of female ex-offenders is to uncover how they feel their life experiences led them to commit crimes that sent them to prison. In the review of the literature completed in the beginning of this study, previous research characterized female offenders as women who are

often mothers, sexually, physically and/or emotionally abused, substance abusers, and unemployed (Fletcher, Dixon, & Moon, 1993). The themes revealed in this study are consistent with those mentioned in previous research. The first research question in this study is, "What life experiences do these female offenders cite as having contributed to their convictions?" There are three themes associated with this topic: (1) being abused as a child, (2) unhealthy relationships with men, and (3) substance abuse.

The Abuse of a Child

The first life experience that the women in this study cite as leading them to incarceration is being abused physically, emotionally, and/or sexually as a child. Previous research describes how many women offenders are victims of abuse. This characterization was described by many of the women in this study.

Birdie, who is in her 50s and now a resident director at one of the research sites, spent most of her life since the age of 14 in an institution. She began her story with being sent to a "Christian home" for troubled girls when she was pregnant at 14. "It was a very abusive situation. I had been physically abused, mentally abused, and I was emotionally traumatized beyond belief. I am not saying that that created all of my problems, but that is what was going on." In another section of the interview Birdie also discussed being abused by her grandmother as a little girl. Birdie describes herself as a "tomboy" child and her

grandmother would force her to get dressed in "princess" dresses and then her grandmother would kiss her in an inappropriate manner. This abuse caused Birdie a great deal of pain in life. She was confused about relationships with women and what she thought was appropriate behavior and what was not.

Sharon was also abused as a child. She spent close to 16 years in prison for murder. She states, "I grew up in a very abusive situation. After my mom died, my grandmother had us and she was real, real abusive towards us. And being a kid and going through that kinda [sic] stuff you grow up thinking everybody is mean and nasty and you just have to…that is who you become. "

Melenee, a woman who has been incarcerated multiple times for drug-related charges and failure to pay child support, grew up in a foster system that she feels neglected her. She describes having "a lot of hurt and a lot of pain" in her life.

The Abuse of a Woman

The childhood abuse experienced by many of these women led most of them to build and maintain various types of dysfunctional relationships with men. This is the second theme associated with this research question. Previous research related to female offenders suggests that men have physically, emotionally, and/or sexually abused many of these women (Fletcher, Shaver, & Moon, 1993; Stuart & Brice-Baker, 2004). The findings here support that claim.

Shelly, a self-proclaimed sex addict who has been incarcerated once for charges related to drugs, says that men and feeling neglected as a child are what got her sent to prison. Shelly states, "Allowing men to persuade my thoughts instead of doing what I know was [sic] right…is why I went to prison." Shelly also discussed in her interview how she has almost relapsed twice and she claims this was because she was getting involved with men who were currently abusing drugs.

Trina, a woman who has been sentenced to prison seven times for robbery, theft, and other drug related crimes, details how her identity is connected to "pimps" and "hoes" on the streets. "I grew up with pimps, hoes and drug dealers all my life. My mother was a drug dealer and my auntie and uncles were pimps. My auntie was a hoe and when I was young that is what I wanted to be, I wanted to grow up being the biggest drug dealer in the world." Trina claims this led her to prostitute for much of her adult life to fund her drug addiction. Trina is now seeking a divorce from her husband of seven years who is serving a 16-year sentence in prison.

Amy, a 41-year-old recovering drug addict who has been incarcerated once, describes her life as being crime free and normal. She said she was raised in a healthy, ordinary family and led most of her adult life as a law-abiding, working citizen. In her late 30's, Amy became involved with a man who was a

recovering addict. During their relationship this man began using and selling

crack cocaine. Amy stayed in the relationship, and after years of being around

the drugs and not using them, she finally tried crack and became immediately

addicted.   In her addiction, Amy stole to support her drug habit. She is clear

that the decision to use drugs and to steal was her own, but that her boyfriend is

who introduced her to that lifestyle.

Birdie, who was pregnant at 14 and had her child "stolen" from her at the

"Christian" school at 15, experienced a very dysfunctional relationship with her

husband whom she married at 19. Birdie describes this relationship that began

in the late 1960s. " As soon as I got out of Riverview (prison), my parole agent let

me get married, and she took me off parole so I could move to California. She

told me I could get off parole and move to California if I got married. I found my

husband that night. I went hitch hiking over in the hood and found me a

husband. I didn't know he was a paranoid schizophrenic posing as a marine."

Birdie then details how this man physically abused her almost to the point of

death, and she escaped during the middle of the night with nothing.

Finally, Sharon spent most her adult life in prison for murdering a man

that she reports abused her. Much of the life story that she revealed to me

involved abuse from men and dysfunctional relationships that she had with men.

After being in one abusive marriage, she divorced and "started using men."

These multiple abusive relationships along with being abused early in her life, as Sharon describes, led her to commit murder.

The Abuse of a Drug

The final theme associated with experiences that these women attribute to their life of crime is substance abuse. Again, as previous research has detailed, many women offenders have substance abuse problems, and often their criminal charges are related to drug abuse.

Trina describes how as child she wanted to be the "biggest dope dealer in the world." She dealt drugs for several years and at the age of 18 she started smoking crack-cocaine. She was in and out of prison seven times because she would "come across some big money and I would start using."

Kim attributes her life of crime to alcohol. "Basically what happened was I started drinking after I had my son and that is when my alcoholism progressed. If I hadn't been in so much denial about what alcoholism was, I probably wouldn't have carried on for so many years and graduated to heavier drugs. " Kim lost custody of her four children, was incarcerated for multiple DUI charges, and resorted to prostitution to support her habit.

Lindsey, like most women in this study, began abusing drugs at an early age. "I started recreationally when I was like 13. I started smoking weed when I was like 14, and before I graduated, I was doing cocaine and pills. I had my

daughter when I was 20. Right after I had her is when I started with the Oxy (Oxycontin) and then I went into rehab for that, and got back out and was introduced to heroine…and then I did crack….” Lindsey was incarcerated for robbery and possession of cocaine, and she considers her mother to be the victim of her crime. In order to fund her drug addiction she stole from everyone, including her mother.

The women's stories overviewed here are similar to most of the women with whom I spoke. Of the 11 women who participated in this study, eight of them have been incarcerated for drug-related charges. These women explain how their experiences of abuse as children, their negative relationships with men, and their addiction to drugs all led them down paths of crime. Many of the women I spoke with do not use these experiences as excuses; they explain that these experiences are simply part of their life stories. Julia, whose father died of AIDS that was a result of a heroine addiction and whose mother was addicted to prescription pain medications states, “I can't use the way I grew up as an excuse. A lot of people do that, but we have choices.”

<center>Living with the Affects of Time Spent Behind Bars</center>

The focus of the second research question for this study is related to the effects incarceration has had on the lives of the female ex-offenders participating in this study. The responses related to this question were overwhelmingly

positive. The participants revealed three major themes connected to the impact incarceration has had on their lives: (1) prison was a place where a sense of self was found; (2) prison brought me closer to God; and (3) prison saved my life. The women in this study were clear that they did not want to return to prison, however; they communicate a very altruistic feeling associated with the effects incarceration has had on their lives.

Finding Oneself

Lindsey, a young woman in her 20's, who has been incarcerated once, says, "I worked on myself from the time I was there until the time I got out…It was the best experience of my life." Julia, who has been incarcerated twice, relates to this sentiment. "If I could do things different, would I? No, I don't think I would because I learned so much about me…I think that is why I needed to be there, because I needed to sit down and get to know who Julia was because I didn't know who I was." Birdie explains how prison impacted her a little differently. "Prison didn't help me become who I am, it showed me a whole lot of ways I wished I wouldn't have been." And finally Trina says, "It (prison) didn't stop me from doing what I came back out to do, but it helped me see who I was and that lifestyle that I was living."

Getting Closer to God

Many participants feel their prison experience brought them closer to God and saved their lives. Sharon, who served a long sentence explains, "In a way I kinda [sic] thank God for the experience. It made me a better person." Kim, a woman who has been in and out of prison all of her life said that "…it was like a safe haven for me because I didn't have to worry about the constant battle with drinking and drugs and I felt good about myself, I felt like I was able to have a relationship with God in prison. I felt separate from him out here (in the free world)." These women communicate their belief that prison was a place for them to work on themselves, and in doing so, many thank God for that experience and believe that they built a stronger relationship with God while living through that difficult time in their lives.

Prison Saved Me

As mentioned previously, the women in this study reveal that prison provided them with an opportunity to learn about themselves. A theme closely related to that is the third theme described here—prison saved me. Many of the women explain how they wanted something different after living much of their lives in a criminal lifestyle.

Trina, who has been in and out of prison since the age of 18, says that being incarcerated all those times wore on her, and she finally decided she

wanted something different. " I am really tired of get up, go steal, get high, get up, go steal, get high. That became a pattern of life for me and I don't have another number in me (a "number" refers to another stint in prison). I am tired, I am tired, I am tired, and now I am willing to do something different today with my life."

Kim explains how before she went to prison for her fifth and final time her life had hit bottom and in going to prison she got her soul back. "I had hit all lows, I was just done. I was homeless, I stayed with friends here and there, but I was basically homeless. I had resorted to prostitution as a way of life, as a way to survive. I had no contact with my family and any of my children, and I was just watching everything go by me. I barely existed. I had a spiritual deadness, soul sickness, the emptiest feeling I ever felt. " She continues to describe how while incarcerated she developed her close relationship with God, and she feels this gave her a chance at life.

<center>Female Ex-Offenders as They Perceive Themselves</center>

The third research question in this study pertains to how the participants communicate their identities as women. In interviewing the participants and spending time with them in casual conversations, it became apparent that these women communicate their identities as (1) women who have felt unloved and

empty at various points in their lives (particularly as children), (2) as survivors, and (3) as women of God.

A Woman Unloved

As these women described their lives to me and answered questions regarding who they feel they really are, one theme that arose was the idea of feeling empty and/or alone. Lindsey says, "Ever since I was young I always remember this emptiness. No matter how much love that I had I just never felt like I belonged anywhere." Melenee describes similar feelings. Melenee grew up in foster care after both of her parents died when she was four. She stated that she was neglected in foster homes so she ran away. The transitional program offered her a new family and she said, "I had been for so long, so long, without feeling loved, without being happy, they taught me how to love again, they taught me that I was a good person, they taught me to just love and be loved."

A Woman as Survivor and One Who is Searching

Although broken relationships and battered spirits were common elements of these women's identities, many of the participants labeled themselves as survivors as well. I asked each participant to describe herself to me, or to use adjectives that describe who she is. Many women used the word *survivor* in their list of adjectives and revealed how they are continuously

working to overcome the obstacles they have faced in life, while others described how they are still searching for who they truly are.

Julia states, "I love God, I am still trying to find me. I know who I am and what my goals are now, but I think I am just trying to find a place to fit in." She continues to say that "this is me, accept me, and love me…I know somebody will." Another participant, Amy, says, "I am loving life today, I will never forget what happened to me and where I come from." Kim describes herself as "I am more willing than I have ever been in my life, at peace with who I am now, and still learning."

A Woman of God

The last theme associated with the participants' identities is being a woman of God. Once again, when asked directly about how these women see themselves, the thought of being closer to God was revealed. The women used various terms and phrases to discuss their lives as women of God.

When Birdie was asked to describe herself she said, "I am learning from my mistakes and I am learning to trust the Lord." As a woman who describes herself as struggling with homosexuality, Birdie now says, "Can't I just be a woman of God for a while and see what happens." When I asked Kim, "If you could tell people anything about you what would it be?" she answered, "That I

have been crucified with Christ." During the interview Kim described herself as "the bride of Christ" and as a woman who now lives her life for God.

The thoughts revealed in my interviews and discussions with these women detail who they are, or how they see themselves. As is seen here, the theme of ex-offender is not part of how they describe themselves. Instead, it is important to note that they acknowledge what experiences in life may have led them to commit crimes and now they view themselves as overcoming those experiences and moving forward with their lives. Amy explains this clearly. "I think I will never let it (her prison experience) go. I need to remember that so when I tell my story to someone that is a part of my story, because it was a big part…It was all part of a plan that God has in store for me."

Reconciling Society's Negative Perceptions

Along with gaining more insight into how female ex-offenders view themselves as women, the fourth research question in this study was aimed at uncovering how female ex-offenders reconcile their own self-perceptions with the labels commonly attributed to female prisoners by society. I have described the categories most often associated with how the participants communicate their own identities, now I will discuss how their self-perceptions of themselves compare with what they feel society believes about women who have been incarcerated.

When asked about their perceptions of how society views women who have been incarcerated, the participants in this study were very clear that they feel most of society views those who have been incarcerated negatively. There were three categories that were initially coded for this topic, but when those categories were collapsed into themes, there was one central theme, negativity.

Negative Views of Women Who Have Been Incarcerated

When the participants were asked, "What do you think society says about women ex-offenders?" there was a significant sense of rejection. Melenee says this clearly, "They think we are shit. They think we are crap." She goes on to describe how the label of prisoner never leaves. "It stays with you. That is an impression that was put on your life and you are going to have to deal with it the rest of your life so you might as well make it into your life because it is your life."

Shelly believes that most of society is not able or willing to understand. "I think you got [sic] some that understand and then you got [sic] half of society that doesn't really want to give you a chance….that is when you get very discouraged, it is like do you even want to try (to do better)."

Lindsey feels that society fears people like her who are ex-offenders. "People who aren't educated on it probably have a lot of fear, doubting, and don't have any trust…or they look at us like we are a bunch of trouble makers and problem people and we will never amount to anything." Lindsey goes on to

say that she believe this is a false perception, and she credits the large numbers of media representations that focus on repeat offenders, and the little media attention given to women who succeed after being released from prison for influencing this perception in society.

Trina also discusses the perception that ex-offenders are untrustworthy. "Society as a whole says that we are unemployable, that we are not trustable, we can not be trusted, and once this always this, and that is not true."

Another research participant, Amy, succinctly lists the negative stereotypes she feels society has about women who have been in prison. "I think we are stereotyped as drug addicts, whores, and no goods. But I think the stereotype can be taken away as long as you are gonna [sic] do the right thing."

This notion of "doing the right thing" and proving oneself is a way that the women participating in this study deal with the negative images associated with their prison experience. There are three themes associated with combating the negative society stereotypes these women often face: (1) proving oneself, (2) being a survivor, and (3) giving back to society.

I Have Something to Prove

Throughout the interviews and conversations with these women, there was often a feeling of accountability and wanting to prove to themselves, their family and friends, and others in society that they made bad choices but are now

willing to live as an upstanding citizen. Most of the participants recognize that their choices hurt many people, but they are now ready to move forward in life in a positive way.

Trina explains how having 10 felony convictions may seem like it could hold her back, and in some ways it will, but she expresses determination. "I have four (charges) of aggravated trafficking on my record, and I have 10 felonies, it (prison) will always be a part of me, but I can overcome it, because today I believe that there is nothing I can't do."

I Survived

The second theme revealed in considering how female ex-offenders overcome society's negative stereotypes is maintaining the idea that they are survivors. Sharon simply states, "I am not a victim, I am a survivor." Trina reveals, "I have a positive attitude today, not negative. I was so mean, bitter, ugly, evil, you name it, I was that. I don't have those characteristics today, I am a beautiful person today."

Kim describes how after being in and out of prison most of her adult life she feels as though she has finally come to a point in her life where she is happy. She is a mother of four who at one point had lost custody of all her children. She now has three of them back in her life, she has a steady job, and is in a program that will help her to one day own her own home. She says, "I am more willing

than I have ever been in my life, at peace with who I am now…" Shelly adds to the thought of being a survivor by stating, "I am someone that thought I would never be sober, and I have four years…It is like if I can do it, anyone can do it." Shelly describes her journey of getting to this sense of accomplishment. "I think the person I want to become is finally coming out and it just took three years in prison, almost a year and a half in a half-way house, and almost hitting rock bottom in a half way house…that actually got me to where, this is where you need to be."

I Want to Give Back

With the notion of being a survivor came the last theme associated with reconciling their own perceptions of whom they are with society's negative views of this population--giving back to society. Every woman that I interviewed for this study mentioned that her future entailed giving back to society in some form. Their sense of giving back was described in various ways.

Birdie is now a resident director at the transitional program where she once sought help. She lives in one of the transitional homes and serves as a mentor and director to the women currently in the program.

Kim wishes to go back to school for her chemical dependency license. She is a leader of a recovery group at Faith's House. She hopes to one day be able to

enter prisons and provide drug counseling to women who are currently incarcerated. Lindsey also wishes to become a drug and rehab counselor.

Amy would like to work with women ex-offenders in recovery but in a unique way. Amy hopes to focus on nutrition and exercising. "I feel that even when you are incarcerated something is lacking, in incarceration, in treatment facilities and in transitional homes…health and exercise. I kinda [sic] want to get something like that started."

Trina wants to tell her story to young kids. "In my future I entail [sic] to be a motivational speaker for children, to tell my story, to tell my prison life story, and my drug life story because I believe I can get through to them."

Julia describes her desire to give back. "I have a desire to give back…I have this desire to help with fundraising and to give back in that way. " Julia, an aspiring pastry chef, has participated in a bake sale and a spaghetti lunch that assists in raising money for ministries associated with her transitional program.

Lastly, Sharon, a survivor of domestic abuse, plans to go into schools when children are young and discuss with young girls the importance of having self-respect and healthy relationships. Sharon received an associate's degree in social work while she was serving her 16-year sentence. She hopes to obtain further schooling in that area so that she can be an advocate for victims of domestic violence.

As is briefly discussed here with several examples, the women in this study all mention giving back to their community in some form. The women I spoke with had a real sense of urgency and duty for giving back to society. The thoughts of proving themselves, being a survivor, and giving back to society all seem to help them overcome individually the negative connotations that society has placed on them collectively.

<div align="center">Understanding the Needs of Female Ex-Offenders</div>

One of the more pragmatic aspects of this study is that the participants expressed the needs of female ex-offenders. The needs of female offenders differ from their male counter-parts and little research has been completed in this area. The women participating in this study revealed needs that have been explored somewhat in previous literature; however, there are additional needs discussed here that prior research has yet to address.

When the participants in this study were asked about the needs of female ex-offenders it was clear that these women felt that the needs of this population are not currently being met. When I asked Sharon if she felt women ex-offenders' needs were being met she said "absolutely not." Amy states, "From what I understand from talking to a couple of ladies, there are a few programs…I think they need more help in that area. They get a little bit of treatment while they are in there (prison), but I think they need help when they get out." The themes

associated with the needs of female ex-offenders are: (1) the importance of transitional programs like the ones they are in, (2) housing, (3) financial assistance, (4) having a plan, and (5) support.

The Importance of Transitional Programs

Over the period of time I spent with the women participating in this study, they often discussed how their transitional program aided them tremendously, but that there weren't enough programs out there to assist women like them. Melenee explains, "My needs were only met because I came to Faith's House and they cared so much. Basic people's needs aren't met." She goes on to say, "…life is really hard when you are booted out of the pen with forty dollars. Life is truly hard and when I left, this (Faith's House) was like a family to me, no matter what happened I could take it to the church… ."

Lindsey discusses the harsh realities of women who leave prison but have no place to go. "I think as women we have different needs from men… it is too bad that the prison system doesn't help. If you don't go fight for it, or nobody tells you, just like I found out about Faith's House, then you would never know. I don't think we would have a lot of repeating offenders because there is [sic] certain needs that human being [sic] need [sic] met, and so if you get thrown out on the street and don't have no place to eat or no shelter or whatever, you are

going to go back to what you have always done your whole life just to survive, and people have to survive."

Sharon goes on to discuss the importance of transitional programs. "Especially if you have been in for a while, you should transition slowly back into the world, because it is a transition and you need someone to almost hold your hand crossing the street because you don't know how to cross the street anymore. You don't know when you can and when you can't. "

Having a Place Like Home

Being in a transitional program met one of the basic needs discussed by the participants of this study, housing. Housing is the second theme revealed concerning the needs of female ex-offenders.

Trina explains the importance of having a stable place to call home after being released from prison. "Housing would be an issue for most women, somewhere with stability to come to, be it their own home or places like this (Hope's House), and other places, so that they can get a new life instead of going back to the same old things because every time I have gotten [sic] out I have went back to the same thing, same old neighborhood, and once you are there in that environment you go right back to doing what you are comfortable with."

Melenee had an interesting perspective on housing and using programs in order to have a place to live. When she left Faith's House she continued to enter

other programs in order to survive. "My next step was going into a program in Oregon for a women's shelter by the Salvation Army. I went to their program, they had a drug rehab program that I went to and they gave me a place to stay…I went to NA and AA classes, just did the necessary requirements even though my drug problem, I didn't have for quite some time. I had to go through a drug program to get any kind of help."

Forty Dollars Isn't Enough

As was mentioned by Melenee previously, when women in the state of Ohio leave prison they are given a small amount of money, in 2008 it was $40. Financial assistance is the third need that was prevalently mentioned by these women.

Sharon describes financial assistance as her biggest need. " My biggest need was just financial. That is my biggest need, because being here (Faith's House), really all of my other needs are met…" Lindsey discusses financial needs in a slightly different way. "…as far as like financial, cause I know I didn't ever have to budget anything my whole life and now…" Lindsey is referring to the financial mentoring program that is available to the women in Faith's House.

The Importance of a Plan

Another theme that emerged from the data in this study, as it relates to the needs of ex-offenders, is the idea of having a plan upon exiting prison. This is a

theme that I have not seen discussed in other literature concerning female

offenders. The women in this study are voluntarily participating in transitional

programs and for them that is all part of their plan.

Julia explains how having a plan can keep an ex-offender moving forward

with her life. "Where I am from, _____ Ohio, we don't have like re-entry

programming or anything like that. I think if you are going to a bigger

community and you are going to a half-way house, and you have a plan…if you

are just going home from prison and go back to the same old things you knew

before, then you probably aren't going to accomplish much."

Sharon also describes having a plan. " You have to have a plan when you

leave prison, you can't just leave prison." When I asked her "how do you have a

plan?" she replied, "This (Faith's House) has to be part of your plan. Some

people might have a supportive family, but the rate of that is so low, a lot of

people don't want to be bothered with you anyway. But you have to factor in all

of that kind of stuff. Recidivism is so high when it comes to …a lot of the times

they go back to doing the same things that they have always done and they think

they will get different results. You have to have change in life in order for you to

have a life."

The Need for Support

The most stressed need reported by the women in this study is the importance of having a support system after incarceration. The idea of "support" is something that has not been reported in the previous literature regarding the needs of female ex-offenders. All eleven women participating in this study mentioned the importance of support in their ability to survive after incarceration. Support is the final need discussed here.

Lindsey details the importance of feeling free in a loving community. When asked about the most beneficial aspect of her program she said, "Unconditional love and accountability. But on the other hand the freedom….everybody is on their own journey and everybody is different and they don't judge you for that, even though it is faith based. (I enjoy) the community part, the togetherness."

Amy discusses the importance of her support system. "Growing and getting my support system base is very important to me so when I do leave here I have someone to call in that first hour because who knows what it will be like. The staff here is wonderful, it is definitely something that I needed…"

Kim says that the acceptance of the community is what kept her in the program. "In the beginning the acceptance from everyone in the church, people just accepted me and reached out to me. If I wouldn't have had that I don't think

I would have stayed." Kim has now graduated from Faith's House but lives in a rental home across the street where she is now in a program to help her one day own her own home. She explained how being a part of the Faith's House community offered her support, love, and accountability.

Sharon describes the support she felt when she first arrived at Faith's House. "I like the fact that when I first came here people were actually waiting to greet me with open arms. People I didn't even know. I had so much stuff on my bed, clothes and body wash; I had a welcome home party. I was treated like I was coming home, not like I was going to a halfway house." She continues by saying, "And the fact that there is always somebody to talk to. I mean the ministry is always open for you, you have your mentor, and if you don't talk to your mentor there is [sic] other mentors that you can talk to. We have access to talk to anybody about anything…it's in confidence and they are going to do what they can to help you."

In the next section, I will discuss the conclusions that can be drawn from the themes of the research questions that I have detailed above. Embedded in the themes highlighted above are broader conclusions that deserve more analysis, as they make the findings of this study interesting, relevant, and possibly problematic. The themes detailed above aid communication scholars and others working with this population of women by providing additional insight into

how some female ex-offenders view themselves, how they feel society views

them, as well as the affects incarceration has had on their lives. The direct quotes

from the participants are useful for gaining a better understanding of how these

women view their world, and more importantly for this study, how they

communicate that view. While all of the themes revealed in this study are

significant, several topics deserve to be addressed in more length.

CHAPTER V: MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL: A DISCUSSION OF THE DATA

After conducting the coding as described by grounded theory and finding the themes associated with the research questions, it is important to address the broader implications that can be drawn from the data. The conclusions discussed here may create a need for further discussion, explanation, or questioning.

There are five major conclusions in the research data that are useful for further discussion. The conclusions are taken from the themes that arose after completing the entire coding process. The conclusions that will be further analyzed here include: the role of support in transitioning from behind bars, prominence of God that is present in participants' responses, the gap between how prison changed the lives of these women but their reluctance to actually speak of the crime that changed their lives, the dichotomy between how female ex-offenders describe their own identity versus how they feel society dictates their identity, and finally what the research participants feel worked best in their transitional program, as well as areas where they feel their programming is lacking.

Support as a Central Element to Successful Transitioning

As was described previously, the women in this study stress the overwhelming need for support in order to have a successful and healthy

transition from prison to society. The idea of *support* as a fundamental need for women ex-offenders has been discussed little to none in the literature regarding female ex-offenders. Fletcher, Shaver, and Moon (1993), Kenemore and Roldan (2006), and O'Brien (2001) have noted that having a safe place to stay is essential, and that when there are healthy interpersonal relationships available upon release from prison, transitioning can be smoother than if these types of relationships were not present. The findings in this study concur with those thoughts; however, the women in this study describe a much stronger need for support networks that may exist in multiple forms. Support, as is referenced here, is a relatively new way of thinking about successfully transitioning from prison to society.

The women in this study were asked, "What are the needs of female ex-offenders upon leaving prison?" and while housing, employment, food, and shelter were all mentioned in their responses, the most common need expressed was support (in multiple forms). Family and friends may provide support for women transitioning from prison to society, but substance abuse support groups, pastoral mentoring, and mentoring in various other aspects of their lives is essential as well. Women participating in this study have a spiritual mentor, employment mentor, financial mentor, and substance abuse support groups. In addition, each woman has a volunteer mentor from the community who has

completed mentor training who is assigned specifically to her within the first few days of her leaving prison. The strong need of support, as is expressed by women ex-offenders in this study, is an important finding for real world applications regarding programming for women who have been incarcerated.

Spirituality and the Female Ex-Offenders In This Study

In the current study, faith and religion are prominently discussed in the interviews with the research participants (as is evidenced above in the data analysis chapter). Nine of the eleven participants are ex-offenders who are participating in a faith-based transition program. Although the primary focus of this study is not to explore religion, as it relates to female ex-offenders, the research participants in this study prominently discussed religion and faith in God. I believe that since the majority of participants in this study have chosen to attend a faith-based transitioning program and are surrounded by daily messages of religion, these choices and messages may impact their responses to the interview questions in this study. With that in mind I feel it is necessary to briefly address the relationship between prison and religion as it has been discussed in previous literature.

Religion and prison is not a new concept in America's penal institutions. "Religious programs for inmates are not only among the oldest but also among the most common forms of rehabilitative programs found in correctional

facilities today" (Johnson, Larson, & Pitts, 1997, p. 145). Faith-based

programming in prisons and transitional programs place an emphasis on

personal growth and responsibility, while seeking religious redemption. These

types of programs "place the onus for solving social issues onto individuals and

reframe imprisonment as a moral issue of sin and personal redemption. The

premise of the faith-based policies is a theology of social action that claims

religion itself is the cure for socioeconomic problems" (Erzen, 2008, p. 1).

Therefore, understanding the role that faith-based prisoner programming plays

in the lives of women offenders is significant.

The literature regarding the role of faith-based prisoner programming is

scattered at best. Historically, research has suggested that there was little to no

relationship between religion or religious convictions and crime. However,

during the George W. Bush administration faith-based programs for offenders

have been given more attention since religious institutions have been permitted

to apply for federal assistance for various types of services, some of which are

services to help those in the criminal justice system (Clear, 2003).

There is a concern among a large group of social scientists that there are

limits to which social science can inform us about matters of faith (Knepper,

2003; Sundt, & Cullen, 2002). Clear (2000) summarizes this thought by saying,

"Science deals with things that are observed, measured, and inferred experiences

of the spirit that happen within individuals" (p.54). With this being noted, it has

only been since the 1990s that research has cautiously concluded that

participation in faith-based programs has aided in positive prison adjustment

and lower recidivism rates among certain prisoners (Clear, et. al. 1992a/b;

Johnson, 1987; Johnson, Larson, & Pitts, 1997; O'Connor, Ryan, & Parikh, 1997;

Young, Gartner, O'Conner, Larson, & Wright, 1995). Faith-based offender and

ex-offender programs aim to help the participants understand more about who

they are and how they can seek religious redemption.

Although the current study is not aimed at assessing religion and prisoner

re-entry, it is a topic that has impacted the lives of the majority of the participants

in this study. Several of the themes associated with faith that were revealed in

this study were being women of God, being thankful to God for their experience

in prison, and feeling that their incarceration was part of God's plan.   It is

important to question if these themes would be present in other studies similar to

this one if the women were not part of a faith-based program. While I

acknowledge that religion is a large theme in the data collected here, I do not

think it poses a problem for this study, but simply opens the conversation for

further studies with women ex-offenders who are not in faith-based programs.

Questions such as, "If the ex-offender does not have any faith how will he/she

view their prison experience?" and "What role does religion or faith play in

aiding a smooth transition from prison to society for female ex-offenders?" need

to be addressed to understand further the role faith plays in impacting ex-

offenders' identities and its role in re-entry programming.

<div align="center">What She Didn't Say</div>

The themes of religion and God permeated through the data collected in

this study, but what is also important is what wasn't said in the interviews with

the participants. There is a theme consistent throughout the interviews and my

many conversations with these women that lies in what they did not reveal …the

details of their crime. This study focused on issues of identity and how being a

female ex-offender may or may not impact one's identity. Throughout the

interviews, the participants explained on numerous occasions how prison

impacted and/or changed their lives. Most of the women in this study were very

forth-coming about their lives and their prison experiences. However, not once

did a participant reveal to me the details of her crime. The participants openly

explained what they were criminally charged with, but never did one woman

convey the specifics of her crime.

For example, Sharon who was charged with murdering her boyfriend,

often discussed how being a victim of domestic violence is what led her to shoot

her boyfriend. She even acknowledged that the moment she pulled the trigger it

"changed her life forever." What Sharon doesn't discuss is what was happening

on the day she committed her crime, where the crime was committed, or what was occurring between her and her boyfriend when she shot him.

Likewise, Julia, who was charged with various assault charges pertaining to violence, assaulted her husband after discovering that he was having an affair. In the interview, Julia discussed in great detail the events that preceded her crime. She described what was happening in her life that day, how she was feeling and other step-by-step details of her life on the day her crime took place. She even goes as far to explain how she got in her car (to drive to the other woman's house where her husband was located) and went to find her husband. She then ends this revealing account with, "I did not go over there with the intention of hurting him, I just don't know what happened." Julia did not provide me with any additional information of what exactly she did to harm her husband or what took place when she arrived at the other woman's house.

The stories of the participants' crimes are important in this study because these are the moments that many of the women attribute with changing their lives. But, the moments that changed their lives, thereby affecting their identities, is not discussed. I intentionally did not directly ask any of the participants to reveal their crimes to me because I wanted to learn how important or unimportant their crimes were to their identities. Although the participants did not reveal the detailed accounts of their crimes, through our

numerous interactions and in-depth interviews all of the women discussed their

criminal history. This lack of detail as it relates to the crime is interesting in that

it leads myself and other scholars to further question why these types of life

changing moments are difficult to reveal and is it the crime that is life-changing

(therefore impacting one's identity) or is it the time spent in prison that affects

one's identity, or is it the influence of the transition program to focus on their

future? Additionally, learning more about why women ex-offenders reveal

details of their crimes or choose not to can be important in further understanding

how women ex-offenders reconcile for themselves the role actual crime plays in

impacting who they are. This current study was aimed at examining the

identities of female-ex-offenders and how these women see themselves. As the

data suggest in this study, crime simply may not impact the identity of female

ex-offenders.

<div align="center">I Committed a Crime, But I am Not My Crime</div>

Another conclusion drawn from the themes revealed in the data relates to

how the women view their own identities versus how they believe society views

them. This conclusion is interesting because there is a large discrepancy between

how the women view themselves and how the women feel society views them.

As was mentioned previously, when asked how the women would describe

themselves they revealed themes of being unloved, being a survivor, and being a

woman of God. There was a sense of moving forward with their lives, and a feeling of surviving this difficult time. None of the responses to this line of questioning included thoughts of identifying themselves as offenders, prisoners, or deviants in our society. The women in this study simply saw themselves as women who served time in prison and were moving forward with their lives.

In contrast to their own beliefs about their own identities, the women feel that society continues to stigmatize them and label them as criminals. As was described in the data analysis chapter, when the participants were asked about their feelings regarding society's attitude toward women who have been incarcerated they expressed the one dominant theme of negativity. The women participating in this study feel that society continues to label them as "untrustable," "unemployable," "crap," etcetera. Sharon said it clearly when she said that she served her time in prison and that the government said she was redeemed, but society continues to punish her. Sharon asked, "How long do I have to be punished by society?" Many of the women gave examples of the acts and processes that they cannot achieve or have difficulty achieving since being released from prison due to society's continuous marginalization: difficulty with employment, finding housing, volunteering with certain organizations, and voting are mentioned in various conversations. The women expressed a sense of discouragement surrounding how they fit in with society.

The dichotomy between how the women view their own identities versus the labels that society dictates to them can be conflicting for this group of women. The women in this study are voluntarily participating in re-entry programs in hopes of doing everything they can to ensure that they are upstanding citizens. However, how they feel inside and how society views them is at war. The struggle between whom they feel they are and who society says they are is an important area for future study. By learning more about these opposing views of women ex-offenders, re-entry programming can be designed to address this dichotomy by (1) assisting the ex-offender with learning how to deal with society's negative perceptions and (2), helping communities and families associated with ex-offenders understand the obstacles and realities of being someone who has been incarcerated. Future research questions relating to this area should focus on gaining a better understanding of what families and communities know about the offender population, as well as learning more about the obstacles ex-offenders feel are in place after prison. If we can gain a more thorough understanding of these areas then re-entry programming may be able to better assist female ex-offenders in overcoming their many challenges after incarceration.

Making Female Offender Re-entry a Success

One of the more practical areas of this study directly pertains to making re-entry for women a successful transition. Throughout the interviews conducted for this study and casual conversations with the participants, it was important for me that I learned more about what can be done to improve re-entry for this group of women. The participants described areas of programming that they feel helped them the most in their transition, and they also shared with me areas where they feel more work can be done.

One of the aspects of programming that these women felt benefited them the most actually occurred while they were in prison, prisoner programming. Many of the participants completed as many programs in prison as possible. Some of the programs completed behind bars included: education (GED and advanced degrees), parenting classes, substance abuse counseling, agriculture, hair stylist licensing, seeing-eye dog training, faith-based programs, and specific industrial skills training. The women expressed the importance of these programs behind bars, but also mentioned that these types of programs were dwindling. Women who served 10 or more years described how prisoner programming was once easily accessible, but how in the last five years it has become extremely scarce. This information is important for real world

application because multiple state governments and the federal government

have drastically reduced funding for these types of programs.

Another aspect of programming that was beneficial to the participants in

this study was having structure and accountability in their re-entry program.

Many of the women expressed how they resisted these elements of programming

initially, but found that they needed structure and accountability to succeed. The

women discussed needing clear, strict rules, with apparent consequences. They

also mentioned the importance of having a safe place to be accountable. Many of

the women revealed times when they had broken program rules but had not

been caught, but told on themselves anyway. The idea of being accountable and

honest was important to most of the women with whom I spoke.

The final area of programming that was most important to these women's

success relates to having support and a safe community. Both of the transitional

programs that I worked with for this study worked diligently at providing a

sense of community for the women. Many women in these transition programs

do not have family and friends to turn to upon being released from prison, and

the people in the re-entry programs are like family. Many steps are taken to

provide a sense of community and support: one-on-one mentoring, community

dinners where all residents must be present and eat together, various types of

community support groups, community housing (where the residents live

together), and having multiple counselors and mentors in various areas to lend support. The feeling of being part of a community was difficult for some women because they were not used to having that sense of love and caring, however; all the women I spoke with expressed the importance of having a safe community in place.

In addition to discussing the strengths of these programs, the women also shared areas where they feel their programs could improve. One such area deals with transportation. For most of these women, public transportation is their primary means of getting from one place to another. And for some women in this study having consistent work was a requirement for staying in the program. The women talked about finding employment, but needing a way to get there. Bus routes were possible, but having the initial monies to buy bus tickets was not always easy. When the women were released from prison the government gave them $40. Many of the women use some of this money for bus tickets, however some need the money for toiletries, medication, food, etcetera. Several of the women mentioned creating some type of system where two or three bus tickets were given to women upon their arrival in the program, and then when each woman gains employment she buys two or three bus tickets to give back to the program. This would create a cycle of bus tickets, which would allow women newly released from prison a mode of transportation.

Another area of program improvement mentioned by many of the participants, involved assistance in gaining employment. Employment is a real struggle for many women ex-offenders. While both re-entry programs involved in this study work very hard to assist their residents, the women still feel they need more. Even with many employment-programming strategies in place, the residents continue to have difficulty finding a job, which stresses the magnitude of this particular obstacle.

The final area of improvement revealed here pertains to accountability. The participants discussed the benefits of being held accountable, but many said they would prefer more accountability. One of the programs involved in this study permits their residents to come and go as they please. They can go wherever they would like without permission, but they must be home by 10:00 pm. This form of freedom is important because it allows the residents to make choices and decisions about their own lives. However, some residents feel that initially they need more rules and structure so that they can slowly transition back to society. The second program involved in this study is the complete opposite. The women who live there can not go anywhere without prior permission, they must always have a senior resident with them, and they are not permitted to leave unless it is for medical reasons or to attend a substance abuse recovery meeting. The two programs are polar opposites in regards to making

decisions about where and when their residents may leave the program walls. However, the residents from both programs stressed the importance of having clear program rules and consistent consequences for breaking the rules.

The areas of programming strengths and weaknesses discussed in this study are useful for future female ex-offender programming decisions. The participants openly discussed what was benefiting them in their programs and what was needed. This information will be shared with each of the programs so that future decisions regarding programming changes can be considered.

The conclusions discussed here are useful for gaining more insight into the lives and identities of female ex-offenders. These conclusions enable some knowledge to be gained, while also opening the door for many future studies in this area. Perhaps one of the greatest values pertaining to this study is that the women answered for themselves questions about who they are, how they feel, and what their needs are. The ability to have their voices heard was important to me and to them. Policy makers, governments, program directors, and doctors often make the decisions about what female ex-offenders do and need, while very few actually ask the women what they feel they should do or what they need. The themes associated with interview questions and the broader conclusions that can be drawn from the data collected may be useful for future research in this area as well as in meeting program needs.

Limitations

This study did not come without limitations. While there is value in each woman's story and we can learn from each individual story there are thousands of women in the United States who have been incarcerated, but this study only includes eleven of them. There were two different re-entry programs included in this study, with one program housing nine women and the other program containing eight women. I was not able to build relationships with all 17 women; therefore I did not feel comfortable interviewing all 17 women.

Additionally, while I spent a great deal of time at each program getting to know many of the women, more time could have been spent. For the scope of this study I could only spend approximately four months at each program. I had to travel 30 minutes to Hope's House and two hours to Faith's House, making my time at each program restricted, but valuable. Spending a longer time in each of these programs would have allowed me to build more relationships with more program residents, thus having more female ex-offenders' voices heard.

The final challenge in this study relates to one of the research sites being a faith-based program. This is an interesting phenomenon because although nine of the research participants were in the faith-based program, the information they shared and the stories they revealed are still true to who they are as women. However, one has to question how this study may have been different if the

influence of a faith-based program was not part of the study. I see the presence

of God and faith in the participants' responses as an asset to this study, while

simultaneously being a limitation. What is most important is that the issue of

faith is recognized here and accounted for.

CHAPTER VI: CONCLUSIONS

This study is the beginning to a much larger research agenda. As was previously mentioned, one of the goals of this study is to provide transitional programs with more information about the needs of the women who are participating in these programs. In the data analysis and discussion chapters the strengths and weaknesses of their current programs were discussed. With the feedback provided by the research participants here, their programs and other similar programs may learn more about female ex-offenders' needs upon re-entering society. Another aim of this study is to understand better the identity of female ex-offenders, as they view themselves. This self-described identity is useful for transitional programming because knowing more about how this group of women view themselves provides insight for better assisting them upon their release from prison.

With the detailed information gathered from the women participating in this study, I offer several programming recommendations for the transitional programs involved in this study as well as other programs. First, the women in this study discussed a strong need for accountability and consistency. Transition programs need a clear, yet simple, program whereby the residents understand the rules of the program and the consequences of breaking those rules. Consistency in enforcing the consequences is also important. The women

participating in these types of programs need a sense of stability and

predictability when re-entering society. Transitional programs can often be safe

environments for female ex-offenders to make small mistakes, so when making

choices about their lives after leaving prison, rules and consequences must be

clearly communicated and enforced.

Another recommendation for transitional programs is to have as many

support networks in place as possible for women re-entering society. One of the

transitional programs involved in this study is faith-based, therefore several

pastors were always available to assist the residents. All of the participants in

this study discussed the importance of support in their ability to have a smooth

transition from prison to society. Counseling and support services in the areas of

mental health, substance abuse recovery, financial responsibility, mothering,

healthy family relationships and boundaries, educational training, job readiness,

self-esteem and confidence building, and social skills are all needed. What seems

to be most effective, as was described by the research participants, is that there

are multiple mentors and support networks available to the ex-offenders so if

one supportive relationship does not fit or work well, there are other support

networks to call upon. Living in a physically safe, as well as emotionally safe

community is critical to the success of female ex-offenders.

The last recommendation offered here relates to employment for female ex-offenders. Both transitional programs in this study take great strides to gainfully employ their residents after certain areas of the transitional program have been completed. However, gaining employment for a woman with a criminal record can be challenging. Some form of employment network needs to be established in the local area surrounding the transitional program. Perhaps a database of local businesses and places of employment that hire ex-offenders would be beneficial. Additionally, knowing what places of employment have accessible transportation is also important. Job training, resume building, and interviewing skills are all important elements in assisting ex-offenders in gaining employment, however, readily knowing which companies do and do not hire ex-offenders can better assist the job-hunting process, while also reducing the shame and humiliation often associated when women ex-offenders search for employment in locations that do not hire ex-offenders.

Although assisting transitional programs is a major goal of this research, others may benefit from these findings as well. State and federal governments have continuously cut prisoner programming over the last decade or so, and many state-run transitional programs have received large budget cuts. Using the information provided in this study, along with other research related to this topic, government and policy-makers may learn more about who female ex-

offenders truly are and what they feel their actual needs are after incarceration.

One of the benefits of this study is the female ex-offender was asked her opinions

about her life experiences and incarceration and her actual voice is heard.

Hearing directly from the ex-offenders themselves is something that has been

done very little in researching this group of women.

Additionally community activists and community coordinators may

benefit from this study. Women who exit prison return home and/or to local

communities. Community programs regarding ex-offenders may benefit ex-

offenders but they may also help other community members as well. As was

discussed in this study, ex-offenders, particularly women ex-offenders, are often

marginalized by society. Having community programs that educate their local

members about the realities of women ex-offenders, while also educating the ex-

offenders about local resources and assistance may make re-entering society after

prison a smoother process for the community in which the ex-offender will

reside and for the ex-offender herself.

The findings from this study are useful for scholars in the communication

discipline, as well as other social science fields, but equally important, is the new

information this study offers for practical purposes in the areas of assisting this

group of women. This study offers transitional programs, government agencies,

and community coordinators insight about the experiences of several female

offenders. The information obtained here may be able to better assist this group

of women after incarceration however; the research process does not stop here.

Although this study provides new and valuable information, there is more

research to be done. This study was a first-step in my own research agenda.

Learning about the identity of female ex-offenders as a marginalized group in

this society from their own perspectives is a beginning point for future research.

For my own future studies with this research area, I will conduct a longitudinal,

or follow-up study, with these same research participants. There is very little

research regarding what happens to female ex-offenders upon their release from

prison. There are currently generalizations concluded from statistics regarding

recidivism rates, but for those women who do not recidivate, we know little

about their lives after prison. At the conclusion of the interviews conducted for

this study I asked the participants if I could contact them in the future in hopes of

interviewing them again. All participants said yes, thus I will contact these

women in approximately two years to discuss their involvement in a follow-up

study. In the next study with these participants I will explore what the women

who have not recidivated have done to regain their lives in society and what has

aided and impeded their successful re-entry. Additionally, I will also continue

exploring the idea of support as it relates to successful transitioning from prison

to society. Support was a major theme in this study, with the participants often

commenting on how important support was for their re-entry. I would like to investigate various female ex-offender-mentor relationships to uncover what is most beneficial about these mentor-mentee relationships. For communication scholars this is an area of study that can provide more insight (with possibly a new perspective) into the areas of listening, self-disclosure, relationship formation, etcetera.

This study provided a foundation for exploring the identity of female ex-offenders and how these women perceive themselves. Symbolic interaction and feminist standpoint theory offered a theoretical framework for this initial investigation. In additional studies I will continue to explore the identities of female ex-offenders and their position in society, but perhaps next time I will turn to the communication and identity literature as a framework for further uncovering issues of marginalization, identity layers, and identity formation.

Another area of research in this area that I foresee conducting in the future relates to understanding the role of faith and faith-based programming in female prisoner re-entry. As the majority of research participants in this study belonged to a faith-based transitional program, the impact of religion is evident here. In future studies, I will explore the differences between female ex-offenders who are participating in faith-based programs versus those ex-offenders who are not. A comparison can also be explored between those offenders who have faith in

God and those who do not. Particular, focus will be placed on how their relationship with God or lack of relationship with God has impacted how they feel prison has impacted their lives.

This study not only opens the door for my own future research program but it also leads to many more questions for other scholars. The data provided in this study and the conclusions drawn from the data analysis leave many questions for future consideration. Like my own future research agenda, other scholars should learn more about ex-offenders after incarceration. Topics in this area that need examining are community programs and assistance for ex-offenders, mother-child relationships after incarceration, and familial relationships after incarceration. Future research in the area of re-entry should consider examining the impact programs such as Narcotics Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous have on re-entry and the rates of success between re-entry programs that "lockdown" their residents, versus those re-entry programs that allow their residents more freedom. Another area of study for scholars interested in this area is that of prisoner programming. While this study focused on women after incarceration, several research participants commented on the importance and helpfulness of programming while incarcerated. Research has been conducted a great deal in this area; however, there is little qualitative research that concerns the opinions and thoughts of the offender regarding

prisoner programming. Surveys and quantitative studies have investigated the effectiveness and cost/benefit of prison programming, but little to no research has questioned what the offenders feel are the most beneficial types of prisoner programming in their rehabilitation. Additionally, studies investigating the recidivism rates during heavily funded prisoner programming days of the 1980s and 1990s, versus recidivism rates in the 2000s, now that prisoner programming funding has been drastically reduced, is another area for future study. And finally, this study began to reveal the dichotomy between how the research participants viewed themselves versus how they perceived society's view of them. Future research in this area would be beneficial for reducing recidivism rates and perhaps lessoning the stigma placed on women who have been in prison. Other research should be done to consider more clearly the attitudes of society regarding female offenders and the attitudes the female offenders perceive society to possess. The possible connect or disconnect between these perceptions may prove helpful in re-integrating prisoners back into public communities. A survey of the publics' attitudes about female offenders could be conducted followed by a survey of how female ex-offenders perceive the public to view them. This more in-depth analysis of society's views of the incarcerated is another step towards possibly making the prison to society transition a smoother process by enabling various forms of social change.

For me, this study was a starting point for a research agenda that has received very little attention in the communication discipline. The stigma and mystique often associated with women offenders is what motivates me to conduct this type of research. Media, policy-makers, and average, everyday citizens often view those who have been behind bars as evil monsters who should be shunned in our society. While prisons do contain individuals who have committed heinous crimes, we are all people and people with various life experiences. The women who participated in this study have paid their debt to society, as was determined by the United States justice system, and they are now trying to integrate back into civilization. These women are mothers, daughters, sisters, friends, co-workers, and neighbors who have committed crime(s), served their time in prison, and are now trying to regain a normal, law-abiding life. These are women, who much is read about in books and newspapers, or much is seen depicted in media, however, very few have their voices heard. This study was aimed at acknowledging a few of these women's experiences and needs so that their voices might be heard, their power might be restored, and their agency might be gained. By communicating where they have come from, where they are now, and where they are going their stories may provide knowledge and information that can be used to assist women who come behind them. This study revealed that we are all women, period. We are women with different

backgrounds and various experiences, and although we may appear to be

different we are all similar in many ways. This study revealed that the identity of

a woman who has been incarcerated is not defined alone by her prison

experience. As the women participating in this study so generously revealed

they are not simply offenders, but instead they see themselves as women of God,

mothers, and survivors, just to name a few.

Where It Is Now

My walk through Alcatraz at the age of nine left me feeling that prisons and the people who inhabit them are a mystery in our world. I could not imagine how individuals behind bars could have any type of life that resembled that of the average citizen. I believed before this process began that I was not someone who marginalized or perpetuated the stigma placed on those who live behind bars or those who have been in prison. What I now know is that I was the person who acted as a voyeur into the lives of people who have been incarcerated. I didn't think that I thought of women prisoners as "those people," but I now understand that they were a mystery to me and I was mesmerized by society's way of shunning this group of women.

During this study I spent 11 weeks at one transitional program and 15 weeks at another. As was described by the women at Faith's House, I became a member in their community. I have not been to prison, nor have I experienced many of the horrendous acts that many of these women have been a part of, but I did become a trusted member of their inner circle. At Faith's House I was fortunate to have many encounters with the residents there and I began to have a comfortable relationship with most of them. At Hope's House my experience was different. The women were polite and open with me, but I never became a part of their community. Since concluding my research, I have continued to volunteer at Faith's House. I continue to visit there once a week and I have now seen most of the women who participated in this study graduate the program and

move on with their lives. They are still a part of the Faith's House community so I still see them, but I now volunteer and work with new women entering the program.

These women have taught me that life is full of various experiences, some fortunate others unfortunate. I have learned that we may be of different races, cultures, and experiences, but we are all women. I have learned that being in prison is not some far fetched reality, in some cases it can be just one mistake, one bad choice, or one horrible circumstance away. The women who I worked with in this study have taught me that as women we must balance excuses with accountability and that forgiveness is a necessity in life. I am thankful to each of them for their patience and openess throughout this process. I now know that prison is not some mysterious, hyper-sensationalized structure for housing Others. The women who live there are real women, women who experience life just like everyone else..

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Tell me about your life when you were first sentenced to a correctional facility?
2. What experiences in your life do you feel led you to be in a situation where you could be charged with committing a crime?
3. Tell me about your first day living in prison.
    A. What were you feeling?
    B. What were the prison living conditions?
4. Tell me about the day you left prison.
    A. What were you feeling?
5. Do you feel prison has impacted you and your life? If so, how? If not, why not?
6. What needs do you have now that you are out of prison?
7. Do you feel that women prisoners' needs are met after they leave prison?
8. What do you think society says, or thinks about, women who have been in prison? Is what they say true, or not true?
9. How conscious/aware are you about being a female ex-offender?
    A. In what areas of your life does the reality of being an ex-offender impact you the most?
    B. Are their areas of your life where you feel this label does not affect you?
10. Describe yourself to me. What words would you use to describe who you are?
    For example, I might describe myself as a student, daughter, silly, stubborn, etc.
11. If you could tell people anything about you, what would it be?
12. How do you feel about being at this facility?

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Approval Form for Interview Session

      I agree to take part in the communication research study about female prisoners' experiences being conducted by Nikki Howard. I agree to take part in the one-on-one talk with Nikki. I have been told that I should speak to Nikki or to her advisor about any thoughts or questions I have about the study. Nikki Howard can be contacted at 419-575-5694 or howardn@bgsu.edu. Her advisor, Dr. Lynda D. Dixon, can be contacted at 419-372-7172 (o) or 419-372-0202 (fax). I may also contact the Chair, Human Subjects Review Board, Bowling Green State University, (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgsu.edu), if I have any questions or thoughts during the study. I have been told about the risks of being in this study, in that they are no greater than those I have in everyday life. I have also been told that I have a right to stop being in this study at any time. I can tell Nikki Howard face-to-face or by writing her a note that I wish to stop being a part of this study.

_____
      (print name)

_____
      (signature)   (date)

____ No, I do not wish my information to be quoted.

____ Yes, I give my permission for my information to be quoted.