


African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance





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Summary of Dissertation
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Dissertation Committee

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Abstract

- A study in which the researcher attempts to get to the heart of how and why African American men , the most disproportionately incarcerated race in America, find themselves at the turning point of change from criminality to desistance after many years of criminal behavior and multiple incarcerations in California State prisons.

Situating the Researcher

- African American woman
- Philosophically, culturally and socially shaped by race in America and the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s
- A social justice practitioner and community activist

Purpose of Study

- Little is known from the personal perspective and voice of the ex-offender about the decision processes and experiences of turning from criminality to desistance
- One in nine African American males between ages 20-34 are behind bars, compared to one in 30 for white males.
- Finding ways to reduce recidivism and better understand the processes of desistance is critical to building and sustaining the social constructs of individuals, families and communities.

Gap in the Research

- Limited research on what works in transforming an individual's criminal behavior to desistance from crime?
- Limited research exclusive to African American male ex-offenders, recidivism and successful desistance.
 - Limitation of Glueck's data: There were no minorities, Blacks or others, included in Glueck's longitudinal studies.

Research Questions

- What are the stories that reflect the personal experiences of African American men who lived the cyclical life of crime, incarceration, release and reentry, crime & recidivism.
 - What was the turning point?
 - How was desistance achieved?

Definitions for Purpose of this Study

- Recidivism
 - Return to prison for repeat or new offense
- Jail
 - A local city or county penal institution
- Prison
 - A state or federal penal institution
- Desistance
 - A process in which an ex-offender quits committing criminal acts

Study Participant Criteria

- African American (Black)
- Age 22 or older
- Has served multiple long-term (more than 1 year) incarcerations
- Is free from incarceration for three years or more
- Is self-identified as desisting from crime

Review of Literature

- Reentry and reintegration
- Recidivism
- Desistance

Reentry

- Comparatively little research is focused on ex-offenders reentering society and living their lives free from re-incarceration.
- Interest in reentry research has increased because of both the large number of prisoners being released and the impacts of reentry on society

Recidivism

- Finding ways to reduce recidivism and better understand the processes of desistance is critical to building and sustaining the social constructs of individuals families and communities.

Recidivism

- Prison admissions have declined over the past several years.
 - Trend in policy changes
 - Closure of prisons
 - Releases due to overcrowded prisons
 - Budget considerations

Desistance

- Three stages - onset, maintenance and desistance - are known as the life course of transitions of criminal behavior.
- Desistance - process or discrete?

Need for this Study

- Current literature is limited. Points of view and theories are primarily from the perspective of the researcher; not from the voice of the of the ex-offender.
- The omission of the factor of race in most studies is evidence of a significant gap and flaw in research.
- 40.2% of the U.S. prison population is African American (DOJ, 2010).

The Need for this Study

- A compelling reason to expand research efforts to focus on minorities:
 - African American communities bear the burden of decline and dysfunction because of the disproportionate number of offenders returning to these communities.
- Many researchers have acknowledged that desistance is a process, yet there is very little in the literature about what that process might be.

The Need for this Study

- To achieve and maintain a civilized society, something must be done to assist ex-offenders in transitioning from the anti-social behaviors of criminology to behaviors void of criminal acts.

Methodology - Narrative Inquiry

- Qualitative phenomenological research - Its roots are in anthropology , philosophy and sociology.
- Narrative is story, humanistic, personal.
 - o “The narrative power of story is that sometimes it can be more compelling, more moving, more physically and emotionally stirring than lived-life itself” (Van Manen).

Why Narrative Inquiry

- Narrative Inquiry Research seeks the “how” and the “why” of the personal transformation that is fundamental to change and desistance.
- Adds to limited body of criminology research using the qualitative phenomenological approach of narrative inquiry.
- Little is documented from the personal voices and world view of ex-offenders.

Why Narrative Inquiry

- The general philosophical orientation of phenomenology research and the personal interaction required of narrative processes resonates with my practitioner activism and social justice advocacy.
- Ex-offenders tell their own stories like no one else can, i.e., the phenomenon of lived experiences

The Study

- Eight African American men tell their personal stories of criminal behavior, arrests and incarceration, recidivism and the change from a life of crime to desisting.
- Interviews and open dialogue between researcher and ex-offender participants.
- Focus groups with study participants who engaged in open dialogue about influences of criminality and the experiences of desisting.

The Onset - Michael M



Absence of Men - Aaron



My Father's Son - Anthony



Findings of the Study

- Commonalities in Participants' Stories
 - No father in the home or positive male influence
 - Raised by mother or grandmother
 - Low income or welfare recipient (except 2)
 - Attracted to criminal acts for economic and material gain
 - Sold and/or used drugs, all incarcerations were drug related

Findings of the Study

- Began criminal activities before or by age 18
- Arrests and incarceration was expected and normalized as a consequence of chosen criminal behavior
- All had multiple arrests and incarcerations in California state prisons
- All graduated from high school

Findings of the Study

- Revelations
 - No participant voiced that their arrests and incarcerations were racially motivated
 - The “war on drugs” in the 1970s and 1980s targeted minority communities subjecting Blacks and Hispanics to higher level of arrests and incarceration

Prisons & Prisoners - Michael M



Findings of the Study

- Social, economic and discriminating legacies create an environment in which some disadvantaged people are subject to criminal behaviors to maintain a base line of survival, i.e. food, shelter, safety for themselves and/or their families
- Age ranges of participants, 32 to 75, documents changes in types of crimes, sentencing laws and strategies for reentry and desistance assistance.

Findings of the Study

- Confirmation that desistance is a process as participants voiced that the temptation to offend for economic and material gain is still, sometimes, a challenge.

Desisting & Drug Free - Lynn



Turning Point: Religion - Papa John



It's Changing Time ~ Michael R



Agent for Change - Aaron



Participant Turning Points

- Different reasons for different ex-offenders
 - Age
 - Health Issues/Concerns
 - Employment
 - Committed personal relationship
 - Spiritual/Religious
 - Just plain tired of going to prison
 - Clean and sober living

Implications for Leadership and Change

- Study adds new information to current limited body of research
 - Voices has implications of transferability to offender populations who seek hope in the possibility of change to desisting lives.
- Participants acquired new insight into themselves through the process of telling their story and hearing their own voices.

Implications for Leadership and Change

- Participants expressed increased self awareness as a result of participating in the study and felt honored for the potential recognition through the study.

Implications for Leadership and Change

- Participants committed to assist community youth in changing from pathway and behaviors leading to criminal acts and potential arrests and incarceration.

Implications for Leadership and Change

- Influences on Researcher's Views
 - Enlightened understanding of the pervasive acceptance and adaptation to arrests and incarceration by some African American men
 - Acquired knowledge that criminal behaviors are sometimes a conscious choice

Implications for Leadership and Change

- Influences on Researcher's Views
 - Desistance is preceded by a decision to choose not to continue offending, in spite of challenges to reentry.
 - Increased successes in practitioner approaches will likely be realized using scholarly research and methodologies as a framework and foundation to help guide practices and to achieve goals.

Agent for Change - Sherwood



Future Studies

- The areas of Reentry, Recidivism and Desistance are huge public policy and social issues in America, the largest prison industry in the world.
 - More research is needed in each of these areas
 - More Research involving other groups, e.g., women, youth, Hispanics, is needed
 - Public policy regarding sentencing for non-violent crimes should change to less punitive sentencing

Future Studies

- *African American Men Who Give Voice to the Personal Transition from Criminality to Desistance* is my premier study using narrative inquiry. More studies will be conducted as I follow the participants to see the direction and experiences of their lives post study.

The Case for Future Activism



Future Studies

- I remain passionate about diminishing crime in our communities, assisting youth in making good choices for their lives and changing restrictive and discriminatory practices that deny ex-offenders the choice of reentering, reintegrating and becoming fully engaged citizens in America

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