

# Evangelical Christianity and Criminal Rehabilitation: A Clinical Sociological Approach to Stigma and Identity Management

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## Abstract

Crime and religion are social constructs that indicate what society considers acceptable and deviant behavior. The connection is further complicated when considering how the formerly incarcerated integrate back into society after incarceration. This study examines Evangelical Christianity's role in criminal rehabilitation through identity repair. The article utilizes a clinical sociological approach and focuses explicitly on symbolic interactionism. The researcher conducted a case study of five formerly incarcerated individuals from the United States who are now working in vocational ministry settings. The researcher uses qualitative analysis to uncover how the participants explore social interactions and social systems that impact identity construction and criminal rehabilitation. The researcher finds that Evangelical organizations overfocus on individuality in conversion and do not recognize their part in the conversion process. The study also suggests that ex-felons need to manage their expectations and stigma. The implications of the findings suggest that identity formation and restoration is a social activity dependent upon multiple parties. This discovery can help those seeking to impact criminal rehabilitation as they find ways to repair previous identities and live crime-free.

**Keywords:** crime, religion, rehabilitation, stigma, clinical sociology

Society does not offer many ways for ex-felons to break from their stigmatized past and identities to become productive citizens. While the assumption is that recidivism depends on the ex-felon's effort and desire, it naively emphasizes individualistic traits without considering sociological factors. Ex-felons experience many physical

challenges and practical barriers after incarceration. However, a primary struggle that heavily impacts their response centers on identity. The identity that a person develops and maintains will further influence their attitudes, actions, and decisions.

Identity creation is a social process, not an individual one. Society either validates or withholds a particular identity for an individual. This acceptance or rejection will impact the person's internalization and responses. People who have experienced an event that stigmatized their identity, like a criminal conviction, cannot create a non-criminal identity unless society verifies it.

Religion is crucial in developing meaning, creating identity, and interpreting the social world. Ex-felons who want to move beyond their criminal identity need a vehicle to accomplish this transformation. Religion is a way in which ex-felons can create meaning after incarceration, construct a destigmatized identity, and reinterpret their identity and past mistakes to produce a new one. However, this transformation is not the sole responsibility of the individual, and the religious community has an essential function. This article explores the role of Christian identity restoration after people experience a criminal conviction.

The article uses clinical sociology, which applies sociology and creates solutions that address societal problems. A sociological intervention is needed to understand how ex-felons can develop destigmatized identities and successfully reintegrate back into society. Often, religious ministries lack the sociological insight necessary to contribute effectively to rehabilitation. Likewise, some secular approaches downplay religion's importance in rehabilitation. Providing sociological interventions combines these two elements and positively impacts the successful rehabilitation of the formerly incarcerated. This study contributes to existing research by offering the voice of those formerly incarcerated, and it provides clinical sociological interventions to address the problem.

The article will first review the literature related to crime and religion. Next, the study will provide information regarding the clinical context and setting of the research, along with the methodology used. Two primary themes emerged from the interviews. The first theme

focused on the relationship between criminal rehabilitation and religious redemption through Evangelical Christianity. The second theme emphasized the connection between symbolic interactionism and identity restoration for those formerly incarcerated. Based on the analysis, the study offers two sociological interventions. The first intervention is for Evangelical organizations. It focuses on Evangelicals recognizing their role in identity confirmation and calls for a change in evangelistic practices. The second intervention is offered to ex-felons and includes ways they can manage their expectations and stigmatized identities.

## 1. Crime and Religion Literature Review

Crime and religion are nebulous concepts that can be taken for granted. Durkheim ([1912] 1955) famously defines religion as a moral community that follows the same beliefs and practices that connect to sacred objects and are separated by profane ones. From that definition, the two primary elements of religion are beliefs and practices that unify a group of people. Durkheim defines the religious community as a “church”, and he said that it must consist of priests and laity who share the same morality, beliefs, and practices. Eliade (1987) adds to this definition by pointing out that religions will frequently repeat myths to allow people an opportunity to imitate their gods and maintain the sacredness of their reality.

The challenge is that beliefs and practices can be at odds with others. The inconsistency between people’s professed religious beliefs does not always match their actions. Cox (2009) suggests that Evangelical Christianity has isolated the concept of faith from belief and that modern Christians judge Christianity based on the belief of theological doctrinal statements. The emphasis on correct belief over correct practice establishes a system where what people say they believe is more important than how they put those beliefs into practice.

Evangelicals can claim that ex-felons can receive forgiveness but simultaneously withhold it from them. Bae (2017) explains this through a difference between involuntary and voluntary cognition, which means people can distinguish between the belief that ex-felons

can be forgiven versus the religious community actually forgiving them. It is crucial to understand and explain how religious people treat the formerly incarcerated instead of relying on what they claim.

An essential part of religion is that it establishes the moral standards for the community, which guides its members' behavior. One way the moral standard is set is by isolating and protecting sacred objects from the profane (Durkheim [1912] 1955). The sacred in religion is treated differently from similar items by its members (Eliade 1987). While profane and sacred are subjective concepts, it is important to understand what makes them blasphemous or holy to a group of people (Weber [1921] 1968).

Religion must maintain the reality of its members, and one way this occurs is through conversion and disassociation between the converted and the unconverted (Berger 1990). The religious community needs to be able to distinguish itself from others. Casanova (1994) suggests that religious fundamentalists do this by requiring sin and apostasy to exist. Therefore, religious fundamentalists define their holy actions by clarifying that others are unholy.

Since fundamentalists need the unholy so they can be holy, some fundamentalists may struggle with how to define or treat those formerly incarcerated. A challenge for those engaged in criminal activity is that the religious community could consider their actions and those associated with them as profane. When that happens, the congregation may assign a value to people and segregate the profane members from the holy congregants. In religion and criminality, attention needs to be given to how and if the profane can become sacred.

The United States (US) has a long and complicated history with religion. Weber ([1905] 1958) shows that Protestantism mixed with capitalism influences the American ethos. Things like frugality, working hard, assigning meaning to vocation, avoiding idleness, and putting ethical significance on wealth are all things that result from the mix of capitalism and religion, and guide American society. Weber identifies that capitalism and religion mix and guide American society. Berger (1990) observes that religion is currently marketed as a commodity because people can no longer impose it.

Mills (1959) suggests employing sociological imagination to understand people and institutions, which means recognizing history, meaning, social position, and false consciousness. Applying this to the US, it is clear that religious and capitalistic principles are always in play. The influence of Protestant Christianity and capitalism is engrained in US society even when it is not overtly recognized. Therefore, the ideas about criminality and moral behavior are rooted in religion. Kaufman (2019) suggests that understanding how religion matters to people and how religious concepts are used will help evaluate its impact on those in the criminal justice system.

People use religion for guidance through difficult circumstances. Religion allows people to make sense of past mistakes and alleviates anxiety about death (Royce [1908] 2017). Religion is often used as a vehicle of transformation for individuals in dealing with tragedy. Needs and desires can conflict, so religion is employed in those decisions.

Religion and crime are similar because both are socially constructed and represent the collective consciousness of a particular society. Durkheim ([1893] 2014) argues that religious law and penal law are connected, and people seek justice for crime because they want retribution for violating ideas or morals that they hold as sacred. Religion and crime establish moral guidelines, have expected practices, prioritize specific values, assign sacredness and profaneness, and connect the collective consciousness.

Crime is any activity that offends collective consciousness, appears detrimental to society, and incites a punishment reaction against the doer (Durkheim [1893] 2014). Criminal acts are contextualized based on a specific culture and can change. Since crime violates social consciousness, people can easily classify criminal acts as immoral. Durkheim ([1893] 2014) clarifies that an action is a crime because it is condemned by society instead of being condemned because the behavior is a crime. Durkheim makes an important distinction because it recognizes societal bias and refocuses the reactive punitive passions to thoughtful rehabilitative approaches.

Crime and religion frequently intersect through prison institutions. In the US, correctional facilities utilize chaplains who

work under a prison administrator (Beckford 2013). The religious goals of chaplains intersect with the institutional objectives of prisons. While the chaplain may seek to convert or have the prisoner develop spiritually, these goals coincide with the correctional goals of increasing inmate discipline and reducing recidivism (Hallett et al. 2019). Correctional institutions may also support religious programming because it is inexpensive and utilizes a mixture of volunteers and paid staff. Stansfield et al. (2019) point out that religious programming may be the only rehabilitative service that inmates receive.

The literature also indicates that redemption connects to successful reentry. Society impacts how people interpret the world and know themselves (Berger & Luckman 1967). Religious people need to understand how their spiritual practices and beliefs influence offenders. When incarcerated people feel forgiven and acknowledged by God, they report feeling comforted (Landman & Pieterse 2020). Experiencing religious forgiveness impacts a person's ability to forgive others, and being forgiven positively impacts offenders (Morton et al. 2019).

There are reentry challenges connected with ex-felons, religion, and redemption. People take many social institutions for granted that are inaccessible to ex-convicts (Wallace et al. 2020). Ex-felons report that religion is a crucial source of resilience and reintegration, but they also experience social structure barriers that challenge their ability to practice their faith (Teti et al. 2012). The literature frequently emphasizes the discrimination ex-felons experience, resulting in a lack of basic needs like housing and employment (Hlavka et al. 2015).

Employers discredit people with a criminal history, and the applicant's ability to overcome the stereotype is frequently related to their criminal offense (Uggen et al. 2014). A different study indicates that hiring managers are more willing to hire those with criminal histories if the applicant shows remorse, apologizes, or offers justification for their criminal behavior (Ali et al. 2017). A criminal record follows an applicant for their entire life, which can leave them always open to employment discrimination or having to explain

illicit behavior from decades prior. In addition to employment and housing challenges, parolees endure extra financial burdens through fees associated with parole, random drug testing, and court-ordered classes, which contribute to reincarceration (Pogrebin et al. 2014).

Congregations may be limited in what they can do to address the physical needs of ex-felons, but they can offer significant support in ways that are aligned with what the organization is already doing. One religious organization assisted ex-felons in developing recovery capital, focusing on finances, social connection, and life skills (Connolly & Granfield 2017). Many churches already offer money management classes and other avenues where their congregants develop relationally and practically.

However, ex-felons could find it challenging to experience social connection through a religious community. Goffman (1959) argues that social exchanges occur through people concealing their desires and acting consistently with the expectations of others. Being part of a religious group involves the pressure of living an expected lifestyle. The challenges faced by many ex-felons are things that most congregants take for granted. For example, one study found that ex-felons with many incarcerations lack the social and economic capital to change, and therefore they continue a cycle of repeat offenses, solidifying public opinion that these individuals are defective (Pogrebin et al. 2014).

An underlying issue for many ex-felons contributing to recidivism is exclusion from social networks, which continues to limit their ability to build social capital (Koschmann & Peterson 2013). To experience the newness and opportunity for change associated with redemption means that many ex-felons need to develop new relationships. They cannot return to their criminal network, and one study found that some family members even expressed difficulty reestablishing relationships post-incarceration (Dolwick-Grieb et al. 2014).

Religious support for ex-felons positively affects reentry success (Stansfield 2017). Religious organizations that were successful with ex-felon reintegration did so in simple ways. For example, Connolly and Granfield (2017) found that ministries that treated ex-felons

with dignity were more successful, and Koschmann and Peterson (2013) found that mentoring the formerly incarcerated helped address hidden recidivism causes.

The final area that connects with redemption and rehabilitation is desistance, which explores how people formerly convicted of crimes live a crime-free life. The process of desistance helps people accept responsibility and fosters a deeper understanding of how to live reciprocally in a community where they give and receive (McKiernan et al. 2013). Religion plays a significant role in desistance because it enables people to shift their narrative and perspective of past crimes, leads people to normative behavior, and encourages desistance (Ellis 2018). It was also found that religion is useful in the desistance process because it offers the opportunity for self-reflection and provides hope for people's future (Said & Davidson 2021).

Religion is integral to desistance because it impacts behavior and aligns people's actions with societal expectations. Desistance includes personal willpower, determination, and social support (Stansfield et al. 2019). Religion formally and informally controls people's behavior by establishing social and moral expectations. Religion allows ex-felons to develop social solidarity and align with the values and expectations of their religious community.

Religiosity helps individuals with impulse control and helps reduce reoffending associated with self-control (Pirutinsky 2014). Furthermore, Brauer et al. (2013) found that compared to nonreligious participants, religious ones had more self-discipline, social support, informal social control, and conservative moral beliefs. An essential part of desistance was attending religious services. One finding showed that religious involvement increased fear of retribution, social bonds, and self-control (Kelly et al. 2015).

There are at least two noticeable missing pieces from existing literature and research. The first is the views of the ex-felons. Most of the current research focuses on attitudes that congregants or the public have about ex-felons. This study provides the perspective and voice of those formerly incarcerated regarding Christianity and criminal rehabilitation.



A second area lacking in the existing research is a clinical sociological perspective on religion and criminal rehabilitation as it relates to stigmatized identities. Clinical sociology seeks to critically analyze and assess beliefs and practices to develop interventions for change and improvement (Fritz 2006). Previous clinical sociological research has not considered religion's contribution and hindrance to rehabilitation and identity repair.

## 1. The Clinical Setting and Research Methodology

I utilized qualitative case study analysis to understand how crime and religion intersect with identity. I received approval from my institution's Internal Review Board and contacted prison ministries to find participants. All the participants signed an informed consent. The criteria for inclusion in the study were having experienced an arrest or conviction, and some exposure to religion during and after release. However, as I interacted with participants, I noticed a theme. All of the people who were interested in participating in the study were currently employed in vocational ministry. Therefore, I adjusted the initial study to explore how these men were clinically rehabilitated through religion and developed new identities.

There were a total of five participants. They all had felony convictions, served multi-year sentences, and are now working in vocational ministry settings. The interviews occurred through Zoom from April 2023 to June 2023. The interviews lasted from 44 minutes to 83 minutes. I used semi-structured interview questions. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then deleted. I used qualitative analysis in the transcription to identify themes.

Participant 1 was arrested for violent crimes and drugs. He received his first felony conviction at 17 years old and continued to engage in criminal activity related to drugs and violence. Participant 1 was incarcerated for over 16 years. Participant 1 experienced a challenging childhood. He was raised in a single-parent household with only his mother present. He reports that his life was unstructured, and he grew up with drugs being a normal part of life. He was not raised in a Christian home and seldom went to church.

Participant 2 received a life sentence, of which he served 15 years before being released. Participant 2 attempted to kill someone and was convicted of a murder-for-hire. He describes his childhood as mischievous. His father committed suicide when he was a boy, and his mother raised him. His family were nominal Catholics, and he entered the military between his junior and senior years of high school.

Participant 3 was convicted of the second-degree murder of a two-year-old child. Participant 3 maintains his innocence. He received a 15-year to life sentence and was incarcerated for almost 29 years. He reports that he only received a couple of traffic tickets before his second-degree murder conviction. Both parents raised Participant 3 in an inactive Catholic home. He considered himself an atheist before becoming a Christian, and he served in the military before his conviction.

Participant 4 was convicted of drug charges and other criminal behavior that he engaged in while working with a drug cartel. He received a 22-year sentence and served 19 years in a federal prison. He was raised in a Christian family with both parents present. His religious beliefs rely heavily on the supernatural. While he was not active in church before his conviction, he speaks about supernatural occurrences and experiences he had as a child and throughout his life.

Participant 5 was convicted of sexual assault of a child. Before his conviction, he was a youth pastor, and the child he assaulted was part of his youth ministry. He received a ten-year sentence and served nine and a half years. Participant 5 reports that he did not have any criminal charges before or since this incident. He was raised in a religious home, went to private Christian schools, and started his career in vocational ministry after graduating from college.

There are some differences between the participants in this study compared to typical ex-felons. For example, all the participants in this study are employed in a vocational ministry capacity. Some participants had secular jobs post-release, but they are now ordained or working towards ordination by their faith group.

Another difference is that the participants are entrepreneurial and could build social capital and make significant accomplishments.

Participant 1 reports: “There’s nothing out of the ordinary about me that would place me above anyone or anybody else.” However, later he reports: “So I was even before becoming a Christian, like I’ve always had the characteristics and the traits like to stand on my own two feet.”

Participant 1 is highly motivated and has always exhibited leadership qualities. He was previously successful in criminal activity and aspired to be the best drug dealer possible. While incarcerated, he also exhibited an ability to develop social capital and leadership qualities among other inmates. After his release, Participant 1 had a job waiting for him in a vocational prison ministry.

Participant 2 was successful in his military career before his conviction. Participant 2 lived in a friend’s 7,000-square-foot home when he was paroled. His friend was also a business owner who gave him a job. He was a salesman and ended up working his way up to sales manager, where he oversaw revenues in the millions.

Participant 2 is currently a leader at a ministry and appears to take his leadership and networking skills for granted. An example of this is his advice to inmates seeking employment. He says that ex-felons need to work two jobs if necessary. He advises those searching for a job to cold-call employers and follow up several days later. Many people do not have these skills or know how to conduct this type of interviewing and networking.

When Participant 3 was released, he had a job waiting for him based on a previous connection. He was only initially working 30 hours a week, so his boss contacted others in the industry to get him part-time work. In addition to these two jobs, he also started working odd, physical jobs for people. Networking and word-of-mouth contributed to him receiving additional business and allowed him to support himself.

Participant 4 is extremely entrepreneurial. He utilized his sales and networking skills through his criminal career and business with the cartel. While he displayed a strong work ethic, Participant 4 is also highly motivated. When he could not find ministry employment, he created a ministry, which was an extension of what he was doing while incarcerated.

Participant 5 describes himself as a “super-Type A personality” who does not take no for an answer. After being released from prison, Participant 5 had a job working in commercial real estate. While he knew little about this field, Participant 5 was given the job by a father who previously had a kid in Participant 5’s youth ministry. Eventually, Participant 5 felt the need to reenter vocational ministry. His employer continued to pay him his commercial real estate salary, but allowed him to focus on creating a new prison ministry for the next six months. His employer helped him develop a business plan, set up a nonprofit organization, and connected him with investors.

While all five participants achieved a lot, they also experienced a level of privilege that other inmates may not. For example, all participants were white men. Several also commented that they do not look like “a stereotypical criminal”. Participant 2 reports that people look at him and think, “‘Oh, he doesn’t have any tattoos. Oh, he’s a white guy like me... Wow. He’s just like me.’ And the light goes on, and they are like, ‘I could serve somebody like that.’” Participant 4 also mentions not having tattoos and expressed an ability to blend in at any business meeting.

Participant 3 acknowledges people’s stereotypes about ex-felons by stating, “I don’t present as that stereotypical knuckle-dragging, predatory thug when I’m speaking in front of this group, and then all of a sudden, they find out I served 29 years. And they’re hit with something that’s a total conflict with their beliefs.”

The only one who has visible tattoos is Participant 1. While the other participants had limited criminal activity before their conviction, Participant 1 lived a criminal lifestyle. Even though he has tattoos, they are an asset in his current profession. The tattoos are a reminder and provide a bridge between the churches and inmates while showing that he has been in both worlds.

All the participants experienced successful reintegration. However, part of that success is related to their privilege of concealing their criminality and ability to network with others. Racial segregation still prevails in the United States church (Dougherty et al. 2015). So, it is unclear how minority participants would have the same success integrating back into society.

## 1. Criminal Rehabilitation and Religious Redemption

The concept of rehabilitation is essential to criminology because it outlines how an ex-convict reenters society. Evangelical Christianity offers a similar principle to rehabilitation, which is called redemption. From an Evangelical viewpoint, redemption is how someone's past mistakes are corrected. The language people use is essential as it relates to the sociology of knowledge, and people cannot have a sociology of knowledge without a sociology of religion (Berger & Luckman 1967). Both terms cover how past mistakes are dealt with and how people reenter society.

Four of the five participants experienced a religious conversion while incarcerated. Participant 5 was previously a youth pastor, but he still describes his time in incarceration as spiritually formative and significant. All of the participants saw prison in redemptive ways. For example, Participant 1 reports that part of the appeal to religion in prison is belonging. He says, "So, the nature and the atmosphere of prison is like, if you don't belong to someone, then you don't belong to anyone." Participant 4 continues the idea of the redemptive nature of prison by stating, "Prison will either make you bitter or better. I chose not to be bitter."

The first area of redemption and rehabilitation covers redemptive ideas and practices. An essential part of redemption and rehabilitation involves the community. Kewley et al. (2015) argue that redemption is a mutual process that involves at least two parties. For example, the ex-convict does not experience redemption if the religious community refuses it to him. Redemption is not solely the responsibility of the ex-convict, but instead, the religious community and society are equally responsible for the ex-offender's successful reintegration.

The connection with others while incarcerated emerged during the interviews. Participants 1 and 4 both reported a desire to serve the religious needs of their fellow inmates. Participants 2 and 5 discussed how the prison chaplain positively impacted their incarceration. Participant 3 says that being accepted and not criticized when he first converted was a crucial experience. When he asked theological

questions, he received a welcoming response from fellow religious inmates.

In addition to the response by other inmates and prison chaplains, the participants all focused on the importance of being connected to an outside religious community. Participants 1, 2, and 3 became members of churches in the community before being released from prison. Participant 1 describes how this impacted him post-release with the statement about his church, “And it was like when I went there it was like, I wasn’t a stranger. Like over the years, they already knew who I was, and that broke down those barriers of awkwardness. And I felt completely welcomed, and I felt loved.”

Participant 4 did not have a positive or welcoming experience with congregations or clergy once released. Instead, he experienced skepticism about his religion and qualifications as a minister. However, the religious community still played an instrumental role in his life. Before being incarcerated, Participant 4 had a pastor prophesy over him by stating he would become a minister one day. While Participant 4 did not think much of the experience at the time, he recalled it as part of his biography, and it seemed to solidify his identity and place.

Participant 5 discusses the importance of religious community throughout his interview. He specifically credits his current involvement in a small group at church as a way of connection, accountability, and support. Regarding religious life and connections while incarcerated, he notes:

*The one thing about the prison church in particular, if you choose to do that, and a lot of people don’t. But if you choose to do that, the pretense of you know that I’ve actually got my life together is obviously gone. Because if your life is together, then why the heck are you sitting in the prison chapel service, you know?*

The religious prison services served as a safe place for the participants to explore Christianity and not be held back by their previous convictions. It offered an opportunity for them to embrace vulnerability and their previous mistakes while also providing hope for the future.

Religious redemptive narratives significantly impact ex-felons because the transformation in identity translates into a change in behaviors (Ellis 2018). Redemption affects how ex-felons interpret their past, understand their current situation, and envision their future. Ex-felons have experienced redemption from their past when they can serve and prevent others from making similar mistakes (Flores & Cossyleon 2016).

One theme that emerged from the study regarding redemptive narratives was the religious education and training they received while incarcerated. All participants received some religious training, and all were involved in ministry while incarcerated. Their training and ministry involvement positively impacted their redemptive narrative and confidence.

Participant 1 earned several theological and ministry degrees, which included over seven years of seminary training and a doctorate. Participant 4 reported having over 20,000 hours in biblical training and received 16 years of religious curriculum and laity training before entering seminary, where he also earned a doctorate.

While Participants 2 and 3 did not earn specific degrees, they underwent rigorous educational programs. Participant 2 reported reading the Bible 10 to 12 hours daily and compared his first four years of prison to a seminary. His church and denomination later ordained him. Participant 3 was enrolled in several religious educational programs, including a Bible institute.

The only one with religious training before their conviction was Participant 5. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in religion and ministry before his criminal arrest, but he also described his incarceration as a time of spiritual growth. Participant 5 compared his spiritual development while incarcerated to when he earned his bachelor's degree in ministry: "My relationship with Lord actually developed during my incarceration much more than it did during the time I was in school, which is interesting."

Redemption is central to Evangelical Christianity, but it is sometimes withheld from ex-criminals. The divide between ideas concerning redemption and redemption being put into practice is seen in one study where 80 percent of respondents believed ex-

felons could receive redemption, but 90 percent thought criminals were too damaged to change (Burton et al. 2020). Redemption is offered, but not freely given. Congregations sometimes struggle with the tension between ideas of redemption and punishment.

Christians can use redemption to serve their own purposes by reserving it for only something they experience. For example, Stacer and Roberts (2018) found that while most religious prison volunteers reported altruistic motives, their responses indicated that a primary reason for volunteering was that it made them feel good. Another study about Christian attitudes concerning the forgiveness of ex-felons discovered that white congregants are less likely to forgive and that black churchgoers were the most empathetic for those labeled as criminals (Jones & Sims 2016). Perhaps one explanation for the willingness of black churches to offer redemption to criminals is that the most significant factor in how people treat ex-felons is if they know someone engaged in criminal activity (Rade et al. 2016). Police disproportionately target the black community, so race and relationships may play a more significant role in ideas of redemption than religion.

## 1. Identity and Symbolic Interactionism

Another vital element of crime and religion is identity. The research primarily focused on stigma and the impact that identity has on behaviors. Stigma is a challenge for ex-felons, and how they conceal and disclose their backgrounds can negatively impact them. The research also focused on how religion provides ex-offenders with a new identity to replace their criminal one.

The concept of identity is rooted in symbolic interactionism because it deals with meaning and is reinforced by social interaction and institutions. Blumer ([1969] 1998) argues that symbolic interactionism focuses on the meaning people attribute to social products as they interact with each other. Therefore, concepts such as identity are not innate, can change over time, and are modified through relationships with others. Therefore, symbolic interactionism is valuable in studying how identity is created, maintained, and restored. There are three primary premises in understanding symbolic



interactionism: humans act based on meaning, the meaning comes from social interaction with others, and the meanings are modified through an interpretation process (*ibid.*).

Ex-felons are frequently stigmatized for their criminal past, but religion offers them a way to reinterpret and establish a new identity. Goffman (1963) famously defines stigma as a discrediting mark that impacts a person's social identity. Stigma is a concept, and stigmatized people frequently engage in stigma management to carefully manage and conceal people's perceptions of them. Denver et al. (2017) discovered that how people are treated reinforces stigma by creating self-stigma.

A theme that emerged from the study was the prominence of the Christian identity for the participants and how it replaced their previous criminal ones. Burke and Stets (2023) argue that the individual and society are interconnected in the concept of identity, and identity is a defining set of meanings that provide people with their roles, membership, social categories, and unique characteristics. All five participants describe their Christian identity as central to who they are as people. While they acknowledged previous mistakes, the participants used their Christian identities to reinterpret past mistakes and used their new identities and previous ones as a framework for serving others.

Foucault ([1975] 1991) argues that society expects people to have a recognizable, fixed identity that falls into a hierarchy. For ex-felons, it is extremely difficult to establish a new identity because the criminal designation stays with them. No matter what they do or accomplish post-prison release, they will forever be reminded of their criminal identity. Identity activation only occurs when others validate it, as the individual spends a significant amount of time carrying out that particular identity's behaviors and activities (Burke & Stets 2023). Once a person is convicted of a crime, it will forever be on their record. A study that focused on the perspectives of parolees found that while they may work hard to develop prosocial networks, they still experience distrust and suspicion from others (Pogrebin et al. 2015). People with a criminal record always have to identify themselves by their criminal identity on job and housing applications.

One meta-analysis study found that successful reentry interventions include reducing stigma and developing interpersonal relationships with others (Rade et al. 2016). Religion provides a second chance for ex-offenders and new interpersonal relationships within the religious community. However, the challenge may be that some ex-offenders do not engage in religious communities after release. Stigma makes it challenging to develop the needed social support because it impacts self-esteem, which then causes people to limit their interactions with others and conceal themselves (LeBel 2012).

Involvement with a religious organization decreases stigma by offering forgiveness of mistakes, reinterpreting biography, and providing social connection. For example, sex offenders involved in religious programming after being released from prison had increased socialization and reduced recidivism (Stanfield et al. 2020). Another study found that involvement with a religious community is crucial for successful reentry (Mowen et al. 2018).

Hlavka et al. (2015) suggest that stigma, shame, and acceptance are primary issues plaguing ex-felons. In addition to navigating stigma from previous criminal behavior, many ex-felons experience stigma from trauma associated pre-, post-, and during their incarceration (Williams et al. 2021). Stigmatization is further experienced by the formerly incarcerated because they may be prohibited from voting and participating in political change (Miller & Spillane 2012). Society expects ex-felons to be rehabilitated after they are released, but the stigma they continue to experience, and the barriers put in place, make it very difficult.

Even when stigmatization is not apparent to society, it is a burden that does not easily leave. Ricciardelli and Mooney (2018) found that ex-offenders can conceal their stigma, but they still feel like they possess an unseen character trait where they worry about being discovered and discredited by society. The internet does not help with stigma because many websites humiliate and violate ex-offenders' privacy, ensuring ex-felons always have an online criminal record (Lageson & Maruna 2018). Ex-felons from a lower socioeconomic background have the extra burden of dealing with

class-based stigma, which can result in a lifetime of internal and self-stigmatization (Loughnan et al. 2014).

The participants echoed the internalization of stigma, and one example is Participant 2's self-disclosure: "And that's one of the internal struggles I struggle with. I don't know if you, as you talked to other formerly incarcerated, but I have this constant weight that I don't belong; that I should still be in prison." Similarly, Participant 3 recalls:

*I felt inferior to everyone else. Now, I had been taught through my biblical education that, you know, we're all sinners and we're all equals, but I didn't feel it... Despite the fact that no one treated me inferior, I felt it myself. And it's something I still battle with.*

Rituals help ex-offenders change their identity and combat stigma (Snedker 2016). Religion provides rituals that reinforce a religious identity. Even with a new identity brought on by rituals, it is difficult for people to lose their old ones. For example, Goffman (1963) suggests that people who move beyond their stigmatized category are still considered representatives of their previous group by others. So, an ex-felon who begins his religious identity after engaging in criminal behavior may always be viewed as an outsider by the religious community they seek to join.

The second part of identity with religion and crime is reframing and establishing a new identity. How someone views themselves is essential to their identity and reality construction. Berger and Luckman (1967) suggest that subjective meaning translates into objective facts and that identity is socially constructed, changes, and is decided by language. So, if a person always views themselves as a criminal, they are likely to continue criminal behavior. Likewise, when someone identifies as a religious person, they are more likely to adhere to the moral guides established by their religion.

A common theme for all the participants is how they interpret their ex-felon identity. When asked about being an ex-felon, Participant 3 reported that it was not defining for him and, "It's almost a weird badge of honor – not to have been imprisoned, but to have been in prison and be doing okay now." Likewise, the other

participants viewed their ex-felon identities as an opportunity, a redemption story, just part of their past, and subordinate to their Christian identity.

While some participants shared stories of discrimination, they used their Christian identity as a coping mechanism. They interpreted their discrimination and sometimes rejection in view of their religious identity. Identity verification is the process where others confirm the person's proposed identity. When a stigmatized identity is verified by society, it limits the person's opportunity to develop a positive new identity by reinforcing negative internalizations (Burke & Stets 2023). The participants sought other forms of identity verification that reinforced their religious identity, like through self-talk or serving others, to confirm their Christian identities.

Mills (1959) connects social problems with how biography and history intersect with social structures. Therefore, successful reentry depends not only on religious affiliation but also on how ex-convicts view themselves and their past. The ability to begin a new identity and use past mistakes as a growth opportunity will enable ex-convicts to overcome many social problems. Ex-offenders can use religion to shed their criminal identity and establish a new religious one (Kewley et al. 2017).

Religion is seminal in offering the formerly incarcerated hope, forgiveness, and purpose. The way religion accomplishes this is through reframing past criminal behavior and creating a new identity. Ex-felons report that they can reframe their past and that colloquial religious sayings like "everything happens for a reason" offered a different way of seeing their history (Teti et al. 2012).

Miller and Vuolo (2018) suggest that people who spend time building a religious identity may not want to jeopardize losing their investment by engaging in criminal acts. In this way, group solidarity can encourage someone who makes a religious decision to continue living a religious lifestyle. Religious conversion gives the offender the benefits of a new identity while encouraging them to conform to the system (Algranti 2018).

Each participant experienced opposition and skepticism concerning their religious conversion. Participant 1 was called a "fake Christian"

even one year after his conversion. Participants 2 and 5 discuss how people confronted their wives about their marriage decisions and dissuaded them from continuing their relationship. Participant 3 is estranged from his adult child. Participant 4's sexuality was called into question when he maintained celibacy. A local newspaper found out about Participant 5's past, so they did a story questioning if he should be allowed to work at a church with adults because he had a previous conviction of sexual assault of a child.

Self-esteem reinforces identity through a person's self-talk. People's self-esteem is impacted by the success level of their expectations. Therefore, even a high level of success can be viewed as a failure if the person has even higher expectations than what they achieve (Burke & Stets 2023). This dynamic helps explain how people can internalize and feel like a failure even when others view their actions as successful. Participant 4 recalls his expectations with the church after being released:

*I'm going to be accepted in the church, and they're probably going to give me some sort of position, and we're going to launch prison ministry because at that point I'd already launched a prison ministry behind bars... And I know I'm going to be accepted because I paid the price. That wasn't the case. Just the opposite was the case. They wanted me to sit on the pew. They wanted me to prove myself. They wanted to assess me.*

Crime and religion intersect with identity. Society assigns a lifelong, negative identity to those formerly incarcerated. Religion offers a way for ex-felons to reinterpret their identity and reintegrate into society. Those trying to repair and restore a damaged identity encounter discouragement when their experiences do not align with their expectations. If a new identity is not supported, individuals can abandon their efforts and focus on an identity that received previous support (Burke & Stets 2023). Religious organizations, nonprofits, and governmental agencies must find ways to encourage ex-felons to form new identities.

## 1. Sociological Interventions

A clinical sociological approach is needed to help ex-felons achieve successful rehabilitation. Ex-felons who experience a religious conversion while incarcerated can find it hard to maintain their conversion and live a crime-free life. One of the primary reasons for this is that Evangelicals overemphasize the individual's role in religious identity creation. Churches have a prominent function and a responsibility to validate the new convert. This final section will propose two sociological interventions to address the problem of clinical rehabilitation of identity for ex-felons. Therefore, a clinical sociological approach is needed to evaluate the social norms, relationships, structures, and patterns to address current dysfunctions (Rebach 2001).

At the center of criminal rehabilitation is the concept of identity. Previous clinical sociologists have explored the impact of stigma on developing new identities, but the challenge is that sometimes past identities become intertwined with self-identity and behaviors (Robinette & Straus 2002). Changing identities is not a matter of willpower; instead, the transformation relies upon the social institutions and interactions people experience. Clinical sociology allows a transition from individual choice to intersocietal relationships (Fritz 2006).

As discussed in the previous section, symbolic interactionism is well-suited to address identity creation and restoration. One crucial symbolic interactionism element is the role of meanings and social interactions in developing the concept of the self. A clinical sociology approach that utilizes symbolic interactionism frames this problem regarding how people view and interpret their situations and interactions with significant others (Glassner & Freedman 1979).

Evangelical Christianity provides incarcerated people with a framework of hope and meaning. It also helps them establish new relationships with other religious believers. This new relationship within a church is frequently called a "spiritual family." Therefore, the interactions ex-felons have with their "church family" when released can make a significant impact and help them understand their identity, situation, and future.

The first sociological intervention involves churches recognizing and capitalizing on their role in identity reconstruction, resocialization, and meaning-making institutions for ex-felons. I propose that Evangelical churches and organizations do this by not converting those who are incarcerated or formerly incarcerated. Currently, the emphasis for many Evangelicals is conversion, but there is little or no follow-up. Since inmates and ex-felons are highly stigmatized and vulnerable, they should not be converted unless the religious community can make an ongoing and long-term commitment to the ex-felon post-release.

A normative social practice of Evangelical Christianity is to evangelize non-Christians by having them repeat the “Sinner’s Prayer.” This prayer is a formulaic expression that emphasizes an individual decision through the confession of personal depravity, belief in the substitutionary atonement and deity of Jesus, and commitment to follow Jesus personally. This codified practice of the “Sinner’s Prayer” is the first step in creating the Christian identity for many churches. After this decision, the person engages in the symbolic act of baptism, where they reenact the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as their public declaration of faith.

Repeating the “Sinner’s Prayer” and the subsequent baptism is a facilitative mechanism that encourages social support and identity within the Evangelical community. At the same time, this personal confession and baptism also serve as a limiting mechanism. While it is designed to establish identity and social solidarity, the practice exaggerates personal choice, where the burden of fulfilling the commitment is primarily on the new convert. If the new Christian does not fulfill these expectations, the religious community may not provide the needed interactions to support, encourage, and confirm the new identity.

Evangelicals may not want to limit proselytizing because most see it as a cornerstone of their faith and a divine commandment called the “Great Commission.” However, engaging in evangelistic activity with no plan to follow up is irresponsible, harmful, and selfish. The current Evangelistic model pushes the responsibility for

maintaining a religious identity primarily on ex-felons and inmates, who are already at a disadvantage.

Identity verification by others produces within the individual a positive emotional reaction, and the factors that impact the solidifying emotions for identity are the level of commitment, frequency, verification by intimate relationships, and social structures (Burke & Stets 2023). When someone is highly committed to an identity, they will put more weight on how or if others verify it. Similarly, the regularity with which an identity is confirmed or ignored impacts the individual's conversation with themselves.

The relationship of the person verifying the identity impacts the individual – denying an identity from a loved one can have a more damaging effect. Lastly, a person's relationship within a social structure can affect how they feel and reinforce their identity. Burke and Stets (2023) suggest that those at the bottom of social hierarchies may be more negatively impacted and not have other resources to cope with identity rejection.

Resocialization is an essential part of identity formation and restoration. Human life constantly changes as people transition through life, receiving new roles, statuses, and responsibilities (Robinette & Straus 2002). The nature of being released from prison is a transitional status where an individual is struggling with roles, statuses, and responsibilities. Christianity provides a moral framework that builds solidarity and conformity to social norms, laws, and expectations. As Participant 1 notes:

*Before I became a Christian, I'm the victim, right, and it is me against the state. You know, I didn't take ownership of my offenses and my sins, and I just thought that they were wrong. That, just leave people alone, let them live life however they want to, right. Now, after being a Christian obviously that went the opposite direction – just taking ownership of my sin, repenting, and knowing that all authority is given by God for a specific reason, as laws that he gives to us through these authorities.*

Resocialization is a common clinical sociological intervention (Rebach 2001). It is needed when individuals go through major life transitions, and it allows them to internalize new social norms,



values, and identities. Evangelical churches and organizations can positively contribute to the resocialization of ex-felons, and they need to recognize that identity creation is an ongoing process, not a conversion event.

The last area in identity restoration is meaning-making. People constantly interpret social interactions and assign meaning to objects and the behavior of others (Blumer [1969] 1998). As it relates to identity, this meaning-making process is a collective event. In addition to the intentions and actions of the group and other individuals to the ex-felon, there is also the ex-felon's internalization of themselves that impact identity. Identity is a social occurrence, so the focus needs to be on helping ex-felons reframe their past identities and reinterpret previous mistakes.

People desire to feel important and crave meaningful roles that help them make sense and interpret their lives (Du Bois & Berg 2002). People want to be the hero of their own story and the leading actor in their lives. When they experience a stigmatizing event, they need new ways to reframe their mistakes to maintain or reclaim their hero status. Evangelical Christianity provides a stage where people can be heroes by reinterpreting past events and starting over.

Evangelical Christianity can serve as a facilitating mechanism for transformation and newness. Likewise, it can be a limiting mechanism by focusing on that change and contributing to people feeling stigma for not adapting fast enough. Therefore, a successful rehabilitative approach will emphasize acceptance of the ex-felon in their current situation and allow them to change at a slower pace than what the congregation may expect.

The second sociological intervention is for ex-felons to manage their stigma and expectations. Identity is socially constructed, and it is the responsibility of society and the individual to engage in the process. The way that ex-felons manage their stigma and expectations will impact how they interact and interpret their identity and place in the religious community. Unfortunately, this means that ex-felons should expect that there will be people who reject them despite their good deeds or religious conversion, redefine their ideas about success, and actively address and manage their stigma.

A normative social practice for ex-felons who experience a religious conversion while incarcerated involves making certain assumptions. Ex-felons can speculate that religious redemption gives them a second chance at life, freedom begins once their sentence or community supervision is over, and others will notice and accept them and their transformation. Ex-felons have these three assumptions because they have engaged in codified practices from Evangelicals who have told them that these three things are not only possible, but they should be expected through conversion, belief in the religious doctrine, and living a Christian life.

Evangelicals utilize symbolic practices that impact the expectations of ex-felons. For example, Participant 5 recalls an experience with a pastor at a church who addressed the congregation about this participant's criminal past: "So, they covered it and said, 'You know about this.' And he made this statement, he said, 'The one thing that I urge everybody in this church to remember is the ground is still level at the cross.' And I never forgot those words."

The pastor's words served as a symbol that communicated acceptance and commonality regarding mistakes and the need for forgiveness. While the symbol meant a lot to Participant 5, it practically does not happen, especially with more stigmatized offenses. Later in the interview, this same participant recalls about his criminal past and conviction: "there are certain people that define me by my offense, and there is nothing I can do about that."

The criminal justice system also sets ex-felons up for unrealistic expectations about successful reentry through symbolic practices. For example, when someone finishes their prison sentence, it is commonly said that they have "paid their debt to society". This language implies that the person is starting afresh, and the offense is not held against them anymore. The problem is that a criminal conviction follows the person, and their debt is never canceled.

A facilitative mechanism is stigma management. All the participants navigated stigma management and presentation by being upfront. Participant 2 reports that he experienced churches as welcoming and attributed that to being upfront with them about his criminal past. Similarly, Respondent 5 says:

*I think a lot of times previously incarcerated people go, man, let you get to know me first. And once you get to know me, the truth about my past, it won't be as hard. I just think it's backwards. I really think it's a backwards approach. I think you're better off with a fast no than a very slow and protracted yes.*

Presenting the stigma can help facilitate support and allow for the ex-felon to frame the narrative and experience. However, it is also a limiting mechanism for ex-felons because it can lead to further discrimination and stigmatization. Congregants without a criminal history enjoy a level of privilege that is not experienced by ex-felons. The average congregant can hide previous and ongoing mistakes and present themselves as faithfully religious. Ex-felons, conversely, must decide to immediately and fully self-disclose past mistakes, knowing that it may impact their current and future relationships.

A facilitative mechanism that the criminal justice system provides those formerly incarcerated is the label of “ex-felon”. The intention behind this is to encourage community support and place the criminal offense in the past. However, it also serves as a limiting mechanism. While the language intends to emphasize the “ex,” the focus is usually more on the “felon” part of the term, which continues to lead to social exclusion and stigma.

Ex-felons need to adjust their expectations. A person's self-talk and level of expectation will influence how they interpret success and failures (Burke & Stets 2023). While churches need to accept ex-felons and look past their mistakes unconditionally, ex-felons need to do the same for the shortcomings and biases of congregations. Unfortunately, the expectation of ex-felons needs to be that they will experience opposition, skepticism, barriers, and restrictions. Participant 3 notes:

*There's a reality we live in – folks have parole restrictions. So, if someone's got a sex crime, especially, there are restrictions, and the church has to be prepared for that... The church has to set that up. They have to be prepared for that, and they have to be able to do it in a manner that's not degrading as possible to the individual. But the individual also has to accept that, hey, this is life; you have restrictions. It's not all on the church. It's got to be on the parolee as well. I refuse*

*to put it all on the church... People getting out of prison have to understand there's going to be restrictions. You've got to be realistic about it.*

Just like Christianity allows ex-felons to reframe their previous mistakes, ex-felons need to use that same reframing when it comes to ideas and expectations about successful reentry. When the ex-felon has high expectations that are not met, their previously damaged identity can resurface.

Despite experiencing success, some of the participants who were incarcerated for an extended time expressed negative self-feelings when they compared themselves to others in their age bracket. This evaluation contributed to negative self-talk and internalized stigma because it is not a fair comparison. These participants' lives were put on hold for sometimes decades due to incarceration, while people their age were building families and careers. While the participants could have been more successful than others incarcerated for a similar time, their self-interaction reinforced negative feelings.

## **1. Limitations, Future Research, and Conclusion**

One limitation of this research is the case study method, which only included five participants. The study participants also do not represent the average ex-felon, because they were all white males employed in Christian ministerial positions. Many participants expressed their ability to blend into congregations with their criminal past unnoticed. While this study allowed an in-depth qualitative analysis, another study with a more diverse group of participants who displayed traits that align with common stereotypes of ex-felons could be insightful in highlighting these differences. This second study could also explore how other religions and those not identifying as religious manage stigma and create new identities.

Additional research that will focus on governmental agencies and correctional institutions is needed. This study centered on Evangelical organizations and inmates. While those two groups are vital, uncovering how correctional institutions help and hinder identity rehabilitation could be useful. Some governmental and secular agencies could downplay the importance of religion in

meaning-making, interpreting life, and building identity, so it would be fascinating to see how they handle these issues.

Individuality is a crucial component of Evangelicalism. It manifests through things like a personal faith decision and personal responsibility for moral behavior. While the individual does play a part in the equation, the social responsibility of the religious organization is often overlooked. A sociological perspective is needed regarding conversion and restoring previously damaged identity. By using a clinical sociological approach and highlighting elements of symbolic interactionism, the article provided interventions for Evangelical organizations and ex-felons that will assist in criminal rehabilitation through identity management.

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