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*Onward and Upward – The Significance of Mentorship for Formerly Incarcerated Students
and Academics*

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**Onward and Upward:
The Significance of Mentorship for Formerly Incarcerated Students and Academics**

Abstract

In the era of mass incarceration, millions of American citizens have been disenfranchised by the social stigma of a felony conviction. Mentorship of formerly incarcerated students by formerly incarcerated academics—many of whom identify with Convict Criminology (CC)—is slowly forging a pathway out of the social wasteland of past felony convictions. A common goal of CC is to help formerly incarcerated students and academics overcome the social and structural barriers that severely limit their life chances, as well as those of millions of formerly incarcerated citizens in the world's largest prison system. In this article, three formerly incarcerated criminology faculty members focus on the vital importance of mentorship presented through individual autoethnographic writings. We emphasize four prominent narratives or themes: (1) Common narratives of the role of mentorship: Encouragement, inclusion and social capital; (2) Differing narratives of the role of mentorship; (3) Common narratives of the role of mentorship: Experiences of mentoring as activism and advocacy; and (4) Common narratives of the role of mentorship in reducing professional fragility. We also consider other dynamics that might emerge in the mentor–mentee relationship involving FI individuals, including the complexities of “coming out” as FI and the fragility of FI identity in the academic world. We conclude with recommendations for future research on the role of mentorship for FI individuals and make suggestions for other areas of study for CC, more generally.

Introduction

In many academic fields, an experienced faculty mentor can provide students with invaluable advice, guidance and suggestions. The relationship can take on multiple forms: structured and formal or informal and unorganized (see, e.g., Fuentes et al. 2014:289). Either way of proceeding can be effective. Just the simple process of scholarly interactions with faculty outside of formal class time can be a positive experience for students (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). Mentors can transmit knowledge about how to define success in the academic world—and how to achieve that success. Yet, the formerly incarcerated (FI) student attempting to complete his or her degree and make the transition to faculty status encounters additional obstacles.

Convict criminologists are a group of students, researchers, and faculty members from diverse backgrounds—both with and without criminal records—that mentor FI students and junior faculty, conduct relevant research, and advocate for progressive justice reform for the justice-impacted and society (Richards and Ross 2001; Jones et al. 2009). The mission of Convict Criminology (CC) is threefold: 1) scholarship; 2) mentorship; and 3) prison reform (Newbold & Ross 2013). To be considered a convict criminologist, one need not engage in all three and many people who identify with CC concentrate on one or two of the three components at a given time; many change their focus over time as circumstances or opportunities arise or present themselves.

All three of us are FI criminology faculty who self-identify as convict criminologists and who have experienced directly the struggles of imprisonment, re-entry, and academia. First as students and then as faculty members, we have waded through the obstacles presented to FI citizens returning to society, including the long-lasting collateral consequences of a past felony conviction,

on our way to becoming faculty within criminal justice and criminology departments around the country and internationally.¹

The felony conviction creates many social and economic challenges for those who are given this label (Hughes and Wilson 2002), including difficulties obtaining gainful employment, disqualification from living in certain rental properties, barriers to working in many professions, and denial of educational opportunities, which all three of us experienced in different ways. While a certain body of literature (e.g., Kim et al. 2015; Tewksbury and Ross 2017) has attempted to address effective ways to mentor ex-convict students, this article will seek to explore the meaning of mentorship through a narrative analysis of three auto-ethnographies written by each of us as FI individuals who became criminology professors. We will describe our respective mentorship experiences as FI professors now established within academia, and discuss from a critical perspective, how our identities when situated within the constructs of race, class, and gender become increasingly problematic and complex when interacting with structures of authority and power, such as the academy. Even though there is an abundance of literature on the benefits of general academic mentoring and mentorship (e.g., Campbell & Campbell 1997; Johnson 2007; Kunselman et al. 2003; Ross et al. 2012), there is a dearth of literature which attempts to describe and understand the experience of being mentored by CC-affiliated instructors and professors from the perspective of the actual ex-convict student/scholar mentee. Because of the potential institutional obstacles or structural disadvantages that could impact the mentorship process

¹ Each of us are members of what could be called the “second generation” of CC. This is the group of CC-affiliated scholars who were mentored directly by the founding or “first generation” members of CC. More broadly, many of “second generation” of CC are either faculty or in the final stages of their graduate careers. The “third generation” of CC has emerged within the last 3-5 years and is being mentored by “second generation” and founding members; many are in the early-to-mid-stages of their graduate careers (Richards 2013). Other scholars within the CC conceptualize the development of the group as being comprised of “earlier founding members” and “more recent members” (Newbold and Ross 2013), yet the generational model of CC is used in this research for sake of clarity. This research focuses on the mentorship component of CC because, as stated by Ross and colleagues (2012: 165), the “mentoring of convicts is one of the convict criminologist’s most important roles.”

because of the social stigma that accompanies the ex-convict status (see Goffman 1963; Jones 2003), considering and appreciating the significance and interpretation of experiences of ex-convicts can provide valuable context with which university educators, ex-convict mentors, and university counselors can construct more effective mentorship practices for such students.

This article begins with a discussion of literature surrounding mentorship's relationship to academic success. In the analysis section, we discuss narratives found in the authors' auto-ethnographies and then move to discussion of our narrative themes and how mentorship impacts FI criminology. We conclude with a focus on the complexities of "coming out" as FI, the fragility of FI identity in the academic world and, finally, we present prospects for future research.

Mentorship's relationship to academic success

The benefits of mentorship to the academic process are integral to both student and professional success. Johnson (2007) states, "it was not a new professor's own early career publications, presentations or citations that predicted prestige of first job, but the sponsorship of a highly prolific mentor." Moreover, multiple studies have found that faculty-mentored students perform better academically and cognitively, and challenge themselves more than non-mentored students (e.g., Campbell and Campbell 1997; Hernandez et. al. 2017; Kim & Lundberg 2016; McKinsey 2016). Education has added value when applied to FI people and is correlated with reduced rates of return to prison (Kim and Clark 2013). Thus, educational mentorship takes on a more vital role when the student carries the burden of a previous felony conviction. Newbold and colleagues (2014) underscore the value of education to the formerly incarcerated, stating, "This,

in truth, is where our “rehabilitation” *really began* as we studied for higher degrees” (emphasis added).

Mentorship is common in the academic environment, yet such mentorship has amplified value to the success trajectories of the FI individual and is a key goal and purpose of CC. Indeed, when describing CC, Ross and colleagues (2012: 165) explain, “This mentoring of convicts is one of the convict criminologist’s most important roles”—a role that, as we will describe below, is often performed and enhanced through face-to-face interactions in university settings. In a recent article, multiple methods of mentoring ex-convicts are outlined (Tewksbury and Ross 2017), as we have sought to inform university faculty and instructors about how to mentor FI students more effectively. Our article recognizes the value of those methods, as well as others, and presents the unique mentorship experiences of three FI criminology faculty through narrative analysis.

The professional and social impact/consequences of disclosure of background (“coming out”) will vary based on the particular stage of the academic process in which the FI academic chooses to reveal his or her identity. At the undergraduate level, FI students are tasked with the difficult responsibility of successfully navigating the bewildering university academic and bureaucratic process without making any missteps that could permanently damage their academic careers. Unfortunately, many promising FI undergraduate students have been denied entrance into certain graduate programs (Ross and Richards 2003). At the faculty stage, many FI individuals have spoken of being quietly shunned after revealing their criminal convictions, and others point to blatant acts of discrimination, such as attempts to deny well-deserved tenure (Ross and Richards 2003). While some academic departments may hire those with a known criminal record, speaking of such a record in an open and forthcoming fashion as a form of human capital that provides valuable real-life experience and insight into rarely seen facets of their field and scholarly work,

may be discouraged. The rationale for such discouragement may be the fear of being denied tenure and/or promotion. Consequently, the careful mentorship provided to FI individuals, regardless of economic status, gender, race or sexual orientation, by the senior academics of the CC group, conveys immeasurable value in reducing/fighting the professional bias and social stigma placed on the FI student.

Methodology

In this article, we presented the auto-ethnographies of three FI faculty members, each of whom describes the knowledge he or she accrued through mentorship experiences in an environment where he or she felt free to share life experiences and personal human capital with other CC scholars without fear of rejection or stigmatization from their peers. We used auto-ethnographic methodology to record the author's mentorship stories because auto-ethnography allowed us to move from the personal to the public, connecting our own life to the larger social phenomena of the power of mentorship (Anderson 2006). Wall (2006) points out that autoethnography allows the author to access herself or himself and find his or her place within his or her surrounding culture. Another powerful function of autoethnographies is their ability to assist with "recognizing and articulating the multiplicity of histories that exist within any past event" (Spry 2011: 501), which can support the multiple cultural frames of reference the author's live within, as they move through the vastly different realities of prison, post-prison society, and academia. Newbold and colleagues (2014) emphasize the value of the autoethnographic method to the research produced by FI individuals, explaining, "the passion engendered by the experience of incarceration can add color, context, and contour both to objective and subjective findings."

Sampling, setting, and data collection

For selection, the purposeful snowball method was used (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Miles and Huberman 1994) because all three of us are FI individuals affiliated with CC, and had been mentored by the same group of senior CC professors. We chose to work with each other on this article in order to represent diversity of gender and race/ethnicity within CC. Associate Professor Grant Tietjen is a 43 year old white male, Professor James Burnett is an 59 year old African American man, and Professor Bernadette Olson-Jessie is a 50 year old white woman. All three of us have attained a PhD degree.

While it should be noted that we all received mentorship from multiple other mentors outside of the CC group, this article will focus on the mentorship given and received from a group of FI criminological and criminal justice scholars. The narrative analysis technique was used because it is an effective tool for placing our autoethnographies within our surrounding cultures of conventional academia. We describe this technique next.

Narrative inquiry technique

While an auto-ethnographic methodology was utilized in regards to data collection, we drew from narrative analysis techniques to delineate the meanings these scholars assign to the mentoring process. The content of the stories presented in the author's autoethnographies was compared thematically in the subsequent observations. It is important to note that in order to scrutinize the process of mentoring within CC from a critical perspective using narrative analysis, this process must be understood as being impacted by outside forces. As Ryan (2015: 119) explains, "it is important to contextualize narrative form, structure, content and meaning in wider socio-cultural frameworks." The thematic analysis model of narrative inquiry (Riessman 2008) is used because we are examining the autoethnographies of three participants within this article, and narrative inquiry is well suited for analyzing multiple cases, and finding common thematic

concepts threaded between participant's experiences within their stories. The participants' autoethnographies discussing their mentorship experiences were analyzed and common narratives were found. We read and reread our autoethnographies to determine themes and as common themes emerged across all of the pieces, they were subsequently identified, until we reached the point of thematic saturation. We will hereafter refer to these themes as narratives. Below, we present the meaning of common narratives of mentorship and note that determinations about the common themes were made collectively in order insure integrity of findings.

Findings: Common and differing narratives

1. Common narratives of the role of mentorship: Encouragement, inclusion and social capital

Each narrative illustrates pathways through which mentorship transformed our career trajectories. Knowledge capital possessed by the senior members of the CC group was passed to later-generation members, and we described how CC was an important catalyst for our academic growth process.

Olson-Jessie was introduced to a new source of social capital by CC mentors (Coleman 1988; Parcel & Dufur, 2001; Portes, 1998; Putnam, 2000) that opened up many opportunities, and her post-incarceration life course trajectory was altered positively. While the traditional CC scholar often experiences prison and then engages with higher-education on his or her journey to faculty status, it must also be noted that Olson-Jessie's experience was unique. She was *already* a professor before her criminal charges. Olson-Jessie pointed out that she faced new challenges in her academic career after she returned to society as an FI citizen. Yet, because of her previous

status as a professor, she was able to overcome many of the social-structural hurdles that most FI individuals new to CC face.

The later-generation CC scholars gained access to the academy, in part, through the multiple forms of capital provided through mentorship. Tietjen presented the increased opportunity concept, stating: “This first-generation CC ensemble of amazing individuals extended a lifeline and showed me that second chances were possible; that what we have done in the past is not necessarily who we are in the future.” Burnett, in turn, explained that he made initial contact with CC mentors as a struggling graduate student. As a developing African American criminologist and faculty member, Burnett pointed out how the mentorship process impacted his academic life course:

The fact that they did this without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, type of case, nor sexual orientation is exceptional given their insider status. This highlights their willingness to know the second generation by helping to pave the way, point out the pitfalls, help to avoid the errors.

Through long-term inclusion and encouragement, Burnett was guided through the academic process. He soon achieved a faculty position, as a criminal justice professor, who actively engaged in mentorship within the justice-impacted community. Similarly, in his personal narrative, Tietjen emphasized the vital role that well-respected mentors play in assisting FI scholars new to the academic process in overcoming stigmatization, stating: “It often takes the power of a positive and professionally well-respected mentor to demonstrate to others that the entire life of the formerly incarcerated scholar should not be defined by a singular mistake of their past.”

2. *Differing narratives of the role of mentorship*

All three of us indicated that we experienced mentorship, yet we experienced mentorship in a different context. The mentorship contexts were: mentorship focused on navigating the

labyrinth of graduate school and the academy; mentorship emphasized as vital for the success of marginalized groups; and multiple mentors for different phases of the academic educational/professional process. Olson-Jessie spoke to mentorship as crucial to the early FI scholar's ability to maneuver through the halls of higher education. Students who have been recently released from incarceration in a total institution (Goffman 1963) now carry the negative social stigma of a past criminal conviction, and Johnson (2007) explains that mentorship gave her the knowledge with which to navigate academia as a faculty member while carrying such stigma. For Burnett, the mentoring efforts of CC were important as a "doubly marginalized" or "multi-marginalized" individual—an African American and a FI individual because such assistance and support was not found in other aspects of academia. Through mentorship from senior academics, Burnett was given the knowledge to help others. When he became a faculty member, he taught his own students how recognize multiple structures of discrimination and bias, and was able to instruct them on how to address such issues. Describing such a realization, Burnett stated: "When released from prison in 2002, I realized that I was part of what Arditti and McClintock (2001) refer to in *Voices* as the disadvantaged and marginalized minorities controlled by the criminal justice system."

When delineating mentorship of the formerly incarcerated, Tietjen emphasized different stages of college, graduate school, and faculty careers. At these distinct points in time, different mentors provided guidance for various issues, such as advice on how to handle problems encountered during instruction of students, guidance through the job application process, and

demonstration of quality scholarship and writing skills. The range of mentors gave him a stronger academic foundation from which to enter the job market and tenure process.

3. *Common narratives of the role of mentorship: Experiences of mentoring as activism and advocacy*

All three authors emphasized that their experiences with mentorship have a strong relationship with reform and justice system activism on both micro and macro levels. Indeed, the mentoring dynamic can build a network of FI scholars who can encourage the development of more inclusive academic policies within their institutions. Constructing more inclusive opportunities and conditions for FI students and faculty can lead to academic environments that are more diverse.

At the micro-level, the senior academic mentors that worked one-on-one with us encouraged us to help other ex-cons directly by assisting them in finding educational opportunities in academia. This dynamic differs from other professor-student mentorship relationships due to the perspective of shared experience of being formally labeled by the criminal justice system. The mentor and mentee have both endured negative stereotypes and biases that accompany such labels, and while there may be differences in regards to their personal backgrounds and the nature of their legal issues, they share the status of being people convicted of felonies. People with a justice-impacted background carry lived-knowledge of the collateral consequences that accompany the convicted-felon/formerly-incarcerated individual, which allows the mentor to more successfully address issues, give well crafted advice, and guide that mentee through problems that are more complex and/or detrimental to FI individuals. Each of us, then, were not only mentored in how to

negotiate aspects of post-carceral life, but we were also imbued with the responsibility for becoming mentors ourselves—to other FI individuals who would come after us.

From a macro perspective, all three of us as formerly incarcerated professors featured in this article have all worked with social justice programs, served on community committees, and even founded advocacy programs to assist justice-impacted people. Indeed, each of our mentors helped us on our paths to success, our mentors also stressed the importance of attempting to impact the broader criminal justice system.

When speaking to the concept of criminal justice activism through mentorship, Olson-Jessie pointed to both acting as a mentor and advocate for students who have chosen to open up about their personal experiences within the criminal justice system and having the opportunity to help justice-impacted women in her community (and outside of the academic setting). She adds that it is in her interactions with her students and the women in her community that she felt that her experiences as an FI person are appreciated, and she was able to affect pro-social action.

Burnett also emphasized how he viewed his experiences as a mentee and a mentor as a kind of activism:

I feel that the CC agenda for academic activism is based on the practice of involvement and action as a means of achieving a fair criminal justice system. I feel this is carried out through the mentoring relationship between first and second generation members, as the first generation CC provide guidance, commitment and build relationships that provide a basis for the second generation's growing activism in the academy and beyond.

Burnett credited his mentors for introducing him to activism through action. Because of his CC mentors' lived experiences with the criminal justice system and subsequently with successful careers academia, they were able assist him with harnessing the value of his own lived experiences through higher education. He was directed to engage in educational and scholarly activities with other FI scholars. Through these activities, such as attending conferences and publishing papers

with fellow FI colleagues (students and professors), Burnett established a justice impacted network of likeminded academics and activist scholars. Burnett took advantage of the resources he accessed through his involvement in mentorship-guided activism, and involved his students in service learning, forming activist and action groups that benefited justice-impacted youth in his surrounding community.

Finally, Tietjen worked as an advocate and trusted confidant for justice-impacted students, teaching means of becoming socially active in justice issues through classroom discussion and exercises. Reflecting on his work with community juvenile justice, political action committees, social justice action groups and non-profit organizations that advocate for reform of educational programs for juveniles and adults caught in the justice system and upon re-entry, Tietjen observed:

I directly participate with community social justice action groups, and also teach students about how to recognize systems of oppression/social problems and subsequently how to harness activism as a mechanism to mitigate the severity of the social inequalities present in their community's criminal justice institutions.

4. Common narratives of the role of mentorship in reducing professional fragility

The final theme identified from our writings concerns the way mentorship helped all three of us to address our initially fragile identities as FI individuals in academia. All three of us acknowledged the possibility that academics who are multi-marginalized might be more likely to engage in identity protection to avoid further social stigmatization. Through the process of mentorship by scholars with similar justice-contacted life-experiences, we were able to embrace our pasts, rather than shroud them in secrecy, and/or completely reject the knowledge that could be gleaned from examining our respective experiences and lives behind bars.

Olson-Jessie, who was already a professor before her criminal charges, pointed out that she faced new challenges in her academic career after she returned to society as an FI citizen: "I know that I am lucky to have come so far, but I am also aware of the fragility of an academic

career, and for this, my convict status is still something I guard closely.” For Olson-Jessie, CC mentors provided additional guidance through the new obstacles she faced as a returning citizen scholar trying to reintegrate into society, while facing discrimination, open bias from colleagues, social stigma, and the difficulties of accessing the academic job market with a past felony record.

Burnett explained that the professional networks of CC scholars acted as “agents of empowerment,” guiding him through the academic process and enabling him to overcome the roadblocks he experienced as an FI scholar: “Jones and Richards [senior members of CC] did not hesitate to help me adapt to educational programming, social mentoring, opportunities to engage in prosocial activities and they helped me to feel a sense of future possibilities.”

Essentially, mentorship enabled us to overcome some of the limitations of our “jacket”²—or, at least, feel less stifled by them—through the attainment of the educational credentials needed to access an academic position. Tietjen delineated that the returning citizen will return to society with a head full of knowledge as to how to survive in prison, but that this knowledge is not of much use outside the prison gates. Many former inmates are told by fellow inmates and correctional staff that there are no opportunities for them outside of prison. Tietjen stated: “A large problem lies in the self-doubt of the stigmatization process attached to the formerly incarcerated in a criminal justice system that allows a criminal record to follow the individual indefinitely.” Consequently, the recently returned citizen who might consider higher education as

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The term, “jacket,” refers to a past criminal record and/or convictions that are allowed to “follow” the FI person around for the rest of their lives, his or her life, and tend to be accompanied by negative collateral consequences, such as lack of access to employment, public assistance, and many forms of housing.

a means of self-improvement has often been discouraged by incarcerated peers, who have themselves been discouraged, often by both fellow incarcerated people and criminal justice system staff. Yet, through the encouragement of fellow FI scholars, the mentee discovers that he or she can begin to overcome the stigma of incarceration, gain access to the educational credentials needed to enter the profession of academia, and are subsequently provided with the knowledge (social capital and human capital) to do so.

Discussion

As mentioned in the Introduction, there is a large corpus of literature on the general benefits of mentoring and even a segment of that literature on instructor mentoring of FI students. There is a dearth, however, of research examining the impacts and outcomes of being mentored by ex-convict scholars through the perspective of the actual ex-convict student/scholar mentee. This article has examined the potential institutional obstacles or structural disadvantages attached to the social stigma that accompanies ex-convict status (Goffman 1963) as it impacts the CC mentorship process of FI scholars. This article has also attempted to increase understanding of the significance of experiences of the ex-con mentee. To reiterate, the narrative themes found in our autoethnographies are: (1) Common narratives of the role of mentorship: Encouragement, inclusion and social capital; (2) Differing narratives of the role of mentorship; (3) Common narratives of the role of mentorship: Experiences of mentoring as activism and advocacy; and (4) Common narratives of the role of mentorship in reducing professional fragility.

Although we did not address the issue of the impact of economic class and felon status on social mobility, we feel that it is necessary to include it in *any* discussion of FI individuals. Within American society, the poor experience far more socio-structure disadvantages than those who are

more fortunate (Breen & Jonsson 2005); they are more likely to be arrested and more likely to have their convictions result in imprisonment (Pfeffer & Hertel 2015; Rubinstein 2007). Accordingly, FI individuals are more likely to be targeted by educationally-focused inequalities, and mentors must be reflexive about their own class origins while considering the origin stories of their mentees.

The narratives discovered within this study have focused primarily on *successful* dynamics between mentors and mentees, yet this study also realizes that there are potential unique barriers that FI faculty experience when mentoring FI students. While sharing the experience of incarceration, one important barrier between mentors and mentees to note when viewing the improved lives of the three CC faculty members is the changing/shifting criminal justice policies over the passage of time. For example, a CC member who was incarcerated during the 1970s or 1980s will have had a very different experience and perspective than the student/professor who experienced prison in the 1990s and 2000s. The policies of the 1970s justice system predates draconian sentencing legislation and tough-on-crime policies that led to mass incarceration in the 1980s and 1990s (Austin et. al. 2001;Gottschalk 2009). The tough-on-crime approaches of the 1990s, to which CC was a response, have been or are starting to be replaced, albeit slowly. This is not to discount the valuable insight and shared carceral experiences of either era's group, but to emphasize the shift in policy in the last three decades of American criminal justice system. The important experiential differences of the mentor and mentee need to be viewed reflexively and factored into the mentorship process. As the socio-political and criminal justice climate continues to change, the mentoring practices of CC (along with the entire discipline of CC) must also adapt and morph accordingly to promote the continued positive development of improved lives and scholarly success amongst CC members. Doing so will not only continue the cause of CC, but

will enable future CC scholars to have expanded positive impacts within their own mentorship actions with new scholars, and in efforts towards social equity.

The three personal narratives above function as a call to colleagues—to fight for more inclusive academic policies and to challenge academic culture that marginalizes formerly incarcerated (and/or convicted of a felony) students. Given the large variety of carceral experiences and pathways to academic development, our stories unfold differently. All three of our personal narratives introduce the reader to the means through which their identities as FI people intersect with different class, gender and racial/ethnic identities. For students and junior faculty, the FI identity can also be compounded by institutionalized classism, racism, and sexism within higher education. Consequently, FI students and scholars find themselves in the center of multiple forms of marginalization. If the criminological discipline is to include and support justice-impacted feminist, Black, and LGBTQI epistemologies, then capable faculty mentors are going to be required to effectively grapple with issues of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989). Both non-convict and FI mentors and allies are needed on the front lines of this ongoing struggle for inclusion and legitimacy within the academy and in wider social institutions.

We all described how the mentorship process guided us toward activism and advocacy. Subsequently, our actions as scholars have had a dispersive positive impact on fellow FI scholars, growing the number of people working on reforming the justice system. As we learned advocacy and activism skills from our mentors and engaged in these actions as students and junior faculty, multiple positive outcomes were realized. First, the students/new faculty were able to engage with and form working relationships with others struggling for change in their field. In addition, we were able to learn the process of attempting to create progressive change within the justice system, often integrating our activism and advocacy efforts into individual research and scholarship efforts.

At the same time, our mentors taught us as mentees activism and advocacy knowledge/skills which are imparted to future generations of CC mentees.

As described in the article, through the relationships formed within the collaborative activist and advocacy efforts of our working alongside other scholars/students, we were able to gain access to the social capital (through the guidance of mentors) needed to influence justice policy and reform efforts in their surrounding communities. Moreover, we have interacted directly with other justice-impacted people within correctional/juvenile facilities, joined action committees, formed educational forums, and met with local officials and policy makers.

All three of us learned to channel the stigma of the ex-convict identity into a form of positive human capital through our actions as criminological/criminal justice faculty members. Each story describes the kinds of pain and suffering of the ex-convict identity (Le Bel 2011; Richards 2013), such as being discriminated against during job searches, being marginalized and openly shunned by fellow colleagues, and/or encountering resistance from the administration at their respective institutions because of our FI identities. The narrative of human connection through empathetic responses of mentors has facilitated bridging culture and shifted worldviews (Brown 2012) among each of us. The narratives provide the reader with the tools to visualize and understand the unique difficulties we experienced and how their mentors guided them through this process.

A common narrative we arrived at was the dilemma of if and when to “come out.” The later generations of CC scholars drew upon the prior “coming out” experiences of senior CC members. The social dynamics of this action are often complex and can have both positive and/or negative consequences. Examples of potential negative consequences (partially listed above) could be loss of employment, diminished social status, denial of a position within a professional or educational

institution, and loss of social benefit eligibility. From the perspective of the many who come-out and/or are deliberating about the potential personal and social costs of exposing a past felony conviction, the anguish of the unknown is quite real. Those who possess a criminal record who are working in or working towards an academic position are keenly aware of the risk that background exposure entails. Yet, the autobiographical narratives presented in this article also acknowledge that even when considering the positive benefits accrued from the support of fellow CC peers, later generation CC members will often hide their identities in order to avoid the potentially career damaging negative bias which is attached to identifying as a person convicted of a crime. This creates a “coming out” dilemma for many CC members. All FI individuals, whether members of CC or not, take a risk when “coming out” in regards to exposing their experiences within the correctional system, but it should be emphasized that the effects of “multiple marginalizations” may generate more acute negative collateral consequences; coming out may be a non-option.

Criminology’s stance on FI scholarship may be shifting. For example, FI scholarship has recently received accolades by the American Society of Criminology (ASC). In 2018, Michael L. Walker’s article, “Race Making in a Penal Institution” (2016), in which the author collected ethnographic data as an incarcerated person in a Southern California jail, won the ASC’s Joan Petersilia Outstanding Article Award. In addition, several organized groups of FI students and scholars that partake in transformative criminological scholarship have been formed in the last twenty years (e.g., Berkeley Underground Scholars, Formerly Incarcerated College Graduates Network). Thus, if this indicates a cultural shift towards acceptance of FI within the social sciences

(e.g., criminology, criminal justice, and sociology), then “coming out” may carry less risk in the future.

The mentorship process does create opportunities for different generations of the CC group to connect, yet there are also barriers between FI mentors and mentees. One such obstacle is the difference in cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) between seasoned faculty members ensconced within academia and the student, recently released from the prison environment. Tewksbury and Ross (2017: 7) speak to this phenomenon: “The point is formerly incarcerated students are likely to be lacking in social graces. They may use much rougher and cruder language than typical academic jargon.”

The prison environment tends to support a harsher, tougher form of socialization and dialect, which new inmates quickly pick up as a means of acclimating to their environment. The incarcerated person learns such behaviors as a means of survival within the walls, and after many years of exposure to the carceral social sphere, prison decorum becomes normalized. The senior CC faculty mentor has had many years to re-acclimate to the outside world, and learn the cultural norms of academia. This presents a cultural chasm between the mentor and mentee and this barrier needs to be overcome within the mentoring process (Tewksbury & Ross 2017), in order for the new student to survive and adapt within the halls of institutions of higher education.

Engagement in the mentorship experience has had many positive dispersive effects on this article’s participants, providing valuable insider perspectives and “academic navigation toolkits” (Jones 1995)—perspectives and toolkits that we have since passed on to others. Thus, setting in motion a continuous cycle of mentorship. Tietjen (2014: 93) states: “When I had been in graduate school for a couple of years and more fully understood how the academic world operated, I began to mentor the newer members of the CC group....” With the sustained collaborative efforts of the

continuing cycle of CC mentorship, resources and new pathways to success for FI academics are being created.

Conclusion and Future Directions

While all three of us experienced mentorship, the mentorship journey differed for each of us—at all stages of graduate school and at different times throughout the faculty development process. Individuals who choose to associate with the CC group are mentored regardless of type of criminal conviction, race, gender, or class. Over the course of the last twenty years, a culture of support has evolved which can function to guide new group members. Activism and advocacy were integrated into our mentorship relationships, and we went on to form independent FI advocacy groups, and take part in other forms of criminal justice activism on our own.

While all three of us were able to navigate the arduous journey from prison to a Ph.D. and finally arrive at faculty positions in our respective universities, it must be noted that many other people affiliated with CC do not complete the journey to academic positions. There are multiple reasons for this, such as choosing other career paths, personal circumstances, shifting interests, and not making adequate academic progress in rigorous graduate coursework regimens. This is without mentioning the significant impact that consequences of structural social inequality have on the FI, as outlined in the discussion section.

In addition to the arduous journey from prison to an academic post, and the day-to-day stressors of graduate school, FI faculty must grapple with additional complications. Because of reigning societal perceptions of people who possess felony convictions, a common fear that exists among formerly incarcerated scholars is that their careers are continually threatened and thus fragile. CC scholars fear (not without reason) that their impact as academics is weakened by

public/peer knowledge of their status. Goffman (1963) would explain this public perception of the “criminal” conviction as the stigma of *character traits* associated with commonly held “criminal” stereotypes and perceptions. Mentors with previous experience discussing and presenting their criminal justice backgrounds in public and professional settings can provide guidance for mentees attempting to navigate the pitfalls of these situations. Because they are often asked about their backgrounds, while at conferences, in job interviews, and during public speaking engagements, the FI scholar who has chosen to affiliate with CC quickly learns how to successfully approach the issue of “coming out” when choosing to present his or her past criminal justice experiences to colleagues. While certain fears and a certain sense of precarity may never dissipate—and while the impact of stigma and bias continue to exist—systems of support have been created within CC that allow inspired FI scholars to help FI mentees grapple more successfully with these obstacles.

Future CC research could continue to examine the mentorship process of FI senior faculty mentoring FI students within the CC discipline. As noted above, FI scholars who experienced prison at different times will hold potentially disparate perspectives on prison and the criminal justice system, which may impact the nature and extent of the mentorship experience. Future research could explore the contours and depths of those differences, as well as consider ways in which acknowledging and reflecting on those differences could strengthen the mentorship experience. Other research could utilize the life experiences of returning citizens to perceive how intersecting marginalized identities impact their reintegration process. Given that criminology as a whole would benefit from examining the experiences of the FI within academia and their struggles to overcome institutionalized bias, future research could investigate the variance in “coming-out” processes for FI scholars, which could take into consideration the role of the tenure

track academic system used in the United States in comparison to other countries. Perhaps the FI have different career outcomes within non-tenure educational positions (i.e., adjuncts, lecturers, part time instructors) and systems.

In sum, mentorship and research on the mentorship experience of FI individuals—as well as research on all aspects of FI individuals' lives—is vital to improving the life-chances of those who have experienced prison, creating the potential to progressively inform criminal justice policy. This is also an invitation to the academy and the general public to explore and challenge personally held belief systems that support discrimination against FI individuals.

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