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Drug Conviction and Employment Restriction: Experiences of Employees with Drug-Related Criminal Histories

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Drug Conviction and Employment Restriction:
Experiences of Employees with Drug-Related Criminal Histories

by

Liana Bernard

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Psychology

Thesis Committee:
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Abstract

It has been established that there are numerous barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment following a criminal conviction, including background checks, which occur as part of most selection processes. Barriers to obtaining and maintaining employment may be higher for individuals with drug-related criminal histories as they may face particularly severe negative stereotypes. This study examines the experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories' integration into the workplace and society. Additionally, because stereotypes about individuals with drug-related criminal histories are contradictory to those of individuals with stable employment, I examine how these individuals are impacted by reductions in the stigma that they experience. In this thesis, I analyzed audio recordings of semi-structured interviews with individuals with drug-related criminal histories from 2017 who were employed at the time of the interview using the principles of grounded theory methodology. Most importantly, results demonstrated the importance of obtaining employment for reducing participants' likelihood of recidivism. Additionally, contrary to commonly held stereotypes, those with criminal backgrounds are highly dedicated and motivated to perform at work considering that employment provides the resources needed to maintain sobriety and avoid engaging in criminal activity. Finally, gratitude, distancing, upward spirals, and stickiness were themes associated with decreases in experienced stigma. I discuss theoretical and practical implications, study limitations, and avenues for future research in the stigma literature, and in the workplace literature.

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**Drug Conviction and Employment Restriction:
Employees with Drug-Related Criminal Histories**

Chapter 1: Introduction

"As a country, we have to make sure that those who take responsibility for their mistakes are able to transition back to their communities. It's the right thing to do. It's the smart thing to do... "

-Barack Obama

It has been estimated that 31 million people (13%) in the United States (US) are asked to indicate whether they have a criminal record when seeking employment each year, the majority of which occurs in the selection stage (Denver et al., 2017). These organizational practices often inhibit individuals from obtaining employment or lead to termination, which highlights the severity of stigma related to criminal histories in workplace settings. A large proportion of those with criminal histories have non-violent convictions related to illicit drug usage, possession, or distribution. In addition, there is widespread variation in these experiences, as laws, enforcement, criminal procedures, and punishments differ at the state level. As such, individuals who have engaged in the same behavior (e.g., cannabis usage) may have vastly different criminal justice experiences simply as a function of their geographic location. Stereotypes about individuals with drug-related criminal histories include that they are dangerous, unreliable, untrustworthy, and unpredictable (Matthews et al., 2017). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis has found that individuals with stigmatized statuses perceived as highest in peril (i.e., danger, one of the six dimensions of stigma; Jones, 1984) included "drug dealer," and "criminal" (Pachankis et al., 2018).

Despite widely held negative stereotypes about individuals with drug-related charges, particularly in workplace contexts in the US, emphases on capitalism and

individualism necessitate their access to employment to fully integrate into society (i.e., income, housing, food security) following their charges (Reich, 2017). Contemporary society is becoming aware of the challenges ex-incarcerated individuals face attempting to enter into the workplace. In 1988, a movement began aimed at removing a box that job applicants often must check in order to indicate whether they have a criminal history, titled “ban the box” (D’Alessio et al., 2015; Henry & Jacobs, 2007; O’Connell, 2015), which is legally recognized in 36 states as of January of 2021 (Shoemaker, 2021). Organizations are still permitted, however, to request this information and conduct background checks following initial stages of the hiring process.

Unique challenges and experiences outside of background checks or drug testing may occur in the workplace for individuals with drug related criminal histories as they likely need to achieve sobriety and build new social connections. Although there is substantial empirical scholarship examining experiences of individuals with general criminal offenses and their *entry* into the workplace (Onuferová, 2016; Pager, 2003; Rade et al., 2016; Reich, 2017; Uggen, 2000), there is little research focused on the experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories after they have obtained. This is an important omission because individuals with drug-related criminal histories face a combination of multiple stigmas that are not present with other types of crimes, and the interaction between their societal ostracism and counteracting positive stereotypes that can be gained through employment can provide rich theoretical information about the impact of decreasing stigma.

The purpose of the present study is to qualitatively examine the experiences of individuals with drug related criminal backgrounds as they reflect on their reintegrations

into society and the workplace and examine how decreases in stigma impact these employees. Specifically, I will code and analyze qualitative interviews including participant responses to various questions about their journey from criminal behavior to employment focusing on intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences in work and non-work environments. In the sections that follow, I first provide an overview of the scope and importance of the topic at hand, including background information on the criminal justice system, addiction, background checks, and employment access. Second, I provide an overview of the stigma literature as it pertains to those with drug related criminal histories. Third, I provide an overview of the identity management literature and its relevance in this context. Fourth, I discuss stereotypes about ex-offenders. Fifth, I examine the stereotype content model and how perceptions of warmth and competence may produce barriers for those with drug related criminal backgrounds to integrate into society and the workplace. Sixth, I explain how stereotypes about individuals with drug related criminal histories and stereotypes about individuals with stable employment can contradict each other. I then provide my research questions and provide rationale as to why these questions are important. I describe the qualitative interview data, outlining the methodology I used to analyze these data. I present my results using representative quotes from the participants. Finally, I discuss practical and theoretical implications and conclusions.

Importance and Scope

There are several reasons why individuals with drug related criminal histories' experiences in workplace contexts are worth examining. In the following section, I describe the impacts of race, socioeconomic status, background checks and other barriers

highlight the social and empirical imperative to examine how individuals with a drug-related criminal history integrate into the workplace and society.

First, the structures that make it more difficult for individuals with drug-related offenses to obtain employment disproportionately impact those of low socioeconomic status and those who are racial minorities. Socioeconomic status has been found to be highly related to the likelihood that an individual obtains a criminal conviction (Savolainen et al., 2018) and evidence suggests that illicit drug suppliers are primarily motivated by the desire to seek adequate financial stability and a need to support themselves (Coomber et al., 2016; Martin et al., 2020). Further highlighting this inequity, individuals of a higher socioeconomic status who engage in illegal drug-related activities are more likely to be able to access drug addiction and rehabilitation treatment in order to prevent incurring criminal charges, whereas those of a lower socioeconomic status may only be able to obtain addiction treatment and rehabilitation through social services following a criminal conviction (Cook & Alegría, 2011).

Race has also been found to play a large role in criminal conviction rates (Rachlinski et al., 2008). Racial disparities in the criminal justice system—particularly between Black and White people—have been well documented in sentencing severity (Steffensmeier et al., 1998), racialized policing (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006), in police relationships with youth (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009), perceptions of threat to public safety (Trawalter et al., 2008), and in obtaining employment following conviction (Pager, 2003). Recently, the Black Lives Matter movement has further highlighted these severe racial injustices in the US (Dave et al., 2020). Many have asserted that the criminal

justice system, the “war on drugs,” and the linkage between race and crime serve as a covert means of perpetuating racial inequity and social control, particularly over Black people (Bobo & Thompson, 2006; Rosino & Hughey, 2017).

Socioeconomic status and race have been found to intersect and compound these inequities, which can be seen in disparities surrounding cocaine and cannabis usage and distribution (Beckett et al., 2006). Specifically, disparities have been well documented between individuals who use similar drugs in more expensive versus affordable versions (i.e., cocaine and crack); crack buyers and sellers (who are more commonly Black) have received harsher punishments compared to cocaine buyers and sellers (who are more commonly White; Stuntz, 1998). Similarly, although several White entrepreneurs have found financial success in the legal cannabis industry, many low-income racial minorities remain currently incarcerated for the distribution of cannabis (Bender, 2016). The American Civil Liberties Union found that from 2001 to 2010 Black people were 3.73 times more likely than White people to be arrested for cannabis (Edwards et al., 2013). Further highlighting this inequity, criminality of cannabis is dependent on geographic location within state borders in the US. Although cannabis is currently fully legal in 12 states, its legality is highly variable in the other 38 states (Defense Information Systems Agency, 2020).

Second, examining the experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories is important when making decisions about the use of background checks in selection contexts. Although implementing background checks in the selection process as a method of reducing instances of workplace crime may seem rational, research has not supported a link between crime and workplace crime (Harris & Keller, 2005). Albeit the

relatedness of some crimes to specific scenarios may deem certain occupations inappropriate for some applicants (Watstein, 2009), background checks are used indiscriminately for a variety of occupations. To remedy this dilemma, the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) recommends that employers examine the nature of the job, the nature of the offense, and the time since the offense in making employment-related decisions (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2012), but has not provided specific guidance on implementing these recommendations. This information processing ambiguity has resulted in a high level of responsibility placed on employers, which has resulted in several lawsuits due to misuse/misapplication of these laws (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2015). Even with professional practice guidelines promoting the use of validated procedures in selection and hiring, or a relatedness between the predictor and desired outcomes (Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 2018), background checks have not been properly assessed as a selection tool. Therefore, the use of background checks in selection cannot be considered valid for the vast majority of occupations (Young & Ryan, 2019). Organizations using background checks in selection are likely missing highly qualified, or even exceptionally dedicated applicants—considering their potential dire need for stable employment (Uggen, 2000)—in their selection processes.

Third, individuals with drug related criminal histories experience discrimination in other and more subtle ways in workplace contexts, which may be unique compared to those with other criminal backgrounds. Although there is an abundance of empirical scholarship focused on individuals with criminal histories (Onuferová, 2016; Pager, 2003; Rade et al., 2016; Reich, 2017; Uggen, 2000), there is little research examining

individuals whose criminal backgrounds are specifically drug related. Individuals with drug related criminal histories may not only face stigma in the selection process due to background checks, but they may also cope with stereotypes related to addiction, ostracism, or homelessness. The combined stigma from each of these issues produces a unique intersectional (Warner, 2008) combination and is likely to elicit unique experiences.

Fourth, individuals with drug-related criminal histories can provide important theoretical information regarding the impact of decreases in stigma on individuals (i.e., “course;” Jones et al., 1984), a current gap in the literature. Despite opportunities to study decreases in stigma particularly with populations that experience changes in stigma over time, this remains a theoretical gap in the literature, as identity management is typically examined rather than changes in stigma. For instance, pregnant people experience changes in stigma course but are often examined from an identity management lens (Jones et al., 2016). Additionally, experiences in pregnancy are not generalizable to the present population. Although pregnant women and individuals with drug-related criminal histories experience changes in stigma in workplace contexts, pregnant women also experience discrimination based on the stereotype that they are warm (benevolent sexism; Hebl et al., 2007), whereas individuals with a drug related criminal histories also experience discrimination on the basis that they are dangerous (peril; Cuddy, 2008; Jones et al., 1984; Pachankis et al., 2018). Furthermore, pregnancy elicits deceptively positive stereotypes in society (i.e., benevolent sexism; Hebl et al., 2007), whereas stereotypes about individuals with drug-related criminal histories are overwhelmingly regarded as negative in most contexts (Pachankis et al., 2018). Finally, research focused on the

experiences of pregnant women may primarily examine identity management because pregnant people can have a higher level of control over their disclosure in the early stages, a process that individuals with criminal histories have very little control over (i.e., due to background checks; Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; Harding, 2003).

Fifth, in order to retain diverse employees—including those with drug related criminal histories—it is important to understand these employees' experiences once they have been onboarded to ensure workplaces are not only diverse but are also inclusive. Although diversity can be used to describe difference or variety in demographic characteristics of people in workplace contexts, diversity does not imply inclusion (Roberson et al., 2017). Inclusion refers to the “the extent to which organizational policies and practices encourage and reward acceptance of employees of diverse backgrounds, recognize their unique attributes, and encourage their involvement within the organization” (Roberson et al., 2017, p. 495). Employees with drug-related criminal histories may face interpersonal and intrapersonal difficulties while employed that are even more pernicious than the barriers that they face in the selection process. Specifically, they are likely to experience discrimination from coworkers, supervisors, or customers. These interactions are likely to lead to intrapersonal strain and deplete cognitive resources (Spencer et al., 1999). Although the barriers ex-offenders face finding employment is a familiar and well-known phenomenon in academia (Harris & Keller, 2005; Henry & Jacobs, 2007; Holzer et al., 2003; Rade et al., 2016; Schmitt & Warner, 2011), little research has explored the experiences of employees with a criminal history once they obtain employment. Examining experiences of those with criminal

address inclusion.

Sixth, it is important that individuals with drug-related criminal histories are able to successfully integrate into society with others without criminal histories, a scenario that is perhaps most likely to occur in workplace settings because individuals who may not otherwise interact are connected. Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis posits that overall, contact with stigmatized group members reduces prejudice, a theory that has transcended a variety of contexts and has been supported by meta-analytic results (Allport et al., 1954; Pettigrew et al., 2011). In order for an effective reduction of prejudice to be achieved, the following criteria need to be met: (a) equal status of the groups in the situation, (b) common goals, (c) intergroup cooperation, and (d) the support of authorities, laws or customs (Pettigrew et al., 2011). The workplace serves as a setting in which these criteria are likely to occur. Indeed, employees of equal status frequently serve a common goal or role within their workplace and are likely to cooperate with one another to achieve these goals with the support of the organization. In general, individuals with a drug-related criminal history experience social ostracism (Musa & Ahmad, 2015), which renders contact and a subsequent reduction of prejudice unlikely. Specifically, a history of illicit substance distribution is likely to elicit the stereotype that they are dangerous (Ali et al., 2017; Pachankis et al., 2018), mental health or addiction needs may exhaust others' ability to provide adequate social support, or financial or housing needs may deplete resources of helpful others, all of which may leave the individual ostracized. The criminal justice system in the US further ostracizes individuals

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with criminal convictions explicitly from the rest of society through incarceration, house
arrest, and mandatory rehabilitation centers (Musa & Ahmad, 2015).

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Research Questions**Drug-Related Ex-Offenders as Stigmatized Employees**

Individuals with drug-related felonies are stigmatized in society and workplace contexts. Stigma has been defined as a “mark” (attribute) that links a person to undesirable characteristics (stereotypes; Jones et al., 1984). However, this definition has been expanded by Link and Phelan (2001) to include: (a) distinguishing and labeling of human differences, (b) linking of undesirable characteristics to negative stereotypes, (c) distinguishing in group/out group separation, (d) loss of status, and (e) being dependent on access to social, economic, and political resources that allows for the above processes and subsequent disapproval, rejection, exclusion, and discrimination. Individuals with drug related criminal offenses are distinguished and labeled within the criminal justice system but also are flagged based on background checks demonstrating distinguishing and labeling. Individuals with drug related charges are assumed to be dangerous and unpredictable (Ahern et al., 2007). Both in society and in the workplace, these individuals are separated from those without criminal charges through the use of jail systems and employment discrimination. Finally, social, economic, and political systems in the US perpetuate the discrimination these individuals face through limited freedom, access to housing, and access to employment. Ability to participate in the US political democracy has also recently been restricted. Florida recently ruled that individuals with felonies can be banned from voting if they owe court payments, appeals, or violate court rules (Election Administration of 2019), highlighting the loss of social, economic, and political resources.

Structural Stigma and Criminal Justice System Context

The following section provides an overview of the structural stigma in place surrounding those with drug-related criminal backgrounds in order to broaden orientation toward the present topic. Structural stigma is defined as “societal-level conditions, cultural norms, and institutional policies that constrain the opportunities, resources, and well-being of the stigmatized” (Hatzenbuehler & Link, 2014, p. 2). Structural stigma can be intentional or unintentional, although unintentional forms of structural stigma often present in similar ways as previous intentional forms of stigma (Hatzenbuehler, 2017). In order to broaden understanding of the present topic and take an orienting perspective, greater understanding of the criminal justice system and the influence of different behaviors within these structures is needed. As such, I describe how laws and policies are likely to influence individuals with drug-related criminal histories.

Federal Historical Context

In 1971 US President Richard Nixon announced plans to fight the "War on Drugs" by introducing “tough on crime” laws aimed specifically at criminalizing those who engage in any fashion with illicit substances as a means of social control (Rosino & Hughey, 2018). Most notably, the mere possession of illicit substances—including those substances with more mild effects that have since become legalized in several states (i.e., cannabis)—resulted in the incarceration of millions of Americans. Many of these crimes did not include violence or threat to other people in society. Those with non-violent drug-related offenses were given extreme sentences that did not align with the severity of the crimes, such as life in prison without parole (American Civil Liberties Union, 2013). “Tough on crime” laws that sentence individuals with drug-related offenses harshly

compared to other criminal offenses serve as an indicator of the severe structural stigma that those with drug-related criminal backgrounds face (Hatzenbuehler, 2017; Livingston, 2013). In addition to the unjust mismatch between crime severity and sentencing, this campaign wrongfully targeted communities with majority Black and Hispanic/Latino Americans (American Civil Liberties Union, 2013; Cooper, 2015) and therefore caused disproportionate destruction of those communities.

In 2015, the Obama administration announced the Fair Chance Pledge act (Office of the Press Secretary, 2016), which called on businesses nationwide to invest in hiring job seekers with criminal histories. More than 200 organizations signed this pledge to make it easier for people with criminal histories to find employment (Take the fair chance pledge, 2016).

Criminal charges

Criminal charges vary based on a number of factors, with vast differences occurring between misdemeanor and felony charges. Misdemeanor charges are generally less severe compared to felony convictions and thus incur lighter penalties (Cornell Law School, n.d.). Misdemeanor charges can result in less than one year in jail, community service, fines, rehabilitation and/or probation (Gillespie, 2021). In contrast, felony charges are much more serious and can result in much higher penalties, including long term incarceration (Cornell Law School, n.d.).

Current Federal Legislation

In the US government, although laws are created at the local state level, a number of laws exist at the federal level that can conflict with local legislation. Possession, use, or distribution of illicit drugs is currently prohibited by federal law (Controlled

many including mandatory prison sentences. People found in possession of illicit substances can be sentenced up to one year in prison and the minimum fine of \$1,000, with subsequent convictions incurring longer prison sentences and greater fines (Controlled Substances Act § 844, 1971). Those federally charged for the sale, import, export, or shipping of drug paraphernalia can be imprisoned for up to three years and fined (Controlled Substances Act § 863, 1971). Additionally, anyone convicted of a federal drug offense serving a prison sentence lasting over one year must forfeit their personal property related to the violation (i.e., houses, cars, personal belongings; Controlled Substances Act § 853, 1971). Individuals who incur a federal drug-related conviction can lose any federal benefits including school loans, grants, contracts, and licenses (Controlled Substances Act § 862, 1971). Finally, drug trafficking convictions vary as a function of the substance. Possible prison sentencing times for drug trafficking range from no more than five years to not less than 20 years and up to multimillion dollar fines (Controlled Substances Act § 841, 1971).

Current Local Legislation

In 2017, drug possession became a misdemeanor in Oregon. This made “personal-use possession of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and other drugs a misdemeanor, not a felony” (The Associated Press, 2019). In November of 2020 which was in the duration of the present study, Measure 110—the Drug Addiction Treatment and Recovery Act—was passed, which meant that the possession of illicit substances in small quantities was decriminalized (Drug Addiction Treatment and Recovery Act, 2020). Specifically, instead of getting arrested, people in possession of illicit substances will now receive a

individuals complete a health assessment (Oregon Health Authority, 2021). Additionally, this measure provided funds to support addiction recovery centers. Finally, Oregon, and specifically the most populated area of Washington County, offers Integrative Re-Entry Intensive Supervision Services (IRISS; Washington County District Attorney's Office, 2018) available for select, non-violent drug and property crime offenders. In one of the programs offered through IRISS, instead of incarceration one is released to a sober house. In these sober houses, as long as individuals adhere to the rules, they can avoid incarceration. These types of programs can also aid people in finding employment and move toward a point at which they are self-sustaining (Polcin et al., 2011).

Ban the Box

In 1988, a movement began aimed at removing a box that job applicants often must check in order to indicate whether they have a criminal history, titled "ban the box" (D'Alessio et al., 2015; Henry & Jacobs, 2007; O'Connell, 2015), which is now legally recognized in 36 states (January 2021; Shoemaker, 2021). Organizations are still permitted, however, to request this information and conduct background checks following initial stages of the hiring process.

Disclosure and Identity Management

Individuals who possess stigmatized identities often engage in behaviors aimed at decreasing the negative impacts of their social stigma, a strategy defined as identity management (Goffman, 1963). Specifically, they may control who, how, when, and where others become aware of their association with this social stigma and attempt to disconfirm negative stereotypes about themselves. Stigmatized identities can be

categorized as either visible (i.e., race, gender) or not visible or obvious (i.e., values, beliefs, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, and personal experiences). Those with stigmatized identities frequently engage in identity management strategies (Clair et al., 2005; Ragins et al., 2007). The majority of the identity management literature has focused on those with stigmatized identities that are not visible (Jones & King, 2014). Identity management has been observed among many stigmatized groups in the workplace including sexual orientation minority group members (King et al., 2017), pregnant employees (King, 2017), and ex-convicts (Harding, 2003), among others.

The use of background checks removes disclosure autonomy (Sabat et al., 2017) for individuals with criminal histories, inhibiting their ability to engage in this identity management technique (Jones & King, 2014). Background checks are increasingly common, particularly for large organizations and with the use of online applications (Denver, Siwach, et al., 2017). Indeed, because many applications are now being completed online (Hernandez, 2017), individuals with a criminal record on their background check may be removed from the applicant pool before garnering an interview. This is important because an early elimination due to background check information likely removes applicants' opportunities for interpersonal interactions with selection personnel, and thus the opportunity to provide contextual information or explain their past experiences.

Even if applicants make it to a more interpersonal selection phase following a background check, they will likely need to engage in identity management strategies that may distract from discussing job related information. For instance, in an interview they may need to devote more time discussing their criminal history rather than discussing

their job relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities, which may waste organizational resources on irrelevant information, hinder the applicant's ability to obtain employment, and promote unequal access considering other applicants would have more time to discuss more pertinent information (i.e., person-job fit; Sekiguchi & Huber, 2011). In the event that individuals with criminal histories are able to obtain employment following a voluntary or involuntary disclosure (i.e., background check), they likely experience a need to alter their supervisors' perceptions of them (impression management; Ali et al., 2017, Schlenker, 1980). Considering an individual's criminal conviction may not be visible or known had background check not occurred, and a criminal conviction stigmatizes the employee, they may feel the need to engage in stereotype disconfirming behavior.

Stereotypes About Ex-Offenders

The stereotype content model (SCM; Cuddy et al., 2008) can be used to further explain the treatment and stigmatization of people with drug-related criminal histories. The SCM classifies social groups along two continua including both warmth (i.e., good natured, trustworthy, tolerant, friendly, and sincere) and competence (i.e., capable, skillful, intelligent, and confident) based on perceptions of competition and status, which generate emotional reactions including admiration, contempt, envy, and pity. These emotional reactions then lead to either passive or active, facilitating or harming behaviors. Individuals with criminal histories related to drugs who seek employment experience a compounding of intersecting stigmatized identities. Drug users can be seen as both low in warmth and low in competence considering they are perceived to be both dangerous or unpredictable and to have made poor decisions that brought them to a point

of criminal conviction. The drug offender stigma is perceived as controllable and hence blameworthy, which elicits contempt or even anger particularly as they are perceived to be a drain on the rest of society (i.e., cost of incarceration or rehabilitation; Cuddy et al., 2008; Weiner, 1985). Additionally, it is not uncommon for individuals with drug related criminal offenses to experience houselessness (Polcin, 2016) and unemployment considering those individuals clearly lose employment while incarcerated and holding a job while struggling with addiction can be difficult (depending on the severity; Henkel, 2011). When houselessness or unemployment are attributed to presumably controllable behaviors such as drug use, these stigmas likewise elicit anger (Cuddy et al., 2008).

With a potential triple bind (i.e., drug use, houselessness, unemployment) facing individuals with drug related criminal histories through which they may elicit anger and contempt, they are likely to face several barriers to both employment and inclusion in society. Furthermore, social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) posits that when a stereotype does not align with the prototypical individual in a position an individual is seeking, they are likely to be denied (including in employment contexts; Livingston et al., 2012).

Employment Changes Stereotypes about Ex-Offenders

Obtaining and maintaining employment counteracts negative stereotypes about individuals with drug-related criminal histories and may serve as a means to reduce their stigma. First, drawing on the stereotype content model and behavior from intergroup affect and stereotypes (BIAS) map (Cuddy et al., 2008), stereotypes about individuals with stable employment or income (i.e., hardworking, responsible) counteract those of drug users, individuals experiencing houselessness, or unemployment. Indeed, according

to the stereotype content model, individuals in the economic middle class are perceived as high in competence and high in warmth and thus elicit admiration and active or passive facilitation. Individuals who are “rich” are perceived as high in competence and high in warmth, thus eliciting envy, and either active facilitation or passive harm. In contrast, poor individuals, “drug abusers,” [*sic*] and houseless individuals are likely to be perceived as low in competence and low in warmth, thus eliciting contempt and either passive or active harm. According to the BIAS map, individuals with drug-related criminal histories experience the largest discrepancy in perceptions of competence compared to those with a sufficient stable income. Thus, obtaining a job and stable income may be a means through which individuals with drug-related criminal histories are perceived to be higher in competence, and potentially higher in warmth, thus altering affective reactions and the behavioral treatment they receive from others.

Second, drawing on just world theory (Rubin & Peplau, 1975) individuals with criminal histories are seen as bad people who are deserving of the punishment they receive. In contrast, obtaining and maintaining stable employment and higher socioeconomic status may lead others to perceive individuals to be good people who are deserving of the life that they lead. Just world theory posits that “people believe that the world is a place where good people are rewarded and bad people are punished” (Rubin & Peplau, 1975, p. 65). Believers in a just world have been found to be more likely than nonbelievers to admire fortunate people and to derogate victims, thus permitting the believers to maintain the perception that people in fact get what they deserve (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), a theory that has been widely used for decades (Nudelman & Otto, 2019). Despite the barriers that individuals with drug-related criminal histories face, the

experience of obtaining employment and integrating into society can be seen within Alger's myth of "bootstrapping," the perception that anyone, through hard work, can rise up the economic ladder and achieve the "American Dream" (Alger, 1868). This belief system is still prevalent in society today, evidenced by the fact that the US president and dominant political party at the time of this study endorsed this perspective (Nelson, 2019). Thus, a large portion of the population are more likely to believe that individuals who are able to overcome barriers in place by the criminal justice system to obtain economic resources (i.e., "pull themselves up by the bootstraps") are good and morally deserving of the higher quality of life they are able to achieve with the help of those resources (and, by implication, that those who are not able to overcome these barriers are deserving of the relatively lower quality of life afforded to them).

Third, having access to money inherently allows people more opportunities to avoid the criminal justice system by either paying or due to incongruence between stereotypes about high status individuals and criminals (Askew & Salinas, 2019). For instance, Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton have destroyed emails in defiance of court orders and were able to maintain socio-political power (Eichenwald, 2016; Papenfuss, 2016; Stein, 2016). Further supporting this point, Askew and Salinas (2019) examined the experiences of individuals who consumed or supplied illicit drugs and did not receive a criminal conviction. They found that participants had conventional commitments and roles in society, including stable employment, which allowed them to go undetected or without conviction if they were caught. This phenomenon is theorized to be typical of the "silent majority" (Mohamed, 2010), a group of drug users and distributors whose offending behavior goes largely unnoticed and unpunished. A similar phenomenon is

likely to occur among individuals who have been convicted and attempt to integrate into society. Specifically, it is likely that engaging in similar behaviors to those of the “silent majority” may distance convicted drug consumers or distributors from their stigmatized identity as a drug offender. Therefore, strategies individuals use to distance themselves from criminal stereotypes to avoid charges are also likely to be beneficial in counteracting stereotypes once they have been convicted. It is important to note, however, that the stereotypes and discrimination faced are unlikely to subside completely (Maruna & King, 2009).

In summary, to address these empirical and theoretical gaps regarding experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories and changes in stigma, I will explore two main questions within this qualitative study. I will examine experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories as they integrate into the workplace and society, and how changes in stigma impact these individuals.

Research question 1: What are the experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories while joining and integrating into workplace environments and society?

Research question 2: How does a reduction in stigma impact individuals’ identities and internal thought processes?

Chapter 3: Method

I analyzed audio recordings of qualitative interviews conducted with 17 individuals with a criminal history related to illicit substances (i.e., using drugs, selling drugs, possession of drugs). Data were collected in approximately June of 2017. Participants were recruited via email and compensated with a \$10 Amazon gift card for their time. At the time of data collection, there were no specific research questions or hypotheses; the intent of the interviews was to develop understanding of the experiences that participants had, from their own perspective, in order to inform future research questions and theory.

Reflexivity

Before proceeding further, I will provide information about myself and my perspective generally, and as a researcher, through reflexive practice (i.e., reflexivity; Berger, 2015; Shaw, 2010). Reflexivity is the awareness that “all knowledge is affected by the social conditions under which it is produced; it is grounded in both the social location and the social biography of the observer and the observed” (Mann & Kelley, 1997, p.392). Reflexive practice has been emphasized as imperative in qualitative research (Palaganas et al., 2017). As such, placing the disclosure of my positionality and orientation toward this subject matter first and foremost can aid in my own perspective taking as well as highlight the complexities of my engagement with this work (Pillow, 2003). In the following section, I provide an overview of my personal experiences and orientation toward the present study. In addition to my own reflexive practice, all research assistants who work on this project will engage in reflective practice.

I was raised in a low socioeconomic status household in Oregon and gained access to higher education through Federal Student Aid (<https://studentaid.gov/h/apply-for-aid/fafsa>). With this aid, I attended a local community college where I obtained my associate's degree, then at a local university I obtained my bachelor's degree. I am a first-generation college graduate. While working toward my degrees, I pursued a career in music as a percussionist. As one of few women in percussion within a culture that fostered hyper-masculinity, I have experienced prejudice, discrimination, and ostracism firsthand from my supervisors, instructors, group members and colleagues.

My experiences impact my orientation toward this study in several important ways. As someone who has experienced discrimination firsthand, I advocate for believing marginalized populations lived experiences. However, I can never fully understand experiences of marginalized populations of which I am not a part. Specifically, I do not have a criminal record, nor a history of addiction, so I cannot fully understand this experience. Additionally, my personal experiences of discrimination as a White woman do not generalize to my understanding of experiencing racism. As a White woman, I am considered to be part of a population that US dominant culture perceives to “need protection” from those engaging in illegal activities. Furthermore, if I were to interact with the criminal justice system, bias on the basis of race and gender would function in my favor (Crutchfield et al., 2010; Starr, 2012). In sum, although I aim to believe the experiences of marginalized populations and elevate underrepresented perspectives in this project, there are several components to experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal backgrounds that I am simply naïve to.

Theoretical Orientation

In order to promote further transparency regarding my lens in examining this topic, I describe my theoretical orientation. I took a critical epistemological stance toward the present study. Specifically, I aimed to elevate the perspectives of the participants, but also acknowledge the limitations of their perspectives. My aim to further understand the perspectives of the participants is evident based on Research Question 1: “What are the experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories while joining and integrating into workplace environments and society.” However, I also acknowledge that because these participants are those who have experienced positive outcomes following criminal conviction, they may mistakenly highlight their efforts and underestimate their privileges that facilitated their successful societal integration.

Participants

Participants were individuals with at least one drug-related criminal charge. Participants were recruited from local organizations (i.e., Urban League of Portland, Dave’s Killer Bread Foundation) that are committed to assisting people with criminal histories to find employment. Additionally, participants were asked if they knew anyone else who may wish to participate following the completion of their interview (snowball sampling; Noy, 2008; Goodman, 1961). Once consent was provided, participants were then contacted via email to schedule a one-on-one phone interview.

Demographic Information

I present the following demographic information with an extremely important caveat. Demographic survey data was not collected, rather, the interviewer’s perceptions of participants' demographic presentation was noted by the interviewer in memos following the completion of interviews. As such, the following information is merely

based on the interviewer's subjective perception of the participants' presentations and is therefore not an accurate representation of participants' actual identities. Participants included six people that were perceived as being more feminine and 11 people were perceived as being more masculine (35% feminine). If these individuals' gender identities were aligned with the interviewer's perceptions then this gender proportion is representative of individuals with drug-related convictions in the state of Oregon (approximately 60% male and 40% female in 2018; Oregon Uniform Crime Reporting, 2018). The interviewer also noted their perception of participants' races while memo writing. The interviewer noted that they perceived the majority of participants to be White (53%), three participants to be Hispanic/Latino, one participant to be Black, and they did not specify their perception of four participants' racial identities. The reason for the lack of information about four participants was likely due to the fact that some interviews were conducted over the phone.

Nature of Crime. The majority of participants (14) had at least one felony charge, with the number of felony convictions ranging up to 16 for one participant. Three participants did not specify the nature of their charges. Of the participants with unspecified convictions, one (Participant 1) was relatively young at the time of conviction, only discussed having used alcohol, and specified that they were only jailed overnight. The second participant (Participant 14) who did not specify the nature of their crimes indicated "I was using a lot of heavy drugs and made some really bad decisions essentially". The third participant (Participant 17) who did not specify the nature of their crime may have had felony convictions given the severity of their situation "I was getting

into more severe things, my reality kind of changed. I started realizing that it was a matter of time before I was dead or in prison for killing somebody else".

All participants indicated that they used drugs in some capacity. Several participants (6) explicitly indicated that they used multiple substances. Two participants mentioned using methamphetamine only, and one participant mentioned using heroin only. Three participants only explicitly mentioned using alcohol. Five participants did not explicitly discuss what substances they used. Five participants explicitly indicated that they had sold illicit substances (including heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine).

Qualitative Methodology

Qualitative methodology is the most appropriate method of examining experiences of individuals with a criminal history related to drug use for several reasons. First, the dynamic interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee provides the interviewee with greater autonomy in the data collection process and likely more opportunity to accurately represent their experiences (Jamshed, 2014). In quantitative data collection, the researcher generates a set of questions that they believe address issues that participants experience, whereas the participant has a very limited number of possible responses (Queirós et al., 2017). In contrast, qualitative methods can allow for less restricted responses, including responses that steer the conversation closer to participants' actual experiences and away from the researcher's preconceived notions.

Second, qualitative methods are better for addressing questions of "how?" or "why?" rather than "how many" (Lee et al., 2011, Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). Although it is clear that systems in place (i.e., background checks) restrict individuals' abilities to

obtain employment, other factors that inhibit their potential in workplace contexts are not yet known, and this information can be obtained using qualitative interviews.

Third, qualitative research on this subject can provide more nuanced representation of ex-offenders' intricate experiences in employment contexts to better initiate organizational or societal change (Queirós et al., 2017). Despite the breadth of quantitative data indicating that background checks adversely impact marginalized populations (Holzer et al., 2004., 2003; Pager, 2003), it remains legal to perform background checks and inquire about criminal history in selection contexts (US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d.). Specifically, qualitative interview data may be more accessible to practitioners, policy makers, activists, or people of the population themselves in describing these complex experiences (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016) compared to the quantitative data that are already available (French et al., 2001; Morçöl & Ivanova, 2010).

Fourth, individuals with drug-related criminal histories likely have important experiences that span across faceted areas of their lives, which quantitative methodology may not adequately capture. For example, an inability to obtain financial resources through employment may lead participants to experience houselessness, which may inhibit common impression management (see Leary & Kowalski, 1990) strategies like grooming (Phelan et al., 1997). A qualitative approach can provide more nuanced information about how some life experiences, or stigmatized identities, may impact others and compound to produce beneficial or detrimental effects. Indeed, qualitative methods are recommended for intersectional research in organizational settings (Warner, 2008).

Grounded Theory

I draw on practices in grounded theory in the present study. Grounded theory is a qualitative methodological approach used to examine topics for which little is known (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), particularly complex social processes (Willig, 2009), and for taking a new perspective on existing topics (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998, 1990). Grounded theory is recommended in industrial and organizational research (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016), has been increasingly employed in workplace contexts (Wilhelmy et al., 2016), and particularly in examining diversity-related workplace topics (Sawyer et al., 2017; Siegel & Sawyer, 2019). Grounded theory is inherently exploratory in nature and involves adaptation of data collection, data analysis, or theory building based on insights gained in any of these phases of the research process (i.e., analytical induction; see Hesse-Biber, 2017). It is important to note that this iterative process is reserved for the coding and interpretation of the data as they were collected previously.

Semi-structured interviews

Seventeen in-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals with drug-related criminal histories were conducted by a graduate student studying Industrial and Organizational psychology in Portland Oregon over the phone or a video for approximately one hour each. The main purpose of conducting interviews was to better understand experiences of individuals with drug related criminal histories as they integrated into the workplace and society. Semi-structured interviews specifically were conducted so the researcher could adapt questions or ask follow-up questions as needed based on participant responses (in line with recommendations for grounded theory methodology; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This interview flexibility allowed the interviewer

to better align their questions and information discussed with participants should the researcher's preconceived questions not align or best address participants' lived experiences. This method also facilitated greater autonomy for participants in their ability to guide the conversation and share only information that they felt they wanted to share for ethical purposes (i.e., avoiding gathering information about the nature of their criminal activity that they may not feel comfortable sharing). All interview questions can be viewed in Appendix A. All interviews were audio recorded to allow for faithful verbatim transcription and subsequent analyses.

Analysis

The verbatim transcriptions and the audio files were used in a coding process through which words or short phrases are tagged to sections of text for each interview. Coders listened to the audio files as well as read the transcriptions to better understand contextual and emotional cues participants used to communicate (Chenail, 2012).

I used an exploratory coding approach with no preconceived codes or themes (in line with recommendations for grounded theory; Scott, 2004) in order to best align the coding scheme with the exploratory nature of these data and the research questions (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997). I examined the audio transcriptions line-by-line (Glaser, 1978) and created or assigned succinct pieces of text using the participants' own words (i.e., first order codes; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) to summarize participant responses. In order to increase dependability, these data were analyzed and discussed by multiple researchers (following recommendations by Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Specifically, two research assistants were trained on how to engage in qualitative coding, and each interview was coded by myself and one research assistant. I did not provide the research

assistants with more in-depth, detailed information about these data to decrease potential effects of confirmation bias in the coding process (Gioia et al., 2013). For each interview, one research assistant and I engaged in separate coding of each interview (Yu et al., 2011) in order to maximize the use of our unique perspectives. The research assistant and I then met to discuss similarities and differences between our codes (“hashing out;” Armstrong et al., 1997) following each coded interview until we were able to arrive at an agreement as to what is being said in these data and the succinct participant-based code names used to describe the phenomenon at hand. This process included examining the codebook for possible redundancies after coding each interview to determine whether the use of multiple similar codes was warranted, or whether multiple codes should be combined and renamed. Following the completion of first order coding, the research assistant and I organized the first order codes into major themes (i.e., second order codes; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991) to add structure to the data analysis process. Whereas first order codes focus on terminology and perspectives of the interviewee, second order codes draw more heavily on theoretical constructs.

Trustworthiness

In order to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were implemented as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) to enhance the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the findings.

Credibility

Credibility is a concept similar to that of internal validity in quantitative research, which refers to confidence in the 'truth' of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to achieve credibility in qualitative research it is recommended to (a) conduct research in

a way that increases the likelihood that the findings will be found to be credible, and (b) demonstrate credibility by having the findings approved by members of the group that is being examined.

Most notably, one of the two research assistants who coded the interviews with me pleaded guilty to a criminal drug charge. This research assistant's contribution to this project and the analysis is significant, although he did not incur a conviction as the judge stated he would "pretend" he heard 'not guilty.'" See Appendix B for a description of this research assistant's lived experience detailed through reflective practice. This research assistant was very heavily involved in both iterative coding and analysis, as well as the post-coding analysis, which included re-organizing the codebook into themes, generating findings, and selecting representative quotes for the results section.

Additionally, I engaged in prolonged engagement by viewing documentaries about the criminal justice system surrounding illicit substances. I watched YouTube videos of individuals with drug-related criminal charges detailing their experiences broadly in life, with addiction, while incarcerated, and about experiences obtaining employment. Finally, these data were tested for referential adequacy (Eisner, 1975; Lincoln & Guba 1985) by archiving a set of data until I completed an initial analysis and developed preliminary findings. Specifically, I created the model in response to 15 of the interviews, then returned to the initial model to determine whether findings were still considered valid with the addition of the two archived interviews. Referential adequacy was achieved.

Transferability

Transferability refers to whether or not the findings have applicability in contexts outside of the context in which the study was conducted (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) and is related to the external validity in quantitative research. I demonstrate the transferability of my findings by utilizing “thick description” (Geertz, 1973; Ponterotto, 2006) when providing my findings and discussion. Thick description specifically refers to providing context and meaning in qualitative results (Ponterotto, 2006). Additionally, I detail how findings from this study may transfer to other contexts or populations.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research refers to whether the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Guest et al., 2012), which is related to reliability in quantitative research. I demonstrate dependability by utilizing multiple perspectives in coding and analysis. Interrater reliability was also examined as evidence of the dependability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, following the completion of the coding process, two undergraduate research assistants studying psychology who were naïve to the study were provided with the codebook and passages of text from a representative sample of interviews (10%) to determine the extent to which they agree with the consensus agreed upon by myself and another research assistant. Naïve coders demonstrated adequate agreement with the consensus codes at a rate of .70 which coincides precisely with the recommended threshold (.70; Cohen, 1960).

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to a degree of neutrality or objectivity of the findings. Confirmability was addressed in the present study by utilizing triangulation of multiple perspectives in the research team (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Morse, 2015). Specifically,

each audio transcription was coded by myself and one other research assistant (there were two research assistants). As discussed previously, one research assistant was a part of the population of interest. Finally, all of those engaged in the coding and analysis process engaged in reflective practice throughout the research process (Berger, 2015; Shaw, 2010) in order to bring awareness to how our orientations may have influenced the research process. My reflexivity is detailed above, and a research assistant's reflexivity statement can be found below in Appendix B.

Chapter 4: Results

Research Question 1

The following section describes the results pertaining to Research Question 1, “*what are the experiences of individuals with drug-related criminal histories while joining and integrating into workplace environments and society?*” A representative visual model (see Figure 1) can be viewed below in order to best capture the complexity of the iterative time-based processes that participants experienced. Indeed, due to the complexities and experiences of recidivism among the participants, all research team members agreed that the final codebook was not properly represented in a linear model or table. Although some participants did not participate in all components of Figure 1, all research collaborators—myself, the principal investigator, and two research assistants involved in the coding and analysis process—agreed that this model best summarizes the data visually in response to the first research question. I present the topics extant in Figure 1 in chronological order, although it should be noted that several participants experienced these events in a cyclical recurrent fashion due to recidivism or challenges in obtaining employment.

Criminal History

Although the details of participants' criminal charges were not the focal topic for the interview, and therefore were not inquired about directly in the interviews, several participants provided rich information about their backgrounds. They described their charges while detailing the journey that led them to conviction.

Severe Life Events. Notably, participants overwhelmingly indicated that severe life challenges caused them to engage in criminal behavior. These data suggested that

participants were in incredibly difficult scenarios when they began engaging in criminal behavior, which was frequently coupled with a lack of resources or poor mental health.

Participant 15 describes how they turned to illicit substances with their partner to cope with the grief of having lost their children, and the desperation for help that they experienced committing crimes to receive assistance.

“There was a loss in my life...my twins were stillborn and my husband and I turned to meth, and then meth turned to criminal activity. I lived on the streets for about a year and was homeless and committing crimes and I couldn’t get any help, and then my final...plea for help was extreme crime and that’s what led me to jail” [P15].

Participant 13 also indicated that a loss and grief interacted with their substance use produced life spanning challenges, to indicate that their behavior was circumstantial rather than due to their character. They described what a hard time they were going through, which led to their criminal conviction.

“I was a good person but I was dealing with drugs and alcohol. Yeah, I lost my father. A loss of a, I guess, I lost my kids and the relationship with my ex-wife. So, a lot of stuff was crashing down, so... I don’t blame that for the fact that I was doing those things that I did but, it was just an uncert...and unfortunate time, you know, so... I guess I’m [slight laugh] trying to deal with the repercussions and I had to fight my way back to a regular life” [P13].

Criminal Behavior. All participants discussed either using substances and some discussed selling illicit substances as a result of the severe life events they were experiencing. Although criminal behavior and severe life events were highly related, they are separate steps and therefore I present quotes relating to each of these themes distinctly. Participant 4 described how they sold illicit substances as an alternative to a job in order to survive while dealing with addiction, as they knew they would be unable

to maintain employment with an unsupportive supervisor and a regimented schedule due to the chaos associated with using illicit substances and the unreliability of their behavior.

“I had a drug problem. That was pretty much the root of a lot of my criminal activity, it was to take care of my drug habit. I had to find ways to, you know, maintain my drug addiction and so that involved selling drugs and things like that. Yeah, cause I, you know, being addicted to drugs, it’s kinda hard to have a job because if you’re gonna be, you know, home sick or you know, you don’t know if you’re gonna be able to maintain at work, you know, so it’s just easier to sell more drugs and you don’t have to worry about showing up on time or a boss or any of that stuff, it just lets you kind of do your own thing” [P4].

Social and Legal Repercussions. Participants described repercussions and implications of their criminal charges immediately following conviction socially and legally. A summary of the criminal charges that participants incurred can be found in Table 1, though the interview protocol did not explicitly ask participants about the specifics of their criminal histories; what is known about this was offered unsolicited by participants. Criminal charges ranged from a misdemeanor ($n = 1$ possibly, unspecified and low deviance level), to at least one felony charge ($n = 15$), and one with an unspecified charge with few contextual cues. Some participants had several criminal convictions including one participant with 16 felony convictions. The social repercussions were vast and spanned all areas of participants' lives. They experienced ostracism from those who were not engaged in criminal behavior but simultaneously had to dissociate from those who were engaging in criminal behavior in order to ensure that they adhered to a lifestyle that did not include substance use or distribution. Participant 5 describes how they had to isolate themselves from the people they were surrounded by while they were using illicit substances in order to maintain their sobriety.

“I used all, like uhh, all my life lines trying to y'know... survive in life but I’d still be active in my addiction y'know... I, I felt like I tried all these different ways,

and it doesn't work so... I figured maybe just y'know just stop using, see how that works, and uhh it was something new to me to stop using and to get away from all the people" [P5].

Participant 15 describes how they experienced loneliness, isolation, and a lack of social support throughout the process of incarceration.

"I went through it alone, you know. I went to jail alone, I didn't have phone calls. I didn't have visits. I didn't have commissary. I didn't have letters. I didn't have pictures, I did it alone and it's, that... it sucked, but I became such a strong person" [P15].

Sobriety through Rehabilitation or Incarceration. Participants described achieving sobriety either while incarcerated or using rehabilitative programs that were provided due to criminal convictions. This experience was not only physically sobering, but mentally and emotionally sobering as they recognized the severity of their situation. Participant 14 highlights this by indicating that they experienced mental clarity through sobriety as well as upon release from incarceration.

"Going to jail kind of is what I needed in order for me to get clean and get my head straight and so upon being released it kind of cleared up that for me" [P14].

Behavioral Awakening.

Relatedly, participants described a vast change in their mental state, which drastically changed their behavior following their conviction. Participant 3 demonstrates this by describing their reflection on their past and how much they have changed mentally and behaviorally. In particular, Participant 3 describes how this reflection led them to change their behavior in all aspects of their life.

"Um, that I've been to prison, that I've been to jail. I have rob charges, I have drug charges, uh, I've been in situations that were totally out of my control, and I've been in situations that you know, I knew fair well exactly what I was doing, um, but now looking back I know that the people that I surrounded myself with,

my self worth, my self respect, my confidence, I had none, and it was because I was surrounded by misery and others that were that, that was the norm and now I don't even associate with anything so if someone's trying to change their life and turn it around, um you have to change everything. You have to change your routine. You have to change who you hang out with, um where you live. You have to change it all, and you have to be selfish and about yourself" [P3].

Resources.

Following criminal convictions and incarceration(s), participants moved toward societal integration with varying levels of resources and varying utilization of those resources. Participant 6 describes the deep-seated appreciation that they had the high level of support that they had access to through an integration program.

"It means everything to me. Like, you know, I've expressed it quite a few times how much it means to me that um, there was that much support. It wasn't just hey we're going to let you out of jail and don't reoffend and don't use. Like they really tried to give as much support as possible..." [P6].

In contrast with the experiences of Participant 6, Participant 3 indicated that they experienced a complete lack of resources after being released from incarceration. Because of this lack of supportive resources, they experienced difficulty undergoing the necessary behavioral changes to integrate into the community as they were unsure how to behave appropriately to avoid criminal behavior, as criminal behavior was all that they knew.

"... you have a flicker of, maybe you could do right. But doing wrong for so long, you don't really know how to get back in the groove of doing right because all your resources are gone. Your parents aren't there anymore. You have to, uh, fend for yourself, and usually that goes hand in hand with runnin the streets and whatnot because you're doin crime and that's what you know" [P3].

Severity of Crime. Notably, participants highlighted that the severity of their criminal offense impacted the resources that they were subsequently able to access following their convictions. This is illustrated by the following representative quote in

which Participant 15 indicates that they would need to obtain a more severe criminal conviction in order to obtain the rehabilitative treatment that they needed. They also highlight this severe injustice and the lack of awareness of this issue among the general public.

“I became addicted to methamphetamines. I tried to get help through society on my own, that was impossible because I didn’t have the criminal charge, I wasn’t on probation, I didn’t qualify for the Oregon Health Plan at the time, so I couldn’t get into treatment but they did tell me if I did have these criminal charges, that I could get help, so I left the treatment facility and I became a criminal to get help. That’s what I did and that’s what led me to here, so most of the time when you tell people that, they’re really kind of disgusted by the way that society operates and they don’t know that. They don’t know that people who don’t have a criminal history or, you know, any of that have no criminal history, go into a treatment center they’re gonna get turned away. Most people don’t understand that” [P15]

Job Search

Applying for jobs proved to be a very stressful process for participants that was particularly riddled with discrimination, stigmatization, and limited opportunities.

Background checking was frequently used as a means to deny participants access to employment, but interpersonal interactions also involved more subtle forms of discrimination. Several participants obtained employment through social connections or allies in managerial positions. Participants had to engage in particularly strategic identity management and disclosure techniques given the decision of whether to disclose or not was frequently removed due to background checking.

Background Checks. Background checks were a significant barrier to obtaining employment for participants. Not only was this a practical barrier, but repeated rejections through the use of background checking caused emotional distress for participants.

Participant 2 was deeply saddened and discouraged when organizations would conduct

representative of their present behavioral and mental identity. Participant 2 further describes the frustration associated with the high effort expenditure when applying for jobs and experiencing rejection, and with the disrespect associated with a lack of contact from the organization for which they applied.

“I applied, I interviewed, they gave me the job offer but of course they do a background, they run a background check and because of my felony background I got refused the job so ... it it got it... it kind of put me down and it's like wow ok they're looking at me because of what's on paper but not of what I've become a better person and that happened to me three times, three different people, three different companies and um until I found [fast food organization], it was, it was hard, ya know you get offered that job and then its a two week time where you're waiting for that background check to come back before you get that, and they don't contact you personally, the company that does the background check is the one that tells you don't, you're not getting hired so um... yeah I went through it three times and I mean it kind of puts you down, it puts you down in the dumps for a little bit because ya know you've tried so hard ya know going after this job...” [P2]

Some participants reported being able to obtain employment with organizations that did not use background checks. Participant 9 was able to avoid a background check and obtain employment despite honesty about their criminal background and felt very fortunate to have had this experience.

“I just told them that I had a drug history and he never even did a background check on me and he just hired me. So, like, I just kind of lucked out in that department...” [P9].

Discrimination, Stigma, and Reduced Opportunities. Participants described the discrimination, stigma, and reduced opportunities that they experienced while integrating into society and the workplace. These topics are grouped together because of how frequently participants described them in conjunction with one another. Participant 2 describes the discrimination and stigmatization that they experienced in the selection

process. Interestingly, Participant 2 described low interpersonal discrimination but high formal discrimination in the hiring process, which included hiring managers lying. These experiences elicited a sense of hopelessness about future employment opportunities.

“But yeah, that is definitely a hard issue because it- the- the employers act like they want to help you, but then they just don't call you back, you know what I mean? They'll be like, "oh, of course, we don't..." you know, most of them will even lie to your face and act like it's not going to be an issue, or they said, "well, it might be," but they know the whole time the second you walk out there, they're going to just shred your application, you know? And that... people just, yeah, it's like you said, use stigma. Then there's nothing- that's not ever going to change. People that don't have criminal backgrounds are never going to understand people that did. Especially when it was drug-induced. Like, myself, when I'm using it is not the same person I am when I'm not, you know?” [P2].

The following quote illustrates the discrimination that participants reported experiencing in selection contexts, and specifically how their criminal background reduces their employment opportunities. Participant 17 describes how criminals are hired to do undesirable work.

“...people just tend to talk down to you and the bosses don't treat you better or as good as he does everyone else so it's just, when you get hired on and they know you're a criminal, it's just, you're a grunt. You're doing all the dirty shit. All the hard stuff” [P17].

The following quote further demonstrates the limited opportunities participants experienced. Participant 3 describes an inability to work in their desired profession or in roles that align with their interests. In particular, Participant 3 describes the sharp change from before to after convictions, which seems to communicate that Participant 3 is mourning the loss of their employment freedom.

“It's always talked amongst people who have records that it's really hard to get a job or they had really great jobs, caught a felony charge, and can't do that job no more. Like I couldn't be an airplane stewardess, and I couldn't be uh, uh a nurse or nothin' cause I have such a bad background. Things I was interested in, um you know, they don't, not, can't do that.” [P3].

Allies in Management. However, several participants also encountered positive experiences in their integration into the workplace. Specifically, some participants were able to obtain employment through a social connection or encountered hiring managers who were willing to give them a chance by providing a job offer. Participant 8 encountered a selection manager whose daughter was in recovery and was therefore empathetic to their experience. Participant 8 describes how fortunate they felt that their supervisor was empathetic to their experience and therefore gave Participant 8 an opportunity to succeed.

“I was actually asked- I was just lucky enough that her daughter is in recovery and things like that, so she was ok with it. I told her that I had mandatory classes I had to go to, so I couldn’t work at this time or this time, so she was fine giving me a chance and I think it was because of her previous history with her daughter” [P8].

Participant 3 emphasized the importance of having social connections in individuals’ ability to obtain employment.

“I really believe that you’ve gotta know somebody to get in somewhere or you’re gonna be doin’ dishes or flippin’ burgers. Um, I have a lot of people in my circle that are clean and sober people from the same program I’m from that are doing great and workin’ harder jobs like, uh, like office jobs and running sales floors and you know but they started at the bottom and someone gave them a chance which they normally don’t” [P3].

Identity Management. Throughout the application process, participants became savvy to strategies that they could employ in order to increase their chances of obtaining a job offer. Participant 15 described how they learned to frame their experiences in a way that elicited more favorable responses and understanding from those that they disclosed to. They highlighted that they provided counterstereotypical information, which elicited acceptance.

“So, if I just came out, met somebody, shook their hand, and came out and said, “I’m a felon. I committed a heinous act of burglary, I punched cops in the face, I did a lot of meth,” They’re probably not gonna want to hang out with me. But if I come out to them and I’m like, you know, I was a normal person, I fell into addiction, I needed help, I couldn’t get it, I finally committed enough crimes to get put in jail where I finally got help, it’s looked at a little bit different. When you put the reality of what happened behind it and the real, the realness of what it is, versus what it looks like, people are actually pretty accepting” [P15].

Participants experienced additional challenges due to the use of application procedures that did not allow for in-person interaction—and therefore explanation or other identity management techniques—prior to background checking. Some participants determined strategic and resourceful ways of surpassing the initial online or paper application stages. Participant 9 said that they indicated on their paper application that they would explain their criminal background in person as a way to gain access to in-person interaction phases of selection. They then used their good communication skills to showcase their likeable personality, which elicited positive responses from others.

“Oh yeah. Every time [there are questions about background in applications]. Like, because on the application they’d say “have you ever been convicted of a felony?” Instead of me just listing them all, like it asks you to do on the application. I would say, “I would like to explain in person,” on the application, so I can at least get my foot in the door for an interview. Then once I got an interview, I was trying to smooth-talk my way through it (laughs), you know, I mean I’m good with people, but at the time when people meet me, my personality will speak for itself, you know, and it’s- it’s easy to look at somebody on a piece of paper and not know them and just say no immediately. But when you get somebody like me in front of you and I’m, you know, showing you what I’m really capable of, in talking face-to-face with someone, it opens doors that wouldn’t necessarily be there if they closed it before even give you that chance, you know?” [P9].

Although the vast majority of participants highly valued honesty in the selection process, some participants avoided disclosure even when being asked directly about their criminal background, as they perceived there to be no chance that they would be selected

if they were honest in the early application stages. Participant 12 describes how they lied on initial paper or online applications by indicating that they do not have a criminal record. Then when they obtain an interview or other in-person interaction with hiring personnel, and hiring personnel are aware of their qualification for the job, they disclose their criminal background.

“[it’s] The same scenario, it’s like, when you go to the application part of it, if you have any felonies on our record, convictions, if you put yes, you know, you’re doing the right thing in explaining yourself, you won’t even get in the door as far as I’m concerned. So, 9 times out of 10 times I lie, I put no. and then when I get in to talk to people, because my resume is looking good, I have a lot of experience in a lot of the fields. So, when I talk to the people, they do the hiring, they say oh you know how to do this and how to do that, and I say yeah, and that’s when I go, well but I need to tell you something. So that’s when I tell them about my felony convictions...” [P12].

Given the high rates of discrimination in the application process, one participant did not report their criminal background in job applications and merely planned to not receive an offer if a background check was performed. Participant 1 indicates that they used to lie on their job applications by not checking the box to indicate that they had a felony conviction on paper or online applications. They describe how they weighed the different possible outcomes of lying on their applications. Lying on applications was easier because they would merely not be hired at organizations that performed background checks, and they would receive job offers from those that did not perform background checks.

“Yea, ‘cause there is always that check box there “Have you ever been convicted of an offense.” I think in the early days I didn’t check that box, so basically I lied on my application. I wasn’t forthcoming about criminal history. Now of course, sometimes they would check and sometimes they wouldn’t. So, those who didn’t check, I would get hired and as long as I was able to do my job and do it right I can keep that job. Then there were others that would notice that” [P1].

However, this same participant later noted that they changed their perspective regarding honesty in job applications over time. Participant 1 indicates that if organizations will discriminate against them for having a criminal record, that Participant 1 would rather know about their employer's perspective earlier rather than later. This quote seems to imply that the process of rejection is more damaging if it occurs in relationships in which rapport has already been built.

“I realized it was just better to be forthcoming and not to try to hide things. That way it is out in the open and if they like you, like and if they don't, they don't. That is what is going to make or break whether they hire you. Better them to know now than find out later” [P1].

Rejections or Inability to Obtain Employment

Several participants identified an inability to obtain employment as a barrier to life improvement. They highlighted that without adequate resources obtained through employment (i.e., financial compensation) they would or have considered returning to criminal behavior as an alternative. Participant 17 describes how financial stability is imperative for avoiding more damaging methods of obtaining money in order to survive.

“Without money, it's a matter of time before... I start looking at the other things I used to do to get money because, money is how you live” [P17].

Indeed, although participants noted the severity of the repercussions that they endured for their drug-related crimes, those who distributed illicit substances described alluring practical advantages of working in the illicit substance distribution industry. Participants highlighted the positive working circumstances including autonomy, direct association with work and income, allocation of earnings directly to the individual rather than to a larger organization, and sense of responsibility associated with illicit substance distribution. Additionally, they highlighted the allure of the lifestyle associated with

higher income. Participant 4 speaks to the benefits of selling illicit substances including being one's own boss, keeping all earned profits, a direct relationship between their efforts and financial rewards, and the high sense of responsibility. Participant 4 then contrasts this with undesirable job tasks associated with a presumably undesirable job that ex-offenders frequently hold.

“I like being my own boss, that's the one thing that I liked about when I was in that drug, that drug lifestyle was I was my own boss. Like, I made my own hours. The money I made was mine. I didn't count on any... You know, like, I mean, there was people that I counted on but, you know like... I was the one that was putting in the work. I was the one that was responsible for this... 'Cause you know, and so... that's kind of what I want to run my own shop because then, you know, I guess I do like responsibilities so I don't know why I didn't take this assistant manager role, but... I think it also has to do with, I don't really want to be stuck changing oil for the rest of my life” [P4].

Ultimately, following rejections participants had to take one of three routes; (a) apply for more jobs, (b) obtain or utilize additional resources, or (c) return to criminal behavior, as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Obtaining Employment

Once participants were able to obtain employment, although they were glad to have been able to obtain income, interpersonal interactions and quality of work became highly salient factors.

Interpersonal Interactions. Overall, participants reported having positive social interactions at work once they were hired considering organizations that hired them seemed to be those that were more accepting. Participants noted that these positive interactions greatly contributed to their well-being and sense of belonging at work. Participant 17 describes the camaraderie that they experienced at work due to their interpersonal connections with others with similar backgrounds.

“Well, the ones that have a past like mine, they, it brings us close together. A little... A little... I wouldn't say, I'd say more camaraderie or you know what I mean like, I feel like you can relate with each other a little more” [P17].

Quality of Work. Several participants discussed the limitations imposed as a result of only being able to obtain work with organizations who were willing to hire individuals with criminal backgrounds. These limitations resulted in far less financially resourceful, less enjoyable, and less personally meaningful (i.e., not aligned with one's interests) work tasks. Participant 9 describes work that those with criminal convictions can obtain as being similar to slavery, in that the tasks are mindless and degrading with inadequate financial compensation. Participant 9 implied that these jobs are damaging to ex-offenders' well-being particularly considering the issues that this population already faces.

“... places like that that I've worked before, uhm, uh, they just- they don't pay you enough money. They work you like slaves, you know, it's mindless work like that. You could train monkeys to do and, uh, very degrading, like you're standing on, like, an assembly line all day and you'd be like, well, yeah. Certain things like that are almost more damaging than they are good for you. Especially for people in recovery who are already having issues with themselves...” [P9].

Individual and Organizational Benefits. Once participants were able to obtain employment, they indicated that there were several benefits for both employees and organizations. Obtaining employment was a critical component of their ability to integrate into society and they were therefore greatly appreciative of their employment and highly motivated to perform well at their jobs as a result.

Individual Benefits. First, participants indicated that obtaining employment increased their sense of self-efficacy. By obtaining the positive reinforcement and financial resources associated with obtaining and maintaining employment, this increased

participants' beliefs in their ability to succeed in society. Participant 4 described how they have learned to believe in their capacity to behave in accordance with their goals through dedication and hard work.

“I’ve learned that I’m probably a lot stronger than I give myself credit for... and that I can always do a lot more than I, you know, I’m always like, “Oh, I don’t think I can do this. I don’t think I can do this,” and then, you know, there’s a lot of people that are like, “If you just push yourself you can do it, you can do anything that you want, if you wanna do it.” You know, it’s, it’s difficult because I don’t, always believe in myself like other people do.” [P4].

Participants demonstrated an optimistic outlook on the future due to their experiences by describing several positive and aspirational goals that they had for themselves. Participant 10 discusses their aspirations and intent to open their own business.

“Uh I shear alpacas and llamas. I travel a lot and I go to sheer, go to take off their hair. Um for now *I’m about to open up a dog grooming and self serve business.* because the alpaca and llama shaving is only three months a year, four months a year. Only in the summertime. Uh, when the dogs can be full-year” [P10].

Participants indicated that their jobs allowed them to maintain their positive behavioral changes over time. Participant 11 described how obtaining employment kept them from detrimental situations and gave them a sense of purpose through their positive contribution to society.

“Honestly, just the fact that it keeps me off the streets and I have something to show that I am putting time towards society and that I am not just whatever a criminal would be or a felon would be in most people’s minds.” [P11].

Participants emphasized work as a means through which they were able to achieve success in their lives following their convictions. Participant 13 describes how their employment has prepared them to achieve their goals of starting their own business.

“I am very thankful with the company that I work with because it’s gearing me towards running my own company and... In the same field, so I’m very thankful to do that. The things that I’m accomplishing here, the things that I’m learning. I am going towards running my own company one day and that’s something that I wish. I’m pretty thankful for that” [P13]

The workplace served as a space in which participants could establish positive social connections with colleagues to build a sense of community. Participant 11 indicated that many of their coworkers have criminal records, which has facilitated familial connections and a shared understanding of challenges.

“Seeing as like I said before a lot of the people I work with are also ex-felons. It has kind of gave us like a solid connection that is like a weird kind of brotherly thing. Like we all kind of messed up and we are all trying to make it better. Like a weird bond” [P11].

Organizational Benefits. Participants demonstrated through a strengths-based perspective how their personal experiences and criminal history actually made them better employees compared to those without criminal backgrounds. They highlighted that because of their criminal backgrounds, they were highly motivated in working contexts. This heightened dedication and work ethic is therefore likely to benefit organizations. Participant 4 indicates that those with criminal backgrounds are usually better employees than those without criminal backgrounds because after everything that ex-offenders have been through, they have to work harder to prove themselves.

“Most of the time people with criminal backgrounds have more to prove and actually end up making better employees if they’re actually trying to change their life around because they have more to prove” [P4].

Participant 2 indicates that their franchise owner notices their hard work and is interested in having Participant 2 own a store in the future. Participant 2 can therefore benefit the larger organization with their dedication and work ethic.

“Well...um, I would like to have my own store as a GM [general manager] and um from what I understand from the owner, the franchise owner, is he would like me to have my own store in a couple years which makes me feel good, that means he notices I’m a hard worker and um makes me feel pretty good” [P2].

“um course it’s known nationwide, it’s a great job, I um, started out as part-time employee a year ago, been over a year, I worked 12 hours a week, now I’m an executive assistant and I work 40 plus hours a week, and they support people in treatment they um, in actuality they’re better employees than people who are not, in the year that I have been there the people who are... who are currently in treatment and or still incarcerated umm turn out to be better employees. We actually thrive on people who have gone through that thing, say drugs and then are in rehab uh, for instance my first assistant was a drug addict and spent time and jail one of my shift leaders spent time in prison and we so, we do better with people who have gone through hard times because they know what’s out there, what you cannot get when you apply for jobs they were, [fast food] is huge it’s very fortunate that they are around because we have a lot of stores that that they include people who have seen the worst and have gone through the worst so I’m pretty proud of where I work and what I do.” [P2]

Additionally, participants indicated that they were highly committed to their jobs, with several indicating that through their commitment and dedication they were able to climb organizational hierarchies to reach managerial positions. Participant 6 described their organizational commitment by demonstrating that they climbed the organizational hierarchy to a point at which they became the operations manager.

“I found something and it ended up being a permanent job where I went from telemarketing and have moved up several positions to where I’m the operations manager for the company” [P6].

Research Question 2

In response to research question 2, “How does a reduction in stigma impact individuals’ identities and internal thought processes?”, four major themes were identified. The major themes included gratitude, distancing, upward spirals, and stickiness. In the following section, I provide exemplary quotes. Additional quotes can be found in Table 3 below.

Theme 1: Gratitude

Participants overwhelmingly expressed their gratitude for the situations that they were now in following the devastating life circumstances that they experienced. They did this by expressing their intentions to make the most of their lives in the future, appreciation for a second chance and a need to avoid complacency this time around, and through positive framing of their criminal histories as a growth experience. In order to illustrate participants' expressions of gratitude, Participant 15 indicated that they are thankful for their felony conviction as it led them to a more positive life.

“I’m not ashamed of becoming a felon, you know, it saved my life and I, that’s exactly what I tell people. If I hadn’t become a felon, I’d still be out on the street getting tweaked and getting hungry. So, I’ll gladly be a felon every single day for the things that I have now...” [P15].

Theme 2: Distancing:

Despite the importance of their ex-offender identity in their development, participants reported distancing themselves from their group in several ways including socially, behaviorally, and mentally. Participant 3 describes the difference between their present and previous self and the distance that they have placed between themselves and others in similar situations.

“Um, it feels good. I don’t wanna ever go back to, and I won’t go back to the kind of people I hung out with or the area I hung out with or my standards. I have, I have self-respect and I have standards and I have all these new things that keep me grindin’ on my, you know, to do what I’m doin’ and do it right, and it, it comes slow” [P3].

Participants also provided counterstereotypical information to distance themselves from the stereotypes about ex-offenders but highlighting that their criminal background was attributable to their challenging life circumstances and not to the quality of their

behavior to the loss of important relationships in their life, mental illness, losing employment, and a loss of control of their life in all facets.

“Getting out of a really bad relationship, I actually did really well before, had a really good career, took care of my kids, was married. Things with that were really rocky and then when I got laid off from my job, I think depression happened, and I felt like I was losing control over my life, and ... I lost control in all areas” [P8].

Theme 3: Upward Spirals

Participants described the ways in which obtaining employment sent them on an upward spiral of access to resources, improved their mental well-being, and led to positive behavioral changes. Specifically, obtaining employment served as the inflection point at which participants experienced life improvements that built upon each other to arrive at a higher quality of life. Participant 3 demonstrates that obtaining a job elicited several positive well-being outcomes, the ability to function normally in society, the ability to support themselves, and a sense of pride in their work to change their life.

“... somewhat yeah the job because it gives me like I said self-respect and it gives me a purpose. It gives me, um, courage and it gives me confidence, you know that I can do normal life stuff. I can support myself. I enjoy, um, where I’ve placed myself to be able to support myself. Um that the work I know I’ve done and it may not have felt like it a year ago, but looking back I have done tremendous work in my three years of being clean and changing my life” [P3].

Participant 13 indicates that having a job and being a part of a team helped to facilitate drastic improvements in their life, including attending college, and fitting in behaviorally with general society.

“Um, it feels, it feels good. And I mean my paychecks aren’t huge, you know, I can’t technically, uh, survive on my own yet but it feels good. I have a routine, um, like I said I’ve been into drugs and I’ve been into having a job so that being on the I team, um, has really helped me turn my whole life around. I believe in it

so much. That's why I'm a manager now. I, I have two jobs. I work at the sub shop and I also run a clean and sober house, so, um, that factor being in the IP [Integrative Re-entry Intensive Supervision Services (IRISS)], where basically they hold your hand step by step. Your food, then now we're your house, um you know, let's get you lookin' for a job, so, um, those resources maybe were available before but I didn't know about them, so this, this is the first time and I've been doing great for three years now, um. I went to college, I uh graduated um NCC. Um, you know just the, the normal things that everyone else in life has already figured out, I'm just now figuring out at 40 years old. So it, it feels great to have a, a taste of like, what real life is" [P3].

Theme 4: Stickiness

Participants expressed their frustration with the "stickiness" of the stigma labeling system, or their inability to shed their stigma despite their present distance from criminal behavior. Participant 5 highlights their frustration with their label, and the associated meanings of this label (unproductive in society, dangerous, theft), despite the fact that their situation is different now and they are afraid to return to criminal behavior.

"having a criminal history you're labeled as, like a unproductive member of society, ya know they look like uhh you're scary, people are afraid to leave their stuff out in front of you, they think you're gonna steal from them, y'know uhh they'll think you're the person you know uhh...people will point the finger at y'know uhh like uhh I was at work the other day, there was a guy that couldn't find his wallet and y'know without him even...he never even thought it was me but in my mind y'know I was like, "well fuck y'know, they probably think it's me y'know because of my history and all that y'know but that's that's in my head, y'know, but he never even thought that and y'know he found it in his truck, y'know, so uhh yeah, other people I feel like, y'know, they cu- they look down upon criminals and they don't want to give em a second chance, uhm, y'know to- and then a lot of it I also think is it's mental on the criminal's part y'know for me like uhh, I feel like people look at me that way sometimes they don't y'know it's like... I'm scared to go back" [P5].

Chapter 5: Discussion

Previous literature has examined the experiences of those with criminal backgrounds in the selection process, but has yet to take a comprehensive approach examining their experiences before and after obtaining employment. Despite heated political debates surrounding the rights of those with drug-related criminal backgrounds (Stevens, 2011), this population remains under examined in the literature. Furthermore, the stigma literature has yet to examine the impact of reductions of experienced stigma on an individual. The present study addresses these gaps in the literature by utilizing a qualitative approach and drawing on principles of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to examine the experiences of those with drug-related criminal backgrounds as they integrate into the workplace and society.

I developed a comprehensive model (see Figure 1) of the experiences of those with drug-related criminal backgrounds based on interviewees' experiences navigating integration into society and the workplace to address Research Question 1. Results indicated that individuals experienced a cyclical process of societal integration that included an easily accessible route to recidivism. Obtaining employment served as a catalyst to reduce instances of recidivism and thus remove participants from a cyclical loop from offense to incarceration to attempted integration to reoffense. In greater detail, participants experienced severe life events that led them to engage in drug-related criminal behavior and reap the subsequent social and legal consequences of their actions. They then achieved sobriety in one way or another and experienced vast mental and behavioral changes due to their mental and physical sobering. Upon integrating into society, participants had varying levels of resources available to them, which drastically

impacted their ability to successfully integrate into society. These resources were influenced by the severity of their crime. Participants then attempted to integrate into the workplace where they encountered background checking, discrimination, stigmatization, limited opportunities, allies in supervisory roles, and they had to engage in identity management strategies. Rejections either led to returning to criminal behavior, obtaining more resources, or applying for more jobs. After obtaining employment, interpersonal interactions and quality of work influenced individual and organizational outcomes. These outcomes included self-efficacy, optimism regarding the future, sustained sobriety, positive social connections, life success, organizational commitment, and high motivation.

Additionally, I created a table (see Table 3) to represent the major themes associated with reductions in experienced stigma in order to address Research Question 2. In response to this question, four major themes were identified. The major themes included gratitude, distancing, upward spirals, and stickiness. Specifically, participants expressed gratitude for their current situations given the challenging situations they had encountered in their pasts. Participants distanced themselves physically and emotionally from their stigmatized identities by providing counter-stereotypical information, highlighting the changes that they had undergone, and demonstrating that their circumstances were due to life events rather than the quality of their character. Participants experienced upward spirals with their mental well-being which influenced and improved their lives in other ways (i.e., behavioral changes, increasing access to resources). Finally, participants experienced intense frustration with the stickiness of their stigmatizing label. Because of the distancing and upward spirals that they had undergone

the criminal labeling resulted in their feeling “stuck.”

Theoretical Contributions

The present study offers several theoretical contributions. First, the present study extends the stigma literature. Broadly speaking, the majority of the literature that examines individuals who experience dynamic stigma focus on identity management (Jones et al., 2016) which is likely to occur in the beginning of one’s experience of stigma. Experiences of decreasing stigma are also likely to occur in several populations that experience changes in stigma course but have been understudied. Employees with drug-related criminal histories are an ideal population to examine impacts of decreases in stigma considering the severity of the ostracism that they face (Musa & Ahmad., 2015) and the contradicting stereotypes between those with drug-related criminal histories and those with stable employment.

More specifically, the present study extends the stigma literature by demonstrating a scenario in which the Schmader et al., (2008) theory of stereotype threat as a cognitive imbalance (Heider, 1983) applies to contexts outside of stereotype threat. Specifically, following their criminal charges, participants were faced with a dichotomous route between either drastically altering their behavior or a mental and behavioral rejection of societal norms entirely through continued criminal behavior. Because all participants obtained employment, they selected the former. However, distancing oneself from their stigmatized identity presented as a very common theme in response to my second research question. It seemed that in order to integrate into society and workplace contexts, participants experienced pressure to engage in a cognitive

behaviors and communications. However, participants simultaneously outwardly and explicitly expressed that their past was an important part of who they were. This cognitive dissonance was unmistakable.

Relatedly, Schmader et al., (2008) indicates that individuals who are in situations of stereotype threat experience an imbalance between one's concept of group, concept of ability domain, and concept of self. Specifically, if there is a discrepancy between any two of these concepts, this creates an imbalance, for which the individual feels a need to reconcile their relationship between two of the other factors in stigmatizing environments. Specifically, when there is a negative relationship between a concept of group and concept of ability domain, an individual will either attempt to alter their relationship between their group and their self or attempt to alter their relationship between their self and their concept of ability domain. Participants in this study altered their relationships between themselves and their group by engaging in mental, physical, and behavioral distancing of themselves from their stigmatized group. Specifically, participants described how they were not the same person that they used to be (who engaged in criminal activity), they physically avoided members of their stigmatized group who were still engaging in criminal activities, and they detailed vast behavioral changes that differed from those behaviors associated with their criminal backgrounds. However, this was stressful and produced internal conflict given the importance of their stigmatized identity for their developmental journey. Indeed, although several participants engaged in distancing from their group, they simultaneously spoke of the importance of their criminal background as a part of their identity. Although Schmader et

al (2008) describe balance theory in the context of stereotype threat, the present study provides evidence that this cognitive imbalance may be present in all contexts (i.e., outside of stereotype threat, life spanning) for severely stigmatized individuals.

Second, the present study connects the literature in social psychology on stigma and clinical literature on post-traumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999) by demonstrating that following drastic reductions of experienced stigma, individuals can experience engagement in self-enhancements and experience increases in well-being. Post-traumatic growth refers to the experience of traumatic suffering followed by adaptation and a rebounding effect that results in positive personal growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Studies that examine posttraumatic growth have found that individuals experience five positive life changes following traumatic experiences: (a) emergence of new opportunities and possibilities, (b) deeper relationships and greater compassion for others, (c) feeling strengthened to meet future life challenges, (d) reordered priorities and fuller appreciation of life, and (e) deepening spirituality (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Four out of these five components were demonstrated by participants. Although deepened spirituality was not explicitly discussed in the interviews, the emergence of new possibilities occurred through obtaining access to resources and employment, deeper relationships and compassion for others was presented in participants experiences with their coworkers (i.e., “like family”), and participants consistently described their new priorities and fuller appreciation for life (i.e., gratitude).

More specifically, the present study provides an account of how a reduction in stigma can be related to posttraumatic growth in a population that experiences a very extreme decrease in experienced stigma and very limited access to resources. Previous

literature examining posttraumatic growth among stigmatized populations has typically involved either HIV/AIDS (Murphy & Hevey, 2013), or cancer survivors (Cordova et al., 2001; Shen et al., 2015; Stanton et al., 2006), which may be perceived as less severe stigmas, less controllable, and typically includes physical repercussions for which there is likely to be more infrastructure for support (i.e., healthcare coverage). In contrast and as several participants noted, they were unable to access rehabilitative treatment unless they committed more severe crimes.

Third, the present study contributes to the theory that stigmatized groups can experience residual or “sticky” stigma following destigmatizing changes by examining a novel population. Specifically, previous literature has found that residual stigma can be present with those who have experienced stigma based on their body size (i.e., weight stigma), even following their weight loss (Asbury et al., 2017). The present population’s experiences of stickiness may be unexamined due to the intentional long-term stigma-labeling from the legal system—this experience of stickiness seems intentional. For the most part, criminal backgrounds and their use of background checking perpetuated the vast majority of participants’ experiences with stickiness and their frustration with their inability to shed the stigma despite undergoing vast behavioral and internal changes.

Practical Implications

The present study also offers several practical implications. First, organizations should stop using stereotypes about those with drug-related criminal backgrounds in the selection process by using background checking and turning away ex-offenders without an opportunity for explanation. This practice can lead to bias in the selection process, and therefore sub-optimal hiring decisions, which is harmful to applicants with criminal

backgrounds and for businesses. Indeed, these data challenge commonly held stereotypes (Matthews et al., 2017; Pachankis et al., 2018) about individuals with drug-related criminal histories to provide a more accurate representation of their experiences. Severe life events served as initiation points at which participants began engaging with illicit substances. Continued criminal behavior was then either a result of struggling with addiction or the need for financial resources.

Second, these data provide greater insight into the role of the workplace in reducing crime and counteract commonly held stereotypes about individuals with drug-related criminal backgrounds, thus presenting a case for the removal of background-based discriminatory hiring practices. Although evidence supports that employment reduces the likelihood of re-offense due to ex-offenders' distance from crime (Reich, 2017) the present study provides a qualitative and contextualizing account of how. Sense of community and social connectedness in the workplace (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), stable income (Frerichs et al., 2008), access to housing (Yanos et al., 2004), and the ability to focus on work goals with an associated routine aided in individuals' integration into society.

Importantly, a major contribution of the present study is that participants reported that they exert a great deal of effort toward being better employees than those without criminal backgrounds because they valued their work so much and had more to lose should they lose access to employment as a result of their experiences. This runs contrary to the stereotype that individuals with criminal backgrounds are bad employees and may instead imply that hiring these employees may actually prove beneficial for business goals. Specifically, these employees' high organizational commitment may reduce costs

requirements (i.e., organizational citizenship behaviors; see Podsakoff et al., 2009) can contribute additional resources to increase organizational success.

Third, the present study points to increasing the availability of free and accessible rehabilitative treatment options as a strategy to reduce crime. Indeed, multiple participants indicated that their ability to access resources to aid in their reduction of criminal activity was dependent on how severe their crimes were. It is unjust that these people had to choose between the ability to obtain rehabilitative services coupled with a harsher conviction and sentence, versus an inability to access rehabilitative services and a more mild conviction and sentence. This dichotomy that individuals are faced with is not likely to yield reductions in crimes or aid in facilitating healthy community members.

Limitations

A potential limitation to this study is that only one perspective related to the phenomena of interest has been included—individuals who have been convicted of a drug-related crime who have moved successfully into employment. These participants may represent an exception to the rule in that they have found an organization or supervisor who is willing to hire them despite their criminal history (Reich, 2017). There are many barriers that individuals face after conviction and prior to gaining employment (Wormith et al., 2007). Thus, the present study does not take into account the perspectives of those who have been unsuccessful in integrating into the workplace, and potentially society as a whole as they may not be representative of all individuals with criminal histories related to drug use, but only those who have been successful in obtaining and maintaining employment. However, because participants of this study have

integrated into the workplace, they may be the most knowledgeable population as to how people can break a cycle of recidivism, as they have likely experienced life before experiences of stigma, severe stigmatization, and a decrease in stigma due to the criminal justice system. More specifically, their experiences represent a “within-person” approach, as the same individual experienced multiple perspectives. Specifically, this population has successfully broken the cycle of recidivism and has expert knowledge about a phenomenon that others (i.e., those struggling with addiction, those working on public policies) can benefit from. Therefore, I assert that participants experience integrating into the workplace and society signals strength in this particular sample (see Etikan et al., 2016).

Second, without information from the perspective of employers or supervisors, I had to rely on the information participants provide about themselves as job applicants and as employees. For example, participants may believe they are performing their job duties at a high level, but supervisors or employers may have different perspectives. My position—as explained through my reflexivity (i.e., in the Methods section; Berger, 2015; Shaw, 2010) may further compound this limitation in perspective as I try to empathize with marginalized populations.

Future Directions

Future research should examine populations and contexts that the results associated with Research Question 2 may transfer to. The results of the present study pertained to a group that experienced particularly severe stigmatization and therefore experienced very extreme responses to reductions in stigmatization. As such, these results may transfer to groups who experience severe stigmatization or extremely challenging

scenarios followed by life improvements. For instance, individuals who become severely ill and recover to return to work, like cancer or HIV survivors, may speak of similar themes. Other groups that experience decreases in stigma should also be examined. Although pregnant women (Jones et al., 2016; King & Botsford, 2009) are likely to experience stigma reductions, the structural stigma that these individuals face is unlikely to compare to that of the criminal justice system, and therefore may not elicit similar results. Individuals who experience particularly severe weight stigma (i.e., to the point that work becomes difficult or impossible) and lose a significant portion of body mass through weight loss or gastric bypass surgery and return to working environments may experience similar themes. Examining individuals of other stigmatized groups in workplace settings can therefore increase the comprehensiveness of theory related to decreases in stigma.

Additionally, future studies should examine the perspectives of employers regarding the selection of ex-offenders, as well as perspectives of individuals who have not been successful in obtaining employment to gain a more comprehensive view of trajectories from criminal charges to employment. Indeed, participants in this study indicated that they felt they were better employees than those without criminal backgrounds. This concept should be further examined from the perspective of the supervisors. Individuals who have not successfully integrated in workplace environments following criminal convictions may provide greater insight into what factors benefit or impair one's ability to fully integrate.

Finally, this sample size is modest for achieving theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1999), and presumably did not cover the range of racial diversity in my target

was perceived as Black by the interviewer. Indeed, demographic data were not collected from the participants, and the demographic information that was available about these data were based on the interviewer's subjective perceptions of the participants. Given this limitation, I was unable to examine race or gender differences in experiences among the participants. This demographic information is instead presented to provide a general overview of the sample.

Conclusion

Awareness of issues faced by individuals with drug-related criminal histories in their integration into society has increased over time, but there have been few organizational changes to improve these individuals' experiences in selection and employment. Despite this increasing awareness, little is known about individuals' experiences navigating their integration into society and employment. The present study fills this void. Additionally, because stereotypes about those with stable employment counteract those of individuals with drug-related criminal histories, examining this population has extended stigma literature by providing more information about how changes in stigma impact individuals' internal experiences.

Table 1*Stated criminal background demographics*

Participant:	Stated Charge	Stated Drug Sale	Stated Drug Use	Stated Imprisonment	Stated Jail Time
1	Misdemeanor	-	Alcohol	No	Yes
2	Felony	-	Alcohol	No	Yes
3	Felony	-	Alcohol, Unspecified	Yes	Yes
4	Felony	Unspecified	Unspecified	No	Yes
5	Felony	Heroin	Heroin	No	Yes
6	Felony	-	Heroin, Meth, Opiates	No	Yes
7	Felony	Unspecified	Alcohol, Meth	No	Yes
8	Felony	-	Unspecified	Yes	Yes
9	Felony	Cocaine, Heroin, Meth	Alcohol	Yes	Yes
10	Felony	-	Unspecified	No	Yes
11	Felony	-	Alcohol, Unspecified	No	Yes
12	Felony	-	Unspecified	Yes	No
13	Felony	-	Alcohol, "pills"	No	Yes
14	Unspecified	-	"Heavy drugs"	No	Yes
15	Felony	-	Meth	No	Yes
16	Felony	Meth	Meth	No	Yes
17	Felony	-	Unspecified	No	Yes

Figure 1

Research question 1 representative quotes

Theme	Code	Relevant Quote
Criminal History	Sold drugs to support family	<p>And so I, uh, had a friend--oh, I don't really see him as a friend anymore-- but, uh, uh, I had a person at the time that I considered a friend, pop for me, uh, to--for him to ha--to give me a substantial amount of meth, where I could smell it, and, uh, uh, and make money that way for my, for my family, so I did it. You know, I, I, I, I--that's what I started doing. I, I was, I was with a, selling drugs to support my family, uh, and in, in, in the beginning I was keeping it in that perspective, but as time went on I started using the product that I was, I was needing to make money off of. So that my, my profits started going down and my use started, my usage started going up. And um, uh, man, and, and, and I would have to say, the shit just started getting crazy outright right after that [P16].</p>
	Selling drugs as an alternative to job	<p>So, basically, um, for the most part, before my first major arrest, I have, you know, I have 16 felony convictions. Um, I've had quite a few arrests. I've had, um, some pretty serious ones, you know, and before all of that had started though, like it- it wasn't really a negative thing in my mind. Like I always knew I could get in trouble for doing what I was doing. But I, you know, I started partying really young. And it was mostly that for me, it was mostly just partying at first, you know, like it wasnt, like... I was young. I was like nineteen-twenty- eighteen when I really started selling drugs and, uh, it was- it was more just the fun and the- the money and the social aspect of it- of having like a lot of people around me all the time and... um, so, I mean, there wasn't a lot of negatives at first, 'cause I hadn't gotten in trouble for anything and I was just making way more money than I did at my job. [P9]</p>
Social Repercussions	Jail provides resources anyways so might as well	<p>...That whole extra element of like, you know, what am I gonna do for money and food and sleep and like everything, you know. So, like that- that anxiety will get to people and make them- yeah, that's why people go randomly through robberies and things like that, is because they just- they're down and out and desperate and they don't care. Like, If they get caught, what's the worst that's going to happen? They're going to go to jail and have a bed to sleep in with food and</p>
	Socially Ostracized	<p>[iINAUDIBLE] better than what they have now, you know? [P9] The isolation of the, that I got from that kind of made me want to be more sociable. I was sociable before but never quite to the extent of when I got out because that lack of contact from people and everything just shot me through the roof where I had to talk to anybody and everybody I could. [P11]</p>
	Lack of Social Support	<p>The--this last time I got released y'know I was just nervous, anxious, feeling like I don't know what I'm gon do for more rent money, y'know, and uhh, I felt like it was the first time I had to act like an adult. I didn't know how to feel really. I had damaged relationships with my family, with all my friends, and uhh I didn't see how I was gonna repair it. I felt like I was alone. [P5]</p>

Difficulty with social integration	<p>Well, I've always been the black sheep, just like, uh, I didn't have a have a lot of experience [coughs] in normal life situations and childhood conversations and stuff like that. And people getting ready for retirement just stuff you normally sit around the bar and talk about when you meet people and stuff like that. I have a hard time uh... conversating with people because I don't have the knowledge [laughs] of their conversations. So that just leaves me out a lot. But I'm starting to build a little foundation to get into there. [P12]</p>	
Behavioral Awakening	Vast behavioral changes	<p>Well, yeah, I mean... I was a different- well, so, I really started- So this is the first time in my life since I was thirteen that I've been truly sober. I started smoking weed and drinking and smoking cigarettes when I was thirteen. And, did that, smoked weed at least on a daily basis um, until I got arrested. You know, so, I think part of me, so, it's hard to say that different when when you grow up in all the ways that you should when you started using substances at such an early age. It's something that I definitely don't want for my son. [P6]</p>
	Vast behavioral changes	<p>(LONG PAUSE) Um... I don't necessarily hide it, I just um... I don't really, you know, if it comes up, it comes but but I don't really like through it out there all the time. It's just one of those things like, if, if I'm with certain people that I went through treatment with or um... stuff like that or drug court people or stuff like that, you know, sometimes we, you know, a lot of us kind of all got clean around the same time and we all kind of knew each other and so like, you know, sometimes we'll kind of laugh about it, you know, "Oh yeah, it was so .. Those were the days." you know, but we kind of realize that yeah, it may have been fun at the time but now looking back on it, like, we set our life back because of what we were doing and... a lot of us regret spending so much time...doing that kind of stuff, you know, like I said, I did it for 14 years. If I had been doing stuff productive, you know, going back. You know, I could be a lot further along in life than where I am now. [P4]</p>
	Vast behavioral changes	<p>It just means that I've made a mistake and I've made mistakes in life. You know, I don't... you know, like I said before, I don't believe I'm better than other people who are in the same situation as me, but at the same time, I do believe I've worked hard, harder than I've seen some work to get myself back on track. You know? So, I've only been out: for, um, it was a year in July, and you know, I have a good job, I have a car, I got my driver's license back, I have my own home, my kids have their own rooms, I've got have (inaudible). I've done a lot here. As far as the way I look at myself, I'm pretty proud of who I am. Because I've made leaps and bounds in the first six months that I was even out, you know, to change, and improve, and do a lot of work on myself. You know, so once again, you know, I'm not going to put myself in a category and say, well that happened, so this is who I am now. You know? It's not, not, not what I'm going to do to myself. I don't really think about it a whole lot, honestly, because it's not hindering me today in my life. It has a little bit here and there, but it's not: today. [P8]</p>
Resource Level and Utilization	Lack of resources	<p>Um... no. No, not that I know of. Just that um... just like, I don't know if there's any other programs really out there cause I'm WCt and I went through Ip. I know that we have drug courts as well and a lot of people walk away from these programs successful, and a lot don't. Um, and I just, I don't know what kind of programs are, like, in MCT or any other country and I just hope that there are other programs that are known to people because, like I said, two times I got out of prison,</p>

three times I got out of prison, I didn't even know that there was resources, like, I didn't even know that my program the Irish program was in- intact then, but it's just huge that people that have a background getting out have some type of mentor or someone holding their hand to get them to the next, um, step of their lives, because it's really hard going, um, going from what you know and have- trying to do good, and that transition is really hard without anybody there to show you the way, like this works for me and it can work for you. [P3]

Role models/mentorship

Um ok do, I got released into a clean and sober house where basically all they wanted me to do at first, is focus on treatment not working and so that was something I had a little bit of a benefit for 'cause I'm in a stable housing and I was able to attend all of my treatment classes. They gave me a bus pass so I could make it to and from. My mentor took me to go get food stamps to make sure I had stuff to eat and then when it was time to go to work, um, she took me to a place called DfS so I can get interview clothes and uh basically even gave me rides to, um, different appointments and things like that, A lot of support all around. [P14]

Resources

Jeez, I don't know. Like, I'm a little different even in my program than most people are and I think it's because I enjoy my own company more than most. As far as, I'm not usually one to... I'm not a follower and I don't really have many friends. I like it like that. So, I think a lot of other people need more support than I did. Which me, the way I looked at it was it was a decision and that was, I make my mind up and I stick to it. That's all that it took. The support though, what helped me was probably in the [inaudible] program that I'm in. They gave me a place to live without having to pay rent at first, that way I had time to find a job. And it was a clean, safe environment. Cause a lot of other programs... they put a lot of stipulations and rules on you, it's so hard, it's so hard to get a job or anything else without getting in trouble in your program but they give you enough time to get your ducks in a row and get on your feet so, I think without that, I don't know... I probably would've gone back to whatever... just to have a place to stay. [P17]

Severity of Crime

You have to commit worse crimes to get more resources

And, I'm the lucky one that gets to come out, live in a rent-free house, you know, I don't have to pay bills. I don't have to do this... I work, I save my money, and I do the right thing. You know what I mean? But for most people that, they don't have that. You know, they didn't commit a bad enough crime to earn that. That's how sad it is. To get the maximum amount of help you have to, you have to commit the worst crime. If you don't commit a bad enough crime, you're not getting help. That's the reality of it. [P15]

Not understanding severity until you're actually a felon

if you do bad things, it's going to affect you. It's just you don't really realize the severity of it until you're actually a felon and like, how bad it really is. You know, it's really going to, to be like, oh, well, of course it's going to make it harder, but you don't really realize how hard it is until you've had fifty people look you straight in the face and tell you "no" because of that, you know? [P9]

Support from re-entry

Ok, well in uhh in high school I got into drugs so by 12th grade I was already dealin' and sellin' heroin, and uhh, just went down a bad path and y'know, wanted...more I couldn't, more I [INAUDIBLE..kept?] selling that, that I would have enough money to [or got no money to get it?], so I started stealin' stuff from people and commit crimes to

		get money, buy drugs and that's when I went to jail for the first time. [P5]
Discrimination, Stigma, Reduced Opportunities	Awareness of stigma	I wasn't allowed on the job site. And that was actually a few years ago, in construction, I wasn't allowed on the job site until they did background checks, and that's when I first realized it [stigma]. [P5]
	Rejections & negative emotions	I felt like I was a failure because here I am, I worked all my life very hard ... and then ya know that one word it comes up "felony" just one word and just can ruin it for you...totally and then ya know millions of them out there, your not gonna tell me that these people can't hire rehabilitated people and these people and I was rehabilitated and but they just don't they have that stigma of, of hiring people with criminal backgrounds and I don't understand it. [P2]
	Ex-offenders are bad people	I mean going back to society is, is the hardest thing that you'll do into keeping your recovery because there's a stigma of the addict, you know. And the criminal. We're all bad people, we're all thieves, we're all dirty. You know, we're all disease-ridden, but the reality of the situation is we're just people. We're people that lost our path, you know. We're moms, we're sisters, we're aunts, you know. We're wives, we're girlfriends, we're daughters and same goes for men. It's really kind of unfortunate that there's people out there like I was. You know, so coming out to society is the, it's going to be the biggest test of recovery that you have because, you know, everything out here is designed for you to relapse and for you to fail. Everything. [P15]
Inability to obtain employment	Rejected from over 50 interviews in 3 months	from six a.m. till nine p.m., I would be out searching for jobs. I'd be putting in applications like twenty a day. I would be calling every one of them, following up with them, I would be going to those places. I had professional resumes built, that I actually paid money to have a professional resume builder help me build a- a resume the way that I should. Um, like, I- I've put in a lot of effort to that and I probably had a little over fifty interviews that they declined me because of my criminal history, in three months. [P9]
	Barrier to jobs that would otherwise be "great fits"	It was pretty disappointing. I've worked with cars for a really long time so that's why I, you know, was kind of drawn into the position I am at the oil change place, but it's mostly been me working on Hondas like ever since I was like 16 and that's why I was like, "Oh this would be perfect, if I worked a job at the Honda dealership," you know, like it was just, I thought was gonna be this perfect, great fit, so I was pretty excited about it because, you know, they were like a lot of, you know, our master mechanics here started out as, you know, lube technicians and went through all of the Honda specific training and they become Honda master mechanics and blah blah blah, you know, perfect, this is gonna be great, and then not hearing anything was pretty disappointing. So, yeah. It (small laugh) really sucked. [P4]
	Selling drugs as an alternative to job	I was a little apprehensive because I was really good at selling drugs, I mean I could make a lot of money doing it and so I was a little like ... you're gonna be clean now, and you gotta stop and pay bills and pay taxes, and I was like, "man, that doesn't sound like a whole lot of fun,". So, you know, I was a little apprehensive but you know, it's been, you know, I was really in that lifestyle, maybe now is the time to try to give it a shot and see what it was, what it was like. I figured that if I couldn't hack it as a normal, regular citizen, then, you know, the drug world wasn't going anywhere. I could always go back. [P4]

Quality of work	Values job as a contribution to society	Honestly, just the fact that it keeps me off the streets and I have something to show that I am putting time towards society and that I am not just whatever a criminal would be or a felon would be in most people's minds. Because I mean I have higher goals than just making pizza obviously. [P11]
	Criminals often do harder ('grunt') work	Well (LONG PAUSE) I've had to work... I've done almost everything you could think of. I've done fast-food restaurants. I've done automotive. I've done landscaping. I've done framing. I've done plumbing. I've done a little bit of electrical. I've done pretty much everything I can think of and when, when you're a criminal it's always backbreaking. Like everything you do, you're on the grunt side of it. You're doing grunt work and I work for a temp agency this time and I went through a lot of digging trenches and shit before I found this job. I mean, I have a big skill base, but they don't really care about skill base when you have a... When they can look at you and know you're a criminal (slight laugh). [P17]
	Limited freedom in the job market	Yeah, I work. I'm lucky and I work at the [company] store. I was fortunate enough to find a boss right out of the situation I was in that accepted me and didn't even need to look at my background. They gave me a chance based on who I was versus what I looked like to be so I am very fortunate in that but when I was in treatment and I needed a job to get out, where would I have applied in 2014 to 15. In construction companies paying anywhere from \$15-27/ hr. That's where I would have applied as a substitute. That's where I would have found a job. Where was I applying in treatment, in 2017? [lists several fast food organizations]. Restaurants making minimum wage to nothing, in a year because I became a criminal and people. You can't do office work if you're a criminal. [P15]
Individual benefits	Job gives confidence and security	Not necessar-, I mean, somewhat yeah the job because it gives me like I said self-respect and it gives me a purpose. It gives me, um, courage and it gives me confidence, you know that I can do normal life stuff. I can support myself. I enjoy, um, where I've placed myself to be able to support myself. Um that the work I know I've done and it may not have felt like it a year ago, but looking back I have done tremendous work in my three years of being clean and changing my life. [P3]
	Work as an identity	... I just can't wait to work. I cannot wait to have a job again because it gives you an identity and you can actually stay better in the world of recovery if you have money, which kind of sucks, but it's true. You have to buy your--you have to buy your commodities and things like that, You have to buy your makeup, and that's for us girls... If you don't have makeup, you don't feel human, so coming out of jail and stuff, you don't have these things and it's, it's really hard, So, you have to have a job to become independent and be able to provide for yourself outside of when they tell you to get out of the house because there comes a time when at some point, you have to get out, because we're all saving for that. [P15]
	Work helping with life opportunities	The job part was really hard. I was- I- I'm consider myself blessed and very, very lucky that I landed the job that I did, um, but now that I've had that experience, it's- there's been a lot of things in my life recently that have been opening up doors. Um, the thing- it's like, once you become successful, you start working the proper, you know, a job that gives you a lot of life experience and teaches you a trade and you get years of experience for doing certain things like, and like,

the- they're helping me to go to school, pay for my college... [P9]

Organizational benefits	Using criminal history as motivation to work harder	... I have to maybe prove a little more to my boss that I can do a good job and so, it probably makes me work a little harder and do a little bit better of a job. [P1]
	Has responsibilities that require trust	Um... I work at a corporate oil change place. I've been there for almost two years now, I started as a uncertified technician, moved to a certified technician and now I am a senior technician, which is a keyholder title, where I have responsibilities for running the store on certain days, counting the till, you know I have a key to open the store I have a key to close the store, I have the alarm does, safe code, you know so, they trust me... [P4]
	Worked up the organizational hierarchy	I am the man, I do total remodel, uh, re-gutted apartment buildings, there are 22 units here. And I started at the bottom of the totem pole and now I'm at the top of the totem pole. I've been here for 14 and a half months now, but unfortunately this job is about ready to expire in another month, so then I'm back on the market. [P12]

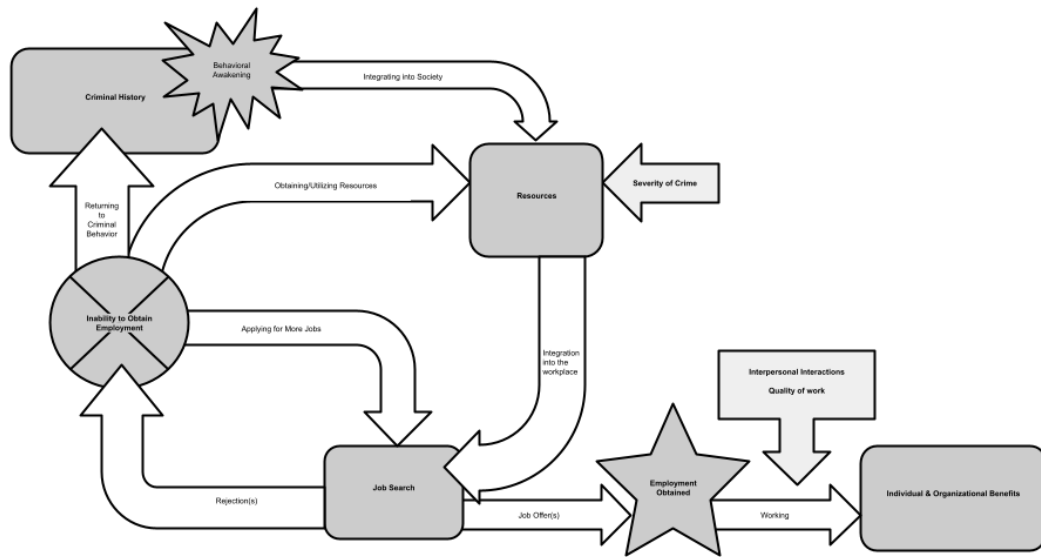
Figure 2*Research question 2 representative quotes*

Theme	Code	Relevant Quote
Gratitude	Second chance at life, avoiding complacency	Honestly, just the fact that it keeps me off the streets and I have something to show that I am putting time towards society and that I am not just whatever a criminal would be or a felon would be in most people's minds. Because I mean I have higher goals that just making pizza obviously. So... (laughs) But for now it is what it is and it helps me stay out of trouble and I've got friends there and it's nice. [P11]
	Positive Framing Growth Experience	Because at this point I'm not ashamed of becoming a felon, you know, it saved my life and--I--that's exactly what I tell people. If I hadn't become a felon, I'd still be out on the street getting tweaked and getting hungry. So, I'll gladly be a felon every single day for the things that I have now and if they can't accept that, and they can't see that, and me as a person. Then I don't want them in my life anyways, even if it's a job or an employer. If you can't accept me for who I am now, and what I've been through, and what I've survived and what I stand for, then I really don't wanna be your employee, I don't wanna be your friend, I don't wanna be your family member because this is who I am. [P15]
	Future aspirations - intentions to make the most of life in the future	I should probably have some goals, but I guess, my only goal is to just live life and have a good time. Enjoy myself and make a lot of friends. [P1]
Distancing	Loss of Connections	It was because I was surrounded by misery and others that were that, that was the norm and now I don't even associate with anything so if someone's trying to change their life and turn it around, um you have to change everything. You have to change your routine. You have to change who you hang out with, um where you live. You have to change it all, and you have to be selfish and about yourself. [P3]
	Criminal Behavior Due to Circumstance	In reality, anyone can make these mistakes that put people in jail, and even in prison, it's just things that happen that we've built around society that we live in like. I didn't think I would grow up to be an alcoholic or whatever but it happened. My grandfather was one and I learned those habits from him and it's just it just happened. We didn't really get the choice as children but you know people end up in different places in different ways and some people end up in the same place but also in different ways. [P11]
	Honesty	What I always did is when that would come up, you know, on the application I would check the box and I would just write like, "will explain in interview". You know, I was just, I would just be honest about it because, you know, there's no reason to beat around the bush and be all like trying to minimize it or hide it or whatever because, you know, if they want to find out, they're gonna find out. So, most of, you know, I'd just do like, these are my charges. This is what I did. I'm trying to move past that now, and you know, if you

		<p>have any questions about any of it, I'm not. You know, I'll answer whatever you want to know. You know, I don't have anything to hide. [P4]</p>
Upward spirals	Increased Willingness to Disclose	<p>I realized it was just better to be forthcoming and not to try to hide things. That way it is out in the open and if they like you, like and if they don't, they don't. That is what is going to make or break whether they hire you. Better them to know now than find out later. [P1]</p>
	Resilience	<p>I mean, somewhat yeah the job because it gives me like I said self-respect and it gives me a purpose. It gives me, um, courage and it gives me confidence, you know that I can do normal life stuff, I can support myself. I enjoy, um, where I've placed myself to be able to support myself. Um that the work I know I've done and it may not have felt like it a year ago, but looking back I have done tremendous work in my three years of being clean and changing my life. [P3]</p>
	Social Support	<p>It means everything. It means everything to me. Like, you know, I've expressed it quite a few times how much it means to me that um, there was that much support. It wasn't just hey we're going to let you out of jail and don't reoffend and don't use. Like they really tried to give as much support as possible, to keep you moving in the right path. And even when I made a mistake, I wasn't you know reamed for it. [P6]</p>
Stickness	Disclosure Management	<p>When you're clean and sober and you're not the same person anymore, and a lot of people are very accepting, but you don't tell them right away. You know, you, you just don't...because then it it puts this red stamp on your forehead and that's not ever what I want people to know about me when they first meet me. So if I can ever avoid the conversation or not ever bring it up, I absolutely don't until I can get to know them better. Or if I feel that it's necessary for people to know. [P8]</p>
	Stuck, Thing Linger Over Them	<p>The felony-friendly jobs, like [business], like places like that that I've worked before, uhm, uh, they just- they don't pay you enough money. They work you like slaves, you know, it's mindless work like that. You could train monkeys to do and, uh, very degrading, like you're standing on, like, an assembly line all day and you'd be like, well, yeah. Certain things like that are almost more damaging than they are good for you. Especially for people in recovery who are already having issues with themselves, but... yeah. [P9]</p>
	Stuck, Thing Linger Over Them	<p>I'm scared to go back. I'm scared for somebody to think that I'm back in the road that I was before, and so like uhh I don't go around people's stuff y'know if I'm around girls and they ask me to hold their purse I won't, and just cause y'know I don't do that stuff no more. And so, I get, the difficulties are y'know thinkin' people view you a certain way and uhh be- bein' stereotyped. [P5]</p>

Figure 3

Experiences of Individuals with Drug-Related Criminal Histories



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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Questions***Semi-structured Interview Questions***

1. *Do you mind if I refer to your criminal history as an “ex-offender” status? Is there a way you prefer I reference your criminal history?*
2. Tell me about what happened (that led to your ex-offender status)?
3. How would you describe the person you were then?
4. What was going on in your life then? How would you describe how you viewed ---- before ----- happened? How, if at all, has your view of ----- changed?
5. Can you tell me about being released and returning back into society? Tell me about your thoughts and feelings when you returned.

Thank you for sharing some of your background with me. Now I would like to shift our focus to your work-related experiences. First, I would like to ask, are you currently employed?

If yes - ask 2-3 questions about “job search”, but focus more on “Job Experience” questions

1. Can you tell me a little about your job? Tell me about your experiences searching for a job?
2. How important was it for you to find employment after your release?
 1. What challenges do you think your ex-offender status created in your job search?
3. When, if at all, did you first experience (or notice) the stigma associated with having a criminal history?
 1. What was that like for you? What did you think?
 2. Did it significantly affect your ability to find a job that you really wanted? The job that you have now?
4. Did you ever get discouraged during your job search? Why?
5. During your job search, did you have any interviews?
 1. Did interviewers ask you questions about your criminal history?
 1. How did you respond? If you can remember, when in the interview did this topic come up?
 2. If they say no to previous questions - Did you disclose your criminal history during the interview? Why or why not?
6. How long have you been employed in your current job?
7. What do you value the most about your job? Your co-workers/supervisors?
 1. What is it that you least value, or dislike about your job?

8. Have you disclosed your status as an ex-offender at work? In your day-to-day life?
 1. Can you *describe any strategies* you have used when disclosing your status as an ex-offender to others that you think have been particularly *effective or ineffective*? *Why* do you think so?
 1. We have found through research that there are several strategies.... how did you come to decide to describe your status?
 2. What do you think are some positive and negative consequences of disclosing your ex-offender status at work and in your day-to-day life?
9. How do others respond to you when they find out your status as an ex-offender? What are the types of behaviors others engage in that you think are in response to finding out your status as an ex-offender?
10. How did this influence your work *behaviors* and interactions with co-workers/supervisors?
 1. Depending on the job - Did this impact how you interact with customers/clients? Why or why not?
11. What reasons do you think others have for treating you differently once they find out about your status as an ex-offender?
 1. Do you feel like you have to act/ behave differently around those who know about your criminal history? How so, and why?
12. What kinds of support have you received from others in regard to managing your status as an ex-offender at work? If so, what types of support and from whom?
 1. How did this support make you feel in regard to stress, satisfaction with your job, commitment to your organization, motivation to work hard, turnover?
 2. Do you know whether there are any other employees with a criminal history at your work?
 1. Do you interact/ have contact with them?
13. What sorts of factors made you decide to disclose or not disclose your status as an ex-offender at work? In your day-to-day life?
14. How would you describe yourself regarding your criminal history? What does that mean to you?
15. How important is your ex-offender status in terms of how you view yourself?
 1. How has this shaped the ways in which you see yourself?

[or]
16. Do you consider your ex-offender status as a part of your identity?
 1. Do you feel like you have to “hide” this part of your identity? Why or why not?

2. Has this experience affected other aspects of your identity? In which ways?
17. Do you feel that others view you in the same way that you view yourself? Why or why not? What types of strategies do you use to better match how you and others see yourself?
18. Do you feel that your decision to disclose or not disclose your ex-offender status changes how you view yourself? If so, how so?
19. Can you describe for me how you think having a criminal history makes life in the U.S. more difficult in comparison to people without a criminal history?
20. Outside of work, do you have friends, or do you know other people with a criminal history?
 1. Are they employed?
 2. Do you talk about your work experiences with them?
21. What about friends/family that do not have a criminal history? Do you talk about your work/non-work experiences regarding your criminal history?
22. Do you believe that your work life has an effect on your home life? How about the opposite? If so, how so?
23. Do you feel as if your level of disclosure at previous workplaces and in your personal life differs? Have you disclosed to no one? Some people? All people in your life?
 1. (*If differing levels*) Why did you decide to tell more or less people at work than in your personal life about your status as an ex-offender? Do you have any concerns related to these differing levels of disclosure? Any potential benefits?
 2. (*If few or none in both*) Why did you decide not to disclose your identity? What concerns do you have regarding not disclosing your ex-offender status to others? What sorts of benefits has not disclosing provided to you?
 3. (*If both*) Why did you decide to disclose your identity to others? What sorts of concerns do you have about having disclosed your ex-offender status to others? What sorts of benefits have disclosing provided to you?
 1. Have you noticed changes in others' behavior after disclosing your ex-offender status?
24. Do you feel that your decision to disclose or not disclose your ex-offender status has changed how others view and support you? This could be in regard to your friends/acquaintances, coworkers, supervisors, organization you work for.
25. Could you describe the most important lessons you learned through experiencing this?
26. How have you grown as a person since being convicted? Tell me about your strengths that you discovered or developed through these experiences and the time

after. [If appropriate] What do you most value about yourself now? What do others most value in you?

27. What are your future goals? In terms of your career? What do you want for yourself, personally? Your family?
28. Is there anything that you might not have thought about before that occurred to you during this interview?
29. Is there anything else you think I should know to understand -- better?
30. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Appendix B - Research Assistant Reflective Practice

“At an early age, my parents divorced, with my mother awarded custody over myself and my elder sister. While my mother struggled to maintain consistent work as a dental assistant, my father was financially reliable as a technical writer, allowing my basic needs to be met through dependable child support. I was raised primarily around the San Jose bay area of California, which is composed predominantly of Asian, Hispanic, and White identifying populations. I have experienced privilege for being both White and cisgender man, though I experienced some stigma due to nonconformity with gender roles through effeminate behaviors and appearance, which also entailed assumptions of my sexual orientation. I began attending community college as a matter of falling in line with my peer group’s expectations after graduation from high school, but life circumstances caused my efforts to stall. During this period, I was arrested for a drug offense and saw my racial privilege firsthand when I mistakenly pleaded guilty and the Judge stated he would “pretend” he heard ‘not guilty.’

My background affects my orientation toward this research in the following ways. As my personal experience of stigma relates to being dismissed for not meeting expectations, I am inclined to attend to those low in conformity. The experience of discrimination also leads me to sympathize with stigmatized groups, though I recognize the limited degree to which I can comprehend the pressures of marginalization due to traits that are out of an individual’s control. As a white man, privileged to not receive a conviction despite my actions, I do not know the first-person experience of racism nor that of a criminal record.”