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African American Male Exonerees' Reintegrating Into the Spousal/ Intimate Partner Role in the Family System

Loretta A. Jackson
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Loretta A. Jackson

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Walden University
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Abstract

African American Male Exonerees' Reintegrating Into the Spousal/Intimate Partner Role

in the Family System

by

Loretta A. Jackson

MA, Jackson State University, 2014

BS, Delta State University, 2013

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Social Work

Walden University

December 2021

Abstract

Wrongfully convicted individuals are abruptly taken from their traditional roles and positioned in new roles prematurely. Without adequate preparation, exonerees struggle to reintegrate back into roles they once strived in. This study aimed to understand the experiences of African American male exonerees' reintegrating into the spouse/intimate partner role in the family. Schlossberg's transition theory served as the theoretical foundation to examine how exonerees might navigate these stages to promote successful reintegration in society and intimate relationships. The research questions sought to understand how African American male exonerees perceive their transition from an inmate role into an intimate role while trying to fathom the impact of prison and what resources would assist with the transition. The inclusion criteria required participants to be exonerated African American males in an intimate relationship before and after incarceration. Nine exonerees were recruited using the snowball sampling strategy, and semistructured interviews were conducted via telephone, Zoom, and email. The data were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach. As a result, three themes, namely, emotional turmoil, public advocacy within communities, and the invisible experience, in addition to three subthemes, relationship distancy, psychosocial support, and the prison effects, emerged from the data. Gaining a better understanding of exonerees' reintegration experiences into their spouse/intimate partner roles will contribute to positive social change by improving the knowledge base and increasing positive outcomes, short and long-term. This study could be used as a vehicle to highlight the target population's barriers and needs post-exoneration to impact their transition positively.

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Dedication

As I began this journey, I reflected upon my reason and purpose for embarking on this journey and finally pursuing this milestone. So many people are placed in your life for a season(s), and although death is the determining factor for some, their words hold dear to your heart. My grandmother, Eddie B. Abraham, spoke my dream of earning my Ph.D. into existence from childhood until the day she passed. She told me this day would come, but I never imagined it actually becoming a part of my reality. Once she passed away, I was granted the opportunity to grow closer to a dear friend named Connie Anderson, who I believe my grandmother passed the torch to in a spiritual sense. Connie displayed the same qualities as my grandmother and always reminded me of my attributes and capabilities. Sadly, I am at the end of my journey, and they both have transitioned. However, the support, love, and encouragement they instilled in me paved the way for something worth living and claiming. Therefore, I dedicate my Ph.D. to those two ladies who encouraged me to persevere and conquer my fears.

Acknowledgments

While obtaining my Ph.D., I received tremendous support and encouragement. I would like first to acknowledge God, who continues to be my foundation and guide as I maneuver through every journey in life. Second, I would like to recognize and thank my dissertation committee, particularly my chair, Dr. Gilkey. Your invaluable guidance, encouragement, and wisdom positively affected my life more than you know. Third, to my parents (Sarah and Aaron Jackson), without your encouragement, senseless acts of kindness, and understanding, I wouldn't have been able to withstand this process. Fourth, to my best friend and sister, Erin Jackson, my deepest gratitude. I wouldn't have embarked on or completed this journey without your motivating and encouraging words.

Fifth, to my caring, loving, and supportive partner, thank you. Your prayers, emotional support, and encouragement are appreciated and duly noted. Your selfless acts of kindness and understanding brought great comfort and relief. Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank all the participants. I am deeply thankful for your contributions because this study wouldn't have happened, and I am forever grateful.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The United States has one of the largest global prison systems, and overcrowding is prevalent (Hans, 2018). In addition to an overcrowded prison system, African Americans have been represented at a disproportionate number within the last several decades (Wagner & Walsh, 2018). The United States incarcerates more individuals, per capita, than any other industrialized country (Flower, 2016; Wagner & Walsh, 2018). As of March 2019, there were 2.3 million people behind prison walls (Wagner & Sawyer, 2019). Of these 2.3 million incarcerated people, the authors reported that African American men constitute over 35% of the jail population and 37% of the prison population.

Racial disparities in the U.S. criminal justice system particularly impact African American males. Using data provided by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, Blankenship et al. (2018) reported that in 2017, prisons in the United States housed 475,900 African American men. African American men are nearly six times more likely to be incarcerated than Caucasian men (Wagner & Sawyer, 2019). African American men convicted of the same crime as Caucasian men are often given a longer sentence to serve. For example, according to the sentencing project (2018), the ACLU reported that African Americans were likely to be arrested for possession of marijuana 3.7 times more than Caucasians. While the issue of disproportionate incarceration for African American males has become a hot political and social justice topic, there remains an ongoing fight to address this issue.

As the country grapples with this matter, another polarizing issue adjacent to the disproportionate incarceration of African American men and prison overcrowding is wrongful convictions. According to the Innocence Project (2011), 20,000 or 1% of individuals in prison are innocent and have been falsely convicted. The Innocence Project and the National Registry for Exoneration continue to bring attention to wrongful convictions with the hope of decreasing the number of people who have been wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit, particularly African Americans. The need to challenge the court system's unethical behavior remains a system constraint that causes much concern regarding fair justice in the United States criminal justice system (Innocence Project, 2011).

The reintegration process can be overwhelming and challenging for some formerly incarcerated individuals as it involves ending the inmate role and adapting to previous roles occupied in the family system (Shavel, 2017). Grounds (2005) and Kregg (2016) found that several supportive services, including case management, individual therapy, and family therapy, are needed during the stage after immediate release from prison and in the long term to help exonerees cope successfully with the challenges of reintegration. In this study, I focused specifically on African American male exonerees as they reintegrated into the role of spouse or intimate partner within the family system. This study could broaden the knowledge base and understanding of the needs of practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and community leaders regarding the experience of reintegration for exonerees.

The purpose of this research study was to explore and understand African American male exonerees' views on reintegrating into their role as a spouse or intimate partner in the family system. In this chapter, I outlined the experiences of exonerees as they transition from prison to society. Chapter 1 also includes a discussion of Schlossberg's transitional theory as the theoretical framework and address the rationale for using a qualitative, generic approach to explore reintegration experiences. I explain the use of semistructured interviews on a snowball sampling of African American male exonerees who met the study's criteria to evoke the experiences related to the phenomenon. Study significance will include the importance of improved understanding of exonerees as they reintegrate back into the family system. I explored why this issue is vital to a high functioning society and what practitioners, researchers, and community leaders could do to promote social change. Lastly, I present relevant information related to wrongful convictions of African American males and the resources they should have access to in order to ensure successful reintegration.

Background of the Study

Past and current research examines cases of wrongful convictions, compensation after wrongful convictions, psychological effects of wrongful convictions, and reintegrating into society after a wrongful conviction (Grooms, 2016; Grounds, 2005; Kregg, 2016). However, few studies have examined the impact of family dynamics after being released from prison (Visher & Travis, 2003). The National Registry of Exoneration (2018) has done extensive work to address the issue of wrongful convictions for African Americans. Some of the contributing factors noted by the National Registry

of Exoneration (2018) regarding wrongful convictions include mistaken identification, official misconduct, perjury/false accusation, inadequate forensic evidence, and false confession. Sommers and Marotta (2014), Bradbury and Williams (2013), Rizer (2003), Karsberg and Harrison (2003), Howard (2019), and Mauer (1999) have also shown a disproportionate number of wrongful convictions for certain crimes as it relates to African American men.

Researchers have conducted several studies on individuals returning to society after being released from prison (Cooke, 2004; Cooke, 2005; Mahaffey et al., 2018; Shlosberg et al., 2014). Those studies offer insight, particularly on African American men and their experiences while reintegrating into society after being released from prison; however, there is minimal research on exonerees reintegrating into the community and their role in the family system (Egleton et al., 2016; Grooms, 2016; Rashaan, 2016).

Historically, African American men were subjected to discriminatory practices and social injustice because of their socioeconomic status; however, unfair practices are increasingly prevalent amongst incarcerated African American males, no matter if they have been wrongfully convicted or not (Egleton et al., 2016). Having a criminal history can destroy opportunities for securing employment, housing, and overall support after release. More so, being labeled a convicted felon decreases the chance of gaining access to social benefits that could aid in a successful transition (Egleton et al., 2016; Mahaffey et al., 2018).

Attempting to reintegrate into multiple roles immediately after release can be particularly challenging and overwhelming. Rashaan (2016) explored the emotional

impact of being wrongfully convicted and conveyed that exonerees suffer from paranoia, fear, anger, stress, and post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of serving a wrongful sentence. Grooms (2016) studied exonerated males and reported that they continued to experience emotional and psychological distress due to being wrongfully convicted and made to serve time in prison. Once the exoneree returned to their family, they were ill-equipped to make life decisions. After being incarcerated, study participants reported suffering from a lack of self-confidence and at times experienced nightmares, insomnia, and paranoia; they were highly likely to experience broken relationships with family and friends and found the reintegration experience challenging to navigate (Grooms, 2016; Grounds, 2005; Kregg, 2016).

Wrongful convictions are not only hard on the wrongfully accused, they also affect the family. Jenkins (2013) conducted a study on the family's perspective of the exoneree once released from prison after serving a wrongful conviction. Intimate partners reported their partner's behavior post-exoneration and the difficulties they experienced with starting over again. Grooms's (2016) study supported Jenkins's (2013) findings in that the spouses or intimate partners stated that the exoneree changed while in prison and was not the same person. Grounds (2004) conducted a study in England that focused on men that served a wrongful conviction at a young age and were freed as an older adult. This study found that the men struggled with psychological and social adjustment after serving a prison sentence, specifically within families. Grounds (2004) also learned that the hardship or distress endured by exonerees mimics that reported in clinical literature on war veterans.

To date, there is a shortage in the literature on the reintegration experience of African American male exonerees transitioning from prison back into their family system. My goal for this study was to add to existing literature and understand the needs and challenges of this population. In this study, I also considered what social workers could do to support this population's needs and how researchers, practitioners, and community leaders could advocate for a more socially just response to helping this population reintegrate successfully.

Problem Statement

In this study, the presenting problem is that wrongfully convicted African American male exonerees are immediately released from prison with minimum to no resources while also being forced to operate as a spouse or intimate partner once again in the family system. After exoneration, wrongfully convicted individuals continue to face obstacles as they transition back into society. Often, communities perceive exonerees as more harmful than parolees who were legally guilty of criminal wrongdoing (Clow & Leach, 2015). Society is unwilling to support reintegration reforms to help wrongfully convicted individuals become functioning community members due to the stigma associated with exoneration. Society continues to convict them even though the legal system has released them and proven the innocence of some exonerees. There is the suggestion that stigmatizing and labeling those transitioning from the criminal justice system motivates a hesitancy to support reintegration services both for the guilty and the exonerated (Scherr et al., 2018).

Research suggests that re-establishing roles in the community continues to be difficult for exonerees in addition to restoring their roles in the family (Visher & Travis, 2003). After being released from prison, committing to a family role is critical for exonerees who have adopted a new identity while in prison. According to Haney (2002) and Haney (2012), inmates must learn, adjust, and adapt to the prison's morals, customs, and general culture in order to survive. The effects of prison adaptation negatively affect most exonerees during and after their reintegration process (Visher & Travis, 2003). It causes them to detach from formal roles and change physically and psychologically to survive while incarcerated (McCorkle, 1992).

Being wrongfully convicted can contribute to individuals adopting unhealthy behaviors to survive while in prison (Visher & Travis, 2003). One should fully consider the needed support to make a successful transition and reintegration possible, or these behaviors might continue and become heightened once released from prison. Some of the unhealthy behaviors noted for exonerees include isolation, emotional detachment from others, insomnia, anxiety, and flat affect (Grounds, 2005). Exonerees try to transition from their inmate identity into that of a law-abiding citizen first before moving into other roles. Because of this, they are reintegrating into family roles that hold too many responsibilities that are not a priority for some exonerees (Visher & Travis, 2003). In this study, I sought to understand African American male exonerees' perspective of the reintegration process into their spouse or intimate partner role in the family system.

After conducting a comprehensive literature search, there appeared to be no current literature addressing African American male exonerees' reintegration experience

transitioning from prison and back into their family system. Undertaking this investigation may contribute to understanding the challenges this population endures during the reintegration process. Contributions to research on the reintegration experience of African American male exonerees may provide a broader understanding of the barriers these individuals face after serving a wrongful conviction and why resources are needed immediately after release.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experience of African American male exonerees as they reintegrated into a spouse or intimate partner relationships as well as the barriers faced with reintegration and resources needed to support successful reintegration. I used a generic qualitative inquiry to better understand and explore the exoneree's reintegration experience into their role as a spouse or intimate partner in the family system. I used a qualitative inquiry to examine resources and supports that help study participants re-establish their role as spouses or intimate partners and achieve successful reintegration.

The knowledge gained through this qualitative study may bring awareness to the issues exonerees endure post-exoneration when re-establishing intimate relationships. It could also provide an expanded framework for practitioners, policymakers, and community leaders to consider as they examine and advocate for ways to help exonerees reintegrate more successfully. Intimate relationships are often crucial to successful reintegration for most individuals transitioning from prison and back into their family systems (Visher, 2007).

Exonerees will have multiple needs to enable a successful reintegration process. Exonerees must deal with the unique experience of being wrongfully convicted, stigmatized as an ex-offender even though wrongfully convicted, and several barriers that impede successful reintegration. However, reconnecting with the individuals with whom they have an intimate relationship can contribute to how well they transition from inmates to exonerated citizens. Intimate relationships can play an essential role in the success of the reintegration experience for exonerees. In this study, I explored this facet of the exoneree's reintegration experience through qualitative means. Upon reviewing the literature, I asserted that being able to better understand the reintegration experience for exonerees is particularly essential.

Research Question(s)

In this study, I explored the reintegration experiences of African American male exonerees who are transitioning from prison into their family system and as a spouse or intimate partner. I used the following research questions to guide the study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How do African American male exonerees perceive their transition from prison (inmate) into an intimate role (husband/partner)?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What resources do African American male exonerees identify that are specific to assist them in re-establishing their intimate partner relationship (husband/partner)?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What do African American male exonerees indicate as barriers to re-establishing intimate partner relationships once they transition into the family system?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

I used Schlossberg's transition theory for this study. Schlossberg's transition theory focuses on transitions adults experience throughout life and how they cope and adjust when those transitions happen (Schlossberg et al., 1995; Schlossberg, 2011). Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). An individual integrates changes into their daily life when a transition occurs. Schlossberg et al. (1995) indicated four aspects of transition that affect how individuals deal with change. These four transitions are situation, self-variable, support, and strategies. Each has implications for individuals exonerated of a crime for which they served time. In this study, I considered some of those implications related to the experiences of exonerees post-incarceration. Transitional issues like situation, self-variable, support, and strategies each suggest different outcomes based on access and the utilization of needed supports when a transition happens, and holds implications for successful reintegration when one or all of these are navigated unsuccessfully.

Another model for exploring transitions and their influence on reintegration is called the transition model. Anderson et al. (2012) identified three types of transitions with Schlossberg's transition theory, namely anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents. The categories of anticipated, unanticipated, and nonevents are used as a means for explaining how the phases of transition impact the individual. These categories of transition apply to the exonerees' experience because of the result in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Anderson et al., 2012). In this study, I

examined the exonerees' experience and highlighted those aspects of transition that particularly impacted successful reintegration as it relates to re-establishing relationships with spouses or intimate partners. Anderson et al. (2012) asserted that when looking at the different aspects of exoneree reintegration experiences, the unpredictable nature of transitioning from one setting to another and reintegrating back into systems previously engaged in can be problematic. This might be particularly problematic when attempting to re-establish intimate relationships. I discuss the theoretical framework more extensively in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

In this qualitative research study, I explored the experiences of African American male exonerees as they reintegrated into spouse or intimate partner relationships, the barriers they faced with reintegration, and the resources that are needed to support successful reintegration. Researchers use qualitative research to find connections between an individual's experience and their perceptions of those experiences as it relates to them (Merriam, 2009). I used a generic qualitative research design to better understand how individuals cope with their lives based on their experiences.

Merriam (2009) noted that a generic qualitative design means the research design does not belong to a specific methodology but instead takes pieces of each method to reveal something unique. The purpose of a generic qualitative inquiry is to explore the essence of how one experiences a phenomenon (Kahlke, 2014). A generic qualitative approach was suitable for this research study because it can be used to focus on the individual's experience and how they perceive that experience to impact their lives

(Kahlke, 2014). As Lim (2011) noted, researchers use a generic qualitative inquiry to gain relevant and meaningful information that supports an informed investigation of the phenomenon. In this study's case, I explored the exonerees' reintegration experiences, particularly regarding re-establishing intimate relationships. I used a generic qualitative design to gain a better understanding of how exonerees deal with reintegration when transitioning back into their family system and intimate relationships.

Participants met the following inclusion criteria to be in the study: (a) must be an exonerated African American male, (b) was married or in an intimate relationship prior to being incarcerated, and (c) was married or in an intimate relationship upon their release from prison. Participants in this study did not have to be with the same intimate partner, postexoneration. As long as they were in a relationship preincarceration and postexoneration, they were eligible to participate in this study. I excluded any participants who did not meet the inclusion criteria for this study.

In this study, I used snowball sampling to recruit participants with experience as an exoneree and posted a recruitment flyer in social media groups targeting exonerees as well as other public community online forums. The primary snowball sampling strategy I used to recruit participants involved me asking participants, potential participants, and supporting organizations to share the recruitment flyer with others who may be interested in this study. I provided more information to interested participants once they contacted me via phone, email, or messenger. A consent form was sent to each study participant via email once I reviewed the study's inclusion criteria with the participant, and they agreed to participate.

The most common sources of qualitative research data are observations, reviewing documents, and conducting semistructured interviews and focus groups (Merriam, 2009). I conducted semistructured interviews using open-ended questions via Zoom, phone, and email with eight participants in this study. The duration of the Zoom and phone interviews ranged between 25 and 120 minutes. I recorded each interview conducted via phone or Zoom in writing and audio. I transcribed each recorded interview manually and used the thematic analysis approach to analyze the data in this study.

Definitions

The following are the the key study terms that I used in this study.

Adaptation: is when people move towards reaching a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral equilibrium (Davies, 2008).

Exoneration: As used in this study, is legally clearing an individual from accusation or blame of a crime for which the person was previously found guilty (Zalman, 2011).

Exoneree: Individuals convicted of a crime they were not guilty of, released from prison due to constitutional or procedural errors (Gross & Shaffer, 2012; Innocence Project, 2018).

Generic Qualitative Inquiry: A generic qualitative approach that does not belong to a specific research design; instead, it takes pieces of each qualitative research design to reveal something unique (Merriam, 2009).

Intimate partner: Refers to both current and former spouses and dating partners (CDC, 2019).

Prisonization: Taking on the folkways, morals, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary (Clemmer, 1958).

Prison adaptation: An adjustment to the prison environment (Kovacs et al., 2019).

Reintegration: Being released from jail or prison, on the local, state, or federal level, and fitting back into a position or place (Wang et al., 2014). For this study, reintegration alludes to African American male exonerees transitioning to a former spouse or intimate role in the family system.

Transition: Any event or non-event that changes relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles (Schlossberg, 2011).

Wrongful conviction: A term used to describe a situation where an innocent individual is wrongfully accused and convicted of a crime that they did not commit (Zakirova, 2018).

Assumptions

Qualitative researchers extract meaning from the experiences of individuals who create and attach meaning to those experiences, which ultimately become their reality (Patton, 2015). In this study, I assumed that exonerated individuals might be hesitant to participate in this study for multiple reasons. Exonerees may be skeptical about participating due to not wanting to revisit their prison experience or they could be concerned that participating in this study might pose further problems for them. They may also distrust those who indicate that they are only seeking their perspective of their experience when this may not have been given serious consideration during their trial.

However, I was inclined to believe that after explaining the purpose of the study, some exonerees would be willing to share their stories. Explaining how their honest feedback and participation would further improve understanding of their needs and potentially deliver enhanced resources to aid in their reintegration experience would increase their willingness to participate. Lastly, I assumed that they would give honest answers once they agreed to participate in this study.

Scope and Delimitations

Previously, researchers gathered a significant amount of information on the psychological effects of wrongful convictions, the legal logistics on wrongful convictions, and the connection between official misconduct and wrongful convictions (Denov & Campbell, 2005; Dioso-Villa et al., 2016; Gross & Shaffer, 2012; Moore, 2007; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). However, there is a shortage in the literature regarding exonerees' reintegration experiences into society and within their families after serving a wrongful conviction. This includes research that explores the experience of reintegrating back into one's role within the family system, specifically, the spouse or intimate partner role. In this qualitative study, I helped fill the research gap on this issue and provided a space for exonerees to give voice to their reintegration experiences. In this study, I also spoke to the precise needs, mainly related to re-establishing a relationship with their spouse or intimate partner. Exonerees recruited for this study had the opportunity to share their perspectives of reintegrating into their spouse or intimate partner role and what supports would cater to successful reintegration as it relates to community supports and resources.

In this study, I was specifically interested in the experience of African American male exonerees as they are disproportionately affected by wrongful convictions (Blankenship et al., 2018; Wagner & Sawyer, 2019). As noted in previous sections of this study, this group is most likely to have fewer resources available to them. Re-establishing intimate relationships with spouses or intimate partners can play a crucial role in successful reintegration once the exoneree transitions from prison back into the family system. Gaining insight from exonerees who remained married while in prison or engaged in an intimate relationship with a partner on the outside may provide a clearer understanding of their reintegration experience. It also may bring awareness to appropriate resources, supports, and advocacy needs that enable successful reintegration and promote positive outcomes postexoneration.

This study only included exonerees who were married or indicated a significant partner that they had lived with before going to prison or who started a meaningful intimate relationship as they saw it after entering prison. To be a part of this study, participants did not have to live full-time with their spouse or intimate partner. I did not assume or expect that the individuals would engage in an intimate relationship postexoneration. However, I hoped that those in an intimate relationship would be willing to participate in this study and share their experiences with reintegration postexoneration.

As mentioned in the theoretical framework section, the Schlossberg et al. (1995) and Anderson et al. (2012) theories of transition provided a framework for understanding some of the critical issues exonerees confront when dealing with reintegration and intimate relationships postexoneration. Methods of transition aid in our understanding of

what might impact the exoneree's ability to reintegrate successfully. It provided a framework for understanding about how the reintegration experience might work for exonerees, particularly challenges to adapt and transition in many instances, with limited support. I provided textual data that made the interpretation of the study's participants' experiences possible and put into context one's experience as told from the individual's point of view. The goal of this study was not to generalize individual experiences but rather to give voice to exonerees' perspectives regarding their experiences of reintegrating back into a non-imprisoned environment. Qualitative interviews aided in achieving this goal. The research, practice, and advocacy community might be able to make judgments about these experiences based on findings from the qualitative interviews and use the findings to better inform services and practice approaches with the targeted group.

Limitations

One limitation may be a small sample size, which could decrease the chances of reaching saturation as it is an acceptable benchmark for qualitative research. According to Dworkin (2012), having a small sample size is adequate and offers an in-depth perspective through individual voices of a social phenomenon. However, it cannot be representative of the target population. Transferability may be another limitation in a qualitative study. To enhance transferability in this study, I used semistructured interviews to gain thick descriptive and detailed narratives of individual experiences that offer some space for transferability and dependability (Anney, 2014). I delineated the context and beliefs that were essential to the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Another limitation could be research bias. Research bias is when the researcher attempts to include expectations of what the participants might say based on what the limited research has indicated and the social narratives that currently exist about African American males and the criminal justice system. I was mindful of any potential biases about the exonerees' experiences and socio-cultural factors that might influence how I viewed the impact of wrongful convictions and the analysis of the interviews thereof. In this study, I committed to establishing an objective stance while also positioning subjective interpretations of the interviews to meet qualitative standards for data analysis, which demonstrated the trustworthiness of the data and review.

Significance

The results of this study could contribute to the current literature on wrongful convictions by focusing specifically on African American male exonerees reintegrating into a spouse or intimate partner role in the family system. Significant research explores wrongful convictions and the impact those convictions have on the wrongfully convicted (Grounds, 2005; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). I addressed the gap in the literature that focuses specifically on African American male exonerees and their experience with reintegration back into the systems that the criminal justice system wrongfully took them away from. This study may enhance critical competencies, such as interpersonal skills, advocacy, analytical skills, and problem-solving skills when working with exonerees. This study may also improve the social worker's knowledge base on the implications of wrongful convictions and the challenges of reintegrating into a spouse or intimate partner

role in the family system. Lastly, this study may justify the need for increased expertise in trauma-informed theories and modalities.

In this study, I presented a unique opportunity to learn more about the experience of African American male exonerees specifically and provide a means to examine what their needs are as they reintegrate back into their families and re-establish intimate relationships. Research is all but non-existent regarding their experience with reintegration and understanding what their specific challenges, needs, and barriers are to better understand what they are entitled to in order to get their lives back. Wrongful convictions disproportionately affect African American males in the United States. I asserted that the social narrative and stigma these individuals confront are that they are not worthy of concern and are regarded as invisible members of society postexoneration. This narrative needs to change as their lives have been wrongfully interrupted. They deserve, in the least, a societal response that enables them to get their lives back and move forward successfully as they re-engage society. This research study may have provided a vehicle that further supports this endeavor.

Positive Social Change

In this study, I added the literature's improved understanding and needs of the exonerated African American male when working to leverage successful reintegration, promoting positive social change. Furthermore, gaining a better understanding of exonerees' reintegration experiences into spouse or intimate partner roles may increase positive outcomes and improve knowledge about their needs that support positive results in the short and long term. It can be argued that the criminal justice system in the United

States has many flaws. These flaws often create significant space for things like wrongful convictions and the disproportionate conviction of African American males for various crimes. Studies exploring wrongful convictions add to our understanding of exonerees' needs and increase the opportunity for improved advocacy strategies, policies, and legislative responses. They also may encourage/identify resource needs, encourage/promote implementation and access for needed resources, or suggest recommendations for needed resources.

Summary

When exploring the issue of wrongful convictions, it was found that legal logistics were almost exclusively the focus wrongful convictions (Clow & Leach, 2015) as was compensation (Norris, 2012) and the psychological effects of serving a wrongful conviction (Grooms, 2016; Grounds, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Most studies did not necessarily focus on reintegration experiences and the needs of the wrongfully convicted, particularly related to the re-establishing of intimate relationships. As the data showed, African American males are disproportionately affected by wrongful convictions and, to such a degree, have a diminished capacity to have their reintegration needs met once exonerated and transitioning from prison (Kregg, 2016). The research showed that relationships with family members are vital in supporting the exoneree's successful reintegration experience into society in general and the family system more precisely. However, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the re-establishing of intimate relationships between the African American male exoneree and his spouse or intimate partner and his role in the family. To better understand the dynamics of this

experience, the needs of these individuals, and the barriers they experience to reintegrate successfully, I specifically used a qualitative, generic approach to explore this issue with African American male exonerees. Theories of transition by Schlossberg et al. (1995) and Anderson et al. (2012) were applied to understand the reintegration process grounded in stages of transition and how exonerees might navigate these stages to promote successful reintegration in society and their intimate relationships.

The next chapter will provide a more in-depth exploration of the literature regarding exoneree reintegration, the stages of transition, and their relationship to reintegration. I also addressed problems with the United States criminal justice system as it relates to wrongful convictions and disparate wrongful convictions within the African American community. The lack of support, resources, needed interventions, and legislation or social policies often further exacerbate the challenges African American male exonerees face once they leave prison and return to their families.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

In this study, I addressed the presenting problem: wrongfully convicted African American male exonerees are immediately released from prison with minimum to no resources while reintegrating into their spouse or intimate partner role in the family system. My purpose in this generic qualitative study was to explore the experience of the African American male exonerees as they reintegrated into spouse or intimate partner relationships, the barriers they faced with reintegration, and the resources needed to support successful reintegration. In the literature review in this chapter, I examine relevant findings from existing literature and research related to exonerations and the reintegration process for those individuals.

After serving a prison sentence, life for African American men entails many challenges, whether wrongfully convicted or not. This is due to many African American men transitioning back into impoverished communities where there is little to no social support available to help them reintegrate successfully (Dumond et al., 2013). Grounds (2005) conducted a study on 18 exonerated men who spent more than 5 years in prison. Postexoneration, these men reported difficulty reintegrating back into their community and interacting with friends and family. The effects of incarceration caused psychological and adjustment barriers during the reintegration process. According to Kregg (2016) and Owens and Griffiths (2012), due to the limited amount of support granted postexoneration, in addition to mental barriers, exonerees struggle to rebuild their lives.

In contrast to parolees, Norris (2012) noted that many exonerees lack assistance during their reintegration process.

Most researchers concentrated on the consequences and causes of wrongful convictions and the effects of serving a long sentence (Konvisser, 2012; Owens & Griffiths, 2012; Smith et al., 2011). Other researchers focused on society's perspective of wrongful convictions, postexoneration experiences, an examination of compensation, and the government's personification of wrongful convictions (Clow & Leach, 2015; Page, 2013; Ricciardelli et al., 2012; Scholand, 2013; Zalman et al., 2012). In this chapter, I highlighted the gap in the literature on African American male exonerees reintegrating into their spouse or intimate partner role in the family. To begin the chapter, I will review the research strategies used to locate articles for the literature review. I also will present the theoretical framework for this study. Lastly, I will review relevant research literature related to African American males, wrongful convictions, exoneration, the community reintegration experience, and the spouse or intimate partner role in the family system.

Literature Search Strategy

I used Walden University's online library system to access EBSCOhost, a common research database, to acquire relevant research on topics of interest. Through EBSCOhost, I had access to Thoreau, a multidatabase search tool, which supports searches in academic search systems like ProQuest, ERIC, Dissertations, SocINDEX, PsycINFO, SAGE Full Text, and Criminal Justice Periodicals. These search tools were vital to identifying relevant peer-reviewed research to support a full examination of pertinent literature.

Keywords and combined terms or phrases that I used to search the databases included *exonerees, exoneration, exonerated, wrongful conviction and reintegration, exoneree and family structure, wrongful conviction and family, wrongful imprisonment, African American males and reintegration, Black males and reintegration exoneree and identity, Schlossberg transition theory, stigma, exoneree, and post-release*. Using these key terms enabled a thorough search of relevant literature, maximizing the topic's exploration. Additional information was from the Innocence Project, the National Registry of Exonerations, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. I searched for articles published between 1900 and 2020.

Theoretical Foundation Framework

In this study, I used Schlossberg's transition theory to explore how individuals adjust to transitions (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Schlossberg et al. (1995) defined a transition as "any event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles" (p. 27). Schlossberg (1981) emphasized the importance of cognitive processes in transition and provided a cognitive framework to gain clarity of an individual's transition. A transition is better understood when one identifies the type, context, and the specific change event (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, 2011).

Using previous research as a foundation, Anderson et al. (2012) expanded the transitional model initially developed by outlining three types of specific transitions: anticipated transition, unanticipated transition, and nonevent transition. Anticipated transitions are predictable or planned events that give one an opportunity for role

rehearsal, whether mental, vicarious, or real. Unanticipated transitions are non-scheduled events that usually cause an unexpected eruption in one's life. A nonevent transition is being prepared for or expecting something to happen, but it does not occur. In the context of the exoneree's experience, the transition to prison and the transition from prison back into the community is a predictable event for actual offenders. However, for individuals that are wrongfully convicted, it is hard to theorize when the transition process starts. It may begin during the prerelease phase while preparing appropriate paperwork, or it may start with the actual release, which is the protocol for all incarcerated individuals. For individuals working with an organization to prove his/her/their innocence, once exonerated, the transition from prison back into the community can be unpredictable and unanticipated. In some cases, an unforeseen surprise as the individual may have given up hope for exoneration.

Anderson et al. (2012) further developed the propositions of the transition theory to create what they call an integrated model of transitions. The researchers suggested that transitions do not have an endpoint; instead, it is a timeless process viewed as either moving in, moving through the learning process, or moving out. As Goodman et al. (2006) described, moving in is when one moves into a new situation with people who share the same agendas and needs. An example may be individuals who are wrongfully convicted, enter prison, and must learn the rules, regulations, norms, and expectations of the new situation just as those who were not innocent and convicted. The authors described moving through a period of uncertainty.

An example may be a wrongfully convicted individual obeying the rules and expectations in the new situation. However, they struggle with their new position and their ability to endure this transition. Moving out refers to that aspect of disengagement from roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions and the process of adopting new roles, relationships, routines, and assumptions about one's environment that are predictable and with some certainty, something that may be a challenge for a person with a wrongful conviction experience. An example may be one accepting the transition and learning to cope while adjusting to the new situation.

One might consider that an exoneree released after being incarcerated may need to understand the rules, regulations, roles, and expectations of the new system. One essential learning process might include identifying and accessing appropriate resources post-exoneration to aid in a successful transition. Another critical learning process might consist of gaining a clear understanding of expectations in the family system that may be new for the exoneree even if they are away from that system for just a few months. The exoneree can experience the moving through phase of the transition once they get acclimated to their new reality post-exoneration. The moving through phase allows the exoneree access to supports that help with social and psychological adjustment, intimate relationships, and gaining a sense of normalcy.

One can evaluate the impact of the transition by the degree of which the transition changes an individual's life (Schlossberg et al., 1995). According to Haney (2002), everyone incarcerated does not have a bad experience. However, a few individuals are sufficiently unchanged or unscathed by the experience because of incarceration. "Prison

is painful, and incarcerated individuals often suffer long-term consequences from having been subjected to pain, deprivation, and extremely atypical patterns and norms of living and interacting with others” (Haney, 2002, p. 5).

Anderson et al. (2012) identified the situation, self, support, and strategies as critical systems affecting transition. Schlossberg (1981) identified four systems impacting the transition experience to better understand how the three types of transitions intersect and impact a person’s experience with change and transition. I used the four systems to individualize the transition to get personal perceptions of the situation, self, support, and strategies used to deal with situations. Schlossberg (1981) implied that an individual’s perception and experience with change and transition determine how they cope and adjust. People’s perceptions of the four systems could explain why they react differently to the same transition experience.

Researchers reference Schlossberg’s transition theory in many studies on veterans’ transitions into higher education (Griffin & Gilbert, 2015), how recent graduates transition from attending school to obtaining employment (Rosemond & Owens, 2018), and women transitioning back to work after maternity leave (Moffett, 2018). I found a few research studies that used Schlossberg’s transition theory, including: (a) African American veterans transitioning from military to civilian life, (b) African American men transitioning from prison to college, and (c) women transitioning from prison into the community. Edwards (2016) conducted a generic qualitative study of African American veterans transitioning to life after serving in the military. The focus of the research was to examine the African American veterans’ transition from the military’s

protected life to the complex life of being an African American civilian. The researcher had 18 veterans who had been retired for at least 1 year. The findings in this study showed that African American veterans do not have a hard time transitioning into civilian life, and racism does not harm the transition. Edwards's (2016) study is similar to this study due to its focus on African Americans transitioning from one setting and role to the next. The author also examined what influenced the transition.

Brower (2015) completed a case study on African American men transitioning from prison to college. The researcher used Schlossberg's transition theory to explore the series of transitions the male experiences postrelease. The researcher interviewed the student, two employees at a community service organization that assisted the student, and an academic administrator. The findings in this study showed that the student was successful due to positive coping strategies and optimism during each transition. Results showed policy and researcher implications for ex-offenders. One problem the student expressed during his time at the community college was stigma. Brower reported that the student and other ex-offenders "were reluctant to divulge their status as former prisoners in a higher education setting" (2015, p.18). However, Ross and Richards (2009) expressed that within the higher education setting, this population of students may be an "invisible minority" (p. 97-98). Brower's (2015) study was similar to this study due to its focus on an African American male's transition from prison to homelessness, and from homelessness to community college. The author also identified barriers that incarcerated individuals experience while transitioning, whether wrongfully convicted or not, which is stigmatization.

Lastly, Roache (2004) used a hermeneutic-phenomenological inquiry to understand women's experiences transitioning from prison into the community. The researcher used unstructured, open-ended interviews with seven women who had transitioned from prison into their community 3 years postrelease. As a result of this study, Roache (2004) outlined 11 common barriers identified by the women during reintegration, which was: the pains associated with incarceration, institutionalization, programming, employment, psychology, stigma, expectations, support, children, maternal role, and homosexuality. The common barriers identify by the women contributed to an unsuccessful transition (Roache, 2004).

Research devoted to recognizing the experience of African American male exonerees is important in understanding the significance of reintegration into the family system. By utilizing Schlossberg's transition theory in this study, it was possible to understand the responses of African American male exonerees and notice how each responded differently from the other. I used Schlossberg's transition theory to bring awareness to each person's tolerance level and explained how they cope with traumatic experiences and stress. In the following sections, I will provide an overview of the four systems applied to the exoneration experience, namely situation, self, support, and strategies.

Situation

Every transition that happens is different in terms of what caused the transition to take place. For individuals who are wrongfully convicted, being released from prison and from all charges that caused them to be in prison is exoneration. Organizations (i.e.,

Innocence Project) work with incarcerated individuals that continue to prove their innocence of charges against them. The organizations cannot determine the length of time it will take to prove their innocence, but they do ensure the wrongfully convicted that they will try their best to help them with their case (Innocence Project, 2018). Timing and control during the transition are essential to whether it is seen as good or bad by the individuals. The prison system primarily controls the transition from prison into the community. However, the transition for wrongfully convicted individuals is determined by the supporting organization and their ability to prove their innocence, in addition to the presiding judge.

Most transitions induce a role change. Being released from prison to reintegrate into a community and family system is a role change. Robertson (1992) defined a role as “socially defined behavioral expectations for individuals occupying certain positions and for those who interact with them” (p.114). The transition from prison into the community or family causes a change in roles, such as from inmate to intimate partner, parent, or employee (O’Brien, 2001). Role changes can be stressful because of the expectations attached to them. Schlossberg (1995) explained that the more one engages and interacts in their new role, the sooner they adjust to the values and norms of that role.

The transition from prison into the community is considered a timeless change. However, without being adequately prepared for the change, some exonerees struggle to reintegrate back into roles they once thrived in. One problem identified by exonerees in the Grounds (2005) study after reintegrating into the family system was the lack of decision-making skills. This was due to the prison structure, which, in some sense,

emasculates incarcerated men mentally. Adapting to the prison setting weakens these individuals' masculine characteristics, causing the reintegration process into the community and family system to be overwhelming and challenging. Wilson (2002) reported that wrongfully convicted individuals often need assistance while adapting to their new environment and roles. Having to abruptly move out of the prison setting and into a new setting impacts the reintegration process for exonerees because they do not have adequate time to disengage from the inmate role and environment and prepare for the new role and setting. Attempting to adjust to a new setting and role, in addition to meeting the expectations of family and society (Knowles, 2015), causes the reintegration process for exonerees to be unimaginable (Grounds, 2005; Rashaan, 2016).

Self- Variable

Individual experiences shape a person. According to Grounds (2005), after serving a wrongful conviction the long-term psychological effects begin postexoneration. The psychological effects can result in severe disruption, dysregulation, and dysfunction (Wooldredge, 1999). The prison experience for exonerees can also include severe mental health problems, such as persistent personality changes, PTSD, depression, adjustment difficulties, relationship impairments, feelings of chronic estrangement and isolation, and traumatic stress responses. Many exonerees suffer from depressive disorders and substance abuse or dependence (Kregg, 2016). These factors can alter a person's values and norms; Furthermore, these factors interfere with each exoneree's ability to transition effectively (Grounds, 2005; Knowles, 2015; Rashaan, 2016; Ricciardelli, 2014).

Support

Schlossberg et al. (1995) introduced four sources of support: intimate relationships, family units, friends, and the institution or community the exoneree is a part of upon release. Intimate relationships can positively or negatively affect the exoneree because, in most situations, the person reintegrating into the intimate partner role changed after being incarcerated (Grounds, 2005). According to Visher and Travis (2011), family members provided critical support to incarcerated individuals upon release from prison. Researchers found that maintaining positive, supportive contact with family members while incarcerated increased positive transitions into the community (Shapiro & Schwartz, 2001; Sullivan et al., 2002; Visher, 2007). Exonerees rely heavily on the family; however, individuals that no longer have family rely heavily on their attorney after being released from prison (Innocence Project, 2018). Wrongfully convicted individuals are not offered the same supports as a parolee after release, even though their wrongful conviction was at the fault of the criminal justice system. Knowles (2015) explained that exonerees struggle with many barriers upon release from prison. These barriers are in connection with the justice system and neglecting the exoneree's records (Kregg, 2016). Research suggests that there is limited-to-no support available for exonerees due to stigma and labeling. Some supporting resources for exonerees are religious groups, advocacy groups, and well-established organizations, such as the Innocence Project, that meet their client's needs upon release from prison (Innocence Project, 2018).

Strategies

Individuals tend to develop coping strategies, whether negative or positive, when faced with a situation or change in their daily life (Anderson et al., 2011; Schlossberg et al., 1995). However, some coping strategies developed by exonerees during the adjustment phase in prison are not acceptable in society outside of prison. With that said, family support is needed to help African American male exonerees adjust to their new environment in addition to space, time, and patience.

In summary, to better understand how individuals cope with change, people must gain insight into their perception of the change. Anderson et al. (2011) suggested using the four systems model to assess an individual's perception of a transition. How African American male exonerees view their situation, self, support, and strategies for coping during the reintegration phase into the intimate partner role in the family system was the purpose of this study, and Schlossberg's transition theory was the best foundation for this study.

U.S. Criminal Justice System and African American Male Exonerees

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor of the U.S. Supreme Court once stated, "Our society has a high degree of confidence in its criminal trials, in no small part because the Constitution offers unparalleled protections against convicting the innocent" (Herrera v. Collins, 1993, p.420). Exonerees involved in America's judicial system assume they will have a fair chance as part of the legal process. However, Gross (2012) proposed that due to the adversarial structure of the judicial system, distinguishing the guilty from the innocent is a difficult task to complete. However, this was the purpose of courts in the

United States. The following Literature Review provided an exploration of exoneration, African American exonerees and wrongful convictions, psychological transitions, community reintegration, family reintegration, and the transition process for exonerees. I outlined relevant information to show factors that shape the African American male exonerees' transition from one system to the next. I also explored factors specific to African American male exonerees and how these factors decrease their ability to transition or return to previous and for some, new roles. I considered issues of transition preparation and different avenues of support as well.

African American Males and Racial Disparities in Criminal Justice

Racial disparities are displayed vigorously in society; however, this issue has heightened within the criminal justice system (Sommers & Marotta, 2014). African American males are represented in prisons at 34%, despite only representing 13% of the United States population (Gross et al., 2017; Wolfers et al., 2015). The U.S. incarcerates African American males 5 times more than any other race (Wolfers et al., 2015). As Peterson (2016) indicates, this is due to stereotyping, socioeconomic status, geographical location, and premediated discrimination of African Americans.

Technically, there is no reliable way to produce an accurate number of individuals sitting in jail or prison who are innocent (Zalman, 2012). Smith and Hattery (2011) reported that 75% of individuals found to be innocent identify as African American and have served over 12 years in prison as a result of a wrongful conviction. Criminal justice researchers Horry et al. (2010) and Gross et al. (2017) reported that African Americans continue to experience adverse treatment in the United States criminal justice system.

African Americans also experience a plethora of socialized biases ranging from inherent and unconscious biases, racial discrimination, and other forms of racism impacting disparate convictions (Gross, Possley & Stephens, 2017; Horry, Wright & Tredoux, 2010). Kutateladze, Andiloro, Johnson, and Spohn (2014) yielded similar findings in a study conducted where they examined racial and ethnic disparities of prosecution and sentencing from various discretionary points. The researchers found that African Americans and Latino defendants were more likely to be mistreated as it relates to being detained, receiving a custodial plea offer, experiencing pretrial detention, and during sentencing. Gross et al. (2017) suggested that the criminal justice system targets African Americans, and this group is more likely to be wrongfully convicted when compared to other races.

Rob Warden and Samuel Gross are co-founders of the National Registry of Exonerations, which they launched in 2012 in conjunction with the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University School of Law. The National Registry of Exonerations is well known for its advocacy and research activities related to wrongful convictions. This organization has examined the issue of race and wrongful convictions through various methods and contends that the cause of wrongful convictions amongst African American males are intentional gestures of racism that proliferate throughout the criminal justice system. Free and Ruesink (2012) wrote a book on wrongful convictions of African American men. The authors reviewed 343 wrongful conviction cases that were solved over recent decades and found that racial profiling was one of many issues connected to the disproportionate number of wrongful convictions amongst African

American men. These findings complemented Gross et al. (2017). The National Registry of Exoneration (2018) asserts that race influences the length of a sentence given by the courts.

Further, is a high factor in the probability of being wrongfully convicted. African Americans are presumed to have equal rights in the criminal justice system and seen as innocent until proven guilty, as the legal system requires. However, Heilig, Brown, and Brown (2012) expressed that they are still marginalized and given an “illusion of inclusion” (p.1) when it comes to the U.S. justice system. Being seen as guilty and experiencing a resulting conviction, whether guilty or not, is all too often the story of many African American males charged with a crime.

Exoneration and Wrongful Conviction

Exoneration is the focus and mission of the Innocence Project, and the organization uses considerable resources to prove an incarcerated individual is innocent of a crime. However, some individuals who are wrongfully convicted begin this process on their own. According to the National Registry of Exonerations (2021, April), African American males represent 1,314 exonerations, which is 51% of the 2,840 exonerations of males that have taken place since 1989. Five contributing factors support wrongful convictions. They are mistaken identification, false confessions, inadequate forensic evidence, perjury/false accusation, and official misconduct. Rarely will an African American male be wrongfully convicted based on one contributing factor. According to the National Registry of Exonerations (2018), the main 2 contributing factors that cater to exoneration are official misconduct and perjury or false accusation. In 2018, the National

Registry of Exonerations reported 105 exonerations transpired because of official misconduct; 111 were a result of perjury or false accusation; 31 because of mistaken eyewitness identification; and 19 based on false confessions separately.

The National Registry of Exonerations compiled a report in 2017 on race and wrongful convictions that reported results from an examination of three crimes that produced the most significant number of exonerations. The report examined 1,900 wrongful conviction cases and was published in October of 2016. The report found that 47% of the wrongful convictions were for African American males, 39% were White males, 12% were Hispanic, and 2% were considered Other. However, when focusing on the 3 crimes that produced the most significant number of exonerations, 1,272 cases were examined. The report showed a racial breakdown of exonerations and types of crime. With 100% being the total for each offense, the report showed that murder convictions among African American males were at 50%, White males at 36%, Hispanic males at 12%, and Other races at 2%. Conviction of sexual assault among African American males was at 59%, White males at 34%, Hispanic males at 6%, and Other races at 1%. Concerning drug crimes, convictions among African American males were at 55%, White males at 24%, Hispanic males at 19%, and Other races at 2%. The conviction of robbery was not a part of the examination; however, African American males were at 62%, White males at 20%, Hispanic males at 15%, and Other races at 3% (National Registry of Exonerations, 2018). Because of the racial disparities found amongst African American males in arrest, conviction, and incarceration, the results of wrongful convictions and exonerations mimic these patterns. African American males' lives

outside of prison show their inability to live fearlessly and be treated equally by society and the criminal justice system is based on generational racism and discrimination. Being targeted and wrongfully convicted only adds volume and confirms African American's logic or perception of the criminal justice system in America, which controls this population, mentally and physically (Rashaan, 2016).

Adaptation and Prison Culture

After being found guilty of a crime, incarcerated individuals experience the moving out phase, isolating them from their preexisting lifestyle and society (Clark, 2001). For individuals who are wrongfully convicted, this unanticipated transition caused disruptions in their life (Anderson et al., 2012). The incarcerated individuals are moving to a new location with individuals that share their exact needs. The prison population owns a unique form of adult socialization called prisonization.

They take on greater or less degree the folkways, morals, customs, and general culture of the penitentiary, which includes acceptance of an inferior role, accumulation of facts concerning the organization of the prison, the development of somewhat new habits of eating, dressing, working, sleeping, and the adoption of the local language (Clemmer, 1958, p. 299-300).

According to Allen and Simonsen (1992), once prisonization begins, incarcerated individuals abandon family roles held before incarceration to immerse themselves into their new role as inmates. Prison introduces significant constraints for incarcerated individuals throughout their sentence. Some challenges include autonomy, safety, social acceptance, heterosexual relationships, and possession of personal material (Goffman,

1961). Like Toch's (1992) study, 700 inmates and 200 correctional officers reported that incarcerated individuals named seven environmental concerns: support, structure, privacy, safety, emotional feedback, activities, and freedom. Ignoring and neglecting the seven environmental concerns could result in a loss of self, no individuality, and complete detachment from social roles outside of the prison system (Sykes, 1958).

According to Haney (2003), the process of institutionalization, often referred to as prisonization, overwhelmingly changes the psychological status of incarcerated males. Hannon, Martin, and Martin (1984) reported that individuals that have never been in prison experience a great deal of anxiety while adjusting to the rules and regulations of the prison, which Anderson et al. (2012) identified as the learning process, in addition to fulfilling their roles in the family system (p. 256). The author continued by explaining, "Institutionalization is the short-expression for the negative psychological effects of imprisonment and involves the incorporation of the norms of prison life into one's habits of thinking, feeling, and acting" (p. 38).

Haney (2003) outlined seven psychological adaptation strategies incarcerated individuals adopt in the process of institutionalization to avoid victimization.

The seven strategies are: (1) dependence on institutional structure and contingencies; (2) hypervigilance, interpersonal distrust, and suspicion; (3) emotional overcontrol, alienation, and psychological distancing; (4) social withdrawal and isolation; (5) incorporation of exploitative norms of prison culture; (6) diminished sense of self-worth and personal value; (7) posttraumatic stress reactions to the pains of imprisonment. (p. 40-45).

Adaptation in the prison setting allows incarcerated individuals to mentally and physically transition and function while serving their time (Clemmer, 1958; Haney, 2006; Trammell, 2009). Adversely, it can hinder an individual's ability to detach from the prison culture and function properly after moving out and transitioning into new settings. The adaptation strategies learned during institutionalization could harm intimate relationships as the incarcerated individual continues moving through the transition (Haney, 2003).

The Physical and Psychological Effects of a Wrongful Conviction

Prison has a unique effect on individuals physically and mentally, which causes them to adapt to their new settings differently. The Innocence Project (2018) reported that an incarcerated individual's physical health would be affected negatively whether wrongfully convicted or not. Due to the prison's low-quality healthcare and overcrowded and unclean conditions, many exonerees leave prison experiencing poor health. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012), incarcerated individuals in the United States prison system are overwhelmingly affected by health problems, such as fungus, sexually transmitted diseases, tuberculosis, and HIV. Westervelt and Cook's (2010) study supported the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's statement by adding that most exonerees released from prison exhibit health problems such as "skin rashes, malnutrition, diabetes, hepatitis, asthma, and digestive" (p. 268). By law, incarcerated individuals have access to primary healthcare; however, the prison administrators deny them access to advanced treatments, specialists, and new

medications (Pertersilia, 2003). According to the Innocence Project (2018), some individuals pass away after exoneration due to severe health problems.

Grooms' (2016) study included nine men and one woman and focused on exonerees' lived experiences one year after exoneration. Each participant in the study expressed that incarceration negatively affected them emotionally and psychologically more so than physically. The participants explained that the physical part of serving a wrongful conviction is nothing compared to how it affects the mind. Grounds (2004) conducted psychiatric assessments on 18 exonerees who spent 19 years in prison. This study reported that 14 participants suffered from personality changes, 12 of them struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), 10 suffered from a depressive disorder, five participants had a panic disorder, and four participants experienced symptoms of paranoia. Grounds (2004) stated, "Individuals released after serving a wrongful conviction may display notable psychological and adjustment issues similar to others that witness a chronic psychological trauma" (p. 175). In 2011, Wildeman, Costelloe, and Schehr investigated the mental wellbeing of 55 exonerees faced with reintegrating into their community, and their findings were similar to Grounds (2004). The authors found that 22% of the participants struggled with anxiety, PTSD, and depression separately or jointly. Simon (1993) explored the short-term effect of wrongful arrest and the 24-hour release of five cases. The author found that in each case, the individuals reported that the sudden arrest was traumatizing. One participant in Grounds' (2004) study and two in Grooms' (2016) study said that the unanticipated wrongful arrest continued to cause anxiety and a sense of fear. Although individuals in Simon's (1993)

study were released sooner than other individuals in cases of wrongful convictions, the findings illustrate that unlawful restraints can harm a person's mental wellbeing.

Managing Roles While Incarcerated

The role of the man in African American families has always been as the head of the household (Anderson, 1999). Cottrell (1942) defined a role as "the culturally expected behavior of an individual occupying a particular position within a system" (p. 617). Moerings (1983) added that an individual's system expects certain things from an individual and what they should be and do. The African American male role as a spouse or intimate partner in the family system includes being present and consistent, a leader and protector, and a provider of physical, emotional, and financial support. Once an individual occupies the role of an inmate, they disregard the responsibilities of a role in the family system (Goode, 1960). An inmate's role is to ceaselessly obey and act inferior to administrators and correctional officers. This is averse to the spouse or intimate partner role and their responsibilities within the family system (Hattery & Smith, 2007).

According to Moerings (1983), the inmate role supersedes prior roles due to the incarcerated individual's inability to disengage from one role to the next in the prison setting. As a result, female partners immediately adopt the role and responsibilities of the incarcerated spouse or intimate partner (Harman et al., 2007). Assuming the role and responsibilities of the incarcerated spouse or intimate partner can have a lasting impact on both partners' mental wellbeing and disposition. For example, accepting the role of the incarcerated partner could cause financial strain. Such strains would lead her to find employment if she is unemployed and depend heavily on her social support, including

close family and friends, as well as public assistance to make ends meet (Liddell, 1998). It can also cause the incarcerated spouse or intimate partner to become suspicious since they cannot fulfill their role in the prison setting (LeBlanc, 2003).

Moving in and moving through prisonization, as stated before, causes incarcerated individuals to learn and adopt strategies to function in the prison setting. The lack of social interaction in an intimate relationship while incarcerated causes prisonization to change the incarcerated individual's role. Also, it can decrease their ability to respond as a spouse or intimate partner in the prison setting and family setting (Segrin & Flora, 2001). For instance, Arditti, Lambert-Shute, and Joest (2003) reported that visitation in the prison setting is an excellent opportunity for intimate relationships to flourish while incarcerated, and they can mend their emotional connection. However, McKay et al. (2016) noted that prison institutions play a significant role in decreasing or alleviating family contact and support for an incarcerated individual throughout their sentence. Having limited to no contact with family causes incarcerated individuals to be incapable of reacting and responding in any other way than as an inmate when granted the opportunity to interact with their spouse or intimate partner.

The Impact of Incarceration on African American Families

According to Braman (2004), incarceration has disintegrated African American families by eroding the family system's formation for decades. Authors Balthazar and King (2001) stated that the number of incarcerated African American males illustrates "partners, friends, families, and communities that operate as intimate network systems" (p. 34). Researcher LaMar (2019) noted that African American families struggle when

separated from a loved one, particularly the male figure. Of course, the ramification depends solely on whether the family views the incarcerated individual as “an asset or liability” (Balthazar & King, 2001, p. 34). African American males removed from their essential role in the family system encounter a sense of loss and disruption. Disengaging from vital roles creates psychological and financial strain in the family system.

LaMar (2019) investigated the impact of incarceration on African American families by interviewing five participants who were married or dating an incarcerated African American male. Findings in the study were congruent with Balthazar and King’s (2001) study and reported that when the African American male separates from the family system, it causes the structure of the family system to change, leading to a communication gap, financial strain, and embarrassment. Smith et al. (2007) and Haney (2003) added that incarceration causes a deterioration in family ties and roles in the unit, physical/emotional connections, and communication, which can be difficult to regain after release.

The Impact of Incarceration on Intimate Relationships

Healthy relationships with family give incarcerated individuals hope and emotional, financial, and realistic support (Lindquist et al., 2015). However, incarceration creates barriers that cause the maintenance of these relationships to be unimaginably challenging. Role changes and the incarcerated partner’s “absence, psychological changes, and economic strains” weaken spousal and intimate relationships. Haney (2002) noted that incarcerated individuals adopt adaptation strategies that disrupt intimate partner, family, and friend relationships during the institutionalization process.

Furthermore, incarceration can deepen pre-existing problems in relationships or present new challenges such as “issues of lost income, a sense of abandonment, or frustration with prison policies and regulations” (Lindquist et al., 2015, p. 2). Overall, incarceration causes psychological distress that can negatively affect relationships with friends, family members, and spouses or intimate partners.

Chui (2009) conducted a qualitative study focused on the impact of incarceration on the mother of a child with an incarcerated father. The researcher interviewed 10 children and 10 mothers. Financial strain was the reoccurring theme while analyzing the data. According to the mothers in the study, their imprisoned spouse or intimate partner was the breadwinner. Without preparation, they could not take on the responsibilities of their partner’s role. Many of the mothers in the study were unemployed before their spouse or intimate partner’s incarceration, which led them to depend on family members for financial support. Attempting to gain financial assistance from family members caused friction and weakened those relationships as well. Even though the abrupt separation caused the mothers to feel lonely and overwhelmed by new responsibilities in the family system, some attempted to maintain the intimate relationship by sending letters, accepting collect phone calls, and going to visitation.

Reintegrating into the Community

Hopson (1981) wrote, “Integration entails renewal and acceptance that the transition is now complete and has become part of one’s history. The transition will influence future directions, but it will not confine one in the past” (p. 38). Research on wrongful convictions and the reintegration process is like that of an actual offender

leaving prison (Campbell & Denov, 2005; Moore et al., 2013; Pecker, 2013; Tomar, 2013; Westervelt & Cook, 2008). However, Grounds (2004) reported that exonerees released from prison are suddenly without preparation as opposed to actual offenders. After their release, these individuals experience another unanticipated transition making the moving out and moving in phase overwhelming. The abrupt transition causes the exoneree to struggle with disengaging mentally from the inmate role in the prison setting and successfully adapt to the new environment. As a result, exonerees are physically transitioned back into their community and expected to pick up where they left off. While reintegrating into the community, labeling and stigma are enormous barriers for African American offenders and exonerees. Rose and Clear (2001) investigated the relationship between stigmatization and the ex-offender. The authors found that ex-offenders cope with stigma by: (1) trying to change society's perception of them; (2) disregard society's perception of them; (3) isolate and withdraw from others; or (4) relocate and start over (p. 326). Murphy et al. (2011) explained that the critical component of labeling is society's response to an individual and its results. Murphy et al. (2011) continued with examples such as the right to vote, eligibility for public assistance programs, and school funding to explain that these things are not accessible by law to individuals who are associated with particular labels. For example, it is difficult for African American males to obtain employment and housing due to the stigmas and labels associated with ex-convicts, ex-offenders, the exonerated, or the wrongfully convicted (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; D'Alessio et al., 2015).

Lopez (2002) stated, “The time lost behind bars is not the most damaging injury inflicted upon the wrongfully convicted. It is the stigma that follows them for the rest of their lives” (p. 720). During the reintegration process, exonerees experienced a re-occurrence of fear, suspicion, and rejection from members of the community. Westervelt and Cook (2010) explained that because the government denies exonerees assistance after their release, they are prone to being re-victimized. Participants in Grooms' (2016) study revealed that the label and stigma associated with incarceration made their reintegration process overwhelming. For instance, one participant expressed that it was difficult to find a job after justifying the wrongful conviction and exoneration status. Another participant stated that even though he did not commit the crime, people still treated him as if he did. In Westervelt and Cook's (2008) study on exonerees, one participant shared that when he returned to his home within the community that had wrongfully convicted him, someone had vandalized his vehicle with the words “child killer” (Westervelt & Cook, 2008). For this reason, some exonerees move into a different community with the hope of decreasing re-victimization and increasing the chances of experiencing a positive reintegration process anonymously in their new environment (Blandisi, 2012; Westervelt & Cook, 2008).

Strickland (2016) conducted a study on African American ex-offenders transitioning back to their communities and learned that these individuals found it extremely difficult to make new connections postrelease. Clow and Leach (2009) investigated the social consequences of a wrongful conviction. Participants had to read an article on an exoneree, and their responses were compared and measured to other articles

they read on other individuals. The authors found that society had a negative perception of exonerees and did not think they would be good business partners, neighbors, friends, or intimate partners. Thompson, Molina, and Levett (2011) added that individuals in specific communities do not want to socialize or form any relationship with exonerees. Despite obstacles faced by African American male exonerees while reintegrating, some can reintegrate successfully into the community by using their old contacts to network and produce a positive outcome.

Reintegrating into the Family System

Family plays a crucial role during the reintegration process for ex-inmates, but the justice system does little to prepare families for this transition (Fishman, 1990). Travis et al. (2001) stated that the reintegration experience is shaped by the ex-inmates' lifestyle, values, and beliefs before incarceration, in addition to their mental and physical health status while incarcerated. There is limited research on the process of reintegrating into spousal/intimate partner relationships and roles post-release. However, Comfort et al. (2018) conducted a study on a couple of relationships during reentry. The authors found that intimate relationships deteriorated due to “communication patterns, partnership expectations, employment opportunities, and other factors that may end differently than expected during the transition from prison” (p. 202).

According to Herman-Stahl et al. (2017), most men return home into their family system and rely on their family for basic needs such as food, clothing, housing, money, and emotional support. In the qualitative data reported by Comfort et al. (2018), couples expressed that they were not prepared to deal with the unique challenges of the reentry

process. The women reported that they were not equipped to deal with the prison behaviors their partners developed while incarcerated. Trying to communicate or address problems would trigger those behaviors. This is why spouse/intimate partners should anticipate working through numerous challenges as their partner attempts to re-establish their roles as a spouse/intimate partner (Travis et al., 2001).

After serving a wrongful conviction, returning home can be overwhelming and exhausting for the exoneree and his spouse/intimate partner. In most cases, men transition into the family system struggling with the barriers associated with a wrongful conviction, in addition to the expectations from the family (Yocum & Nath, 2011). According to Busuttil and Busuttil (2001), the spouse or intimate partner taking on the role and responsibilities often make unrealistic expectations for their partner when they return home from prison. The spouse/intimate partner usually expects their spouse/intimate partner to jump back into their primary role and take on previous responsibilities they had before their incarceration. Farkas and Miller (2007) explained that jumping back into an old role is unrealistic and quite tricky due to the new family structure and changes the exoneree has endured. The authors added that once reality hits, the intimate partners soon realize they must learn about the person they once knew so well.

The results of serving a wrongful conviction can cause long-term turmoil in the exonerees' family and within themselves (Wikoff et al., 2012). A wrongful conviction can result in stigmatizing labels, re-occurring feelings of fear, isolation, bitterness, anger, a lack of up-to-date job skills, damaged relationships, financial dependency, and poor mental and physical health (Westervelt & Cook, 2008). Many participants in Grounds'

(2004) and Jenkin's (2013) studies reported that they had problems adapting to their new living situations and preferred to be alone. The participants also reported feeling embarrassed about not being able to operate up-to-date technology. Similarly, six participants in Groom's (2016) study said they struggled with being around family and friends after prison and self-isolated. One participant added that even though he lived with his family, he made sure to stay in his room, especially when friends or other family came around. Another participant shared that he and his wife were two different people after he served a prison sentence. Even with continued counseling from their pastor, they ended up separating.

Summary and Conclusion

In this section, I outlined relevant facts on the causes and effects of wrongful conviction and exoneration amongst African American males in the United States (Innocence Project, 2018). Furthermore, I provided supporting literature on factors impacting the prison and exoneration experience. I explored the four systems of Schlossberg's transition theory and models of transition to support the issue of the exoneration experience and reintegration. Understanding how an individual perceives a transition gives insight into how they might adjust and adapt to the reintegration experience and what factors to consider as part of transitioning from prison back into a family situation. The literature I outlined in this section offered some understanding regarding this, but the research is limited and does not fully explore the reintegration experience for exonerees transitioning back into their role as a spouse/partner in a family situation. The information I provided may address this gap in the existing literature

regarding the reintegration experience of exonerees as told from their perspective and improve understanding of the exoneree's needs postexoneration, offering improved knowledge about the transitional challenges they face when resuming their role in the family system. In this study, I examined this issue specifically with African American male exonerees and how they dealt with matters of reintegrating into the spousal/intimate role in the family system once exonerated.

In chapter 3, I will present the study methodology, including a discussion of the generic qualitative method. I will also discuss the rationale for the qualitative approach, the research design, data analysis, ethical considerations, reassertion of the research questions, and ways to ensure the study's trustworthiness.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to add to the current body of knowledge concerning African American exonerees as they reintegrated into their spousal or intimate partner role in the family system. In this chapter, I will restate the research questions designed to explore the phenomenon under investigation; namely, African American male exonerees reintegrate into their spousal or intimate partner role in the family system. I will justify the research design and provide in-depth information on the methodology and ethical procedures used for this study in this chapter. I will also discuss the role of the researcher, issues of trustworthiness, including dependability, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and conclude this chapter with a summary of the main points.

Research Design and Rationale

I used the following research questions to facilitate this study:

RQ1: How do African American male exonerees perceive their transition from a prison role (inmate) into an intimate role (husband/partner)?

RQ2: What resources do African American male exonerees identify as being most helpful as they transition back into partnership with their spouse/intimate partner and what do they identify as being least helpful?

RQ3: What do African American male exonerees indicate as barriers to re-establishing intimate partner relationships with their significant other once they transition back into the family system?

I used the research questions in this study as a guide to examine the central phenomenon of interest, which was how African American exonerees perceive the reintegration process into their spousal or intimate partner role in the family system.

According to Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018), research is classified as quantitative or qualitative in general. Quantitative and qualitative methodologies are two primary approaches used in numerous fields such as social science, education, physical science, and health science (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Landrum & Garza, 2015; Leung, 2015). The quantitative research method includes the use of a controlled design and precise measurements to examine a phenomenon (Malagon-Maldonado, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). On the other hand, qualitative researchers use strategies like open-ended questions in semistructured interviews to explore specific aspects of a phenomenon (Choy, 2014). Despite the different methods used in each qualitative research inquiry, I used the research question(s) as a guide to determine the research method to be used in this study (Anderson, 2010; Polit & Beck, 2012).

In this study, I used the qualitative research approach to gain an understanding of African American exonerees' experiences of reintegrating into their intimate partner role in the family system. Polit and Beck (2014) expressed that qualitative research methodology is explored when a phenomenon is not understood, and there is a desire to explore the phenomenon rigorously. Choy (2014) added that "qualitative research brings awareness to the social aspect of research" by gaining a rich narrative from the individuals associated with the phenomenon (p. 102). Using subjective data from participants in a qualitative study results in clarification of a phenomenon; in addition, it

enriches the knowledge base surrounding the phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2014; Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The qualitative research methodology consists of several research designs that can be used, including generic, phenomenological, narrative, ethnography, grounded theory, and case studies (Finlay, 2014). I considered each research methodology for this study; however, they did not align with the objective of this study. For example, phenomenological research investigates the lived experience of a phenomenon. The goal of phenomenological research is to make meaning of the phenomenon. The “phenomenologist’s interest is in the inner dimensions, textures, qualities, and structures (‘essences’) of those cognitive processes, not in the external content or referents that may trigger the cognitive processes” (Percy et al., 2015, p. 76-77). The narrative approach was not appropriate for this study because it does not describe the experiences or offer a concise understanding of the participants’ perceptions. The narrative approach focuses more on the stories of the experiences than understanding the person’s perceptions (Creswell, 2009). “Ethnography focuses on the investigation of the network of social groupings, social customs, beliefs, behaviors, groupings, practices, etc., that define a ‘culture.’ None of these topics focuses on that unit of analysis (social-cultural)” (Percy et al., 2015, p.76). For the grounded theory approach, researchers use data from people to develop a theoretical explanation of the process in question developed over time. The goal of this study was not to develop theories but to gain an understanding of a phenomenon. Finally, “Case studies are in-depth investigations of a ‘single case,’ and researchers use multiple methods and multiple sources of data. A single case is defined

by having recognizable boundaries that differentiate the case from any other collection of instances” (Percy et al., 2015, p. 76-77).

I used a qualitative research approach to support my intent to gain an improved understanding of the reintegration experiences African American exonerees, particularly as it relates to their initial transition from prison into intimate partner relationships. Researchers Polit and Beck (2014) and Rutberg and Bouikidis (2018) suggested that qualitative research is an appropriate methodology for exploring a phenomenon that needs more improved understanding. I sought to answer questions related to what, how, and why of the phenomena. One way to obtain rich data or detailed, in-depth knowledge of experiences is through qualitative research approaches, where improved clarity about a phenomenon is uncovered through the rich stories individuals tell about their experiences (Polit & Beck, 2014).

While researchers can use several qualitative approaches to explore a phenomenon more in-depth, for example, phenomenology, narrative, or case study, a generic design was most appropriate for this study's objectives. Anderson (2010) suggested that researchers should consider the best approach to support the goals of their qualitative study. Furthermore, Yilmaz (2013) explained that the research design for a study should support the purpose of the research study as a whole. My primary objective for this study was to discover and understand the inquired phenomenon. A generic qualitative research design is suitable for this research study because, according to Merriam (2009), the generic qualitative approach does not belong to a specific traditional research design. Instead, it takes pieces of each qualitative research design to reveal

something unique. This means that the generic qualitative approach does not follow a specific set of guidelines or theoretical assumptions like traditional qualitative methodologies (Creswell, 2009).

Research Tradition and Rationale

According to Kahlke (2014), generic qualitative inquiry focused on how an individual (a) comprehends personal experiences, (b) constructs their environment, and (c) legitimizes the phenomenon (Kahlke, 2014, p. 13). Furthermore, Landrum and Garza (2015) suggested that qualitative research takes more of a socially constructed reality approach, which lends the opportunity to gain meaning of the phenomenon from the target population involved. Qualitative research and social constructionism are aligned similarly by highlighting the social magnitude of humans and their ability to create their view of the world (Kahlke, 2014; Merriam, 2002). Epistemology explains the essence of knowledge, and constructivism explains how individuals construct their reality, which causes their perception, interpretation, and explanation of a phenomenon to be viewed differently (Ultanir, 2012, p. 196).

In this study, I explored these vital elements through a generic qualitative approach. I applied a generic qualitative approach to gain a comprehensive and concise understanding of the phenomenon based on the socially constructed perceptions given by the participants using semistructured interviews, namely perceptions of African American exonerees as they reintegrated into the spouse/intimate partner role in the family system.

Role of the Researcher

Fink (2000) described the researcher's role as displaying potential bias when conducting and analyzing qualitative data. A researcher's perspective, beliefs, and background could initiate a biased perspective and negatively impact study interpretations, findings, and implications (Raheim et al., 2016). Researcher bias is always a potential issue when conducting research and can arise at any stage of this process (Chenail, 2011; Creswell, 2009; Malone et al., 2014). Therefore, researchers should adopt or formulate appropriate strategies to decrease potential bias. Sutton and Austin (2015) suggested that researchers be reflexive and clearly outline their position, perspective, and bias. I used this strategy allow readers to understand the process taken while conducting the study and the researcher's efforts to minimize bias.

Researchers, by their societal experience, come to a research project with potential bias. Raheim et al. (2016) explained that awareness of potential bias and developing a plan to alleviate its effects on a study is essential. When I examined researcher bias for this study, the issue of cultural bias could have posed a concern, based on my social experience with the subject of the disproportionate incarceration of African American men and having some personal investment in addressing the sociocultural inequities as it relates to incarceration in the African American community. I was aware and acknowledged that I had some personal investment in learning more about the target population. I am an African American woman, and I empathize with this population and the phenomenon studied. I have not worked or volunteered with this population; however, I have witnessed many African American men struggle to receive assistance

and support after serving a conviction. I recognized potential bias from my own sociocultural experience regarding this research project and identified strategies to help eliminate or minimize research bias.

There are many strategies used in qualitative research to decrease or alleviate researcher bias. Levitt and colleagues (2017) reported that bracketing and journaling are two strategies used to add structure to a study and limit the researcher from inserting a biased perspective when examining the data. In the case of possible cultural bias, I used a reflection journal to minimize research biases and be conscious of my reactions during the data collection and interpretation process. Thorne et al. (2016) support this strategy as well.

Further, I elected to use inclusion criteria; namely, the exonerees chosen for this study were in or had been in an intimate partner relationship postexoneration. This criterion eliminated some exoneree participants who may have had an important perspective worthy of exploration; however, given the study's research purpose and research questions, I only included African American male exonerees with a previous or current intimate partner experience, postexoneration, and focused on the inquired experience and minimized discrepant cases. As mentioned in previous sections, the majority of exonerees in the United States are African American men (National Registry of Exoneration, 2018). Therefore, in this study, I targeted this population group, and in most cases, they had some intimate partnership postexoneration.

Methodology

In this section, I explain the methodology of this generic qualitative study, which included the sampling strategy, data collection activities, recruitment procedures, data analysis plan, and participant protection. In this section, I outlined strategies I used to address elements related to the study's trustworthiness.

Participant Selection Logic

Sampling Strategy

In qualitative research, according to Isaacs (2014), the sampling design predominately used is nonprobability sampling. The author explained that qualitative sampling links specific groups of individuals who are able to share relevant perspectives that elicit a range of experiences associated with a particular phenomenon. For this reason, Isaacs (2014) considered all qualitative sampling strategies purposeful. The purposeful sampling strategy I employed for this project was snowball sampling. According to Griffith et al. (2016), snowball sampling is one of the most commonly used research sampling strategies in qualitative research.

Isaacs (2014) defined snowball sampling as a nonprobability sampling method for examining and exploring “the direct social environment of one or several individuals through sociometric questions” (p. 32). I used snowball sampling to access the target population that might be otherwise hard to access. I also achieved the desired sample size for this study using the snowball sampling approach. While sampling bias was present due to the nonprobability nature of snowball sampling, for this study, it was a reliable sampling strategy to recruit study participants who provided rich insight regarding the

specific exoneree experience that was exclusive and unique to the target participant group. Snowball sampling was relevant to this study because I was able to recruit a few participants, initially, who then shared information about this study with other exonerees who could provide detailed knowledge of the phenomenon of interest.

Sample Size

According to Mason (2010) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016), qualitative researchers should consider the following components when determining sample size: (a) the scope and nature of the research, (b) whether the topic under exploration is clear, (c) the quality of the information, (d) the research design, and (e) timeframe. Some researchers argued that a study's sample size could be small or large, varying from one participant to as many as 100 participants (Cerezo et al., 2014; Dworkin, 2012). Others advised that most samples in qualitative research are less than 20 (Guest et al., 2006) and that for a generic qualitative study, the average sample size was 12 (Cooper & Endacott, 2007).

Determining a sample size in a qualitative research study could be estimated before collecting data or while data is collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample size and data saturation in a qualitative study support trustworthiness in the study (Hennin et al., 2016). According to Cooper and Endacott (2007), sampling to the point of saturation is a requirement of qualitative research. Reaching data saturation means no new data has emerged from the participants (Cooper & Endacott, 2007). Since Guest et al. (2006) and Onwegbuzie and Leech (2007) recognized 12 as the most common sample size when conducting one-on-one interviews, I planned for the sample size for this study

to be between 10 and 12 or until saturation is met. Saturation was met after I gained nine participants for this study.

Instrumentation

The researcher in qualitative research is the presumed instrument to facilitate the unearthing or discovery of a phenomenon in general and specific, unique aspects of the phenomenon (Anyan, 2013; Tracy, 2013). Essentially, the researcher is the main instrument to collect the data. In the case of this study, I used open-ended questions to conduct semistructured interviews. This allowed participants to elaborate and provide in-depth details of the intimate partner relationship experience post-exoneration. When collecting data in a generic qualitative study, Roulston (2018) recommended semistructured interviews. These types of interviews grant researchers the flexibility to ask predetermined open-ended questions and have room to ask additional questions relevant to the participant's responses, while restating further comments given by the participant to gain clarity (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

According to Polit et al. (2014), face-to-face interviews, whether semistructured or structured, are imperative to qualitative research and have been deemed the most preferred or primary method to collect data. This point has been reported and supported by other authors. As stated by Merriam (2009) and Patton (2002), it allowed the researcher to access the individual's perspective closely and gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Hawkins (2018) agreed with Polit et al.'s (2014) findings but highlighted noticeable changes to the traditional method used to conduct interviews within the last three decades. In addition, the continued progress in

technology has introduced innovative techniques for interviewing, including emails, telephone, text message, and videoconference in qualitative research (Hawkins, 2018; Oltmann, 2016). However, even with the advancements in technology and the increase in interviewing options to collect data, Hawkins (2018) stated that researchers should consider assessing potential factors when examining an advanced method for their study. “This includes the study’s objective, the person’s availability to complete the interview, their comfortability and accessibility with the finance component, technology component, and other unforeseen factors when using email as a method to conduct interviews in a study” (Hawkins, 2018, p.1).

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Adjustments to Recruitment Activities

During the recruitment process, several things interfered with my ability to gain participants in this study. However, potential participants shared two situations, specifically, unforeseen stressors initiated by COVID-19 and finding time to schedule the interview, which caused me to contact Walden’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) to make adjustments. As a result, on February 24, 2021, I submitted a change in procedures form to include an additional way for participants to complete the interview via email within a specific timeframe. I also asked if I could change the Visa gift card amount from \$15 to \$20 because I couldn’t find any Visa gift cards for that amount in my area. The IRB approved my request, and changes were effective immediately. This study’s approval number and expiration date remained the same. Due to the changes made to the recruitment procedures, I was able to gain more participants and successfully work

around their schedules. A more in-depth description of this process is outlined in Chapter 5 of this study.

Recruitment of Participants

Upon the approval of the IRB application, I was allowed to proceed to the final stage of this study. At the start of the data collection stage, until saturation was met, I used details from the National Registry of Exonerations to learn the names of exonerated individuals. The National Registry of Exonerations is a public online forum that provides up-to-date data on wrongful convictions and the names of the individuals, along with their stories (National Registry of Exonerations, 2020). This online forum gains its information mainly from public records and the exonerees that contact them directly to share their story. The National Registry of Exonerations has documented exonerations since 1989, so I utilized the forum's available internal tools to narrow my search down to African American males (National Registry of Exonerations, 2020).

After learning the names of several African American male exonerees, I used Facebook, particularly the Messenger feature, to contact the individuals. I sent each of them an invitation message and a copy of the recruitment flyer, which outlined a brief summary of the study and offered my contact information. As a recruitment method for this study, I also shared an invitation message and flyer with groups used by and targeting exonerees on Facebook and other online community forums and organizations that agreed to share the information with others. In the invitation message, I introduced myself, offered to chat via phone to explain my study more in-depth, addressed all questions or concerns, and asked that the flyer be posted in a suitable location so group

members could be aware of the study. Unfortunately, only one group responded to the invitation sent through Facebook Messenger, so I continued to use the National Registry for Exonerations to compile a list of African American male exonerees. Interested participants began to contact me primarily by phone to verify the inclusion criteria and learn more about the study. The inclusion criteria for this study required participants to: (a) be an African American male exoneree; (b) was married or in an intimate relationship before being incarcerated; and (c) was married or in an intimate relationship after being released. Participants in this study did not have to be in the same intimate relationship postexoneration. As long as they were in a relationship preincarceration and postexoneration, they could participate in this study. After I addressed their concerns and confirmed the inclusion criteria for this study, I sent the participants the informed consent form via email. Once consent was granted by the participant, I inquired about their availability to schedule the interview.

Following the approval of changes in procedures, several individuals contacted me via phone regarding this study. Many of them were referred by the participants I interviewed prior to the changes made in the procedures. I sent them a copy of the protocol script for a snowball sampling strategy via text or email, whichever they preferred, and verbally asked if they would share the flyer with other exonerees that might be interested in this study. This technique was effective in this study due to the limited access to the population. Etikan et al. (2015) stated that snowball sampling had been a staple in qualitative research and sociological research, specifically when interacting with a hard-to-reach population. When interested individuals contacted me

about this study, I reviewed the inclusion criteria and addressed their concerns before sharing the informed consent form via email. Once the participant gave consent to participate in the study, I contacted them briefly by phone, email, or Facebook Messenger, before scheduling the interview to ensure they had a clear understanding of the study and offered a copy of supportive resources.

Data Collection

Jamshed (2015) reported that semistructured interviews allow the participant to provide rich data mainly due to the open-ended questions, which in most cases, are prepared in advance. For this study, I used open-ended questions to conduct semistructured interviews with participants. At the beginning of each interview, I informed the participant that the call was being audio-recorded, explained the interviewing process, which included an estimated timeframe, the demographic questionnaire, and their verbal permission to start the interview.

Following the suggestion reported by Fritz and Vandermause (2018) regarding the email interviewing method, none of my interviews were concurrent, which catered to the quality of the collected data for this study. I used an online voice recorder application, called Rev, which was compatible with my laptop, desktop, and mobile device to record my phone interviews.

Participants in this study completed the interview in the comfort of their homes or desired location. Before conducting the interview, whether it be by phone, Zoom, or email, I made sure the location was quiet, comfortable, and suitable for me. To promote comfortability and privacy for the participants, I encouraged them to choose a private

area where they felt safe and comfortable with limited-to-no distractions. However, this wasn't possible for some participants due to their comfortability and availability. In addition, some participants preferred to drive while sharing their perspectives, which caused issues with connectivity via phone and noticeable lags in our responses during the interview. These issues could be observed as minor distractions, but they did not interfere with the exoneree's willingness to complete the interview or take away from their experiences.

For the email interviews, I completed an additional step before ending the interview for verification purposes, which increased the credibility of this study. I saved the participant's response as a PDF and sent it back for review and verification. After reviewing the document, ensuring that the information was the same and not tampered with, they replied to the email, agreeing that they completed the interview. After completing the interview, I thanked the participant, informed them that I would share a summary of the findings once completed, and asked verbally and via email for an address to mail their Visa gift card. Next, I ended the call, immediately saved the audio recording using an alphanumeric code (i.e., H2R1, B7), and summarized my interpretation of the details shared by the participant in my reflexive notes. Finally, I paid for Rev's automated transcription of each recorded interview, which was completed by the computer instead of a human being. All documents pertaining to this study, including the auto-recording, transcribed interviews, flash drive, and notes, were stored in a safe location, password-protected fireproof lockbox, which only I can access.

Data Analysis Plan

Percy et al. (2015) explained that researchers use a thematic analysis process when analyzing data in a generic qualitative study. The authors described three types of thematic analysis in their research: inductive, theoretical, and thematic. I used the thematic analysis approach in this study. Percy et al. (2015) highlighted that the analysis starts when the researcher begins to collect data in the thematic analysis approach. According to Percy et al. (2015), analyzing the data after conducting each interview will allow me to "constantly move back and forth between current data and previous data that is coded and clustered into patterns. Patterns and themes will change and grow as the analysis continues throughout the process" (Percy et al., 2015, p. 83)

In qualitative research, researchers used coding to symbolically assigns a label to a portion of relevant data in a study (Elliott, 2018). Creswell (2015) defined coding as "the process of analyzing qualitative data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way" (p. 156). Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) considered coding a method of discovery: "The researcher determines the code for a chunk of data by careful reading and reflection on its core content or meaning. This gives the researcher intimate, interpretative familiarity with every datum in the corpus" (p. 73). Researcher Saldana (2016) suggested that researchers focus on patterns, similarities, and relationships in the data that refer to the research questions in the study to decrease irrelevant coding.

Authors Percy et al. (2015) outlined a detailed step-by-step analysis the researcher can use in this study. They suggest that the researcher include a review of the transcribed

recording, listen to the audio recordings, and review the researcher's notes for each interview, both separate and along with listening to the interview recording or reading the transcribed interview. Other steps include initial coding, secondary coding, and identifying research questions relevant to secondary coding, which ultimately should generate the identification of key themes to explore.

I used the thematic analysis approach to identify, analyze, organize, and report recurring themes found throughout the data collection and analysis process in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). For example, I used strategies such as reflexing, revisiting, labeling, and highlighting phrases or chunks of data to examine the similarities and differences in the participant's response and determine what sections of the data are prevalent. In addition, I was able to familiarize myself with the data while conducting the study with the thematic analysis approach. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Issues of Trustworthiness

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness strengthens the value of a research study. Anney (2014) suggested that qualitative researchers employ credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable data in their studies. Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) agreed with Anney's assertion that trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in a qualitative study (Anney, 2014). To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I used multiple strategies that complemented each other to ensure rigor that can produce quality research (Tracy, 2010).

Credibility

I achieved credibility in this qualitative study by triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking (Anney, 2014). I used reflexivity and data triangulation. According to Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy (2013), reflexivity is a strategy used to promote self-awareness. I documented my feelings to decrease the chances of it influencing the data. Korstjens and Moser (2018) stated that data triangulation is allowing another professional researcher to review the transcripts and see if they come up with similar codes/themes as the researcher. Other professionals used triangulation to verify developing themes outlined by the researcher from the data, increasing the trustworthiness of this study. Lastly, I used reflexive journaling in this study to stay aware of research bias that could occur.

Transferability

In this study, I aimed to explore African American exonerees' experiences as they reintegrated into spousal/intimate roles in the family system. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), transferability is gaining a full description of the participants and the research process. The full report will include details that allow readers to connect the study results to their setting (Cope, 2014; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). To gain their perspectives, I used a criterion purposeful sample to gather informative information on the phenomenon of interest. The study results would foster transferability by outlining descriptions of the research process and the context of the study (Anney, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability refers to the study's stability and consistency (Bengtsson, 2016; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Researchers address dependability to understand their methods and determine if they are valid. In this study, I addressed dependability by formulating well-documented notes and developing an audit trail (Bengtsson, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, I carefully tracked the research process, including records, notes, and a clear outline of methods use during data collection and data analysis. Taking these steps would promote dependability and ensure that the data support the findings as opposed to my perspectives (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Confirmability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), audit trail, triangulation, and reflexivity employ confirmability. This is because the audit trail vividly describes steps the researcher will take from beginning to end. To promote confirmability, I used audit trails and reflexive journals to deliver a complete set of documentation, outlining each step taken during the research process (Anney, 2014). This allowed me to be transparent and present a detailed trail (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

Ethical Procedures and Considerations

According to the Department of Health and Human Services (2017), the Belmont Report outlines ethical principles and guidelines for research with human subjects. The basic ethical principles are Respect for Persons, Beneficence, and Justice, and they are put in place to protect human participants. To ensure I follow Walden's IRB guidelines, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program course,

which the University requires. The record ID number is 37689099 and the completion date was July 30, 2020. The participants for this study are not considered to be a vulnerable population. However, I followed the Code of Federal Regulations, 45 CFR 46, better known as the Common Rule.

I advised participants to contact me with any questions concerning the study and inform them that they have the right to stop participating in this study at any time. To ensure participants are linked to appropriate resources during this study, I provided a list of national counseling organizations and their contact information. I encouraged all participants to utilize the list of counseling if they need to speak to someone at any time during this study and afterward.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

When conducting any research study, researchers must be transparent with the participant to decrease ethical challenges. Researchers in qualitative studies are a part of all stages of the research process, and they need to clarify their role to potential participants (Sanjari et al., 2014). After explaining my role in the study, discussing confidentiality and the informed consent form will help minimize confusion and limit assumptions. The informed consent I used is the template given by Walden's IRB board. It is easy for individuals with a high school education to read and understand. However, in the event participants struggled with reading or understanding this document, I would read the document to them and make sure it is broken down and understood. During the initial contact, I explained the nature of the study, inclusion criteria, informed consent, audio recording, and identified the individuals who will have access to the records,

including the research committee members and myself. I used password-protected files to electronically save each audio-recorded and transcribed interview. I stored the transcribed data for up to five years, per Walden's IRB requirements. Next, I deleted all audio recordings once transcribed and saved the transcribed interview as password-protected Word files using an alphanumeric code, i.e., 1101,1102. Lastly, I kept interviews in random order to alleviate potential research bias from one interview to the next. Written documents, including informed consent forms, reflexive notes, field notes, and data transcriptions, will be stored in a fireproof filing cabinet or lockbox kept at the researcher's office workspace.

Summary

In this generic qualitative study, I aimed to understand the reintegration process of African American male exonerees into an intimate partner role in the family system. I outlined the research questions designed to investigate the phenomenon of interest in this study. In this chapter, I justified using a generic qualitative approach, the role of the researcher, the criteria used to select potential participants, in addition to the justification for using a purposive sampling recruitment strategy, semistructured interviews, data collection procedures, and data analysis. Lastly, I included the importance of trustworthiness and how to establish it in a qualitative study, as well as ethical procedures the researchers will take before conducting this study.

In chapter 4 of this study, I will include a thick description of the phenomenon of interest from the participant's perspective and the demographics of each participant. I will also provide a detailed description of the data analysis process used,

including codes, clusters, and themes that emerged from the data collected in the study.

Lastly, I will discuss the findings of the study, along with implications for social work practice and research.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the experience of African American male exonerees reintegrating into spouse or intimate partner relationships, barriers faced with reintegration, and resources needed to support successful reintegration. In this study, I pose research questions related to the reintegration experiences of African American male exonerees who are transitioning from prison back into their family system and into their roles as a spouse or intimate partner. I used the following research questions as a guide in this study:

RQ1: How do African American male exonerees perceive their transition from a prison role (inmate) into an intimate role (husband/partner)?

RQ2: What resources do African American male exonerees identify as being most helpful as they transition back into partnership with their spouse/intimate partner, and what do they identify as being least helpful?

RQ3: What do African American male exonerees indicate as barriers to re-establishing intimate partner relationships with their significant other once they transition back into the family system?

In this chapter, I will provide a detailed overview of the study's setting, demographics of the participants, the data collection process, and the thematic analysis process used. I also provide evidence of trustworthiness, address research questions using evidence of emerging themes from participants, and conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings.

Setting

For this study, I did not do any traveling because participants completed the online interview in the comfort of their homes or desired location. Before conducting the interview, whether it be by phone, Zoom, or email, I made sure the location was quiet, comfortable, and suitable for me. To promote comfortability and privacy for the participants, I encouraged them to choose a private area where they felt safe and comfortable with limited to no distractions. Several issues could be viewed as minor distractions due to their comfortability and availability. However, this did not interfere with the exoneree's willingness to complete the interview or take away from their experiences. No one, at any time during the interview, reported psychological distress or withdrew from the study.

Demographics

The sample size for this study was nine, one less than the proposed number, which was 10. The participants shared specific demographical information before the interview. All participants identified as African American men aged from 42 to 55 years old. Due to a wrongful conviction, the number of years each participant was incarcerated ranged from a minimum of 9 years and 7 months to a maximum of 26 years. The number of years each participant has been exonerated ranged from 1 year to 15 years and 3 months. Eight participants reported their pre-incarceration and postexoneration relationship status as dating. Only one participant reported that they were married pre-incarceration and postexoneration. I did not include any of the participant's identifying information for protection purposes. Instead, I randomly picked an alphanumeric code

(i.e., B7) for each participant. Demographic details of each participant are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant's Demographic Information

Participant	Race	Gender	Age	# of yrs. incarcerated	# of yrs. exonerated	Pre/Post Relationship status
B7	Black	Male	55	26	10	Dating
Zb25	Black	Male	44	23	1	Dating
EE5	Black	Male	55	25 ½	2	Dating
H2R1	Black	Male	42	20	2	Dating
So8	Black	Male	51	18 yrs./1 mo	15 yrs./ 3 mos	Dating
Vx4	Black	Male	54	9 yrs./ 7 mos	13 yrs./ 4 mos	Married
F2E	Black	Male	44	15	9	Dating
Xc1	Black	Male	46	14	5	Dating
Co23	Black	Male	45	10 yrs./2 mos	5	Dating
Total # of participants						9

Data Collection

For this study, I used Facebook, particularly the platform's Messenger feature, to send each of the targeted participants an invitation message and a copy of the recruitment flyer. After that, I screened each participant using the inclusion criteria for this study, which required participants to be an African American male exoneree who is/was married or in an intimate relationship before incarceration and postexoneration. However, participants did not have to be in an intimate relationship with the same person before

incarceration or postexoneration. Therefore, as long as they were in a relationship pre-incarceration and postexoneration, they could participate in this study. Afterward, the informed consent form was signed voluntarily, and the interview was scheduled.

I used open-ended questions to conduct semistructured interviews with participants. In addition, before and after each interview, I offered a copy of supportive resources. The duration of the online interviews completed via Zoom and phone ranged from 23 minutes to 118 minutes, and interviews conducted via email were completed within a timeframe of 1 to 2 weeks. I used an online voice recorder application called Rev to record my phone interviews. Each participant authorized audio recording prior to the interview. I did not follow up with participants that completed their interview via phone or Zoom. However, I saved the participant's response as a PDF for the email interviews and sent it back for review and verification. Then I shared a copy of the protocol script for a snowball sampling strategy.

Next, I saved the audio recording immediately using an alphanumeric code (i.e., H2R1, B7) and paid for Rev's automated transcription of each recorded interview, which was completed by the computer as opposed to a human being. Then I used the computer version to transcribe the interviews manually. All documents pertaining to this study, including the audio-recording, transcribed interviews, flash drive, and notes, were stored in a safe location as well as a password-protected fireproof lockbox, which only I can access.

As described in Chapter 3, I experienced challenges with recruitment in this study. Adjustments to the proposed recruitment plan had to be made due to unexpected

stressors related to COVID-19 and scheduling interviews at a feasible time. As a result, from December 2020 to February 2021, I could only recruit four participants for this study. Because of the difficulties with recruitment, I submitted a change of procedure form to Walden's IRB committee. Upon approval, participants were able to participate in this study via phone, Zoom, and email. After revising the initial recruitment plan, from March 2021 to May 2021, I recruited five participants and completed their interviews via email.

I experienced one particular disadvantage with email interviews, which offered limited responses on behalf of participants. Two out of five participants that completed their interview via email gave an in-depth answer for each question. The remaining three participants provided short responses, which could negatively impact the study's findings. Nonetheless, I used this strategy to cater to the needs of this population, which as a result, granted nine participants the opportunity to share their experience with the phenomena of interest.

Data Analysis Coding Process

Thematic Analysis Approach

To analyze the data in this generic qualitative study, I used the thematic analysis approach. Braun and Clarke (2006) described the thematic analysis approach as flexible, accessible, and comprehensible for entry-level researchers. I used the thematic analysis is a six-phased iterative process to simultaneously engage in data collection and data analysis while investigating the phenomenon of interest (Nowell et al., 2017). Nowell et al. (2017) reviewed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process and summarized

it in layman's terms as "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set" (p. 2). According to Percy et al. (2015), analyzing the data while conducting interviews allows researchers to "constantly move back and forth between current data and previous data that is coded and clustered into patterns.

However, patterns and themes will change and grow as the analysis continues throughout the process" (Percy et al., 2015, p. 83).

Familiarize Self with the Data

According to Braun and Clarke (2012), phase one of the thematic analysis process instructs the researcher to familiarize themselves with the data, which is standard in qualitative research. The purpose of this phase is for researchers to intimately immerse themselves in the data to detect information that could potentially be relevant to the study's research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012). To begin this phase, I prepared the location where this process took place before reviewing the interviews to ensure it was suitable and distractions were minimized. Next, I transcribed each interview manually, using the automated transcription as a starting point while listening to the audio recordings. Braun and Clarke (2012) stated,

Note-making helps you start to read the data as data. Reading data as data means not simply absorbing the surface meaning of the words on the page, as you might read a novel or magazine, but reading the words actively, analytically, and critically, and starting to think about what the data mean. (pp. 60-61).

I reviewed each transcript individually and made notes casually rather than systematically because coding does not start in this phase. However, notes taken in this

phase should be viewed “as memory aids and triggers for coding and analysis” and only used “to help with the process of analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, pg. 61).

Generate Initial Codes

In the second phase, the systematic analysis begins. Researchers should reflect on their notes and the data to generate initial codes, which “are the building blocks of analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 67). Codes, according to Braun and Clarke (2012) define, label, and provide an interpretation of the data that could potentially cater to the study’s research questions. As I continued to immerse myself in the data, patterns were apparent while generating the initial and secondary codes for this study. Revisiting the past and present textual data and audio recordings constantly allowed me to get acquainted with the data and focus on meaningful phrases, words, or paragraphs that could potentially be relevant to the study’s research questions. As I reviewed the hard copy data, I used shorthand writing to code specific portions, phrases, and words in the data. The initial codes were parallel to the participant’s verbiage. For example, the code lack of knowledge mirrored the participant’s response (e.g., SO8 said, “I lack knowledge of living life free now.”) Other initial codes included hard, prison experience, strange, mindset, judged, and heartbreaking.

Search for Themes

In this phase, the initial and secondary codes transition into themes. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), “A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research questions and represents some level of patterned response or meaning with the data set” (p. 82). In this phase, according to Braun and Clarke (2012),

researchers should review the initial and secondary codes for similarity, which is essential to “creating themes and subthemes, which are subcomponents of a theme” (p. 68). I grouped codes with identical meaning into patterns while searching for themes. I used the study’s research questions to link the participant’s responses to relevant patterns, making it easier to identify any shift in the past data while comparing the current data. In addition, I used different color highlighters to keep up with the repeating codes and patterns, which as a result, helped me construct themes from the coded data. Braun and Clarke (2012) stated that a crucial part of data analysis in qualitative research is discarding coded material and temporary themes that aren’t relevant to the overall analysis. The data that did not complement the study’s research questions were filed separately at first, but later discarded because the findings in this study should tell a story that was guided by the research questions and relevant to the phenomena of interest.

Review Potential Themes

Braun and Clarke (2012) stated that this phase involves reviewing the raw data, coded data, and potential themes thoroughly to ensure it is unified and complements each other, which is quality checking. In this phase, I moved back and forth through the coded data and potential themes to explore the similarities. Additionally, I sent an audio recorded interview with the transcription and an email interview to an expert in qualitative research—the chair of this dissertation—for peer debriefing. After processing the feedback from peer debriefing, I narrowed down the themes and added subthemes to each data set. Finally, I revisited all the raw data to ensure the identified themes and

subthemes represented the data appropriately and were relevant to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Define, Name, and Report Themes

According to Braun and Clarke (2013), Phase 5 and 6 of the thematic analysis process are slightly inseparable due to the extensive analytic work that is involved. At this point, the interpretation of the coded data and identified themes should align with the study's research questions and the researcher's scholarly field of work (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Additionally, the themes should catch the reader's attention, giving them a glimpse of what it entails. With that in mind, I reviewed the coded data along with the themes and subthemes and engaged in peer debriefing once again. Next, I identified initial codes, then conducted secondary coding to arrive at eventual themes and subthemes per the themes identified. Each theme suggests a relevant aspect of the participants and allows for the development of meaning and understanding of the participant's experience. After going through the analysis process of initial transcription review, as well as ongoing transcription review and field memos, I arrived at themes that were identified based on my interpretation of the data. These eventual themes helped form meaning of the participant's experiences and drew conclusions about the spousal or intimate partner relationship experience post-exoneration. Initial codes, secondary codes, participant's response, emerging themes, and subthemes are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1*Coding and Emerging Themes*

Research Question	Participant's response	Initial Codes	Secondary Codes	Themes	Sub-Themes
RQ1:	SO8: "Spousal role was more advanced since being incarcerated."	Hard, Confusing, Strange, Mindset, Mistrust, Heartbreaking, Controlled, Judged, Stereotyped	Impossible Detachment	Emotional Turmoil	Relationship Distancy
RQ2:	Zb25: "Nobody supports me; I'm alone in various things." B7: "Counseling will help us understand each other." EE5: "We like social dinosaurs, left behind."	Help, Support, Heard, Dinosaurs, Sense of Community, Individual Counseling, Family Counseling	Practical Support without manipulation	Public Advocacy Within Communities	Psychosocial Support
RQ3:	Zb25: "Job interview is like being on trial again or going before the parole board again." SO8: "Lack Knowledge of living life free now."	Lack of Knowledge, Visible, Prison Experience, Baggage, traumatized	Adjusting	The Invisible Experience	The Effects of Prison

Regarding Figure 1, initial codes were generated after I became familiar with the raw data, and I used the participants' language for labelling. As I continued to move back and forth through the data, I grouped the initial codes per the research questions, and further refined to secondary codes like Impossible detachment for RQ 1 or Adjusting for RQ 3, and ultimately, referring these codes to themes like "emotional turmoil. Subthemes like relationship distancy and psychosocial support were identified based on notable patterns in the data and their relevance to the research questions.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

I used the thematic analysis approach for this generic study to immerse myself in the thick data, and it also increased the trustworthiness of this study. According to Amankwaa (2016), trustworthiness is an asset to qualitative research as it enhances the quality and rigor of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) reported that credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability must be established to produce trustworthiness in a study. Nowell et al. (2017) used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness as a guide to developing practical steps researchers can take during each phase of the thematic analysis approach to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research. I used several strategies outlined in Nowell et al.'s (2017) step-by-step process as a guide to ensure trustworthiness was established during the entire research process, which is outlined in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Establishing Trustworthiness During the Thematic Analysis Process

Thematic Analysis Phases	Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarize yourself with your data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engaged all the data Utilized reflective journaling to document essential notes, and thoughts Manually transcript the data Acknowledged potential codes
Phase 2: Generate initial codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manually color-coded words, sentences and paragraphs that were similar and relevant to the research questions Discussed potential codes with dissertation chair Revisited the audio recordings and raw data
Phase 3: Search for themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Linked similar codes to formulate themes Outlined essential details about each theme and prioritized each. Separated data that did not support this study Revisited the audio recordings
Phase 4: Review themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discussed themes and subthemes with dissertation chair Revisited data to support each identified theme and subtheme
Phase 5: Define and name themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Debriefed final themes and justification with dissertation chair Revisited the raw data and audio recordings Finalized name and definition of each theme and subtheme
Phase 6: Produce the report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Debriefed findings with dissertation chair Outlined specific details of the thematic analysis process Produced a scholarly report of the findings

Credibility

To preserve credibility in this qualitative study, I asserted a rigorous protocol described in Chapter 3 before investigating the interesting phenomenon. Further, I used reflexivity, which promoted self-awareness and minimized potential bias throughout the

research process. I used reflexive journaling and memo writing to document my thoughts before, during, and after each interview. In addition, I used reflexive journaling to brainstorm potential codes and themes while conducting the study. Another strategy I used was data triangulation. I moved back and forth through the data, including interviews, audio recordings, and reflexive notes, to strengthen the credibility of this study, and stored the raw data and textual data to create an audit trail for future use if adequacy is needed (Nowell, 2017). The final strategy I used to improve credibility and become aware of overlooked problems or issues in the study was peer debriefing.

Transferability

According to Anney (2014), outlining the research process and the study context, in detail, addresses transferability in qualitative research. To foster transferability in this study, I provided an in-depth description of the thematic analysis approach and specific techniques used during the research process. Further, I used an inclusion criterion for this study and asked participants to complete a demographic questionnaire that provided a clear description of the participants. Korstjens and Moser (2018) added that a comprehensive description of the research study findings allows researchers to understand the context and search for connectivity within the study. As a result, I used reflexive journaling and thick descriptions of the participant's perspective and experiences with the phenomenon of interest to interpret the findings, making it simple for readers to evaluate transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I also documented the adjustments made to the recruitment procedures and limitations to the study to ensure readers a clear understanding of the research process.

Dependability

I established dependability in this study with an audit trail and a comprehensive and concise description of the research process. Bengtsson (2016) noted that dependability in qualitative research depends on the study's stability and consistency, which is vital to the trustworthiness component. I provided an in-depth description of the research process, including the data collection and data analysis, and developing an audit trail of the raw textual data to address dependability in this study. According to Korstjens and Moser (2018), the specific strategies noted supports the notion that the findings from the study are supported by the data instead of the researcher's perspective.

Confirmability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) reported that the researcher should inquire about an audit trail, triangulation, and reflexivity to establish confirmability in qualitative research. To address confirmability and be transparent in this study, I outlined the specific steps taken in the thematic analysis process, congruent with the suggested techniques to promote trustworthiness in qualitative research (Nowell et al., 2017). I also developed an audit trail and stored the raw data, including all textual data collected during the research process, after completing the data triangulation strategy of moving back and forth through the material. Using these techniques confirms that I followed the research process appropriately, and the collected data and findings are accurate.

Results

In this study, I sought to gain an understanding of the participants' experience during the reintegration process and what resources and supports are needed to help them

re-establish their role as spouses or intimate partners in the family system. I used the thematic analysis approach to highlight and code the data retrieved from participants using semistructured interviews. As a result, I was able to identify three emerging themes and three subthemes for all three research questions and formulate an interpretation of the participant's perspective of the investigated phenomenon. A detailed description of the emerging themes and subthemes, with supporting quotes from the participants, for each research question is outlined below.

Theme 1: Emotional Turmoil

The participants in this study were wrongfully convicted and served a minimum of 9 years and a maximum of 26 years in prison. All nine participants shared that the emotional experiences they endured when they were falsely accused heightened when they were wrongfully convicted and continued post-exoneration. The following theme emerged from RQ1: How do African American male exonerees perceive their transition from a prison role (inmate) into an intimate role (husband/partner)? Research question one asked participants to explain their role and responsibilities in the family system prior to being wrongfully convicted and to describe their experience of transitioning back into that role, post-exoneration. Some questions asked to answer the main research question were: "As a spouse/intimate partner in the family system, what does your role as a spouse consist of?" and "How were things for you in terms of re-acclimating back into the family system after being wrongfully convicted?"

Seven participants described their transition back into their role as a spouse or intimate partner in the family system as hard, chaotic, different, strange, and scary.

Zb25: "It was hard because reality is, it takes finances to uplift, maintain and actually keep things afloat when coming home."

EE5: "She is a dominant person and will not take that stuff. I'm not going to take that stuff, so it was different and not easy."

H2R1: "Re-acclimating back into spouse/partner was chaos. I always remained frustrated because she never tried to assist me in learning what was needed to restart my life being free. As a spouse upon release, I really did not know what to expect because she was a different spouse from the spouse I was with before incarceration. I started being out on bond first before being completely released, so I started by living with my spouse, upon which she had a son living there and two grandkids. My first situation within the home was being there without a job, so I mostly worked around the house, the grandkids were closer to me than the spouse. It was her home in which she lived many years before our meeting each other, so my role there was just being there because everything belonged to her. I did not know how to be the head of the household."

Vx4: "It was different when I came home. My wife was different and my boys act like I was a stranger."

F2E: "Re-acclimating was strange and scary. I felt fear, confusion as to what to do next, no confident in how to except the worldly responsibilities, yet happy."

Xc1: "After I got out things were hard because I was different, and she was too. I spent 14 years in prison and how things go down in there is totally different from the real world."

Co23: “It was heartbreaking and hard to attempt to rebuild those relationships. My spouse left me and was in another relationship. My children did not know me.”

Seven participants made at least one statement regarding the emotional turmoil they experienced after being accused and wrongfully convicted of a crime they did not commit. The participant’s response aligns with the eventual theme because they continue to experience the effects of being wrongfully convicted even after being exonerated. This theme is relevant to the research question because it is how the participants perceive their transition from a prison role into an intimate role in the family system. While sharing their experience, several participants acknowledged that serving a wrongful conviction caused friction in their intimate relationships and shared information relevant to the research question. The subtheme “relationship distancy” surfaced from this theme due to the unique patterns in the data.

Subtheme: Relationship Distancy

While serving a wrongful conviction, roles in the family system changed over time, causing the participants unease post-exoneration. Four participants returned to the partner they were with prior to being wrongfully convicted. These four participants reported that they felt like their spouse or intimate partner’s behavior was a trigger in some instances, which caused them to respond like they would in the previous setting. Other participants entered a new relationship post-exoneration and felt like people took advantage of them because it was assumed that exonerees do not know much about the real world due to their lengthy conviction. As a result, they struggled with

communication and understanding one another, which led some to end the relationship or constantly move from one relationship to the next.

B7: “She is trying to groom me, teach me, and prepare me for this society because it is not like the society I came out of. I was reluctant and I did not understand that that's what she was doing because she did not say that that is what she was doing. When you had to get permission to eat or take a shower and told when to turn the lights off, the TV's off, when to get up, when to do this, when to do that that you went to do that, the last thing you want is someone over you telling you what to do when you come home, even if it is for your own good.”

H2R1: “I have resentment from, how I was treated while I was in prison by her. She could not be honest about her life while I was in prison and stuff was coming out. So that makes stuff hard with me and women.”

Vx4 reported, “My wife played the man role while I was gone so it was difficult for the boys to trust me. Even though I was innocent my wife would talk to me like it was my fault that I was locked up.”

Four participants expressed that the structure of the environment was different before being wrongfully convicted.

So8: “Being back in the spousal role was more advanced and faster than me being that I have been incarcerated.”

Xc1: “We argued a lot about petty stuff. We don't talk, play, laugh, joke, or go out like we did before I got locked up.”

EE5: “You are like a plant that is raised in the closet and all the world is out there. Especially those of us that get locked up young; there's no maturation in a relationship because you are not growing old with anyone. So, you're not able to appreciate a lot of things.”

Two participants felt like their intimate partner was taking advantage of them and being manipulative.

H2R1: “They think we need more help than what we do, and we tend to give them a little more power than they do need because we do not know a lot of things. For example, I was in a year long relationship, and she knew all my information because she was helping me. When we broke up, she started putting bills in her name at one of my rental properties. There were all types of issues that I did not know how to deal with, and she knew that, but stuff happens. It just makes you a little more cautious, a little more settle, or a little cold hearted as they say.”

So8: “Her knowing my mind lacking the knowledge of living life free open a door for her to become selfish and take advantage. Meaning she was the bread winner in which she purchased all my clothing, cooked all the food, and complained at anything I made a decision to do, she was a correctional officer whom I met while incarcerated right before I was released. Once I learned I was there just for her to take advantage of. Took me a while to learn. While there her nephew convinces the employer to give me a chance to work with them having to explain why I was incarcerated. So, I started working and upon being paid she complained about all I needed to pay. I lived with her for two years until I left.”

Participant one expressed that one trigger, in particular, between him and his partner was that she assumed and accused him of things he wasn't doing.

B7: "I get up early in the morning but she is not up. I got in my mind what my brother told me about waking people up. So, I would go downstairs in the basement to watch TV, use the computer, or my phone. She knows I'm doing this, but she is suspicious of me. That drove ribs because now it is like you're accusing me of something and I have been accused falsely and spent decades in prison, but all that she's not understanding."

The response provided for this subtheme aligns with RQ1 in addition to the purpose of this study. In the context of this subtheme, participants reported the difficulty they have experienced or continue to experience in intimate relationships. As described by the participants, the challenges and barriers result from being disconnected from society for more than one decade. It is also due to them returning to a new environment with only old habits they've adapted from their previous setting and no support with adjustments.

Theme 2: Public Advocacy Within Communities

Several participants noted that support is needed on all levels, but local support within the communities would be beneficial immediately after release. After being exonerated, there are limited resources available and limited agencies and organizations willing to meet the needs of this population. The following theme emerged from RQ2: What resources do African American male exonerees identify that are specific to assist them in re-establishing their intimate partner relationships (husband/partner)? Some

questions asked to answer the main research question were: What resources have assisted you in readjusting into your role as a husband/intimate partner since your release from prison and what type of supports do you believe are lacking for exonerees re-establishing their spousal/intimate role in the family system?

Upon release, only one participant reported that they were prepared and received some form of support from the prison regarding reintegrating into society prior to being released.

B7: "I knew in advance that I was out getting out. They gave me a set of clothes to get dressed in, shorts and short shirt, pants, shorts, short-sleeved shirt. Then they tried to give me a debriefing, you know, almost like you get when you come in from Iraq. They kept emphasizing how much society had changed since I left and it is not the same society you are going into; you need to be prepared and you need to deescalate the situation this way. They did that for maybe about a half an hour before I was released."

Only two participants reported some form of support from the community, and the church was mentioned as a good resource and beneficial by each participant.

Vx4: "We started marital counseling at our church a couple years after I got out. The pastor helped us understand each other better. Our older family members talked to us a lot and prayed for us."

F2E: "Church, Elders, Jobs and meeting new/different peoples helped with readjusting."

The remaining participants reported no support upon release from the justice system or organizations that catered to them reintegrating into their spousal or intimate partner role in the family system. They also noted that most organizations and individuals that say they can help are not consistent, does not do it from the heart, and there is always a hidden agenda.

So8: “The only assistance I can think of is just expecting the unexpected. I always thought that my spouse would be the greatest assistance in my readjusting. And the unexpected was that the spouse never did assist, and this made it harder when it came to my readjusting.”

Zb25: “I think individual and family counseling would certainly help me because it would help us be more aligned and on the same page.”

Xc1: “What you mean what type of supports? We don’t have no support with nothing. They let me out of prison and that is it. They do not even want to pay me for they mistake. And these businesses and churches just want money and when they see they not gone get nothing from you, you on your own. I do not trust them anyway.”

Two participants expressed that the lack of respect for exonerees is displayed by the criminal justice system and that behavior is mimicked by society at large. The justice system does not take responsibility for their actions, and they will not clear their names or records in a timely matter, which hinders them tremendously.

B7: “The newspaper says things about me, but I did not care so much about what it did to me, I cared about what it was doing to my grandmother, who was looked

at as a [pillar] in the community. I was wrongfully convicted, and this crime now divides my neighborhoods because not only is this person a friend of mine, but he was also a personal friend that I look to as a little brother. I was released but they still did not find the people that actually committed the crime.”

Zb25: “The reality is, a lot of people, even my family and people I grew up with, still questioning was it actually me that committed those crimes. Some people had to be on the front line to defend me, and I did not know this because I was incarcerated. My partner’s mother told her a lot about me, but I am glad she listened and believe my side of the story. When I look for work, they disrespect you, call you names, and don’t believe you when you explain the charge on your record. I’m still fighting over it now trying to get them to actually admit that they were wrong for incarcerating me.”

The participants report several resources that could cater positively to their reintegration process into their spouse or intimate partner role in the family system.

B7: “There should be counseling, no doubt. There should be counseling before and even doing if you actually could. I think both should receive counseling because in a lot of relationships, we listen to respond, instead of listening to hear your partner.”

EE5: “There needs to be a place like a college or something that uses a holistic approach to reintegrating into society while at the institution and prior to a person getting out. That just doesn’t exist. People that is been gone a long time, exonerees and long-term offenders, basically needs a real healing or a real center

for people that are getting out. Not just for the tech stuff, but there is [arrested] development. There needs to be something that teaches social development, mental, emotional maturity. Exonerees, long-term offenders, and returnees needs social maturity, because you are just thrown into the deep end. So, when they come out, they will know how to appreciate relationships and not look out from a perspective that is driven by misogyny.”

H2R1: “I done had people reach out to me, but no one has stayed constant. I pretty much got all my help on my own. Everybody know how to start a relationship, staying in a relationship, dealing with the issues that come up that we have not been faced with. We need help understanding relationships and I know a few others exonerees a few of us have these issues.”

Vx4: “We need family retreats so we can explain to our family what happen and why we were locked up. We need to be given the opportunity to have the lives we could have had before being locked up.”

F2E: “Medical and mental assistance the day of release. The teaching of how to approach and enter into the spouse relationship after being gone for many years is needed.”

Xc1: “To be honest I never thought about prison messing up my whole life. Like I know it was gone be hard finding work and stuff like that, but I never thought about it messing up me connecting with my girl and stuff like that. I think we need free help to understand how to talk to our women and to learn how to get over the past and leave it there and not bring it home.”

One participant reported that a sense of community would be helpful as well during the reintegration process.

Zb25: "I am alone in various different things and no support, so I also think having the opportunity to meet individuals that's open to help and learn about the pain you are suffering, the lost time, anxiety, stress, high blood pressure, and all those types of things we deal with. They might not be trained in psychology or may not be a therapist, but they are normal people that could encourage us to go to groups and meet people that understand us."

Three participants noted that they need resources to help them be more self-sufficient, so they won't depend on their partner as much.

B7: "A PhD in today is society is a CDL (Commercial Driver's License), especially for black men returned into society. If you had a CDL, people do not care about your background, what your resume say, or how polite the resume is. They just want to know; can he drive this truck, can he get my stuff from A to B, and can I depend on him to do it. Another thing the Bureau of Prisons could try doing is adopting a prerelease program for people returning into society. Not just for exonerees, but people coming home so they can be in front of the curve. You don't want a person coming home with absolutely nothing. They should actually come home in a position where they can have a leg up or have established credit before getting out."

H2R1: "I done been in a few relationships since I been home. I know how to play my role and do what I supposed to do as a man. I knew that before I went to

prison, but I am still learning how to put it into motion. I need to understand the process of being in a relationship. We don't know how to go to the social security office. They know how to go to the social security office. We don't know how to start business; we don't know how to do that. So, if a woman knows how to do these things, you tend to let them do it. If they say they know how to do it, you are kind of dependent on them a little too much. You just coming home, wanting to do so much, and you don't really know how to do it all. So, we need to learn how to be more self-sufficient out here in the world and get up to speed on what is really going on.”

Xc1: “I was gone from the real world for 14 years and I did not know a lot before I got locked up because I was in the streets with the wrong crowd, I did not go to school like I suppose to, so I got my GED and stuff like that. So, I could not do much before I got locked up but being locked up for 14 years stop me from learning new stuff at jobs learning about computers and stuff like I did not get a chance to better myself. So, I got out my girl helped with the easy stuff, but I could not find work and stuff because of the charges on my record and that took over a year to fix that. She was doing everything for me, and my mom and family did not have much to give but they help when they can. I think we need free help to clean our records and train us on some kind of job so we can support our self.”

The participants reported several resources that would be beneficial upon release, which is relevant to RQ2. The eventual theme caters to each participant’s response regarding preparation, family and community support, and a sense of community. Several

participants noted that they are judged and stereotyped by society upon release. In some situations, they do not get the respect they deserve from their family, community, or the criminal justice system that took their freedom. While reviewing the data, I noticed that five participants mentioned the need for psychosocial support due to the process of being wrongfully convicted, the unforeseen trauma they experienced while incarcerated, and trying to rebuild what was destroyed. The subtheme “psychosocial support” was generated from this theme.

Subtheme: Psychosocial Support

During each recorded interview, the participants described the emotional and psychological turmoil they experienced while being wrongfully accused, serving a wrongful conviction, and how it continues years after being exonerated and released. It was impossible for the participants to answer this question without sharing their experience prior to being exonerated, which is the beginning of the emotional turmoil they endured. Four participants reported that things changed once they were falsely accused and wrongfully convicted.

B7: “I was shocked that they were charging me with this, so imagine after they convict me of this, right, I’ve never been charged before, I never had a parking ticket, or a jaywalking ticket. So, I never been in prison and never been charged with anything. To do this, for a person of my nature, I was flabbergasted to say the least. I was more hurt about the image and what they were saying about me.”

Zb25: “All the time nobody could have avoid it because I just got blindsided by the situation. I had to explain myself, but I did not have no knowledge about it

because I did not do it. My lady passed away and did not have the opportunity to see me get exonerated.”

EE5: “Like the day of my arrest, I still remember this yesterday to me.”

H2R1: “I did not think I would be found guilty, but what people was telling me and how the system works, I thought I would be found guilty. As soon as I went to prison, I lost communication with pretty much everybody except my mother, my best friend. I'm not going to say I lost communication, I withdrew and went into my own little feelings.”

After being physically and mentally detached from society for one to two and a half decades, the participants expressed that they felt outdated or left behind while the world continued to evolve.

So8: “I think all exonerees are lacking the mental support upon release, their mental fear, shocks, letdowns, false expectation, mental support for the first 90 days upon release or start the process during the release phase. Mentally being pushed back into the spousal role in the family system is a greater experience then what exonerees think we are prepared or ready for.”

EE5: “We like social dinosaurs, left behind. So, I still listen to rap music and have like young tendencies because when trauma sets in, your personality or parts of it gets stuck. They just get frozen in time and prison is the same almost every day.”

Zb25: “They release me; I got mandatory release, I'm not on paper and I do not have no obligations. It is like it never happened, but the wounds still there. The wounds and the scars are still there. I do not think nothing is as bad as prison. I

think the ones affected by prison more have been falsely accused and coming home from that type of environment, noisy, chaotic, people crossing each other, betray, lies, defeat, jealousy envy, etc., assistance is needed because the baggage is covered up. It is kinda one thing that put me in a position where I have to acknowledge and deal with the reality that I need counseling, therapy, and all those types of things.”

The participants reported the psychological factors associated with serving a wrongful conviction and several things in their new environment that trigger specific responses. The response provided for this subtheme aligns with RQ2 because it offers in-depth details of what they experienced and why support is needed postexoneration. To better understand why support and resources are needed for exonerees postexoneration, theme three and the subtheme bring awareness to the invisible challenges and barriers that hinder exonerees from adjusting and reintegrating successfully.

Theme 3: The Invisible Experience

During each recorded interview, the participants described the emotional and psychological turmoil they experienced while being wrongfully accused, serving a wrongful conviction, and how it continues years after being exonerated and released. The following theme emerged from RQ3: What do African American male exonerees indicate as barriers to re-establishing intimate partner relationships once they transition back into the family system? Some questions asked to answer the main research question were: What were your thoughts and feelings after being exonerated and transitioning back into your previous roles? How did your experiences in prison affect your transition back into

your spousal or partner role? Do you feel like you're the same person you were before being wrongfully convicted? How did the adjustments you made to function or survive in prison affect your relationship with your partner?

Several participants expressed different feelings after learning they were being released and exonerated from all charges.

EE5: "One jumble is just like the next, it is just different tools. Yes, you are safer in a cell, but you do not know what is going to happen to you in the streets or the cell."

So8: "Upon being exonerated, my happiness over ran my thoughts, and my thoughts were being formed from listening to the people and family around me. When I learned/told that I was coming home. I thought about how it would feel being home with a spouse and not being and living around guys."

Vx4: "I was afraid when I first heard I was going home. I had a million thoughts running through my head because I did not know what to expect. My wife seemed cool over the phone and at the visitations, but I knew she was not the same woman from years ago. I was ready to be a father to my boys because I had a good father growing up, so I knew they needed me at the house."

F2E: "Fear, confusions, yet happy, thinking in confusion as to what to do next. No confident in how to except the worldly responsibilities."

Xc1: "Man I was scared as hell because for one I did not know what was going to happen when I got to the court room. Like I was sick from thinking about the last time I went in front of the judge. I was sweating and thought they was gone get

me again for this stuff I know I did not do. When they told me, I was release on bond I felt all kind of emotions and was lost on what to do next. I had told my family not to entertain this too much because we went through this before, but I was wrong and wish I was prepared. To be real doing all the stuff I did years ago before I got locked up did not even come to my mind. I had to get my stuff and the lawyer picked me up and stuff. By that time, I was just thinking they was gone stop the truck and take me back to prison and I still think about that man to this day.”

Co23: “I was scared and felt that nobody believed me, and I would be judged for going back.

The participants shared similar feelings upon being released from prison, but they were not prepared to deal with the challenges and barriers they faced due to their experiences in prison. Adjusting to the environment was identified as the main barrier, but the reasoning varied for each participant.

B7: “My biggest issue was adjusting. Like, 5 o’clock in the morning, I’m already calling people, texting them. My brother told me that they are not on this military stuff, and they do not get up that early, so don’t call in the morning. So, I did that for maybe a whole 6 or 7 months. I got in my mind what my brother told me about waking people up. So, I would get up early and go downstairs in the basement to watch TV, use the computer, or my phone. She was still asleep and knows that I do this, so I do not wake her up, but she was suspicious of me. That drove ribs because now it is like you are accusing me of something and I have

been accused falsely and spent decades in prison, but all that she was not understanding.”

Zb25: “Prison taught me that I had to have a little more discipline over time with my emotions. I was emotional before going to prison, but now I suppress things and hide my emotions because emotions in prisons can be like a sign of weakness for real. These things became a part of me, and I did not realize it until I had to examine my own self.”

EE5: “There is significant trauma, you know. When I first got out, I could not sleep because of the mania, I was messing up, and I needed surgery. As soon as I got exonerated, I got two spine surgeries, I used drugs and was forced into a rehab.”

H2R1: “Trust! When you are around people that you cannot trust for 20 years, you are in a situation where you cannot trust people. When you do get around people, you should trust, but you are observing them too much and overthinking because they are doing more than others. You got to learn to observe things and pay attention because it is different than being in the world. You got to judge and see things before it happen.”

So8: “My challenges were getting to know the difference in my day-to-day life. Barriers are plentiful; They will make you push through or get pushed over. No, I am not the same person I was before incarceration because the mind is what changes.

Vx4: "I am not the same and I live like I am being watched at all times. I do not like being in large crowds because I feel like anything can happen. I just started sleeping normal because I usually be up at night and sleep during the day because everything bad use to happen at night. I have to remind myself daily that I am free because I live life on edge. My homeboys say I act institutionalize when I am around. My wife says I eat like I am starving and act like someone is going to take my food. Sometimes I feel alone even though my family is around me because I cannot express to them how I really feel."

Xc1: "We do not understand each other. Like in prison we had to get up at 5 every day and we went to chow for like 40 mins every day at 6 in the morning 1 in the afternoon and 5 at night. Sometimes it would be shorter depends on meal, but when the first person in your line sit down to eat by the time the last person sits down to eat everybody else got to be finish or you throw it out. I got use to that and she do not get it. She gets mad at me for getting up at 5 every morning because she gets up later like 8, and she cook at different times every day and stuff like that. We sleep in different rooms, and I do not be on her like she wants me to be, and I do not hang with the friends I had. I feel like the police gone pick me up at any time and I hate to get pull over by them. I stay to myself and from them and stuff like that. I'm a different person and she is too. I told her when I got out that people always talking about prison and how easy it is because they give meals and stuff like that, but if you never been to prison a day in your life and did time you do not understand nothing. I am doing much better now, but when I first

got out, I could not sleep because I could hear the prison doors slamming, men screaming, getting stab to death and stuff like that. It takes a long time for that stuff to calm down in your head. It still happens sometimes now, but not like it did at first.”

Two participants noted that they have a disadvantage when it comes to dating once they've been exonerated.

H2R1: “The women I am dating tend to be my age, but I have been in prison for 20 years. They were out here going through relationships, but 20 years went by, and I did not mature. I jumped from 20 to 40 with nothing in between, so I did not know how to do certain stuff. I did not know how to handle living with women, dealing with other men calling because they were in a relationship in the past. All that type of stuff create a lot of issues for me.”

Xc1: “I had to make a lot of changes when I got locked up and had to do it fast because prison is not for the weak. Let me just say in the real world I was the man. I talked to her about everything handle business please her provided for her. When I was locked up, I could not do none of that stuff. I can't talk to her because I did not want her visiting me in that place or making me feel emotions because that mean you weak in prison. I was locked up with no way of helping her and when I got out for the first 3 years, I still could not do nothing.”

All the participants shared barriers to re-establishing intimate partner relationships post-exoneration. The participant's response aligns with the eventual theme because I used their language collectively to construct this theme. In addition, this theme is relevant

to RQ3 because the participant's response answers the question specifically. Several participants shared unique effects of prison that were relevant to the research question. The subtheme "the effects of prison" was generated from this theme.

Subtheme: The Effects of Prison

The participants report that the effects of serving a wrongful conviction have impeded their reintegration process into their spouse or intimate partner role in the family system. The trauma they experienced continues to affect them while they attempt to take on the responsibilities as a partner in the family system.

Zb25: "The beginning of my interview process on jobs where I talk about my history and stuff like that, is like being on trial all over again or being before the parole board all over again; they would say, you are not acknowledging full responsibility right now, so the parole will see you in 5 years or another 6 years. I also got old stuff that's sensitive and sometimes, I might have a moment because of my thoughts about prison or something might trigger it. People say they understand I went to prison, but you are home now. I am home, but I cannot reach myself, I cannot reach them, I cannot reach the experience I had. The things I do I cannot even tell you, explain the tears that I have cried, or change the missed visits from being transferred across the world for 4 to 5 years."

H2R1: "I am the same person towards a woman as far as loving on a woman, treating a woman the way I treat them, but it is harder for me because I do not trust women. I do not trust nobody really because of how I was treated in my situation while in prison."

So8: “An incarcerated mind is limited; it kills the mind from making choices and the choices that is allowed are very limited as well.”

Vx4: “I had to let me wife know that I am a man and I run the household. I had to hustle daily until I found a job that I was able to clock in so she could feel secure. I had to understand my wife because she required more now. I had to change my mindset to be more affectionate.”

F2E: “Prison experiences affected the transition with my spouse. Hard to find work and receiving the right help from the right people were always challenge. I had to adjust to being with a different spouse because I am different now and it affected the relationship, but I learned.”

Xc1: “Getting locked up hurt me, but my girl and family, too. They are wrong and I know the system will never change, but I will not be in the wrong place or with the wrong people for them to get me again.”

In the context of this subtheme, participants reported the challenges and barriers they experience while trying to fulfill their responsibility and role as a spouse or intimate partner in the family system, which is relevant to the theme and RQ3. The participants reported barriers related to their prison experience and the difficulties they have trying to detach from them. Based on the information provided by the participants, several resources and supports are needed to help them successfully reintegrate back into their role.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the experience of African American male exonerees reintegrating into spouse or intimate partner relationships, barriers faced with reintegration, and resources needed to support successful reintegration. The detailed experiences as identified by the nine participants answered the study's three research questions, which resulted in the emergence of three themes and three subthemes. The key theme for research question one was emotional turmoil. Participants described the transition from prison as an inmate into the family system as a spouse or intimate partner as scary, hard, difficult, and chaotic, especially after being incarcerated for one to two and a half decades. The key theme for research question two was public advocacy within communities. Several participants noted that support is needed on all levels, but local resources would be beneficial not only during the incarceration, if possible, but immediately after being exonerated for certain. Finally, the key theme for research question three was the invisible experience. The participants went into detail about the challenges and barriers they face due to their prison experience and as a result, they reported adjustment issues with their new environment, and trust issues.

In Chapter 5, I will reiterate the purpose and nature of the study and why it was conducted. I will also provide an interpretation of the findings by comparing them with what has been found in the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. Next, I will discuss the limitations of the study, recommendations for further research, implications for positive social change, and end Chapter 5 with a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this generic research study was to explore and understand the African American male exonerees' reintegration experience into their role as a spouse or intimate partner in the family system. Researchers have conducted several studies on individuals returning to society after being released from prison (Cooke, 2004; Cooke, 2005; Mahaffey et al., 2018; Shlosberg et al., 2014). These studies offer some insight, particularly on African American men and their experience while reintegrating into society after being released from prison; however, there is minimal research on exonerees reintegrating back into the community and into their roles within the family system (Egleton et al., 2016; Grooms, 2016; Rashaan, 2016). In this study, I sought to further understand the reintegration process into the spouse or intimate partner role for African American male exonerees, solely from their perspective, which could provide an expanded framework for consideration by practitioners, policymakers, and community leaders as they examine and advocate for ways to help exonerees reintegrate more successfully.

For this generic study, I interviewed and collected data from nine participants who identified as African American male exonerees using the telephone, Zoom, and email. I performed the data analysis process using the thematic analysis approach established by Braun and Clarke (2006). As a result, three eventual themes and subthemes surfaced, answering the three research questions that guided the study. The theme for the first research question was emotional turmoil, with the subtheme being

relationship distance. The theme for the second research question was public advocacy within communities, and psychosocial support was the subtheme. Lastly, the theme for the third research question was the invisible experience, with the subtheme being the effects of prison.

Key findings from this generic study are a reflection of the participant's experience of reintegrating into the spouse or intimate partner role post exoneration. The invisible experiences expressed by the participants were influenced by an unexpected wrongful conviction, the prison culture or prisonization, and exoneration, which continues to tremendously affect them and their families. The unique effects of prison, based on the results, indicated that the psychological and psychosocial consequences of a wrongful conviction, serving one to two decades in prison, are long-lasting, and appropriate resources are needed to help them cope and successfully transition back into their previous setting, roles, and responsibilities.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this generic study and the literature outlined in Chapter 2 share similarities but differ in several ways. To my knowledge, there appeared to be no current literature addressing African American male exonerees' reintegration experience transitioning from prison back into the spouse or intimate partner role in the family system. Granted, the literature in Chapter 2 focused on the effects of serving a wrongful conviction and the post-exoneration experience, which is congruent with the responses of several participants. However, the previous literature was about exonerees reintegrating into society rather than a specific role in the family system. In this study, I aimed to

explore the experiences of African American male exonerees' reintegrating into spouse or intimate partner relationships, barriers faced with reintegration, and resources needed to support reintegration into the spouse or intimate partner role in the family system. In addition, the results of this study are interpreted and labeled as confirmed, disconfirmed, or extended knowledge in the discipline, which was determined by comparing the findings to the literature in Chapter 2.

Theme 1: Emotional Turmoil

After spending more than 1 to 2 decades in prison, participants reported being exonerated and immediately released without preparation. Nonetheless, the exonerees said they experienced positive emotions after being released from prison, but those emotions were short-lived. Bowling and Sherman's (2008) study offered findings on supporting service members and their families in navigating the task of reintegration and were similar to the initial emotional response when returning home, which was positive. However, the authors reported that the initial response fades away, and overwhelming feelings take over. For some, specifically those in relationships, the primary goal should be to spend the initial days reuniting with their partner and re-establishing their intimate partner role (Comfort et al., 2018). However, due to the traumatic experiences before, and during their incarceration, in addition to unresolved emotions, unrealistic expectations of their partners, and the lack of preparation, the reintegration process into the intimate partner role for exonerees confer unforeseen challenges post exoneration. The participant's response in this theme reflected the critical concept of the situation and supports one of the key dimensions of Schlosberg's transition theory. According to

Anderson et al. (2012), assessing the situation includes learning what triggered the transition, role changes, the timing, who is in control of the transition, the duration, a similar experience with past transitions, and identifying concurrent stress. I will provide more discussion on the construct in the context of the theory in the next section on theoretical findings.

The participants described their transition back into the spouse or intimate partner roles as complicated, strange, heartbreaking, chaotic, different, and scary. The participant's view of their transition from one role to another was influenced by several factors, one being the overwhelming feelings associated with their wrongful conviction and exoneration. Comfort et al.'s (2018) study on relationships during re-entry found that intimate relationships deteriorated due to "communication patterns, partnership expectations, employment opportunities, and other factors that may end differently than expected during the transition from prison" (p. 202). The first issue the participants acknowledged was identifying and re-establishing their role as intimate partners in the family system. Contributing factors included lengthy incarceration, lack of knowledge on relationships, and the partner's assumptions of the exoneree's abilities. Findings from Moering's (1983) study on incarcerated partners and their wives labeled this issue as role strains. In addition, Harman et al.'s (2007) reported that it is difficult for an intimate partner to disengage from their incarcerated partner's role and responsibilities postrelease due to the extended timeframe they have had to fulfill it.

Subtheme: Relationship Distancy

Incarceration alters the family structure, limiting the incarcerated individual's ability to successfully fulfill their role and responsibilities. Farkas and Miller (2007) explained that jumping back into an old role is unrealistic and quite difficult for exonerees due to their experiences and basic needs after exoneration. Bowling and Sherman's (2008) study offered findings on supporting service members and their families in navigating the reintegration tasks, which supported this notion. They stated that this is due to them being mentally and physically depleted. The participants in this study felt that if their partner worked with them to re-establish their role fully, with patience and understanding of their experiences, the role transition would be successful. Bowling and Sherman (2008) supported this statement. They stated that returning service members should renegotiate and re-engage their family roles with support from their spouse, starting with household tasks.

According to Moerings (1983), the inmate role supersedes prior roles due to the incarcerated individual's inability to disengage from one role to the next in the prison setting. Unfortunately, the participants reported difficulty disengaging in several postexoneration situations, which caused them to become distant from their intimate partners. The participants spontaneously transitioned from the inmate role into the intimate partner role without knowing the responsibilities or changes that transpired while they were incarcerated. The prison setting could be deemed predictable due to its scheduled routines and controlled structure, which removes the individual's freedom of choice. However, the home setting is entirely different regarding routine, schedules,

rules, and responsibilities. After exoneration, the participants reported experiencing a lack of control and freedom of choice in the family system due to their partner's actions and controlling demeanor, which caused them to respond with anger and frustration. Several participants reported that they did not like being controlled by the correctional officers, so they rebelled against them at times because they were not supposed to be in prison. Several participants responded the same way in the family system, which led to arguments and terminations of the relationship.

Additionally, participants identified communication and showing affection, which has been recognized by Comfort et al. (2018) as one issue that develops during incarceration and continues afterward, as a challenge. Comfort et al. (2018) also found that intimate relationships deteriorated due to "communication patterns, partnership expectations, employment opportunities, and other factors that may end differently than expected during the transition from prison" (p. 202). Sayers (2011) found that family reintegration difficulties for veterans and their spouses were similarly concerning as it related to role changes, family routines, decision making, and expectations. The study participants of Comfort et al. (2018) expressed that they were not prepared or equipped to deal with their partner's behavior, especially when trying to converse or address a problem. The participants in this study felt similar to that of the participants in Comfort et al. (2018); due to their incarceration for such a lengthy time, they were not prepared to successfully engage in an intimate relationship. Their partner's behavior and unwillingness to listen for understanding rather than to respond caused them to relive traumatic experiences. The findings for this theme were similar to Comfort et al.'s (2018)

study's findings. However, the results were from the partner's perspective rather than the incarcerated partner's point of view.

Theme 2: Public Advocacy Within Communities

Community involvement is critical and beneficial to exonerees post exoneration due to the long-term turmoil incarceration can cause (Wikoff et al., 2012). However, there are limited nonprofit organizations available to assist exonerees with a successful reintegration into the community as well as their intimate partner role in the family system. This theme discussion reflects the key concept of support, which is one of the key dimensions of Schlosberg's transition theory. According to Anderson et al. (2012), assessing an individual's social support system includes identifying intimate and family support, friendships, community support, and more extensive level support. I will provide more discussion on the construct in the context of the theory in the next section on theoretical findings. The participants in this study reported that because the justice systems did not respond publicly to their wrongdoing, it caused them to struggle with rebuilding their lives, particularly that of their reputation. In addition, the participants felt that it also caused them to lack a sense of belonging and support from their community and family. Westervelt and Cook's (2010) statement on reintegration for exonerees supported the participant's response, which stated that "without an apology or formal 'de-labeling' exonerees struggle to reshape their identity as innocent" (p. 37).

According to the participants in this study, the reintegration process was overwhelming, but attempting to reintegrate into the family system was even worse. The participants in this study reported that they need support to empower them to become

more self-sufficient and help them successfully engage in an intimate relationship. Several participants reported bad experiences with being exploited by organizations that pretended to care and experiencing disrespect on behalf of potential employers, especially individuals in their local justice departments. Sabzi Khoshnami et al.'s (2021) study's findings on the reintegration of ex-offenders were similar and labeled as an underlying factor that hinders reintegration for ex-offenders. Two other underlying factors that resonate with this study and were identified by Sabzi Khoshnami et al. (2021) were governmental institutions and civil support, which help offenders after being released from prison. Grounds (2005) and Kregg (2016) found that several supportive services, including case management, individual therapy, and family therapy, are needed during the stage after immediate release from prison and in the long term to help exonerees cope successfully with the challenges of reintegration.

Subtheme: Psychosocial Support

Nonprofit organizations, such as the Innocence Project, continue to bring awareness to wrongful convictions, but more support is needed to meet unique needs. Similar to this study's findings, Gerlock et al.'s (2014) study's findings on military-related PTSD and intimate relationships noted that veterans who have PTSD bring a set of "unique interrelated issues" into an intimate relationship, whether it is an existing or new relationship (p.349). The participants in this study have been exonerated for a minimum of 1 year and a maximum of 15 years and 4 months. They continue to struggle with successfully reintegrating into their intimate partner role in the family system and community, especially the recent exonerees. Grooms's (2016) study on exonerees

confirmed that they continued to experience emotional and psychological distress 1 year after exoneration. However, there is minimal research on exonerees reintegrating into an intimate partner relationship post exoneration.

Entering a relationship with trust issues, feelings of betrayal, paranoia, anger, communication issues, trauma experiences, lack of updated skills, or understanding of relationships caused seven out of nine participants to be unsuccessful in several potential relationships. Due to the adverse effects of serving a wrongful conviction and its impact on the individual mentally, awareness of this vulnerable population is needed, and advocacy to enhance the local community's ability to meet their unique needs. Westervelt and Cook (2010) suggested that reintegration programs partner with the Innocence Project to assist exonerees in rebuilding their lives. This supports the participants' responses in this study because they spoke consistently about the need for reintegration programs that offer services to address their needs. Flewelling's (2012) study's findings supported this and reported that the returning service members and their spouses needed mutual treatment to help them successfully manage the transition. Therefore, the participants reported that to rebuild their lives, individual and family counseling and holistic approaches should be available to assist them in engaging in intimate relationships in the prison setting as well as long-term post exoneration.

Theme 3: The Invisible Experience

Exonerees experience a plethora of challenges and barriers post exoneration, and this theme's discussion reflects the critical concepts of the self-variable and strategies. It supports two of the key dimensions of Schlosberg's transition theory. According to

Anderson et al. (2012), assessing the self-variable includes having a sense of meaning, resilience, and a positive outlook. The authors stated that determining the strategies helps one create a plan for dealing with the transition. I will provide more discussion on the construct in the context of the theory in the next section on theoretical findings.

According to the data from this study, the invisible experiences started when they were falsely accused and then taken in for questioning. The participants reported that their initial encounter with the police officer left a lasting impact on their views of the justice system. The interrogation tactics that were used proved to be traumatic, and because of this, some participants reported that for the first three to six months after their release, they struggled with anxiety and fear of uncertainty. The findings in Simon's (1993), Grounds' (2004), and Grooms' (2016) studies were congruent with this study regarding the initial wrongful arrest of an individual. The studies found that the sudden arrest was identified as being traumatic, and the unanticipated wrongful arrest continued to cause anxiety and a sense of fear.

Once incarcerated, the participants explained prison culture and how they adjusted to survive. According to Trammell (2009), adaptation in the prison setting allows incarcerated individuals to mentally and physically transition and function while serving their time. Porter et al. (2021) supported this study's findings by reporting that incarcerated individuals make behavioral adjustments and deal with persistent doubt and stress when interacting with individuals in the prison setting. The participants noted that complete detachment from the societal role and adjusting to norms assisted them with navigating the prison setting; however, these strategies hindered their transition into the

family system. The literature that supported this study's findings focused on returning veterans. According to Flewelling's (2012) study on daily adjustment for returning veterans, coping and adaptation strategies used to deal with separation from their partner caused specific issues in regard to adjustment when they return to the family system. The participants reported mental challenges when adjusting to an uncontrolled environment, the differentiation of receiving assistance from being controlled, taking orders from others, showing emotions or affection, trusting others, letting their guard down, and understanding and engaging in an intimate relationship. The participants reported that the challenges with reintegrating into their spouse or intimate partner role are invisible to others, making it hard for others to be aware and assist with them. However, they reported that coping strategies such as adaptive thinking, problem-solving skills, setting boundaries, self-care, and positive self-talk help them manage barriers while re-engaging society as a whole.

Subtheme: The Effects of Prison

The effects of prison are experienced differently amongst incarcerated individuals, specifically as it relates to their spousal and intimate partner roles in the family system. The participants in this study reported that they engaged in intimate relationships immediately after prison, which enhanced adjustment issues. These challenges were acknowledged by Grounds (2004) in their research on exonerees. The author stated that exonerees' reintegration experience is accompanied by "psychological and adjustment issues similar to others that witness a chronic psychological trauma" (p. 175). Unfortunately, the literature on exonerees does not focus on the challenges and

barriers of prison and how they interfere with reintegrating into an intimate role post exoneration. However, there is a vast amount of literature on veterans' reintegration into roles, and their challenges are similar to those in this study.

In regard to reintegrating into their role as intimate partners, the participants felt that their partners never considered the impact prison had on them. The participants stated that their experiences affected them mentally rather than physically. Groom (2016) reported that the participants expressed that incarceration negatively affected them emotionally and psychologically more than physically. The participants reported having PTSD and that small things significantly affected them. Like returning veterans, Ricciardelli et al. (2021) found that PTSD impacts the function and structure of the family and causes marital problems and difficulties with adjusting to the family setting as a whole. Bowling and Sherman (2008) findings on supporting service members and their families in navigating the task of reintegration reinforced and identified potential challenges for the returning service member as feeling unneeded, insecure about their role as a civilian, and possessing no sense of belonging. The participant in this study noted similar experiences post exoneration regarding reintegrating into their intimate partner role in the family system. The participants reported that their intimate partner's lack of understanding regarding the effects of prison caused them to experience emotional and trauma triggers such as loss of control, loss of independence, feeling unneeded, betrayal, and unjust treatment. The experiences the participants reported have not been addressed; however, the effects of prison are long term, and because of this, specific resources are needed to assist them post exoneration.

Theoretical Framework and Findings Interpretation

The findings validated the theoretical framework of this study. I used Schlossberg's transition theory to provide a lens to examine the participants and the transition they experienced using the 4S model: situation, self, support, and strategies. According to Schlossberg (1981), the 4S model focuses on individualized perceptions of a transition and what supports and strategies assist with coping while moving through the transition. In this study, the participants viewed their situation as complex due to the unanticipated transition from the prison environment to the family setting. Moving into a new setting without moving out and disengaging from the roles and responsibilities of the previous setting were detrimental for the participants in this study. The participant's situation took them through many changes, which caused PTSD, depression, adjustment difficulties, relationship impairments, and traumatic stress responses. Still, they had a positive outlook on life post exoneration, which is a component of the self-variable in Schlossberg's transition theory.

Schlossberg et al. (1995) introduced four sources of support: intimate relationships, family units, friends, and the institution or community one is a part of upon release. The participants reported limited support post exoneration and said that this could be due to the lack of awareness regarding wrongful convictions and the justice system's decision not to acknowledge their error publicly. However, despite the unforeseen challenges and barriers they experienced, the participants focused on their meaning and purpose in life, adopted positive coping strategies, and worked hard to rebuild their lives post exoneration. Thus, using Schlossberg's transition theory adds to

the research literature. In addition, it offers a systematic framework that could be used to understand the exonerees' perception of reintegration and assist in the development of psychosocial support specifically for this population post exoneration.

Limitations of the Study

This study offered an essential contribution to the literature; however, there were notable limitations in this generic qualitative study. The first limitation was the study's sample size. According to Dworkin (2012), having a small sample size is adequate and offers an in-depth perspective through individual voices of a social phenomenon.

However, due to the small sample size of nine, the findings cannot be fully generalized or represent the targeted population. Nonetheless, saturation was met, and no new information was generated after conducting interviews with the nine participants. In Chapter 3, researcher bias was identified as a potential limitation, and to alleviate this problem, I used reflexivity, memos, and peer debriefing continually during the data collection and analysis phase (Anney, 2014; Nowell et al., 2017).

Another limitation in this study was the targeted population, as it is considered hard-to-reach. Some exonerees are not interested in participating in research, which could be due to the involuntary barriers they experience after serving a wrongful conviction. Therefore, the following limitation of this study was recruitment. The biggest challenge was gaining the exoneree's trust, which contributed to the small sample size. Several interested individuals contacted me via phone after receiving the flyer via Facebook Messenger. I thought they were calling to inquire about the study, which some did, but the majority wanted to know why my Facebook page was set to private, why I was

studying this population, and how I plan to help. They either decided not to participate or wanted to participate without being recorded. I explained the ethical procedures outlined in Chapter 3, but they were still wary about participating.

The next challenge I had with this population was commitment. After screening the interested exonerees and answering their questions and concerns, I asked for their email address to send them the study's informed consent form. Unfortunately, many of them stopped responding when I asked for this information because they did not want to share any personal information. Othertimes, individuals who shared their email address with me stopped responding or communication disappeared after scheduling the interview. Another challenge was the study's inclusion criteria for participation. When I screened the interested individuals, several of them did not meet the second requirement for the study, which was participants had to have been in a relationship before being wrongfully convicted. Several exonerees reported that they were wrongfully convicted at 17-years-old and could not engage in an intimate relationship before being wrongfully convicted.

The next limitation was the lack of up-to-date research on this population regarding reintegration. The previous literature focused on this population identified a vast number of challenges and barriers that are experienced. However, this research information is outdated and doesn't reflect the current obstacles they face as they re-engage with society in various roles post exoneration.

The last limitation was using email interviews. Allowing participants to complete email interviews was convenient for them; however, some did not give a thick description

of their experience due to the lack of interaction or engagement. Nonetheless, I made sure the email interviews were not concurrent, which allowed me to work with one participant at a time, increasing the data quality (Fritz & Vandermause, 2018).

Recommendations

After conducting this study, many topics were generated regarding this target population for future research inquiries. The first recommendation is in response to the limitations of this study. To decrease the limitations associated with this population directly, I would recommend partnering with an affiliated organization to reduce their suspicion of the research and increase cooperation in future research. The next recommendation concerns the sample size. The findings cannot be generalized in this study and correlated to previous studies on this population due to the sample size. To minimize this issue, I recommend broadening the inclusion criteria for qualitative studies to offer opportunities for exonerees to participate. However, I would also recommend conducting research using a quantitative approach, which could increase the number of participants due to the short time needed to participate.

A few topics that emerged from this study were centered on race and gender. For future research, I recommend broadening the criterion to gain perception related to reintegration into a spouse or intimate partner role from a diverse sample of other races and genders. The diversity component would add different perceptions of reintegration into the family system's intimate partner role and allow future researchers to compare and contrast the differences. This would add to the research literature and generate awareness about the needs of this population. Future research could also explore the

reintegration process into different roles in the family system and what supports are needed to help them be successful. This inquiry could cater to the development of psychosocial support programs on the local level. Finally, future research could focus on the reintegration process for exonerees based on their wrongful conviction. This inquiry would be beneficial because, based on the literature about actual offenders, a person who has been convicted of murder has experiences in prison that may not be the same as a person charged with sexual assault. Therefore, the support needed post exoneration may vary depending on the conviction (Whitehead, 2021).

Implications

Implications for Positive Social Change

The findings of this study supported the notion that social workers need developed knowledge and skill sets to support exonerees post exoneration. Westervelt and Cook (2010) stated that reintegration programs are needed to partner with the Innocence Project to assist exonerees in rebuilding their lives. To promote positive social change, community-based agencies should consider assessing and expanding their services to offer psychosocial support to exonerated individuals. Some may be reluctant to engage this population; however, exonerees' contributions to the community could alleviate underlying issues regarding arrest rates in impoverished areas, interrogation tactics, and racial profiling. With regard to this study, exonerees' involvement within the community could also encourage the development of programs that focus on reintegrating into the family system post exoneration. This would offer stakeholders and community leaders opportunities to use funding appropriately towards training and

developing programs that focus on assisting individuals and couples after incarceration. If implemented successfully, this could be the positive change needed to help decrease reintegration problems for actual offenders and veterans. Lastly, acknowledging and including this population could increase their participation in community endeavors, enhance their sense of belonging, and help them overcome specific barriers to serving a wrongful conviction.

Recommendations for Practice

Currently, there have been many exonerations, and most involve males, particularly African American males. These individuals have a disadvantage due to their race, but their experiences are worsened after being convicted and exonerated. The issues of inequality, social injustice, and the lack of resources to meet the needs of this vulnerable population are relevant to the mission and core values of the social work profession. Social workers are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values needed to discover and address the needs of exonerees post exoneration. However, due to the limited research literature on this population, social workers need to expand their knowledge base to ensure they are competent before engaging and advocating for them. Sarteschi and Pollack (2021) reported that there is no scholarly literature on “the role social workers have in the lives of those who have been exonerated.” Several researchers have provided information on this targeted population and the detrimental impact they endure at the hand of a system that continues to disregard their needs (Campbell & Denov, 2004; Grooms, 2016; Grounds, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2012). The literature

on this population could be used on the macro level as a framework for the development of improved advocacy strategies, policy, and legislative responses.

The next implication for practice includes revamping community-based programs to meet the needs of diverse populations. According to Langberg and Ciolfi (2017), educating and encouraging residents and community leaders to focus on alleviating the problem rather than punishing individuals could offer an opportunity for local organizations to receive funding and create appropriate interventions. Social workers could also implement change by advocating and influencing policy. Hanson et al. (2015) findings on stakeholders' perception and motivators for incarcerated individuals to participate in research found that motivation stems from the community. Similar to the conclusions of this study, the authors realized that a sense of belonging and interacting with the community for support in a non-judgemental matter would increase their willingness to contribute to research literature. This will cater to the advancement of services on all practice levels if social workers advocate and address this population's needs. Social workers can meet this population's needs on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels by taking a stance and filling a specific role in the exoneree's life, which would result in positive and public social change.

Conclusion

To date, wrongful convictions and exonerations continue to be understudied topics. Initial attempts to bring attention to wrongful convictions with the hope of decreasing the number of people who have been wrongfully convicted of crimes they did not commit, particularly African Americans, have been done by the Innocence Project

and the National Registry for Exoneration. Afterward, researchers began examining cases of wrongful convictions, compensation after wrongful convictions, psychological effects of wrongful convictions, and reintegrating into society after a wrongful conviction (Grooms, 2016; Grounds, 2005; Kregg, 2016). However, few studies have examined the impact of family dynamics after being released from prison (Visher & Travis, 2003).

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore and understand African American male exonerees' perception of reintegrating into their role as a spouse or intimate partner in the family system. To gain a clear understanding of this phenomenon, I collected data from nine African American male exonerees to answer the study's research questions. This study may not fill the gap in the literature; however, it provided essential information on a gap that had not been explored before this study and provided a space for exonerees to voice their reintegration experiences.

Based on the findings of this study, the traumatic experiences and lengthy prison sentences caused unforeseen barriers for the participants regarding reintegrating into their intimate partner role in the family system, and long-term support is needed. These findings were consistent with a few studies but were arguably more robust given the focus and inclusion of the perceptions offered directly from exonerees. This study enhanced the research literature for the discipline, which caters to social workers and the need for their knowledge, skills, and values post exoneration. Not only does this study highlight the need for long-term support for exonerees, but it also shows the increased need for community leaders, policymakers, and practitioners to acknowledge this population and uphold their core values. Action must be taken on behalf of this

population, which continues to be silenced and made vulnerable through no fault of their own. The narrative needs to change as their lives have been wrongfully interrupted. They deserve, in the absolute least, a societal response that enables them to regain control of their lives and move forward successfully as they re-engage society.

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Appendix: Demographic Questionnaire and Interview Questions

Demographic Questionnaire

Instructions: Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability. If you are unsure what is being asked, feel free to ask the researcher to explain.

- What is your age? _____
- How old were you when you were wrongfully convicted? _____
- How long were you and your partner together before you were wrongfully convicted? (____ Years/____Months)
- Were you married or dating before being wrongfully convicted?
(__Yes/__No/__Other: explain)
- Were you with the same person after being exonerated?
(__Yes/__No/__Other: explain)
- How long were you incarcerated? (____ Years/____Months)
- How long have you been released from prison?
(____ Years/____Months)
- Which of the following factors contributed to or caused you to be exonerated?

___Mistaken Witness Id

___Perjury or False Accusation

___False Confession

___False or Misleading Forensic Evidence

___ Official Misconduct

___ DNA/

___ Other: explain

- What is your highest education level? (___ middle school/ ___ high school/ ___ GED/ ___ some college/ ___ associate degree/ ___ bachelor degree/ ___ master degree/ ___ PhD)
- What is your current employment status?
(___ Employed/ ___ Unemployed/ ___ Other: explain)
- What is your current housing status? (___ live with spouse/partner/ ___ live separate from spouse/partner/ ___ live part-time with spouse/partner.
Please explain)

Interview Protocol

Opening Statement

I would like to thank you for taking part in my research study. Before you begin, please make sure you are in a safe location with limited to no distractions to ensure you are able to read each question thoroughly, reflect, and provide an in-depth response to each question. If you need to take a break while completing this interview, be sure to save your feedback and close the document until you return to finish to ensure your feedback remains confidential.

Interview Questions

1. As a spouse/intimate partner in the family system, what does your role consist of? What are you responsible for? (i.e., head of the household, breadwinner, provider, makes final decisions)
2. How were things for you in terms of re-acclimating back into the family system after being wrongfully convicted? (i.e., did it cause chaos between you and your spouse/partner? If yes, in what way?)
3. What were your thoughts and feelings after being exonerated and transiting back into your partner/ spousal role? (i.e., how did you feel when you learned you were going home, what were you thinking, did you feel confident transitioning back into your role and taking on those responsibilities)
4. How have your experiences in prison affected your transition back into your spousal/ or intimate partner role in the family system? (i.e., What significant challenges and barriers have you faced, are you the same individual you were before being wrongfully convicted, what has changed, how has been incarcerated affected you)
5. What are the significant adjustments you had to make that affected your relationship with your spouse/intimate partner once you started to re-establish your relationship?
6. What resources have assisted you in readjusting into your role as a husband/intimate partner since your release from prison?

7. What type of supports do you believe are lacking for exonerees reestablishing their spousal/intimate role in the family system?
8. Is there anything I have not asked you that you believe will provide a more complete picture of your experiences?