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Lived Experiences of Exonerated Individuals 1 Year or Longer After Release

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Claudette Grooms

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

Lived Experiences of Exonerated Individuals 1 Year or Longer After Release

by

Claudette Grooms

MA, Liberty University, 2012

BS, Liberty University, 2010

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Forensic Psychology

Walden University

November 2016

Abstract

The majority of information related to the postprison experiences of exonerated individuals is frequently found in reports by journalists, or based on the findings of scholars on systematic factors that contribute to wrongful incarcerations. There is a lack of social science research on the unexplored meanings and essence of the postprison lived experiences of exonerees exclusively from their perspectives. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. The conceptual framework was guided by Tajfel's social identity theory and Becker's social reaction theory. Interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of 8 exonerated males who were released from prison 1 year or longer. The data were analyzed using van Kaam's 7-step phenomenological analysis process as modified by Moustakas. The 7 themes that emerged from the data were employment and financial challenges, negative societal reaction, broken family relationships, unresolved emotional and psychological factors, self-imposed social isolation, role of family support, and resilience. Understanding the experiences of exonerees contribute to positive social change by providing knowledge to policymakers and others in the criminal justice system to assist in creating policies to expunge the records of exonerees without the necessity of litigation. Findings from this study also provide valuable insights on the need to offer monetary compensation and social services assistance to exonerees in all U.S. states to help in their reintegration experiences as they transition into their communities.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to my parents, Caryll and Ivy Woodburn, who walk with me in spirit. I thank them for instilling in me the importance of faith in God, an appreciation for education, and the dignity of hard work. I also dedicate this work to Billy, my wonderful husband and best friend. Your unconditional love and encouragement empowered me to complete this project. Finally, I dedicate this study to my son Brian and grandson David. Your patience and support when I chose to work instead of enjoying time with the family, even on vacations, are greatly appreciated. Thanks for understanding the importance of my dreams.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

The exoneration of hundreds of individuals in the past 3 decades triggered a significant growth in public and academic attention to the cases involving exonerees and the causes of wrongful conviction. Before this period, the assertion of many judges and lawyers was that innocent people were not convicted in the United States (Gross, O'Brien, Hu, & Kennedy, 2014). In 1993, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in a U.S. Supreme Court opinion 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). The assumption of the public and individuals involved in American's judicial system was that convictions were accurate because they were the result of fair processes. However, as Gross (2012) stated, the sorting of the guilty from the innocent, which was the intended purpose of the courts in the United States, can be difficult to accomplish due to the adversarial structure of the judicial system.

The fallibility of the courts became evident when harmless error court rulings were challenged, and modern science facilitated the public's awareness of the vast amount of erroneous convictions (Gross et al., 2014). Exonerations emanating as a result of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) testing of evidence and procedural errors brought to light that systematic measures stemming from the U.S. Constitution at times fail to avoid wrongful convictions (Gross & Shaffer, 2012). Estimates are that between 5,000 and 10,000 wrongful convictions occur each year in the United States with approximately

2,000 to 4,000 cases resulting in the incarceration of innocent individuals (Zalman, 2011). Testing of evidence has resulted in numerous individuals being exonerated and released from prison after being declared factually innocent of the crimes for which they were convicted (Gross & Shaffer, 2012). According to Westervelt and Cook (2012), who interviewed death row inmates after their exonerations, exonerees confront experiences that are unique to them as they rebuild their lives from scratch on reentry into their communities. However, Westervelt and Cook focused on state harms, and not exclusively on the postprison lived experiences of the exonerees.

The postprison experiences of exonerees are not the same as the experiences of parolees who were guilty of the crimes for which they were imprisoned. As Westervelt and Cook (2012) explained, paroled prisoners are provided financial and social services from state agencies. On the other hand, exonerated persons have little or no financial, psychological, emotional, or social support to rebuild their lives after their prison release (Westervelt & Cook, 2012). Exonerees are frequently denied assistance from U.S. state agencies designated to assist ex-offenders on the grounds that they were not guilty of the crime, or crimes, for which they had been imprisoned. Hence, they are not entitled to agency assistance (Wildeman, Costelloe, & Schehr, 2011).

Limited social science literature exists concerning the postprison experiences of exonerees, from their viewpoint, years after their release (Tan, 2011). The discussions regarding the postexonerated experiences of individuals in research are primarily on case studies (Wildeman et al., 2011), and the consequences and effects of long-term incarceration (Owens & Griffiths, 2012). Also dominating the studies on exonerees is

research on wrongful conviction that highlight systematic factors contributing to wrongful convictions (Karaffa, Page, & Koch, 2015; Wildeman et al., 2011). These factors include eyewitness misidentification, improper forensic evidence, unreliable informants, and false confessions

As the number of exonerated individuals being released from U.S. federal and state prisons continues to grow, social science research is needed to explore the phenomenon of the postprison lived experiences of wrongfully convicted individuals, from their perspectives, years after their release. Research on the experiences of exonerees years after their prison release, from their perceptions, may promote positive social and policy implications by broadening the knowledge of the need for some states to reform their monetary compensation statutes. In addition, findings from the present study may contribute to the collective knowledge on the importance of governmental statements regarding the innocence of exonerees, expungement of the records of exonerees, and the value of reentry support for this population. Thus, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release.

The background information in this chapter provides details related to the experiences of ex-inmates as they attempt to reintegrate into society. I also discussed the differences in the reintegration experiences of parolees, ex-inmates, and exonerees after their release from prison. A gap in the literature exists regarding the meanings and essence of the postexoneration lived experiences of exonerees. The purpose of this research was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated

individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. The conceptual framework for this study is social identity theory (SIT) as it relates to the identities assumed by some individuals in prison and the stigma associated with incarceration. I also used social reaction theory (SRT) as it relates to the labeling of former inmates as a framework in this study.

In the nature of study section, I addressed the rationale for using a phenomenological approach. This section also includes a discussion on the use of semistructured interviews of a purposeful sampling of individuals who met the criteria to elicit the experiences related to the phenomenon. Data were analyzed using van Kaam's 7-step phenomenological approach as modified by Moustakas (1994) to provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon as expressed by each participant. The significance of the study section broadens on previous literature by contributing to a comprehension of the meanings and essence of the postprison experiences of exonerees after their prison release. Expansion of knowledge on the postprison lived experiences of exonerees will positively affect social change by providing policymakers and public officials with information to advocate for reentry assistance programs, expungement of criminal records, and changes in compensation statutes for exonerees.

Background of the Study

As a consequence of the incarceration experience, exonerees and parolees emerge from prison with many emotional and practical challenges in their attempt to reintegrate into society (Grounds, 2004; Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney, 2013; Tomar, 2013; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). The fundamental difference between exonerees and parolees

in their reentry experiences is their relationship with the government. Parolees are released with an understanding that they still have an obligation to the government (Evans, Jaffee, Urada, & Anlin, 2012). The government's role in this process is to assist parolees in their transition back into society.

As a result, there is continual contact with the state in which parolees reside (Severson, Veeh, Bruns, & Lee, 2012). In addition, parolees are provided postrelease services to assist in the state's attempts to prevent recidivism. On the other hand, exonerees are released with the concept that they no longer have an obligation to the government (Severson et al., 2012). However, this means that the government no longer assumes an obligation to exonerated persons.

Studies conducted on wrongful convictions have provided insight into some reasons for the reintegration experiences encountered by exonerees (Campbell & Denov, 2004; Grounds, 2004). Campbell and Denov proffered that some difficulties wrongfully convicted persons experienced during their imprisonment were due to their refusal to admit guilt. The participants in the study conducted by Campbell and Denov expressed that their refusal to admit guilt also affected how they were viewed and treated by some members of the society after their exonerations. Moreover, the focus of the exonerees on the government's refusal to acknowledge the error of their wrongful convictions affected their adjustment after incarceration. According to Grounds (2004), the emotional effect of enduring a prison environment for years as a result of wrongful imprisonment also creates experiences for exonerees that are unique to them.

The consequences of incarceration and the reentry experiences of ex-inmates also provide insight into the reintegration experiences of exonerees. For example, Westervelt and Cook (2010) outlined in their study certain infections and diseases associated with long-term incarceration, and how these illnesses affect the attempts of ex-inmates to restructure their lives. The discriminatory practices of some individuals against ex-prisoners also provide an awareness of the postrelease experiences of exonerees. According to Garland, Wodahl, & Schuhmann (2013), housing is often an issue because many landlords refuse to rent to former inmates due to their fears of community safety.

The inability to obtain housing results in the homelessness of many formerly incarcerated individuals (Harding, Wyse, Dobson, & Morenoff, 2014). Discriminatory factors associated with employment also plague ex-prisoners. Garland et al. (2013) concluded that many employers refuse to employ ex-offenders when it is revealed that they were once imprisoned. The issue of trust and the fear of future criminal acts were the reasons the employers gave for not hiring persons with criminal records (Garland et al., 2013).

The reintegration experiences of ex-prisoners can also be affected by the identities acquired during the incarceration period (Boduszek, Adamson, Shevlin, Hyland, & Bourke, 2013). Some inmates adopt the social identities of the *ex-convict* label and are unable to shake these identities after their release from prison. LeBel (2012) pointed out that individuals who keep the identities they adopted during their incarceration are frequently subjected to external and internal limits. These self-imposed limits create reintegrating difficulties. For example, associating with negative groups who are

notorious for their social prison identities are external limits that some ex-inmates place on themselves.

Meanwhile, positive beliefs and motivations are internal factors that correlate with the constructive experiences of formerly incarcerated persons (LeBel, 2012). Some former prisoners can manage the identities associated with being incarcerated. Opsal (2012) analyzed semistructured interviews of female ex-offenders to provide insight into how former inmates used positive self-concepts, and confronting the stigma of being labeled a deviant, as coping tools in their postprison management. According to Opsal, former inmates who managed the prison identities, and the stigma of being labeled an *ex-convict*, had an easier time coping with reentry barriers. These former inmates were also able to reconstruct and replace negative identities and were less likely to re-offend.

Researchers such as Campbell and Denov (2004), Grounds (2004), and Westervelt and Cook (2010) conducted seminal qualitative studies that provided awareness of the consequences of wrongful imprisonment and the postrelease experiences of some exonerees. However, the conclusions of their research were not based exclusively on the perceptions of exonerees. There are also studies regarding compensation for exonerated individuals (Mandery, Shlosberg, West, & Callaghan, 2013; Norris, 2012) based on quantitative research that provided statistical data, but not a voice to exonerees. Moreover, according to Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) and Wildeman et al. (2011), a large body of the literature on exonerees tends to address only the legal reasons for wrongful convictions. The process of describing the lived experiences of the exonerees, from their perspectives, is missing from the literature.

As Wildeman et al. (2011) argued, it is essential to have studies on wrongful convictions and exonerees “beyond the limited legalistic framework” (p. 429). To date, no research has been found that provides data on the postprison lived experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their release exclusively from their perspectives. The research gap must be addressed by placing a human component to the postexoneration lived experiences of exonerees. Moreover, there is a need to understand the physical, social, and legal consequences of wrongful conviction and imprisonment, from the perspectives of exonerees, to provide greater awareness of the importance of improving the postrelease legal and social assistance offered to exonerees.

Statement of the Problem

The limited body of research on wrongful imprisonment, exonerations, and exonerees documented the lack of compensation for persons who spent years in prison for crimes they did not commit (Mandery et al., 2013; Norris, 2012). Alvarez and Loureiro (2012) and Thompson, Molina, and Levett (2012) outlined the role of governmental misconduct concerning wrongful convictions. There are also studies that increased awareness of the legal explanations for wrongful convictions, and imprisonment (Konvisser, 2012; Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012). To date, few researchers have explored the perceptions of exonerees on their lived experiences after they were released from prison (Wildeman et al., 2011). The literature that does exist on the reentry experiences of wrongfully imprisoned persons was mainly produced by legal scholars who did not approach their studies from a social science perspective.

Lack of research to determine how exonerees perceive their lived experiences after their prison release is a problem because the exonerees have not been able to tell their stories and experiences. There is a gap in the literature regarding the meanings and essence of the postexonerated lived experiences of the exonerees. Addressing the current research gap will provide exonerees an opportunity to tell their stories and assist in developing public policies to meet the needs of the exonerees through postrelease legal and social services. Moreover, findings from this study may assist in providing an understanding of the behaviors and mental processes associated with life after a wrongful incarceration. In addition, this phenomenological study could have compelling implications for justice and public safety, and could be included when policies regarding the expungement of the criminal records of exonerees are being explored. Furthermore, findings from the present study could identify influences and aid policymakers when decisions on monetary compensation and social services designed to assist exonerated individuals in their reintegration into society are being examined (Norris, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. Wrongful imprisonment can affect the psychological and physical health of many individuals during and after incarceration (Campbell & Denov, 2004; Grounds, 2004; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). In the present study, the descriptions provided by the participants, exclusively from their perspectives, created awareness to the neglected phenomenon of the postprison lived experiences of persons who were wrongfully

imprisoned. Documenting the shared postexoneration lived experiences of the participants will contribute to the knowledge of the meanings and essence of the lived experiences of wrongfully convicted individuals 1 year or longer after they were exonerated. The research also has the potential for positive implications by providing information to policy makers that might result in improved services for exonerees after they are released from prison.

Research Question

The following was the central research question created to elicit a better understanding of the presenting phenomenon for this qualitative inquiry: What are the meanings and essence for the postprison lived experiences of wrongfully convicted exonerees, at 1 year or longer after their prison release? According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is grounded in questions that offer a direction to meaning and interest. Phenomenology is also grounded in the contribution of the participants with what is being experienced. Moreover, questions in phenomenology imply that all the participants in the study have something in common that provide some significance to their lives (Moustakas, 1994).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study was built on the concepts of stigma and labeling. Specifically, stigma as understood from Tajfel's (1982) SIT, and Becker's (1963) SRT also referred to as labeling were the theoretical frameworks guiding the study. The effect of stigma on important life domains and the behavior, health, feelings, and thoughts of individuals can be understood from the theoretical framework of SIT

(Hogg, 2006). Tajfel postulated that to comprehend the social environment and build self-esteem, the normal cognitive process of humans is to place individuals into groups. The assumption of SIT is that when individuals identify with certain social categories or groups, they often take on the personality and behaviors of the groups based on the significance and emotional attachment they place on the groups or categories (Hogg, 2006; Tajfel, 1982).

Hutchison, Abrams, & De Moura (2013) found that group attachment and glorification can be disadvantageous to the self. Group glorification and strong group attachment can result in only viewing the group in the best light and can be detrimental to individuals who deny the wrongdoings of the group. Identifying with specific social groups is central to not only the adjudicative process of wrongful convictions, but also the postprison experiences of ex-inmates (O'Brien & Findley, 2014). SRT (labeling) portrays individuals that possess criminal backgrounds with identities that are negative (Shlosberg, Mandery, West, & Callaghan, 2014). Labels such as *ex-convict* can lead to depression, loss of self-esteem, stereotyping, devaluation, rejection, and discrimination. The essence of labeling is the strong reaction placed on individuals in being labeled a criminal, and the negative effect on a person's self-concept (Becker, 1963).

Murphy, Fuleihan, Richard, and Jones (2011) purported that the concept of labeling is not centered on an act. Instead, the key component of labeling is society's reaction to individuals and the subsequent effects of the labeling on the individuals. Detailed information regarding the conceptual framework of stigma and labeling, as defined in the theories of social identity (Tajfel, 1982) and social reaction (Becker, 1963),

are presented in the review of the literature. The conceptual framework of stigma and labeling, within the theories of social identity and social reaction, support the research inquiry because they assist in providing a correlation between the research question and the postprison lived experiences of the exonerees. The descriptions offered by the exonerees on how they believe they are perceived by the public, along with the described self-views, provided valuable understanding of their postprison experiences. The theories of social identity and social reaction are more fully discussed in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. This study employed the phenomenological design described by Moustakas (1994) as a method to provide descriptions of the experience, instead of an analysis or explanation of the experience. The phenomenological design was the most expedient and beneficial qualitative approach to obtain an in-depth comprehension of the postexoneration lived experiences of exonerees. Further, this approach supports the exploration for a greater understanding of the lived experiences of a small number of individuals who share the same phenomenon (van Manen, 1997).

The objective of phenomenology, according to van Manen (1997), is to elucidate the nature of everyday experiences. Phenomenology requires a commitment to set aside, or bracket, existing theories and opinions that would generate concepts. Thus, the research should not be guided by any preconceived notions, frameworks, or expectations. Data for this phenomenological study were collected through descriptive qualitative

interviews of a purposeful sampling of 8 individuals who were exonerated after a wrongful conviction.

Organizations and advocate groups that are in contact with exonerated persons were asked to post and distribute flyers to announce the study to potential participants. Flyers were also posted on the open bulletin boards of numerous churches for display. The flyers provided contact information for potential participants to contact me. Participants were selected after it was established, using a demographic questionnaire, that they met the three inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were (a) the individuals were incarcerated as a result of a wrongful conviction, (b) they were exonerated as a result of DNA testing or procedural errors, and (c) they were released from prison 1 year or longer.

After contact was made by potential participants, and criteria were established, participants were asked to participate in open-ended, semi-structured interviews. I interviewed each participant after a signed consent form was secured. Contact with participants occurred over the telephone or by email. The telephone interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and emergent themes obtained by using hand coding processes. I used epoché to identify any preconceptions, biases, and judgments of the participants on the phenomenon being investigated. Kaam's 7-step phenomenological approach as modified by Moustakas (1994) was used to analyze the data.

Operational Definitions

The following list of terms represents the operative definitions of the terms used in this study.

Exoneration: As used in this study, exoneration is an official act of members in the criminal justice system that declares a defendant not guilty of a crime or crimes for which a person had previously been convicted and sentenced (Zalman, 2011).

Exonerees: Individuals who are declared innocent and released from imprisonment as a result of constitutional or procedural errors that cannot be dismissed as harmless error, and persons who were found to be innocent as a result of the testing of evidence (Gross & Shaffer, 2012).

Expungement: For this study, *expungement* refers to the erasing of the criminal record that led to a wrongful conviction and imprisonment. A record that has been expunged may not be considered by a private or public entity in matters about employment (Shlosberg et al., 2014).

Factual innocence: The conviction of a person who was innocent either because no crime was committed or because the crime committed was carried out by someone other than the person convicted (Jenkins, 2013; Olney & Bonn, 2015).

Harmless error: A ruling by the court that the error made by the parties in a case did not affect the judgment or the decision made by the jury. The idea is that the evidence presented in the trial outweighed any errors committed during the trial (Kassin, Bogart, & Kerner, 2012).

Innocence movement: The *innocence movement* refers to activities by lawyers, social psychologists, legal scholar, journalists, and activists, who since the mid-1990s, have focused on freeing innocent inmates and rectifying the causes they perceive to be associated with miscarriages of justice in the U.S. criminal justice system (Zalman,

2011). As used in this study, the *innocence movement* refers to organizations and individuals concerned with justice reforms intent on proving the innocence of individuals who were erroneously convicted and imprisoned.

Innocence Project: As used in this study, the Innocence Project refers to the organization founded by Scheck and Neufeld at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law at Yeshiva University. The organization assists inmates to prove their innocence through DNA testing (Innocence Project, 2014).

Labeling: As defined by Becker (1963), *labeling* is the stigmatization of individuals who are perceived to exhibit behaviors that do not conform to the norm of the society. Individuals who break societal rules are labeled as deviants by dominant social groups and considered outsiders in the society (Murphy et al., 2011). *Labeling* is also defined as a social reaction that highlights certain attributes of individuals, assess them as undesirable, and devalue persons who possess these characteristics (D'Alessio, Stolzenberg, & Flexon, 2015).

Offender: A person involved in a criminal case or convicted of a crime that is considered a defendant in the criminal case (Morenoff & Harding, 2014).

Parole: The release of an inmate from prison whose prison term has not expired. The release is conditional on continual lawful behavior that is monitored by a parole officer for a set time, also referred to as postrelease supervision (Wang, Hay, Todak, & Bales, 2014).

Parolee: A former inmate who is released from prison prior to the completion of the sentence imposed but is subject to continual monitoring by the criminal justice system to ensure compliance with certain terms and conditions of the release (Wang et al., 2014).

Recidivism: The behavior of an individual after being released from prison that leads to re-offending and an eventual re-arrest (Wang et al., 2014).

Reintegration: The transition of persons released from local jails, state, or federal prisons into their communities (Wang et al., 2014). For this study, *reintegration* refers to the transition of wrongfully imprisoned persons from prison into their communities.

Stigma: A social construction in which a social group or groups characterize individuals in the discredited group as tainted, devalued, inferior, or deem individuals to possess discredited identities based on perceived personal, physical, or social qualities (Goffman, 1963). In this study, *stigma* is identified as a construct of social identity that helps in the comprehension of intergroup behaviors, particularly as it relates to the concept of self and social group attachment (Amiot & Aubin, 2013).

Wrongful conviction: *Wrongful conviction* is defined as the conviction and imprisonment of a person for a criminal offense they did not commit (Zalman, Larson, & Smith, 2012).

Assumptions

I assumed that some persons who were exonerated after being wrongfully convicted may not have been willing to participate in the study. Their reluctance may be related to their desire not to relive the experiences associated with their wrongful convictions and incarcerations. Therefore, a larger pool of participants was sought with

the intention of obtaining between 6 and 10 participants. Moreover, I assumed that the open-ended interview questions would enable exonerees to articulate their thoughts and experiences related to their postprison lived experiences.

This assumption was meaningful and critical to the study because the use of open-ended questions is an effective technique to elicit rich narrative data from participants. I also assumed that the responses communicated to the open-ended interview questions would provide emerging themes, concepts, and categories to reveal an understanding of the meaning of each participant's lived experiences. This assumption was meaningful because I assumed that the communicated responses would answer the research question in this study. Furthermore, I assumed that exonerees who participated in the study were motivated by the desire to tell their stories, so the information they provided was accurate.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to participants who were exonerated after being erroneously incarcerated. Thus, I collected data for this study from a purposive sampling group of participants who were able to identify lingering, and persistent postprison lived experiences. The participants engaged in open-ended interviews designed to elicit candid responses regarding their postprison lived experiences. Only individuals who were wrongfully imprisoned can provide information on the postrelease lived experiences of exonerees.

The present study was limited to exonerees who had been released 1 year or longer to produce in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences. Exonerees who have

been released 1 year or longer will have a more realistic concept of their postincarceration experiences after the conclusion of the proverbial honeymoon of their release. Thus, there is a greater probability that these exonerees furnished more meaningful information than recently released exonerees would have been able to supply. Furthermore, exonerees who are released less than 1 year might not have had enough time to comprehend, and be able to articulate, how the identities acquired during incarceration have affected their reintegrating experiences.

Although social justice theory is equated with the concepts of equal rights and liberties protection for all members of society, particularly the rights of less affluent individuals (Agartan, 2014), it was excluded in this study. Social justice theorists postulate that all members of a society qualify for human rights and should be embraced. According to Robinson (2010), involvement with the criminal justice system can be consistent with the theory of social justice when based on the assumption that all members of society are granted equal rights by law. However, this postulation is often in conflict with social justice theory when it involves disadvantaged or non-dominant groups in the society. The theories of social identity and social reaction were deemed more appropriate for this study because they relate to the experiences of ex-prisoners found in current research (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; Moore et al., 2013; Morris & Piquero, 2013). Therefore, they were considered more applicable to the experiences of exonerated individuals.

I obtained saturation from 8 exonerees residing in the southeastern region of the United States, so there was no need to recruit participants from other regions. Therefore,

the results of this study may not apply to all exonerees who were wrongfully convicted. The sample size was small because the goal in phenomenological studies is not to make generalizations or inferences about the population being studied (Dworkin, 2012). Given that the population is from only one region, the findings from this study will not generalize or transfer to all exonerees. The purpose of this qualitative study was not to determine generalizability or transferability, but to contribute to the literature towards gaining an understanding of the phenomenon, from the perspectives of the exonerees, of their lived experiences, 1 year or longer after their prison release.

Limitations

This is a phenomenological study so one limitation might be related to its design that involved a small sample size. Although a small sample size is acceptable to garner an in-depth understanding of the meanings and essence of a phenomenon (Dworkin, 2012), it should not be regarded as a representative sample used to construct generalizability. Transferability and dependability was established in this study from thick descriptions and an audit trail (Anney, 2014). Further, credibility was established when saturation was achieved. The rapport established with participants can also limit the study because the researcher is often viewed as the dominant force behind the study and the interview. According to Irvine (2011), the interviewer defines the interview situation, so the interview is often not a dominance-free discourse as seen between partners who are equal.

Thus, another limitation of the study is that the exonerees might or might not have provided truthful responses regarding their experiences. Instead, the participants might

have responded to the interview questions based on what they believed were the right answers. I employed a non-manipulative telephone rapport and tone with each participant to alleviate this limitation. Biases such as knowledge on a topic and prior assumptions about the participants can influence the outcome of a study and thus limit its findings (Chenail, 2011). In the present study, I addressed biases through self-reflection and bracketing.

Significance of the Study

Findings from this study added to the body of literature about the postprison experiences of exonerees by contributing to an understanding of the lived experiences of exonerees, 1 year or longer after their prison release. There was a gap in the current literature regarding a comprehension of the unexplored meanings and essence of the postprison lived experiences of exonerees from their perspectives. Thousands of individuals are erroneously convicted each year (Zalman, 2011), and hundreds have been released as a result of the overturn of their erroneous convictions (Gross & Shafer, 2012; Wildeman et al., 2011). However, no studies were found that specifically described the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, from their perspectives, 1 year or longer after their prison release. Information that materializes from this study can broaden the knowledge of policymakers, state agents, and community leaders about reentry assistance programs for exonerees (Wildeman et al., 2011).

In addition, this study will provide public officials with increased knowledge related to the value of expungement and compensation statutes as they pertain to exonerees. Developing an understanding of the experiences of the exonerees may expand

the understanding of the post-incarceration experiences of exonerees beyond the legalistic framework (Wildeman et al., 2011). The studies on exonerees are monopolized by case studies and the investigative and legal errors that contribute to wrongful convictions. Knowledge gained from this study may shed light on the adjustment experiences of exonerees from their perceptions, and not based on the opinions of scholars or journalists (Tan, 2011). The postprison lived experiences articulated by the exonerees may also be understood from the prison identities they believe were assumed during their incarceration.

Positive Social Change

This study has implications for positive social change by providing added narrative to the knowledge base that may help to change the way exonerees are viewed after incarceration. An understanding and emphasis on the postprison lived experience of exonerees may benefit exonerees in their effort to reintegrate into society. Further, exonerees might also gain knowledge and awareness of how the identities they developed during their incarceration have facilitated, or hindered, their transition into society. Finally, by providing a voice to this population, future research may be used to enhance the postexoneration experiences of exonerees, and shed light on some of the consequences of wrongful convictions as they pertain to life after exoneration.

Summary

The postprison lived experiences of exonerees from their perspectives have not been well understood or documented. Although research literature highlights the legal reasons for wrongful convictions (Balko, 2013; Clow & Leach, 2015), compensation

statutes (Mandery et al., 2013; Norris, 2012), and the consequences of imprisonment (Grounds, 2004; Konvisser, 2012; Westervelt & Cook, 2010), the perspectives of the exonerees, based exclusively on their lived experiences, 1 year or longer after their release, is unknown. The conceptual framework of stigma as understood from Tajfel's (1982) SIT, and Becker's (1963) SRT, also referred to as labeling were the guiding foundations for this study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release by providing them with an opportunity to communicate their experiences.

This study was significant in this respect because it explored the meanings and essence placed on the phenomenon of the postrelease lived experiences of individuals who were wrongfully convicted. By establishing an understanding of the lived experiences of exonerees, the results from this phenomenological study will fill the existing gap in the growing body of research on wrongful convictions, exonerations, and exonerees. Chapter 2 contains a review of the conceptual framework of stigma and labeling as they relate to Tajfel's (1982) SIT, and Becker's (1963) SRT, including how they related to the present study and guided the research question. I also presented a review of exonerations, wrongful convictions, and relevant literature supporting the gap in the literature on the voices of exonerees about the phenomenon under study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. The literature review in this chapter is an investigation of the existent literature and research related to the phenomenon of wrongful convictions, and the postprison experiences of exonerated individuals. The rate of exonerations in the United States has increased from an average of 24 each year between 1989 and 1999 to approximately 52 per year from 2000 through 2010 (Gross & Shaffer, 2012). The National Registry of Exonerations (2016) reported that as of May, 2015, there were 1,600 exonerations, 91% of which were males and 9% females. Approximately 40% of these exonerees had spent 10 years or longer in prison, and 61% had been incarcerated for at least 5 years. As a group, the exonerated individuals had spent almost 14,750 years in prison, an average of 9 years each.

Similar to individuals who are freed after serving their prison sentences, exonerated persons face varying degrees of postprison experiences. Several challenges faced by exonerees are due to self-destructive behaviors such as alcohol and drug abuse, as well as violence (Westervelt & Cook, 2012). On the other hand, some postrelease experiences are due to the lack of support provided to exonerees. Exonerated persons are freed with a paucity of social resources, and face the uphill battle of rebuilding their lives from scratch when they attempt to reintegrate into their communities (Owens & Griffiths, 2012).

Many states do not provide any form of compensation to the unjustly convicted (Norris, 2012; Owens & Griffiths, 2012). In some U.S. states, compensation is available only through civil litigation or private state legislations. Unlike most ex-inmates who are paroled, most exonerees are not provided any governmental social and community reentry assistance (Norris, 2012). The stigma of being labeled an *ex-convict*, and the identities assumed during incarceration, can also affect the postprison experiences of exonerated individuals (Campbell & Denov, 2004).

According to Toyoki and Brown (2014), some inmates can manage the social identities prevalent in penal institutions, and reject the adoption of the stigmatized identity of being labeled a prisoner. Certain individuals are also able to manage the identity and label of *ex-convict* after their release. Persons who manage the penal social identities tend to have less postprison release difficulties (Toyoki & Brown, 2014). Individuals who are unable to succeed in the management of the prison identities experience damaging self-views. Negative views of the self and low motivation are factors associated with the postrelease experiences of some individuals (Cherney & Fletcher, 2016).

The majority of researchers who conducted studies on wrongful imprisonment have concentrated on the causes of miscarriages of justice, the consequences of false imprisonment, and the effects of long-term incarceration (Konvisser, 2012; Owens & Griffiths, 2012; Smith, Zalman, & Kiger, 2011). Attitudes held by members of society about false conviction and imprisonment has also been studied by researchers (Clow & Leach, 2015; Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012; Zalman et al., 2012). Studies on the postprison

experiences of exonerees are limited and tend to examine compensation statutes, and the role of governmental agencies on wrongful convictions (Page, 2013; Scholand, 2013; Shlosberg et al., 2014). This review will highlight the gap in the literature on the postprison lived experiences of exonerees, from their perspectives, 1 year or longer after their prison release.

The initial presentation in this review is the search strategies utilized to locate relevant literature. I made efforts to present a contextual framework of quantitative and qualitative studies on exonerations, wrongful convictions, and incarcerations. In the literature review, I explored the concepts of stigma and labeling to provide an awareness of the perceptions of members of the society about ex-inmates. There is a discussion related to the assumption of identities in prison, and how the assumed identities could affect the experiences of exonerees during reintegration. I also connected the concepts of stigma and labeling with the reintegrating experiences of exonerees.

Research Strategy

I used numerous procedures to ensure that I conducted a thorough search of the literature. A search of current published, peer-reviewed articles, and foundational works in studies on wrongful convictions and imprisonment, and the stigma associated with being labeled an *ex-convict* constitute a significant portion of the literature. I examined literature by exploring various databases at Walden University's library website. The search databases included PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, ERIC, Science Citation Index, Expanded Academic ASAP, SocINDEX, Criminal Justice Periodicals, SAGE Full Text Collection, MEDLINE, Political Science Complete, Google Scholar, and Hein Online.

Keywords and phrases used for the search were *wrongful imprisonment, exonerees, exoneration, exonerated, wrongful imprisonment and conviction, wrongful conviction and consequences, wrongful conviction and psychology, stigma and ex-convicts, labeling and ex-convicts, stigma, social stigma, labeling theory, social identity, wrongful conviction and employment, exonerees and compensation, exonerees and stigma.*

Additional information was also derived from the Innocence Project, The National Registry of Exonerations, the Death Penalty Information Center, and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

An evaluation of the articles to determine their relevance to this study revealed emerging patterns in search results and reference lists as outlined by renowned authors or researchers of the topic. A review of the literature did not provide any empirical studies that explored the lived experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their prison release. However, the review provided a better understanding of some of the causal factors associated with the reintegrating experiences of exonerated individuals. This review also highlighted the most recent findings on the ramifications of wrongful convictions, and imprisonment, and the barriers associated with the reintegration of ex-inmates into the world beyond the prison walls. As part of my comprehensive and methodical search, I also examined the concepts of stigma and labeling, along with associated theories, to shed light on how discrimination might factor into the experiences of exonerees.

Conceptual Framework

Becker's (1963) SRT provides an understanding of the experiences of individuals after their release from prison in the social context of labeling. Becker framed the theory around the concept that social deviations result in the labeling of persons who are considered outsiders. Tajfel's (1982) SIT offers a framework for some of the postprison experiences of individuals as it relates to the relationship between self, society, and stigma. According to Tajfel, individuals are placed into groups by members of society, and some individuals identify and accept the identity of a categorized social group.

Labeling

Becker (1963) developed the present acceptable approach to the concept of labeling, also referred to as SRT. According to Becker, deviance is created by social groups in a society to establish social rules. When the rules are broken, the perpetrator, or the alleged perpetrator, is labeled a deviant. Although many labels applied to individuals are not accurate, once the label is conferred, individuals become a part of all the broad generalities that are applied to that label.

One of the significant contributions to the concept of labeling is that it places individuals in circumstances that make it difficult to continue the normal routine of everyday life (Becker, 1963). For example, persons who have been imprisoned find it difficult to obtain employment because of the label of being an *ex-convict* (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; D'Alessio, et al., 2015). Dominant social groups in a society have the power to formulate social stigmatization into laws by implementing various civil disenfranchisement against those they deem to be deviants (Murphy et al., 2011). As

Murphy et al. stated, rights such as the right to vote, eligibility for housing, financial aid, and public assistance programs can be denied to individuals who are labeled deviants based on the laws created by certain social groups.

Many state legislators refuse to provide assistance to exonerees who, in their views, contributed to their wrongful conviction by pleading guilty, or falsely confessing to a crime they did not commit (O'Brien & Findley, 2014). Groups such as prosecutors, police investigators, and other decision makers involved in the criminal justice system justify their roles in wrongful convictions by rationalizing the reasons for the convictions (Koppl & Sacks, 2013; O'Brien & Findley, 2014). These groups also publicly assert their belief in the guilt of exonerated defendants. Frequently, the reaction of these groups is that those who are charged with crimes, even if later found innocent, are probably guilty of something (Pecker, 2013).

Grounds (2004) discussed that the social consequences of imprisonment and reentry difficulties are the same whether the individuals were wrongfully imprisoned, or guilty of the crimes for which they were incarcerated. Hence, wrongfully imprisoned persons are labeled as criminals and experience the same reintegration experiences (Pecker, 2013). The views of decision makers involved in wrongful convictions are in keeping with the core of SRT. As Murphy et al. (2011) stated, the postulation of SRT is that symbolic brands placed on individuals such as criminal and deviant are a consequence of the rules and sanctions imposed by persons in dominant groups. The dominant groups in a society institute the rules and members of the community judge the

violation of these rules through the eyes of the rule makers and rule enforcers (Becker, 1963).

According to Visher, Bakken, and Gunter (2013), the loss of social standing in the community, along with the hostility and fear exhibited by persons in the general community, are social barriers to the successful reintegration of ex-prisoners into their communities. For example, Niu and Rosenthal (2009) found in their quantitative study that the respondents viewed socially dominant groups as being more trustworthy than subordinate groups. Trust discrimination was strong against persons considered to be part of subordinate groups. Niu and Rosenthal categorized subordinate groups as groups with individuals who were less educated, of lower economic status, non-White, and non-English speaking. They also considered females part of the subordinate groups.

Gunnison and Helfgott (2011) conducted a qualitative study to examine the perceptions of community corrections officers regarding the influence of the differing social backgrounds of officers and ex-inmates to the reintegration of ex-prisoners. The assertion of many ex-offenders was that some community officers do not understand the needs of ex-inmates because of the differences in the social backgrounds of the two groups. The study revealed that several officers recognized the contrasting social backgrounds of officers and ex-inmates as playing a role in the reintegration success of some previously incarcerated individuals. The officers also stated that they perceived some ex-inmates as using their social backgrounds as a pretext not to strive to overcome reintegration obstacles.

Stigma

Stigma is the devalued social identity that groups or individuals ascribe to other persons or groups in society (Goffman, 1963). SIT partially explains the concept of stigma. The ideology of cognitions and behaviors concerning group processors was established in the 1970s with the development of SIT by Tajfel (Hogg, 2006). According to Hogg (1986), SIT is a social psychological assessment of the role of self as related to one's perception of being a member of a social group.

Tajfel (1982) found that part of the normal cognitive process of humans is to categorize things and individuals into groups to comprehend the social environment and build self-esteem. The next step in the SIT process is where persons seek to identify with an in or out categorized social group. Tajfel referred to this process as social identification. The final step in SIT is to compare the groups socially and assume the behavior of the group in which one identifies (Tajfel, 1982).

The assumption of SIT is that as part of the identity process, individuals display group behaviors such as discrimination, stereotyping, and stigmatization against persons they consider to be members of out-groups (Tajfel, 1982). Social identity and self-concept are built around intergroup relations and the treatment of members of those categorized as being members of out-groups (Hogg, 2006). According to O'Brien and Findley (2014), the cognitive processes of individuals identifying themselves in certain social groups explain the decisions made in wrongful convictions and the stigma experienced by groups classified as exonerees or ex-convicts. To maintain membership in a group, people often unconsciously resist disconfirming information, and instead seek

and interpret the facts in a way that sustains the existing stereotype of certain groups (Todd, Galinsky, & Bodenhausen, 2012).

The origin of the word stigma is very revealing. Lloyd (2010) stated that its origin is a Greek word that referred to a tattoo or puncture mark that was usually made by a sharp item. The word, according to Goffman (1963), was used to define signs that were cut or burnt into the body of an individual to smear them as a person of immoral character. These stigmatized individuals were labeled as slaves, criminals, and people that should be avoided (Goffman, 1963). Durkheim, the 19th century sociologist, was the first to introduce the concept of social stigma by examining how criminal justice affects a society (Durkheim & Lukes, 2014).

The central idea behind Durkheim's concept was that the criminal process is mainly an indicator of society's conscience (Durkheim & Lukes, 2014). Society is not shaken by the commission of crimes. Rather, when certain crimes are committed, society is stunned because it contradicts the beliefs held by some members. The period of industrialization brought about a sense of imbalance between the norms and values held by the society in the United States and the new norms and values of immigrants. The imbalance referred to as anomie, occurs when the lack of a comprehensive societal norm results in behaviors that are viewed by some members of society as deviant (Durkheim & Lukes, 2014). Persons who were deemed to be deviants are stigmatized by society because their behaviors do not meet the approval of the majority of individuals in their communities.

The modern concept of social stigma, as it relates to a person's identity, was first introduced by Goffman (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012). According to Goffman (1963), social stigma is the disapproval of individuals or groups by members of society based on perceived characteristic grounds that are believed to distinguish them from other members of society. Today, unlike the days of the Greeks stigma is not associated with a physical mark. Instead, stigma is an attribute that comes with pervasive social disapproval that yields an unending spoiled identity (Murphy et al., 2011). Stigmatization can be unconcealed and show itself in the form of avoidance, social rejection, dishonoring, dehumanization, and depersonalization of others into stereotypic distortions (Herek, Saha, & Burack, 2013).

Social stigma incorporates the ideologies used by members of society to explain and rationalize their perceptions of stigmatized individuals (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012). For example, according to Ricciardelli and Clow, many exonerees are terminated in the middle of their job applications or interviews when identified as exonerated individuals, or there is disclosure of their prior imprisonment. Although previous convictions and exonerations are not visibly evident as in the case of an individual who is disabled, the photographs and stories of some exonerees are sometimes on the Internet and in newspapers. Therefore, in many instances, society's views on the identities of exonerees and the rationale for why the exonerees were convicted in the first place are frequently based on media representations, and not based on the true identities of the exonerees (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012).

The concept of labeling portrays individuals that possess criminal backgrounds with identities that are negative (Shlosberg et al., 2014). Labels such as *ex-convict* can lead to depression, loss of self-esteem, stereotyping, devaluation, rejection, and discrimination. According to Murphy et al. (2011), the concept of labeling is not centered on an act. Instead, society's reaction to individuals and the subsequent effects of the labeling define labeling.

Asencio and Burke (2011) explored how the identities placed on persons by groups affect the perception of self. The researchers suggested that self-labeling, along with SIT, explains why some individuals accept the identities placed on them by others. For example, the social identity of the criminal label can become so internalized and absorbed that the criminal identity becomes the view of self. The effect of this assessment of self is that the individual assumes the behaviors associated with the identity (Asencio & Burke, 2011).

The concepts of stigma and labeling, including self-labeling and assuming the stigmatized identity, provide a contextual understanding of the lived experiences of exonerees (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, & Stutterheim, 2013; Shlosberg et al., 2014). Having a criminal record generates a social reaction that is almost always damaging. According to Bos et al., the devaluing of the social identities of individuals based on the flaw placed on them by society and the acceptance of the identity flaw by some ex-inmates, result in stigma. This flaw, or attribute, is viewed as a negative based on an ideology that is framed by stereotypes. DePierre, Puhl, and Leudicke (2013) stated that people with more power often stigmatized others with less power as a means of maintaining inequalities

between groups. Those in society who view formerly incarcerated individuals as deviants maintain powerful ranks above exonerees even after their exoneration and confirmation of innocence (Bos et al., 2013).

Review of the Literature

The corollaries of wrongful convictions and imprisonment on the lives of persons who are declared innocent are far reaching during their reintegration process. The following literature review delivers an insight into the consequences of wrongful convictions, and imprisonment, and provides a background to the postprison experiences of exonerees. The literature also provides contextual information related to how the prison environment can affect an individual's postprison experiences. Specifically, the review furnishes information on how the social identities acquired during years of incarceration can influence self-views, reintegration, and recidivism.

DNA Testing

According to the National Registry of Exonerations (2016), the use of DNA testing accounts for approximately 25% of all exonerations with approximately 75% of the individuals exonerated through measures other than DNA tests. The use of DNA testing of physical evidence in criminal cases has irrefutably proven the innocence of hundreds of falsely imprisoned persons (Gross et al., 2014). As of January 2016, as a result of DNA testing of crime scene evidence, there were approximately 337 post-conviction DNA exonerations in the United States (Innocence Project, 2016). This number includes 20 individuals who served time on death row, and 16 sentenced for capital crimes without the sentence of death. Since the advent of DNA testing in the late

1980s, it has become possible to produce conclusive scientific evidence of a wrongful conviction years after the crime was committed (Scholand, 2013). Persons exonerated through DNA testing are declared to be factually innocent as opposed to being pronounced legally innocent when exoneration occurs as a result of procedural errors (Gross & Shaffer, 2012).

Overview of Exonerations and Wrongful Convictions

Until 30 years ago an enormous question was whether the criminal justice system in the United States convicted and imprisoned innocent individuals (Gross et al., 2014). Although there was a belief by individuals in the United States that wrongful convictions and incarcerations were possible due to the adversarial nature of the criminal justice system, the vast consensus was that wrongful convictions were isolated incidents that rarely occurred. However, as Zalman (2012) reported, as of 1989 DNA testing has provided incontrovertible proof that these incidents are commonplace, and the possibility exists that thousands of innocent persons have been convicted and imprisoned. Moreover, organizations continue to uncover cases in which males and females have spent years in prison for crimes they did not commit (Gross et al., 2014; Zalman, 2012). Estimating the size of the problem is challenging because of the differences between estimates in state jurisdictions and the United States as a whole. For example, Smith et al. (2011) interviewed judges, defense attorneys, prosecutors, and police personnel who estimated that wrongful convictions occurred in about one-half of one percent of cases in their jurisdictions. On the other hand, they estimated that wrongful convictions occurred in approximately 1 to 3% of cases throughout the United States.

Glaze and Kaeble (2014) reported that as of the end of 2013, there were approximately 2,220,300 incarcerated individuals in the United States. Based on this incarcerated population there would be about 22,203 people imprisoned for crimes they did not commit. According to Smith et al. (2011), although the Innocence Project is considered to be one of the leading sources of data information on wrongful convictions, their information might not be conclusive. As Smith et al. reported, the Innocence Project's data could be inconclusive because only a small number of criminal cases involve DNA evidence.

The cases involving DNA evidence tend to be those that involve murders or rapes, but there is a significant percent of wrongful convictions that occur for other types of crimes. In other words, when estimates of wrongful convictions are measured, cases involving drug offenses, assaults, and property offenses are typically not included in the percentages (Smith et al., 2011). As Zalman (2012) reported, there is no evidence that all exonerations throughout the United States are reported in data information on wrongful convictions, particularly when exonerations occur based on procedural errors. However, according to Smith et al. (2011), it is evident by the hundreds of post-conviction DNA exonerations in the United States since 1989 there is a significant problem in the criminal justice system with innocent persons being erroneously convicted and imprisoned.

The extent of wrongful convictions is also apparent in data from organizations such as the National Registry of Exonerations who partners with the University of Michigan Law School. According to the National Registry of Exonerations (2016), as of May 2015, there have been 1,600 exonerations in the United States. This total included

all exonerations based on factual innocence and those based on procedural exonerations. The Death Penalty Information Center (DPIC) issues information on exonerees who were previously on death row.

Similar to the data from the National Registry of Exonerations, the DPIC data included persons freed as a result of DNA evidence and those who were wrongfully convicted due to procedural errors. The implication is that although the data included all persons found to have been wrongfully imprisoned, some individuals might not be factually innocent. The DPIC reported that 156 death row inmates were exonerated between 1973 and December 2015 (Death Penalty Information Center, 2016). Gross and Shaffer (2012) also described the magnitude of the issue of wrongful conviction. They stated that between 1989 and 2012, death sentences in the United States represented less than one-tenth of 1% of the total amount of convictions. However, death sentenced individuals accounted for approximately 12% of exonerated defendants who were later found innocent.

Although there are differences between the number of exonerations reported by the Innocence Project, the National Registry of Exonerations, and the DPIC, there is no dispute that there is an enormous amount of falsely convicted and incarcerated individuals. The missteps of the criminal justice system are evident in the number of people exonerated annually since 1989. According to the National Registry of Exonerations (2016), there has been a continual increase in the number of persons exonerated with 22 exonerations in 1989 to 73 in 2000. The number of exonerations continued with an even larger increase of 124 exonerations in 2014.

Physical and Psychological Health

Studies conducted regarding the physical health of incarcerated individuals suggested negative outcomes are likely regardless of guilt or innocence (Innocence Project, 2016). Westervelt and Cook (2010) stated that most exonerees are released from prison with health problems such as “skin rashes, diabetes, hepatitis, asthma and muscular atrophy” (p. 268). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012) reported that inmates in U.S. prisons are disproportionately affected by health problems such as HIV, sexually transmitted infections, and tuberculosis. Studies on the postprison mental health condition of incarcerated individuals also reveal the scope of the problem.

Grounds (2004), a pioneer in the study of the consequences of wrongful conviction and incarceration, reported on the neurological effects of long-term wrongful imprisonment. Grounds conducted a qualitative study of the psychological assessments of 18 wrongfully convicted and incarcerated men after their prison release. As part of the study, Grounds interviewed family members and friends who had known the men before, and after, their imprisonment. The study revealed that all the men suffered from psychological factors such as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), mood and anxiety disorders, and depression similar to the psychological issues experienced by war veterans.

Feelings of estrangement from family and friends were additional psychological issues that factored into the problems faced by the wrongfully imprisoned participants. Grounds (2004) conveyed that many of the participants in his study communicated that they preferred to reside alone due to the difficulty they experienced adapting to living in a

household with other people. Similar to formerly justly incarcerated persons, the wrongfully imprisoned individuals articulated that they did not have many of the social skills required to function effectively in society after their prison release (Grounds, 2004). For example, lack of knowledge of technological advances often had the exonerees feeling humiliated when trying to cope with the significant postrelease developments.

In some instances, the psychological consequences of incarceration are long-term, making the adjustment to life after exoneration more difficult. A quantitative study conducted by Wildeman et al. (2011) examined how wrongfully convicted and imprisoned persons experienced life after exoneration. The period of imprisonment of the exonerees was between 2 to 23 years with an average incarcerated time of 11 years. The authors reported that before, and immediately after their prison release, a substantial amount of the exonerees suffered from depression, anxiety, PTSD, or a combination of all three disorders.

The exonerees, who experienced depression, PTSD, anxiety disorder, and other forms of psychological problems, were those who had been released from prison after serving less than 10 years (Wildeman et al., 2011). Seventy percent of the men who displayed more severe psychiatric symptoms had served 10 years or more in prison. Wildeman et al. reported that approximately 40% of the participants had difficulty sleeping, 38.2% had lost interest in activities, and 32.7% felt distant or removed from family and friends (Wildeman et al., 2011). The results also indicated that inability to secure employment after exoneration added to the psychological difficulties experienced by the participants.

The mental anguish experienced by incarcerated individuals is apparent by the enormous amount of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and completed suicides reported in prison data in several countries (Fazel, Grann, Kling, & Hawton, 2011). According to Fazel et al., most completed suicides occurred after the prison release of individuals. Daigle (2012) used a quantitative methodology to investigate the suicide rate of offenders inside and outside of prison. He reported that the majority of suicides occurred after prison release. Lack of proper treatment for vulnerable inmates who exhibited suicidal behaviors in prison, and non-existent follow-up treatment after their release, were major contributors to the 78.92% of postprison suicides. Imprisonment constitutes a stressful experience for inmates who enter prison with no form of mental illness (Daigle, 2012). The added stress of confinement associated with prison life only increases mental illnesses and psychological instability. When the stress of being wrongfully convicted and imprisoned is added, the risk of mental breakdown is intensified (Daigle, 2012).

Konvisser (2012) argued that female inmates are just as susceptible to the psychological consequences of incarceration as their male counterpart. A high percentage of female inmates suffer from PTSD and other medical issues as a result of the trauma of incarceration. Schnittker (2014) stated that former inmates tend to report symptoms that meet the clinical criteria for mood and anxiety disorders that are considered to be disabling psychiatric disorders. These disorders, along with other depressive symptoms exhibited by former inmates, can undermine the persistence of many exonerees to maintain a continuing search for employment.

Employment

The ability to secure and sustain employment is a major factor as to whether ex-inmates can successfully reintegrate into their communities. The public's perceptions of persons who were incarcerated account for the failure of many exonerees to gain employment (Garland et al., 2013). Exonerees, similar to prisoners who completed their prison term, face societal retribution as ex-inmates and are less likely to gain employment (Grounds, 2004; Visher et al., 2013). Mbuba (2012) conducted a study to explore the effects of incarceration on the lives of former prison inmates.

Mbuba (2012) used in-depth ethnographic interviews of parolees and extracted themes from the interviews. According to Mbuba, participants assessed their inability to obtain employment as postrelease punishment. The label of ex-offender results in a life-long relationship with society because ex-inmates are viewed with suspicion. Individuals making hiring decisions perceive past histories with the criminal justice system as a deterrent to employment (Mbuba, 2012).

Batastini, Bolanos, and Morgan (2014) conducted an examination of the attitudes of persons toward hiring individuals with prior criminal judicial system involvement. The findings of the study revealed that many postrelease offenders were unable to obtain employment because of the attitude of many employers who will not hire individuals with criminal records or previously imprisoned persons. Perceptions of fear, the dangerousness of the ex-offender, and lack of responsibility were factors associated with employers' views of formerly incarcerated individuals. According to Batastini et al., these opinions are in keeping with the perceptions of some people in society that a

blemished character triggers imprisonment. Although exonerated individuals are declared to be innocent, in the eyes of many employers their flawed character led to their involvement with the criminal justice system (Batastini et al., 2014).

Governmental Role

Postrelease Assistance. State agents, in the form of police professionals and prosecutors, frequently refused to acknowledge the role they play in wrongful convictions (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Moreover, although parolees obtain only a small amount of assistance from state agencies for housing, job training, and drug rehabilitation services, the assistance provided to exonerees are even less, or non-existent. State agencies play an enormous role in the postexoneration experiences of exonerees. Westervelt and Cook (2010) conducted a qualitative study to explore the postprison state harm on exonerees. They performed life story interviews with death row exonerees to investigate the role played by state agencies in creating and intensifying the harms suffered in adjusting into their communities. Findings from the study revealed that the harms sustained by exonerees were multifaceted.

Most exonerees do not acquire access to half-way housing to assist in their reintegration (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). The inability to obtain postrelease job training hampers efforts to gain employment. In addition, attempts to secure drug rehabilitation services are often non-existent due to lack of finances and health insurance (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Exonerees, particularly those who mourn the loss of loved ones, suffer from feelings of grief and a sense of helplessness in addition to feelings of being victimized by the government.

Westervelt and Cook (2010) reported that four of the inmates in their study were accused of killing family members. During their trial, conviction, and death sentence for murders they did not commit, the exonerees were forced to suffer the agony of the loss of their family members. The feelings of helplessness and grief are mitigating psychological factors associated with the experiences of exonerees in their attempt to integrate into their communities. Although Westervelt and Cook did not present a conceptual framework for state harm, they defined state harm victims as those individuals who have experienced economic hardship, physical harm, psychological pain, and discrimination.

Compensation. Lack of monetary compensation for exonerees also influences the adjustment of exonerees into their communities. Years in prison deprive wrongfully convicted persons of the ability make a living for themselves and their families. According to Bernhard (2009), in many U.S. states, there are no statutes to provide compensation for exonerees for their years of incarceration. Bernhard (2009) reported that a private bill, a lawsuit against the state, and compensation statutes, are the three options available to most exonerees. However, these options are beyond the scope of many exonerees because of their indigent status. More than half of U.S. states do not provide any reentry compensation or compensation statutes for wrongfully convicted exonerees (Bernhard, 2009). Bernhard found that exonerees, who had their lives forever altered by the failings of the criminal justice system, had no legal recourse to obtain monetary compensation.

Norris (2012) performed a content analysis in his quantitative study to assess the monetary compensation offered to erroneously convicted persons by U.S. states. The

study sought to investigate the weaknesses and limitations in compensation statutes. Norris' findings were consistent with the conclusions of Bernhard (2009) that only a limited number of U.S. states offer monetary compensation to exonerees. As of May 2011, compensation statutes were only available in 27 U.S. states and the District of Columbia (Norris, 2012). Fifteen of these states provide financial provisions base on the time served by the exonerees. Two states establish their monetary amounts by state incomes, and two compensate exonerees based on the number of incarcerated years.

The State of New Jersey offers their exonerees the larger of either twice the income the exoneree made before their conviction or \$20,000.00 (Norris, 2012). Ten U.S. states provide a yearly compensation, ranging from \$5,000.00 to \$80,000.00, with a median amount of \$45,150.00. The states that do not provide any monetary compensation based on time served offer a set amount of money for the incarceration period (Norris, 2012). However, according to Norris, some states leave decisions regarding compensation up to a judge or committee.

The State of Texas offers wrongfully convicted persons an additional \$25,000.00 for time spent on parole or as a registered sex offender (Norris, 2012). The other U.S. states do not offer any additional compensation for the time the exonerated person might have spent on parole or the indignity of the label of sex offender. Twenty-three states treat compensation as gross income and tax the compensated amount. Many exonerees discover after their prison release that they owe the state money for child support payments because of their inability to pay during the incarceration period (Norris, 2012). Therefore, even when some exonerees receive some form of compensation, depending on

the length of time in prison, the state seizes the majority of the financial compensation as child support payment (Norris, 2012).

Many exonerees who do not receive any compensation face the risk of committing an offense in their attempt to adjust to the world beyond the prison walls (Mandery et al., 2013). According to Mandery et al., most exonerees who commit crimes after they are released are the ones who do not receive any form of compensation or assistance from the states. A quantitative study was conducted by Mandery et al. (2013) using the data on exonerees compiled from the Center on Wrongful Convictions at Northwestern University. The study monitored the behavior of exonerated individuals. Compensation was used as a continuous variable to provide insight into the patterns of behavior.

Mandery et al. (2013) disclosed that monetary compensation had an enormous effect on rebuilding the lives of exonerees. The findings by Mandery et al. are consistent with the literature that discussed the barriers to successful reentry into the community (D'Alessio et al., 2015; Visher et al., 2013). Exonerated individuals who received an average of \$500,000.00 had lower offense rates (Mandery et al., 2013). In comparison, persons who were either not compensated or received lower compensations had higher records of reoffending. Although money assists exonerees to meet their financial needs, exonerees view compensation as having a more symbolic value in that they perceive it as fair and valued treatment.

Expungement. Perhaps the most problematic effect of wrongful conviction and incarceration is the *ex-convict* label and the stigma attached to this label. The ex-convict

label is consistent with the stigmatization of former inmates and act as a barrier to successful reintegration into society (Ng, Sarri, & Stoffregen, 2013). Shlosberg et al. (2014) conducted a quantitative study to examine the effect of the failure to expunge the records of exonerees. Although erasing the records would assist exonerees in gaining employment and making successful transitions into society, one-third of exonerees were unable to eradicate their records (Shlosberg et al., 2014).

As Shlosberg et al. (2014) stated, approximately 38.1% of exonerees were convicted of at least one postrelease crime and 61.9% did not offend after they were exonerated. However, the rates of offending varied by U.S. state based on the expungement laws of the state. The State of New York has the most auspicious expungement laws and, as a result, only 8.3% of exonerated individuals offended after their release (Shlosberg et al., 2014). The State of Florida had the highest rate of postexoneration offending with 58.7%, followed by 45.7% in the State of Texas. Moreover, Shlosberg et al. (2014) noted that the State of New York, which has the most generous compensation statutes and expungement laws, had the lowest reoffending percentage. According to Westervelt and Cook (2010), erasing the records of exonerees could provide them the opportunity to obtain governmental assistance and employment opportunities that would have eluded them had the wrongful convictions remained on their records.

Discrimination

Many individuals relate their biases against exonerated individuals by attributing the wrongful conviction to the perceived inherent criminality of the exonerees (Moran,

2012). Perceptions as to whether individuals bear some responsibility for their stigmas determine whether there will be positive or negative reactions toward the stigmatized individuals (Garland et al., 2013). The more people thought that individuals were responsible for their stigmas the more they blamed the individuals. Thompson et al. (2012) investigated the relationship between the amount of stigma placed on exonerees and people's evaluations of their personal characteristics.

Thompson et al. (2012) found that exonerated persons experienced an enormous amount of biases because of stigma. Most of the participants in the study believed that exonerees might be less intelligent than the average individual. The view of the participants was that lack of intelligence could be a contributing factor to their wrongful conviction. In addition, the years spent in prison might make the exonerated individual less good-natured. Because of this, the participants did not desire to have any personal relationships with exonerated individuals (Thompson et al., 2012).

Discrimination against exonerees might also be the result of the view that, although exonerated, the individuals might still have been guilty of some aspect of the crime (Clow & Leach, 2014). The views of the participants were strong against exonerees whose imprisonments were the result of their false confessions to offenses they had not committed. The quantitative study conducted by Clow and Leach (2014) found that exonerees who falsely confessed experienced more stigma as compared with exonerees who did not. The views regarding false confessions are harmonious with assessments speculating that offenders would not confess to crimes they did not commit (Kassin, 2015; Pimentel, Arndorfer, & Malloy, 2015). Therefore, even when exonerees are found

factually innocent as a result of DNA evidence, they are still presumed guilty of something, so their incarceration was justified.

The presumption of guilt by members of society exacerbates the stigma and labeling placed on exonerees and makes reintegration extremely challenging (Clow & Leach, 2014). Alvarez and Loureiro (2012) analyzed survey data to determine whether individuals with a criminal record are stigmatized. They found that previously incarcerated persons not only have difficulty re-entering the job market, but they also receive lower wages than individuals with no criminal record. The number of years spent in prison, and the type of crimes instigating the incarceration, are additional factors associated with the inability of ex-inmates to gain employment.

The correlation of stigma and the sociological variable of a person's race were examined by Smith and Hattery (2011) as they related to wrongful convictions and the experiences of exonerees. The conclusions of the study were that an individual's race plays a major role in the public's views of exonerated persons. The race of the alleged perpetrator is also a risk factor for wrongful convictions. African American men also represent a disproportionate amount of the exoneration population.

Of 150 cases in which the researchers had available data, 70% of the exonerees were African American men (Smith & Hattery, 2011). The study also revealed that although African American men made up approximately 40-50% of the incarcerated population, they accounted for the majority of exonerated men. According to Smith and Hattery, the perceptions of the public are that many African American men are involved

in criminal activities. Therefore, although exonerated the men more than likely served time for other crimes they committed.

Social Identity and Reintegration

The culture maintained in a prison environment often teaches incarcerated persons coping and prison survival skills that are not necessarily productive outside of prison (Rocheleau, 2015). Some exonerees may find it difficult to reintegrate into society because behaviors that might be adaptive in prison may have the opposite effect during reintegration into the society (Grounds, 2004). The norms and knowledge of the antisocial subculture obtained from other inmates can create a new identity of self for novice inmates (Walters, 2003). A quantitative study of 148 inmates conducted by Walters revealed that incarceration reshapes the thinking and identities of inmates.

The reshaping of identities in prison is consistent with the conclusions of Galinsky, Wang, Whitson, Anicich, Hugenberg, and Bodenhausen (2013) that to identify with certain groups, some individuals will take possession of derogatory labels. Dominant groups impose the degrading labels to reinforce stigmatized groups. Galinsky et al. conducted a quantitative study to test the causes and consequences of self-labeling with a derogatory group label. The study revealed that individuals perceived that acceptance of the self-label of being in a derogatory group, such as prison gangs, demonstrated a sense of power over the stigma of the label and of being associated with the group. However, although self-labeling can weaken the stigmatizing force of the label, the sense of power can affect judgments (Galinsky et al., 2013).

Asencio (2011) conducted a quantitative study to examine social identity process in an institutional setting. The findings of this study were that the self-view of individuals on their identities could be affected by how they are viewed by those with whom they are familiar. The participants in the study were incarcerated male and female offenders in a medium security prison. In a total institution context, persons with whom the inmates were confined were relevant to their identity processes. The view of self that continues postprison release can have an effect on how individuals reintegrate into society (Asencio, 2011).

Effect of Imprisonment on Recidivism

Although exonerees may not be considered ex-criminals, they face the same recidivism risk as offenders who are guilty (Mandery et al., 2013). Berg and Huebner (2011) stated that two poignant reasons for recidivism are the inability to obtain employment, and lack of social ties. Factors associated with the amount of time spent in prison also determine postprison offending and incarceration. Prisonization, which is the failure to shed the learned behaviors and subculture of prison, can also result in recidivism (Frank & Gill, 2015). Prisonization explains why there is empirical regularity attesting to the cycle of ex-inmates returning to prison. Prisonization also elucidates how and why prisons serve as a degenerating stimulus, a school for crimes, and the high percentage of annual rearrests.

A review of the existing literature did not reveal any figures detailing the rearrests of exonerees. However, a study conducted by Durose, Cooper, and Snyder (2014) found that of the 404,638 state prisoners released in 2005 in 30 U.S. states, within 3 years

67.8% were rearrested and 76.6% within 5 years. According to Orsagh and Chen (1988), individuals' social bonds diminish the longer they are removed from society. Orsagh and Chen studied 1,425 offenders released from a North Carolina prison and found that there was a positive correlation between the number of years spent in prison and recidivism.

Orsagh and Chen (1988) stated that longer sentences result in decreased employment opportunities because of loss of contact with the job market. This loss reduces the chances of securing legitimate earnings. The inability to obtain employment often results in recidivism. However, Orsagh and Chen concluded that the effects of longer sentences on recidivism are complex and varies based on the specifics of the ex-inmate.

Meade, Steiner, Makarios, and Travis (2012) conducted a quantitative postrelease study of 1,989 offenders in the state of Ohio. The authors focused on the relationship between the length of incarceration and the odds for reoffending during the year following release. Meade et al. found that the odds to re-enter prison lowered for former inmates who had spent longer periods in prison. When the amount of time served in prison was more than 2 years, the odds of recidivism decreased. However, there was only a significant difference in the odds of offenders reoffending when the time served was five years or more. Meade et al. noted that one explanation for the difference in the odds could be due to the incapacitation of inmates during their prime years. These odds may also have an effect on the postprison experiences of exonerees.

Postexoneration Healing

Despite the negative postexoneration experiences of some exonerees, many have been able to live productive lives (Jenkins, 2014). These exonerees refer to themselves as survivors of the miscarriages of justice. In a qualitative study conducted in the United Kingdom, Jenkins utilized observations and interviews during a three-year period to explore the relationships between survivors of wrongful conviction and survivors of crime. In particular, Jenkins sought to investigate the healing and recovery process of the wrongfully convicted individuals and the survivors of the crimes.

Jenkins (2014) reported that many wrongfully convicted individuals did not trust the adversarial system of justice and suffered panic attacks at the thought of entering a courtroom. The participants in the Jenkins study explained that although they experienced postprison released stigma and labeling, what kept them going was their aspiration for the state to acknowledge their innocence and wrongful convictions. Their healing was also facilitated by assisting other victims of wrongful convictions. Some survivors of wrongful convictions specified that their reintegration into society was enhanced when they developed new friendships with other survivors in the wrongfully convicted community and connected with justice support groups (Jenkins, 2014).

According to Wildeman et al. (2011), exonerees expressed that they felt better after they conveyed their stories to others with similar experiences. On the other hand, some exonerees, particularly those who were in maximum-security prisons, were unable to move beyond their prison experiences, so they withdrew and self-isolated (Grounds, 2004). There is a sense that family and friends cannot comprehend their experiences, so

they opt to live in seclusion. According to Grounds, some exonerees felt that solitude helps with the persistent fear of again being wrongfully arrested, convicted and imprisoned. Many exonerees elected to focus on their state's contribution to their wrongful conviction, and expressed feelings of being victims as a result of the wrong done to them by the government (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). As a consequence, these exonerees were unable to move beyond their perception that they were victimized by individuals in the criminal justice system. Thus, reintegration into society was harder for these exonerated persons.

Summary and Conclusion

The empirical studies outlining the reintegrating experiences of ex-inmates and the ramifications of wrongful imprisonment, though sparse, provided an indication of the reasons for the postprison success or failure of ex-inmates and exonerees (Alvarez & Loureiro, 2012; Campbell & Denov, 2004; Grounds, 2004; Jenkins, 2014; Konvisser, 2012; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). The struggle to obtain compensation is arduous for exonerees as many U.S. states do not offer any form of compensation to those who were erroneously incarcerated (Mandery et al., 2013; Norris, 2012). The inability to obtain employment is a central factor in the reintegrating experiences of exonerees (Mbuba, 2012). Expunging the records of exonerees is rarely done with only a few U.S. states erasing the criminal histories of the wrongfully convicted (Shlosberg et al., 2014).

The existing literature also revealed that reintegration experiences may be the inability of individuals to discard the social identities adopted as part of the prison subculture (Galinsky et al., 2013; Grounds, 2004). The review highlighted the causes and

effects of wrongful conviction and imprisonment because the literature on the lived experiences of exonerees is limited. The review centered around the available research on the experiences of ex-offenders and the effects of long-term imprisonment. As most of the literature on exonerees primarily described compensation issues, and the government's role in the wrongful convictions and incarcerations of individuals, it is unknown how exonerees perceive their lived experiences 1 year or longer after their prison release (Norris, 2012; Page, 2013; Scholand, 2013). The intent of this phenomenological study was to fill the gap in the literature by examining the lived postexoneration experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their release. As such, the study was based solely on the perceptions of the exonerees.

In Chapter 3, I presented how the study was conducted, the identification of the participants, and the research question. I included the rationale for selecting the phenomenological methodology as the appropriate model for exploring the postprison lived experiences of the participants. I also addressed the methods used to organize and analyze the information obtained from the participants. I concluded the chapter with a description of the ethical considerations and trustworthiness of the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their release. In this chapter, I discussed the exploratory approach used to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the postprison lived experiences of the population being studied 1 year or longer after their prison release. Current studies do not describe the perceptions of exonerees about their postprison lived experiences 1 year or longer after their release. Furthermore, legal scholars who concentrated on the legal reasons for wrongful convictions conducted a majority of the studies on life after exoneration. Research on the lived experiences of exonerees after their release from prison, solely from their viewpoint, is needed to fill the identified gap in the literature.

In this chapter, I restated the central research question designed to explore the phenomenon under study. I also discussed the justification for using a phenomenological design and the role that I played as a researcher, including the mitigation of bias. In the methodology section, I addressed the identification of participants and the necessary criteria for their selection along with the basis for the choice of a purposive sampling recruitment strategy and the proposed sample size. In addition, I discussed the data collection procedures, the in-depth interviews, and how the interviews were recorded and documented.

Data analysis for this study was centered on van Kaam's 7-step phenomenological analysis process as modified by Moustakas (1994) that categorizes data into themes and

descriptions. I addressed credibility in the form of member checking and reflexivity along with issues relating to trustworthiness such as transferability, dependability, and confirmability. I also addressed the protection of the participants, informed consent, and the confidential nature of the study. I concluded the chapter with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

In the present study, I used a phenomenological method of inquiry to obtain an understanding and descriptions of the postprison lived experiences of the participants from their realities. The phenomenological method also allowed me to explore the perceptions of the exonerees on the correlation between their incarceration, and postprison lived experiences. The following central research question was designed to obtain a thorough composite description of the stories and experiences of the participants: What are the meanings and essence for the postprison lived experiences of wrongfully convicted exonerees, at 1 year or longer after their prison release?

According to Landrum and Garza (2015), the two primary approaches to social science research are qualitative and quantitative methodologies. A qualitative approach allows the participants who are experiencing a phenomenon to describe their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in their words. In particular, phenomenological approach centers on obtaining thick descriptions, recollections, feelings, and perceptions of the participants to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of this study was to explore the essence and meanings of the postprison lived experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their prison release.

Thus, the research approach was a phenomenological method of inquiry (Moustakas, 1994).

Rationale for Qualitative Approach

Researchers who employ quantitative research seek to develop explanations for experiences by statistically measuring the assumptions of reality (Yilmaz, 2013). A quantitative approach is appropriate when the aim is to comprehend what variables influence the outcome of a study. Furthermore, a quantitative method of inquiry sanctions the idea that psychological and social phenomena both consist of objective realism that is entirely unconnected to the participants under study (Yilmaz, 2013).

On the other hand, qualitative research assumes a socially constructed reality stance where descriptions are provided from the perspectives of the individuals involved in the phenomenon (Landrum & Garza, 2015). In qualitative methodologies, the world portrayed is one in which reality is continually changing, multifaceted, and socially constructed (Landrum & Garza, 2015). Thus, researchers in qualitative studies usually recognize the life-world of humans and the descriptions they place on their experiences. Yilmaz (2013) maintained that qualitative research is constructed on the assumption that due to the complex nature of social phenomena, it is impossible to reduce social phenomena into variables.

Rationale for Phenomenological Approach

Phenomenology is the study of lived experiences as viewed through the lens of the participants (van Manen, 1997). One of the goals in phenomenology is to investigate the meaning of the lived experience of people to identify and describe the core essence of

their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenology, the focus of the researcher is on the descriptions the participants provide rather than the researcher's interpretations. In addition, phenomenology facilitates a small number of participants involved in a phenomenon to establish patterns and relationships of meaning (Yilmaz, 2013).

The techniques used to collect data in phenomenology provide rich descriptions of significant facets of the life-world of the participants. According to Giorgi (2012), phenomenology allows the researcher to set aside theories and presuppositions to facilitate the descriptions of the lived experiences. Although the researcher's subjectivity might be an issue, it is the investigator's responsibility to be continuously receptive to the experiences relayed by the participants during their interviews (Giorgi, 2012). The phenomenological approach also permits the researcher to analyze the descriptions provided by each participant and separate them into meaning-laden accounts. Consequently, the researcher can obtain an accurate description of what it is like to be experiencing the phenomenon.

According to Moustakas (1994), using key components of the phenomenological approach allows for the attainment of the meaning and essence of a phenomenon. The components are epoché, (phenomenological reduction), the seeking of meanings (imaginative variation), and synthesis of the data (Moustakas, 1994). During the epoché process, researchers set aside personal biases, prejudgments, and presumptions about the topic under study. The researcher comprehends the experiences of the participants through a cleansed consciousness to gain new knowledge. The reduction process involves bracketing in which the topic and questions are highlighted. An outcome of the

imaginative variation process is structural and textural descriptions. The descriptions are integrated into statements of the essences of the experiences of the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994).

Rationale for Eliminating Other Qualitative Designs

Researchers use other qualitative paradigms such as grounded theory, ethnography, narrative, and case study approaches as methodologies in lived experiences studies. However, these qualitative methodologies were deemed less suitable for this study because of their structural approach. For example, although grounded theory assumes an interpretive and naturalistic position in the world of lived experience, it would not be appropriate for this study. The objective of grounded theory studies is to generate theories that are grounded in, or molded by, data from the field based on inductive reasoning and not on the experiences of the participants (Corbin & Strauss, 1990).

Grounded theory shifts from a specific to a general explanation of the phenomenon in its theory-generating process (Foley & Timonen, 2015). According to Corbin and Strauss (1990), the approach in grounded theory is to ground theory into the phenomenon instead of being interpretive or descriptive. In other words, grounded theory approach does not present full conceptual understandings of lived human experiences. Thus, grounded theory would not be a suitable approach because the objective of this study was not theory development but to provide an understanding of the meanings and essence of the postprison lived experiences of the participants.

Ethnography originated from the field of anthropology and is the scientific study of the interaction of culture groups in their natural setting (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). Researchers utilizing ethnography are usually concerned with the behaviors, beliefs, and language of an entire culture-sharing group (Van Maanen, 2011). In addition, the investigator becomes immersed in the daily activities of the culture-sharing group during the data collection process. Based on the objective of this study, an ethnographic approach is inappropriate because it would not answer the primary research question concerning the postprison lived experiences of exonerees. Moreover, the necessity of spending time in the field required in ethnography would not be suitable, or possible, in this study.

Researchers in a narrative inquiry concentrate on the collection of stories from individuals, although the narrative could be the phenomenon under study (Hennings, Froggatt, & Payne, 2013). The goal of researchers in a narrative approach is to comprehend life as lived and interpreted by participants in their words, or in words through their stories (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). However, the stories do not concentrate on the lived experiences. Instead, the goal of researchers in a narrative inquiry is on shedding light on the identities of the individuals in the stories, and how the individuals view themselves. The narrative approach is comparable, in some instances, with the phenomenological method (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). The central difference between the two methods of inquiry is that researchers in phenomenological inquiries concentrate on descriptions and interpretations of the lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon.

On the other hand, the narrative method concentrates on the stories of the experiences of one person or several individuals (Hennings et al., 2013).

A case study approach seeks to provide a detailed understanding of the case in a context or setting (de Jong, Schout, & Abma, 2014; Yin, 2014). In a case study, the unit of analysis might involve a single case or multiple cases (de Jong et al., 2014). The case study approach involves an in-depth and insightful approach. However, data collection can include many sources such as interviews, observations, and the collection of documents that might be beyond the resource of a single investigator.

Therefore, case study and narrative methodologies would not be considered appropriate fits for purposes of this study. The methodological approach for a study should complement the research problem, statement of the problem, and the proposed research questions (Yilmaz, 2013). For the reasons stated above, I determined that a phenomenological design the best approach to understanding the lived experiences of the population under study. The phenomenological approach was consistent with the goal of the study and aligns with the research question.

Role of the Researcher

Participants for the present study were recruited to investigate the postprison lived experiences of exonerated persons. A review of the literature on wrongful convictions and exonerations revealed that a majority of the individuals who have been wrongfully imprisoned and exonerated are from non-dominant ethnic groups (Death Penalty Information Center, 2015; Gross & Shaffer, 2012; Innocence Project, 2016). There are unique challenges inherent in the recruitment of the ethnically diverse participants for this

study. According to Renert, Russell-Mayhew, and Arthur (2013), non-dominant ethnic groups are under-represented in studies conducted on humans.

Many non-dominant groups are skeptical of empirical studies because of past abuses (for example, the Tuskegee Syphilis Study), and mistrust of research institutions (Mays, Coles, & Cochran, 2012). Members of some non-dominant ethnic groups also believe that studies involving their groups are conducted to stigmatize the groups (Mays et al., 2012). Given these conditions, and the sensitive nature of the phenomenon in this study, my role was that of a reflective coparticipant. Thus, I placed a huge emphasis on ethically protecting the participants and simultaneously obtained the objectives of the study. The participants were considered coresearchers to allow them to take an active role in the study as the phenomenon was being explored (Yilmaz, 2013).

Coparticipant

One of the roles of the researcher in a phenomenological study is that of a coparticipant. The investigator engages the participants in the exploration of the essence and meaning of the lived experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Another role as a coparticipant is to analyze the collected data and share the stories of the study's participants. As a coparticipant in this study, I developed the interview questions, conducted the recorded telephone interviews, transcribed the responses provided by the participants, and analyzed the data.

The information on the experiences, as reported by the participants, was separated into units, and the data transformed into clusters of meaning and textural descriptions (van Manen, 1997). I conducted the interviews by telephone to provide more expanded

geographical access to participants. Moreover, telephone interviews enabled access to participants who might have been reluctant to discuss sensitive accounts of their experiences with face-to-face interviews. Although the drawback to telephone interviews is the inability to observe non-verbal cues such as facial expression and eye contact, cues such as tone and emotions can still be present during telephone interviews (Ryan, Coughlan, & Cronin, 2009).

Self-Reflection

In this phenomenological research, I used reflections to present data on the collective and expressive world of the participants (Lien, Pauleen, Kuo, & Wang, 2014). A reflective approach adds rigor and credibility to a study and should be part of all qualitative inquiry methods (Darawsheh, 2014). Lien et al. argued that useful phenomenological studies require the objectivity of reflection to add validity to the research. Rational and objective thoughts are used to gain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of the participants as they see it. A reflective role also involves considering the ways in which presumptions such as those about demographics (age, race, and gender), might affect the findings of the study (Lien et al., 2014).

Researcher Bias

According to Malone, Nicholl, and Tracey (2014), research bias can occur at all stages of the research process. It is imperative that researchers acknowledge and formulate strategies to minimize potential bias to validate the accuracy of the study. I have been employed in the legal profession as a paralegal for more than 25 years assisting attorneys in the trials of civil and criminal cases. In addition, I have done

volunteer work at the Georgia Innocence Project. These factors could pose a threat to my objectivity.

The volunteer work involved the review and evaluation of criminal cases of incarcerated individuals to aid in determining whether there was credible evidence for appellate claims of factual or procedural innocence. However, all interactions were with the attorneys working on the files of the incarcerated individuals. There was never any communication, or contact, with the inmates. Moreover, none of the criminal cases that I reviewed resulted in exonerations.

Addressing Researcher Bias

Chenail (2011) stated that one of the greatest challenges for a qualitative researcher during the research process is addressing research bias. Researchers must have an open attitude to understand and describe the meanings generated by the participants in a phenomenological research (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). Bracketing is a method used in a phenomenological inquiry to address any preconceived conceptions the researcher might have of the phenomenon under investigation. During the bracketing process, researchers perform self-reflections to identify any beliefs they may have about the phenomenon under study (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Researchers then put aside their knowledge, ideas, and experiences to provide an accurate description of the lived experiences of the participants. Researchers also document their reflections as they become aware of their biases and assumptions.

Researchers must be cognizant of the potential bias that exists as a result of their professional and volunteer experiences, and remain objective throughout the study

(Tufford & Newman, 2012). The investigator must conduct a review of all possible biases that could influence the analysis of the data, and carefully document any relevant thoughts and procedures. In the present study, I used reflective notes to assist in the reflective and descriptive processes. The reflective notes also helped me to monitor and mitigate biases during the data collection and analysis processes. In addition, I used the bracketing strategy to evaluate each participant's experience without judgment, to enable each participant's descriptions of the phenomenon to develop.

Methodology

Selection of Participants

The topic and the research questions are the driving forces behind the selection of participants in a phenomenological inquiry (Englander, 2012). The knowledge that potential participants understand and can describe a phenomenon, from the viewpoint of their lived experience, must be the basis for the choice of participants. In other words, the researcher must have a sense of the expected boundaries of the phenomenon under study (Englander, 2012). The participants were exonerated individuals who were released from prison 1 year, or longer. The participants' prison release was the result of DNA testing or procedural errors. All the participants met the criteria for the study and volunteered to participate in the interview process.

Recruitment of Participants

I recruited participants for this study through organizations and advocate groups in contact with exonerated persons. The organizations and advocate groups were asked to post the invitation to participate flyer (see Appendix A). I informed the organizations and

advocate groups that they were only required to post the flyers on their bulletin boards or other public places at their facilities. They were not asked to solicit, coerce, or manipulate exonerates to participate in the study. Flyers were also posted on the open bulletin boards of numerous churches for display.

The invitation to participate flyer describes the purpose of the study and participant criteria. Also included in the flyer is the telephone contact information and email address developed specifically for this study. I verified eligibility for the study when a potential participant made contact. During the initial interview, I used the screening demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) to screen potential participants about demographics to ensure they met the criteria for the study. Issues related to the confidential nature of the study were discussed in detail.

The participants' names were not included in the study. Instead, each participant was allocated a number beginning with number one for the first participant (P1). Interviews of all participants were recorded on audiotape. Each participant agreed to a date and time of their interview. I also informed each participant that the length of their interview would be between 60 to 90 minutes.

I e-mailed a consent form to the individuals who met the study's eligibility requirements. Participants were told that if they did not have access to a computer they would be mailed the consent form and provided with a self-addressed stamped return envelope. The return envelope would have a confidential stamp affixed on the outside of the envelope. However, all the participants provided me with an email address. Only after

a signed consent form returned was contact made with a participant to set up an appointment for the telephone interview.

Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling strategy was the only sampling technique used in the present study. Purposive sampling strategy is used in a study when participants meet the criteria for the study and have a unique and critical perspective on the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994; Robinson, 2014). According to Robinson, in purposeful sampling the judgment about which participant will provide the best perspective on the phenomenon is left up to the researcher. The investigator intentionally invites these participants to be a part of the research.

Criteria for selection in this study were that participants were all exonerated as a result of DNA testing or procedural errors. In addition, participants were incarcerated as a result of being wrongfully convicted, and released from prison 1 year or longer. If additional participants were needed, the snowball sampling technique would have been used to solicit the assistance of exonerees who already volunteered to participate in the study. Snowball sampling is valuable in phenomenological research when participants in a study recommend other participants who might be interested in the study (Kandola, Banner, O'Keefe-McCarthy, & Jassal, 2014). If additional participants were needed after snowball sampling, the flyer would have been placed on social media (Facebook).

Sample Size

Moustakas (1994) stated that sample size in a phenomenological inquiry tends to be small, and consists of prudently and purposively selected persons who have common

experiences. The goal is to produce detailed patterns and descriptions of meaning. However, the sample size must be large enough to accomplish saturation. Saturation is achieved when no new ideas are presented in the data collection and analysis processes (Robinson, 2014).

Consequently, no additional participants are needed or recruited when a thorough understanding of the phenomenon is accomplished (Robinson, 2014). In a phenomenological approach, the sample size is usually less than 12 participants (Morse, 2000; Pietkiewicz, & Smith, 2014). As Morse argued, samples do not represent a population, but a perspective. In contrast to generalizing an entire population as in quantitative inquiries, the central goal in phenomenological studies is to concentrate on the lived experiences of a small sample of individuals who share similar experiences (van Manen, 1997).

In phenomenological studies, Morse (2000) suggested that it is possible to obtain rich data for analysis with a sample size of between 6 to 10 participants. Quality data is not necessarily determined by the number of participants that the researcher interviews, but by the volume of usable data obtained (Morse, 2000). For example, Joosten and Safe (2014) in their phenomenological study reported that saturation was achieved when there were no new emerging themes after interviewing 7 participants. Their study involved the exploration of the lived experiences of mothers of children with autism, and the strategies used to manage their roles and emotions, and the behaviors of their children.

King (2015) reported that she achieved saturation with 8 teenage girls in her phenomenological study. King explored the connection between the self-esteem of

adolescent African American girls and their lived experiences with Christianity.

Following the guidelines for purposeful sampling, I used a sample size of 8 participants in the present study. Saturation was achieved when this sample size sufficiently produced descriptions from the participants that encompassed and adequately represented the perceptions of the population of exonerees.

Instrumentation

No formal instrument was used in this phenomenological study. As a coparticipant in the research, the qualitative researcher must take on certain roles during the data collection and analysis phase of the study (Anyan, 2013). I used semistructured interviews to obtain data and explore the experiences and perceptions as described by the participants. To reduce bias, I bracketed my personal and professional experiences on the topic.

There should be a conscious awareness of the hierarchal power differential between investigator and participants that is often associated with qualitative interviews (Anyan, 2013). In the present study, I used a respectful, non-threatening tone throughout the recorded telephone interviews to develop an egalitarian rapport with the participants. I approached each interview as a collaborator, with the primary objective to provide research data that would have a positive effect on the daily lives of the exonerees. As Anyan (2013) stated, the quantity and quality of the data are contingent on the relationship developed between the researcher and participants.

Data Collection Procedure

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to obtain contextual rich descriptions of the lived experience of each participant (Chenail, 2011). Before the interview procedure, I asked each potential participant to provide answers to the screening demographic questionnaire to ensure they met the criteria for the study. The demographic questionnaire includes each participant's age category, sex, ethnicity, race, years incarcerated, and years released from prison. The screening demographic questionnaire also contains the method of exoneration.

I used open-ended questions to allow the exonerees to speak freely about their experiences without the obligation of providing specific responses (Anyan, 2013). Specifically, semi-structured interview questions outlined in the interview protocol (see Appendix C) were used to gather data, and deter the collection of useless data (Moustakas, 1994). Additional questions and probes were used to capture the perceptions and descriptions of the participants. The interviews were conducted by telephone at a date and time convenient to each participant. The duration of each interview was between 60 to 90 minutes.

Each interview was audio recorded with a secure and reliable recording device. I took reflective notes during the interviews to document impressions of the encounter with each participant. These reflective notes were later used as part of the analysis process to provide an account of any preconceptions that could negatively affect the findings of the study (Joosten & Safe, 2014). Interviews were conducted until saturation was achieved.

As part of the debriefing procedure after each interview, I allowed the participant the opportunity to express concerns about the study. The participants were asked to add any information they believed was not addressed during their interviews. There was no necessity to contact any participant for follow-up telephone conversations to clarify statements made during the interviews. After each interview, I transcribed the data verbatim for analysis. Each participant was allowed the opportunity to read the findings from their portion of the interview transcript to clarify any misinterpretations that might have occurred during the transcription process.

Data Transcription and Analysis Plan

I transcribed verbatim the audio recording of each interview before performing any subsequent interviews. Personally transcribing each audio recorded interview allowed me to become acquainted with the data (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, the dialogue of the interviews, along with the reflective notes, helped me to identify the meanings and essence of the experience under study. In this study, the responses to the interviews were used to extract the participants' perceptions of the meanings and essence of their lived experiences 1 year or longer after their exoneration. The data collected from the interview questions explained the phenomenon experienced by the exonerees and allowed for thick, rich descriptions of their postprison lived experiences.

Collected data was analyzed in keeping with phenomenological principles to obtain emerging themes as to how exonerated individuals who were wrongfully convicted describe the meanings and essence of their postprison lived experience 1 year, or longer after their release. Data was organized and hand coded. No software was used

for analysis. During the analysis of the data, a check was made to determine whether there were any discrepant cases or contradictory findings. The data analysis procedure was the phenomenological data analysis strategy established by van Kaam and modified by Moustakas (1994). The following is a summary of Moustakas' 7-step data analysis procedure used in this study.

- 1 *Horizontalization*: Preliminary grouping and listing were performed on every expression deemed relevant to the experiences described by the participants (Moustakas (1994).
- 2 *Reduction and elimination*: The data were reduced by repeatedly reading each participant's transcript and eliminating statements that did not represent the experience. Statements that overlapped and were repetitive were eliminated. Vague expressions were also eliminated. The remaining statements represented the meaning units or horizons of the experience used to describe the phenomenon in descriptive terms (Moustakas, 1994). These remaining statements are what Moustakas (1994) referred to as invariant constituents.
- 3 *Clustering and thematizing the invariant constituents*: The invariant constituents were grouped and labeled by theme, a process Moustakas (1994) referred to as clustering. The clustered and labeled constituents represented the core themes of the lived experience.
- 4 *Final identification of the invariant constituents and themes by application*:
Validation: The invariant constituents and themes were checked against each participant's transcript to ensure that the expressed themes either clearly reflected,

or were compatible with the constituents. The constituents that did not reflect the experiences of the participants were deleted (Moustakas, 1994).

- 5 *Construction of individual textural description:* Quotations from the transcribed interview of each participant were used to construct a textural description of the meaning and essence of the experiences of each participant (Moustakas, 1994).
- 6 *Construction of individual structural description:* Structural descriptions were constructed for each participant based on the textural descriptions created (Moustakas, 1994).
- 7 *Constructions of a textural-structural description:* The textural and structural descriptions were merged to construct an understanding of the experience of the phenomenon as experienced by each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, as Moustakas (1994) recommended, I assembled a composite description that represented the synthesized essence and meanings of the experience for the entire group of exonerees. Data that contradict the emerging themes or patterns from a data analysis should not be ignored (Lewis, 2009). Instead, all data should be reported even if they do not support the theory of the study. No discrepant cases or contradictory findings in the data were found in this study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Anney (2014) argued that in qualitative studies, quality is achieved during the research process by employing verification strategies. Anney (2014) suggested that stringent protocols unique to qualitative studies should be employed for qualitative research to be credible, transferable, confirmable, and dependable. Trustworthiness can

be accomplished by using multiple verifiable strategies that build on each other to ensure rigor. Rich rigor is essential for increasing the odds for quality research and provides pragmatic, empirical evidence that can enrich future studies (Tracy, 2010).

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is defined as confidence in a study that the findings are trustworthy (Anney, 2014). In other words, credibility authenticates whether or not the conclusions of the study represent plausible information that arose from the collected data and represents an accurate interpretation of the original views of the participants. Specific activities suggested by Anney (2014) to achieve credibility are triangulation, reflexivity, and member checks.

Triangulation: One activity that can be used to establish credibility is triangulation. According to Anney (2014), triangulation is utilized in qualitative research to acquire corroborating evidence. During this process, numerous sources of data, resources, and methodologies are sought to corroborate the findings of the study. For the present study, I used triangulation to verify the accuracy of the developed themes against the findings of other research studies. Tajfel's (1982) SIT and Becker's (1963) SRT were also used in the analysis process as a method of triangulation.

Reflexivity: According to Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy (2013), reflexivity in qualitative studies is a self-awareness process used to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the findings of the research. For this study, I used mutual collaboration with the participants to address reflexivity. Further, I kept a journal of each interview with details

of how my volunteer experiences that entailed the review of criminal cases of inmates influenced the results of each interview.

Member checks: Another strategy that I used to add to the quality of this study was member checks. Member checks involve taking the study's findings back to the participants to ensure that the conclusions accurately depict their experiences (Anney, 2014). However, Carlson (2010) cautioned that participants could become overwhelmed during this process, and recommended sharing only the portion of the transcript pertinent to each participant rather than providing the entire transcript. I sent each participant findings from their portion of the transcript to ensure the accuracy of the interpretation of the transcript. Each participant was asked to confirm that the findings represented an accurate description of what was shared during the interview.

Transferability

According to Shenton (2004), it might not be possible to demonstrate that the conclusions are relevant to other conditions and populations because the findings of qualitative studies are frequently based on a small sample size. Fisher and Stenner (2011) concurred with this view and stated that transferability is not a goal in phenomenological research. Rather, credibility and meanings associated with a phenomenon are the goals in phenomenological studies. In contrast, some researchers suggest that transferability is possible if the investigator provides enough contextual information to enable the reader to make the transfer (Anney, 2014; Cope, 2014). Transferability is the degree to which the findings of a qualitative study can be converted to other contexts with other persons (Anney, 2014).

According to Cope (2014), a qualitative study has met transferability when the results of the research are significant to individuals not involved in the study. Moreover, transferability is accomplished when readers can associate the findings with their experiences. In this study, I provided rich descriptions to facilitate transferability. Dense descriptions provided by the purposively sampled population, the analysis processes, and the findings of the study will enable judgments to be made of how well the context of this study compares with other similar contexts (Anney, 2014).

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative studies is a strategy used to protect the integrity of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). One way to establish dependability in a study is to develop an audit trail. The audit trail documents all the methodological steps taken to arrive at the findings of the study. I developed an audit trail in this study to outline the research process and explain the rationale for using the analysis steps to reach the final interpretation of the data. All documents, including data transcripts, forms, journal, notes, audio tapes and flash drives were stored in a locked fireproof filing cabinet in my home office. I am the only person with access to the locked fireproof filing cabinet.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to establish that the findings are the result of an interpretation of the data and not based on the researcher's perceptions (Cope, 2014). According to Thomas and Magilvy (2011), confirmability in qualitative research necessitates that researchers be always reflective about how their preconceived opinions could affect the study. It is difficult to bracket presuppositions, judgments, and

researcher bias (Moustakas, 1994). However, reflecting on the insights and feelings presented by participants as they relate their stories will minimize threats to confirmability (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). In this study, I used reflective notes to record any potential threats to the confirmability of the final research analysis. Bracketing and reflecting were also used to aid in the confirmability of the study.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical Considerations

Discussing some of the postprison lived experiences after being wrongfully imprisoned might be difficult for some exonerees. All ethical considerations required when human subjects are the participants were followed in this study to minimize any discomfort to the participants. The participants all volunteered to take part in the study, and they were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Moreover, I strictly adhered to the do no harm to human participant policy.

All statements were accurate accounts of information provided by the participants. The ethical standards outlined by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) governing research guided this study. In keeping with these standards, the approval of the IRB was obtained before participants were recruited, contacted, or the collection of data commenced. The IRB's approval number for the present study is 02-09-16-0389835 with an expiration date of February 8, 2017.

Protection of Human Participants

There is universal consensus that human participants must be protected in all research (Wolf, 2012). In compliance with Walden's IRB guidelines, the National

Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certification program for the protection of human research participants was completed. The Training Certification number is 1660743, and the date of certification is May 1, 2015. Although exonerees might not be considered part of the vulnerable population, due to the sensitive nature of the present study, it was guided by the Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 46, Protection of Human Subjects (Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), 2009).

The federal regulation provides guidelines regarding the ethical obligations and responsibility of researchers toward human subjects on conduct, design, and analysis (HHS, 2009). Hence, the study was guided by U.S. federal, state, and Walden's IRB's ethical standards by following the do no harm rule and instituting well-defined agreements with the participants. Furthermore, the participants were advised that they were free to call or email me with any concerns they had regarding the study. Additional measures were also implemented to protect the participants from harm.

One such measure was that if a participant threatened harm to self or others during the interview, the interview would immediately conclude and local law enforcement at the participant's location contacted. In addition, after the initial contact, and before the interview, each exoneree was provided with a list of national and state counseling referral numbers (see Appendix D). If a participant became distraught or overwhelmed during their interview, the interview would have immediately terminated. The distraught participant would be debriefed by explaining that it was not the intent of the researcher to cause the participant any emotional stress. Finally, I advised all participants that if they needed to speak with someone after the interviews, they should

call one of the national or state numbers from the list of counseling contacts they were provided.

Informed Consent

I discussed the confidential nature of the study and the importance of the informed consent with each participant. The informed consent was designed in a straightforward manner to promote its comprehension by individuals with a high school or less education. All participants received full disclosure of the type of study being conducted, the purpose of the study, and the requirements of the study (Moustakas, 1994). In compliance with the requirements of Walden's IRB, each participant was asked to sign an informed consent before taking part in the study. The executed consent forms were stored in a locked fireproof filing cabinet in my home.

The informed consent provided participants with the background information and purpose of the study. The potential benefit and risk of participating in the study and the confidential nature of the study were outlined in the consent form. Participants were made aware that they did not have to participate in the study if they did not wish to be a part of this research. In addition, I informed all the participants that if they did agree to participate, they could withdraw from taking part in the study at any time during the process.

Confidentiality and Data Storage

Emphasis was placed on the confidential nature of the study. The participants were informed that I am the only person that will have access to their identities and states of residence. All participants were identified by a number. For example, the first

participant interviewed was identified as P1. All information that could disclose the identity of a participant was removed. Participants were not required to provide any information that they did not feel comfortable disclosing, and no personal written materials from the participants were requested. There were no unforeseen ethical concerns relating to data collection.

All documents, including data transcripts, forms, journal, notes, audio tapes, and flash drives used during the dissertation process were stored in a locked fireproof filing cabinet in my home office. I am the only person with access to the locked fireproof filing cabinet. No data was stored on desk or laptop computers. In accordance with IRB's ethical guidelines, all written or electronic files, audiotapes, transcripts, and documents (including recruitment materials) will be kept for five years after the completion of this study. After the five-year duration, all files and documents associated with this study will be destroyed. All paper data will be shredded and all audio recordings and flash drives deleted electronically and destroyed.

Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. The introduction relays the importance of the study. The research question that guided the interview is restated in the chapter. I described and discussed my role as the researcher including being the primary data collector and coparticipant.

Recruitment of participants consisted of 8 exonerated males who participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by the research question. The method utilized

to recruit the targeted population, along with the sampling strategy, and the sample size was also described. The goal of the study was to obtain thick, descriptions of the phenomenon under study. I addressed the use of Moustakas' (1994) modified 7-step data analysis procedure. The strategies used to aid in the trustworthiness of the study were described and discussed. Lastly, the ethical procedures and considerations employed to protect the participants and the data, were included in this chapter.

Chapter 4 provides the setting in which the study was conducted. I discussed the demographics of the 8 participants and the characteristics that are relevant to the study. Also presented is a thorough account of the data analysis procedure, including the codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the data. Evidence used to establish the trustworthiness of the study will be outlined. Finally, I will address the central research question and provide data to support the findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. I employed an exploratory approach to investigate the postexoneration lived experiences of the participants exclusively from their perspectives. The following central research question guided the study: What are the meanings and essence for the postprison lived experiences of wrongfully convicted exonerees, at 1 year or longer after their prison release?

I began the chapter with a restatement of the purpose of the study and the central research question. Included in the chapter, is a presentation of the setting as related to how it may have influenced the responses presented by the participants during the interview. I addressed the demographic characteristics of the population and implementation of data collection by using semi-structured interviews with 8 participants. I presented the data analysis procedures along with evidence of trustworthiness. I addressed the research question as it relates to the themes found throughout the interview transcripts in the results section of the chapter. Finally, I concluded the chapter with a summary of the significant information.

Setting

I conducted the interviews with the 8 participants via telephone. All interviews were completed without any interruptions. Moreover, at no time did any participant request to withdraw from the study, or express any emotional or psychological stress

during their interviews. I debriefed all participants after their interview. During the debriefing process, I screened the participants to provide them an opportunity to verbalize concerns about their participation, and articulate whether they were experiencing any mental health distresses as a result of taking part in the interview. All participants stated they were fine, and none of the participants reported the necessity to contact a crisis center or counselor.

Demographics

The sample consisted of 8 African American males. I determined their eligibility to meet the study's criteria during the initial telephone conversation. The participants provided their demographic information that I handrecorded on a separate demographic questionnaire for each participant. Inclusion criteria were used to screen for the method of exoneration, age, years incarcerated, and years released from prison. The participants identified that they had been wrongfully convicted, exonerated, and released 1 year or longer from prison.

Three participants stated that their exoneration was the result of DNA testing. Five participants identified that their exonerations were the result of procedural errors that had occurred during the investigation and trial processes. The names and geographical locations of the participants were not included in the study's results to protect their identities. Instead, the participants' names were replaced with a number beginning with number one for the first participant (P1). Details of the participants' demographic characteristics at the time of their interviews are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Information of Participants

Participant	Age (y)	Ethnicity	Gender	Years incarcerated	Years released from prison
P1	35	African American	Male	16	3
P2	54	African American	Male	10	9
P3	51	African American	Male	14	5
P4	26	African American	Male	5	2
P5	46	African American	Male	15	2
P6	34	African American	Male	11	1
P7	30	African American	Male	9	2
P8	53	African American	Male	21	2

Data Collection

Semi-structured telephone interviews with 8 exonerated African American males from the southeastern region of the United States provided data for this study. The participants volunteered to participate in the study after responding to the invitations to participate flyers (see Appendix A). I used the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) to screen the participants to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. The interview dates and times were scheduled after each participant returned a signed informed consent form. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) guided the interviews. Prior to performing the interviews, I emailed each participant a list of national and state counseling referral numbers (see Appendix D).

The participants' interviews were conducted by telephone, at the convenience of each participant, during the months of March and April 2016. The duration of the interviews of 7 of the participants was between 60 to 65 minutes. The interview with P2 lasted 70 minutes. None of the participants withdrew from the study at any point in the interview process. There were no interruptions during the interviews, and each participant was only interviewed once.

All participants authorized the tape recording of their interviews. I recorded the interviews with a digital Sony recording device. There was no necessity to seek clarification during the transcription process. Therefore, there was no need for follow-up telephone interviews with the participants. I transcribed the interviews verbatim into a Microsoft Word document and saved the data on a password-protected flash drive. The flash drive, along with all audiotapes, informed consents, and demographic questionnaires were stored in a locked fireproof filing cabinet in my home office. I am the only person with access to the locked filing cabinet. There were no variations from the data collection process described in Chapter 3, nor were there any unusual circumstances encountered in the process.

Data Analysis

The research data were analyzed using the 7-steps for phenomenological research analysis established by van Kaam and modified by Moustakas (1994). The use of the 7-step approach helped to analyze and synthesize the data effectively. The analysis was conducted by using hand coding and without the assistance of computer software programs. As the primary instrument in the analysis process, I first employed epoché to

identify and manage my preconceptions, biases, and prejudgments about the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, during the transcription process, I listened and re-listened to the audio-recorded interviews of the participants to immerse in the words spoken. As Moustakas stated, the immersion of the words spoken by the participants allows for the infusion of the essence of their experiences. Moustakas' 7-step data analysis procedure is detailed below.

Each participant's transcribed interview was read and reread several times, and I highlighted every significant statement made that was relevant to the experience. The significant statements were highlighted in different colors to effectuate a color code for each potential theme that emerged from the data. Next, a list was made of each sentence or phrase that provided a representation of the thoughts of each participant. The sentences or phrases provided an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. This first step is the process of horizontalization where each sentence or phrase is viewed as being equally relevant and having equal value (Moustakas, 1994).

The second step is the reduction and elimination process. During this step, I assessed the expression of each participant to determine whether its inclusion was necessary and adequately described any element of the phenomenon under study. I identified the meaning units or horizons of the experience, and statements that were redundant or imprecise were eliminated, reducing the data to only those of informative value to the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). In other words, this step provided the invariant constituents of the experience. After each sentence or phrase was thoroughly read and determined to have equal value, the statements that were repetitive, irrelevant, or

vague, were removed from further data analysis. The identified and labeled horizons were clustered into 33 initial categories.

The third step in the analysis process was the clustering of core categories of the experience and placing the invariant constituents into themes. Moustakas (1994) referred to this as the clustering and thematizing process. I clustered the 33 initial categories into 7 themes after recognizing and merging overlapping or repetitive categories. This step allowed me to arrange the data into themes that represented the essence, or core themes, of the experience. The 33 invariant constituents and the 7 clustered themes are presented in Appendix E.

In the fourth step, I validated the core themes of the experience to ensure the statements and accompanying themes were consistent with each participant's transcribed interview (Moustakas, 1994). During this process, I compared the transcript with the core themes to establish they were, (a) explicitly stated by each participant, (b) consistent with the account if not clearly expressed, and (c) even if they were not overtly or clearly expressed, the themes were relevant to the participant's lived experience. The analysis of the data resulted in the identification of the 7 themes. In the fifth step, the relevant and validated statements that were given specific themes were constructed into individual textural descriptions of the experience as outlined by each participant. This process provided an understanding of what the participants experienced (Moustakas, 1994). Verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews were used in this step.

The sixth step involved the construction of a composite description of the experience of each participant (Moustakas, 1994). I incorporated a structural explanation

of how the experience occurred into the textural description. In other words, I constructed a structural essence of the experience of each participant based on the participant's textural description and imaginative variation. In the seventh step, I constructed the textural (what) and the structural (how) descriptions of the experience of each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, I integrated the descriptions into a composite description of the meanings and essence of the experience that represented all the participants. Each identified theme had significant support from the responses, and this served as confirmation that saturation was accomplished. The themes elicited from the data are presented in Table 2. During the analysis of the data, I performed a thorough examination to determine whether there were any discrepant cases or contradictory data. Discrepant cases are data that offer deviation of the perspective on the phenomenon under investigation (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). No discrepant cases or contradictory findings were found in the data.

Table 2

Themes by Participant

Themes	Participants who identified themes
1. Employment and financial challenges	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
2. Negative societal reaction	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
3. Broken family relationships	P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8
4. Unresolved emotional and psychological factors	P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
5. Self-imposed social isolation	P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7
6. Role of family support	P1, P2, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8
7. Resilience	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8

Evidence of Trustworthiness**Credibility**

Stringent protocols unique to qualitative studies were used to ensure the credibility of the present study (Anney, 2014). I employed all protocols described in Chapter 3 to safeguard the credibility of the research during the data collection and analysis processes. Reflexivity, in the form of bracketing and recording of preconceptions about the phenomenon, was implemented to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the findings (Houghton et al., 2013). There was a mutual collaboration with the participants to address reflexivity. During the mutual collaboration process, the participants became involved in the evaluation of the data. I kept a reflexive journal of each interview to record how prior experiences with the criminal cases of inmates might influence the

analysis process. The chronicled notes from the journal were read and re-read to ensure that any prejudgments about the participants were bracketed before the commencement of the analysis.

I used member checking to verify the accuracy of the interview data after the transcription of each participant's interview (Anney, 2014). Each participant was sent a copy of the findings from their portion of the interview transcript and asked to read the transcript to verify that it accurately represented their statements during the interview. Each of the 8 participants confirmed that the transcript provided a correct accounting of their interview. I informed the participants that they would be able to view the final dissertation after it was analyzed and approved. As stated in Chapter 3, I employed saturation to add to the credibility of the study. After the transcripts were completed, coded, and member checked, I conducted a final examination to ensure that saturation was attained. Saturation was accomplished after the seventh interview when no new information or themes emerged (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015).

Triangulation was also implemented to corroborate the findings of the study (Anney, 2014). I triangulated emergent themes against the findings of other research studies on exonerees, ex-inmates, and wrongful convictions (Alvarez & Loureiro, 2012; Campbell & Denov, 2004; Grounds, 2004; Jenkins, 2014; Mandery et al., 2013; Mbuba, 2012; Norris, 2012; Shlosberg et al., 2014). The themes were also triangulated against the conceptual framework of Tajfel's (1982) SIT and Becker's (1963) SRT. There were no adjustments or changes to the strategies conveyed in Chapter 3 that might affect the credibility of the present study.

Transferability

Thick descriptions, in the form of detailed context driven illustrations of the perceptions and experiences of the participants, were provided to enhance transferability of this study. No changes were made to the description of procedures in Chapter 3 that directly influenced the transferability of this study. Although qualitative studies are usually not generalizable to wider populations, transferability is facilitated when individuals reading the findings in a study can associate these findings with their experiences (Cope, 2014). It is hoped that the contextual information I provided in this study would be useful for further study.

Dependability

Researchers use dependability in qualitative studies, to outline the context, research method, and type of participants used in a study to determine whether results would differ in a similar research (Houghton et al., 2013). An audit trail, specifying the steps in the research process, was the approach used to enhance the dependability of this study. I reported details of all steps in the data collection process, and the analysis method used to determine the findings. No changes were made to the procedures described in Chapter 3 that might affect the dependability of the study.

Confirmability

Cope (2014) stated that confirmability in a qualitative study is based on the extent to which the researcher can demonstrate that the findings are centered on an interpretation of the data, and not on the perceptions of the researcher. There was no deviation from the strategies previously described in Chapter 3 that could affect the

confirmability of this study. I took careful reflective notes to establish confirmability as I reflected on the insights and feelings presented by the participants as they narrated their stories during the interviews (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). I also employed bracketing to minimize threats to confirmability by looking beyond any bias, assumptions, and preconceptions of the phenomenon under investigation.

Results

The researcher in a phenomenological study acquires an understanding of the experiences of the participants by providing an appreciation of the context of their reality (Bjorklof, Kirkevold, Engedal, Selbaek, & Helvik, 2015). In the present study, an understanding was gained of not only what the participants experienced, but how their experiences were developed. Themes emerged that responded to the following research question: What are the meanings and essence for the postprison lived experiences of wrongfully convicted exonerees, at 1 year or longer after their prison release? Seven themes were ascertained when 5 or more of the participants identified a common unit of meaning in their interview. The 7 emerging themes included employment and financial challenges, negative societal reaction, broken family relationships, unresolved emotional and psychological factors, self-imposed social isolation, role of family support, and resilience. I provided specific quotes to exemplify the themes that emerged.

Theme 1: Employment and Financial Challenges

The 8 participants stated that they were presently employed and described the difficulties they experienced to find employment immediately after their prison release. The participants verbalized their frustration that although exonerated, they experienced

the employment challenges associated with years of incarceration. One of the biggest obstacles in finding employment was the reluctance of employers to employ formerly incarcerated individuals, even when advised of the exoneration status of the participants.

P6: No employer believe me when I say I was in prison for 11 years but did not commit the crime. They look at me like I'm crazy. One guy I saw for a job said to me, "isn't that what everyone says?"

P5: Getting a job was just hard. I didn't know it would have been this tough. You know what I mean. Because I was exonerated and got out of prison, I thought things would be easy. But no! They treat me just like a ex-con. When I just got out and went in some places to apply for work, employers would look at me like I was a fool applying for a job and not able to tell them where I worked for 15 years. I didn't wanna put on the application that I was in prison so I would leave that section blank.

Some participants expressed that they were unable to secure employment at the job-related skill level they had before their incarceration.

P2: I work in a warehouse which is completely different from the type of work I did prior to going to prison. I have a degree in biology and worked as a cytogeneticist in a hospital lab before I went to prison.... I assisted in prenatal diagnosis by examining chromosomes for abnormalities. It took me over two years to get the warehouse job I now have. When I just got out the only place that would hire me was a moving company, moving furniture. And even that took me six months to get. I only got that job because of someone I knew at my church.

P3: I was employed with a company as an accountant. I now work as a custodian at a Christian school. No one wanted to hire me fresh out of prison. No one cares about wrongful imprisonment and exoneration. They don't give a damn. Excuse me ma'am. You are an ex-prisoner and that's all people care about. They just flat out say no, I can't hire you. I was out of work for 7 months before my church hired me as a clerk.

P6: I work as a cook and dishwasher in a restaurant. I was in my last year of college and I was looking forward to graduating with a business degree. I thought because I was so close to graduating it would not be hard for me to get a job. I would tell employers I only had a few credits left before I graduate. Boy, was I ever wrong! Even when I did get an interview for an office position, I was asked about the 11 year gap in my resume. After trying for over a year to get a job in something that I wanted to do while in college, or work in a customer service job like I did before I went in, I decided to just take what I could get. Getting a job was a major challenge! Before I got this job in the restaurant, I would work for a day or two doing day work, anything I could get, but nothing steady. I had no money to do anything. I still have no money. A man without a job is very challenging.

Participants with less education and little or no technology skills found the job market particularly sparse when they tried to reenter the workforce.

P1: Like when I got incarcerated I had my GED already. I went to hair school after I got out and could not find a job. I finished the program and when I was

going to get my license, you know, there was so much run around that it took me about a year, or close to a year, in order for me to get it. There was so much paper work that I had turned in. I had to sign a, basically an affidavit that they drafted with all kind a stipulations that they didn't put upon everybody else. So things just get very, very difficult out here and it is definitely easy to lose the focus. It is definitely an easy thing to be discouraged.

P5: I work as a dishwasher in a restaurant. I got the job 2 years after I got out. When I got out of prison I was a 44 year old man with no real work experience. I really didn't have a good work history before I went in. No one wanted to hire me just out a prison.

P8: I just do odd jobs since I been out. I was so nervous when I got out. Everything so different! Computers, cell phones, and all that! I didn't know about all that stuff before I went in. We mostly used pagers before I went in. I had to get used to all this new stuff.

The participants also expressed how the challenge to secure employment created financial hardships, and made it difficult, and in some cases even impossible, to assist their loved ones financially.

P1: And like me getting out and not being able to get a job at first, I was not able to financially take care of myself at all even to the point where I, you know, I can't even offer up anything for rent, or any of the household needs, which is my mother's household.

P4.: You know, it took me over 1 year to get a job. I applied everywhere I could. Everywhere you go, they say, apply online. I apply online, you know and hear nothing. I go to places that had help-wanted signs out. I go in, apply, and nothing. What I bring home every week is only enough for food and gas to get to work. I can't even think about having a family and being on my own. After all my grandmother done for me, you know, raising me when my parents abandoned us, paid all those lawyers for me, I still can't help her to pay any bills.

An auxiliary result of the employment and financial challenges experienced by the participants was their described inability to secure a residence of their own. P7 spoke about his powerlessness to move from his family's home and live on his own. He expressed that he must reside with his mother because he earns minimum wage working at a chicken franchise.

P7: Ma'am took me almost a year to get this job! Before that I did odd jobs for people in the neighborhood. You know, yard work and things like that. At 30, I shouldn't be living in my mama's house. But I don't have enough money to move... I wish I could move but I can't right now.

Theme 2: Negative Societal Reaction

The second theme emerged when the 8 participants described how negative reactions by members of society have affected their postprison experiences. The exonerees proclaimed that their exoneration status did not exclude them from the dishonor associated with incarceration. Each participant expressed his perception that, despite being exonerated, he is viewed as an individual who spent a lengthy period in

prison. They described their experiences of the repercussions and discriminations associated with the label of an *ex-convict*.

P3: People treat you like you have the plague or something. They just don't wanna be around you. They smile with you and make it seem like they like you, but I know for sure I am treated differently from how I was treated by people before I went in. One guy I work with told me that he couldn't invite me to his house because he can't have people who were in prison around his children. That's just how it is now.

P5: After being out for two years I realize that my life will never be how it was before I went in. I will always be that man who spent a long time in prison and people will never forget that. Guys will hug me in church and everything, but I don't get invited to go out with them and don't get asked to their house for dinner or anything like other church folks.

P6: I didn't know that there was this much discrimination against people who were in prison... Discrimination just in how I am treated by people! They act as if I am an inferior being. I do not belong in their neighborhoods, around their children, or in their circle of friends. I know it. I feel it. I live it every day. You are treated differently and like an outsider not just by people who do not know you but by people who know you. Deal with you every day! My supervisor invite people over his house all the time. I am never invited. I know it's because I was in prison. He told one of the other workers that's the reason. You know what I'm saying. Never told me that though!

P7: Although I didn't rape that girl, people still act like I am just an ex-con. You know what I mean? People still think of you as someone who spent time in prison so you are different from them.

Two participants described the negative treatment they received from individuals who were considered part of their inner circle before their incarceration. P2 revealed, "Some couples my wife and I hung with no longer associate with us since I've been out. We are no longer invited to their homes for dinner or to attend functions with them."

P6: I stay away because I know his [brother] wife doesn't like the idea of someone who spent time in prison around their sons. She feels my prison image might affect my nephews. She says I walk and talk too much like those prisoners you see on television. I don't believe that's true but I stay away from her and her children.

Theme 3: Broken Family Relationships

The third theme emerged when participants described how the years spent in prison have resulted in broken relationships with family members. Six of the participants verbalized that the close relationships they had with family members before their incarceration no longer existed. The participants described how the stress of their wrongful conviction and years apart resulted in a difficult adjustment with family members. The participants had to relearn to interact with their loved ones.

P2: Also, years of being apart placed a strain on our relationship. We have had to work hard to rebuild the marriage we had before I went in. My wife and I had a

very good relationship before I went to prison. It was only through lots of prayer and counseling with our pastor that my family and I have made it this far.

P5: I stayed with my wife and sons for two years after I got out. But it was rough. Me and her was two different people from before I went in. There was a lot of arguments. After two years she told me to leave.

P6: My personality changed! I am a different person from who my family knew before I went to prison. My time in prison has affected my relationship with my family because they don't understand the new me.

P8: I had a son with my girlfriend before I went to prison. He was 7 when I went in. Last time I saw his mother was two years after I went in. She came to see me in prison. Told me she was moving on with her life. That's alright. I found out she married some man and my son call him dad. My son is now in his 30s. I haven't seen him from he was seven. She didn't want him to visit me in prison. I can understand that. He don't know me. Another man raised my boy! My only child! Because I was sent away for something I didn't do. That hurts.

P6: I have one brother and we were close before I went to prison. We are not close anymore. We have kinda drifted. We do not go out together anymore. My brother is ashamed of his so called ex-prisoner brother. That is cool. I understand. But it hurts. I do not have a big house and fancy cars. I did not get to finish college, but I am still a good person and still his brother.

Theme 4: Unresolved Emotional and Psychological Factors

There were consistent responses from the participants about the emotional and psychological factors associated with their wrongful convictions and the years spent in prison. The participants described how the emotional and psychological issues they faced during their incarceration continued during their postprison experiences. Some of their experiences are the result of their inability to shake the characteristics and unique experiences of living in a prison environment. Debilitated ability to make decisions, lack of self-confidence, bitterness, nightmares, insomnia, and paranoia are examples of the emotional and psychological factors described by the participants.

P2: In prison you only make about two or three decisions for yourself each day. You are told when to get up, when to eat, when to sleep. Everything! Being out you have to make several decisions for yourself each day. I have been out for a while but it's still hard for me sometimes to make even simple daily decisions. What do I eat today for lunch? You know things like that. This has affected my relationship with my family. My wife and I always made decisions together. Now, I want her to make the decisions because I am still not comfortable making decisions. She has been patient, but I know it gets on her nerves... A major challenge for me is to overcome the bitterness I feel about the criminal justice system. I am bitter and believe that bitterness will last the rest of my life.

P3: Everything about what you were on the inside is carried over on the outside. You may try to hide and mask it but it's there. Hard to forget that you were in for all those years for a murder you did not do. I had no anxiety problems before I

went in. Now, my anxiety level is always high because of the fear of returning to prison. My views about life and people are different. I am enjoying being free but my life will never be the same. After being told every day for over 14 years what to do and where to go for every minutes of the day, I am enjoying the freedom of doing what I want to do. But, emotionally I do not believe I am really free.

P5: I became a totally different person on the inside. After being out, I had to readjust the way I walk, talk and act. I couldn't walk around the streets walking and talking like I did on the inside. But that was hard for me when I was talking to someone about a job. I feel as if even when I try to hide that I was in prison, how I walk and talk give me away.

P8: Prison has changed me from a confident person to a person who is nervous and anxious about everything. My nephew or one of his friends even go with me to the store and go in with me. I was nothing like this before I went in. Now I am scared to go out alone.

P2: It is very hard to continue each day. I know I must move forward because I do not want to get stuck in a frame of mind that is damaging. But moving on is not easy! The nightmares continue. All the things you have seen and experienced while in prison is hard to erase. The fights, deaths, suicides, these are not easy things to get out of our head. I went through a lot in prison but young men killing themselves are just the hardest ones to erase.

P3 expressed how the nightmares he had in prison continue. When asked to describe the nightmares he responded, "Nightmares of being in a dark hole or locked in a

box and can't get out. That never stops." One participant described his paranoia and insomnia since his prison release.

P4: But I know I drive them [family] crazy because I am so paranoid. Prison life made me paranoid. Now I'm always checking the doors and windows to make sure they're locked. When the doorbell rings, I jump because I believe the police are coming to put me back in prison. I hardly sleep at nights. I may get about two hours sleep every night because I stay awake making sure no one come in the house. In prison I did not sleep at night. I fear I would be attacked and that made me not able to sleep. In prison I was able to function each day with little sleep. I am out and still can't sleep.

The legacy of anger and the mental anguish of imprisonment were described by three of the participants.

P6: My wrongful conviction and years in prison has made me an angry man. In prison I got into a lot of altercations. I had to fight to stay alive and not be an easy target. I had to endure a lot in prison. And that is hard to forgive and forget.

P7: I get upset with my mother and I know I shouldn't. But I tend to get angry about the past and take it out on her. I witnessed brothers being killed. I saw the bodies of brothers who had killed themselves. I feel no matter how good things get for me, those images will never leave me. I had to defend myself a lot in prison. You act like you better than other guys, you can get killed. It's hard to change when you get out. After 9 years in prison you can't just switch back to who you was before you went in. Man, even on the job, they think I act too tough.

So I guess you could say that prison has made me come across tough and hard. I can't help that.

P8: The hardest part is the mental part of adjusting to life outside of prison. It's as if your brain can't process being out. You still think like you are on the inside. In prison, guys try to control and get over on the guards and other inmates. You have to act tough and let them realize they can't operate like that around you. I operate the same way now. I operate much tougher than before I went in because I don't want no one to think they can get over on me. That kinda thing don't change! You learn to take care of yourself and that stays with you... I had gotten so used to living on the inside and fixed my brain to that way of life now it is hard to take out 20 years and just go back to thinking and living how I was living before I went in.

Theme 5: Self-imposed Social Isolation

The fifth theme that emerged from the data was the participants' postrelease self-imposed social isolation and resulting loneliness. As the participants described their postprison experiences, they defined mistrust as one of the reasons for their social isolation. Six of the participants stated that they have found it difficult to be around people following their release from prison. They communicated their preference to be alone. P4 stated, "I stay in the background even when my grandmother has friends coming over to the house. I just stay in my room. Keep to myself." According to P5, "I have no social life because I think that people just see another black man who is an ex-con when they see me. I prefer to be alone than endure that. I just keep to myself."

Throughout the data, it was evident that the participants had experienced a significant amount of postprison mistrust as a result of their erroneous incarceration. Some of the participants expressed that they found it difficult to trust not only the criminal justice system but also individuals with whom they regularly associated. P6 stated, “Being in prison has made me leery of everyone except my mother! I do not trust some family members, my co-workers and I most certainly do not trust the criminal justice system.”

P2: I am now suspicious of everyone, even on my job. I watch for clues as to whether I might be hurt or if someone is lying. Can this person be trusted? Will they stab you in the back? When you are in prison, you watch everyone to make sure you will not be hurt. That watchful behavior is hard to shake. I am mistrustful of most people.

P7: Prison has changed my personality. I am no longer the happy go lucky, carefree kid I was before I went in. I am hard. I do not trust people. I am a loner. I can't forget what I went through. The trial, prison, everything! I fight every day to try to forget, but I can't.

Theme 6: Role of Family Support

Seven of the participants acknowledged that assistance from family members had been their primary support system after their release from prison. They explained that they were unable to obtain any help from the state to assist in their readjustment into their communities. Not only have they relied on their family members for emotional support, but also housing and financial maintenance. According to P4, “Only help I got since I got

out is from my family. Those people at the prison didn't give me anything when I was leaving."

P2: My wife has been my only resource since I have been out. The only other help I got was from the prison ministry at my church. They helped me to find employment. I got nothing from the state. One day you are out with nothing and just have to start your life again.

P5: I had no help from anyone. My wife helped me when I got out. Because of her I had somewhere to live and food to eat. You don't even have good clothes to go look for work unless someone give you some clothes. My wife was the one who bought me everything when I got out. But really, there was no one else. Those people in the corrections feel you are free so you will be fine.

P8: Only help I got since I been out is from my nephew and my brother and sisters. Nothing from the people who took away 20 years of my life! No help with anything. Just boom, you are out with nothing and you just have to move on with your life on your own. Act like nothing happened and just move on. I guess they figure, they are letting me out and that should be enough.

Theme 7: Resilience

The resilience to succeed outside of prison was the seventh theme that emerged from the data. The 8 participants conveyed that the circumstances of their incarceration and their challenging postprison experiences engendered their resilience to succeed and not return to prison. Despite the obstacles to transition back into society they all expressed that returning to prison was not an option they wished to experience. P3 stated,

“You continue to struggle to make it on the outside because you don’t want to return to prison. I go to work, do everything I can to stay away from trouble. Go to church.”

P1: When you are in for that amount of time you tend not to ever want to go back so the decisions that you make are based upon that premise. I focus on my job and save to be able to get a place of my own.

P5: You get out you have to change from a physical and mental fighting spirit to a mental fighting spirit. You have to fight to not give up. Every day you have to mentally psych yourself to carry on and not give up. Giving up mean going back inside! I can’t just think about what the system has done to me. Have to now think about what to do to make sure I stay out of the system and move on with my life.

P7: Without money it is hard move on with your life. I cannot buy a car. I walk to work. Work is not too far from where I stay, but you know, it’s dangerous when I work late at nights. Don’t want to get stopped by the cops thinking I’m doing something wrong. So that’s always scary. Some people change before they leave work but I make sure I keep on my uniform so cops can see I am walking home from work.

Composite Description of the Experience

The creation of a composite description of the experience was the final step in the analysis of the data. The composite description is a synthesis of the themes the participants imparted that underscores the commonalities of the varied experiences of all the participants as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). The objective of this step was to provide a summary of the meanings and essence of the phenomenon under study. Further, the

composite description provided answers to the following research question: What are the meanings and essence for the postprison lived experiences of wrongfully convicted exonerees, at 1 year or longer after their prison release?

All the participants expressed that their erroneous incarceration had a significant influence on their postprison adjustment. However, the number of years released from prison was not a factor into the challenges experienced by the participants. For example, P6's described obstacles 1 year after his release were the same experiences verbalized by P2, nine years after his release. The experiences were defined by the incarceration, and not on the number of years released.

Although the postprison experiences of exonerees are similar to those of parolees, there are distinctive influencers that make the transition of exonerees unique. For example, once exonerated, unlike parolees, the participants were all released into their communities with no help from their states or correction departments to transition from prison to their communities. After they are exonerated, exonerees struggle with the psychological and emotional effects of their erroneous convictions and imprisonment. As a result, not only must exonerees adjust to changed communities, they also wrestle with the emotional and psychological consequences of their institutionalizations.

The challenge of finding employment and the interrelated financial difficulties were key problems described by the participants. The participants identified gaps in employment history, the reluctance of employers to hire formerly incarcerated individuals, and diminished job skills as some of the foundations of their employment challenges. Although the 8 participants responded that they were employed, it took them

between 6 to 18 months before they were able to obtain, and maintain, the positions they had at the time of their interviews. In addition, all the participants were only able to secure employment through the efforts of family members, church members, church organizations, and associates who had verbally vouched that the participants could be trusted.

None of the participants were able to attain employment from merely applying for advertised positions online or in person. After months of unsuccessful attempts to obtain pre-incarceration levels of employment, some participants accepted jobs that were not commensurate with their educational and job skills levels. Participants with limited education and work experience found it harder to reenter the job market. As a result, the participants described that their current jobs were associated with low or minimum wage earnings.

Years of incarceration and technological advancements also factored into the obstacles the participants faced in their attempts to attain employment. For instance, some participants had not used a computer or cell phone before they were incarcerated. Learning to use the computer was vital because the exonerees had reentered a world where almost every employer required the completion of job applications online. Even participants who were astute in the use of technology before being incarcerated found that their skills were obsolete because of technological advances. P3 expressed that although he had used a computer before his incarceration, after 14 years in prison he was unfamiliar with most of the computer improvements.

Another barrier that exacerbated the employment challenges confronting the participants was the reluctance of employers to hire previously incarcerated individuals, notwithstanding their innocence. Even after the participants informed prospective employers that their convictions were erroneous, they were still unwilling to hire the recently released exonerees. The skepticism was due to the unbelief of many employers that the participants were wrongfully incarcerated. As one participant proclaimed, in the eyes of potential employers, all formerly incarcerated persons state that they did not commit the crime, or crimes, for which they were convicted.

Continued underemployment erodes the ability of many exonerated individuals to progress above their low socioeconomic status. P2 stated that, although exonerated for 9 years, he and his family still experienced financial difficulties because they had exhausted their finances on his extensive legal fees, and his level of employment was below what he had before his incarceration. As a result of their marginalized socioeconomic status, most of the participants stated that they resided with family members because they did not possess the financial capacity, nor had they achieved the financial security to have a home of their own. Financial concerns were also highlighted when 7 of the participants expressed their frustration in not being able to assist family members with household expenses.

Although wrongfully imprisoned and exonerated, the participants responded that they experienced the negative societal reactions frequently imposed on other ex-prisoners. They defined varying types of negative reactions when members of the society discovered their previous incarceration. The participants described rejections, the *ex-*

convict label, and disassociation as some of the postprison negative reactions they experienced. There is no regard for their exoneration status, and the participants reported being considered criminals based solely on the fact that they spent an extended amount of time in prison. According to some participants, associates and family members have expressed to them that due to the length of their incarceration, their postprison personalities are more like other ex-prisoners. As a result of the disgrace associated with incarceration, family members detached themselves from the participants because they were embarrassed that their loved ones had spent an extended period in prison.

Years in prison and away from family resulted in fragmented and shattered relationships with girlfriends, spouses, and children as friends and relatives struggle to accept and understand the changed individual who had returned from prison. Children who were very young before the incarceration of some participants, and grew up without their fathers, found it difficult to develop postprison relationships. Some participants expressed that they were no longer as close to family members as they were before their incarceration. For example, P5 stated that he and his wife were unable to maintain the relationship they had before he went to prison, and they eventually separated two years after his release. According to P2, his daughter was 5 years old when he entered prison. After being apart for 10 years, he and his daughter were unable to develop a close relationship.

Intertwined with the other challenges described by the participants are the emotional and psychological consequences of incarceration, and the inability of the participants to relinquish their prison personalities. The participants described insomnia,

anxiety, and paranoia, as some of the psychological after-effects of being erroneously institutionalized. Furthermore, after years of strict prison regiments, some participants experienced a loss in their self-confidence, and a debilitated drive to be successful. As P2 communicated, "In prison, I lived one day at a time and since I have been out that is what I still do. That drive for success is gone because my self-confidence is gone." Some participants admitted that their adjustment obstacles could be the result of their inability to eliminate the characteristics they had developed in prison. For example, P5 explained that spending half of his life in prison made him an angry and bitter person, and he believed that his adjustment difficulties could be the result of these issues.

Many exonerees' harsh exterior acquired in prison as a coping mechanism remains after release. Some of the participants indicated that their reentry into their communities had been affected by the tough persona they developed during their incarceration. P7 described his difficulty in trying to abolish the toughness he had developed in prison. He stated, "After nine years I can't just switch back to who I was before I went inprison has made me come across as tough and hard. I can't help that. Now, I don't take crap from no one." According to P6, he came across as tough and impatient even during job interviews.

As a result of their wrongful conviction, exonerated persons frequently feel an intense fear that they could again be erroneously accused of a crime they did not commit. The participants described the various steps they employed to ensure they did not return to prison. One such measure was their self-imposed isolation. The isolation often results in

loneliness and is based largely on the inability of the participants to trust individuals outside of the prison environment.

Six of the participants expressed that mistrust of some individuals in prison persisted in their attempt to reintegrate into their communities. P3 stated that the emotional effect of no longer being in an institutionalized environment made his postprison adjustment lonely and frightening. All 8 participants expressed that the fear of returning to prison also contributed to their self-imposed isolation. Due to their distrust of almost everyone outside of prison, and the social difficulties they experienced with being around others, the participants expressed that it was safer to be lonely than trust someone and return to prison.

All the participants expressed being released from prison with little more than the clothes on their backs. With no financial assistance from their states after their release, the participants had to depend on family and friends for housing, food, and assistance in obtaining employment. For example, 7 of the participants stated that their family members saved them from homelessness. The other participant, P3, whose mother and sister died during his incarceration, communicated that but for the assistance of a former cellmate he would have had to find a homeless shelter after his release from prison.

Despite the reentry barriers described by the participants, there was a resilience to be successful and not return to prison. This resilience involved distancing themselves from anyone, or any situation, that could entangle them with the criminal justice system. P7 stated that after being incarcerated for 9 years for a rape he did not commit, he was cautious even around family members. For example, he verbalized that he ensures that

someone is always around, or in the room when he is around his 6-year old niece.

Likewise, P2 expressed that he ensures that someone is aware of his location all times.

He also safeguards against being alone if he has to be far from home. His fear is that a simple traffic ticket could escalate to him again being imprisoned for a crime he did not commit.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. The perceptions and experiences as described by the 8 exonerated men were obtained from semi-structured interviews. The interviews served as the only method of data collection. I conducted all interviews via telephone. The interviews generated significant statements regarding the postprison lived experiences of the participants.

Outlined in Chapter 4 are the sampling method, central research question, data analysis procedures, evidence of trustworthiness, the themes that emerged from the data, and the in-depth narratives presented by the participants. I analyzed the data by hand coding and the 7 steps for phenomenological research established by van Kaam and modified by Moustakas (1994). Based on the central research question that guided the study, 7 themes emerged from the shared experiences and descriptions presented by the participants. The themes identified were employment and financial challenges, negative societal reaction, broken family relationships, unresolved emotional and psychological factors, self-imposed social isolation, role of family support, and resilience.

The participants described the first theme, employment and financial challenges, as the major contributor for their low socio-economic status. The inability to obtain housing was also the result of their employment and financial problems. A noteworthy reason for the job challenges was the reluctance of employers to hire individuals who had spent time in prison. The second theme was the negative societal reactions the participants perceived they had experienced. All the participants described the hurt they felt from the negative reactions they experienced from family members and individuals in their communities.

Broken family relationships, the third theme of the study, emerged when 6 of the participants described their postprison relationships with family and friends. The years away from family members and friends had resulted in strained, broken, or non-existent relationships with children, girlfriends, spouses, and siblings. The fourth theme developed when the 8 participants described unresolved emotional and psychological factors, related to their wrongful convictions and incarcerations as contributors to their difficult reentry experiences. Six of the participants described the desire to be alone and their postprison social difficulties.

Thus, self-imposed social isolation emerged as the fifth theme of the study. The sixth theme, role of family support, was described by all but one participant and involved the financial, housing, and employment assistance obtained after their prison release. Resilience, the seventh theme, materialized when all the participants described their determination to succeed outside of prison and the steps they had taken to ensure they did not reenter the criminal justice system. The themes, as described, are based on the data

presented by the participants and contributed to the body of research about the postprison experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their release.

In Chapter 5, the purpose and nature of the study are reiterated, based on the need to increase existing knowledge of the postprison lived experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their release. Also presented is an interpretation of the meanings and findings of the data as compared to the existing body of peer-reviewed literature discussed in Chapter 2. I discussed the study's limitations concerning trustworthiness, along with recommendations for further research within the boundaries of the study. Also explored are social change and theoretical implications, along with practice recommendations. Chapter 5 closes with a conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. Researchers have primarily addressed the underlying legal factors associated with wrongful convictions (Alvarez & Loureiro, 2012; Mandery et al., 2013; Ricciardelli & Clow, 2012; Thompson et al., 2012; Wildeman et al., 2011). However, studies exploring the lived experiences of exonerated persons, exclusively from their perspectives, are missing from the literature. There was a need to fill the gap in the literature by placing a human component to the after-exoneration lived experiences of exonerees. The goal of the present study was to acquire further understanding of the experiences of exonerees, exclusively from their perspective, to potentially assist in the development of public policies to accommodate the transitional legal, psychological, and social needs of exonerees.

I collected data for this phenomenological study through telephone interviews of a purposeful sampling of 8 participants who identified as being exonerated after a wrongful conviction. I performed my analysis of the data by using the 7-step research analysis process established by van Kaam and modified by Moustakas (1994). Seven themes emerged based on the central research question that directed the study. The themes included employment and financial challenges, negative societal reaction, broken family relationships, unresolved emotional and psychological factors, self-imposed social isolation, role of family support, and resilience.

Findings from this phenomenological study outlined the perceptions of the participants of their postprison lived experiences in transitioning back into their communities. The findings from this study described the participants' views related to society's reaction to their exoneration, and how their psychological and emotional well-being was affected by their incarceration. Also reflected in the findings is how years of being in a prison environment affected the participants' lives after exoneration. Moreover, the results indicated how the participants' reentry experiences were influenced by the identities developed during their incarceration.

Interpretation of the Findings

Overall, the findings of the study validated the peer-reviewed literature described in Chapter 2. All 8 participants expressed that the transition from prison into their communities had been extremely arduous. Not only did the participants have to negotiate the psychological and emotional turmoil of adjusting to life outside of prison, but they were also confronted with an economic and social environment for which they were unprepared (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). This study sought to explore the experiences of participants 1 year or longer after their prison release to obtain a more comprehensive description of their long-term postprison lived experiences. The study's findings are summarized below as they related to the literature review in Chapter 2. In addition, I interpret the findings to compare them to the literature review to determine whether they confirm, disconfirm, or extend knowledge on wrongful convictions, exonerations, and exonerees.

The participants expressed that, although the incarceration played a major role in their postprison experiences, their experiences were the result of the years spent in prison and not the number of years released from prison. For example, the present difficulties described by the participant who had been released 1 year were similar to the expressed obstacles of the participant freed for 9 years. This result is consistent with the findings of Wildeman et al. (2011), who reported that there were long-term consequences to wrongful imprisonment. The quantitative study conducted by Wildeman et al. revealed that the experiences of wrongfully imprisoned persons were the result of years of incarceration, and not based on the number of years they had been released from prison.

Theme 1: Employment and Financial Challenges

There was a consensus among the participants when they verbalized that, as a result of their wrongful incarceration, they experienced substantial postrelease employment and financial challenges. They expressed that their exonerated status did not facilitate their efforts to find employment. Similar to other formerly incarcerated individuals, the exonerated participants faced the reluctance of employers to hire persons who were once associated with the criminal justice system (Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; Visher et al., 2013). The difficulty to secure employment articulated by the participants was echoed by the respondents in the qualitative study conducted by Mbuba (2012). Mbuba (2012) found that the label of ex-prisoner results in a life-long stigma of being viewed as a criminal.

Several participants stated that prospective employers refused to believe in their innocence, and did not hire them although they were aware of their exonerated status.

The reluctance of employers to hire the participants coincides with the results of the study conducted by Batastini et al. (2014). According to Batastini et al. (2014), in the opinion of many employers, all associations with the criminal justice system are due to the imperfect character of the individuals. Batastini et al. (2014) also concluded in their study that employers do not employ exonerated persons because of mistrust in their proclamations of innocence.

The 8 participants reported having postprison financial difficulties because of exclusions from medium to high wage job categories. The prohibitions occurred regardless of education or the job skill level of the participants. As a consequence, the participants were only able to secure employment in mediocre paying jobs. The low wage rank of the participants mirrored the findings of the quantitative study conducted by Alvarez and Loureiro (2012). The statistical findings of their study confirmed their hypothesis that formerly incarcerated persons re-entering the labor market received lower wages than persons with no criminal record performing the same tasks.

The difficult to secure employment confirmed the studies found on life after imprisonment. Employers are extremely resistant to hire individuals formerly associated with the criminal justice system. This is because many employers view the history of people involved in the criminal justice system as a disincentive to hiring (Batastini et al., 2014; Cherney & Fitzgerald, 2016; Mbuba, 2012; Visher et al., 2013). This study's results on the socioeconomic status and low wage earnings of the participants confirmed the findings in the literature regarding the inability of ex-inmates and exonerees to secure employment that pays above entry level or minimum wage income (Alvarez & Loureiro,

2012). Moreover, the study's findings on the employment and financial difficulties of the participants, extended knowledge to include exonerated individuals who were released from prison 1 year or longer due to the limited social science research on exonerees years after their prison release (Wildeman et al., 2011).

Theme 2: Negative Societal Reaction

The participants all described various negative societal reactions they experienced from family members and members of their communities. One participant expressed feeling like an inferior being. Another participant verbalized that he was treated by members of his community as if he had the plague. Several participants also reported rejection from family members as a result of the shame of the *ex-convict* label.

One participant articulated that he will always be regarded as a man who spent an extensive time in prison not as someone who was wrongfully imprisoned, and thus his life will never be the same. A qualitative study conducted by Moran (2012) found that ex-inmates not only experience discrimination as a result of the unmarked consequences of incarceration, but because of conspicuous signs such as tattoos, missing teeth, and manner of speech. The participants in the present study echoed this finding when they articulated that the way they walked and talked unmasked them as former prisoners. The marked signs frequently result in societal discriminations (Moran, 2012).

Clow and Leach (2015) concluded that there is a presumption of guilt by members of society against exonerees that makes reentry extremely challenging. A study was conducted by Clow and Leach to determine the perceptions of respondents toward exonerees who had falsely confessed to a crime and then recanted their confession. The

results of Clow and Leach's quantitative study were that there was increased stigma against individuals who falsely confessed to a crime or crimes. The findings were the same even for the variables of exonerations based on DNA testing or procedural errors. Even when presented with the evidence, the respondents still presumed that the exonerated persons were guilty.

The negative social reactions described by the participants confirmed the findings presented in the literature review. Some members of society exhibit discriminatory behaviors toward exonerated individuals because, in their opinion, the wrongful conviction was created as a result of the criminal nature of the exoneree that is visible in their appearance (Moran, 2012). Moreover, exonerees experience social bias and discrimination because of the perception of many persons in society that an inherent criminality attributed to their wrongful convictions (Pecker, 2013). The stigma of being incarcerated even if later found innocent, also accounts for the negative social reactions found in this study. The negative social reactions described by the participants confirmed the findings presented in the literature review. Some members of society exhibit discriminatory behaviors toward exonerated individuals because, in their opinion, the wrongful conviction was created as a result of the criminal nature of the exoneree that is visible in their appearance (Moran, 2012). Moreover, exonerees experience social bias and discrimination because of the perception of many persons in the society that an inherent criminality attributed to their wrongful convictions (Pecker, 2013). The stigma of being incarcerated even if later found innocent also accounts for the negative social reactions found in this study (Clow & Leach, 2015).

Theme 3: Broken Family Relationships

In addition to the modifications of their personalities and emotional adjustment to their postprison environments, exonerees must adjust to the changes in family members that occurred during their imprisonment (Grounds, 2004). The participants in the present study expressed that the personalities they had consciously, or unconsciously, adopted during their incarceration contributed to their broken relationships with family members. According to some participants, the inability to transition from a prison environment to a family household resulted in frequent disputes with family members. The broken relationships with family members corroborate the findings of Grounds (2004) who reported that exonerated individuals were often estranged from family members after their prison release.

In his study, Grounds (2004) identified that the family members of his respondents had adapted to a life without the exonerees making their readjustment into the household dynamics difficult on their return from prison. The broken family relationships articulated by the participants in the present study were also identified in the study conducted by Todd et al. (2012). In their study, Todd et al. found that many individuals, to sustain membership in specific group or groups, unconsciously accepted the stereotype attached to the group or groups making postrelease life with family members difficult. The broken relationships finding in the present study confirmed the results in the literature that described how years away from family hindered the rebuilding of prior relationships with loved ones (Grounds, 2004, Westervelt & Cook, 2010; Wildeman et al., 2011).

Family members discovered that it was hard to adjust to the new individuals returning from prison due to the complexity of the new identities of the participants. In addition, participants who had entered prison when their children were young found it hard to reestablish a parent-child relationship with their much older children. This finding extends knowledge on broken family relationships as it relates to exonerees, group membership, and prison personalities (Wildeman et al., 2011). For example, 6 participants admitted that although their family members found their adopted personalities disturbing, they were unable, or refused, to change their assumed prison personalities. Instead, they accepted the resulting broken family relationship and viewed it as just part of the dishonor and intricacies associated with years of incarceration.

Theme 4: Unresolved Emotional and Psychological Factors

The 8 participants indicated that their postprison experiences were influenced by several unresolved emotional and psychological factors associated with their wrongful conviction and incarceration. Similar to many formerly incarcerated persons, the participants experienced postprison psychological issues such as paranoia, anxiety, and sleep disorder. The participants described bitterness, anger, lack of self-confidence, fear, and the inability to make decisions on their own as some of the unresolved emotional struggles they experienced after their prison release. The psychological and emotional experiences of the participants were consistent with the findings of the qualitative study conducted by Westervelt and Cook (2010).

Westervelt and Cook (2010) collected data for their study from interviews with 18 death row exonerees. Westervelt and Cook reported that several of the respondents were

released with a variety of physical illnesses. They also experienced emotion and psychological distresses after their exoneration. Several of the respondents reported having mental problems and various emotional distresses as a result of their years of erroneous incarcerations.

Daigle (2012) found that many former wrongfully imprisoned inmates returned from prison with psychological instabilities, although they entered prison with no mental health issues. Daigle conducted an analysis of the records of more than 1,000 former male inmates in his quantitative study. He reported that a total of 21.25% had committed suicide, attempted suicide, or engaged in suicidal behaviors after their prison release. According to Daigle, the psychological and emotional effects are intensified and can be severely damaging when the stress and mental anguish of being wrongfully convicted are combined with incarceration. Grounds (2004) also reported that the exonerated respondents in his study were diagnosed with psychological disorders such as paranoia, panic disorder, and depression after their release.

The psychological and emotional challenges experienced by the participants confirmed the findings of previous research. Prior studies found that a substantial number of incarcerated persons suffered from varying forms of postrelease psychological disorders and emotional issues (Campbell & Denov, 2004; Daigle, 2012; Grounds, 2004; Konvisser, 2012; Wildeman et al., 2011). In addition, as detailed in previous studies, and confirmed in the present study, one of the fundamental changes in exonerated individuals that greatly affect their postprison experiences is the psychological problems that

accompany incarceration as a result of suffering a wrongful conviction (Grounds, 2004; Wildeman et al., 2011).

Theme 5: Self-imposed Social Isolation

The participants described self-imposed isolation as a technique employed as protection from being imprisoned for a crime, or crimes, they did not commit. Several participants expressed that they preferred to live a lonely life than be subjected to the life they had in prison. According to the participants, some of their self-imposed social isolation was also due to their lost social skills and mistrust of the criminal justice system. Grounds (2004) reported that many exonerees preferred to be loners than face another imprisonment. Similar to other former inmates, erroneously imprisoned individuals no longer have the social skills needed to function effectively in the post-incarceration society in which they returned (Grounds, 2004). As a result, many former inmates are humiliated when they attempt to cope with the changed world and hence, isolate themselves.

The self-imposed isolation described by the participants confirms previous research findings (Grounds, 2004; Jenkins, 2014; Westervelt & Cook, 2010). Prior research revealed that the persistent fear of again being erroneously accused of a crime they did not commit instigated the self-isolation and loneliness of many exonerees. In addition, as found in the present study, many exonerated persons preferred to be isolated from others, or anything that could cause any form of contact with the criminal justice system (Jenkins, 2014). Jenkins reported in his study that most wrongfully convicted

individuals did not trust the criminal justice system, and even suffered panic attacks at the thought of entering a courtroom.

Theme 6: Role of Family Support

The participants reported that they did not receive any governmental assistance after their prison release. Parolees obtain some help from the state in the form of housing, job training, and drug rehabilitation services (Westervelt & Cook, 2010). On the other hand, exonerees are released with nothing and must fend for themselves in their attempt to reintegrate into their communities (Owens & Griffiths, 2012). Seven participants communicated that the preponderance of their postexoneration help came from members of their families. Family members provided emotional support, housing, and money for clothing and food. In addition, many of the participants were only able to obtain employment because of the aid of family members.

Some researchers have conducted studies on the importance of providing monetary compensation to exonerees for their wrongful imprisonment to assist in their reentry into society (Mandery et al., 2013; Norris, 2012; Page, 2013; Scholand, 2013; Shlosberg et al., 2014). Norris found that more than half the states had no compensation statutes. Furthermore, the compensation offered to exonerees in many U.S. states is not automatic and is only attainable through litigation. Most exonerated individuals do not have the financial resources to hire an attorney to fight in the courts for compensation. Left with little or no means of financial support, a majority of exonerees rely on the support of family members.

Although the participants in this study voiced their belief that they should be compensated for the harm they have experienced, similar to findings in the literature, they did not attribute their postexoneration difficulties entirely to lack of compensation (Norris, 2012; Page, 2013; Scholand, 2013). Instead, the participants believed that their dependence on family members was the result of the failure of members of society to separate their negative views of wrongfully convicted individuals from justly incarcerated persons. The participants also stated that the refusal of the states to erase the wrongful conviction from their records severely hampered their reentry transition. In their view, the rejection of the states to eradicate the records of their wrongful convictions necessitated their dependence on family members.

Findings in this study related to dependence on family members confirmed the literature on the postprison experiences of exonerees. Lack of financial security creates an atmosphere where exonerees are forced to depend on family members (Mandery et al., 2013; Norris, 2012; Page, 2013; Scholand, 2013; Shlosberg et al., 2014). The dependence on family members also confirms the findings of Owens and Griffiths (2012) and expands the literature by providing knowledge exclusively from the perspectives of the exonerees. Owens and Griffiths' statistical analysis of postrelease exoneration compensation across states revealed that most exonerated individuals do not receive the assistance from U.S. state agencies afforded to parolees. Findings in this study also extend the knowledge of the postprison realities of exonerees, years after their prison release.

Theme 7: Resilience

All participants articulated that their difficult postprison experiences have not deterred their resilience not to return to prison. Despite postprison hurdles, similar to the participants in the present study, there is a resolve by many exonerated individuals to survive their wrongful convictions and do whatever it takes to live a productive life outside of prison (Jenkins, 2014). Steps taken by the participants in the present study included making sure their locations are known at all times, disassociation with former friends and some family members, and avoidance to become entangled with the police department. The resolve of the participants in the present study is also analogous to the tenacity of the exonerees in the Jenkins study who referred to themselves as survivors of their wrongful conviction and incarceration.

According to Meade et al. (2012), former inmates who had been incarcerated for longer periods had lower recidivism rates. Furthermore, recidivism rates lowered the longer ex-inmates were able to remain out of prison. All the participants in the present study had been imprisoned for five or more years. Moreover, except for one participant, all the participants had been released from prison for two or more years.

The resilience of the participants confirms the findings of studies in the literature review that many exonerees go on to live productive lives (Jenkins, 2014; Meade et al., 2012). On the other hand, the study conducted by Berg and Huebner (2011) did not confirm the resilience of the participants to stay out of prison years after their release. Berg and Huebner reported that many ex-inmates returned to prison as a result of the behaviors they learned in prison, the hardships in finding employment, and lack of social

ties. Moreover, Berg and Huebner found in their quantitative study that only ex-inmates with strong family and social ties were able to remain out of prison years after their release. In contrast, despite the social and personal obstacles faced by the participants in the present study, they had, thus far, succeeded in their resolve to stay out of prison.

Conceptual Framework and Findings Interpretations

The results of this study validated the conceptual framework on which this study was built and executed as identified in a majority of the emerging themes. The central component of this study's conceptual framework was Becker's (1963) SRT in the social context of labeling, and Tajfel's (1982) SIT as it relates to stigma. SIT was formed around the theory that individuals who are deemed social deviants are labeled and considered outsiders (Becker, 1963). As stated in Chapter 2, both theories are identified with the experiences of ex-inmates and erroneously convicted persons in the peer-reviewed literature.

It became evident during this study that the postexoneration experiences of the participants were highly influenced by the social deviant label attached to them as a result of their incarceration. SIT explains how people are grouped together by members of the society. As a result, individuals frequently identify with and accept the identities they are given. SIT offers a framework for some of the postprison experiences of exonerees as it relates to their views of self, how they are perceived by members of society, and the stigma they experience.

SRT - Labeling

SRT addresses the concept that deviance is the creation of social groups in a society to generate social rules (Becker, 1963). Individuals who break the social rules are labeled deviants. Once the individuals are labeled, they become part of the broad views applied to the label. According to Becker, it is hard to continue life's normal routine once the label is conferred.

All the participants in the present study experienced difficulties in procuring adequate employment. Further, the participants reported being stuck in a low socioeconomic status. A majority of the participants expressed that they had little or no hope of rising above their lower economic status as a result of the label that has been conferred on them. Cherney and Fitzgerald (2016) corroborated these employment difficulties. Cherney and Fitzgerald analyzed interview data and found that the label of *ex-convict* presented severe employment challenges for parolees.

The low socioeconomic status of the participants in this study is consistent with Becker's (1963) SRT that dominant social groups in a society formulate social rules into laws that disenfranchise against those they deem to be deviants (Murphy et al., 2011). According to Murphy et al., the Internet-driven electronic background checks that are prevalent in today's society transmit limited criminal background information on individuals. An overall outcome of the criminal history of a person is usually not included in these background checks. However, these electronic criminal background messages are viewed by prospective employers as a flag that the job applicant has a

character flaw or is a deviant. The label of being a deviant limits most formerly incarcerated persons, whether wrongfully or justly convicted, to low paying jobs.

Labeling of ex-inmates also results in the loss of social standing in their communities. The social standing loss, and the fear and hostility exhibited against ex-prisoners are social barriers to postprison adjustment (Visher et al., 2013). In the present study, the participants articulated that society's rejection, and the fear of reentering prison, shaped their self-imposed social isolation. Exonerated individuals are labeled as *ex-convicts* in the same manner as persons who were justly incarcerated (Pecker, 2013). The participants in this study verbalized that, in their view, although exonerated they are labeled and perceived as *ex-convicts* by members of the society because of their incarceration.

SIT - Stigma

SIT is an identity process that involves people who discriminate against and stigmatize other individuals whom they consider members of the out-groups of society (Tajfel, 1982). According to Goffman (1963), stigma is the degraded social identity placed on individuals by other persons or groups in society. O'Brien and Findley (2014) reported that as part of their cognitive processes, individuals identify themselves with certain social groups. Persons in the powerful social groups justify their decisions regarding wrongful convictions and ex-inmates based on their desire to remain in these social groups.

As Goffman (1963) explained, social stigma is related to the disapproval of persons or groups in a society who perceive that the flawed character, or the spoiled

identity of some individuals, separates them from other members of the society. This stigma is the result of preconceived ideas used to formulate an individual's identity that results in the negative view of the individual. Stigma is demonstrated in the form of social rejection, dehumanization, dishonor, and stereotyping (Herek et al., 2013; Kassin, 2015; Thompson et al., 2012). Often, individuals in the social groups that are considered outsiders are unable to reconcile why they are members these groups and just accept the diminished identities as a survival mechanism (Asencio, 2011).

The 8 participants described various stigmas they experienced after their prison release. The participants believed that the fundamental reason for the negative social reactions they faced from both family members and persons in their communities is the stigma of the *ex-convict* label. The stigma of being perceived as an ex-convict is consistent with the findings of Ricciardelli and Clow (2012). Goffman's theory of stigma was the conceptual foundation of Ricciardelli and Clow's research.

Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) conducted a study to examine the perceptions of individuals in society toward erroneously convicted persons. Ricciardelli and Clow (2012) reported that the respondents' perceptions of the exonerees were that they were all guilty. Furthermore, all the respondents expressed negative feelings towards wrongfully convicted individuals. A wrongful conviction leads to the assumption of unwanted or blemished characteristics that result in stigma and discrimination (Bos et al., 2013).

The stigma associated with incarceration also contributed to the unresolved psychological and emotional factors experienced by the participants. The psychological and emotional trauma of imprisonment, along with the loss of dignity after exoneration

experienced by most wrongful imprisoned persons, creates reentry difficulties (Grounds, 2004; Schnittker, 2014). Some of the unresolved psychological and emotional factors associated with wrongful imprisonment was the acceptance of the perpetuated stigma by some ex-inmates (Bos et al., 2013; Todd et al., 2012). Stigma acceptance is manifested in this study by the inability, or refusal, of a majority of the participants to abolish the identities and the conceptions of self they had developed during their incarceration.

Many participants verbalized their inability to abolish the toughness they developed in prison. Several participants expressed that they have accepted the fact that they will be viewed as ex-prisoners for the rest of their lives. These self-views and acceptance of negative identities are consistent with the findings of researchers who have studied how the identities placed on individuals by social groups in a society are accepted as the perception of self (Asencio & Burke, 2011; Moore et al., 2013). Self-labeling and SIT are reasons why numerous individuals accept the negative identities subscribed to them by dominant groups in society. According to Asencio and Burke (2011), the labels bestowed on individuals can become so internalized that the negative identities become the view of self.

The view of self and acceptance of the acquired identity are similar to the findings of Frank and Gill (2015). In their qualitative study, Frank and Gill reported that some former inmates expressed severe hardships in trying to return to the behaviors associated with the moral identities they had before their incarcerations. In fact, many inmates became severely stressed in switching back and forth between a moral identity and the inmate identity. As a result, they resigned themselves to just staying with the inmate

identity during their incarceration. However, after confinement, they suffered severe challenges in once again attempting to return to a moral identity. The hard exterior and toughness associated with the prison identity, regarded as outside the norm of society, were expressed by some of the participants in the present study as behaviors adopted during their incarceration that they could not, or would not, discard.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides an important contribution to the literature on the postprison lived experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their release. However, it is important to document how limitations to the trustworthiness of the study were mitigated. This phenomenological research was limited to a small sample size of 8 exonerated males. Therefore, the findings are not generalizable to all exonerated individuals in the United States other than those stipulated in the current inclusion criteria. I conducted interviews until saturation was achieved to mitigate this limitation.

Saturation was accomplished after the seventh interview when no new ideas were presented (Robinson, 2014). Moreover, thick descriptive data were used to describe the experiences of the participants. An audit trail was also used to ensure dependability of the study (Anney, 2014). The research process was thoroughly expounded from the data collection process, the context of the study, to an explanation of the findings.

The interviewer shapes the interview situation in a study so the interview is often not deemed to be a dominance-free interchange between the interviewer and participants (Irvine, 2011). As such, participants might only provide answers to the interview questions that they believe are the right answers. In this study, attempts were made to

ensure an atmosphere of open, honest, and non-dominant communication during the telephone interviews. I ensured that all questions were open-ended. I was also careful not to inject any personal assumptions, or beliefs, throughout the interview process. The interview protocol was utilized as a guidance to assist in the management of this process. Because of this, I assumed that the participants responded to all the questions in a truthful manner.

Researcher bias was recognized as a probable limitation to this study based on knowledge on the topic and prior assumptions about the participants (Chenail, 2011). Self-reflection and the bracketing of my preconceived biases were used to reduce this potential bias. All knowledge, beliefs, experiences and values were put aside to describe accurately the postprison lived experiences as presented by the participants. I also used a self-reflecting journal to record how my volunteer experiences of reviewing the criminal cases of inmates could limit my subjectivity on the data (Houghton et al., 2013).

Recommendations

I conducted this study to address the identified gap in the literature regarding the postprison lived experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their prison release. The study consisted of a sample size of 8 persons who had been wrongfully convicted, exonerated, and released from prison 1 year or longer. The years released from prison ranged from 1 to 9 years. The participants were all African American males residing in the southeastern region of the United States. The 8 participants provided valuable insights into their perceptions of their postprison lived experiences, and how and why these experiences were developed, specifically as they pertain to their social identities.

This research was open to all exonerated persons, but the interviews were conducted with only male exonerees. Therefore, the results of the study may underestimate the extent to which the postprison experiences of the participants affect the reentry success or failure of the overall population of exonerees. Hence, further research could be conducted to address the limitation of this study by examining the postprison lived experiences of female exonerees years after their prison release. Future studies could also be conducted to concentrate on a more diverse sample of exonerees because this study consisted of only African American males. For example, although 70% of all exonerated individuals are African American males (Smith & Hattery, 2011), research could be conducted to include the experiences of male exonerees of other races and ethnic groups. A more diverse sample of individuals could reveal additional experiences that were not ascertained in this study.

It should also be noted that due to the nature of the data in this study, there was no control for variables. Consequently, a quantitative study could be conducted to determine how the postprison experiences of exonerees are measured by the variables of stigma and labeling. Specifically, statistical data could help to increase the knowledge of how the identities developed in the prison environment affect the reintegration postexoneration experiences years after the prison release. There are no data specific as to how exonerated persons manage their prison identities after their prison release. In general, any additional study within the realm of the postexoneration experiences of exonerated individuals would advance the knowledge to the social, psychological and legal needs of this population.

Implications

Implications for Positive Social Change

Legal scholars have concentrated on the causes and legal solutions to wrongful convictions. However, there is a need for increased empirical research, from a social science perspective, to contribute to the development of policies to assist exonerees in their transition into their communities (Wildeman et al., 2011). In the present study, the need to have their wrongful convictions erased was expressed by some of the participants. Findings from this study could promote positive social change by providing added knowledge to policymakers and individuals in the criminal justice system to enhance the argument of the need for mandatory expungement of the wrongful conviction records of exonerated persons. Norris (2012) reported on the importance of compensation for exonerees because only 27 states and the District of Columbia have some form of compensation statute. The findings from this study could increase knowledge on the benefits of offering monetary compensation to exonerees, without the necessity of litigation, to compensate them for their years of erroneous incarceration.

Researchers have reported on the negative psychological and emotional ramifications of a wrongful conviction and incarceration (Grounds, 2004; Konvisser, 2012; Wildeman et al., 2011). One theme identified in the present study was the unresolved psychological and emotional factors described by the participants. This finding has implications for positive social change by highlighting the importance of providing psychological services to exonerees in all the states to assist in the psychological trauma of their wrongful conviction. Mental health services could also

assist exonerees in their transition from the prison environment into their communities. Moreover, these findings will provide exonerees with an understanding and awareness of how the identities they developed during their incarceration accelerated or impeded their transition experiences specifically as related to stigma and labeling.

Methodological Implications

As stated in Chapter 2, the studies on the lived experiences of exonerated persons are limited. Understandings of the experiences of exonerated individuals are typically garnered from the experiences of formerly incarcerated persons. The methodological implication of this study is that Moustakas' (1994) 7-step data analysis procedure utilized allowed for a more targeted analysis procedure that led to refined in-depth descriptions of the lived experiences of exonerees 1 year or longer after their prison release. The data collection and analysis methods employed also provided more comprehensive descriptions of the experiences of exonerees, exclusively from their perspectives.

Theoretical Implications

Norris and Bonventre (2015) discussed the importance for social science researchers to continue advancing the theoretical understanding of wrongful convictions. Data on wrongful convictions and exonerations combined with theoretical frameworks can help to develop a more profound comprehension of justice system errors and exonerations. A major implication of this study is that SIT and SRT can be employed to advance the theoretical understanding of the social and psychological needs of exonerated persons as related to their postprison lived experiences. Specifically, these theories can be used as theoretical foundations in quantitative studies in building a

connection between data on the variables for wrongful convictions, and the social and psychological needs of exonerated persons. Studies such as this can connect criminal justice scholarships with psychology.

Recommendations for Practice

The participants in this study provided valuable insight into how the damaging reactions to exonerees in the society have made their transition into their communities difficult. These insights will provide family members, legislators, and other individuals in the criminal justice system with knowledge as to how stigma and label harmfully influence the reentry experiences of exonerated persons, years after they are released from prison. Accordingly, implications of this study for positive social change include an increased awareness of the social and emotional postexoneration challenges of exonerees exclusively from the perspectives of the exonerees. Finally, the descriptions provided by the participants can provide direction for future research to enhance the postprison lived experiences of exonerees. The descriptions can also enlighten society on the consequences of not only wrongful conviction but also life after exoneration.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals, 1 year or longer after their prison release. The objective of the study was to investigate a gap in the literature of an understanding of the unexplored meanings and essence of the postprison lived experiences of exonerated individuals exclusively from their perspectives. A majority of the findings of the study were consistent with previous empirical information from the

literature review on the consequences of a wrongful conviction, and the post-incarceration experiences of former inmates and exonerated individuals. The participants imparted valuable descriptions into the postrelease difficulties they experienced in attempting to reintegrate into society.

The participants also provided significant information on how the stigma and ex-convict label negatively affected their transition into society. Similar to formerly incarcerated persons who were justly convicted, exonerated individuals struggle to secure employment and thus face severe financial difficulties. Exonerees must also cope with the psychological and emotional damage caused by their wrongful conviction and incarceration. In addition, they struggle with fragmented and strained relationships with family members.

The participants articulated that they were not provided any post-incarceration social or psychological services that are offered to parolees to assist in their transition. Although many states offer some form of postexoneration financial compensation, for the most part, this compensation can only be obtained through civil litigation (Norris, 2012). Similar to the majority of exonerees in the literature review, the participants in this study have not received any compensation for their wrongful conviction. As a result, most exonerees are forced to rely on family members for financial and housing support.

The participant's in-depth descriptions are supported by Becker's (1963) SRT from the social concept of labeling and Tajfel's (1982) SIT from the social concept of stigma. The stigma associated with the deviant label of *ex-convict* bestowed on formerly incarcerated persons even after their exoneration is a key element that provides an

understanding of how and why participants experienced the described postprison difficulties (DePierre et al., 2013). Another significant factor in understanding the experiences of exonerees is the acceptance of the deviant label. The participants understood the importance of abolishing the prison identity but several were unable, or refused, to abandon the characteristics and behaviors they had developed during their incarceration.

The records of exonerated individuals are not subject to mandatory or automatic expungement (Shlosberg et al., 2014). Moreover, in most instances, the socioeconomic status of exonerees does not afford them the opportunity to secure the expungement of their records. Four of the participants expressed that they were unable to procure the expungement of their wrongful conviction records because they did not have the financial ability to pay an attorney. The inability to obtain the expungement of records results in the stigmatization and labeling of exonerated persons (Clow & Leach, 2015). The failure of the government to automatically expunge the criminal records of exonerees severely affects their postprison experiences. Westervelt and Cook (2010) reported on the ameliorative effects of expungement on the postprison experiences of exonerees. Erasing the records of erroneously convicted individuals would not only afford them the opportunity to obtain assistance from the government but also provide them with more viable options to improve their social status.

The inability to eradicate their records provides the vehicle for exonerees to be regarded as ex-convict and face the ramifications associated with the label. Hence, they are subjected to the negative societal reactions to this label. The distrustful reactions to

exonerees often result in self-isolation and loneliness. As the participants expressed, exonerees prefer to isolate themselves from everyone than relentlessly suffer the indignity of being viewed as ex-convicts. However, despite their damaged identities, most exonerees are resolute in their determination to remain free members of society. Therefore, they are willing to take whatever measures are necessary to stay out of prison and not become involved with the criminal justice system.

The purpose of this study was effectively accomplished by providing the 8 exonerees a voice to describe their postexoneration lived experiences. It is hoped that the knowledge presented by the participants will add to the literature regarding the importance of states to automatically expunge the records of exonerated persons, and develop comprehensive compensation legislation, without the necessity of civil litigation, to assist in the transition of exonerees from prison into society. These compensations should include long-term access to job training, educational assistance, counseling services and assistance with housing. It is also hoped that the findings of this study will advance the understanding of the postprison lived experiences of exonerees from a theoretical framework.

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Appendix A: Invitation to Participate Flyer

INTRODUCING A RESEARCH STUDY FOR EXONERATED INDIVIDUALS

As of May, 2015, approximately 1,600 individuals have been exonerated after they were cleared of charges as a result of new evidence of innocence.

Many individuals who were wrongfully imprisoned experience difficulties rebuilding their lives after they are released from prison. Meanwhile, many wrongfully imprisoned individuals are able to adjust to life after their imprisonment.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO YOU?

If you were exonerated after being wrongfully imprisoned and have been released from prison one year or longer, you are invited to join a confidential research study conducted by Claudette Grooms, a doctoral student at Walden University. The goal of this study is to gain an understanding of your postprison experiences. In other words, this study will provide you the opportunity to tell your postreleased stories.

**ALL INFORMATION WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL AND USED
ONLY FOR THE PURPOSE OF UNDERSTANDING
THE EXPERIENCES OF WRONGFULLY IMPRISONED INDIVIDUALS
AFTER THEIR RELEASE FROM PRISON.**

Your participation is voluntary and you can terminate (stop) your participation at any time during the interview process. **Your participation in this study will be conducted through telephone interviews.** There is no monetary compensation for participating in this study. Your participation in the study will help to advance our understanding of the postprison experiences of persons who were wrongfully imprisoned.

If you decide to participate in this study you can contact the researcher via the email or telephone number provided at the end of this flyer at which time you will be given further details of how this confidential study will be conducted.

Claudette Grooms

◆ Telephone: XXX-XXX-7904 ◆ Email: cmwgresearch@gmail.com

“This research is not sponsored by any organization or advocate group associated with exonerated individuals.”

Appendix B: Screening Demographic Questionnaire

What is Your Age/Category?

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-45
- 46-55
- 56-64
- 65 & Older

What is your sex?

- Male
- Female

What is Your Race/Ethnicity?

- African American/Black
- White
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black (Hispanic Origin)
- Black (Caribbean)
- Black (Other): _____
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Hispanic or Latino

How Long Were You in Prison?

- Years

How Long Have You Been Out of Prison?

- Years

Method of Exoneration?

- DNA Testing
- Procedural Errors

Appendix C: Interview Protocol

Opening Statement:

I would like to thank you for taking part in my research study. This interview will be audiotaped and then transcribed. You will be invited to review the transcribed interview and make any changes, clarifications, or additional comments you believe should be made to the transcript. Do you have any question thus far about what I have just explained to you? If at any time during the interview you need to take a break or stop, please do not hesitate to let me know. Are there any other questions? Please let me know if it is okay for us to begin the interview.

Foundation Question:

What are the meanings and essence for the postprison lived experiences of wrongfully convicted exonerees, at 1 year or longer after their prison release?

Interview Questions

1. Can you describe the circumstances surrounding your wrongful conviction?
2. How long were you imprisoned?
3. How long have you been released from prison?
4. Can you describe the circumstances surrounding your release from prison?
5. How did you feel when you heard you were being released from prison?
6. What has your experience been like since you were released from prison?
7. Are you presently employed?
8. How do you believe your experiences in prison have affected your experiences since your exoneration?
9. What was your life like before you were imprisoned?
10. How has your life differed since your release from what it was like before you were imprisoned?
11. What major challenges and barriers, if any, have you faced since your release from prison?

12. What resources have assisted you to readjust into society since your release from prison?
13. What type of support do you believe is lacking for individuals who were wrongfully convicted after they are released from prison?
14. What harm, if any, do you feel you have suffered as a result of being wrongfully imprisoned?
15. How do you believe you, as an exoneree, have been treated by members of society since your release?
16. How has the experience of being wrongfully convicted affected you?
17. How would you describe your readjustment into society since your release from prison?
18. Is there anything I have not asked you that you believe will provide a more complete picture of your experiences since your exoneration?

Closing Statement:

Again, thank you for taking part in my study. You have provided me with the ability to document your perspective on your postprison lived experiences as an investigator and for that I am extremely grateful. As soon as I am able, I will give you a written copy of your interview. Please review the transcripts and give me your feedback. Again, thanks.

Appendix D: Counseling Referral Telephone Numbers

NATIONAL CRISIS HOTLINE NUMBERS	
National Hopeline Network	1-800-784-2433
National Suicide Prevention Hotline	1-800-273-8255
SAMHSA's National Helpline	1-800-662-4357
CALIFORNIA	
Los Angeles Crisis Hotline	1-800-854-7771
Open Path Counseling Center, Los Angeles	310-258-9677
Southern California Counseling Center, Los Angeles	323-937-1344
FLORIDA	
Florida Suicide Prevention Coalition	800-273-8255
Family Counseling & Psychotherapy Center, Gainesville	352-375-3335
Samaritan Center of South Florida, Inc.	954-463-2272 <u>or</u> 866-417-6555
GEORGIA	
Care and Counseling Center of Georgia, Decatur	404-636-1457
Georgia Crisis Hotline	1-800-715-4225
Metropolitan Counseling Services, Atlanta	404-321-1794
LOUISIANA	
Catholic Charities Counseling Solution, New Orleans	504-835-5007
Celebration Hope Center, Metairie,	504-833-4673
Family Service of Greater New Orleans	504-822-0800
NEW YORK	
Bellevue Hospital: Adult Outpatient Psychiatry Clinic, New York	212-562-5710
Bright Point Health: Counseling Center, Bronx	855-681-8700
Center for Educational and Psychological Services, Columbia University, New York	212-678-3262
PENNSYLVANIA	
Eleventh Street Family Health Services, Philadelphia	215-769-1100
Delaware Valley Community Health Clinic, Philadelphia	215-235-9600
Mental Health Association of Southeastern Pennsylvania	267-507-3843 <u>or</u> 1-800-688-4226
TENNESSEE	
Frayser Family Counseling Center - Memphis	901-353-5400
Mental Health America of Middle Tennessee - Nashville	615-269-5355
Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network	615-297-1077

Appendix E: Invariant Constituents and Emerging Themes

THEMES	INVARIANT CONSTITUENTS
Employment and financial challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Inability to obtain employment months after release (P1) b. Employers not differentiating exonerees from other released prisoners (P3) c. Failure to obtain employment parallel to what exonerees had prior to imprisonment (P2) d. Discomfort with new technology (P8) e. Financial difficulties as a result of inability to obtain employment (P6) f. Powerless to assist family members (P4) g. Unable to move from family's home (P7)
Negative societal reaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Treated as if you have the plague (P3) b. Feelings of inferiority (P6) c. Do not belong in neighborhoods (P6) d. Rejection by circle of friends they had prior to imprisonment (P2) e. Always be viewed as ex-convicts by members of society (P7) f. Not invited to church functions as others in the church (P5)
Broken family relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Relationships with family members no longer exist (P5) b. Lack or no association with children (P8)
Unresolved emotional and psychological factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Unable to get rid of prison persona (P5) b. Decision-making difficulties (P2) c. Insomnia and paranoia (P4) d. Bitterness (P2) e. Anger (P6) f. Fear and anxiety (P8) g. Nightmares (P3)
Self-imposed social isolation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Discomfort around others (P4) b. Loneliness (P8) c. Inability to trust others (P2)
Role of family support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Wife provided everything after prison release (P2) b. Living with nephew or would be homeless (P8) c. Family was the only help received (P4) d. No assistance from state (P1)
Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Desire to succeed outside of prison (P3) b. Focus on future goals (P1) c. Resolve not to focus on wrongful imprisonment (P5) d. Determination not to return to prison (P7)