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Psycho-Social Processes of Desistance in Post-Release Reintegration of African American Ex-Offenders

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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LaDawn Jones

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Psycho-Social Processes of Desistance in Post-Release Reintegration of African American Ex-Offenders

by

LaDawn Jones

MS, Kaplan University, 2014

BS, Kaplan University, 2012

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Criminal Justice

Walden University

May 2020

Abstract

Virginia's incarceration statistics revealed a significant increase in recidivism 6-36 months post-release, the highest jail occupancy rate in the United States in 2014, and the seventh highest prison occupancy rate in 2016. African American males are the highest incarcerated population every year statewide. Virginia's diversion initiative, implemented to address recidivism and overcrowding, had a high failure rate among enrollees in reported outcomes from 2010 to 2015, a lower number of African American enrollees compared to White enrollees, and inconsistent funding from 2007 to 2015. This phenomenological case study focused on the reintegration experiences of African American ex-offenders in Virginia through the lens of the theory of cognitive transformation. This study addressed (a) the catalysts of the psycho-social processes that move African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior and (b) the internal (psychological) and external (social) forces that keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending or push them back to crime. Data were collected from semi structured interviews with 15 African American participants from Virginia's minority ex-offender population. Findings from coding and thematic analysis revealed that the shifts in the theory of cognitive transformation were predictors of desistance rather than catalysts of a cognitive transformation or psycho-social process. The catalysts of the psycho-social processes that led to desistance were three types of awareness: self-awareness, situational awareness, and social awareness. Findings of this study can be used to improve programs, resources, and services throughout the state of Virginia, as well as develop holistic evidence-based cognitive programs.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

There are over one million people incarcerated in correctional institutions in the United States (Carson, 2015). Criminal justice administrators struggle to provide and sustain effective programs for offenders and ex-offenders that would reduce the recidivism that causes prison overcrowding (James, 2015). In a country where incarceration is made a priority over rehabilitation, states spend billions of dollars annually on imprisoning offenders (National Institute of Corrections, 2017). Data from 2005 to 2013 showed there were over 620,000 local jail inmates each year nationwide (Gollinelli & Minton, 2014). By 2016, the total jail population exceeded 700,000 inmates (Zeng, 2018). Adult males account for over 80% of the jail inmate population, and African Americans are the second highest population incarcerated compared to Whites (Zeng, 2018). By the end of 2016, Whites accounted for 48% of the jail population compared to 34% African Americans, 15% Hispanics, and 1% other race (Zeng, 2018). However, African Americans were incarcerated at a rate 3.5 times higher than Whites (Zeng, 2018).

Among the over one million state and federal prisoners, 92% are males (Carson, 2018). From 2006 to 2016, African American males had the highest incarceration rate among the prison population (Carson, 2018). At the end of 2013, roughly 37% of male prisoners were African American, 32% were White, and 22% were Hispanic (Carson, 2014). During this time, African American males were 2.5 to 9 times more likely to be imprisoned than White males, while African American females were 5 times more likely to be imprisoned than White females (Carson, 2014). According to the 2016 data on male

prisoners, 34% were African American, 28% were White, 23% were Hispanic, and 12% were classified as other race (Carson, 2018). Contrarily, Whites were the highest female prison population at 46%, compared to 19% African American, 18% Hispanic, and 16% other race (Carson, 2018). Over 80,000 prisoners were held in local jails by the end of 2016. Carson (2018) found States that held at least 20% of their state prisoners in local jails were Louisiana (58%), Kentucky (48%), Mississippi (26%), Utah (26%), Tennessee (24%), and Virginia (21%).

Carson (2018) identified seven jurisdictions that had more prisoners in custody than they had bed space available: Illinois (138%), Nebraska (126%), Iowa (115%), the Bureau of Prisons (114%), Delaware (114%), Colorado (109%), and Virginia (108%). According to the American Civil Liberties Union (2015), jail and prison overcrowding is caused by recidivism. *Recidivism* is described as the re-arrest, reconviction, or reincarceration of an individual (Council on Virginia's Future, n.d.; Celi & Miller, 2015). As thousands of offenders are released each year, successfully reintegrating them into the community has become a significant public safety concern for criminal justice administrators and the public (National Institute of Corrections, n.d.). Ex-offenders are vulnerable for a year or more after release from incarceration (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006). However, researchers have vaguely explored the experiences of ex-offenders regarding reintegration into the community after release from correctional institutions. It is also unclear to what extent cognition, identity, and human agency keep ex-offenders from further criminal involvement.

Numerous studies have addressed the causes, risk factors, and predictors of recidivism. Gendreau, Goggin, and Little (1996) claimed the best predictors of adult offender recidivism were prior criminal history, criminogenic needs, education, age, gender, race, socioeconomic status, personal distress, intellectual functioning, and family factors. Kubrin and Stewert (2006) examined the role that neighborhoods played in recidivism and found that ex-offenders who returned to disadvantaged communities were more likely to recidivate. Later studies conducted by Makarios, Steiner, and Travis (2010); Belenko, Hiller, Mennis, Stahler, Welsh, and Zajac (2013); and Buckmon (2015) revealed that the lack of education, employment, housing, and completion of treatment programs were predictors of recidivism.

Despite the development of diversion programs and the implementation of nationwide diversion initiatives, rates of recidivism and prison overcrowding are steadily increasing in several states (Brumbaugh, Ginder, Minton, Rohloff, & Smiley-McDonald, 2015; Carson, 2018; Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015; Celi & Miller, 2015). In the current study, I focused on the state of Virginia and its ex-offenders for several reasons. First, Virginia had the highest jail occupancy rates (119% by 2014) and prison occupancy rates (108% by 2016) in the United States (Brumbaugh et al., 2015; Carson, 2018). Second, between 2008 and 2013, Virginia's recidivism rates rose steadily with the greatest likelihood of increased recidivism occurring between 6 and 36 months post-release (Celi & Miller, 2015). Third, Virginia's statewide diversion initiative first implemented in 2007, had a high overall failure rate among enrollees according to the reported outcomes from 2010 to 2015

(Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). I found it necessary to thoroughly examine the increase in recidivism and occupancy rates, risk factors, diversion programs and resources, as well as the accounts of ex-offenders' previous experiences with reintegrating into the community after release from incarceration in Virginia.

According to the National Institute of Justice (n.d.), there is an important connection between recidivism and criminal desistance. *Desistance* can be described as what keeps individuals from reoffending (Calverley & Farrall, 2006; Kazemian, 2009). Criminal desistance is understood by the premise that when released from a correctional institution, the individual will either desist or recidivate (National Institute of Justice, n.d.). Theorists such as Laub and Sampson (1993); Cernkovich, Giordano, and Rudolph (2002); Maruna (2001); and Farrall and Maruna (2004) studied desistance by exploring social and cognitive influences on the cessation of criminal behavior. However, only one theory, the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT) presented by Cernkovich et al. (2002) was found to be appropriate in addressing the purpose and research questions in my study. The cognitive processes involved in ex-offenders' post-release reintegration, including shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency that influence or discourage recidivism 6-36 months post-release, are limited in the field of criminal justice. For this reason, I explored ex-offenders' experiences with reintegration into the community from correctional institutions in Virginia, and the psycho-social processes involved during the most vulnerable period following their release. Findings may enable criminal justice administrators, who know the risk factors, state demographics, and ex-offenders'

experiences with reintegrating into the community in Virginia, to take informed steps to aid criminal justice populations. Such knowledge may be helpful in developing new strategies to reduce post-release recidivism and overcrowding in correctional institutions. Findings may also aid in the development of evidence-based services or programs for criminal populations in Virginia. The implications for positive social change include a better understanding of African American ex-offenders' experiences with reintegration and a better understanding of the psycho-social processes that influence desistance from criminal behavior.

Background

Although researchers claimed that recidivism rates in Virginia have been declining, data from 2008 and 2013 showed that recidivism rates remained consistent with significant increases between 6 and 36 months post-release from prison (Celi & Miller, 2015). According to Celi & Miller (2015), increasing rates of recidivism impact occupancy and bed space needs. By 2014, Virginia's jail occupancy was the highest in the United States (119%), and by 2016 was seventh highest (108%) among state prisons (Brumbaugh et al., 2015; Carson, 2018). These statistics supported the American Civil Liberties Union's (2015) assertion that recidivism causes jail and prison overcrowding. Virginia's administrators have utilized legislation and grant funds to develop diversionary reintegration programs and services to reduce post-release recidivism and high jail occupancy (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). However, the full effectiveness of these programs is yet to be documented. The latest data from Virginia's statewide diversion initiative revealed low enrollment, a high

overall failure rate, and inconsistent funding (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Since the implementation of this initiative in 2007, reported statewide program outcomes available at the time of this study revealed that between 2010 and 2015 there were 4,434 participants enrolled, equating to about 739 enrollees each year. Among the participants enrolled in the statewide diversion initiative, there was a 66% failure rate due to withdrawals, noncompliance, or revoked eligibility (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Findings from the statewide diversion initiative coincide with James's (2015) claims that there is a lack of access to effective treatment programs and services for individuals after release from incarceration.

Numerous recommendations were made to state administrators to improve the allocation of resources based on data, to expand enrollment in diversion programs, and to clarify program goals (Brown, Forrester, Hull, Jobe, & McCullen, 2000; Center for Health and Justice at TASC, 2013; Justice Policy Institute, 2013). According to the Justice Policy Institute (2013), Virginia's justice system is ineffective, expensive, and inequitable. I discovered that considerations of previous recommendations to expand and improve diversion programs in Virginia have not been documented. Ex-offenders are vulnerable to psychological and social pressures following release from correctional institutions (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006). However, researchers have not explored ex-offenders' perceived internal and external forces that keep them from reoffending during the most crucial time of transition from incarceration back into the community. It remains unclear what catalysts in the psycho-social processes move ex-

offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior. A contemporary criminological theory under the umbrella of the theories of desistance, which includes the analysis of internal (psychological) and external (social) forces, was selected to guide my study. The chosen theory introduced cognitive shifts that were used to provide a thorough interpretation of ex-offenders' reintegration experiences and psycho-social processes while expanding on the findings from previous studies.

Problem Statement

Studies relating to post-release reintegration have addressed risk factors and recidivism related to state statistics and programs, including gender, age, race, education, employment, and broader social factors (Belenko et al., 2013; Buckmon, 2015; Gendreau et al., 1996; Hall, 2015; Makarios et al., 2010). However, researchers have not used the lens of a criminological theory to examine the catalysts within the psycho-social processes experienced by ex-offenders that had to occur before they decided to desist from criminal behavior. In addition, researchers have not examined how ex-offenders experience internal and external shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency 6-36 months post-release in a state where jail and prison occupancy are the highest in the United States. In Virginia, African Americans are incarcerated more than any other race and are overrepresented at all levels of the justice system (Justice Policy Institute, 2013). According to Virginia's jail and prison data from 2011 to 2015, there was a high incarceration rate among African Americans for violent crimes and drug crimes (Celi, 2016; McGehee, 2017, 2020). Also, it is unclear why there were more Whites enrolled in statewide diversion initiatives than African Americans who had a higher incarceration

rate than their counterparts according to jail and prison data (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Statewide diversion enrollment data between 2010 and 2015 revealed 30% African American enrollment compared to 64% White enrollment (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Furthermore, enrollments in statewide diversion programs are granted at the discretion of the judge and based on the availability of funding. The prevalence of judicial discretion has not been documented in studies, but has been noted from the analysis of Virginia's jail data, which clarified the use of mandatory sentencing guidelines. O'Sullivan (2013) suggested the inclusion of penal measures and additional research into the psychology of desistance. To lay the foundation for understanding ex-offender reintegration, I examined reports and literature on factors affecting reintegration, including Virginia's jail demographics, statewide diversion initiative outcomes, and the psychology of desistance. It was appropriate to explore the experiences, programs used, and social environments of African American ex-offenders in Virginia. Understanding the experiences of African American ex-offenders may help criminal justice administrators develop programs and services that fit their needs during their transition into the community. This study was conducted to bridge the gap in understanding the dynamics between the internal and external forces experienced during reintegration that keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending, and to identify the catalysts of the psycho-social processes.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore ex-offenders' experiences regarding internal (psychological) forces and external (social) forces that kept them from reoffending within 3 years after their release. The focus was on ex-offenders' lived experiences with reintegration and desistance from criminal behavior in Virginia. The objectives of the study were to (a) analyze the lived experience of ex-offenders, (b) explore the dynamic interplay between the individual and catalysts for change (see Cernkovich et al., 2002), and (c) examine how ex-offenders rationalize cognitive and identity transformations in relation to their role in the transformative process. Ex-offenders' experiences were interpreted through the lens of the theory of cognitive transformation to identify the catalysts in the psycho-social processes that move ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior. I explored the internal and external forces such as ex-offenders' openness to change, exposure and reaction to hooks for change, self-identity, and self-influence. These forces were conceptualized and categorized as shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency. Reintegration, the central phenomenon for this study, was studied using the combined phenomenological case study approach. For this study, the term *reintegration* was defined as the transition of released offenders from incarceration into the community, also known as reentry (see James, 2015). Additional operational definitions are listed in the Definitions section of Chapter 1.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to obtain an in-depth understanding of the interplay between the individual and catalysts for change. To capture the essence of African American ex-offenders' lived experiences of moving toward desistance during reintegration, I sought to answer the following central research question and sub question:

Central research question: What are the catalysts in the psycho-social processes moving African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior?

Sub question: What internal (psychological) and external (social) forces keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending or push them back to crime?

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT), which is one of many theories of desistance. Cernkovich et al. (2002) argued that desistance from crime involves intentional and reflective actions of offenders that include aspects of cognition, identity, and human agency that result in a transformation. The basic premise of TCT is that there is a "dynamic interplay between the individual and the catalysts for change" (Cernkovich et al., 2002, p. 1055), which includes "cognitive and identity transformations, and the actors own role in the transformation process" (Cernkovich et al., 2002, p. 992), also described as *human agency*. Cernkovich et al. identified four types of cognitive transformations, also known as cognitive shifts, as fundamental to the transformation process and suggested a "hypothetical sequence in which these transformations occur" (p. 1055). The first transformation is a general cognitive openness

toward personal development and positive change (Cernkovich et al., 2002). The second transformation involves exposure and reaction to turning points; these turning points are described as *hooks for change* (Cernkovich et al., 2002). Cernkovich et al. referred to examples of hooks for change as marriage, family support, and employment. The third transformation requires envisioning a replacement self, and the fourth transformation is a complete transformation of perspectives (Cernkovich et al., 2002). These transformations or shifts occur simultaneously to inspire and direct behavior that will encourage desistance from crime (Cernkovich et al., 2002).

Cernkovich et al. (2002) admitted that "additional research could add depth to researchers' understanding of concepts" (p. 1055). The four types of cognitive transformations provided the theoretical framework to understand ex-offenders' experiences with reintegration 6-36 months post-release. At the time of this study, it was not clear which cognitive shifts or transformations encourage or discourage recidivism among minority ex-offenders during the crucial 6-36 month post-release reintegration period. I followed Cernkovich et al.'s considerations for future research, which suggested the inclusion of experiences from a mixture of male, female, and minority respondents. Also, Cernkovich et al. "did not include any questions related to cognition, identity, or agency in their protocol [due to a lack of] prior theoretical interest in these issues" (p. 1009). I focused on the essence of the cognitive process in theory, and explored the cognitive processes within ex-offenders' experiences during their 6-36 month reintegration period with a focus on cognition, identity, and human agency.

Nature of the Study

I used a qualitative approach for this study. Qualitative methodology was appropriate to understand and describe experiences of ex-offenders who had reintegrated into the community after release from a correctional institution in Virginia. The study of ex-offenders' experiences with reintegration complemented Cernkovich et al.'s (2002) presumption that specific cognitive shifts occur simultaneously to inspire and direct behavior that will encourage desistance from crime. African American ex-offenders' experiences were captured using the qualitative phenomenological case study approach through in-depth interviews. Feagin, Orum, and Sjoberg (1991) asserted that "social histories that qualify as case studies are those conducted on the experiences of a group and that seek therein to elicit discoveries and insights that can illuminate the experience of similar groups" (p. 5). The specific framework through which cases of ex-offender reintegration were studied in-depth was the cognitive processes of TCT. The purpose of this study was the exploration of the cognitive processes experienced by African Americans 6-36 months post-release to understand ex-offender reintegration from their perspectives.

Definitions

Desistance: The cessation or avoidance of offending and criminal involvement; the end of criminal involvement for a period (Calverley & Farrall, 2006; Kazemian, 2009).

Diversion: An alternative to incarceration that involves implementing strategies within a variety of programs that seek to avoid formally processing offenders through the

criminal justice system. Strategies include, but are not limited to, diversion programs that direct offenders to treatment or care programs (Dammer & Weise-Pengelly, 2016).

Human agency: An individual's ability to reform by acting as their own change agent (Laub & Sampson, 1993; Maruna, 1999).

Recidivism: The re arrest, reconviction, or reincarceration of an individual (Council on Virginia's Future, n.d.; National Institute of Justice, n.d.).

Reintegration: The transition of released offenders from incarceration into another setting; reentry (James, 2015).

State responsible offenders: Confined to Virginia offenders only, which excludes out-of-state contract offenders (Celi, 2016).

Theory of cognitive transformation: The presumption that to desist from criminal behavior an individual will need to experience four cognitive shifts, which are classified as an openness to change, exposure and reaction to hooks for change, envision a replacement self, and transform perspectives. These four cognitive shifts occur simultaneously and are interconnected (Cernkovich et al., 2002).

Assumptions

The structure of social science research is based on the researcher's theoretical, philosophical, and professional lenses that create a set of assumptions that are recognized by the scientific research community as paradigms (Tuli, 2010). This phenomenological case study was conducted from the interpretivist paradigm, which is underpinned by a combination of interpretive epistemology and constructive ontology (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). The interpretivist paradigm is aimed at interpreting participants' subjective

experiences and sees subjective realities as a product and construct of social processes (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). An interpretivist-constructivist perspective views and portrays the world as constructive, complex, and experienced by people in their interactions with each other and with wider social systems (Tuli, 2010). The purpose of this study was to understand ex-offender reintegration by exploring the cognitive processes experienced by African American ex-offenders 6-36 months post-release. This purpose was accomplished by collecting data from interviews addressing the subjective realities of participants' experiences with reintegrating into the community. Data were analyzed to discover shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency during participants' 6-36 month post-release reintegration period. The analysis of participants' experiences provided an in-depth understanding of the patterns of thought and behavior regarding the participants' broader social systems. The qualitative phenomenological approach enabled participants to assign meaning to their realities. The shared meanings helped me to understand the essence of participants' reintegration.

Scope and Delimitations

Due to the limitations of inconsistent recidivism and incarceration data, I conducted an in-depth investigation of the latest data from the demographics of Virginia's statewide diversion initiative. Additionally, I investigated diversion resources offered throughout Virginia at the time of this study to get a better understanding of what may have been available to ex-offenders in a community context, and to make comparisons to participants' responses. The decision to sample African American ex-offenders was based on two factors: the recommendations of Cernkovich et al. (2002) to

study minority men and women, and the secondary data from Virginia's recidivism and incarceration reports that indicated high incarceration rates for African Americans. The state of Virginia was selected because the state had the highest jail and prison occupancy rate in the United States (Brumbaugh et al., 2015; Carson, 2018). Also, to further align this study with the archived data provided on Virginia's statewide diversion initiative, jail and prison occupancy rates, and incarceration, I recruited participants who were formerly incarcerated ex-offenders who had reintegrated into the community after release from a correctional institution in Virginia between 2006 and 2016.

Limitations

Several limitations impacted this study. First, a lack of consistent reporting and recordkeeping of recidivism, jail, and prison data from the state of Virginia affected the depth of the study. Second, this study was limited to adult African American ex-offenders residing in Virginia who had been incarcerated in a Virginia correctional institution between 2006 and 2016. Third, interview responses may not be representative of all ex-offender experiences, and should not be generalized beyond the boundaries of this study. Lastly, participants needed to reside in and have experiences with reintegrating into the community after being released from a correctional institution in Virginia.

Significance

There have been extensive research and theories to explain why crime occurs. However, few empirical studies have addressed the reentry experiences of African American ex-offenders after being released from incarceration in Virginia. This study allowed ex-offenders to reflect on and explain their experiences to provide a clear

understanding of how they described their transition from incarceration back into the community 6-36 months post-release. While observing risk factors within each narrative, I examined internal (psychological) and external (social) forces that kept participants from reoffending. It was not known what catalysts of the psycho-social processes moved ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior. The TCT concepts of cognition, identity, and human agency were used to analyze and interpret ex-offenders' experiences. The findings from this study may bridge the gap in the literature regarding reintegration and recidivism by providing a deeper understanding of the psycho-social processes involved in ex-offenders' reintegration experience. This study contributed to the field of criminal justice by addressing ex-offender reintegration, post-release recidivism, desistance, criminal justice reform, and criminological theory. The study's findings may help criminal justice administrators, psychologists, clinicians, and scholars understand the needs of offenders while incarcerated and after release into the community.

Summary

Virginia measures successful reintegration into the community based on recidivism data (Council on Virginia's Future, n.d.). Increasing recidivism rates indicate ex-offenders' challenges with reintegrating into the community after release (Council on Virginia's Future, n.d.). It is evident that post-release recidivism causes prison overcrowding (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015; Gaes, 1985). Significantly increasing recidivism rates and prison overcrowding have become a national crisis (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015). Researchers have highlighted predictors of recidivism (Belenko et al., 2013; Buckmon, 2015; Gendreau et al., 1996; Hall, 2015;

Makarios et al., 2010). Yet, studies have not addressed the psycho-social processes experienced by ex-offenders during the crucial period when recidivism is most likely to occur. The purpose of this study was to understand ex-offenders' reintegration into the community by exploring their cognitive processes that were experienced 6-36 months post-release. I described, through a theoretical lens, how ex-offenders experienced shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency in reintegrating into the community 6-36 months after release from correctional institutions. Despite the implementation of Virginia's statewide diversion initiative, the effectiveness of its programs and resources is yet to be documented. This study added to the body of knowledge in criminal justice research by providing professionals and scholars with a better understanding of ex-offenders' reintegration experiences. The findings may help criminal justice administrators and professionals improve, expand, and enhance diversion programs, services, policies, and community networks for ex-offenders.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Over 600,000 individuals are reentering society from correctional institutions each year in the United States (United States Department of Justice, 2017). States struggle to reduce post-release recidivism during the first 3 years of ex-offenders' reintegration into communities (James, 2015). This chapter presents an in-depth discussion of the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT), including a background of the theoretical foundation and the theory's application to the reentry experiences of ex-offenders. The literature review following the Theoretical Foundation section in this chapter addresses the reintegration process and risk factors related to secondary data from the findings in Virginia's reports, as well as state measures used to reduce post-release recidivism and help ex-offenders reintegrate into society. Much of the literature on ex-offender reintegration and reentry has indicated several risk factors that are considered to be common predictors of recidivism: employment, substance abuse, mental health, education, age, race, and gender (Belenko et al., 2013; Buckmon, 2015; Gendreau et al., 1996; Hall, 2015; Makarios et al., 2010). In Virginia, there are roughly 12,000 state-responsible offenders released each year (Celi, McGehee, & Miller, 2016; Celi & Miller, 2015). However, previous reintegration, recidivism, and desistance studies have not addressed Virginia's criminal justice demographics and its relation to literature on the risk factors of ex-offender reintegration; also, studies have not addressed the psycho-social processes that move Virginia's African American ex-offenders toward desistance or push them back into crime.

Literature Search Strategy

Walden University's online library, which includes SAGE and Proquest's criminal justice databases, were used to access relevant peer-reviewed journal articles for this study. In addition to Walden University's databases, Google Scholar was also used to locate peer-reviewed journal articles. Google's search engine was used to find Virginia's state agency websites and criminal justice textbooks that provided archived data and statistics on reintegration, recidivism, incarceration demographics, and theories. Key words searched were *reintegration*, *recidivism*, *offender reentry*, *desistance*, *Virginia jail statistics*, *Virginia prison statistics*, *recidivism in Virginia*, *Virginia diversion programs*, and *theory of cognitive transformation*.

Theoretical Foundation

Criminological theories play a vital role in scientific research and have been developed to explain why crime occurs. In this study, the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT) provided the foundation that helped structure data collection and interpret ex-offenders' reentry experiences, while focusing on their cognitive processes and cognitive shifts. Researchers explored social and cognitive influences on the cessation of criminal behavior to expand their theoretical perspectives (Laub & Sampson, 1990, 1993; Cernkovich et al., 2002; Maruna & Farrell, 2004). TCT was relevant in fulfilling the purpose of this research and shaping the research questions. TCT, developed by Cernkovich et al. (2002), is one of many theories of desistance that examine the manifestation of cognitive shifts and transformations in adults' desistance from crime. This theory helped to bridge the gap between reintegration and recidivism. The following

sections address the early developments of TCT as it was constructed from the studies of other theorists, and its application in the current study.

Human Agency Conceptualized

Cernkovich et al.'s (2002) TCT was initially a response to Laub and Sampson's (1993) theory of informal social control (TISC). Laub and Sampson's longitudinal study followed over 100 male and 100 female delinquents up to their adulthood. Emphasis was placed on marriage and employment as structural social bonds to examine the continuity and change of offending patterns (Laub & Sampson, 1993). Researchers claimed that informal social ties and societal bonds are "turning points," that effect delinquency (Laub & Sampson, 1993, 2003). Laub and Sampson updated TISC to include the element of human agency after reanalyzing Glueck and Glueck's (1950) longitudinal data. Glueck and Glueck's original data were collected from 500 delinquents and 500 nondelinquents. Glueck and Glueck followed the subjects until they became 32 years old. Laub and Sampson continued to follow these respondents up to 70 years old. Based on the findings, Laub and Sampson described *human agency* as an individual's ability to reform by acting as their own change agent. This includes an individual's influence and beliefs that play a part in their self-development, adaptation, and renewal over time (Bandura, 2001). As shown in Figure 1, theorists identified five aspects of the process of desistance into adulthood, which included the role of social bonds, social controls, and human agency (Ball, Cullen, & Lilly, 2011; Laub & Sampson, 1993, 2003):

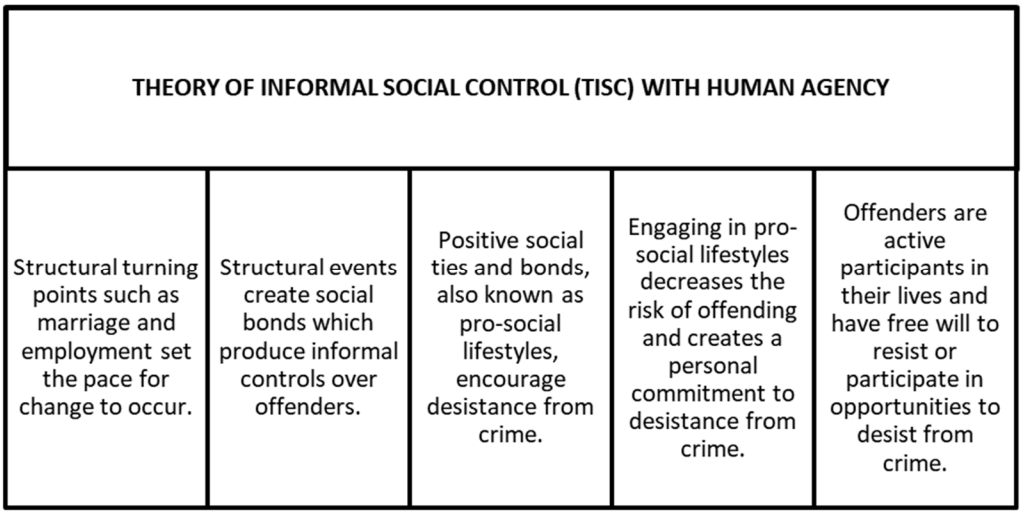

Figure 1. The five aspects to the process of desistance during adulthood as described in the theory of informal social control proposed by Laub & Sampson (1993; 2003).

TISC did not encompass the introspective nature of ex-offenders, which may have an impact on criminal behavior. Although the element of human agency referred to the individual will of the offender to choose their life course, it did not encompass the cognitive or mental processes that may encourage desistance from crime (Cernkovich et al., 2002). The exclusion of the cognitive aspect of desistance spurred the work of Cernkovich et al. (2002), who tested TISC in their follow-up study and developed the TCT. Cernkovich et al. conceptualized human agency as four cognitive shifts and transformations in the TCT.

Theory of Cognitive Transformation

Cernkovich et al. (2002) conducted a follow-up study of delinquent Ohio females and males from their original study published in 1982. Data were collected and analyzed from interviews with 109 females and 101 males who had grown into adulthood. TISC was challenged in two ways. First, rather than conceptualizing employment and marriage

as turning points, Cernkovich et al. used the construct hooks for change. Theorists believed that it was necessary that offenders become hooked on opportunities that will redirect their life course (Ball et al., 2011; Cernkovich et al., 2002). Second, Cernkovich et al. viewed human agency as a manifestation of a cognitive transformation process. The cognitive transformation process was categorized into the following four cognitive shifts, as shown in Figure 2:

1. openness to change,
2. exposure and reaction to hooks for change,
3. envisioning a replacement self, and
4. a complete transformation of perspectives.

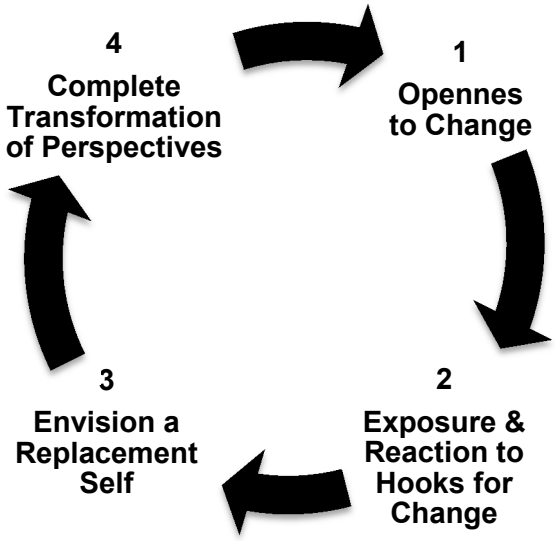

Figure 2. The theory of cognitive transformation. The numbers represent the order of the cognitive shifts that encourage desistance from crime, as proposed by Cernkovich et al. (2002).

Although TCT was developed to counter Laub and Sampson's (1993) TISC, Cernkovich et al.'s (2002) findings did not reveal significant results concerning the

assumed predictors of desistance from crime, such as marriage and employment. The only noted significance was race and ethnicity (Cernkovich et al., 2002). Cernkovich et al. discovered that race/ethnicity was a significant predictor of desistance.

The four cognitive shifts in the TCT go beyond external social and environmental factors that influence behaviors by including self-reflective influences on offending patterns (Cernkovich et al., 2002). TCT promotes the argument that rethinking the influences of crime can allow individuals to desist from persistent offending (Ball et al., 2011). This position was later supported by Farrall and Maruna (2004) in their assertion that there are two types of desistance: primary desistance and secondary desistance. Primary desistance refers to a period of time when ex-offenders experience no crime, and secondary desistance refers to long-term desistance as ex-offenders recognize themselves as changed people (Farrall & Maruna, 2004). However, Polaschek (2015) claimed that Farrall and Maruna's definitions did not clarify a transitional period between primary and secondary desistance. Furthermore, criminological theorists have not explored the cognitive processes experienced by ex-offenders during the crucial reintegration period of 6-36 months post-release in relation to Cernkovich et al.'s four cognitive shifts.

For these reasons, TCT was appropriate in exploring and interpreting which cognitive processes of minority ex-offenders influence or discourage recidivism 6-36 months post-release from correctional institutions in Virginia, and how ex-offenders experience shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency during reintegration. Knowledge is useful in developing new theories when "partial or inadequate theories exist for certain populations and samples, or existing theories do not adequately capture

the complexity of the problem" (Creswell, 2013, p. 48). Ball et al. (2011) recommended that researchers conceptualize human agency and empirically test it as a causal factor.

Literature Review

Reintegration and Recidivism

Reintegration involves the transition of an offender from incarceration back into the community (James, 2015). Often there are obstacles that ex-offenders encounter when making this transition that can be apparent or hidden from society, internal or external, societal or familial (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006). Virginia's government agencies measure ex-offenders' success with transitioning from incarceration back into the community based on recidivism data (Council on Virginia's Future, n.d.). Celi & Miller (2015) claimed that recidivism rates in Virginia are declining annually; yet in the same report, data showed between 2008 and 2013 annual recidivism rates remained consistent with significant increases between 6-36 months after release from correctional institutions (Celi & Miller, 2015). The subsequent sections detail Virginia's incarceration data and demographics, the factors that affect reintegration, the outcomes from Virginia's statewide diversion initiative that was used to address recidivism, and the psychology of desistance.

Reincarceration. The latest available report published on recidivism at the time of this study measured reincarceration rates for state responsible (SR) offenders of Virginia's local and regional jail-only populations, and the Department of Corrections (DOC) facility offenders. Data revealed that the SR offender reincarceration rate rose from 22.8% in 2009 to 23.4% in 2012 (Celi et al., 2016). While the recidivism rate of

DOC facility-only offenders dropped from 22% in 2009 to 20.9% in 2012, recidivism of jail-only offenders increased from 25% in 2009 to 27.7% in 2012 (Celi et al., 2016). This reported data indicated that recidivism and incarceration rates of SR offenders rose within a three year period, while DOC facility-only offenders experienced a slight decline in recidivism (Celi et al., 2016). Researchers also noted that due to limitations in capacity in DOC facilities, some offenders included in the data were transferred to jails, which may account for the decline in DOC recidivism (Celi et al., 2016).

Jail and prison populations. There are over 28,000 inmates in Virginia's jail system (McGehee, 2017, 2020). Virginia's jail populations increased from 25% in 2009 to 37% in 2012 (Celi et al., 2016). By the start of 2014, jail occupancy was the highest in the U.S at 119%, with a steady increase in the jail population to 49% by 2016 (Brumbaugh et al., 2015; Celi et al., 2016). According to jail offender profiles and demographics from 2014, African Americans were incarcerated more for violent crimes and drug crimes, while Whites and other races were incarcerated at a lesser rate for property crimes.

African American males represented over half of the total prison population from 2011 to 2019 (McGehee, 2017, 2020). By the end of 2016, prison occupancy was the seventh highest in the U.S. at 108% (Carson, 2018). McGehee (2017) reported in 2016 that the highest crime rates were for robbery (17%), larceny (14%), rape/sexual assault (11%), assault (11%), drug sales (10%), and drug possession (6%). Although the demographics of the gender and race behind each offense were not documented, reports

revealed that there are currently over 37,000 inmates in Virginia's prison system (Anderson & Carson, 2016; National Institute of Corrections, 2017).

Factors Affecting Reintegration

Several factors affect the process of reintegration and put ex-offenders at risk of reincarceration, re arrest, and reconviction. Risk factors include neighborhood characteristics, substance abuse and mental health treatment, age, race, gender, education, and employment. These risk factors are commonly known as predictors of recidivism. Virginia's reported data coincide with much of the literature from studies on ex-offender reintegration and risk factors.

Neighborhood characteristics. Several studies highlighted the relationship between recidivism and neighborhood characteristics. Crime ridden neighborhoods and communities that lack resources have been found to influence ex-offenders' criminal behavior (Belenko, Hiller, Mennis, Stahler, Welsh, & Zajac, 2013; Calverley & Farrall, 2006; Kubrin & Stewert, 2006). Kubrin and Stewert (2006) studied the neighborhood contexts where Oregon offenders lived and found that individuals who return to disadvantaged neighborhoods were more likely to recidivate than individuals who returned to affluent neighborhoods that are filled with resources (Kubrin & Stewert, 2006). Calverly and Farrall (2006) described these complexities as the social context involving communities that could influence or discourage recidivism. Seven years later Belenko et al. (2013) examined the influence of individual and neighborhood characteristics in predicting recidivism of 5,354 released Pennsylvania state prisoners. Belenko et al. found the likelihood of reincarceration increased particularly with ex-

offenders who lived in areas of high recidivism. In Virginia, local and regional reincarceration rates increased annually despite the implementation of a statewide diversion initiative, which is discussed in depth in the Virginia's Diversion Measures section (Celi et al., 2016; Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015).

Mental health and substance abuse treatment. Mental illness is a leading predictor of recidivism that has been studied extensively by researchers. Currently, post-release therapeutic communities, community networks, and community-based interventions are emerging in research as beneficial to the reduction of post-release recidivism and prison overcrowding (Alfaro, Frazier, Gideon, & Sung, 2015; Cesar & Wright, 2013). In a multi-year study by Bruns, Lee, Severson, and Veeh (2012), recidivism outcomes for 357 primarily male reentry participants released to the community revealed that program completers were significantly less likely to recidivate compared to their counterparts who did not complete reentry programs. Researchers also asserted that offenders who complete treatment are more likely to avoid incarceration in the future (Bruns et al., 2012). The effectiveness of incarceration-based drug treatment programs on recidivism was also evaluated throughout recidivism literature. Mackenzie et al. (2012) found that treatment programs of various types modestly reduced recidivism. Makarios, Steiner, and Travis (2010) suggested that completion of treatment positively impacts an offender's mental illness as well as their ability to find housing and employment. In Virginia, reports showed that recidivism rates were significantly increasing within three years after release, and was the highest among offenders with a

minimal, mild, moderate, or severe mental impairment (Celi et al., 2016). From 2010 to 2013 mentally ill jail populations had doubled the reincarceration rate and surpassed every other group (Celi et al., 2017).

Age, race, and gender. Numerous researchers found the likelihood of reincarceration increased with younger males; particularly those with lower levels of education, fewer children, and by offense type (Belenko et al., 2013; Bruns et al., 2012; Hall, 2015). Although age, race, and gender were not documented in Virginia's recidivism reports, jail demographics from the year the jail occupancy rate was the highest in the United States provided the most insight in this regard. I analyzed and compiled Virginia's jail and prison demographics regarding age, race, and gender.

Virginia's offender profile and demographics. Offender profiles and demographics helped to provide a robust understanding of the age, race, and gender characteristics of the criminal justice population in Virginia. Data showed that African American males in Virginia represented over half of the incarcerated population each year that was relevant to this study (McGehee, 2017, 2020). Overall, there was high incarceration rate for African Americans for violent crimes and drug offenses (McGehee, 2017, 2020).

Statewide confined offender profiles. The latest available published report on offender population trends at the time of this study analyzed statewide confined offender profiles from 2011 to 2019 (McGehee, 2017, 2020). Reported data showed that 92% of statewide confined offenders were male, and 8% of statewide confined offenders were female (McGehee, 2017, 2020). African American males represented over half of the

incarcerated population each year from 2011 to 2019 (McGehee, 2017, 2020). The statewide confined African American male population reached 58% in 2011 with a slight decline to 55% by 2015 (McGehee, 2017). The statewide confined White male population increased from 32% in 2011 to 34% in 2015, while 3% were considered Hispanic or other race (McGehee, 2017). Among statewide confined female offenders, 3% were African American, 4% were White, and 1% were Hispanic or other (McGehee, 2017, 2020). By 2019 the statewide confined African American male offender population had continued a slight decline to 53%, while the White male offender population increased to 36% (McGehee, 2020). The female statewide confined offender populations remained consistent across all races with a slight increase in White offenders to 5% (McGehee, 2020). The age ranges of the top three highest rates of incarceration from 2011 to 2019 were averaged and found to be 31% between the ages of 30 – 39, 25% between the ages of 18 – 29, and 23% between the ages of 40 – 49 years old (McGehee, 2017, 2020). According to Celi (2016), 88% were confined under truth-in-sentencing guidelines, and 12% were parole eligible. The age demographics of Virginia's offenders conflicted with Belenko et al. (2013), and Bruns et al.'s (2012) claim that younger age groups are more likely to recidivate. Instead, Virginia's jail data showed younger adults ages 18 – 24 years old had a lower incarceration rate (10%) from 2011 to 2019 compared to the 15% who were between the ages of 25 – 29 years old and the 31% who were between the ages of 30 – 49 years old (McGehee, 2017, 2020). It is important to note that the report showed slightly different calculations of data +/- 1-2% for statewide confined

offenders than reports published from previous years (Celi, 2016; Celi et al., 2017; McGehee, 2017, 2020).

Local and regional confined offender jail demographics. The 3 year post-release recidivism report on SR local and regional jail offenders from 2009 to 2012, and similar jail demographics from 2014 provided in-depth knowledge of Virginia's correctional system at the local and regional level during the years the state was reaching the highest jail occupancy rate in the United States. The demographics of SR offenders confined in local and regional jails in 2014 consisted of 93% males and 7% females (Celi, 2016). Overall, 52% were African American, 45% were White, and 4% were identified as Hispanic or other race (Celi, 2016). The top three age brackets for most offenses included 31% between 30 – 39 years old; 20% who were 40 – 49 years old, and 18% who were 25 – 29 years old (Celi, 2016).

State-responsible released offenders. Much of the SR offender data discussed in my study consisted of a combination of jail-only offenders and DOC facility-only offenders. The recidivism report revealed that 7,228 SR DOC facility offenders and 4,793 SR jail only offenders were released in 2014; totaling 12,021 SR released offenders (Celi et al., 2016). However, according to reports published several months earlier, there was a documented total of 12,109 SR offenders released in 2014 (Celi, 2016). There is some discrepancy between the total calculations of released offenders, which may be due to the dates of data collection for each report. Nonetheless, jail data revealed that of these 2014 SR released offenders, roughly 88% were male, and 12% were female (Celi, 2016). Approximately, 53% were African American, 44% were White, and 4% were Hispanic or

other race (Celi, 2016). In 2015, the male SR released offender population consisted of 47% African Americans, 38% Whites, and 3% Hispanics or other. Regarding the female SR released offender population, 5% were African American, 8% were White, and 2% were Hispanic or other (Celi, 2016). The top three age brackets at the time of release were 31% between the ages of 30 – 39; 23% between the ages of 40 – 49; and 17% between the ages of 25 – 29 (Celi, 2016). These age groups were consistently the top three, which supported the justification for sampling participants in this age range.

Education. Researchers have claimed for years that education reduces recidivism and have suggested the use of correctional education as a tool to reduce recidivism. (Bruns et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2000; Gallagher, Mackenzie, & Wilson, 2000; Hall, 2015). In Gallagher, et al.'s (2000) meta-analysis of 33 corrections-based education, vocation, and work programs for adult offenders, findings revealed that program participants recidivated at a lower rate than non-participants. Bruns et al. (2012) found that ex-offenders who had lower levels of education were most likely to return to prison. Hall (2015) surveyed eight states and found that offenders who received college level correctional education had lower rates of recidivism for more extended periods of time.

An analysis of academic, vocational, and transitional programs offered by the Virginia Department of Correctional Education from 1979 to 1994 revealed that "completion of an educational program while incarcerated may be positively and directly related to post-release community adjustment" (Brown et al., 2000, p. 256). Virginia's statewide incarceration data showed that the majority of inmates did not receive education while imprisoned (Celi, 2016). The lack of education while imprisoned may

have contributed to offenders' risk of recidivating once released. Education was not only found to reduce recidivism, it was also found to increase ex-offenders' likelihood of finding employment (Gallagher et al., 2000).

Employment. When ex-offenders reenter the community, they face stigmas within society. Criminal backgrounds and records often become obstacles to obtaining employment (Gallagher et al., 2000). James (2015) claimed that employment had mixed results in recidivism studies. There are many variables that must be taken into account when assessing the impact that employment has on recidivism such as the economy, societal stigmas, mental health, human agency, and education. The correlation between employment and desistance in Virginia is yet to be studied and documented.

Virginia's Diversion Measures

For over a decade, there has been a focus on diversion treatment programs as a strategy to reduce the post-release recidivism that causes prison overcrowding in Virginia (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). However, it is at the discretion of judges and the availability of funding for resources that ultimately determine whether ex-offenders are offered diversion services when arrested, while incarcerated, and once released (Powers and Duties, 2014). Virginia's statewide diversion initiative was implemented in conjunction with the sequential intercept model and state resources to address post-release recidivism and prison overcrowding. I was able to provide a broader picture of Virginia's criminal justice system by examining the sequential intercept model and outcomes reported on Virginia's statewide diversion initiative.

Adopting the sequential intercept model. Cesar and Wright (2013) recommended that criminal justice administrators use a model of offender reintegration that includes providing support to the individual, the community, and at the system level of offending. Since the 1990's, Virginia has relied on risk assessments during sentencing (Petersilia & Reitz, 2012). Risk assessments were intended to give judges discretion to decide who would be eligible for diversion from jail. However, it also gave them discretion to prevent it (Petersilia & Reitz, 2012). The purpose of discretion in sentencing is to grant the judge the authority to provide an alternative punishment or adjust sentences at will, therefore supporting diversion initiatives for varying offender types (Petersilia & Reitz, 2012; Power and Duties, 2014). Currently, legislation permits judges to use discretion when sentencing all felons and lesser offenses (Powers and Duties, 2014). The level of discretion used by judges in Virginia are unknown. The statewide confined offender demographics revealed there was a rise in the use of the truth-in-sentencing guidelines between 2011 and 2015 from 84% to 88%, and the local jail demographics revealed that 99% of the jail population was subjected to mandatory sentencing guidelines (Celi, 2016; McGehee, 2017).

The sequential intercept model, adopted by Virginia in 2007, was intended to keep the mentally ill out of the prison system and divert them into an appropriate form of diversion treatment (Griffin & Munetz, 2006). The objective of the sequential intercept model developed by Griffin & Munetz (2006) was to prevent offenders' initial involvement with the criminal justice system and provide diversion services for offenders at five different intercepts:

1. law enforcement and emergency services (prearrest),
2. initial hearing and detention (post-arrest),
3. jails and courts,
4. reentry from jails, prisons and hospitals, and
5. community corrections and community support services.

Federal funding was available to help correctional administrators design and improve reentry infrastructures. However, little attention has been given to investigating the inconsistency in the financing of diversion intercepts throughout the state of Virginia. In 2007, the Virginia General Assembly approved millions in funding to promote diversion (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). At that time, seven awards that funded community service boards (CSB) for discharge planning purposes and post-booking services were granted in Arlington, Fairfax-Falls Church, Henrico, Norfolk, Virginia Beach, the Horizon Behavioral Health, and the Richmond Behavioral Health Authority (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Richmond, the capital of Virginia, only acquired funding for discharge planning in 2007 for the amount of $71,250 (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Although this was categorized as annual funding, there was no evidence of recurring funds. Furthermore, other entities that received initial funding alongside Richmond's Behavioral Health Authority managed to acquire grant funds in the years following. In 2009, ten grants were awarded to CSBs in Alexandria, Arlington, Chesterfield, Fairfax-Falls Church, Hampton-Newport News, Middle Peninsula-Northern Neck, New River Valley, Portsmouth,

Rappahannock Area, and Virginia Beach. However, from 2010 to 2013 there were no grants reported. Three one-time grants were awarded in 2014 to CSBs of Staunton, Augusta, Norfolk, and Crossroads. The last two ongoing diversion grants were awarded in 2015 to Henrico Area Mental Health and Developmental Services, and Prince William CSB (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Reports also revealed that it was not until 2009 that the most intercept levels were funded among 10 CSBs; in a few locations this included the vital Intercept 1 (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). In 2014 only one CSB received funding for Intercept 1, while other locations received grants for Intercept 3 and 4. In 2015, the only intercepts funded were Intercept 2 and Intercept 3, at two separate locations (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). The amount of funding granted to the state of Virginia from 2009 to 2015 totaled over $2.9 million. This amount included an estimated $225,000 in one time grants (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015).

Cities and counties in Virginia did not acquire grant funding for all five intercepts. There was no support acquired by jurisdictions or CSBs for programs at all intercepts simultaneously each year. It is evident that the support for services is scattered and lack uniformity. Intercept 1 is crucial to diversion because this intercept involves prearrest services that will help to divert offenders away from incarceration at the very beginning phase (Griffin & Munetz, 2006). The report revealed that Intercept 1 was barely supported from 2009 to 2015. Equally important, was the lack of support for Intercept 4 and Intercept 5, which involves community services that offenders need once released.

The ability to acquire and maintain funding is vital to establishing effective communities and networks that are needed to reduce recidivism (Cesar & Wright, 2013). Resources used in diversion services at all intercepts points, cities, and counties within the state of Virginia remain unclear. Virginia's diversion services may be limited due to a lack of funding or the improper allocation of funds.

State resources. Resources can be hooks for change, or they can guide ex-offenders toward hooks for change in the form of educational resources, support groups, and community associations. Past studies on recidivism supported the use of community-based programs and interventions for offenders while incarcerated and once released from jail (Alfaro et al., 2015; Cesar & Wright, 2013). Programs that focus on drug and mental health treatment, employment training and assistance, and housing assistance have proven to be effective in reducing recidivism (Bruns et al., 2012; Mackenzie et al., 2012; Makarios et al. 2010). It is the responsibility of the Virginia Department of Justice to provide and grant individuals access to resources while incarcerated and upon release. I conducted an internet search for Virginia's reentry resources and found very little information and website links associated with programs offered by the state government. The Richmond Behavioral Health Authority (RBHA) website provided a network of non-profit organizations that claimed to offer various life skills, medical, mental health, substance abuse, and disability services within the community for released offenders (Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, n.d) Also, the Virginia Department of Corrections (VADOC) claimed to offer a 3-phase reentry transition program for non-

violent offenders that focused on work release and community release (Virginia Department of Corrections, n.d.).

Ultimately, state-sponsored websites revealed that intervention-based programs were outsourced to local non-profit organizations within the community (Richmond Behavioral Health Authority, n.d.). The high dependency upon third-party resources has its advantages and disadvantages. Third-party networks can be advantageous when there is an interdependent structure of agencies and organizations that can work in cooperation with one another to achieve the common goals of diversion and reducing recidivism. It can be a disadvantage to the goal of reducing recidivism if outsourced organizations are unstable or temporary as indicated by the discovery of invalid links and error website pages that are no longer in operation. The Virginia Department of Social Services (n.d.) had a webpage dedicated to prisoner reentry at the start of this study. By the time this study neared completion the webpage was no longer available, and all information previously cited from the webpage had to be omitted from this study.

There is no documentation on the roles community organizations, RBHA, VDSS, and the VADOC may have played in providing services as part of the statewide diversion initiative. However, I was able to uncover the role these organizations played during ex-offenders' transition back into the community through participant interviews for this study. I discovered that high recidivism rates 6-36 months post-release in Virginia were exacerbated by the lack of resources available to ex-offenders. Thousands of adults are projected to be released each year in Virginia, and ex-offenders who have access to effective resources in their community are less likely to recidivate and more likely to

desist from crime (Celi & Miller, 2015; Kubrin & Stewert, 2006; McGehee, 2017, 2020). Internet searches of Virginia's government agencies and organizations revealed that reentry programs do exist, but in what capacity remains unknown. There was no data published on the effectiveness of specific programs, resources, and services that were available to ex-offenders in Virginia. Therefore, I examined ex-offenders' experiences with reintegration through interview responses to examine whether ex-offenders in Virginia were offered or had access to resources, and whether resources helped to influence shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency as described by the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT).

State diversion initiative and outcomes. The goal of Virginia's diversion initiative was to identify various offender types, use discretion to divert offenders away from incarceration, and connect individuals to helpful services (Virginia Department of Behavior Health and Developmental Services, 2015). The bulk of data on Virginia's statewide diversion initiative have only been reported after 2009. Between 2010 and 2015, 4,434 individuals who had felonies (46%), misdemeanors (20%), and lesser offenses (34%) were enrolled in Virginia's statewide diversion initiative (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). This number of enrollments equates to 739 individuals per year (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). 35% of enrollees' offenses were minor and consisted of offense types such as disorderly conduct and petty larceny (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). 29% were property related crimes, 12% were violent crimes, 14% were considered other and also

included sex crimes, and 10% were drug crimes (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Of all individuals enrolled, mood disorders (44%), psychiatric disorders (26%), anxiety (9%), substance abuse (7%), and other diagnoses (14%) were treated (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). The average age of enrollees were 36.7 years old, but there were no data on the genders of enrollees. There was also a 66% statewide program failure rate (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015).

Reports revealed a discrepancy in data among program enrollees and incarceration data. Although McGehee (2017, 2020) revealed that African Americans were incarcerated more than any other race in Virginia, the Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services (2015) reported that there were over 2 times the number of Whites (64%) enrolled in diversion programs than African Americans (30%), or groups classified as others (6%). There was no indication of employment acquired by diversion program enrollees by 2015; yet 79% of diversion program enrollees showed improvement in their housing situations after being discharged from the program (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). Approximately, 35% of enrollees maintained engagement and linkage to diversion programs, as well as showed improvement in their mental health (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). However, there was no documentation of the number of SR offenders, DOC-facility only offenders, jail-only offenders, and SR releases enrolled in diversion services. James (2015) argued that

states do not provide well-designed intervention programs for individuals during incarceration and once released back into the community. The small number of jurisdictions and organizations that were funded as part of the diversion initiative, the high overall statewide failure rate, and the low number of African Americans enrolled in diversion programs compared to Whites, highlighted the disparities within the criminal justice environment surrounding the ex-offenders who participated in this study. Researchers failed to address the correlation and disparities of ex-offenders' reintegration experiences that have fueled post-release recidivism and prison overcrowding in Virginia.

The Psychology of Desistance

Researchers recommended that findings from criminology and psychology be integrated and expanded to deepen our understanding of desistance from criminal behavior (Bowen, Brown, & Walker, 2013). The qualitative literature on the psychology of desistance was used in this study to supplement and challenge existing aforementioned quantitative literature and reports. Much of the literature review thus far has explored Virginia's criminal justice system and the reintegration process as it relates to recidivism; and highlighted several factors that affect the reintegration process. I found it necessary to give equal attention to qualitative literature specifically on ex-offenders' perceptions of their reintegration experience and what helped them to desist from criminal behavior rather than recidivate. Researchers suggested further exploration of internal and external forces that keep ex-offenders from reoffending to get a more in-depth understanding of desistance in relation to theory (Bowen et al., 2013). According to Bowen et al. (2013), theoretical frameworks that include the examination of internal and external change

shows promise as an aid to understanding desistance from criminal behavior. Knowing its role in desistance can help to describe how ex-offenders rationalize their own influences and that of their environment. For this reason, this study was guided by TCT, which encompassed the dynamics of both internal and external forces as a transformative process. The process of understanding how ex-offenders move from offending to nonoffending is complex, and much different than explaining why they choose to commit crimes (Bahr, Davis, & Ward, 2013). Concepts of cognition, identity, and human agency tend to overlap in the fields of criminology and psychology. The following sections present qualitative literature that provides a deeper contextual understanding of these main theoretical concepts as it concerns previous studies on the psychology of desistance. Reviewing how these concepts were studied in past research helped to interpret internal and external forces as well as answer the central research question: "what are the catalysts in the psycho-social processes that moves ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior?" once data were collected and analyzed.

Cognition. Researchers often begin with the examination of cognition to explain criminal behavior and to examine the catalyst to any behavior. The role of cognition in the decision to desist from crime have been found to be both an internal and external force in TCT. That is why researchers continue to argue that differing cognitive commitments to change and responses to their environment produces differing reentry outcomes (Berg & Cobbina, 2017). Cernkovich et al. (2002) referred to this many years before as an exposure and reaction to hooks for change. Reentry outcomes depend upon the individual, their environment, and their circumstances (Bahr et al. 2013). The

perspectives of 16 ex-offenders helped Bahr et al. (2013) identify six factors that ex-offenders personally felt influenced their ability to reintegrate and desist from crime. The six factors were substance abuse, employment, family support, types of friends, motivation, and age (Bahr et al. 2013). Although Bahr et al.'s findings correlate with quantitative studies on the factors that affect reintegration, there was an added emphasis on support significantly impacting ex-offenders' desires and perceptions to change. Their study challenges the TCT by inferring that support precedes an openness to change. Cernkovich, et al. described support as a hook for change that an ex-offender may be exposed to after experiencing an openness to change.

O'Sullivan (2013) explored the psychological process which underlie desistance by examining the lived experience of seven ex-offenders and claimed that hooks for change are only as relevant, meaningful, and valuable as ex-offenders deem them to be. O'Sullivan's findings do little to explain what sets in motion all other facets of desistance. The closest indication of a catalyst in ex-offenders' narrative rationalization of their experiences were discussed in Gouvis, Solomon, and Waul's (2001) When Gouvis et al. explored the factors that were most helpful in successfully reintegrating ex-offenders, participants in their study stated an awakening had to happen within each individual. The focus group of 13 male ex-offenders and 1 female ex-offender in Washington, DC, described the awakening as "a moment of clarity" and "resolve to change" (Gouvis et al., 2001, p. 4). Participants believed an awakening had to occur before they could take advantage of services, resources, and opportunities. Awareness is closely associated with an awakening as described by Gouvis et al. and an openness to

change in TCT. Cernkovich et al. (2002) argued before ex-offenders can react to hooks for change, envision a replacement self, and undergo a complete transformation of perspectives they first have to be open to change. Still, there is little explanation in the TCT regarding the presence of an awareness or heightened moment of clarity within theorists' explanations of openness to change. Cernkovich et al. did not focus directly on awakening, but claimed it is reasonable to assume that chronic ex-offenders have a heightened awareness of having desisted. It was not well documented what causes an openness to change in prior studies, nor is the role of awareness fully understood. The limited scope of TCT made it necessary to test, investigate, and expand upon its original interpretation of internal and external processes involving cognition from the experiences of African American ex-offenders.

Personal identity. Understanding how ex-offenders view him or herself is an important aspect in interpreting criminal behavior and thinking. Yet, studies differ on the interpretation of how ex-offenders' experiences are rationalized. This confusion may be partly due to the differing purposes, theories, and goals of past research studies. Maruna (1999) argued that many desisters tend to display a new identity to avoid the external force of societal stigma. However, proponents of TCT believe that after exposure and favorable reactions to hooks for change, an individual will begin to envision a replacement self with the purposes of no longer identifying with criminality (Cernkovich et al., 2002). The common factor among personal identity studies on desistance is the individual's dissociation with his or her past criminal behavior (Maruna 1997, 1999). Maruna (1997) described this unique rationalization and narrative as redemption scripts.

The redemption scripts of individuals who have desisted tend to include assertions that their past criminal behavior is not the real them or who they really are (Ball et al., 2011; Maruna 1997). Maruna (1999) believed to effectively desist from criminal behavior the individual must restructure the personal understanding of his or her self.

Interpreting the role of personal identity as envisioning a replacement self or displaying a new identity may be too vague when trying to decipher psycho-social processes in tandem. It is also not well documented whether desisters who reflect on their identity experienced openness to change, and whether motivations arise from self-reflections with respect to human agency. Nor has much attention been given to the self, not as a personal identity shift or change agent, but as a level of awareness within the individual. Bright, Kemp, and O'Sullivan (2015) suggested future exploration of personal strategies and self-concepts such as self-belief. I was able to provide a deeper understanding of the role that the perception of self plays during ex-offenders' reintegration into the community after release in Virginia.

Human agency. The term *human agency* is typically defined as the ability of an individual to act as his or her own change agent, which results in desistance from criminal behavior (Laub & Sampson, 1993). The narratives of ex-offenders in past research studies revealed that people who desist are likely to have goals, turn to a higher spiritual power, and make an effort to give back in atonement for their past wrongdoings (Maruna, 1999). The individual's personal role and will to reform was found to be Laub and Sampson's (1993, 2003) explanation of extraneous factors that affect desistance from criminal behavior. Cernkovich et al. (2002) characterized Laub and Sampson's

description of human agency as a four-shift cognitive transformation. It is understood from the theoretical propositions of TCT, that all four cognitive shifts are manifestations of the ex-offender's role in his or her own transformation. However, the role ex-offenders played in exposing themselves to hooks for change or making a choice to associate with programs or people that encouraged desistance from criminal behavior was vaguely discussed in Cernkovich et al.'s study. Although human agency includes the dynamics of internal and external forces, previous studies lack the insight into the catalysts of the entire psycho-social processes that move ex-offenders towards desistance from criminal behavior.

Complete transformation of perspectives. The desistance process is considered to be complete when an individual has a complete transformation of their perspectives concerning their self, their behaviors, and their environment. Cernkovich et al. (2002) stated that desisters viewed past behaviors as no longer viable, relevant, or positive. Researchers found that ex-offenders experience a complete transformation of perspectives when they have transformed how they perceive their past deviant behaviors and lifestyle (Cernkovich et al., 2002). It was reasonable to assume that completely transforming perspectives can reduce recidivism and encourage desistance; however, it was unclear whether this was a catalyst in the psycho-social processes that lead ex-offenders toward desistance during the first 3 years after release.

Race relations. Traditional criminological studies fail to address the harsh realities of prejudice and racism, as well as their role in predicting reentry outcomes. How one racial group perceives their reentry experience may differ from another racial

group. Unfortunately, studies have sought to explain desistance without including the effects of racial biases and disparities in punishment between racial groups. Centuries of racism, stereotypes, and stigmas dating back to the slavery era in the United States are still present in our criminal justice system today. Yet, it remains unknown how this affects the psyche of the minorities that researchers claim need to be studied further. To avoid stigmas and deviant labels, researchers have found that ex-offenders who desist choose to display a new truer identity (Maruna, 1997). Studies do not address how the universal label "minority" could be a viewed as a deviant label as it implies inferiority by default. There is no discussion on how this societal label given to all African Americans impact their lives, criminal behaviors, and reintegration experience. Furthermore, it is not known how racial biases and stereotypes affect the individual's cognitive processes that are recognized in the TCT. Studies that have omitted the deep examination of African Americans in this way have made it necessary to explore it in this study. African Americans commit the same crimes at the same rates as Whites but tend to be incarcerated more often than any other race and given longer sentences (Celi, 2016; McGehee, 2017, 2020). African American males and females are three times more likely to be incarcerated in jails than Whites, and 5 to 9 times more likely to be incarcerated in prisons than Whites (Carson, 2014; Zeng, 2018). Studies that fail to highlight that Whites who receive less or no jail time for the same crime as African Americans may have a significant impact on the way desistance and reentry outcomes are measured. Also, past studies on recidivism, reintegration, and desistance do not include insights from the innocent who have been wrongly accused. Future research is needed on the psycho-social

impact of stigmas placed on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals in Virginia.

Summary

Thousands of adults are projected to be released each year in Virginia (Celi & Miller, 2015; McGehee, 2017, 2020). Reintegration involves the transition of an offender from incarceration back into the community (James, 2015). When making the transition, ex-offenders often encounter obstacles which can be apparent or hidden from society, internal or external, societal or familial. The majority of the secondary data reviewed in my study have been conducted from 2009 to 2016. The sequential intercept model adopted in 2007 to divert offenders away from incarceration, was not effective for a majority of offenders in the recidivism report published by Virginia's Department of Corrections (2016). State diversion programs were only available in a small number of cities and counties in Virginia. Furthermore, the availability of diversion programs was dependent upon the discretion of judges, and the ability of administrators to obtain and sustain the funding needed to operate programs at full capacity. Statewide demographics revealed 88% of the statewide confined offender population were under the truth-in-sentencing guidelines, while local and regional jail demographics revealed that 99% of the local and regional jail population were subjected to mandatory sentencing guidelines regardless of the offense (Celi, 2016; McGehee, 2017). This indicated that it is likely that a very small percentage of offenders were offered diversion programs. Overall, African American males in Virginia are disproportionately more likely to be incarcerated more than any other group. African American males are incarcerated more often for violent

crimes and drug offenses, while Whites are incarcerated more often for property crimes (Celi, 2016). Additionally, there was a high overall failure rate with fewer enrollments of African Americans than Whites into statewide diversion programs (Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). I assessed the quality and effectiveness of Virginia's statewide diversion initiative based on the state's use of the sequential intercept model, the acquisition and allocation of grants, the state initiative outcomes, and the overall credibility of data (see Celi, 2016; Celi et al., 2016; Celi & Miller, 2015; Griffin & Munetz, 2006; McGehee, 2017, 2020; Virginia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Services, 2015). I analyzed social factors, recidivism, penal measures from state reports, and the psychology of desistance to better understand ex-offenders' subjective experience with reintegration. Exploring all possible realities and facts that may have an impact on the successful reintegration of African Americans in Virginia aided in understanding and interpreting ex-offenders' experiences during the crucial 3 year post-release reintegration period.

The literature and reports reviewed in this study brought into question the catalysts to the psycho-social processes moving African American ex-offenders toward desistance form crime, and the internal and external forces that keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending or push them back to crime in a state where jail and prison occupancy was the highest in the Nation. I found it necessary to conduct interviews of African American ex-offenders in Virginia to understand their post-release reintegration experiences as detailed in Chapter 3. I used the findings to provide thorough explanations of how ex-offenders experienced shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency while

reintegrating, which is discussed in Chapter 4. I was able to assess the theoretical propositions of TCT, present a theoretical interpretation of their experiences, and explore the psycho-social processes involved in reintegrating into the community. This study lends knowledge toward the discussion of improving Virginia's criminal justice system and reducing recidivism with a deeper understanding of reintegration from the perspectives of African American ex-offenders.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The study was conducted to explore the internal and external psycho-social processes that were experienced by ex-offenders in the first 6-36 months after their release back into the community from correctional institutions. The previous chapter addressed the factors impacting successful reintegration, rates of incarceration and recidivism in Virginia, jail and prison overcrowding in Virginia, and the psychology of desistance. This chapter presents the research methodology for this study, which includes the research design, rationale for the study, characteristics of the sample population, and data collection methods. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the data collection procedures and a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I adopted a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis in examining ex-offenders' reentry experiences through the lens of the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT). Qualitative research is inductive and is appropriate for collecting, interpreting, and presenting rich data (Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016). Several qualitative research designs were considered for this study: case study, ethnography, and phenomenology. The case study is used to investigate an event, individual, or situation over a period of time, and the ethnographic design is chosen to explore the cultural patterns and behaviors of a specific group (Patton, 2015). The phenomenological design is selected to explore the shared essence of an experience that is captured by in-depth interviews (Patton, 2015). I did not choose the common case study or ethnographic designs because they were not suitable for this study. It was not the aim of this study to follow participants

over a lengthy period of time or make overarching cultural assertions. Nonetheless, case study and ethnographic inquiry could be used to build on the findings of this study to bring a new understanding to the body of knowledge on ex-offender reintegration. The research design chosen for this study was combined phenomenological case study through in-depth interviews.

The phenomenological design aligned with the purpose of this study and the corresponding research questions. I obtained personal descriptions "to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support, or challenge theoretical assumptions held prior to data gathering" (see Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016, p. 3; Merriam, 1997, p. 38). Participants' experiences were explored to answer the central research question: What are the catalysts in the psycho-social processes that move African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior? The phenomenological design enabled an examination of participants' experiences in light of the current literature on reintegration and ex-offenders' experiences, and to discover gaps in existing theories (see Ellinger & McWhorter, 2016). Bounded by time, age, location, and race, the phenomenological design also provided an interpretation of the shared essence of participants' experiences with internal and external forces while reintegrating.

Research Questions

For this study, *reintegration* was defined as the transition of released offenders from incarceration into the community (James, 2015). The central research question and sub question are listed below. Corresponding interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Central research question: What are the catalysts in the psycho-social processes moving African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior?

Sub question: What internal and external forces keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending or push them back to crime?

Participant Selection, Sampling, and Participant Recruitment

Participant Selection Logic

Researchers have struggled to come to a consensus about how desistance should be conceptualized and studied. The theoretical literature indicated the need for studying minority populations and individuals who chronically offend to understand what affects their desistance from crime (Cernkovich et al., 2002). Laub and Sampson (2001) recommended focusing on the causes of variations in the offending patterns of participants rather than the arbitrary designations between them.

There has also been much debate about what constitutes the termination, suspension, and cessation of offending. Farrington, Gallagher, Morley, St. Ledger, and West (1986) found that after several years of nonoffending (5-10 years), an individual is not exempt from ever reoffending because desistance is not permanent. However, Baskin and Sommers (1998) suggested a 2-year period of nonoffending is long enough for an individual to be classified as a desister who can be studied. I found it necessary to target ex-offenders who were at varying stages of desistance and who had experienced at least 1 year of nonoffending after release from incarceration. The offender types included long-term desisters and repeat offenders who were actively participating in their desistance at the time the interviews were conducted. I examined reintegration experiences from long-

term desisters and repeat offenders, which helped to discover and compare emerging themes, as well as provide an in-depth and robust interpretation of the causal dynamics that were needed to understand the psycho-social essence of the reintegration experience. Repeat offenders were able to share alternative perspectives drawn from several reentry experiences and offending patterns that one-time offenders were not able to provide.

The state of Virginia was selected as the participant location and setting for this study because this state had the highest jail occupancy rate in the United States according to the latest available data at the time of this study (see Brumbaugh et al., 2015). Providing an understanding of the themes experienced by ex-offenders who are active participants in their desistance may enable program administrators to modify programs to better serve the needs of ex-offenders in Virginia. Participant criteria and recruitment are detailed in the following sections.

Participant Criteria

The demographics of this sample population of ex-offenders followed the recommendations from previous studies. The participants in the study consisted of formerly incarcerated African American men and women selected from a sample of desisting ex-offenders who reside in Virginia. The decision to sample adult minority ex-offenders in Virginia was based on two factors: the theoretically based recommendations of Cernkovich et al. (2002), and the secondary data from Virginia's recidivism and incarceration reports. To align the study sample with the archived data provided on jail and prison occupancy rates, I recruited participants who had reintegrated into the community after release from a correctional institution one or more times in Virginia

between 2006 and 2016. Also, the selected participants must have been between the ages of 18 and 40 years at the time of their latest release date, with at least 1 year of desistance. The large gap in age allowed analysis and comparison of findings from previous studies from a social and historical context. The target population was ex-offenders who were active participants in their desistance, such as reentry program participants, employed ex-offenders, or job-seeking ex-offenders. Reentry participants were the most appropriate participant sample due to the high failure rate among enrollees of Virginia's statewide diversion initiative, as discussed in Chapter 2, and the literature that indicated that program completers are more likely to desist from crime. Participants self-reported their eligibility and came from a variety of reintegration experiences.

Sample Strategies and Sample Size

Several purposeful sampling strategies were used in this study. Criterion sampling enabled the selection of study participants based on specific criteria. Extreme and deviant case sampling permitted the sampling of long-term desisters and repeat offenders, as long as both types experienced at least 1 year of desistance from criminal behavior and fit the remaining criteria. Snowball sampling allowed the study participants and reentry program administrators to suggest or identify potential participants they knew who may be interested in participating in the study.

There is much debate about how many participants should be included to achieve data saturation. The sample size must not be too small to analyze theoretically or too large to synthesize deeply. According to Crouch and McKenzie (2006), "a small number of cases (less than 20) will facilitate the researcher's close association with the

respondents and enhance the validity of fine-grained, in-depth inquiry in naturalistic settings" (p. 483). However, Mason (2010) conducted a meta-analysis of thousands of studies, and the reported sample sizes differed from Crouch and Mckenzie's recommendations. Mason found that the highest number of study participants in phenomenological studies was 89, and the lowest was seven. Within this range, an average of 25 study participants was identified (Mason, 2010). The highest number of study participants in case studies was 95, and the lowest was 1 (Mason, 2010). Within this range, an average of 36 study participants was identified (Mason, 2010). Combined methodological approaches such as the phenomenological case study approach were not documented, and reflective phenomenology studies yielded no results. Furthermore, it was unclear why specific odd or even numbers of participants were selected. Mason concluded that researchers were not working with saturation in mind, but instead to fulfill a quota that will allow them to say the study is finished.

Eccles, Entwistle, Francis, Glidewell, Grimshaw, Johnston, and Robertson (2009) proposed two principles for determining the sample size for theory-based interview studies. Eccles et al. recommended that researchers (a) specify an initial analysis sample size by identifying the minimum number of participants that will be needed for the study, and (b) establish a stopping criterion by identifying the number of interviews that may needed until no new ideas emerge (Eccles et al., 2009). I determined 15 study participants to be an adequate sample size for initial analysis with a stopping criterion of 20 study participants. Saturation was achieved in the initial sample, and the final sample size was 15 study participants.

The participants of my study consisted of formerly incarcerated minority men and women selected from a purposeful sample of ex-offenders in Virginia. The participants resided in Virginia at the time of this study and were released from correctional institutions in Virginia at least one time between 2006 and 2016. Selected participants were adults over the age of 18. The large range in age allowed the comparison of this study's findings to previous studies and reports from a social and historical context. The purpose of this case selection was to analyze their reintegration experiences in comparison to the reviewed literature and cognitive shifts of the TCT. Each participant represented a case of reintegration in Virginia and was selected through pre-screened recruitment.

Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment of study participants required careful planning and flexibility using a variety of methods. Active and passive recruitment strategies were used to recruit potential study participants. *Active recruitment* is described as actively seeking study participants on-site. Metcalfe and Newington (2014) suggested collaborating with primary care programs and agencies to improve the chance to identify and gain access to eligible participants. Permission was sought to collaborate by contacting administrators of reentry organization and explaining the purpose of this study and the participant criteria. Organizations that were contacted for collaboration were Virginia Cares – The Commonwealth Statewide Reentry Solution, Total Action for Progress, Virginia Department of Social Services, The Adult Alternative Program, Norfolk Prisoner Reentry Program, Friends Guest House of Northern Virginia, and the Bridging the Gap Program.

Consent to collaborate was obtained from one reentry organization. Copies of the participant invitation announcement were sent by email at the request of the program administrator for printing and posting onto on-site message boards; yet contact ceased. No participants were referred from the collaborating reentry organization, the reentry building was not used to interview participants, and participants in this study did not mention any affiliation with the reentry organization. Collaborating with these organizations would have been helpful in providing referrals of eligible individuals who may have wanted to volunteer to participate in this study. The participant invitation announcement explained the nature of the research study, participant criteria, information on confidentiality, anonymity, and consent. The participant invitation announcement can be found in Appendix A.

Passive recruitment is described as the process of waiting for potential participants to inquire about the study. Robinson (2013) suggested advertising as a strategy that would be appropriate for passive recruitment. Passive recruitment advertising was done through hand-outs, strategic placement, online postings, and online advertising. Printed advertisements of the participant invitation announcement were placed in various locations throughout Virginia. However, internet advertising tools allow wide-range targeted advertising across multiple platforms, and have been studied extensively (Bowers & Hamilton, 2006; Merletti, Pivetta, & Richiardi, 2012). Internet advertisements were displayed on Facebook Inc, and Craigslist. Craigslist online postings were the most successful recruitment tool for this study. Recruited participants were also

given the opportunity share the participant invitation announcement and suggest additional potential participants that they know, which proved to be effective.

Ethical Protection of Participants

The participants in this study were adult males and females who volunteered to participate in the study. Consent, confidentiality, and safety are vital principles in conducting scientific research and were explained in the consent form for each participant to review and sign. Participants who were willing to participant had the option to provide verbal consent prior to the start of the interview if they did not want to sign the consent document. Participants also had the option to be interviewed in person, by phone, or on a WebCam program for their convenience and comfort. The confidentiality of the participants and the information they provided were protected. All interview transcripts, audio files, and related documents were stored on a secured computer's hard drive storage. Printed backup copies of files were placed in a pass-code locked file box and were properly discarded one year after the date of completion of this study. Only the researcher and those selected to assist in validating results had access to the transcripts. Identifying information was removed from transcripts prior to data validation.

Research Protocols and Procedures

Procedures and protocols were established on how participants were recruited and informed, as well as how data were collected, coded, analyzed, and validated**.** The following procedures were used as a guide during the participant recruiting process.

1. Pre-code interview questions for predictors and cognitive shift themes before participants are recruited.

2. Recruit and select participants from within the communities in Virginia and online platforms using a pre-screening within the participant announcement.
3. Provide letters, by mail or electronically, informing the participant on the purpose of the study, consent, and confidentiality. Await participant signature to volunteer for the study. Allow the participant the option to verbally consent.
4. Once a participant's consent documents have been signed and returned to me, or the option to verbally consent is confirmed, give the participant the opportunity to choose how to be interviewed (by phone, video call, or in-person).
5. Before the start of each interview, ensure that each participant who signed a consent form has a copy for their own records. Ask for verbal consent before all interviews (consent to conduct the interview and consent to record the interview) and use a phone script.
6. Begin the interview by following the interview protocol and improvise as needed based on participants' responses (Appendix B). Take extensive notes of participant responses if the participant chose not to be recorded.
7. At the end of the interview, debrief and thank the participant for participating in the study. Deliver the $20 Walmart gift card in hand or electronically by email (e-gift card) as stated in the participant invitation announcement.
8. Transcribe interviews verbatim from audio to a Microsoft Word document. Begin the analysis of data manually and move to NVivo or Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for data analysis, only if necessary.

9. Use cyclical coding to discover shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency so in-depth descriptions of past reintegration experiences, and cognitive shifts can be examined through responses.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the selected individuals. Participants had the option to interview by a WebCam program, phone call, or in-person. All participants chose to be interviewed by phone. Phone interviews reduced risks of anxiety, safety concerns, and violations of privacy. Each interview was recorded on a portable audio recording device with participants' consent. Each participant also had the right to decline the recording of the interview. All participants consented to having their interview recorded. If any participant chose not to be recorded, notes would have been written by hand as an alternative data collection strategy.

Interviews focused on ex-offenders' past experiences of reintegrating into the community 6-36 months post-release from a correctional institution in Virginia, and how they experienced shifts in cognition, identity, and human agency while reintegrating into the community. The interview questions were designed to capture various perspectives of ex-offenders' experiences with reintegrating into the community; as well as the internal (psychological) and external (social) forces that keep them from reoffending or push them back to crime. The recordings of all interviews were transcribed, and the electronic transcripts in Word files were secured on the hard drive of a password-protected computer. Backup-copies of the electronic transcripts were stored in a locked filed box protected by a pass-code in my home office.

Data Analysis

Yin (2014) identified pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models, and cross-case synthesis as five common analytic techniques, while Merriam and Tisdell (2015) emphasized thematic analysis. There are many strategies for analyzing phenomenological case study data. Therefore, it was crucial to establish techniques, guiding rules, and principles for assessing qualitative data (Schilling, 2006). To present an in-depth picture of each case of reintegration, interview responses needed to be pre-coded, organized, transcribed, described, cyclically coded, and directly interpreted. The interview questions and two research questions were pre-coded by assigning categorical themes to each question before responses were collected as recommended by Huberman, Miles, and Saldana (2014). Pre-coding provided a structure for the cyclical coding that was conducted once interview responses were collected, and additional themes emerged. The interview questions were pre-coded with themes that were derived from the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT). Pre-coded themes included the four cognitive shifts of TCT, as well as the cyclical coding of categories such as cognition, identity, and human agency. After pre-coding the interviews questions, I transcribed, organized, and analyzed interview responses. I listed interview questions and responses in a Microsoft Word document for comparison and cyclical coding. Interview transcripts were analyzed by hand with the option of transferring the files into NVivo for further analysis. I did not need to use NVivo for data analysis. Analyzing interview transcripts by hand allowed continuous coding that was needed to find emerging patterns that have not been documented in prior research. In phenomenological

case study research, data are interpreted and discovered based on emerging patterns (Creswell, 2013). I combined pattern matching, explanation building, and thematic analytic techniques as noted by Yin (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015). I also followed Schilling's (2006) five-level recommendation on analyzing qualitative data as shown in Figure 3:

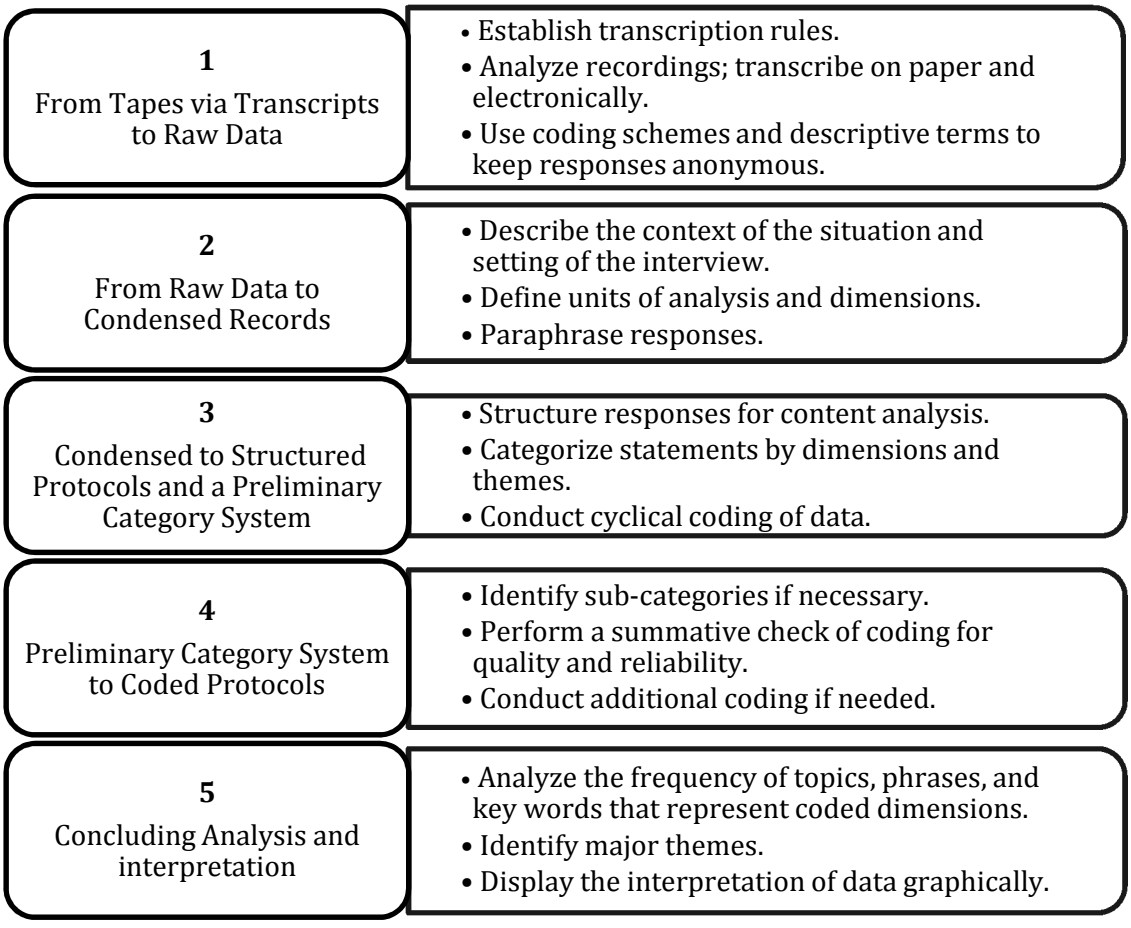

Figure 3. Analyzing qualitative data. This figure illustrates the five levels of analyzing qualitative data as recommended by Schilling (2006) combined with analytic techniques noted by Yin (2014) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015).

Interview Questions

There was roughly fourteen open-ended interview questions (IQ) and additional follow-up questions that inquired about ex-offenders' past experiences with reintegrating into the community 6-36 months post-release and what has kept them from reoffending. Data collected from the interview questions were used to understand ex-offenders' reintegration experience and investigate theoretical propositions. Therefore, thematic elements that were relevant to producing a clear interpretation of findings, assessing theory, and answering the research questions were examined. The thematic elements of the IQs and corresponding responses were pre-coded with the four cognitive shifts, which are an openness to change, exposure and reaction to hooks for change, envisioning a replacement self, and a complete transformation.

Subthemes: Cognition, Identity, and Human Agency

Questions and responses were cyclically coded with categories such as cognition, identity, and human agency. Although Cernkovich et al. (2002) considered all four shifts to be cognitive; literature has shown that moving from criminal behavior to a life of desistance is complex psycho-social processes. In this study, cognition can then be understood as one part of the whole interpretation of desistance from criminal behavior during reintegration. Cognition was examined from questions that assessed participants' openness to change, whether they had any resistance to change, and how they perceived their transition. Questions related to cognition were intended to investigate how the participants rationalize their choices and experience within their environment. Identity was assessed from questions that allowed participants to reflect on their personal identity.

Questions involving identity examined self-perceptions, changes in identity such as how participants viewed themselves in the past compared to the present, and the role of identity in recidivism and desistance during their reintegration experience. Like cognition, Cernkovich et al. determined that human agency encompassed the four individual cognitive shifts that manifests as a complete cognitive transformation. However, the exposure to hooks for change is different than the participant's reaction to hooks for change. It needed to be clearly understood how participants may have exposed themselves to hooks for change and aided in their own transformation. Therefore, I assessed human agency from questions that examined participants' use of programs, resources, and services (reaction to hooks for change), how such support was found, hobbies, extracurricular activities (self-exposure to hooks for change), as well as reasons for wanting to change (reaction to hooks for change). Participant's own decisions and role in moving from criminal behavior to desistance were thoroughly analyzed. The complete transformation of perspectives was analyzed from participants' responses to interviews questions that helped to identify signs of detachment from past criminal behavior. Additional themes and follow up questions were documented as data emerged.

The interview began with an introductory question that allowed participants to describe their experiences with reintegration in Virginia overall. Specific questions and follow-up questions were used to open up the discussion on internal and external forces that influenced their decision to desist from crime and assess theoretical propositions. Depending upon the participant's response to the interview questions, probing questions that involved further elaboration on the social, psychological, emotional, and physical

motivations were asked. The interview protocol was used a guide and was revised as new data emerged from participants' responses. Collectively, these interview questions helped to answer the research questions and re-evaluate the theoretical propositions presented by Cernkovich et al. (2002). The complete interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

Issues of Trustworthiness

While quantitative studies need to address reliability and validity, qualitative studies need to establish trustworthiness. Patton (2015) highlighted credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability as the four criteria for establishing constructivist trustworthiness.

Credibility

To establish credibility, the researcher must assure that the participants' views and the researcher's reconstruction of the participants' views are the same (Patton, 2015). To achieve credibility, I used member checking and triangulation. Member checking involved restating and confirming responses with the participant for accuracy. Respondent validation allowed study participants to provide feedback that helped to clarify and avoid misinterpretation of responses. I needed to be able to comprehend and understand the responses of the participants correctly. Triangulation involved the comparisons and analysis of various qualitative methods such as interviews, observations, relating literature, and documents. All forms of data were taken into account to understand the essence of ex-offender reintegration as a phenomenon.

Dependability

The researcher must assure that the process and findings can be replicated in other studies to establish dependability. Patton (2015) suggested that the research study be audited by an outside person to determine whether the process and findings are "logical, traceable, and well documented" (p. 685). I had the process, methods, and findings of this study reviewed by Walden University's doctoral committee as well as the Institutional Review Board (Walden IRB approval no. 08-31-18-0550064).

Confirmability

Participant responses should be able to be confirmed by their links to the findings and interpretations. Confirmability of a study is established by clarifying that the participants' responses are their own and does not include researcher biases. According to the traditions of qualitative inquiry, the researcher is required to exclude any personal experiences and biases with the topic of study (Creswell, 2013). Although I was a victim of a violent crime in Virginia, I did not have any biases toward this research study. My experiences and personal perspectives were bracketed out of this study and its findings to understand the ex-offender reintegration experience.

Transferability

Qualitative studies must be transferable, which means the findings can be transferred to similar contexts and cases. The data collected from the interview questions cannot be generalized beyond the boundaries of this study, but can be used to address disparities, and investigate theoretical propositions. Since qualitative studies lean more toward deeply understanding a phenomenon rather than providing blanket

generalizations, I used rich and thorough descriptions to show transferability. Rich and thorough descriptions of interview responses provided the detail and context needed to capture the essence of participants' experiences. It helped to provide a clear picture of the sample population within their environment, and allows findings to be applied to future studies (Ponterotto, 2006).

Summary

This chapter offered an explanation of the research methodology for this study, which included the research design, rationale for the study, characteristics of the sample population, data collection methods, ethical procedures, and trustworthiness. A qualitative research design with a phenomenological case study approach best aligned with the purpose of this study. The phenomenological case study was selected to explore, interpret, and describe ex-offenders' past experiences with reintegrating into the community. Participants were selected from a sample of African American ex-offenders in Virginia. Each participant represented a case of reintegration. The study participants were released from a correctional institution in Virginia between 2006 and 2016. The initial and final sample size were 15 participants from Vriginia's minority ex-offender population.

This chapter also explained how data were collected from semi-structured interviews conducted by phone. Interview questions inquired about the past reintegration experiences of ex-offenders 6-36 months post-release and the cognitive shifts relating to cognition, identity, and human agency. Data analysis was completed by the transcription, coding, organization, and input of interview responses into Microsoft Word documents

for pattern and thematic analysis. Trustworthiness was established by achieving credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability. The process, methods, and findings were reviewed and audited by Walden University as necessary. The next chapter presents the findings of this study and in-depth interpretations of African American ex-offenders' reintegration experience in Virginia.

Chapter 4: Results

I aimed to examine, through ex-offenders' narratives, internal (psychological) and external (social) forces experienced within the first 3 years after ex-offenders' release. The focus was on African American ex-offenders' lived experiences with reintegration and desistance from criminal behavior in Virginia. The objectives of the study were to (a) analyze the lived experience of ex-offenders, (b) explore the dynamic interplay between the individual and catalysts for change (see Cernkovich et al., 2002), and (c) examine how ex-offenders rationalize cognitive and identity transformations in relation to their own role in the transformative process. The findings of this study were used to answer the central research question: What are the catalysts in the psycho-social processes moving African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior? Findings were also used to answer the sub question: What internal (psychological) and external (social) forces keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending or push them back to crime? This chapter presents the demographics of study participants, data collection and analysis procedures, evidence of trustworthiness, and the results.

Demographics

A total of 15 participants were interviewed, consisting of nine African American men and six African American women, all of whom currently reside in and were formally incarcerated in Virginia. All participants were adults over the age of 18 at the time of their release. Participants were located in the Central and Hampton Roads regions of Virginia. Cities in the Central region included Charlottesville, Petersburg, and Richmond.

Cities in the Hampton Roads region included Norfolk, Portsmouth, and Virginia Beach. Table 1 presents the participant demographics for this study.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Region	Felon
P1	M	Central	Yes
P2	M	Central	Yes
P3	F	Hampton Roads	Yes
P4	F	Central	Yes
P5	M	Hampton Roads	Yes
P6	M	Central	Yes
P7	M	Hampton Roads	Yes
P8	M	Central	Undisclosed
P9	F	Hampton Roads	No
P10	M	Central	No
P11	M	Central	Yes
P12	F	Central	Yes
P13	F	Central	No
P14	F	Central	Yes
P15	M	Central	No

.

Data Collection

Data collection lasted about 8 months. Each of the 15 participants were interviewed once by phone. All participants provided verbal consent and permission for the interview to be recorded prior to the start of the interview. Two participants also signed a consent form prior to their interview. The interviews were recorded using an audio recording device, were transcribed manually in a Microsoft Word document, and were saved in a file on a secure hard drive. There was an average of five pages of transcripts for each interview. Participant locations within Virginia were identified through the participants' recruitment calls and interview responses. Several unusual circumstances were encountered during the data collection process when using the Craigslist platform to recruit participants. For example, I experienced harassment by email from individuals who used racist epithets and were angered that the study did not include Whites. Also, the participant invitation announcement was flagged for removal for several months, causing the posting to be automatically removed from the platform. The email harassment and flagging of the participant invitation announcement posting eventually ceased, yet this delayed the participant recruitment process. Community collaboration was unsuccessful in this study. Only one local reentry organization agreed to collaborate. However, no participants were recruited by referral from that organization. Contact with the organization ended shortly after participant invitation announcements were sent by email.

Data Analysis

I transcribed interviews verbatim, organized interview responses for each question in a new Microsoft Word document, and printed out the responses to each question separately. I decided not to use NVivo qualitative analysis software due to the complexity and context of the participants' responses. Conducting data analysis manually by hand allowed an in-depth examination of the responses to identify themes, patterns, and essences based on context rather than relying on the presence of specific terms and phrases. Each interview was assigned a participant number with a gender label. There was a total of 14 interview questions, including follow-up questions. Data were analyzed inductively from coded units to larger representations, such as categories and themes. Pre-codes that were identified for the theoretical components, interview questions, and research questions were used to analyze interview responses. The pre-codes for the TCT were the cognitive shifts: openness to change, exposure and reaction to hooks for change, envisioning a replacement self, and a complete transformation of perspectives. Interview questions addressed these shifts. The four shifts in TCT were categorized as cognition, human agency, identity, and complete transformation of perspectives. Pre-codes for the two research questions were psychological and social, which became separate categories and themes in relation to theory.

In the first round of data analysis, the demographics of participants and common themes in the responses to each question were identified. During the second round of data analysis, responses to each question were analyzed using all pre-codes and categories. Codes and categories were labeled by letter or number, and color-coded for the purpose

of highlighting corresponding statements, identifying patterns, and examining themes in every coded element. The third round of data analysis consisted of examining every participant's interview in totality and using cyclical coding to discover any new and emerging themes. Data was then used to report results, answer the two research questions, and provide an interpretation of findings in the context of TCT which is discussed in Chapter 5. The steps taken to analyze data is shown in Figure 4:

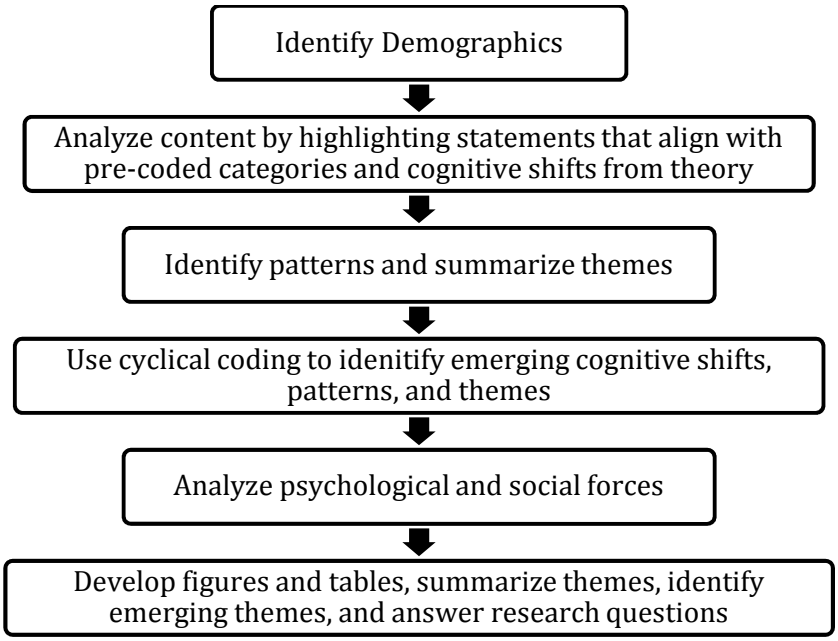

Figure 4. Steps of data analysis after transcribing recorded interviews.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

My own personal experiences were bracketed out of the study, interview questions, interview responses, and interpretation of findings. Credibility, clarification, and confirmability were established through member checking and respondent validation. The participants' interview responses were their own and data were transcribed verbatim based on audio recordings of each interview. Misunderstood responses and questions

were restated and confirmed with each participant during the interview to ensure accuracy. Allowing participants to provide feedback and clarification during the interview helped to clarify the context of their reintegration experience. After the interview, respondents also received a summary of their interview responses electronically by email for their records and to verify accuracy. Participant's did not report any issues with their interview or interview summaries.

The study was audited by Walden University's doctoral committee and Institutional Review Board (IRB) to assure that the process, methods, and findings add to the body of knowledge on ex-offender desistance and reintegration. External auditing helped to establish dependability. Thorough and in-depth descriptions were used to show transferability, which allows the findings to be presented in similar contexts and cases in future research. Thorough descriptions provided detail and context to capture the essence of the participants' experience and painted a clear picture of the sample population within their environment. As a qualitative phenomenological case study, this research leans more toward deeply understanding the essence of African American ex-offenders' post-release reintegration experience rather than providing blanket over-generalizations. Although the data collected from the interview questions cannot be over-generalized, it can be used in the discussion of criminal justice programs, reintegration, diversion, and theoretical propositions such as TCT.

Results

The pre-codes and interview question themes within the categories of cognition, identity, human agency, and complete transformation of perspectives were analyzed to

identify patterns in responses that can potentially explain the catalysts in the psycho-social processes that moves African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior. Psychological and social categories were examined separately for the purpose of identifying the internal (psychological) and external (social) forces that keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending or push them back to crime. Although the presence of these codes and categories were found in every interview question, specific interview questions were intended to address these elements directly. These results were used to later interpret findings in the context of TCT in Chapter 5.

Cognition

Cognition involves the mental processes of the individual. I examined cognition by assessing how participants articulated their openness to change, whether they experienced resistance to change, and their perspective on the ease or difficulty of their transition. Openness to change is the first cognitive shift of the TCT. Although all 15 participants had an openness to change after their release, there was still some resistance in transitioning back into the community.

Openness to change. All 15 participants expressed an openness to change within the first 3 years of their transition back into the community. However, when asked if they experienced any resistance to change, 4 out of 15 participants (27%) expressed having some resistance during the first 3 years. P8 explained how his resistance occurred as a result of encountering societal obstacles. “Meeting those road blocks, all those no’s, it got difficult and jobs don’t want to hire you when you have a record” (P8 Male). Mental health and anger issues also contributed to participants’ resistance “slightly, only dealing

with the depression and the anxiety and PTSD" (P9 Female), and "just being angry about being locked up and why I was locked up" (P14 Female). Of the 27% of participants who experienced resistance to change, half stated their resistance occurred during the first 6 months to 1 year after their release. P14 was angry for a year after her release, "the first year or so I wasn't as accepting, I was angry. After the first year I was more open and accepting. I just had to get over myself the first year". P11 experienced resistance to change as he tried to adjust to his new reality:

> Probably within the first 6 months or so to a year of my release. It hasn't ever hit me that it was actually reality until I sat down and talked with a few people and got some advice from them.

Difficult or easy transition. Another aspect of cognition is how participants perceived their reintegration process. All 15 participants associated the difficulty or ease of their first 3 years of transitioning with their ability to find employment, support, and resources. Participants were asked whether their transition was difficult or easy; 60% of participants, 5 males and 4 females, described their transition as difficult. For most participants, "once you have a criminal record" (P3 Female), and "come home and be a felon is hard; and finding work is the hardest part" (P12 Female). Finding and securing employment is a dire need that would allow participants to create stability by providing food and housing for themselves and their families. However, "having a record and trying to prosper" (P8 Male) was a paradox that was evident in participants' difficulty in finding sufficient employment during the first 3 years. All participants shared the view that "a lot of people don't hire felons" (P6 Male), and "nobody wants to give somebody with a

record an opportunity" (P3 Female). Even when employment was secured, participants still experienced obstacles in being "re-acclimated to the community" (P8 Male) and being able to financially support their household due to a lack of jobs with higher wages. "It was real hard for me to actually find jobs with good pay to support me, my kids, and the household" (P11 Male).

Only 3 participants (20%) described their transition as easy, while the 3 remaining participants (20%) had mixed responses. The 2 males and 1 female who described their transition as easy found employment fairly quickly. P1 claimed that when released, "it took me about a week to get a job". Similarly, P5 had a "pretty smooth" transition back into the community because he was "able to find work relatively quickly around two, two and a half weeks". P13 said once she updated her resume, her first year was "relatively easy". Mixed responses included participants' reflections on the positive aspects in combination with the negative aspects of their transition experience. P2 said he had family support and housing which made his transition easy. "I didn't have to worry about a place to live and all of those other things and everything. So that was the easy part" (P2 Male). Yet, he was lacking reliable transportation needed to get to work which made it difficult, "As far as work, because of the transportation situation and because of not having a license, that was the difficult part for me" (P2 Male). Overall, the ease of transition was aided by consistent family and organizational support that included help with their resume', employment searches, housing, food, clothing, supplemental income, and transportation. Participants' openness to change, resistance to change, and perception of their transition is shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6:

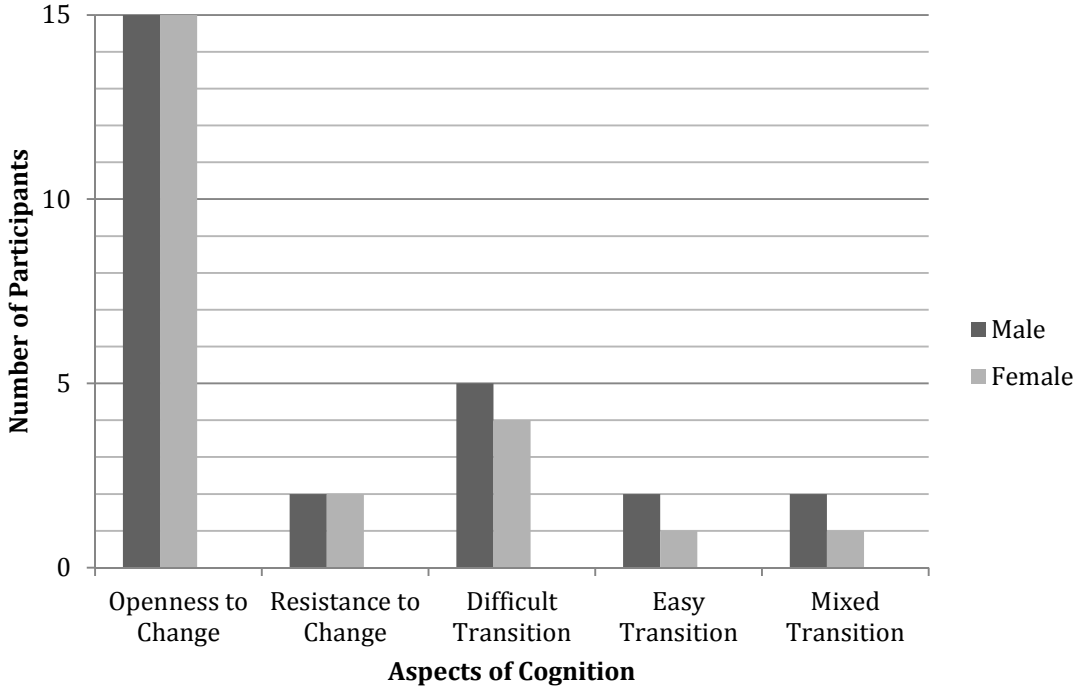

Figure 5. Openness to change, resistance, and perceptions of transitions. Aspects of cognition are shown. Participants' responses to interview questions regarding their openness to change, resistance to change, and perceived ease or difficulty of their transition is distinguished by gender.

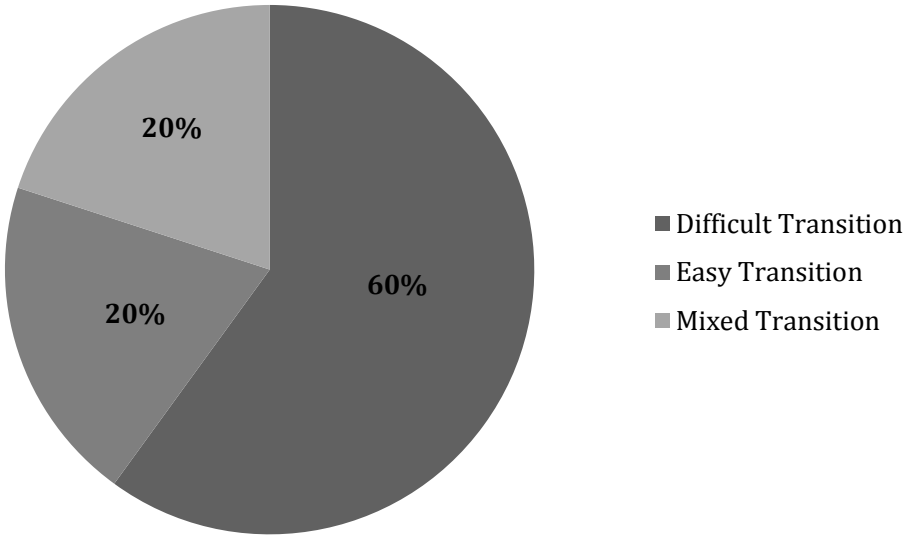

Figure 6. Perceptions of transitions, first 3 years post-release. This figure represents the percentage of participants who perceived their transition to be difficult, easy, or both during the first 3 years of their transition back into the community.

There were 9 participants who experienced a difficult transition. Of these 9 participants, 7 were felons consisting of 3 males and 4 females, and 2 were non-felons consisting of 1 male and 1 female. Participants who had a difficult transition lacked consistent basic necessities needed to survive and thrive such as food, clothing, shelter, support, transportation, and mental health treatment. Findings revealed that lack of vital daily resources ill prepares ex-offenders for employment and hinders their ability to successfully re-acclimate into the community.

Human Agency

There was some overlap with the categories of human agency and cognition in relation to hooks for change. However, exposure and reaction to hooks for change were not examined under cognition. Instead, findings aligned hooks for change with human

agency, which were analyzed in reference to TCT. Therefore, it is important to note that attention was paid to participants' self-exposure to hooks for change, and not just external exposure to hooks to better understand the role of human agency in reintegration and desistance. Additionally, I analyzed participants' reasons for wanting to change and their extra-curricular activities for elements of human agency and hooks for change.

Exposure and reaction to hooks for change. Hooks are people, places, and things that act as motivators or influencers for individuals to change and desist from criminal behavior. In the TCT, hooks for change are the catalysts for change within the individual; the second cognitive shift in theory. Findings show that hooks for change were often encountered outside of the individual such as with family, employment, religious activities, and reentry programs; or developed by the individual in the form of a learned skill or hobby. Participants were asked about the programs they used to help with their transition, their most important reasons for wanting to change, their hobbies, and how they have kept themselves busy to understand the dynamics between their exposure and reaction to hooks for change. Analyzing self-exposure to hooks for change, natural exposure to hooks for change, and how participants reacted to hooks for change are integral parts of understanding the role of human agency in the reintegration process. In this study, hooks for change were not found to be the motivation for changes within participants unless it included the element of human agency in their exposure and reaction to hooks.

Exposure and reactions to programs, resources, and services. Participants were asked about the programs, resources, and services they used to help with their transition

back into the community, and how they found those programs. The responses helped to understand the personal initiatives taken by the participants to help themselves as well as how they reacted to those hooks for change. 86% of participants used programs, resources, and services to help with their transitions. Of these 8 males and 5 females, 2 male participants attended reentry drug programs during incarceration, while others used programs, resources, and services after release. Most participants who received reentry assistance after their release said they found them by "word of mouth" (P8 Male), "looking online for resources" (P9 Female), and through family members. While doing volunteer work, P8 received the help he needed to deal with the mental health issues that developed as a result of being separated from his family: "Initially, I volunteered and while I was volunteering to help other people I was receiving help also, and then just talking to people in the community I was directed to RBHA, Richmond Behavioral Health Association". P5 credited his probation officer as his first source of information and reentry assistance, "I got out, I was put on probation for 10 years. So, that was my first source of information, and they led me to classes I could go to for anger management, classes I could go to for alcohol abuse". When P9 went to Social Services and searched online for resources, she found "a few numbers and contacted the Heart Organization, and applied for TANF, and SNAP" to help take care of her children. 2 participants obtained help from family members who worked for reentry programs. P11 stated that his assistance came from his aunt who "works with the people that come home from jail", and helps former inmates find a job and a place to stay "within 6 months to a year" of their release. P12 also received assistance from her "family member that helps,

who works with felons". However, in some instances participants who sought out programs, resources, and services encountered obstacles. "I personally went to the library and went online and started researching felon hiring establishments, and a lot of it to be honest with you were dead ends or they were websites that weren't up anymore" (P7 Male).

Participants were self-motivated and willing to find the help they needed or received help from family members. The programs, resources, and services used by participants included drug and alcohol programs, work programs, social service programs, anger management programs, mental health programs, and food bank programs. Specific entities and programs named by participants were Celebrate Recovery, Virginia Workforce, Richmond Behavioral Health Association, The Virginia Department of Social Services, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid Virginia Premier, Motivate Clinic, Real Life Community Center, Capital Area Partnership Uplifting People (CAPUP), and the Social Security Administration. Figure 7 shows the number of male and female participants who used programs resources and services while incarcerated and after release:

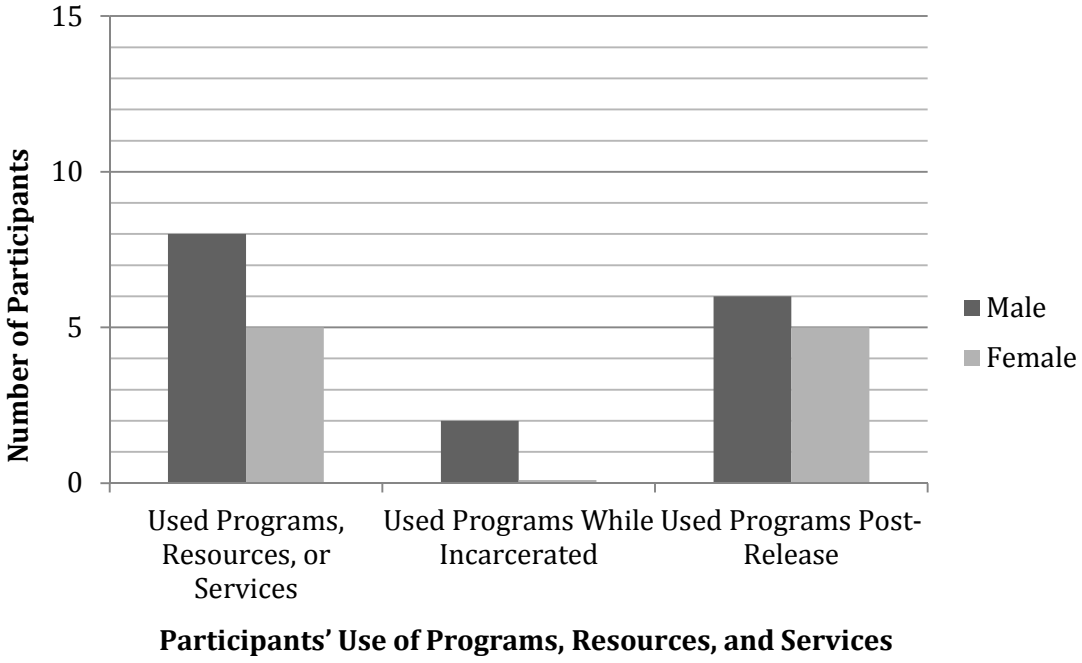

Figure 7. Hooks for change through the use of programs, resources, and services. This figure illustrates participants' human agency towards hooks for change. Participants' use of programs, resources, and services during the first 3 years of their transition back into the community are distinguished by gender.

Reasons for wanting to change. Participants stated reasons for wanting to change, which provided perspectives on their personal hooks for change that may not have been highlighted before. When participants were asked about their most important reasons for wanting to change and do better, reasons included for their own selves, family, or both. 73% of participants stated "my family" (P1 Male, P8 Male, P12 Female), "my kids" (P4 Female, P5 Male, P11 Male, P12 Female), "my children" (P9 Female), "my grandchildren" (P15 Male), or made references specifically to their "daughter(s)" (P3 Female, P7 Male, P14 Female). Of the 6 males and 5 female participants, 3 participants mentioned both their family and their own selves as the reasons for wanting to change and do better. P8 stated that his family is a "top priority" and "wanting to make

a good name" for himself as well as get his "good standing back" was his reasons for wanting to change. Similarly, P11 said his number one reason was for his children, "Number 1 is for my kids. My kids and then myself because I have to do it for myself too". On the contrary, P5 believed that changing for himself first allowed him to provide for his children, "I would say myself, because if I didn't do better then I wouldn't be able to provide for my kids". 27% of participants, consisting of 3 males and 1 female, made a change for themselves, without any mention of family or children.

> My most important reason for changing was simply because I needed to. I realized and recognized that the way that my life was going. I could not continue to go on. I was no good to anyone, myself or anyone, living in the condition I was living. (P2 Male)

P13 claimed she wanted to establish a career and her own business, "I felt like I am somebody who wants to have a career and own my own business. So, once I got that veracity and mindset that's when I ran for it and didn't stop doing what I had to do." Participants' overall intentions for initiating change were to become a "role model" (P14 Female) and a positive individual in the lives of their family members. P3 wanted her daughter to know that "her mother was not just some incarcerated inmate," and P7 wanted to get back into his daughters' lives "as a positive person".

Hobbies and extracurricular activities. There was a combination of hobbies and extra-curricular activities that participants engaged in to keep themselves busy. Several overlapping responses included working, looking for a job, engaging in family activities, taking care of family, and religious activities. 47% of participants, 5 males and 2 females,

mentioned working as an extra-curricular activity. “I like sports, I like art. But I mostly spend my day looking for work” (P10 Male). 40% of participants, 4 males and 2 females, discussed taking care of family and engaging in family activities.

> I like to barbeque and walking my dog. I don’t have too many hobbies no more really you know, because I stay to myself mostly. Just being with family that’s my thing, you know. Being with my kids, that keeps me busy. (P1 Male)

Participants also described how involvement in their children’s lives was helpful to maintaining desistance from crime. “Definitely being more involved with my children and their schooling and things like that helps out a lot” (P8 Male). Several participants, 2 males and 2 females, expressed that both work and family were their extra-curricular activities. P12 said she is motivated simply by “working and taking care” of her “kids”. P2 began a catering company with his wife and attends his son’s sporting events, which keep him busy with “family, with work, and sports”.

Religious activity accounted for 4 out of 15 participants’ responses (27%). As participants engaged in religious activities, these activities became hooks for change, which aided in their personal transformation, will power, and personal development. P3 turned to church and God to address issues that derived from having low self-esteem and thoughts of committing suicide.

> I had to really get into church a lot because I felt I had low self-esteem, I felt bad about myself. I couldn’t provide for my child, I felt like what’s the use of being a mother. There was many times when my mind would tell me to commit suicide when I wanted to live. (P3 Female)

P14 is "studying to be a [Jehovah's] Witness" and feels that "getting closer to God" helps her address her anger issues. Participants also mentioned working in addition to religious activity. P15 said his extra-curricular activities were "mostly working and doing Bible study". Less frequent responses were cooking, taking care of pets, education, music, arts and crafts, fitness, sports, reading, and engaging in community activities. Figure 8 shows the hobbies and extra-curricular activities male and female participants engaged in during their reintegration into the community:

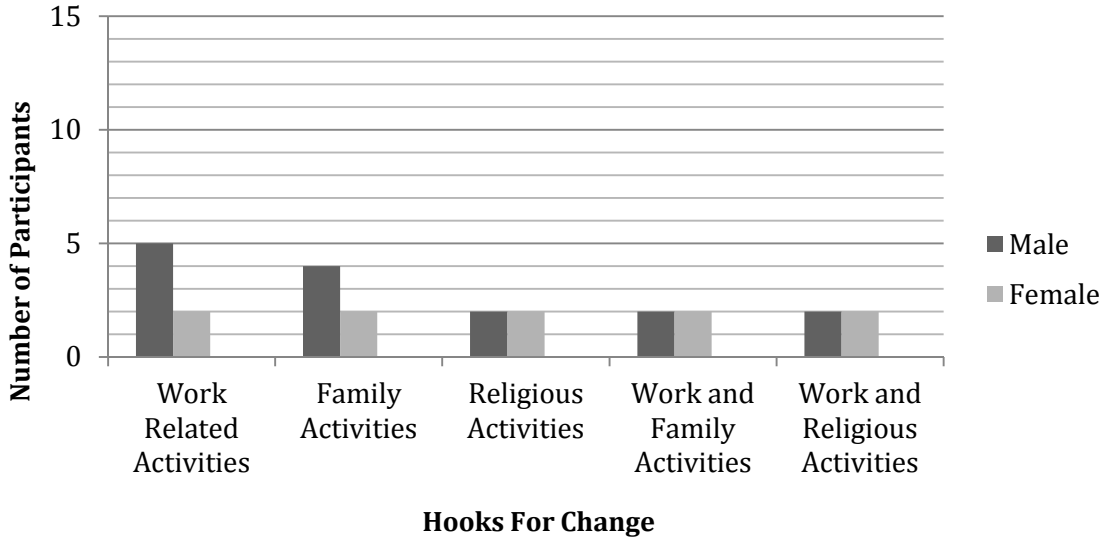

Figure 8. Hooks for change through hobbies and extracurricular activities. This figure shows participants' human agency toward hooks for change. Participants' hobbies and extracurricular activities during the first 3 years of their transition back into the community, such as working, family activities, and religious activities are distinguished by gender.

Identity

It was important to consider how participants viewed themselves at the time of their release into the community compared to how they currently view themselves to understand the role of identity in maintaining desistance during reintegration. Under the

category of identity, I analyzed internal changes with identity, comparisons of past and present self-identity, and whether participants envisioned a replacement self as described as the third shift in the TCT. The majority of participants felt something changed within and portrayed a sense of accountability. Their perception of themselves in the past compared to the present moment of the interview was shaped by how they perceived their individual circumstances then and now. Participants' perceptions gradually shifted from negative at the time of release to a more positive personally accountable perception as years passed and circumstances improved.

Internal changes in identity. Participants were asked if they felt something had changed within themselves during the first 3 years after their release. There were 14 participants (93%) who felt something had changed within. Participants described how these inner changes caused them to become more aware as they now "view things more differently and more open eyed" (P12 Female). P8 claims he "took notice of where" he "went wrong initially". Thinking clearly helped P1 maintain desistance as he began to "feel more responsible" and trusted by his family after a life of drug use and a lack of clarity. Of the 14 participants who felt something had changed within, themes of personal accountability were present in 6 participant's responses (43%). A conscience of personal accountability made them unwilling to do anything that would jeopardize their freedom and cause them to return to a life of incarceration. "I told myself when I get out of prison that I have to change my life because if not I was gonna end up right back there" (P6 Male). P15 said his change was to "never be incarcerated again, in any ways possible, not to do anything that would cause me to be that way you know; not to go back into a

facility where I can't come back home". Spirituality and faith changed within 2 participants. 1 male and 1 female participant indicated that their "relationship with God got really strong" (P3 Female), and "faith played a big part" (P2 Male). It is evident that changes in participants' internal selves, including having deeper trust, belief, and faith in themselves, were also applied to family interactions, personal choices, and a higher spiritual power.

Self-identity: Then and now. Participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their self-identity during the first 3 years of their release compared to the present moment of the interview. The comparisons of their past and present identity revealed a pattern of distinct self-proclaimed difference or change. When asked how they felt about themselves at the time of release compared to now, and whether this feeling was a new or mature version of who they already are, 53% of participants, 5 males and 3 females, did not define their identity as mature. Instead, these participants described themselves as becoming better off, wiser, more educated, a better person, more focused, more motivated, more sophisticated, less angry, less entitled, more responsible, renewed, more positive, and undecided. Participants' perceptions gradually shifted from negative at the time of release to a more positive personally accountable perception as years passed and circumstances improved. P14 was not open to change the first 6 months to 1 year after her release due to feeling like the world was against her, but her anger gradually shifted as she began feeling more responsible for her actions.

> I feel like I am a less angry person. I feel like I am less angry and less entitled. When I got out I feel like I always said, "why me" and "the world is against me"

> and "I'm so angry at everybody". And if anybody walked down the street they were against me. I hated everybody, but now I don't. I don't feel that way. I see the issues that I have as my doing, like I have to get out of this, and if I wanted my life better I have to do it. If my life is bad then I have a part in that. So, I feel like I think I'm more responsible for my actions. (P14 Female)

Three participants mentioned being variations of the same person without any mention of maturity. "I am the same person I have always been. I felt at heart I have always been a good person. I just feel renewed and I am able to now do what I knew I could do all along" (P2 Male). P8 said he feels like a new and upgraded version of the same person, "It's like a new version, like a 2.0. I'm still the same person, but I'm taking things to a more positive level and have a more positive outlook on things" (P8 Male). Only 2 participants stated feeling a changed identity into a "new person" (P15 Male) or "new me" (P9 Female). Forty-seven percent of participants directly mentioned that they felt more mature. Regardless of whether participants directly mentioned feeling more mature or otherwise, the majority of participants' reflections on their identity involved qualities of maturation. Contrary to Cerknovich et al.'s (2002) claim, even chronic offenders are able to draw on prior experiences to forge ahead. However, it remains unclear whether desistance from crime influenced maturation or whether maturation influenced desistance from crime.

Envision a replacement self. Self-identity in this study was conceptually different than the way identity was described by theorists of the TCT because reflections on identity covered a broad range of characteristics that did not include envisioning a

replacement self. Cernkovich et al. (2002) noted that ex-offenders envision a replacement self when their identity decreases desire for criminal behavior and their current identity is distanced from their past self. There was evidence of detachment from past criminal behavior and deviant personalities. However, despite participants feeling like a "brand new person (P1 Male), "new me" (P9 Female), or "new person" (P15 Male), participants did not directly express that they envisioned a replacement self as proposed as the third cognitive shift in the TCT. Therefore, envisioning a replacement self was not directly or significantly indicated within the data. The changes in the identity of male and female participants is depicted in Figure 9 and Figure 10:

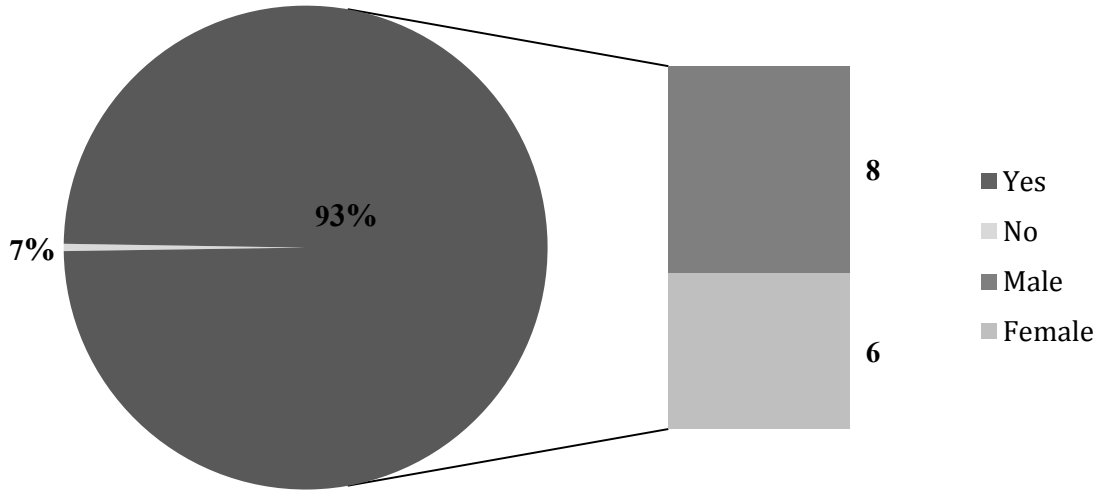

Figure 9. Internal changes in identity. The pie chart depicts the percentage of participants who felt something changed within themselves (Yes) compared to those who did not feel something changed within themselves (No) during the first 3 years of their transition back into the community. The bar graph connected to the pie chart represents how many male and female participants said they experienced internal changes regarding their identity.

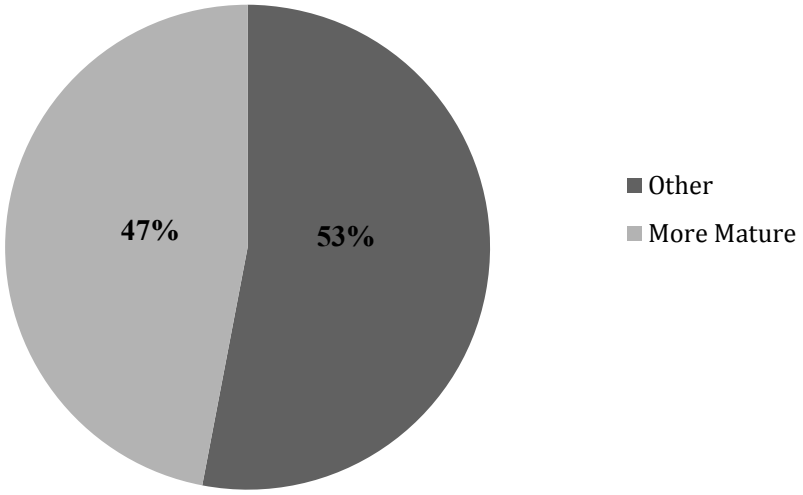

Figure 10. Self-identity then vs. now. This pie chart represents the percentage of participants who felt more mature compared to other responses regarding the first 3 years of their transition back into the community. Other includes descriptors such as better off, wiser, more educated, a better person, more focused, more motivated, more sophisticated, less angry, less entitled, more responsible, and undecided.

Complete Transformation of Perspectives

The fourth cognitive shift in the TCT denotes a complete transformation of the individuals' own perspectives. Theoretically, a cognitive transformation is complete when the individual's past criminal behavior and actions are viewed as no longer meaningful, relevant, or viable (Cernkovich et al, 2002). Signs of detachment from behavior that previously led to crime were evident. Participants' openness to change spurred a complete transformation of perspectives as they expressed their willingness to change and began acknowledging their criminal behavior with a statement of intent to avoid or not repeat criminal behaviors. P12 expressed how she was very open to

changing and avoiding criminal behavior, “I never want to go back and do bad things”. P5 was open to change once he realized he was a “revolving door” and was reoffending “every 3 months”. In addition to signs of detachment, several participants described their outside environment and social life as something that had to change. This change was evident for participants who described themselves as socially active as well as those who became less-social than they were before they were incarcerated. I found that external changes involved avoiding toxic environments and negative social experiences. “My social life is more with good people that are in good groups that I am involved with. So, my life is no longer involved with the people who got me into the system” (P14 Female). Within these changes were hints of personal accountability.

> I didn’t have much of a social life per se, but I did begin to start keeping myself out of places where I know I shouldn’t be, not putting myself in situations or positions that could potentially get me in trouble. (P2 Male)

All participants revealed that there was a complete transformation of their perspectives regarding their openness to change, behavioral patterns, and criminality.

Psychological and Social Themes

As I analyzed psychological (internal) and social (external) forces, themes of self-awareness, situational awareness, and social awareness emerged. Within the three themes of awareness, there was also an essence of personal accountability. All participants had an awareness of themselves, their situation, their environment, and the impact of their actions. They perceived themselves as evolved in some way in their present life than compared to when they were first incarcerated and released. Past actions leading to

criminal behavior and incarceration were avoided by their own changed perspectives and actions during the first 3 years of their transition back into the community.

Openness to change leads to a complete transformation of perspectives. An openness to change was accompanied by self-awareness and influenced by statements of personal accountability: "100% because that was a bad side of my life and I am ashamed of it now" (P6 Male). Participants' self-awareness, openness to change, and personal accountability created a psychological dynamic that spurred a complete transformation of perspectives. P1 was so open to change that he admitted he was tired of living a life of drug use. From this self-awareness, his complete transformation of perspectives became apparent as he expressed how he viewed his incarceration as a push to start over.

> I was ready for it. I was real open. I was ready to do that. I was tired of living the life I was living. I was glad I got locked up in the penitentiary so I can start over again really. Because that's the only way. I wouldn't have started over if I wouldn't have gotten locked up. You know what I'm saying? (P1 Male)

There was also an apparent situational awareness that was strong enough to influence the participants' realizations of needing to change their lives for the better. "I was so very open because I realized that was my first time being incarcerated and that was not the place for me" (P9 Female). Participants' situational awareness was also based on how they perceived their circumstances at the time of incarceration and their projections for their future. In addition to showing disdain for their own past criminal behavior, the majority of participants viewed their incarceration experience as negative, and a deterrence that encouraged future desistence.

> I felt very happy because I was ready to come home, because I had a mindset that I was going to do positive things. So, my mindset when I came home was I don't want to go back to jail so I just have to do everything I can. I am working hard. I think I'm doing pretty good. (P11 Male)

Additionally, participants' realized their openness to change and their complete transformation of perspectives were supported by their family and support groups. Their family and support groups played a role in their reasons for wanting to change and acted as motivators by helping participants stay focused on their psychological and social commitments to change (personal accountability) during the most challenging times of their transition back into the community.

> With children, and a wife, and a family, and with the support group that I had, I was very open and receptive because I knew it was something that I needed to do. I had made tons and tons of mistakes in my life, you know, and I battled through addiction. I battled through just poor choices and poor decisions. So, you know, yes it was an easy decision. Jail is not a nice place to stay. (P2 Male)

The psychology of identity. Reflections on personal identity also revealed self-awareness and personal accountability. Not only were participants aware of their past criminal actions, they held themselves responsible for their actions by perceiving who they are now as transformed or evolved individuals. They were detached from their former criminal actions and personas. Agentic actions thereafter aligned with their changed perception of self. However, as aforementioned, there were no significant

indicators of participants expressing or displaying actions of envisioning a replacement self as proposed in the third cognitive shift of the TCT.

Exposure and reaction to hooks for change. Theorists argued that hooks for change can be found in anything and anyone, which was also described as the main influencing factors behind all other cognitive shifts in the TCT. Social awareness was revealed in participants' exposure and reaction to hooks for change as a psychological force and a social force. The significance of social awareness within participants' exposure and reaction to hooks for change was evident in their own role in identifying and using hooks for change and how they rationalized and changed their social environment. Participants were also given the opportunity to provide recommendations for the improvement of the programs, resources, and services that they have used during their transition.

Perceptions of social environments. Participants described making changes to their outside environment and social lives by choosing to stay to themselves, get involved with positive support groups, and avoid past environments or associations that led to criminal behavior. "Social life, I didn't. To this day I still don't socialize too much, because socializing with the wrong crowd, being in the right place at the wrong time, is what got me in trouble" (P7 Male). Although the majority of participants were less social externally, closer connections such as family and support groups were made a priority. "I don't socialize much with many people, pretty much just family" (P9 Female). The heightened social awareness that participants experienced during their transition influenced them to gravitate towards positive trusted social forces such as family support,

taking care of their children, and engaging in family activities. These social forces also aligned with their reasons for wanting to change.

Participant recommendations for program improvement. The majority of participants used programs, resources, and services while incarcerated or once released, which they claimed were helpful to their transition. Their experience with finding and using programs revealed a series of agentic moves (human agency) toward hooks for change that heightened their social awareness of program effectiveness, social barriers, and the overlooked needs of those who are transitioning back into the community. Participants were asked how can the programs, resources, and services that they used be improved. Participants emphasized that there is a lack of public awareness of the resources available within the communities that the local and state programs serve, "Just getting the word out for people to know that those types of services are actually available, because a lot of people just don't know" (P8 Male). It was recommended that more attention be paid to increasing public awareness of available programs, resources, and services.

> I think more people need to know. I think just making people more aware that these programs exist because a lot of people don't even know these programs are out here. And it's not just for people who are incarcerated it's for anybody. So, people knowing that these programs - I just think Awareness. People need to know, "Hey man this is available. These are available." I think some of these programs need to be promoted a little bit more so that people know without a shadow of a doubt that there's help. There are resources out there for people in

> that situation. Reentry programs, I mean churches, different organizations, you know, that will help you get yourself established. You know, social services, there are tons and tons of resources out here, but I just think people don't know about them and then I think sometimes one of the biggest issues is that people are ashamed, especially men. You're dealing with men you know who have pride issues and they are - they don't want to seem like they are getting hand-outs. I think that's an issue too. So, counseling and letting these men know, "Hey listen you need help, and nobody is above help". (P2 Male)

One participant mentioned that when attempting to search for resources online, websites for reentry programs and felon hiring establishments were no longer accessible. "A lot of it to be honest with you were dead ends or they were websites that weren't up anymore" (P7 Male). Drug programs offered to participants while incarcerated also received criticism for allowing inmates to abuse the system to get one year off of their sentence (early release), only to quickly end up back in jail.

> Well, it was inside the penitentiary, it could have a lot of improvements really because you know, guys are using it just to get one year. You know you get out one year earlier you know what I'm saying, so guys are using it for that mostly a lot too, you know. A couple of guys that was in there with me got out and went back in and got in, you know. So, you know it's all up to the person. You have to make your own mind up. (P1 Male)

Other concerns included the management of online systems and the availability of resources within programs at their particular location. "The Heart Organization, from

what I was told, they only assist Norfolk residents. Since my release I became a Portsmouth resident. So, they gave me other resources for the Portsmouth area" (P9 Female). When P4 was first released she said she didn't have food to eat so she went to food banks. Unfortunately, the food offered by food banks were in limited supply.

> Well, they can do a little bit more often. I was only able to come but once a month to these programs. So, when I first came out I didn't have food or anything to eat and stuff like that. I couldn't come but once a month so they could have did it a little bit more often. (P4 Female)

P13 said she felt like Medicaid could improve their website to have "an online system for doing different things like if you were scheduling for an appointment; it would be easier to have more information online so that way you don't have to call them". Ultimately participants' social awareness of the programs, resources, and services in their environment helped them to navigate toward the support that best fit their needs.

Participant perspectives on African American recidivism. Awareness of their social environment allowed participants to be able to share their perspectives on why African Americans return to crime after being released, as well as give advice to others who will soon be transitioning back into the community. Participants believed recidivism is influenced by numerous interconnecting factors including the environment, childhood trauma, mental health issues, a lack of resources, unwillingness to change, and a loss of hope. When participants were asked about the advice they would give others who will be soon transitioning back into the community, there was a collective emphasis on changing

their environments and associations, having a strong support group, having accountability for their actions, and not being afraid to seek help.

Emerging themes. The psychological elements of having the right mindset, making up their mind, and being in the right state of mind, emerged as themes in the reintegration process that led to desistance when participants described their openness to change. Changes to the outside environment and social life were described by P2 as easy with a focused and determined mind.

> I just started doing things differently. I began to be a little bit more focused on my responsibilities and what I needed to do and I just made my mind up that I wasn't going to continue to keep making those poor decisions that got me into the situation I was in. Now, once you make up your mind the rest is kind of easy. (P2 Male)

When asked about openness to change, P11 said he had a "mindset" to do positive things and everything he could to not go back to jail. When giving advice to individuals who will soon be transitioning back into the community P2 said, "The biggest thing is you have to make up your mind that you want to change". The context in which the mind and mindset were discussed in several responses to different questions were found to be synonymous to having awareness. Therefore, no distinction was made in its role in desistance, but should still be considered when understanding the essence of the participants' experiences and their rationalization of cognitive processes involved during reintegration in totality. There was also an element of preparation and planning before being released from incarceration and during their transition that helped participants stay

on a successful path of desistance from criminal behavior. P1 discussed his plan of action during the first 3 years after his release, which made his transition easy. “When I first got out it took me a week to get a job. After that I bought a scooter to ride back and forth to work with. After I got the scooter, I eventually afforded a car and bought a car”. P2 said he had a “5 year plan” and is currently “2 ½ almost 3 years into it”. He said his transition was easy because he had support, but his plan to find and keep a job made his transition difficult since he lacked reliable transportation.

> As far as work, because of the transportation situation and because of not having a license, that was the difficult part for me. Because of where I live there is no mass transit whenever you need a vehicle you can’t drive on suspended license. (P2 Male)

Planning for their transition back into the community is considered by theorists of TCT to be indicative of a cognitive blueprint (Cernkovich et al., 2002). Future research on the mindset, as well as planning and preparation within ex-offenders’ reintegration experience will be vital to the field of criminal justice and the study of desistance. Although a less frequent occurrence in responses, planning was discovered as a psychological force and a social force.

Discussion of Research Questions

The central research question was the following: What are the catalysts in the psycho-social processes moving African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior? Data from this study revealed that three types of awareness are the catalysts in the psycho-social processes that moves African American ex-offenders

toward desistance from criminal behavior. Self-awareness, situational awareness, and social awareness is how ex-offenders develop an openness to change, are exposed to and react to hooks for change, reflect on their identity, and completely transform their perspectives.

The sub question was the following: What internal (psychological) and external (social) forces keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending or push them back to crime? The psychological forces that keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending are the three types of awareness (catalysts), human agency (the actor's own role and will-power), and personal accountability. Desisting individuals have (a) self-awareness of their own negative and positive nature, (b) situational awareness of the consequences of their criminal actions and how their actions effect their life circumstances, and (c) social awareness of available programs, external support, and how negative environments can encourage criminal behavior. Human agency requires will-power and is continuous agentic action taken toward desistance based on what the individual is aware of. Personal accountability is an individual's intention to take responsibility for their actions and solidify internal (psychological) and external (social) commitments made to themselves. The social forces that keep African American ex-offenders from reoffending include employment, family, spiritual activities, community programs, and support groups, as well as the social awareness of external needs and deficiencies regarding these forces. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that African American ex-offenders who lack awareness, human agency, personal accountability, and

positive external support will likely be pushed back to crime. The connections between awareness, cognitive shifts, thematic categories, and forces are shown in Table 2:

Table 2

Connections Between Awareness, Cognitive Shifts, Thematic Categories, and Forces

Type of awareness	Cognitive shift(s)	Theme category	Force
Self-awareness with personal accountability	Openness to change, complete transformation of perspectives, envision a replacement self	Cognition, complete transformation of perspectives, identity	Psychological
Situational awareness with personal accountability	Openness to change, complete transformation of perspectives	Cognition, complete transformation of perspectives	Psychological
Social awareness with personal accountability	Exposure and reaction to hooks for change	Human agency	Psychological and social

Note. Types of awareness, cognitive shifts, categories, and forces were based on participants' responses. Exposure to hooks for change includes participants' self-exposure to hooks for change.

Summary

Data were analyzed manually by hand using pre-codes developed from the four cognitive shifts of the theory of cognitive transformation and were used to answer the two research questions. The four cognitive shifts were openness to change, exposure and reaction to hooks for change, envision a replacement self, and a complete transformation of perspectives. The four cognitive shifts were also categorized as cognition, human agency, identity, and complete transformation of perspectives. Pre-codes for the two research questions were psychological and social, which also became separate categories

and themes in relation to theory. Catalysts to the psycho-social processes were identified in the findings as self-awareness, situational awareness, and social awareness. Collectively, the internal (psychological) and external (social) forces were found to be the three types of awareness, personal accountability, human agency, and positive support from external sources.

All participants had an openness to change and associated the ease or difficulty of their transition with the ability to secure employment and resources. Their self-awareness fostered an openness to change that eventually led to a complete transformation of their perspectives about their criminal behaviors and criminality. They no longer viewed themselves as a deviant. Instead, they viewed themselves as a brand new person, upgraded, same person but renewed, and having qualities of being more mature. Situational awareness made participants perceive their incarceration experience as a strong deterrence from crime. Exposure and reaction to hooks for change were positive due to participants' own social awareness and willingness to seek the help and support they needed from positive sources. A few participants used drug programs while incarcerated, while others used social services, work programs, and reentry resources after released. From participants' perspectives, recidivism among African Americans in Virginia is caused by negative environments, a lack of resources within the community, mental health issues, loss of hope, and unwillingness to change. Participants believe that having a strong support group, changing, gravitating toward positive environments, and not being afraid to seek help will reduce recidivism. Participants made recommendations for the improvement of programs, which included making communities more aware of

what is available, reassessing the effectiveness of incentivized drug programs, and improving the allocation of resources. All 15 participants experienced an openness to change, exposure and reaction to hooks for change, and a complete transformation of perspectives. Participants did not envision a replacement self. However, they did experience changes in their identity that should be studied further in future research. These cognitive shifts were not experienced in the order that was originally described by theorists. Instead, these cognitive shifts were found to be predictors of desistance rather than the catalysts to a cognitive transformation.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I examined ex-offenders' lived experiences with reintegration and desistance from criminal behavior in Virginia. Ex-offenders' experiences were interpreted through the lens of the TCT to identify the catalysts in the psycho-social processes that move African American ex-offenders toward desistance from criminal behavior, and to identify the internal (psychological) and external (social) forces that keep African Americans from reoffending or push them back to crime. I explored the dynamic interplay between the individual and catalysts for change, and examined how ex-offenders described cognitive and identity transformations in relation to their own role in the transformative process. Findings revealed that the catalysts in the psycho-social processes that move African American ex-offenders toward desistance were three types of awareness: self-awareness, situational awareness, and social awareness. The internal (psychological) and external (social) forces that influence desistance or recidivism were the three types of awareness as the catalyst, personal accountability, human agency, family bonds, employment, and support from external sources.

Interpretation of the Findings

Virginia's criminal justice system has not been explored in reintegration, recidivism, and desistance studies. Previous studies also lacked focus on the psycho-social processes that move African Americans in Virginia toward desistance from crime. The findings of my study were compared to reports on Virginia's criminal justice system and literature on the risk factors related to ex-offender reintegration. Participants in my

study were self-reported desisters and included chronic offenders, which coincided with Virginia's recidivism reports that revealed recidivism increases 6-36 months after release.

The review of literature indicated several factors that put ex-offenders at risk for recidivating and affect their ability to desist. Risk factors were neighborhood characteristics, mental health and substance abuse treatment, age, gender, race, education, employment, and societal stigmas (Belenko et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2000; Calverley & Farrall, 2006; Gallagher et al., 2000; Hall, 2015, Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). Findings from the current study align with Belenko et al. (2013) and Kubrin and Stewart's (2006) claim that individuals who return to disadvantaged crime-ridden neighborhoods and areas of high recidivism are more likely to recidivate than those who return to affluent neighborhoods that provide ample resources. I was able to confirm that recidivism can be influenced by neighborhood characteristics and the social context involving communities (see Belenko et al., 2013; Calverley & Farrall, 2006; Kubrin & Stewart, 2006). Participants in my study did not discuss their neighborhoods in detail, yet they emphasized the need to change social circles, seek support, and avoid environments that encourage criminal behavior. I found that there was a lack of resources within programs and a lack of public awareness of available resources within communities throughout Virginia. This finding was indicated not only by chronic offenders, but also by the collective perspectives of participants regarding why recidivism occurs among African American ex-offenders in Virginia. Results showed that 86% of participants used programs while incarcerated (two participants) and after release (11 participants), which confirms findings from other studies that participation and completion of various types of

programs discourage recidivism. However, there was some indication that findings also align with James's (2015) claim that states fail to provide well-designed intervention programs during incarceration and after release. I discovered, through participants' interview responses, that inmates abuse drug programs while incarcerated to get a reduction in their sentence as an incentive for participating, but they recidivate shortly after release. Participants may have lived in areas or used agencies funded by the statewide diversion initiative; however, participants' degree of enrollment and participation was unclear. There was no mention of enrolling or participating in diversion programs in this study.

In previous studies, receiving education while incarcerated and after release has been found to reduce recidivism (Brown et al., 2000; Hall, 2015). However, statewide incarceration data relevant to this study showed that the majority of inmates did not receive education while imprisoned (Celi, 2016). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that a lack of education for inmates in Virginia likely contributed to recidivism. Findings in the current study did not confirm or disconfirm that recidivism is more likely with younger males and individuals with lower education, as concluded by Belenko et al. (2013) and Bruns et al. (2012). All participants in this study were adults who were not asked about delinquency during earlier stages of life. Furthermore, participants' levels of education were not the focus of this study, and participants were not asked about receiving education. Only a small number of participants discussed seeking or enrolling in higher education during the first 3 years after release, which reflected movement toward hooks for change and desistance.

Researchers have contended that education influences ex-offenders' likelihood of finding employment (Gallagher et al., 2000). However, James (2015) found mixed results concerning education and employment. I found that participants in my study associated the ease or difficulty of their transition with their ability to obtain employment, while also emphasizing well-paying employment. Having the means to provide for themselves and their families were top priority for all participants. Findings of my study suggest that African American ex-offenders who find employment quickly after release will perceive their transition to be easier than those who do not find employment quickly. Similarly, African American ex-offenders who obtain well-paying employment are more likely to perceive their transition as easy because they can provide for their household, in comparison to African American ex-offenders who obtain low-wage employment and struggle to provide for their household. Criminal records are often obstacles to securing employment (Gallagher et al., 2000). I found that African Americans experienced obstacles to employment that were both personal and societal. Findings revealed that being labeled a felon was a psychological and social barrier when African American ex-offenders applied for jobs and consented to background checks for employment in Virginia. Based on their job search experiences, participants believe that employers view felons as liabilities and typically are reluctant to hire them. Even when there were no obstacles to employment and employment was found, the perception of being labeled as a felon still discouraged and delayed agentic moves toward securing employment quickly after release. Other stigmas such as being labeled or viewed as a minority were not found to be significant in this study.

All but one component of Laub and Sampson's (1993, 2003) explanation of criminal behavior and desistance (Figure 1) coincided with the findings in my study. Despite Laub and Sampson's claim that marriage and employment are turning points that set the pace for change to occur, most participants that I interviewed were not married, and employment did not set the pace for change to occur. Instead, marriage had little significance in this regard, and securing employment was a byproduct of participants' cognitive transformation, which I found to be one of many predictors of desistance. Contrary to Laub and Sampson's assertions, I found the catalysts that set the pace for change to occur were self-awareness, situational awareness, and social awareness. Structural events such as enrollment and participation in reentry programs, extracurricular activities, and religious activities created positive support groups (social bonds) that encouraged self-discipline (informal control). These positive social bonds helped African American ex-offenders develop a prosocial lifestyle and commitment to change. African American ex-offenders interviewed in this study were active participants in their desistance and used their free will (human agency) to decide to recidivate or desist from crime.

Extending the Theory of Cognitive Transformation

Cerknovich et al.'s (2002) study mainly focused on the narratives of women rather than men. Cernkovich et al. recommended several sampling strategies for future research on TCT, which included more focus on the narratives of men, minorities, and chronic offenders. I attempted to follow these recommendations by collecting data from adult minorities, focusing on the responses of both men and women, and including

chronic offenders in the sample. Cernkovich et al. had no prior theoretical interest in issues of agency or cognition until they emerged as new conceptual categories from themes in their study. The interview questions in their study did not address cognition, identity, or human agency. Therefore, I brought cognition, identity, and human agency to the forefront to confirm, disconfirm, or extend TCT as a provisional theory. Interview questions in this study addressed each of the four cognitive shifts proposed in TCT, and findings revealed that all but one of the cognitive shifts were present in participants' experiences. All participants in this study had an openness to change, were exposed to and reacted to hooks for change, and had a complete transformation of perspectives within 6-36 months after release. However, participants did not express that they had envisioned a replacement self. Changes in identity occurred, but not in alignment with the TCT. The order in which these shifts were experienced was also different than that described in TCT. Participants experienced an openness to change (self-awareness) that led to a complete transformation of perspectives (situational awareness). Their complete transformation of perspectives encouraged changes in identity (self-awareness) and involvement with hooks for change (social awareness). Findings also revealed that the four cognitive shifts were psycho-social predictors of desistance rather than catalysts of a cognitive transformation. Figure 11 illustrates the four cognitive shifts as predictors of desistance based on the findings of this study:

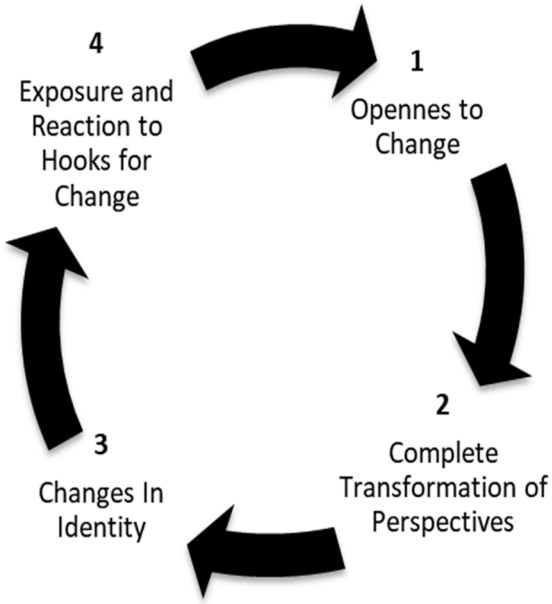

Figure 11. The four cognitive shifts as predictors of desistance based on findings. The numbers represent the order of the cognitive shifts that encourage desistance from crime as revealed by the findings of this study. These cognitive shifts were found to be predictors of desistance.

Findings from this study led to the discovery of the catalysts of the four cognitive shifts of TCT, which are the three types of awareness aforementioned. Desisting individuals have self-awareness of their own negative and positive nature, situational awareness of the consequences of their criminal actions and how their actions effect their life circumstances, and social awareness of available programs, external support, and how negative environments can encourage criminal behavior.

The findings of my study show that African American ex-offenders who exhibit awareness of their actions and personal accountability will likely take the necessary actions to change and desist from crime. Cernkovich et al. (2002) described this awareness as reflexivity. Cernkovich et al. claimed that it is reasonable to assume that chronic offenders who eventually desist have heightened awareness. This was confirmed

in the findings of this study and also includes one-time offenders. There is a heightened awareness among African American ex-offenders that stem from their interactions with various elements within their environment while reintegrating into the community. Theorists briefly described the role of awareness, however there was not enough attention paid to its significance as the catalyst of a cognitive transformation or as a psycho-social force. I found that the cognitive transformation that leads to desistance from crime was manifested by sharpened awareness, personal accountability, and human agency.

Findings also show that personal accountability was a form of acceptance of past criminality for African American ex-offenders that required strong individual intention to take responsibility for their actions and solidify internal (psychological) and external (social) commitments made to themselves. Personal accountability emerged in my study as a link to human agency that allowed ex-offenders to have the cognitive transformation needed to move toward opportunities to desist. Cernkovich et al. (2002) described human agency as the upfront work accomplished by actors themselves and their role in appropriating hooks for change in their environment. Human agency requires will-power and is continuous agentic action taken toward desistance based on what the individual is aware of. Human agency encouraged participants' exposure and reaction to hooks for change. Findings of this study confirm Cerknovich et al.'s claim that ex-offenders who desist from crime and latch onto hooks for change use human agency intentionally and reflectively. Human agency was also found to be an internal (psychological) force that preceded all four cognitive shifts that move African American ex-offenders toward the cognitive transformation needed to desist from crime. However, researchers asserted that

despite exuding human agency, hooks for change are only as meaningful, relevant, and valuable as ex-offenders deem them to be (O'Sullivan, 2013). I discovered that two participants did not use any reentry programs because they were not deemed valuable or relevant to them. Furthermore, hooks for change were found to cover a broader range of positive influences, from a single thought to a support group or extra-curricular activity. Findings confirm Cernkovich et al.'s claim that successful hooks provide ex-offenders with a detailed plan of action and cognitive blueprint for initiating change in the future, (Cerknovich et al., 2002). It is also important to note that there were no significant gender differences in the findings of this study. Based on the findings of this study, the psycho-social processes that produce the cognitive transformation that lead to desistance during reintegration is shown in Figure 12:

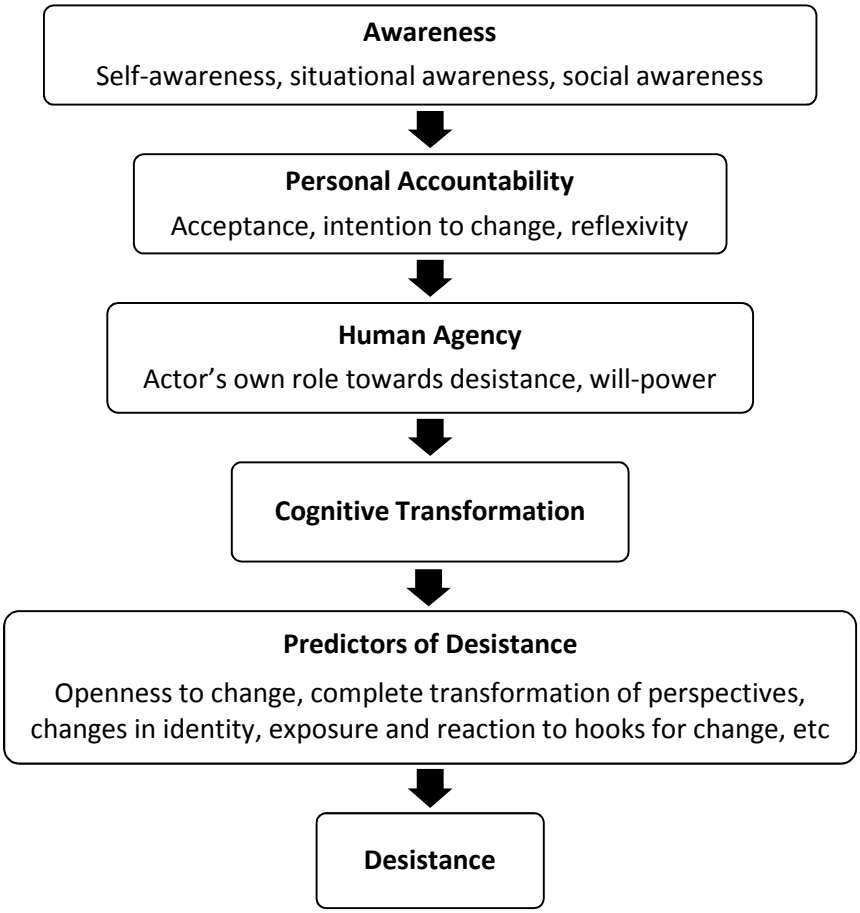

Figure 12. The psycho-social processes of desistance and the role of cognitive shifts. The cognitive shifts from the theory of cognitive transformation were categorized as predictors of desistance and not catalysts of a cognitive transformation as proposed by theorists. This process was constructed based on the findings of this study.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations regarding secondary data, participant eligibility criteria, and the inability to generalize beyond the boundaries of this study impacted this study. There was a lack of consistent reporting and recordkeeping of recidivism, jail, and prison data from the state of Virginia, which significantly affected the depth of the study. Participants must have been adult ex-offenders residing in Virginia who were incarcerated in a Virginia correctional institution any time between 2006 and 2016. The participants must

have been able to articulate and reflect on the first 3 years of their reintegration into the community after being released from a correctional institution in Virginia. Interview responses may not be representative of all ex-offender experiences in the U.S., and therefore should not be generalized beyond the boundaries of this study.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future research includes the study of a larger minority sample population, the U.S. criminal court system, Virginia's criminal justice system, and the psychology of desistance. Future research that includes a larger sample of African American ex-offenders in Virginia and follows the methodology of this study will help to expand knowledge on reintegration and the psychology of desistance. The U.S. criminal court system should be explored in future research to better understand the role judges play in the desistance process. More research is needed on the effects that judicial discretion in sentencing has on recidivism and desistance. There is also very little scholarly research on the state of Virginia. It is recommended that future research explore Virginia's criminal justice system in-depth. Additional research is needed on the allocation of funds in Virginia's criminal justice system and its impact on desistance, the organizations and agencies that were part of Virginia's diversion initiative, as well as the effectiveness of individual reentry entities in reducing recidivism in Virginia. Scholars agree that findings from criminology and psychology studies should be integrated and expanded to deepen the understanding of desistance from crime (O'Sullivan, 2013). It remains unclear whether desistance from crime influences maturation or whether maturation influences desistance from crime. Additional research is needed on awareness

as it relates to desistance, and its role in cognitive transformations. Researchers also suggest that future studies explore other personal strategies and self-concepts such as self-belief (Bright et al., 2015). Therefore, the role of identity in the reintegration and desistance process should also be examined.

Implications

Criminal justice scholars who are able to rethink the influences of crime will be able to use the findings of this study to build on the discussion of ex-offender reintegration, post-release recidivism, desistance, criminal justice reform, and criminological theory. Virginia's criminal justice program administrators who know the risk factors, state demographics, and ex-offenders' past experiences with reintegrating into the community will be able to take informed steps to aid criminal justice populations. Program administrators and clinicians can now understand the role that self-awareness, situational awareness, and social awareness plays in the psycho-social processes of desistance. Findings of this study can be used to improve programs, resources, and services throughout the state of Virginia, as well as develop holistic evidence-based cognitive programs. Programs, resources, and services that enhance and encourage a deeper awareness within themselves, their situation, and their environment are effective strategies for encouraging desistance among ex-offenders. A number of states have implemented mindfulness meditation for prisoners and ex-offenders, which have proven to be effective. Findings of this study also highlighted the need for more resources and public awareness of what is available in the communities served. Virginia's criminal justice administrators can avoid funding and sustainability issues by using the findings to

build a network of programs, resources, and services that can collaborate as needed. Public awareness campaigns involving hiring events for ex-offenders, community events, and increased advertising may be effective approaches. Offering programs and services that make ex-offenders feel supported like family will help foster long-term commitment to desistance and trust among those who need the help that is offered. Helping ex-offenders to desist means there will be less victims of crime, and ex-offenders are able to break cycles of criminality.

Conclusion

This study examined ex-offenders' lived experiences with reintegration and desistance from criminal behavior in Virginia. Virginia's criminal justice reports and previous literature on risk factors of recidivism were confirmed by the findings in this study. Ex-offenders' past experiences were interpreted through the lens of the theory of cognitive transformation (TCT). Cernkovich et al. (2002) had no prior theoretical interest in issues of agency or cognition until these conceptual categories emerged from themes within their qualitative data. Also, interview questions in Cernkovich et al.'s study did not include questions concerning cognition, identity, or human agency. However, in my research study, cognition, identity, and human agency were brought to the forefront and ultimately extended TCT as a provisional theory. Findings revealed that all but one of the cognitive shifts were present in participants experiences. All participants in this study had an openness to change, were exposed to and reacted to hooks for change, and had a complete transformation of perspectives within the first 6-36 months after release. Findings did not indicate that ex-offenders envisioned a replacement self. Changes in

identity did occur, but not in alignment with TCT. The order in which these shifts were experienced was also different than the TCT. Participants experienced an openness to change (self-awareness), which led to a complete transformation of perspectives (situational awareness). Their complete transformation of perspectives encouraged changes in identity (self-awareness) and involvement with hooks for change (social awareness). Findings also revealed that the four cognitive shifts were psycho-social predictors of desistance rather than catalysts of a cognitive transformation as originally proposed by theorists. Future research is needed on a larger minority sample population from Virginia, judicial discretion in the U.S. criminal court system, Virginia's criminal justice system and the effectiveness of its affiliated entities, and the psychology of desistance. Criminal justice scholars who are able to rethink the influences of crime will be able to use the findings of this study to build on the discussion of ex-offender reintegration, post-release recidivism, desistance, criminal justice reform, and criminological theory. Virginia's criminal justice program administrators can use the findings of this study to take informed steps to aid criminal justice populations by improving programs, resources, and services.

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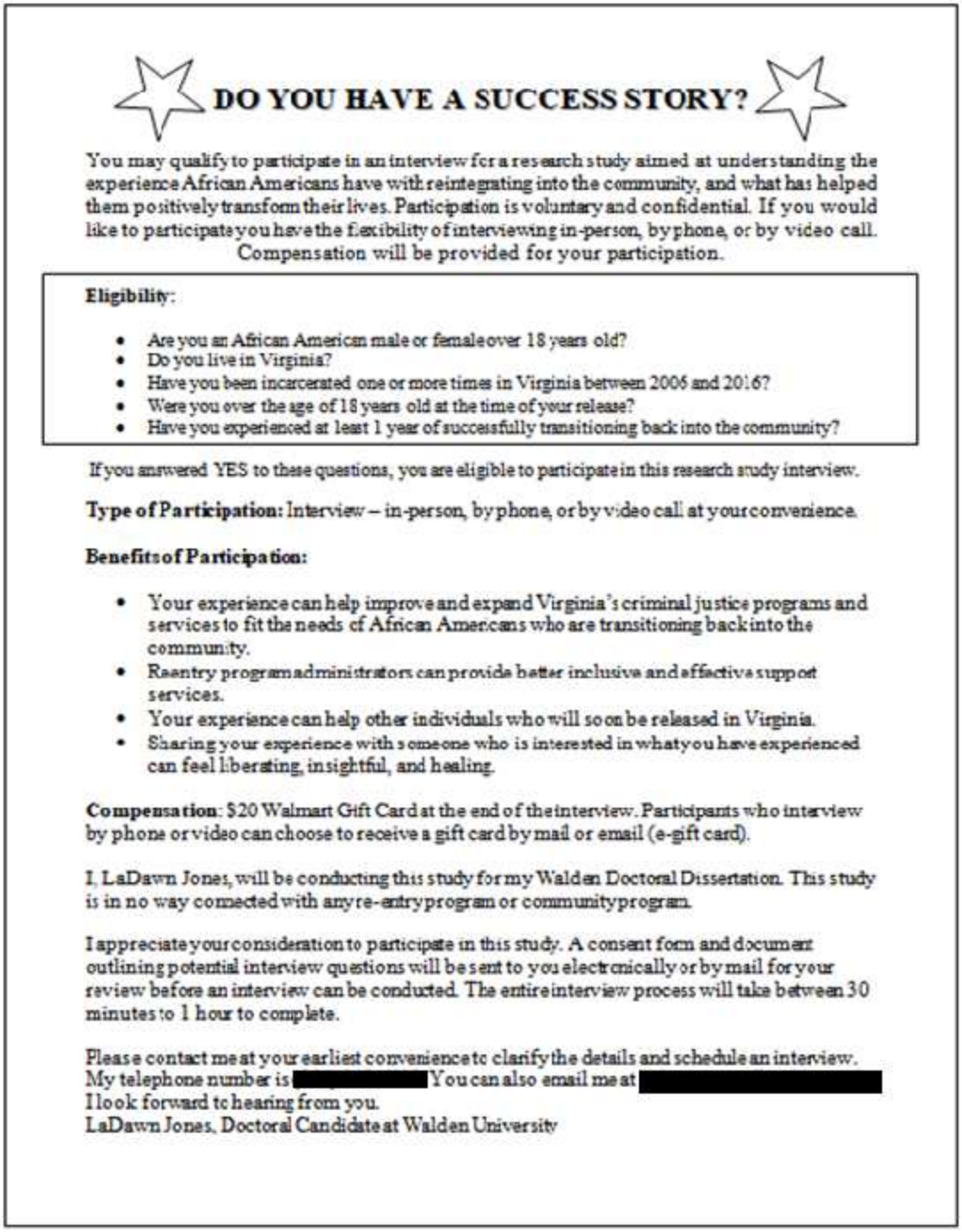
Appendix A: Participant Invitation Announcement



DO YOU HAVE A SUCCESS STORY?

You may qualify to participate in an interview for a research study aimed at understanding the experience African Americans have with reintegrating into the community, and what has helped them positively transform their lives. Participation is voluntary and confidential. If you would like to participate you have the flexibility of interviewing in-person, by phone, or by video call. Compensation will be provided for your participation.

Eligibility:

- Are you an African American male or female over 18 years old?
- Do you live in Virginia?
- Have you been incarcerated one or more times in Virginia between 2006 and 2016?
- Were you over the age of 18 years old at the time of your release?
- Have you experienced at least 1 year of successfully transitioning back into the community?

If you answered YES to these questions, you are eligible to participate in this research study interview.

Type of Participation: Interview – in-person, by phone, or by video call at your convenience.

Benefits of Participation:

- Your experience can help improve and expand Virginia's criminal justice programs and services to fit the needs of African Americans who are transitioning back into the community.
- Reentry program administrators can provide better inclusive and effective support services.
- Your experience can help other individuals who will soon be released in Virginia.
- Sharing your experience with someone who is interested in what you have experienced can feel liberating, insightful, and healing.

Compensation: $20 Walmart Gift Card at the end of the interview. Participants who interview by phone or video can choose to receive a gift card by mail or email (e-gift card).

I, LaDawn Jones, will be conducting this study for my Walden Doctoral Dissertation. This study is in no way connected with any re-entry program or community program.

I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. A consent form and document outlining potential interview questions will be sent to you electronically or by mail for your review before an interview can be conducted. The entire interview process will take between 30 minutes to 1 hour to complete.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to clarify the details and schedule an interview.
My telephone number is [redacted] You can also email me at [redacted]
I look forward to hearing from you.
LaDawn Jones, Doctoral Candidate at Walden University

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Date and Time: _____
Location: _____
Name of Interviewer: _____
Name of Interviewee: _____
Participant Number: _____

1. (Introduction) Please, describe your past experience with transitioning back into the community. If you can please reflect back on the first 3 years after you were released, how would you describe your transition? (Follow-Up) Was it difficult or easy? What made your transition difficult/easy?

2. (Probing) Do you feel something changed within yourself during the first 3 years of your transition back into the community? If so, please describe what changed within yourself and how it positively transformed your life. (Probing) What about on the outside, your environment, your life, and social life? If so, please describe what changed outside of you that encouraged you to positively transform your life.

3. (Probing) What programs, resources, and services did you use to help with your transition back into the community and how did you find these programs,

resources, and services? (Follow-up) How can the services and resources you mentioned be improved? If you did not use programs, services, or resources please explain why. (Probing follow-up) How have you helped yourself?

4. How open and accepting were you to changing your life for the better during the first 3 years of your transition back into the community? (Follow-up) Did you have any resistance to change at all? If so, can you tell me about it?
5. What were your most important reasons for wanting to change/do better?
6. (Follow-up) Why did those reasons make you want to change?
7. What are your hobbies? (Follow-up) How have you kept yourself busy since your release?
8. What else in your life has kept you on a successful path during the first 3 years of your transition? What about currently? (Possible Follow-up) How difficult or easy is it to stay on a successful path? If difficult, what made you feel it was difficult?

9. How did you feel about yourself at the time of your release compared to right now? (Follow-up) If how you now see yourself as different from the time you were released, why? Would you describe this feeling as a new you or a mature version of who you already are?
10. From your perspective/observations, why do some African American men and women return to a life of crime after being released?
11. (Closing question) What advice would you give individuals who will soon be transitioning back into the community on how to positively transform their lives inside and out?