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Prisoners' Perspectives on Limited Rehabilitative Program Opportunities

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Abstract

Approximately 1.5 million persons are incarcerated in American prisons (Carson, 2020), and the rate at which persons who have been incarcerated reoffend (recidivism) is high (Alper et al., 2018, p. 1). This has propelled the effort to help offenders change their trajectory. Rehabilitative programs are used to help prisoners gain skills and strengths necessary to succeed in the community after their release. Yet, these high recidivism rates persist. Why do some prisoners not benefit from these programs? Although many researchers have studied the efficacy of programs over the past six decades, less attention has been directed towards access to prison programming. Additionally, studies that explore prisoners' perspectives are not common. This researcher sought to understand programming access and utilization through the prisoner's lens. This phenomenological, qualitative study explored 49 male prisoners' perspectives. The findings suggest the prison's operational structure impeded program access and the study's participants who experienced blocked access were negatively affected, not receiving needed rehabilitative programming and, separately, suffering from the act of disenfranchisement from services.

Keywords

phenomenology, reflexive thematic analysis, class, stratification, justice, program participation, inmate

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Prisoners' Perspectives on Limited Rehabilitative Program Opportunities

Kerry Edwards
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Approximately 1.5 million persons are incarcerated in American prisons (Carson, 2020), and the rate at which persons who have been incarcerated reoffend (recidivism) is high (Alper et al., 2018, p. 1). This has propelled the effort to help offenders change their trajectory. Rehabilitative programs are used to help prisoners gain skills and strengths necessary to succeed in the community after their release. Yet, these high recidivism rates persist. Why do some prisoners not benefit from these programs? Although many researchers have studied the efficacy of programs over the past six decades, less attention has been directed towards access to prison programming. Additionally, studies that explore prisoners' perspectives are not common. This researcher sought to understand programming access and utilization through the prisoner's lens. This phenomenological, qualitative study explored 49 male prisoners' perspectives. The findings suggest the prison's operational structure impeded program access and the study's participants who experienced blocked access were negatively affected, not receiving needed rehabilitative programming and, separately, suffering from the act of disenfranchisement from services.

Keywords: phenomenology, reflexive thematic analysis, class, stratification, justice, program participation, inmate

Although the number of state and federal prisoners in the United States has declined almost 9% since its recent peak in 2008, the count of approximately 1.5 million prisoners (Carson, 2020) remains problematic. The number of persons held in local, state, and federal facilities in the United States at the end of 2016 was the highest among the 233 nations of which the Institute for Criminal Policy Research reported (2018). Additionally, recidivism rates are high. For example, one study of state prisoners found “[a]n estimated 68% of released prisoners were arrested within 3 years, 79% within 6 years, and 83% within 9 years” (Alper et al., 2018, p. 1). These figures concern criminologists, practitioners, and government agents tasked to reduce crime.

As with persons involved in other stages of the criminal justice system (e.g., police encounter, arrest, prosecution, etc.), prisoners are disproportionately from disadvantaged groups. The disparity is evident in several areas: economic/employment status (Looney, 2018), vocational classification (Uggen, 1999), educational attainment (Harlow, 2003; Irwin & Austin, 1997), and racial and ethnic classification (Carson, 2020). Many researchers have discussed connections among social class, class creation, laws, and the criminal justice system from a conflict-theory perspective (e.g., Chambliss, 2001; Crutchfield, 2015; Hagan & Shedd, 2005; Petersilia & Turner, 1987; Quinney, 1977; Sellin, 1935; Turk, 1964; Vold, 1958; Wilson, 1996).

The government's role regarding disparity can be one that seeks to provide paths for upward mobility, one that is indifferent, or one that perpetuates disadvantage. The prison's role is especially important because rehabilitative prison programs, the process of which often

includes upward social mobility, are the primary tools purported to help prisoners change their life trajectories. Yet, the government's obligation, commitment, and ability to provide this remedy is unclear; for instance, in an op-ed regarding prisoner rehabilitation resources and general treatment, Murad (2017) asked, "To what is a prisoner entitled?" (p. 1).

For the past several decades, because challenges encountered during the transition from prison to the community and thereafter have significant impact upon post-release success, efforts have focused on reentry—preparing inmates for reintegration (Petersilia, 2004; Travis, 2000; Travis et al., 2001). Areas under this reentry umbrella include employment, education, mental health, cognitive behavior, life skills, substance abuse, housing, and family dynamics (Visher et al., 2010).

The Federal Bureau of Prisons (U. S. Department of Justice, n.d.) asserted that "release preparation begins the first day of incarceration..." (para. 1). Because many prison-based programs have some effect upon the offender, it is important that practitioners and policymakers understand how to maximize the positive effects and minimize negative effects. Prisoners, too, are concerned about programming benefits. In 2018, Jailhouse Lawyers Speak led a nationwide prisoner strike as part of a "prison resistance movement..." to promote change in the prison structure and overall criminal justice system (Ware, 2018, para. 71). Their demands included several programming matters—work, education, and rehabilitative services (Sawari & Ware, 2018).

For decades, professional stakeholders have sought to identify and hone the best evidence-based programs for offenders. However, the prisoner's insight and voice, representing those who directly experience the "rehabilitative" process, is largely missing in research that guides the process determining the delivery and types of programs that can provide opportunities for upward mobility and provide an enduring exit from disadvantage and the carceral system. This paper addresses one portion of these programming issues: What is the nature of prisoners' desires for and participation in rehabilitative programming, through the prisoners' lens? A phenomenological approach and reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) were used to flesh out the participants' perspectives without the limitations typically present in quantitative methods, such as limited choices of responses. The participants revealed ways in which prison programming underutilization occurs and the resultant defeating effects they experienced. This paper illustrates the logistics of prison operations can function as a gatekeeper that determines which prisoners receive opportunities for upward social mobility and which do not. Thus, in addition to simply serving as an outcome component of the inequitable criminal justice system, the prison organization also creates internal class stratification among prisoners, blocking access for some to a means of escape from the lowest social stratum. This paper aids in understanding how social institutions can inadvertently create inequity, even undermining their purpose. The remainder of this paper contains a literature review regarding prison programming, a methodology section, a research findings section, and a discussion. The literature review was partially compiled prior to designing the study and partially following analysis.

Literature Review

How Does Work Affect Crime?

Applicable Criminological Theory

Criminological literature has identified mechanisms that, at least partially, explain links between work and criminality; these theories and research have suggested negative elements associated with work (unemployment, instability, strain, social disorganization, and anomie;

Agnew, 1992, 2001; Bursik, 1988; Durkheim, 1984; Lockwood et al., 2016; Merton, 1938; Shaw & McKay, 1969; Wilson, 1996) can contribute to criminality, whereas positive work elements (opportunities, resources, responsibilities, and social bonds; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson & Laub, 1993) can be protective and thereby reduce criminality (Modestino, 2019; Uggen, 1999; Wadsworth, 2006; Wilson, 1996). Thus, work may be an avenue to change criminality.

Type of Work, Opportunity, and the Labor Market

The “high-tech” industry’s bifurcated labor market, consisting of the experts and non-experts, has offered little opportunity for unskilled non-experts to accrue human capital, acquire credentials that are limited to higher education, and realize upward mobility (Burris, 1993). Crutchfield (1989) asserted “that many of the new jobs in the service sector and in ‘high-tech’ industries have characteristics of secondary sector work. These positions may provide employment for some, but ... they may leave many without the bonds and linkages that inhibit criminal behavior” (p. 507). Also, the labor market has become more ad hoc and temporary (Smith, 2001); unstable work has disproportionately impacted those with less than a high school education and more of those who are Hispanic (U.S. Department of Labor, 2018). It is easy to surmise that offenders, part of the disadvantaged class, have had insufficient quality work opportunities.

Meaningful Work as a Protective Factor

Given the nature of labor market stratification and theories connecting strain, social bonds, social control, and employment variables, researchers have expected to find links between unemployment and crime. While studies on prison work and vocational programs (Bossler, 2004; Evans & Koenig, 2011; LaVigne et al., 2007; MacKenzie, 2006; Saylor & Gaes, 1992; Uggen, 1999; Visher & Kachnowski, 2007) have found these programs can increase post-release employment and reduce recidivism, the strength of the magnitudes vary and sometimes are not especially compelling.

To address the inconsistent and modest findings regarding employment status and crime, some have explored the meaning of work and its social context. Uggen (1999) challenged the usefulness of measuring employment versus unemployment in assessing the impact on crime. He argued the quality of work and its role regarding social position is more relevant to assessing the effect of work upon recidivism. He concluded job quality matters, finding that “job quality effects on crime are not limited to economic or utilitarian criminal activity and the mechanism linking job quality and crime is not exclusively economic” (Uggen, 1999, p. 144).

Much research has examined work experiences related to rewards. Job rewards can be viewed as extrinsic or intrinsic (Shapiro, 1977; Wakefield et al., 1987). Extrinsic rewards are tangible rewards such as wages, and intrinsic rewards are those such as “self-expression and individual accomplishment” (Shapiro, 1977, p. 22). Morin (2008) expanded the model of meaningful work, including the following factors: autonomy, learning and development, moral correctness, positive relationships, recognition, and social purpose. In a similar vein, Wadsworth’s (2006) study measured perspectives of job characteristics. Wadsworth concluded, “Collectively, these findings suggest that the subjective experience of having a good job may deter criminal behavior more effectively than higher wages or job stability” (2006, p. 357). A more recent study of employed parolees found that job satisfaction was correlated with longer periods of post-release success (i.e., not being rearrested; Niebuhr & Orrick, 2020).

Research in this area has also explored the meaning of work and perceptions of self. Uggen, Wakefield, and Western (2005) found that work could be an avenue through which offenders “develop identities as law-abiding citizens” (p. 215). Hagan and McCarthy (1997) suggested that working challenges criminal identities. Burnett and Maruna (2006) framed their interpretation within the “restorative justice movement... characterized by themes of repair, reconciliation and community partnership” and explained “[t]he idea behind this model is that real integration requires more than physical re-entry into the community, but also should involve ‘earning’ one’s place back in the moral community” (Burnett & Maruna, 2006, p. 84); they wrote, “The goal of strengths work is to provide opportunities for such individuals to develop pro-social self-concepts and identity, generally in the form of rewarding work that is helpful to others (the so-called ‘helper principle’)” (Burnett & Maruna, 2006, p. 84). Crediting Toch (2000), Burnett and Maruna articulated potential outcomes: “The alleged benefits of assuming the role of helper, for offenders, include a sense of accomplishment, grounded increments in self-esteem, meaningful purposiveness and a cognitive restructuring towards responsibility” (2006, pp. 84-85). Similarly, the research project from which this present study emanated demonstrated that inmates perceived certain prison work (e.g., forestry/wildland firefighting and furniture making) as more meaningful than others in multiple respects—beneficial to community, skill building, challenging, pride in work activity or product, requiring discipline, and involving teamwork; additionally, the more meaningful work seemed to affect identity (Edwards, 2014).

How Do In-Prison Education and Vocational Education Affect Recidivism?

While some research has clearly indicated that prison-based educational programs reduce recidivism (Aos et al., 2006; Ellison et al., 2017), other research has yielded mixed findings depending on the type of educational program (Anderson, 1995; Duwe & Clark, 2014; Jensen & Reed, 2006; Steurer & Smith, 2003; Wilson et al., 2000). Gaes (2008) argued although many studies have drawn varied conclusions, overall, research suggests correctional education is “one of the most productive and important reentry services” (p. 27). Duwe and Clark (2014) noted that approximately 38% (3,582) of their sample (9,394 state prisoners) did not have a high school diploma or GED at the time they were incarcerated; however, approximately 34% (1,212) of those had earned a high school diploma or GED by the time they were released. Thus, 25% (2,370) of all these inmates were without a high school diploma or GED at the time of their release, illustrating the importance of correctional education.

In their meta-analysis regarding in-prison vocational and work programs, Wilson et al. (2000) found that vocational programs were correlated with reduced recidivism rates (11%; as cited in MacKenzie, 2006). They also found that some work programs indicated reduced recidivism, but less than the vocational program effect. MacKenzie also posited, “[V]ocational training and other work programs increase employment opportunities, and this reduces future criminal activities” (2006, p. 94). MacKenzie wrote, “There is sufficient evidence at this point in time to conclude that vocational education programs are effective in reducing recidivism” (2006, p. 101).

Literature Summary

Criminological theories have asserted different aspects of work can be criminogenic or protective. Access to work for disadvantaged populations, including offenders, has been limited by the labor-market structure. Fortunately, research has suggested that certain types of work, even if they do not fit within the primary sector of the labor market, may provide a unique protective benefit—identity capital (see Côté & Levine, 2002). Work, vocational, and

educational programs may, to varying degrees, be rehabilitative, provide protective factors, and reduce recidivism. Effective programs likely include those that raise the educational level, “develop pro-social self-concepts and identity...” (Burnett & Maruna, 2006, p. 84), and involve “quality work.”

The reviewed literature provides a useful context in which to consider the present study’s findings. This paper addresses organizational barriers to access programming and highlights the inmates’ perceptions of such barriers.

Self-of-the-Researcher

This study arose from my interest in two fields, criminology and the sociology of work. Through my experiences, academic study, and previous work in criminal justice (juvenile probation officer, employment case worker for adult parolees, and volunteer mentor for parolees), I had two especially pertinent preconceptions as I began this research: Financially adequate and stable employment is essential for offenders to change their trajectory; and in-prison work has not assisted offenders in obtaining adequate work post-release. Thus, I entered the research process believing that the nature and role of prison work needed to be better understood.

I did not foresee that I would encounter significant surprises within the data or experience a change in my self-ascribed responsibilities as a researcher. First, I discovered the nature of prison work programs was more complex than I expected and included issues also pertinent to other programming; one of these discoveries warranted a separate analysis, which prompted this paper. Second, while digesting the participants’ experiences and struggles, my sense of purpose changed—from conducting research for its own sake to providing an outlet for the participants’ voices and fostering change to help others. Thus, I developed an unexpected sense of obligation.

Methods

Research Questions and Approach

The broader study from which this analysis arose examined male prisoners’ work experiences prior to, during, and after their incarceration. The study closely examined the meaning of work from the prisoners’ perspectives. However, stemming from an interview question simply intended to flush out any self-selection bias regarding involvement in prison work programs, another significant issue emerged—impeded access to prison programming that included educational, therapeutic, vocational, and work. This issue should interest social scientists who, when using non-experimental design, are, generally, unable to isolate any impact from participants’ self-selection into any particular activity. Thus, understanding the nature of selection is relevant, especially when examining engagement in rehabilitative programs. The following research question captures the current study: Through prisoners’ vantage points, what is the nature of prisoners’ desires for and participation in rehabilitative programming? The exploratory aspect of examining the experiential nature of a human phenomenon fits an inductive, qualitative strategy. This study was conducted from a phenomenological approach to explore “subjects’ experiences and how subjects make sense of them” (Babbie, 1999, p. 259), seeking to “know” through understanding lived experiences and the related meanings and taking into consideration that the researcher also becomes part subject in knowledge production through involvement in the study’s design, data collection, and analysis via interpretation (Smith et al., 2009).

Participants

The initial phase of the research took place at Wespen,¹ a minimum and medium security prison² in the western United States. This site was chosen because it had diverse inmate work programs: agriculture, forestry/wildland firefighting, furniture manufacturing, offsite work, and onsite operations work. The research protocols were university-IRB approved.³

The participants (N=49) were selected using both purposive and random sampling. An administrator provided the researcher with a list of the correctional ID numbers, current work assignments, and expected release dates for all inmates who would be released within three months. The researcher divided these inmates by work assignment and attempted to choose 12 participants from each work category. For those categories that had less than 12 inmates, all were chosen as potential participants. For those categories that had more than 12 inmates, potential participants were chosen randomly. A meeting/interview schedule was planned. Prior to visiting each week, the researcher provided the administrator a list of inmates to meet. Occasionally, when a potential recruit was unavailable to meet, to maintain recruiting, the researcher chose another inmate from the list; the researcher tracked the work areas of the alternate recruits in effort to balance the final distribution across work areas. Note the pool of potential participants included all inmates fitting within the release timeframe because the facility required all able residents to work. The participants' demographic characteristics were similar to one or more of the following inmate groups: all Wespen inmates, all state inmates, and state and federal inmates nationwide (Department of Corrections [DOC], 2007; DOC, 2008; Wespen, 2008; West et al., 2010; Western, 2008); however, there were also several differences.⁴

Data Collection

The participants were initially interviewed at Wespen immediately following their election to participate in the study. These approximately hour-long, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews took place in an unused office; the interviews included both closed-ended and open-ended questions regarding demographics, pre-Wespen work experiences, Wespen programming experiences, aspirations, peers, family, neighborhood characteristics of where they resided pre-Wespen, and post-release employment plans. For this research, programming was defined as any structured prisoner activity that required permission for participation; each prisoner had an assigned case manager who planned this programming. The following interview questions were particularly relevant to this analysis concerning program participation: What programs are you participating in (e.g., education, therapy groups, vocational, work, etc.)? Why did you choose these?

¹ To maintain participants' confidential identities, citations and bibliographical references for the State's DOC literature and website cannot be complete.

² Although, at the time of the initial interviews, these inmate participants were classified in the State's lowest two risk-levels, most had served part of their sentences at other facilities when they were classified at a higher risk-level.

³ The Office of the Institutional Review Board, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, New Mexico, United States (IRB Protocol #08202).

⁴ Demographics included age, race/ethnicity, current offense, length of incarceration, and education. The participants' average age was four years older than inmates nation-wide (Wespen, 2008; Western, 2008); the participants were more likely than inmates nation-wide to be Hispanic/Latino (61%) or Native American (14%) and less likely to be White-non-Hispanic (16%) or Black (8%; Wespen, 2008; West et al., 2010); the participants' average length of incarceration (23.3 months) approximated the 2008 national average (23.5 months; Western, 2008) but was greater than the State's average (18.5 months; DOC, 2007); and the participants' current offenses were more likely to be drug-related and DUI. However, many of the participants' criminal histories included varied types of offenses.

Although these questions were not intended to yield qualitative data, and the last was designed only to gather self-selection data for the initial study, rich perspectives were sometimes offered. When the researcher encountered responses that might lead to more in-depth understanding, she dug deeper (Smith et al., 2009), asking additional questions such as “what did you think about that” or “why do you think that happened?” The researcher recorded in writing the participants’ responses and noted other impressions, such as the participants’ emotional affects. The recorded responses included direct quotes that seemed particularly meaningful, but, without shorthand skills, the researcher did not record every word the participants uttered. To protect the participants, these interviews were not audio recorded because any items could have been confiscated by prison officials.

At three months and six months post-release, approximately hour-long follow-up interviews⁵ were conducted; telephone interviews were used to be convenient for the participants, a population that often experiences transportation difficulties, and, therefore, increased the likelihood of obtaining these interviews. These interviews provided insight to the participants’ post-release successes or failures.

Another form of data was public records. In the state where Wespen was located, the department of corrections operated an inmate locator database that was accessible to the public. For those participants whose outcomes were unknown, due to failure to contact or to successfully arrange an interview, these records were searched at three months and six months post-release to determine if the participants had been reincarcerated after their release from Wespen.

The last form of data was field notes (Babbie, 1999). After leaving Wespen each of the interview days, the researcher spent approximately 60-90 minutes recording her impressions and personal experiences. These included noting any experiences that would provide insight into the participants’ daily prison life, such as lockdowns and being escorted through restricted areas.

Analysis

The hand-written interview records were transcribed into digital documents, which were then imported into NVivo software to aid coding, sorting, and record-keeping. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020) was used to explore the data and derive meaning. The following stages of analysis were conducted recursively. After poring over the transcripts, immersing herself in the participants’ stories, reviewing field notes, and noting general impressions, the researcher used “systemic data coding” to identify topics and initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2020, p. 4). After reflecting on the initial codes, noting where they converged and diverged, the researcher generated themes. After themes were analyzed and refined, the themes were then explored in light of the participants’ broad stories (semantic data) and the researcher’s impressions of deeper meaning gleaned from the participants’ storytelling (latent data; Braun & Clarke, 2020). Through this process, the researcher generated higher-level themes (latent themes) to capture these interpretations of meaning. Next, the researcher considered possible links between the latent themes, the participants’ broader stories of success or failure such as reincarceration, and theoretical concepts. To address rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis, the researcher used constant comparison of themes across participants and kept notes of the analytical process.

The following is an example of analysis concerning topics, initial codes, semantic themes, and latent themes:

⁵ Follow-up information was obtained for 37 (76%) of the participants. Twenty-eight (57%) of the participants participated in one or both follow-up interviews. Public records showed that 10 participants were reincarcerated in prison within six months of their release.

Participant statement: “I’d go to forestry if I was here longer...[They] probably feel sorry for us.”

Topic: No Choice

Initial code: Too little time

Refined semantic theme (clustered with other participants’ similar responses):

Too little time: “Too short”

Latent theme: Misfortune: Too little time

Presentation of Findings

The results are presented using composite narratives (Willis, 2019), each combining the stories and experiences of two or more participants, representing the group perspective orientation of this study. Pseudonyms are used in the narratives to protect the participants’ confidentiality. The composites were carefully constructed with attention to the integrity of the narrative: All parts of each narrative were gleaned from the participants situated in that thematic area; and the narrative was written so as not to overstate or understate the participants’ experiences. Several areas are addressed in the narratives: The composite participant’s criminal history and background give context to the participant’s challenges and needs for rehabilitative programming; the participant’s residence across facilities, participation in programs, and perspectives concerning the programming experience are central to the phenomenological approach and reflexive thematic analysis.

Two demographical items were included in the narratives to convey the humanness of the study participant: The participants’ ages in any given composite were rounded to the nearest age ending in a “0” or “5,” after which the researcher randomly chose one; achieved educational level was randomly chosen from among those of the participants involved in a composite, with the exception of those necessary to fit particular narratives; race/ethnicity was not determined for any composite (see Footnote 4).

Composite narratives are presented for each latent theme. However, the first theme includes three composites to illustrate the phenomenon across three different program areas. The last narrative in the paper is a reference composite that provides a contrary experience to that of the participants who were the primary focus. This composite aids in understanding the importance and positionality of the phenomena under examination. The section following the findings, the discussion, compares this study’s findings to other pertinent research, links the components of the analysis, and provides a model including the topics, themes, and conceptual locations among existing criminological theory. The discussion also includes policy implications.

Findings and Themes: Offender Program Participation

All the participants (N=49) had difficulties (e.g., substance abuse, gang membership, educational deficits, and unstable work histories) that warranted participation in beneficial prison programs. The following portraits show the fit, or lack thereof, between the participants’ needs/desires and program participation, primarily related to system logistics, as well as the impact of disjuncture.

The analyses revealed two topics: Choice Logistical Obstacles and Transience. Choice Logistical Obstacles was comprised of two areas, Choice Granted No Obstacle or No Choice, the latter of which had three latent themes: “Misfortune: Too Little Time”; “Powerless: Go

Where You are Needed”; and “Bottom of the Barrel: Multiple Reasons and Multiple Areas” (see Table 1). The Transience topic was comprised of two areas, Transient Across Zero to Two Settings and Transient Across Three Settings, the latter of which had one latent theme—“Transient Instability: Twisted Off.”

Choice Logistical Obstacles indicated whether a participant had a choice in which programs he participated, including educational, therapeutic, vocational, and work areas. The importance of this topic concerns the intersection of opportunity, choice, and personal agency. The potential impact is most clear when considering the following: All 25 participants whose most recent in-prison job was skilled or semi-skilled chose that position; of the 24 participants whose most recent job was unskilled, 13 had no choice; and empowerment and transformation via quality employment is associated with rehabilitation (Burnett & Maruna, 2006; Uggen, 1999). The second topic, Transience, captured some participants’ short and fluctuating experiences in work and/or residence across time—pre-prison, in-prison, and post-release—that alluded to instability and challenges to success. Each of the following composite narratives blends two or more participants’ stories and responses which illustrate these themes.

Table 1
Topics, latent themes, and participants

Topics and Latent Themes: Participants (N=49)			
Topic: Choice Logistical Obstacles			
Choice Granted No Obstacle (n=29)*	No Choice (n=20)		
	Latent Themes		
	Misfortune: Too Little Time (n=8)	Powerless: Go Where You are Needed (n=8)	
		Other Logistical (n=3)**	Labor Needed (n=5)
Topic: Transience			
Transient Across Zero to Two Settings (n=40)***	Transient Across Three Settings (n=9)		
	Latent Theme		
	Transient Instability: Twisted Off (n=9)		

Notes. * Choice Granted No Obstacle is addressed in this paper only briefly and as an exception to the pattern of primary focus, which was No Choice.

** Other Logistical reasons included work placement due to disciplinary or physical health circumstances in combination with labor need. This theme was rare and is not elaborated upon in this paper.

*** Transience Across Zero to Two Settings is shown for relative comparative purposes but is not of primary focus in this study and was not elaborated upon in this paper.

Misfortune: Too Little Time

Eight (16%) participants reported they were prevented from engaging in or finishing a program at Wespen (educational, vocational, work, etc.) because they did not have enough time left to serve. Many beneficial and desirable programs had minimum required lengths of participation, varying between 6 to 18 months. If an inmate's remaining time on his sentence was less than the minimum required, he could not participate in that program. This "too short" of a time-period resulted from one or more processes: short sentence, good time, lump sum award (for program participation), time served in jail, and time served in another prison. The portrayals in this thematic section, Too Little Time, demonstrate that the obstacle affected the participants in several program areas—work, comprehensive reentry planning, and education—and interfered with both their rehabilitative needs and their desired programming. Almost half of these men who were "too short" were reincarcerated within six months of their release from Wespen.

Work

This narrative illustrates that inmates whose history indicated the need for rehabilitative jobs but were excluded from participating in meaningful work programs because they had too little time perceived the experience as a lost opportunity. In this example, Daren, who only had three months left on his sentence, desired to work in forestry, a 10-month long program that was rehabilitative by providing a skill and through transforming identity (Edwards, 2014). Restricted to a less desirable position, he conveyed his perception of loss and misfortune through imagining others' critical perceptions.

Daren (40-year-old, <HS) was serving time for drug possession. In the past, he had also been convicted of burglary. He attributed his legal problems to "drugs—addiction to cocaine." His substance abuse had interfered with his floor installation job: "I didn't show up a few times because I didn't sleep all night—on drugs—and they let me go. I was pretty pissed off at myself."

After he was fired, he sold cocaine and other drugs for several years and engaged in other criminal activities—culminating in the current charge. He was placed in a drug-court program and got a job in construction but still sold drugs to supplement his earnings. Failing to comply with drug court requirements, Daren was arrested. He spent months in jail before he was transferred to Wespen where he served another three months until parole.

At Wespen, he worked in the kitchen, which he indicated was less than desirable compared to other inmates' jobs. He stated, "I don't think it's important" and, with a defeated emotional affect, the other inmates "probably feel sorry for us." He would have preferred a more meaningful work program in prison: "I'd go to forestry if I was here longer."⁶ Just shy of three months after his release from Wespen, Daren was reincarcerated for absconding from parole supervision.

Comprehensive Reentry Planning

The following portrait shares several characteristics with Daren's story. Albert had numerous problems that would justify meaningful program participation, yet his opportunities

⁶ To participate in the forestry program, Wespen required that inmates have significant time remaining on their sentences. This program appeared to have remarkable rehabilitative qualities; participants seemed to have reconstructed their identities around mainstream values—helping the community, serving a meaningful purpose, and being part of a team. The participants who worked in forestry had the lowest recidivism rate compared to those who worked in other types of prison jobs.

were limited due to his short residence at Wespen. Albert had expressed his desire to be a stable force for his family. He was full of ideas for his future, but he was ill-prepared for reentry without a solid plan.

Albert (35-year-old, GED) had an unstable life history. He grew up with little supervision in an impoverished neighborhood, which he described as “ghettoish,” with much drug abuse and unemployment, did not complete high school, was a gang member, had a history of substance abuse, and had sporadic, low-skilled employment. As a juvenile, he committed attempted murder. His adult convictions included drug trafficking and a stolen vehicle. He had been imprisoned two times, including this sentence for burglary.

For this six-year sentence, after spending 13 months in jail, he served 38 months across five separate facilities, the last six months of which he spent at Wespen. Each transfer to a different facility also meant a change in programming. At Wespen, Albert had not been able to continue in a program which he had begun in the facility where he had last resided. The program, SPiRE (Specific Planning in Reentry), was the State’s highly regarded comprehensive program designed to help inmates plan for stability through developing life-skills, education, vocational training, and employment planning.⁷ Because the program only began every six months and lasted for one year, he said there was “not enough time” for him to re-enroll and continue the program at Wespen.

Expressing his frustration and lack of confidence, he explained that he had tried to contact a career services organization “about three times and never heard back.” He expected that finding a job was “probably going to be hard,” but he was “gonna give it a shot.” Upon his release from prison, his vague plan was to “drive a taxi” and “learn how to operate computers.” He said his goal was “to be able to support my family.” Within three months of his release from Wespen, Albert was reincarcerated for a parole violation.

Education

Similar to the stories above, Dominic’s experience highlights the link between too little time and limited opportunities. In this illustration, the participant desired to improve his educational level but was unable to do so in the short time-period available. Consequently, he was unsuccessful in achieving the broad transformation that he had sought.

Dominic (30-year-old, <HS) reported that he first had legal trouble when he was 12 years old and was caught drinking alcohol. His history included DUI, evading an officer, and drug possession. This was his first prison sentence. He was ordered to serve three years for aggravated battery. After accounting for time served in county jail, earned good time, and a lump sum award, Dominic served 19 months in prison. Wespen, where he stayed for seven months, was the third facility in which he resided.

Dominic explained that he always had a “problem learning” and had become especially self-conscious about his educational deficit soon after he arrived at Wespen, when his work supervisor told him that he was “an illiterate mother f*cker” and had him moved to a different job. This incident prompted Dominic to enroll in the GED program. He stated, “[I] want to prove to everybody that I’m better than they think I am.” However, with little time left to complete his studies, Dominic was unable to obtain his GED. After he was released from prison, Dominic reported that he was working for a landscaper but was earning low wages. His inadequate education had yielded inadequate earnings and impacted his 12-year-old child. He stated with desperation, “I’m thinking about putting my daughter out there so she can earn her own money.”

⁷ The recidivism rate for inmates who complete SPiRE is almost 20% less than the State’s average (DOC, 2008).

Powerless: Go Where You are Needed

Five (10%) participants indicated they were frustrated because, with little or no choice, they were assigned undesirable jobs at Wespen. They reported that they were told either the desired positions were not available or their labor was needed in specific positions due to operational needs. In these cases, the job placements were in unskilled areas lacking vocational or other meaningful, rehabilitative usefulness. Two of these men were reincarcerated within six months of their release.

The following depiction offers a glimpse into the experiences of the inmates who either had no choice or very little choice in their job placements. In this portrayal, Jack experienced both situations. His story, especially his descriptions of his jobs and the processes of being placed in those positions, helps to illustrate the participants' experienced lack of personal agency and the sense of defeat related to both the loss of opportunity and the loss of personal power.

Jack (45-year-old, HS) had been to prison three times between the federal prison system and another state system; his criminal history included grand larceny, manufacturing and distributing methamphetamine, and felon in possession of a firearm. He first encountered the justice system at age 13 for possession of a firearm. He explained he was drawn to committing crime because his "brothers were into criminal activities" and it was "much easier to make money" through crime. Regarding this incarceration, Jack was sentenced to 30 months in prison followed by five years of probation for larceny and criminal damage to property, including a sentence enhancement as a habitual offender. Nine months was credited for his time in county jail. He served the other 21 months in three facilities.

At the first facility where he was housed, the work opportunities were limited. He expressed he was powerless and stated, "They put me in the kitchen. We had no choice...I've done kitchen in the fourth facility now." He was happy to have had more meaningful options at the second facility where he worked in a vocational program building furniture. He described it as a positive experience and stated he "learned a lot." After a few months of good behavior, he was rewarded by being transferred to Wespen, a facility which is less restrictive.

When Jack transferred facilities, he had to choose between working in the kitchen and waxing floors—the jobs that needed to be filled. Compared to the few months of furniture building that he had enjoyed, he was disappointed to have to choose between two low-skilled positions. Considering the weariness of kitchen work, he chose the floor waxing job. Still, it was clear that he did not perceive much post-prison usefulness from either. He stated, as if equally exhausted and disgusted by the thought, "I guess I could go work as a custodian; I find it to be very simple."

After his release from Wespen, Jack worked part-time in housekeeping at a hospital while hoping to find a better paying full-time job. He was reincarcerated for a robbery within four months of being paroled.

"Bottom of the Barrel": Multiple Reasons and Multiple Areas

Four (8%) participants were denied an opportunity for more than one reason (time constraints, limited openings, and operational need), and/or they were denied participation in more than one area of programming (work, vocational, educational, etc.). In a few of these cases, the disjuncture between the desire for programming and the unrealized opportunities appeared to aggravate the participants' emotional difficulties and confirm their damaged sense of self. One of these four participants was reincarcerated within six months of his release.

This participant was the epitome of readiness for change, as he expressed both the desire for meaningful programs and a contrite disposition. Of the latter, he stated, "I am ashamed to

be here.” However, his limited options rendered his experience at Wespen less productive than necessary.

Javier (30-year-old, GED) was first convicted at age 20 for aggravated assault. Nine years later, he was sentenced to three years in prison for burglary. Following one year in jail, which counted towards time served, he spent an additional year in the penitentiary system—one month at the diagnostic center, seven months at another facility, and four months at Wespen.

Javier participated in two short-term substance abuse and cognitive-change programs, which he reported as somewhat useful but not optimum because they were “large classes.” He explained that he chose the programs to address his “emotional and alcohol problems” and he “would have liked to [have] spent more time in programs,” such as the more in-depth therapeutic community program at Wespen; however, he did not have the required minimum time left on his sentence to participate. His limited time also prevented him from participating in Wespen’s forestry program or in the vocational telecommunications program, both in which he was interested: “They were too full, and I was too short.”

Instead, Javier, who had been employed in the service industry prior to his imprisonment, worked in five different unskilled jobs between the two facilities—two clerk positions, a kitchen position, and two janitorial positions—a few of which he was “placed in” with no choice and which he characterized as “meaningless work.” He further described his work as “bottom of the barrel,” conveying that he had only received second-class dregs.

Transient Instability: “Twisted Off”

Nine participants (18%) reported exceptionally frequent changes in residence or work across all the stages that the study covered—pre-prison, in-prison, and post-release. An average of one or more changes per year in employment pre-prison or post-release was classified as transient; three or more job positions at Wespen or residence in more than three facilities during the incarceration was classified as in-prison transience. Unsurprisingly, many of these participants were also discussed above due to their difficulty participating in programs. In these cases, the participants had no opportunity in prison to break the transient cycle. For several of these participants, ongoing transience and its associated turmoil coincided with poor outcomes. Five (56%) of these men were reincarcerated within six months.

This narrative describes some of the participants’ recurring battles with instability. Although Brad had completed some college courses, he could not overcome his pattern of quitting his responsibilities. Aware of this problem, Brad spoke of his tendency to “job hop.” In various forms, his transience was displayed prior to this incarceration, in-prison, and after his release.

Brad (30-year-old, some college) had spent most of his life in trouble. His first arrest occurred at age 14 when he shoplifted. He attributed his problems to emotional difficulties. He began smoking marijuana at an early age and progressed to frequent methamphetamine use. His history included burglary, drug possession, unlawful taking of a motor vehicle, and embezzlement. Brad had previously been imprisoned for one year. This time he was sentenced to several years in prison for disposing of stolen property.

His non-prison employment history was varied and generally unskilled, such as auto detailer and fast-food server. He reported that he worked an average of seven months each year. His jobs typically were “boring,” “too hard,” or in which it was “hard to keep focused.” He left his last job, a labor-intensive “roughneck” at an oil rig, because he “had been high and was too tired to go to work.”

During this 22-month incarceration of his 42-month sentence, reduced by almost half due to good-time and lump sum awards, he resided in three different prisons and moved among

six different prison jobs—the shortest of which was six weeks and the longest of which was eight months. One month after he was released from Wespen, Brad enrolled in community college and was hired at a call center. Although he was doing well, he soon “twisted off” (a common phrase in the oil rig industry for a person who resigns) both his classes and his job. He then acquired a seasonal, part-time position at a clothing store. Within four months of his release, Brad had quit two jobs, quit attending classes, committed a burglary, absconded from parole, and been sent back to prison.

“Your Work Shows What You’re About”: Exceptions to the Pattern

Contrary to the participants and themes which were described in the above sections, there were three types of exceptions: those who experienced substantial program participation and did poorly post-release, those who experienced poor program participation yet did well post-release, and those who experienced substantial program participation and did well post-release. The following portrayal illustrates the last of these exceptions and reveals the contrast between those who experienced a disjuncture between their needs/desires and programming opportunities and those who were able to engage in meaningful prison programs.

Major (35-year-old, HS) participated in meaningful programs and did very well post-release, although he had an unstable background. His criminal history was fairly extensive with five separate convictions, mostly for property crimes. His past non-prison employment was intermittent, working approximately six months per year, and was last terminated when he did not report to work one day due to substance abuse.

His activities at Wespen included taking a cognitive-change class and various jobs. Most of his prison jobs were unskilled labor, such as janitorial and simple maintenance. However, the last of his jobs was on the forestry crew. Major described the experience positively: Of his crewmembers, he pointed out the social bonds, “We’re one team. We all stick together”; and of the work experience, he stated, “Your work shows what you’re about.”

After his release, Major reported that he was doing well, was working in tree-cutting services, and was also refurbishing furniture. Moreover, he had found another purpose. He and another ex-offender started a program designed to help offenders in jails process their feelings. Every weekend, he and his partner visited the local jail to help others change their lives for the better. Major proudly reported that he had also changed other behaviors: “[I] changed my friends completely,” and “I haven’t touched alcohol or drugs.” It appeared that Major’s forestry experience had transformed his life. His experiences in and after prison were markedly different from the experiences of those who were denied meaningful programming opportunities.

Discussion

The narratives depicted the participants’ pre-Wespen criminogenic conditions, such as low human capital (i.e., unskilled work, sporadic work, and low educational levels), financial strain manifested through property crime and drug trafficking, and substance abuse. How can prison processes address offenders’ rehabilitative needs and prepare them for post-release challenges? Despite mixed findings across studies, some research has shown that educational, therapeutic, vocational, and work programs in prisons are beneficial, indicated by higher post-release employment rates, increased human capital, improved decision-making, better cognitive function, pro-social thinking, and lower reincarceration rates (Brazzell et al., 2009; Ellison et al., 2017; LaVigne et al., 2007; Visher & Kachnowski, 2007; Visher et al., 2010). This present study corresponds with such research, as post-release reincarceration rates were lower for participants who were able to engage in meaningful programming.

This study reveals obstacles to effective prison programming which could otherwise address the participants' needs. The dynamic underlying one of these themes, transient instability, was not only an obstacle to rehabilitative resources but may also foster criminal behavior. Nine (18%) participants experienced transience in housing, employment, or both during all three of the study stages—pre-prison, in-prison, and post-release. More than twice that many experienced at least transient conditions in-prison. Transient employment and residence are antithetical to the stability associated with desistance from criminal behavior (Sampson & Laub, 1993; Uggen, 1999). Congruent with this assertion, this study revealed many (56%) of those participants who experienced transience across three settings were reincarcerated within six months. Such instability is reminiscent of social disorganization theory (Bursik, 1988) and suggests that the criminal justice community consider whether transience in the prison produces or exacerbates criminogenic conditions, such as more normlessness, more strain, fewer social bonds, and less social control. Brad's case demonstrated this dynamic, ending with an unsuccessful reentry and his third reincarceration.

Another case illustrated a quite different dynamic influenced by stable and prosocial experiences in prison. Major led an unstable life prior to his incarceration at Wespen. Like Brad, he worked intermittently in unskilled, low-paid jobs, had a substance abuse problem, and had multiple convictions. Unlike Brad, however, Major worked in the forestry program, which was associated with positive inmate responses, including perceptions of meaningful work benefitting the community, social bonding, personal agency, pride, and, most notably, identity transformation (Edwards, 2014). Major's post-prison success, including starting a rehabilitative program for other offenders, demonstrated the potential for prison programs to increase offenders' identity capital (see Côté & Levine, 2002) and restore the offender through social exchange and the "helper principle" (Burnett & Maruna, 2006, p. 84).

Major's in-prison experience, which addressed his criminogenic needs, and post-prison experience was considerably different than that of the twenty participants who reported obstacles to participating in Wespen's beneficial programs, such as forestry and furniture making, vocational training in computer technology, and SPiRE. Of the 20 participants (40.8%) who reported significant obstacles, six (30%) were reincarcerated within six months. Of the 29 participants (59.2%) who did not experience similar obstacles, four (13.8%) were reincarcerated.

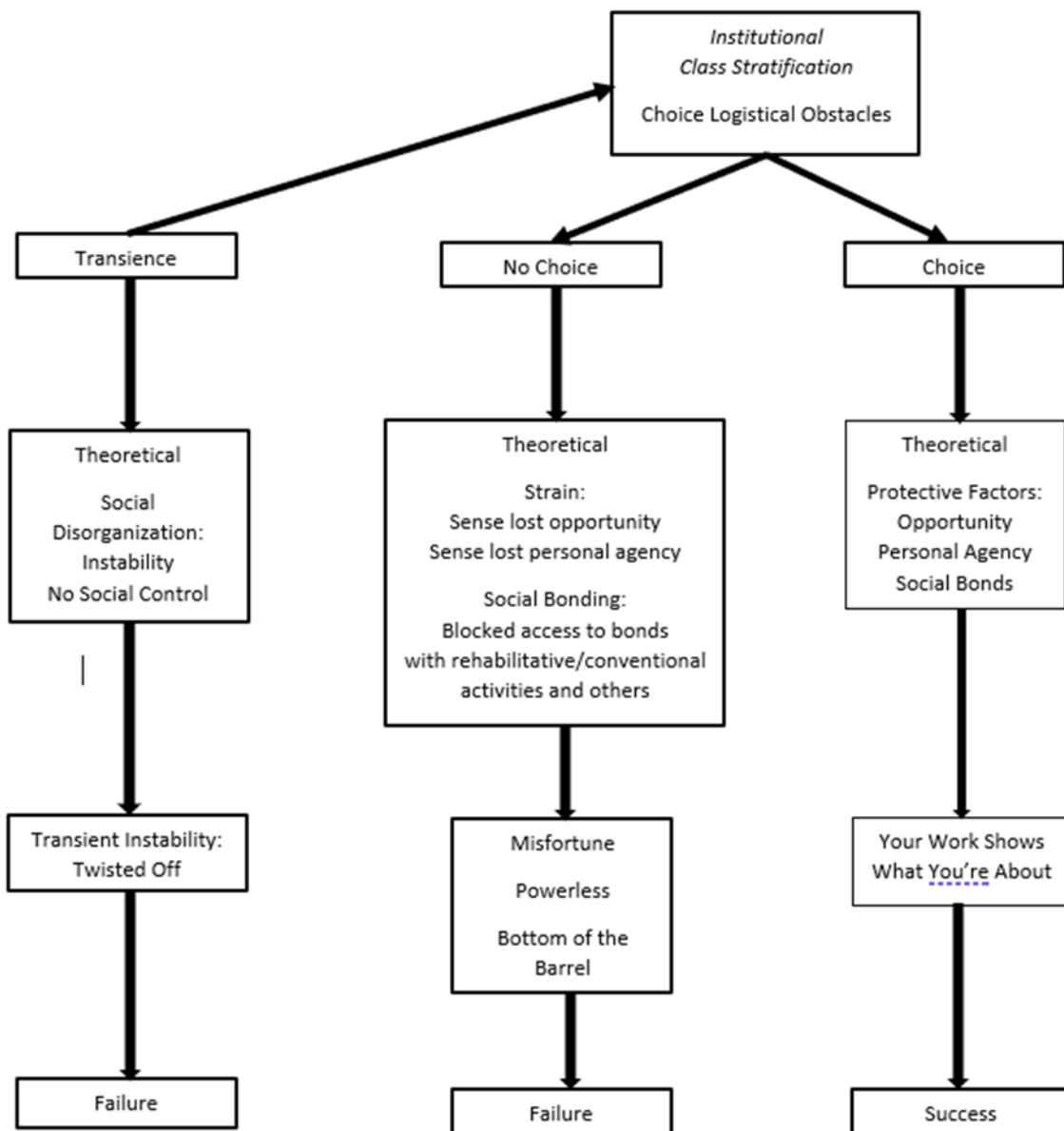
One of the obstacles to program access was being "too short." A large proportion—eight (40%)—of the "subset of participants" who experienced programming obstacles ($n = 20$) reported they did not have enough time remaining to serve at Wespen that would allow them to participate in desirable, meaningful programs. This obstacle was because many of the quality programs, including work programs, had minimum time-to-serve requirements. The contributing logistical factors were short sentences, time spent in jail pending disposition, and movement between facilities related to lowered security-risk. In the latter situation, the reward for good behavior—lowered risk-level—became a barrier to programming. Other research has also identified logistical interference with program access (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008), including, among others, risk-level classification restrictions (Crittenden & Koons-Witt, 2017) and sentence lengths that are shorter than program lengths (Denman & Ochoa, 2015).

The theme "powerless: go where you are needed" was linked to the reliance upon inmate labor to operate the facility. Eight of the participants were either automatically placed in an operations position, such as kitchen work, janitorial, and grounds-keeping or directed to choose between such jobs. Of course, unbeknownst to the inmate, this obstacle to quality work could have been, on occasion, the result of either the inmate being "too short," or the dearth of more beneficial program opportunities. In fact, some of the participants reported they were unable to participate in a program because it was full at the time. This imbalance towards

operations work is not unique to Wespen. Visher and Kachnowski’s (2007) prison study revealed that the majority of the inmates who worked did so in institutional support positions.

How may the lack of meaningful prison work and programming affect inmates? The participants’ responses indicated several important perspectives. They believed certain types of work and certain types of programs could be beneficial and aid in changing their life trajectories. Many of these participants expressed the desire to pursue better lines of work and education inside the prison and upon their release. Many of the 20 participants who were excluded from valued programs indicated they felt cheated or deprived (misfortune), frustrated, and powerless—the antithesis of personal agency. For several participants, there was also a stigma of occupying the lowest rung of the prison job ladder, the “bottom of the barrel.” The impact of this inequity could be significant: “There is growing concern that perceived injustice itself causes criminal behavior” (Hagan & Shedd, 2005, p. 263).

Figure 1
Topics, theoretical location, themes



This analysis suggests there is a secondary sector prison labor market as well as a secondary sector market for other prison programs; additionally, those within the latter sometimes receive no opportunities for educational or therapeutic programming. Thus, blocked access to quality work and other programs not only impedes rehabilitative efforts but also creates a sense of injustice and defeat through the prisoner's cognitive and emotional processing of being denied opportunity. This inequitable arrangement may contribute to a more criminogenic prison system—increasing instability, increasing strain, decreasing personal agency, and reifying the inmate's sense of insurmountable obstacles.

How could prison administration address these logistical and structural elements that create alienated and defeated second-class prisoners? Some states that have experienced these logistical difficulties have taken steps to reorganize program delivery. Some of these strategies have been to limit the scope or length of the programs to fit the structure (e.g., Pennsylvania Department of Corrections, n.d., para. 22). However, it is possible some forms of these adaptive program changes could reduce program efficacy.

Is it time to examine the prison organizational structure, including elements embedded in the security design? It may be useful to consider innovative ways to distribute beneficial program resources more equitably and thoroughly: (1) restructuring the division of labor so that all inmates split time between (a) the mundane or necessary tasks and (b) the rehabilitative and restorative tasks, and (2) designing multipurpose prisons that can accommodate inmates throughout their changes in risk-level and offer stability and program continuity. In addition to illuminating issues in program access, this study calls for a broader examination of whether societal inequity is otherwise recreated in the prison system. This study also provides an example of how social institutions tasked with ameliorating disadvantage may undermine their mission when organizational logistics reproduce, even inadvertently, inequity of the broader societal sphere.

Although this study contributes to the field in two ways—it has added context and the participant's voice to the information available to policy makers, revealing inequity, and it unveiled a surprising factor, transience—there are a few methodological limitations. First, the pool from which the participants were selected was limited to those who would be released from Wexpen within three months from their interview date. As a result, enrolled participants were not distributed evenly across the program areas. However, the uneven groupings were minimized by tracking the participants' classifications as they were recruited, attempting to balance the categories as the enrollment continued. Second, because this analysis emerged from another study, the data collection was not based on a data saturation method, such as enrolling participants and analyzing data in an iterative fashion until saturation. Rather, all available data was analyzed. It was only by chance that after analyzing all 49 participants' data, it seemed saturation had occurred, and no new data would likely have presented. Third, the most regrettable limitation was that participants were not consulted for their feedback and clarification after the thematic coding process.

Although it is not reasonable to claim generalizability due to the relatively small number of participants and the single location, and the reliability of the analyses is subject to a single researcher's interpretations, this writer confidently presents two assertions: It is reasonable to believe, at minimum, the identified obstacles (the semantic themes) to prison programming do exist, as other research has also identified the same or similar obstacles, and it is reasonable to suppose some inmates who have been denied opportunities would perceive such experiences negatively.

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