

Efforts by Offenders to Manage and Overcome Stigma: The Case of Employment

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Abstract

This article explores how released prisoners on parole overcome the stigma of a criminal conviction in their attempts to secure employment. Findings highlight how overcoming the consequences of stigma for finding work requires forms of identity management, and assistance by family and friends that send signals to employers that a former inmate has changed and is a capable worker. The article illustrates that employment provides opportunities for the formation of redemption scripts and a 'replacement-self' through the process of voluntary self-disclosure. We explore these issues through interview data collected from individuals serving a parole order in Queensland, Australia. The article provides insights into the effects of stigma management on offender reintegration.

Keywords: reintegration – parole – stigma – employment – signalling – disclosure – Queensland

Introduction

The stigma of prison time presents offenders with particular challenges in their paths to reintegration because a criminal conviction acts as an institutional marker of a 'spoiled social status' and communicates a message about trustworthiness and potential for criminality (LeBel and Maruna 2012; Pager 2007; Uggen, Manza and Behrens 2004). The stigma of being labelled an 'ex con', released prisoner or parolee limits the opportunities that are seen as essential to the re-entry of offenders, such as securing a job, finding stable accommodation and establishing supportive social networks (Uggen et al 2014). However, individuals with a 'discreditable' social identity — or one that is not immediately apparent to others — often conceal or manage discredited information about themselves (Corrigan 2005; Goffman 1963 O'Brien 2011). Offenders will use stigma management to minimise negative impressions and consequences (Newheiser and Barreto 2014).

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This article investigates a range of stigma management strategies adopted by offenders on supervised parole as they negotiate the job market. We draw on interviews with 50 offenders serving parole orders in Queensland, Australia in order to consider how stigma management affects the parolees' abilities to find work and reconcile their criminal past. Drawing on interview data, we explore offenders' views of anticipated stigma and its consequences, the necessity to conceal a criminal past and parole status from potential employers, as well as the consequences of self-disclosure when work is secured. In line with stigma management research, the article also examines how social networks (for example, family, friends and romantic partners) mitigate the consequences of parolee stigma by helping parolees to construct a more appealing social identity when trying to find work.

Literature review

Offenders face a number of barriers to securing gainful employment following their release from prison or their placement on some type of community supervision order (Festen and Fischer 2002). Even if released offenders can secure a job interview or the job itself, research shows that they face possible rejection or termination when a criminal past is revealed — for example, as a consequence of an employer undertaking a criminal record check or via an offender's own disclosure of his or her record (Lageson, Vuolo and Uggen 2015).

In the literature, 'stigma' is defined as a core aspect of a person's social identity (LeBel 2008). Stigmatised individuals may understand that they possess certain attributes or characteristics that are devalued or shunned due to the connotations they carry in relation to violating particular social standards and norms, with these attributes also eliciting adverse emotional reactions in others (Crocker et al 1998; Newheiser and Barreto 2014). Goffman (1963), the pioneer of stigma research, argued that some personal attributes are so noxious that their bearers are denigrated, devalued and detested by society — that is, they carry a social stigma, which will have important implications for their social inclusion and participation in civil society.

It is important to distinguish between stigma that is 'achieved' and stigma that is 'existential'. The former refers to persons that are discreditable due to particular attributes they possess, and the latter refers to individuals that have very little control or choice over the stigma they carry, for example, race/ethnicity, disability (LeBel 2008). Individuals in the 'achieved' category have the choice to hide their stigmatised status (Goffman 1963). Being imprisoned for a criminal act is an achieved and discreditable form of stigma (LeBel 2008; Pager 2007). Thus, individuals who are former prisoners (discreditable) and are also from a racial minority (discredited) carry double the burden of stigmatisation (Pager 2007).

Evidence indicates that prisoners expect to encounter a great deal of social stigma upon their release, and this anticipated stigma increases their risk of reoffending (LeBel 2012; Winnick and Bodkin 2008). The challenges faced by ex-prisoners in attempting to find work have been highlighted in studies on the attitudes of employers towards hiring ex-offenders, as well as from qualitative interviews with released prisoners (Graffam, Shinkfield and Hardcastle 2008; Harding 2003; Lageson, Vuolo and Uggen 2015; Uggen, Manza and Behrens 2004).

One way that people with concealable stigma can cope with the prospect of social rejection and exclusion is to use what scholars have referred to as 'identity management', which entails deciding when, how, where and to whom potentially stigma-inducing information will be disclosed (Corrigan 2005; Newheiser and Barreto 2014; Ragins 2008).

Research examining the antecedents, specific behaviours and consequences associated with this kind of identity management covers a range of stigmatised groups (Corrigan and Lundin 2001; Jones and King 2013), including prisoners and parolees (Harding 2003; Winnick and Bodkin 2008). Evidence suggests that identity management can have important implications in workplace settings where workers' decisions to either conceal or disclose a stigmatised identity may have serious consequences for the formation of meaningful bonds on the job or, ultimately, for the ability to keep a job (Griffith and Hebl 2002; Jones and King 2013). An improved understanding of parolees' decisions to disclose their status to potential or current employers is important given the strong correlation between employment and desistance from offending (Pager 2007; Visher, Debus-Sherrill and Yahner 2008).

Research indicates that concealment is only one form of identity management that those with stigmatised identities can adopt. Among his sample of parolees, Harding (2003) found three primary stigma management strategies: non-disclosure, conditional disclosure, or full disclosure, with each strategy entailing different tactical choices. For example, one parolee cited in Harding (2003:581–2) who fully disclosed to potential employers reported he only aimed for low positions in a company, where he could first prove his work ethic and commitment before attempting to seek promotion. This parolee also sought to neutralise the stigma of his criminal conviction during a job interview by bombarding the employer with information about his skill, competency and commitment to the job, stating this was to ensure that 'by the end of it [the job interview] they are not thinking about this [his felony conviction] any more' (Harding 2003:582).

These findings by Harding (2003) connect with research that highlights the role of proactive coping strategies in neutralising and contesting the stereotypes and beliefs about stigmatised groups. For example, LeBel (2007, 2009) shows that ex-prisoners can adopt various activities aimed at stigma reduction, such as helping other prisoners or individuals at risk of imprisonment, and advocating on the part of prisoners in order to redeem their reputations, in order to demonstrate a desire and ability to make a valuable contribution to society (LeBel, Richie and Maruna 2015; Maruna and LeBel 2009). What this research illustrates is that stigma management involves actions that challenge the basis of the discredited label that is attached to an individual or group. In other words, individuals may see themselves as quite different from what their label suggests. Also, forms of preventative-telling, such as pre-emptive disclosure (voluntarily self-disclosing before people find out about the criminal past, for instance) are potentially important in allowing individuals to assert a greater sense of mastery (that is, agency) over their stigmatised status (Griffith and Hebl 2002; Jones and King 2013; Ragins 2008).

In our research, we expanded on this body of work on stigma management to contribute additional insights into forms of identity management used by our sample of parolees. We examined the justifications for its adoption in the context of employment and the workplace. One issue we explored is how voluntary self-disclosure (a form of preventative telling) of a criminal past to an employer or colleague — while carrying risks — may provide what Maruna (2012) has described as an opportunity for an offender to share his or her story with others. This can potentially help offenders to 'actively repudiate an alien status' by signalling that they have 'moved on' and 'changed their ways', thus challenging and asserting some level of control over their discredited identities. The commitment to work can be viewed as an additional signal of the ex-offender's repudiation of his or her past lifestyle (Bushway and Apel 2012). Such arguments raise the possibility that self-disclosure in the first instance, followed by the supportive or neutral reactions of others, could promote desistance through a process of bolstering offenders' 'redemption scripts', or fuelling their self-belief that change is possible (Maruna et al 2009). These arguments are particularly

relevant to offender reintegration when considering the role of employment in helping ex-offenders establish the authenticity of their efforts to 'go straight' (Bushway and Apel 2012; Pager 2007).

As indicated above, stigma is not solely managed by individuals. Research on stigma management among people suffering from HIV, for instance, indicates that social networks (friends and family members) help stigmatised groups cope with the exigencies of their discredited social identity (Sanderson 1999). This raises an interesting avenue of investigation relating to the role of social networks in supporting stigma management among ex-prisoners. Given the importance of employment to offender reintegration, it is often necessary that the stigma of a criminal conviction be carefully managed. The close personal associates of ex-prisoners and parolees — intimate partners, family members, relatives and friends — have been identified as particularly important resources in helping them find employment (Berg and Huebner 2011; Visher, Debus and Yahner 2008) and providing the support needed to overcome the social stigma they possess.

The significance of the role of family members and partners in supporting prisoner reintegration is not fully understood (Bale and Mears 2008; Markson et al 2015). In addition, the role of family members in helping offenders overcome obstacles to securing employment is under-researched (Berg and Huebner 2011). One possibility is that offenders' social networks can help to manage stigmatisation issues that can influence employers. We explore this proposition by drawing on the concept of signalling that suggests how offenders provide signals of changes in self-identity and of their readiness to desist (Bushway and Apel 2012). We examine how the social networks of parolees can provide reliable signals that an individual is committed to change and is prepared to be a productive employee. This can help in the formation of more positive social identities that facilitate access to work and job opportunities. Hence the assistance of social ties, or what is often referred to in the literature as 'relational capital', may help mitigate the stigma of a criminal label (Cherney and Fitzgerald 2016).

It is true that the stigma of a criminal conviction can be extremely difficult to transcend, with attitudes towards many stigmatised groups being deeply entrenched in society. However, as argued by Maruna (2014), the 'irreversibility' of such institutional and social stigmatisation should not be assumed. Indeed, Maruna (2001, 2012) has argued that one part of the process of moving away from crime involves organic interactive processes between the ex-offender and third parties that can serve to facilitate reintegration. Preventative telling (that is, forms of voluntary self-disclosure) in the workplace and assistance by others to help manage this process may serve such a function and we explore this possibility through our interview data.

Method

The analysis draws on interview data collected as part of a two-phased project aimed at studying the dynamics of getting and keeping work while on parole. The first phase involved in-depth interviews with a sample of parolees, and the second phase involved analysis of administrative data on offenders on parole over a five-year period. In this article, we rely on the qualitative data from the first phase of the project derived from a total of 50 interviews with adult parolees serving a parole order in the community, and attached to one of five Brisbane (Queensland, Australia) parole offices and one residential supported-parole facility. Interviews occurred over a four-month period in 2013 and participants were recruited through the assistance of designated probation and parole officers employed by

Queensland Corrective Services. Interviews with parolees who were living onsite at the residential supported parole facility were recruited with help from the facility's Assessment and Intake Officer. Participants were offered a small monetary incentive in the form of a A\$20 voucher in recognition of their participation.

The semi-structured interviews allowed parolees to speak in-depth about their experiences related to the search for work, where they had secured work, their perceptions of the role of family and friends and, additionally, internal and external barriers to finding employment. An objective of these interviews was to identify themes that emerged regarding offenders' management of their public image during the reintegration process, including strategies for overcoming stigma, decisions around verbal self-disclosure in the workplace, and the motivations and repercussions of doing so.

The sample comprised 42 men and eight women — which was a slight overrepresentation of women relative to their 10 per cent share of the custodial offender population in 2013 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013). Seven parolees (14 per cent) identified themselves as Indigenous people — an underrepresentation relative to their 31 per cent share of the custodial population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2013). The sample was also skewed in the direction of offenders serving longer board-ordered, rather than shorter court-ordered, parole supervision periods; while the reverse would be true of the supervised offender count in Queensland. Thirty-two (64 per cent) study participants were serving board-ordered parole at the time of the interview, and 18 (36 per cent) were serving court-ordered parole.¹

Eight (16 per cent) participants reported that they were employed at the time of the interview — half (8 per cent) were in casual or part-time work, and half (8 per cent) were in full-time work. All but one of the parolees who held employment at the time of the interview (n=7) were in manual/labouring jobs and were men, and the remaining parolee, a woman, was employed in accounts and administrative work. Only one of the Indigenous parolees was employed at the time of the interview. Among the large majority (84 per cent) of parolees who were unemployed at the time of the interview, all reported they had held at least one job at earlier points in their lives, either during their current parole period or prior to serving their current period on parole.

All parolees in the sample were asked about their current and previous experiences of finding and keeping work. In order to maximise the number of participants to be included in the present study, our approach was to include any who had attempted to find work while they had a criminal record, regardless of whether this occurred in the current period of parole or earlier. This encompassed the total sample of 50 participants. The ability to examine multiple attempts to find and keep work among the sample of parolees made it possible to identify patterns in their experiences.

Each interview was transcribed, coded and analysed in the qualitative software NVivo 10. Initially all interview transcripts were assigned unique attributes relating to gender, parole type, parole order length, Indigenous status, current employment status, and offence history. The interview data was then thematically coded into subcategories such as reported forms of disclosure to employers and related consequences for attaining work.

¹ In Queensland, offenders can be released on a parole order at a fixed date set by the sentencing court if they have been sentenced to three years or less, and are not serious violent or sex offenders (referred to as 'court-ordered parole'). If the offender is a sex offender, a serious violent offender or is serving a sentence of more than three years, he or she can apply to the Parole Board to be released on parole (referred to as 'board-ordered parole'). Currently in Queensland court-ordered and board-ordered parole are the only community release options available to offenders.

Results

Anticipated stigma and its consequences

The possibility of a ‘criminal label’ was highly anticipated by participants in our study. In advance of any contact with employers, or when asked about a hypothetical encounter with an employer, nearly all parolees indicated that they believed that employers would react negatively to their ‘ex-con’ status. Interviewees recognised that the label of being a ‘crim’ would be difficult to transcend, with few members of society sympathetic to their ‘story’, or what they saw as reasons for their offending, for example, drug use or ‘mixing with the wrong crowd’.

Such interpretations accord with arguments in the literature that stigmatised individuals recognise their status as devalued by society that will trigger negative reactions in others (Crocker et al 1998). Such beliefs led interviewees to conclude that few employees were willing to give them a ‘second chance’. One male parolee — a trained motor mechanic who was trying to find work in the car industry at the time — and who had a long criminal record as a juvenile and adult for car theft, stated ‘honestly a lot of people [employers] just don’t give you ... a second chance in life’ (male, aged 28).

Presumed negative reactions from others and the associated impact on a person’s sense of personal value are common reactions among stigmatised groups (Major and O’Brien 2005). While it is understandable that parolees anticipate they will face obstacles, it does raise the question of whether such anticipation creates a sense of fatalism about their capacity to redeem themselves and the opportunities that will be afforded them to do so. The internalisation of their stigmatised status led interviewees to judge that any level of self-disclosure to an employer would reduce their chance to secure work. For example, one female parolee stated: ‘I know there’s no way I’d get a job if I told them’ (female, aged 37). Parolees’ level of anticipation of the employers’ reaction to their criminal status led many in the interview sample to adopt a ‘self-preservation’ strategy, where they would avoid disclosure at all costs, which is consistent with findings in the literature (Harding, 2009; Opsal 2012). For example, one female parolee recalled giving the following advice to another female parolee, with whom she had spent time in prison: ‘[Y]ou don’t need to let anyone know because they can hold it against you ... We have to look after ourselves, it’s self-preservation’ (female, aged 51). Similar themes of self-preservation were evident among male interviewees: ‘If there’s no need, I won’t [disclose to an employer]. It won’t impact on my job if I don’t tell them? Will it impact on my job if I do? Probably ... So I’d rather not say’ (male, age not revealed).

The consequences of disclosure for securing employment

The use of criminal record checks is not a consistent practice across all workplace settings in Australia, but is often determined by the type of work environment one is entering. For example, in Queensland there are requirements in occupations related to children and youth, and security, among others. The inconsistent and varied use of criminal record checks meant that parolees faced uncertainty about when their criminal past might be discovered and when they would face the prospect of explaining their past and defending their initial non-disclosure. In an effort to minimise the possible negative credentialing effect of their criminal status due to the anticipation of a criminal record check, many of our participants avoided applying for particular jobs — for example, clerical, bookkeeping or other professional positions. Instead, labouring jobs (particularly for our male respondents) were seen as more viable options, where having a criminal record was judged as carrying less

stigma and where the physical capacity 'to do the job' was deemed as the primary credential for qualification.

However, for the sample of parolees in this study, escaping the negative effect of their criminal status was not easy. When a job interview or position seemed possible, the revelation of a criminal record often led to exclusion from the employment market through the denial of a job interview or a job itself. This occurred even in circumstances when it was deemed that the parolee was suited for the position:

I've had one interview, which they were going to give me the job until they found out I had a criminal history and was on parole. They were going to give me the job. They rang me up and asked me if I could come in, not for an interview, come in and fill out all the paperwork, tax file number the lot and go. As soon as she found out I had a criminal history and was on parole, which I was honest and open about, canned straightaway. She goes 'well maybe you should ring us once a week and see if we've got any work for you' (male, aged 34).

Even when parolees reported they were able to secure work without having to reveal their criminal past, it was still difficult for them to escape suspicion and sanction when their criminal history was discovered:

[I]t [the business she worked for] was broken into one Sunday afternoon ... it was retail ... and it was robbed one Sunday afternoon and the police came around with a search warrant to my place on the Monday morning. I didn't even know the place had been robbed, and the police then let my employer know that I was on parole, so I was instantly sacked and then I was under investigation. I had to come back in here [in reference to the parole office] and tell them I was under investigation for robbery, which meant I could have gone back to jail ... I didn't match the description [in reference to the original suspect], but it cost me my job and that could've costed me my parole' (female, age not revealed).

Managing disclosure and self-disclosure as a redemption script

A consistent theme in our research was that disclosure of a criminal history or one's parole status had implications for being hired. Parolees reported a range of strategies to manage their stigmatised identities both in the context of securing work and during interactions in the workplace.

About one-half of parolees stated they 'would never disclose' to an employer or to fellow employees, believing it served no purpose other than endangering their abilities to find and retain a job. Among the remaining parolees in the sample, most stated they would only conditionally disclose their criminal past or parole status 'if it was required' or 'if it came up' — for example, in the context of a criminal background check, or if the conditions of their parole required that they must inform employers about their parole status. In the literature on stigma and identity management these types of tactics are defined as reactive coping strategies (LeBel 2008; Corrigan 2005).

Parolees were often conflicted about revealing their criminal past. Some were initially reluctant to disclose offending, but at the same time felt compelled to be open and honest with an employer. A common strategy was for these conflicted parolees to wait to make the revelation following a period of proving themselves as 'good workers'. This conscious strategy was adopted in the hope that employers' recognition of parolees' commitment to work would not only minimise negative reactions and allow them to keep their jobs, but, perhaps more significantly, would demonstrate that the parolee had changed, rehabilitated or 'moved on'. These forms of delayed disclosure aim to challenge the moral attributions people accord to stigmatised groups or, more specifically, scepticism over whether offenders are willing to embrace pro-social attributes. However, delayed self-disclosure did not always

result in a positive response by employers (such as beliefs about trustworthiness and redeemability), as indicated by one parolee who had adopted the strategy:

I had been working with him for about seven months at that stage and I began to trust him. I told him my background and how I grew up and where I'd been [in reference to serving time in prison]. I felt [in reference to the employer] he didn't take kindly to it ... his attitude towards me changed ... he was on my case a lot more and tried to be more dominant (male, aged 38).

Despite the risks to securing work if their criminal record or parole status was divulged, there was a strong belief among many in the sample that concealing details about their parole status and criminal past was deceitful and contradictory to their efforts to 'knife-off', or break from past behaviour (Maruna and Roy 2007). This was a common theme, evident in all but one of the interviews with female parolees and one-half of the interviews with male parolees. As argued by Giordano (2014), desistance is triggered by changes in self-identity that requires the construction of a 'replacement self' matched by behaviour at odds with previous criminal conduct. Voluntary self-disclosure was seen by some parolees in the sample to be a repudiation of one's past criminal identity and incompatible with characteristics associated with criminality — for example, deceit, dishonesty and denying responsibility. As Maruna (2001) claims, such changes in self-identity involve a lot of self-talk among offenders that helps to change their image of themselves and assert agency over their lives. It also includes attempts to convince others about the authenticity of offenders' efforts to transform themselves through forms of preventative telling that aim to challenge features of the stigmatised label (LeBel, Richie and Maruna 2014). The link between self-disclosure and efforts to construct a new self-identity is reflected in the narrative below:

A: To be honest, I was advised [in reference to the support agency the parolee had been referred to] not to say I was from jail. All my experience was written in a way [in reference to his CV] that I worked for a catering company. If the job interviewer, the employer, asked me where did you work I actually said I worked for a company called Brisbane Catering Service. There is no such place.

Q: Was this based on the advice from XXXX? [in reference to the commercial jobs provider with which the parolee had been placed].

A: Yes ... They just thought it was going to give myself a better opportunity to get into the workforce, without having to disclose the negative side of things.

Q: How did that make you feel?

A: I don't feel comfortable with it at all. I had a situation come up a few days ago where a friend of mine was going to take me on as a cook. Unfortunately, that job fell through. I thought from that day, that I'm just going to be completely honest on my next — upcoming job interviews. I'm just going to tell people look, this is who I am, this is what's happened to me; I'd really like an opportunity to show that I'm capable of doing this job. ... I was very uncomfortable with lying because I'm embarrassed of my crime. I'm not ashamed of my crime.

Q: What do you mean when you say you're 'embarrassed, not ashamed'?

A: I mean I'm embarrassed of the crime that I committed because it was such a bad crime. It's murder. So many people have their opinion. But that 15 years [in reference to his prison time] shaped me as a person. It made me the person I am today. I'm not ashamed ... At the end of the day it's my choice [to self-disclose]. I mean I'm the one going for the jobs. They can say

look, we think it's a bad idea, but it's my decision. Okay, yes, I might get more knockbacks, but at least I'm not lying. At least I can hold my head up high (male, aged 34).

In a study on the use of criminal record checks among US employers, Lageson, Vuolo and Uggren (2015:18–19) found that some managers actually preferred job candidates with criminal records to be candid and honest about their criminal past prior to the use of criminal background checks. They found that self-disclosure was seen by some employers as important to their assessments of the character and honesty of a job candidate and their willingness to admit mistakes made in the past. In some cases, this improved the employment prospects of ex-prisoners. We also found that in circumstances where parolees did self-disclose, sometimes they also reported that employers were willing to recognise and reward their honesty and desire to make a new life for themselves. Some employers rewarded a demonstrated commitment to work by affording parolees the opportunity to gain a new social status as an 'employed person':

A: Yeah, I went for an interview. I brang my resume out to the boss at the job, and had an interview with the boss. He liked me and said go away and get your forklift ticket, you've got a job here. So I went and did my forklift ticket, rang him up, he said alright, we're looking for somebody to operate this machine ... It's casual at the start, but after a three-month probationary period ... it's permanent ... I did disclose it in this case. Only because of the fact that he asked, so I did disclose.

Q: And his reaction?

A: His reaction was — everybody needs a second chance (male, aged 29).

The role of social networks in helping to manage stigma

As indicated in the literature, stigma management can involve social networks (friends and partners) that provide resources and assistance that help mitigate the social costs of being stigmatised (Sanderson 1999). In our data stigma was also managed through the assistance provided by close associates such as romantic partners, relatives, family and friends. Interviewees reported that these associates not only linked parolees to job opportunities through their own networks and contacts, but also provided verbal guarantees to employers (for example, 'putting in a good word with the boss'). This was particularly important in helping to neutralise the stigma of a parolee's criminal past. Those who secured work through the help of close associates often reflected on the fact that these others had verbally 'vouched' for them to an employer, and helped them to demonstrate to an employer they were a committed and capable worker. This helped to signal to an employer through 'verbal certification' by a third party, that a parolee could be relied on — thus helping to present a more appealing social identity. For example, this was evident in the following interview exchange with a parolee who secured a job through the help of his partner:

Q: How did you find that job?

A: Through my partner and her friend that actually manages it ... her contacts [in reference to a motel].

Q: Did the issue of you being on parole come up?

A: Yeah, I told them about it ... and that was all right because I was upfront with it ... plus just doing ... I've done a bit of work to show them I can do it.

Q: Your partner she ...?

A: She said [to the employer] he [the parolee] can be depended on ... she did, she backed me on it (male, aged 34).

Beyond facilitating access to a job, family and friends also assisted in improving the competency of parolees to undertake the work, which could provide a further signal to employers that investing in these individuals would not be a wasted opportunity. For example, an interviewee, when detailing the types of work he had secured following several jail terms, recounted how a particular friend (also an ex-prisoner) had helped him to secure a job and overcome employer doubts that he was a capable worker:

My mate has done a little bit of time as well and I met him in prison in 2002. He's a plasterer as well. He's got me a lot of work when I've been in and out. So he understands and so he told the boss ... They were a bit sceptical, they started us at \$20 an hour and pushed us up to \$25 when they saw what I was capable of doing. So they stepped it up a little bit ... it was a different form of work, it was building classrooms. There was a lot of external work, which I wasn't used to. So my mate said I'll train him up and then we can put his wages up once we get going. So we started to smash them out pretty quickly (male, aged 50).

Discussion and conclusion

Understanding the effect of stigma and how it is managed is central to reintegration and ultimately desistance. Our data show that stigma and its anticipated consequences are frequently confirmed when parolees apply for a job. The 'us' and 'them' distinction between parolees and 'law-abiding' community members can be further reinforced when parolees encounter rejection by employers, despite being qualified for the job. Such experiences might further diminish their perceived status and make reintegration all the more difficult. Of course, parolees can decide to conceal their criminal past, but this does not necessarily prove successful because criminal record checks and/or conditions related to parole can make concealment impossible. The result is the adoption of various identity management strategies, each of which presents different risks and consequences.

Maruna (2001) argues that one part of the process of moving away from crime, or desisting, involves organic interactive processes that see offenders create what he referred to as 'redemption scripts' or self-narratives, which make sense of their past behaviour and articulate how they have changed and embraced a new (pro-) social identity. This can help in the formation of what Giordano (2014) terms a 'replacement-self', which is the cognitive formation of a new self-identity that helps ex-offenders to understand themselves in a way that is at odds with their past. Voluntary self-disclosure in the workplace, for some of our interview sample, appeared to offer opportunities for them to articulate a redemption script. In other words, a desire to verbally self-disclose can present an aspiration to 'break from the past' by stating, 'Yes I was once an offender, but I am now a changed person.' Such actions aim to help offenders supplant the criminal label and refashion their social identity. The workplace represents one context in which parolees can carry this out by providing an important test of whether community members and, in particular, employers believe in the authenticity of the revised script, and are willing to cast aside their prejudgments and suspicions about offenders by extending them an opportunity to become gainfully employed.

The results in this study suggest that parolees do not perceive disclosure to be risk free. Nonetheless, for at least some of the parolees in the sample, voluntary disclosure was expressed as something more positive. From this perspective, disclosure could be interpreted as a proactive coping strategy (LeBel 2008, 2012) allowing parolees to assert agency, or a

sense of control over how they might articulate or demonstrate that they have 'knifed off' from past criminal behaviour (Giordano 2014; Maurina and LeBel 2009). This conclusion requires additional verification through future research to better understand its applicability to parolees across different Australian jurisdictions given differences in penal cultures across the country (Tubex et al 2015). Future work should also consider industry differences in the willingness and effect of disclosing. From a parolee perspective, it is possible that the desire to disclose a past record to an employer may be strongly influenced by the type and quality of the work an ex-offender engages in, and whether they find it rewarding and secure. At the same time, there may be industry differences in the meaning that employers ascribe to 'criminal labels' — with varying levels of tolerance or willingness to accommodate. The extent to which parolees perceive industry- or employer-level differences is also worth consideration in future research.

In this article we have highlighted ways in which the close personal networks of ex-offenders can help to overcome the reluctance of employers to hire people with a criminal conviction. As Meisenhedler (1977:329) has pointed out, successful reintegration involves some recognised member(s) of the community publically announcing and certifying that the offender has changed and that he or she is now to be considered non-criminal (see also Maruna 2011). Our interview data show a number of ways that family and friends can play a role in this certification process by helping parolees to present a more appealing social identity. First, we observed examples of these close associates directly 'vouching' that parolees had changed and could be trusted despite their past criminality. Second, family and friends also assisted in this certification process by finding alternative ways that parolees could signal their commitment to work — for example, by volunteering at a workplace to gain experience. Third, in some instances, our parolees described situations where close associates actually helped them to improve their skills and competency, which served to signal that the individual is worth investing in. In addition to efforts that parolees may make to signal their readiness to reintegrate by attempting to re-enter the labour market, our results suggest that third parties can play an important role in this signalling and recertification through assisting in the process of stigma management. It does need to be recognised though that the family members, partners and friends of ex-prisoners may themselves have limited abilities and social capital to help in any meaningful way and may also be dealing with their own forms of social stigma (Halsey and Dugeen 2015).

What might be the practical implications of our findings? First, our findings further highlight that community release planning needs to ensure that released prisoners maintain their social ties with family and friends, where these relationships are positive, because a failure to do so means they potentially lose a significant resource that can facilitate job attainment. Helping parolees and those under other penal sanctions to manage their stigma should also be given consideration in re-entry programs because of the psychological and emotional strain it can generate leading to reduced chances of desistance from offending behaviour. On the employer side of the equation, increased efforts on the part of corrective and social services to identify workplaces that are amenable to employing ex-offenders would also aid in the process of stigma management and improved reintegration.

While our conclusions about the benefits of voluntary self-disclosure in the workplace are tentative and potentially limited to a subset of ex-offenders, they do have implications for reintegration policy. For example, it needs to be recognised that in the context of gaining employment, mandatory criminal record checks and public offender registries deny ex-offenders individual agency — or, more specifically, the ability to act independently and

make their own choices (Liem and Richardson 2014:9) about self-disclosure and how they might best manage their stigma in the workplace and present themselves to others.

There are number of limitations with the current study. Interviews occurred at only one point in time. As a result, we were not able to assess whether or how parolees' decisions about disclosure were linked to their subsequent success or failure with respect to reoffending and/or reimprisonment. Further, while the purposive sample allowed us to roughly approximate the demographic characteristics of Australian prison populations, the small sample size meant our ability to explore potentially important demographic differences was limited. For example, there are reasons to expect differences in the use and effect of disclosure across Indigenous status, gender and offence type that we could not fully explore here (Pager 2007). Like other qualitative studies on desistance, we have taken for granted that the accounts presented by interviewees are an accurate presentation of their experiences and perceptions in connection to finding and keeping work after prison. In this way, parolees' narratives demonstrated active efforts to express the meanings of the stigma they carried and the experiences it created (Liem and Richardson 2014).

Employment is important to reintegration because it affords opportunities for status elevation by allowing released prisoners to recapture their sense of worth (Schnittker and Bacak 2013). For such outcomes to be achieved, former inmates must overcome and manage the stigma of incarceration. Supporting offender reintegration requires an understanding of how efforts to secure employment can be enhanced through strategies that help released offenders manage stigma.

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