

Against All Odds: From Prison to Graduate School

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This case study explores an often overlooked phenomenon in the higher education literature: Students transitioning from prison to college. The case presents the unique story of an African American male who made a series of life transitions from federal prison to homelessness to community college to a historically Black university, and finally to a predominantly White institution for graduate school. These transitions came as the result of successful coping strategies, which included social learning, hope, optimism, information seeking, and meaning-making. Some of the policy and research implications of ex-convicts returning to higher education after imprisonment are also considered.

Keywords: African-American, Black, college access, prison, transition

A middle-aged African American male named Robert Jones sits in a community college classroom feeling overwhelmed and unsure of himself. He has been released after spending ten years in federal prison for drug trafficking. After prison, he was homeless for a period of time, but now he is sitting in a community college classroom thanks to his own efforts and the local homeless coalition's program to help ex-convicts gain housing, employment, and education. He vividly describes his experience on his first day of community college:

I tell you, I swear my head was hurting. I'm serious. I was, like, in class, you know, like Charlie Brown, I had sparks going everywhere. I was like, it's like that came to my mind and I was like now I see how Charlie Brown feels. And I was like, I just leave class with a headache.

What happened to Robert Jones after that first day of community college? Did he return to class the next day? Did he persist to graduate? More importantly, if he returned to class and persisted, why did he ultimately graduate? This case study seeks to answer these questions while grounding his story in the story of countless other African American ex-convicts like him. This case study is a story of possibilities.

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To protect his identity, the student in this case study is referred to as Robert Jones. I met Mr. Jones through a fundraising event for the local homeless coalition. He was one of the featured speakers, who spoke to the audience about his transition from prison to graduate school. While I was moved by Mr. Jones' personal experiences, as a higher education researcher, I also began to think about the broader implications of his story for African American male college students and for institutional practice. This paper is the result of my research on this transition process from prison to graduate school.

Literature Review

The transition of ex-convicts from prison to college is a phenomenon that has received little scholarly attention from the higher education research community. Therefore, this literature review broadly considers findings from two major research traditions: research on African American males and psychology research. Specifically, I explore studies on African American males in prison and in higher education as well as studies from learning theory, transition theory, and positive psychology.

African American Males in Prison

Robert Jones' life trajectory is not unlike many African American males who have been incarcerated in the United States. The statistics on incarceration rates for African American males are sobering. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2011), and nearly one-third of African American males with less than a college degree have been to prison while 60 percent of African American males who have not completed high school have been to prison (Pettit & Western, 2004). The leading cause of incarceration for an African American male is a drug offense (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009).

One explanation for the high incarceration rates of African American males is the phenomenon called the school-to-prison pipeline. Regarding the school-to-prison pipeline, Darenbourg, Perez, and Blake (2010) propose that "exclusionary discipline techniques (e.g. detention, out-of-school suspension, disciplinary alternative education placements) experienced by African American males alienate them from the learning process by steering them from the classroom and academic attainment and toward the criminal justice system" (p. 2).

Supporting this argument are several studies suggesting that higher rates of suspension and harsher disciplinary practices exist for African American males than for White males for the same offense (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Townsend, 2000; Wald & Losen, 2003). Factors that may steer African American males away from academic attainment include higher rates of special education referral (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson, & Wu, 2006), lower levels of teacher quality in predominantly African American schools (Day-Vines & Day-Hairston, 2005), and emotional detachment and alienation from school (Brown, 2007). Factors that may contribute to African American males' overrepresentation in the criminal justice system include law enforcement practices such as racial profiling, drug polices, racial bias in sentencing, and a historical shift away from discretionary sentencing practices towards mandatory sentencing legislation (Kutateladze, Andiloro, Johnson, & Spohn, 2014; Rocque, 2011).

One of the most effective remedies proposed for the school-to-prison pipeline is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS; Barrett, Bradshaw & Lewis-Palmer, 2008; Darenbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Netzels & Eber, 2003). PBIS includes numerous possible

behavior interventions, and is especially beneficial for African American males when it is employed by both mental health professionals and teachers in school settings. Mental health professionals can facilitate social skills and anger management training. Teachers can receive additional training in classroom management techniques and cultural competence. Furthermore, mental health professionals and teachers can work together to foster a greater sense of school belonging in African American male students (Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010).

Closely related to the school-to-prison pipeline is the phenomenon of mass incarceration. The term *mass incarceration*, coined by David Garland (2001), describes the significant growth in the prison population in the United States in recent decades, particularly among African American males (Pettit & Western, 2004; Roberts, 2004; Western & Wildeman, 2009). Western and Wildeman (2009) argue that the trend towards mass incarceration is the result of “harsh sentencing policies and a punitive approach to drug control” (p. 223). Mass incarceration harms individual African American males as well as the African American community as a whole. Mass incarceration impacts individuals by significantly altering their life course. Life course researchers have identified college graduation, military service, and marriage as important milestones in creating stability for young men (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Imprisonment disrupts all of these stabilizing forces in the lives of African American men. With respect to higher education, many colleges and universities in the United States either deny admission to students with criminal records or deny housing to these students (Ross & Richards, 2009). Furthermore, individuals who have been convicted of a drug offense in the United States have limited financial aid eligibility.

Roberts (2004) identifies three ways in which the mass incarceration of African American males harms African American communities: mass incarceration “damages social networks, distorts social norms, and destroys social citizenship” (p. 1281). The damage to African American social networks begins with the family and extends out to the entire community. Thus, mass imprisonment damages African American families both financially and socially, which places an additional burden on the larger community of relatives and friends. Social norms are affected by mass imprisonment by weakening social control, creating distrust of law enforcement, and reshaping gender norms. Most importantly, mass incarceration destroys social citizenship by excluding African American males from the labor market and often stripping them of their voting rights, thereby disenfranchising them both politically and economically (Roberts, 2004).

African American Males in Higher Education

The disproportionately low number of African American males enrolled in higher education is a complex phenomenon related to the educational pipeline, whose roots begin as early as preschool and elementary school (Cuyjet, 2009; Holzman, 2006; Jackson, 2003; Roderick, 2003). The failure of African American males to enroll in college at rates comparable to other groups is related to a number of factors, which include inadequate academic preparation in high school, higher high school dropout rates, the school-to-prison pipeline, and enlistment in the Armed Forces (Verdugo & Henderson, 2009).

African American males who do enroll in college are less likely to persist than White peers and African American females (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Cuyjet, 2009; Verdugo & Henderson, 2009). Harper (2012) suggests that campus personnel, scholars, and policymakers must reframe their thinking about persistence rates for African American males by adopting an

anti-deficit framework. This reframing would involve examining the pre-college socialization and readiness of successful African American male students (e.g., familial factors, K-12 school forces, and out-of-school college preparation resources) as well as investigating factors related to college achievement for African American males such as quality interactions with peers and faculty both in and out of class.

African American females are nearly twice as likely as African American males to attend college (Verdugo & Henderson, 2009). The gender imbalance among African American males and females creates a number of problems both on and off campus. The gender imbalance negatively impacts relationships between African American males and females on campus, creates a scarcity of potential mates with similar levels of education for African American females, and reduces the chances for White students to interact with African American males, thereby potentially reinforcing negative stereotypes of African American males among White students (Cuyjet, 2009; Harper, 2004; Kimbrough & Harper, 2006; King, 1999; Porter & Bronzaft, 1995).

At historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), African American males show positive psychosocial adjustment, have higher relative academic gains, and have higher aspirations than African American males at predominantly White institutions (PWIs; Allen & Haniff, 1991; Cuyjet, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Some scholars attribute the beneficial effects of HBCUs to the positive interpersonal relationships and social support that students find at these institutions (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Davis, 1994). In addition to the social support found at HBCUs, it may be the absence of certain characteristics of PWIs that benefit African American males. For instance, African American males can remain largely anonymous on campus, freeing them from the distraction of racial differences. This freedom may allow African American males to focus on issues other than racial congruence such as friendship, their studies, and extracurricular activities (Baldwin, Fisler, & Patton, 2009; Davis, 1994).

African American males at PWIs have lower levels of academic achievement and are more likely than their White peers to suffer from adjustment problems (Allen & Haniff, 1991; Baldwin, Fisler, & Patton, 2009; Feagin, Vera, & Imani, 1996; Joiner & Walker, 2002; Nettles, 1991; Thompson, Anderson, & Bakeman, 2000). One explanation for the adjustment problems is that African American males are more likely to be stereotyped than African American females and other students on predominantly White campuses (Davis, 1994). Indeed, Cuyjet (2009) argues that African American males at PWIs experience four types of invisibility related to racial stereotyping. First, because few statistical analyses examine the intersection of race and gender, the academic performance of African American females can mask the lower academic performance of African American males. Second, African American males who belong to a subculture that is not assimilated into the dominant White culture can become invisible to administrators, faculty, and staff who may only understand and cater to the needs of the majority culture. Third, the dominant White culture may adopt a stereotypical view in which African American males in college are expected to come from predominantly low socioeconomic statuses, are academically underprepared, and are likely to participate in athletics. This view overlooks the heterogeneity of African American males enrolled in college. Lastly, the heterogeneity of African American male college students may be overlooked by other African American males who may expect all of their peers to belong to the same subculture.

Psychological Research Traditions

In addition to the literature on African American males, this study employs literature from three research traditions in psychology: social learning theory, transition theory, and positive psychology.

One of Bandura's (1977, 1986) fundamental findings was that in social learning, individuals alter their behavior by imitating the behavior of others, both positive and negative. Social learning synthesizes theories of environmental learning (Vygotsky, 1978) and learning as a result of innate psychological factors (Piaget, 1952). Four stages of Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning include close contact, imitation of superiors, understanding concepts, and role model behavior.

Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory identifies the four S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) as salient factors in determining an individual's ability to adapt to a major life transition (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). In addition to Schlossberg's transition theory, two frameworks of coping mechanisms are applicable to life transitions. Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework lists information seeking, direct action, inhibition of action, and intra-psychic behavior (e.g., hope, optimism, a passion for knowledge, and meaning-making) as important coping strategies for individuals experiencing a major life transition. Information seeking as a coping mechanism is consistent with findings from positive psychology that curiosity and information seeking are fundamental aspects of human development (Schulman, 2002). Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) transition framework is also instructive. In this framework, coping strategies fall into the categories of modifying the situation, controlling the meaning of the transition, and managing the stress of the situation.

The emerging field of positive psychology has important linkages to transition theory. Positive psychology as a discipline has provided a necessary antidote to the focus on psychopathology, which has existed for many decades in the discipline of psychology. The basic premise of positive psychology is that it is necessary to examine both the strengths and the deficits of people and their environments in order to make diagnostic and treatment decisions about individuals (Seligman, 2002).

Several important constructs from positive psychology (e.g., hope, optimism, a passion for knowledge, and meaning making) pertain to Schlossberg's transition theory. Among the constructs in positive psychology most applicable to coping with transitions are hope and optimism. Carver & Scheier (2002) define optimists as "people who expect good things to happen to them" and pessimists as "people who expect bad things to happen to them" (p. 231). Optimists and pessimists are often identified by their explanatory style. Seligman (2002) describes three dimensions of explanatory style as it relates to optimism and pessimism. The first dimension is permanence in which optimists believe good things are permanent whereas bad things are temporary. Pessimists believe the reverse. The second dimension, pervasiveness, refers to whether negative and positive events permeate an individual's entire existence or have specific causes. Optimists allow positive experiences to permeate their experience while they attribute negative events to specific causes. Pessimists do the reverse. Lastly, personalization refers to the extent to which an individual takes responsibility for his or her successes and failures. Optimists will tend to take responsibility for their successes and attribute their failures to other people while pessimists will do the reverse.

Expectancy-value models of motivation represent a crucial link between attributes of self such as optimism and hope and positive strategies for adapting to transitions such as direct action or goal attainment. In expectancy-value models, behavior is related to the pursuit of goals, and

individuals have a sense of expectancy or confidence about the attainment of goals. Thus, an individual will not engage in positive behaviors related to goal attainment without the motivation provided by optimism and expectancy (Austin & Vancouver, 1996; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Seligman, 2002).

Among the pioneers in the field of meaning-making, or logotherapy, are Frankl (1976) and Klinger (1977), who argued that finding meaning in life is among the most important facets of human development. Frankl (1976) and Baumeister and Wilson (1991) found that human suffering tends to stimulate the need for meaning-making. Baumeister and Wilson (1991) argue that there are four main needs in meaning-making including finding purpose, establishing values, finding self worth, and developing a sense of efficacy (the belief that one can make a difference).

Research Design

The purpose of this case study will be to understand how a former prisoner in Florida, who had been incarcerated for ten years, was able to transition to graduate school after prison. Transition will be defined as “any event, or non-event, that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Goodman et al., 2006, p. 33).

The research questions for this study are grounded in Nancy Schlossberg’s transition theory, which identifies the four S’s (situation, self, support, and strategies) as salient factors in determining an individual’s ability to adapt to a major life transition (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). The overarching research question was: How did a former prisoner transition to graduate school? Related subsidiary questions include the following: How did a former prisoner understand his life experiences in order to transition to graduate school? What sources of support did a former prisoner use in transitioning to graduate school? What psychological resources did a former prisoner use in transitioning to graduate school? What coping strategies did a former prisoner use in transitioning to graduate school?

Following Yin (2009), this study employs a holistic single-case design. Social science research often involves an examination of the central tendencies in human behavior, but with this case study, I would like to suggest that it is also instructive to examine the behavior and experiences of outliers. The rationale for a single case design is that the research involves an extreme or unique case that is revelatory in nature. This case study adopts a holistic rather than an embedded design because the research focuses on the global nature of the phenomenon rather than separate units of analysis.

The research took place in the natural settings of a housing community for formerly homeless individuals where the research participant resides and at the institution where he is currently attending graduate school. The methods of data collection included several semi-structured interviews with the following individuals: Robert Jones, two employees of a community service organization that assisted Robert Jones, and an academic administrator at Mr. Jones’ graduate institution. The formal interview data included six hours of interview transcripts with Robert Jones (three preliminary interviews of approximately 1.5 hours each and a follow-up interview of 1.5 hours to clarify questions that arose after coding had begun) as well as 1.5 hours of interview transcripts with the other research participants (three interviews of approximately 30 minutes each).

The first three interviews were semi-structured. Based on the previous knowledge I had of his life trajectory from his speech at the homeless coalition fundraiser, I developed three interview scripts devoted to three significant periods in his life: 1) his childhood and

adolescence, 2) his imprisonment and subsequent homelessness, and 3) his college education. Though I relied on interview scripts, the interviews should be considered semi-structured because I sometimes diverged from the scripts in order to more fully explore the situations and events described by Robert Jones.

Each of the three interviews began with a *grand tour question* (Spradley, 1979), and continued with subsequent questions that were intended to follow up for explanatory details not already provided in response to the grand tour question. The first interview began with the question, "What are the significant people, places, and events that you remember from your childhood?" and concluded with the question, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your childhood?" The second interview began with the questions, "When do you feel your life started going in the wrong direction? What are the significant people, places, and events that you remember when your life started going in the wrong direction?" and concluded with the questions, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your time in prison?" and "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about the time you were homeless?" The third interview began with the question, "What are the significant people, places, and events that you remember when your life started going in the right direction?" and concluded with the questions, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your life now?" and "What do you want to do in the future?" The fourth interview, which took place after coding began, was intended to provide greater clarification and further exploration of the situations described by Robert Jones in the three previous interviews. After the final interview, I maintained sporadic contact via telephone and e-mail with Robert Jones over a period of a year and a half. Information from these informal communications provided me with additional background knowledge of the case even though this information was not formally transcribed and coded for analysis.

The semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding with the qualitative research software NVIVO9. Although the study was structured as a case study, I employed coding techniques from grounded analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to explore the microanalytics of interaction within the case. There was no intention to conduct a full grounded analysis to derive theory, but as Brower and Jeong (2008) have pointed out, "grounded analysis, used in part or in whole, is a useful data management approach that is largely compatible with . . . other designs and that can be made quite flexible in the hands of scholars willing to work within its general framework" (p. 838).

The initial step in organizing the data was to read through the data to gain a general impression of the information. Next, I prepared a chronological record of Robert Jones' life story in order to accurately identify the context, setting, and timing of the events contained in the data. After this chronology was created, the data were put into NVIVO9 for coding and memoing.

The coding and memoing processes were both inductive and iterative, taking place in successive cycles of analysis. I first developed open codes in conjunction with the chronology of the focal participant's life story that appeared to relate to his life transitions. From the initial coding phase, several themes emerged that suggested connections to potentially applicable literature. I then performed axial coding to examine relationships among the open codes as well as to incorporate the new constructs from positive psychology and social learning theory. Finally, I performed selective coding in order to explicate a central theme and the lessons learned from the data as well as to relate the emergent themes to existing literature that had been elicited earlier in the analytic process.

Rigor within the analysis was established through triangulation and member-checking. Specifically, data source triangulation (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) was established by interviewing three other individuals knowledgeable about Robert Jones' life experiences in order to confirm the situations and interpretations provided by the research participant. Theory triangulation (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) was established by incorporating multiple theories to interpret the interview data. These included theories about African American males in prison and in higher education as well as psychological concepts from learning theory, transition theory, and positive psychology. Finally, I established credibility through member-checking when the research participant was provided a draft of the case study report (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007).

Limitations

A common critique of case studies is that they are based on a sample of one. This is an account based on one person's life experiences and may thus have limited generalizability in positive science terms. The case was selected because it was unique and because the central actor provided revealing interview data. Its explanatory power draws on its significance as an outlier.

This is a study based on a particular context. Therefore, this study also has an N of 1 in terms of contextual factors at the institutions where Robert Jones was enrolled. This study cannot provide a cross-section of all the dynamics that former prisoners experience in returning to higher education. Additional exploratory research may uncover institutional factors that lead to the success and failure of this population of students. The field can benefit from additional studies that look at the same phenomenon in other contexts.

This study neither claims to provide quantitative or descriptive data on policies and outcomes for former prisoners returning to higher education, nor for African American males in particular. Further research may illuminate the extent of exclusionary institutional policies that deny admission or residential housing to ex-convicts. In addition, it is important for researchers to ascertain how these policies may disproportionately affect the enrollment and graduation rates of African American males. Finally, if a sample of former prisoners who have graduated from college could be identified, a multiple case study could help to determine which institutional practices have contributed most to their success and which practices have created the most obstacles.

Against All Odds

The description of the case is organized both thematically and chronologically. In order to highlight the richness of the interview data and to preserve the authenticity of Robert Jones' voice, I have presented his language exactly as he spoke it, without editing for grammar or word usage. I begin this section with Robert Jones' childhood, continue through his substance abuse, imprisonment, homelessness, and his decision to return to college. I conclude with his plans for the future.

Childhood: “He Would Whoop Me.”

A consistent theme in Robert Jones’ stories from childhood was the presence of family violence. Mr. Jones mentioned his fear of his father on several occasions in the interview data. When asked why he feared his father, he responded:

Well one thing, you know, he would whoop me. I don’t mean he like beat me all the time, but when he did whoop me, he whooped. You know what I mean? I mean like even now it would be considered abuse.

Family violence appeared as a consistent theme in Robert Jones’ stories from childhood.

In one particularly vivid incident from childhood, Robert was so afraid of telling his father that he couldn’t eat any more food that he hid the excess food in the wall of his house until it began to rot. This fear of authority figures became so ingrained that he repeated the pattern with his uncle in another house:

Because I remember, let me tell you something, I was so afraid of my father, I didn’t even know how to tell him that he had put too much food on my plate. . . . I was like 9 or 10, something like that, and it was a hole in the wall behind the door. Because at first I probably threw it out in the yard so he couldn’t see it or something. He said did you do that? And I went no. So what I started doing was I started putting the food in the hole, right? I know it sounds funny. But I started putting the food in the wall. And you know we had a shotgun house, one way out and one way in. No, not a shotgun, it was like one way in you go straight to the back yard side. And I don’t think we had an AC. No, we didn’t have AC so you had to have a fan, right? So it used to get hot, you know. So he came one day. He had no idea. It’s smelling, right? He had no idea where it was coming from right? So he said, you know, come down and what the hell. He said maggots coming all out the wall and everything. I was just that afraid of him. But how deep the fear was you see that shows me how fear can be and it can begin to take control and move you into other situations. He let me go because he was doing something. So he had me staying with my aunt for some reason. And this maybe he just wasn’t aware. But my uncle had given me some food, but the same adult figure, he didn’t have anything to do with my aunt and my uncle, but the same authoritative figure, that same feeling, when I didn’t finish that food, they did have a hole in their wall. You know what I’m saying? So I put the food in their wall.

However, fear of authority figures was not the only recollection from Robert’s childhood.

Despite the family violence, Robert Jones’ passion for knowledge began early with positive experiences he had in school: “[L]ike now school, there are periods that I look back, that I really enjoyed school. And I realize that I was kind of smart.” The positive association between schooling and knowledge set the stage for a love of learning that resurfaced later in adulthood.

Substance Abuse: “It Just Made Me Feel Like I Had Connected with Something.”

Robert Jones’ first experience with drugs began in adolescence when, out of curiosity, he decided to imitate his mother’s behavior:

But you know, I got on drugs when I was about 15, and I just did that out of curiosity because my mom was doing it. I didn't really want her to do it. . . . and I remember pulling out her liquor one time and putting water in it. And she went off when she tasted that, boy. And I think that was like the breaking point for me. So one day I just, like I was just curious, you know, and just tried it. And it's just this overwhelming sensation, that it just made me feel like I had connected with something.

Unfortunately, this early experience set the stage for his life to spiral into substance abuse.

When Robert Jones later met the woman who would become his daughters' mother, he was still using drugs. The daughters were born into substance abuse:

You know, me and their mom was both on drugs when we had them – she had them. She was a junkie, I was a junkie, and I say that because that's how it was.

The relationship between Mr. Jones and his daughters' mother was not a healthy one.

In addition to the substance abuse, the relationship was marked by domestic violence. Mr. Jones repeated his father's pattern of family violence with his daughter's mother:

And to be honest with you, I wasn't ready for our relationship. You know, I never really had a relationship. I didn't know how to have a relationship. And you know, I was very abusive to her, you know, because my father was abusive to women, you know.

Eventually, following the birth of his daughters, the drug use evolved into drug dealing, and Mr. Jones was arrested for drug trafficking and sentenced to federal prison for ten years.

Imprisonment and Homelessness: "I Studied with People that Just Like Philosophers."

In federal prison, he began to remake his life by revisiting his positive early schooling experiences. He remarked, "Those years that I was locked up I had a chance to read and do a lot of self-reflection, you know, analyzing and critiquing, you know, ownership." Robert describes the many hours he devoted to study and reflection in prison:

So, when there was a real estate class taught by the inmate, I sat in there. If it was a business class, law class, I sat in there. When there was classes offered in the school, I would take them. When I could talk to somebody that would sit down and talk to me just about their life or the things they did, I would sit down or. . . get up on them and just sit and listen. You know, I talked with "Jonathon." I done talk with, and I see how they intermingle with themselves as their group. I see how they converse, how they really about business. And I studied with people that just like philosophers. You know, but really smart, been down a long time. I've talked to old guys that, you know, been reading all their life. I tried to do Spanish a couple of times. I worked on my math a couple of times. And I read a lot of my own about African American history, which I never was exposed to that. I've read a lot of stuff just with people with different schools of thought.

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Indeed, Robert Jones assessed his time in federal prison as an “opportunity.”

Following prison, Mr. Jones experienced a period of homelessness. He describes the experience of homelessness:

Well, I will say that it was very uncomfortable. You know. I think it affected my pride too, because I never was homeless. I always had somewhere to go or even if I was selling drugs I still had my own place, you know. And I think it was hard to tell somebody, especially around the dudes that I used to hang with when I was hustling or whatever, saying you’re living at the homeless shelter there.

Decision to Return to College: “There Ain’t No Other Way.”

The time spent studying in prison became instrumental in helping Robert Jones adapt to community college after he was released from prison. After prison, Mr. Jones knew that he needed to follow a different life trajectory, but initially he couldn’t see the path forward:

Because see like I keep telling you, I knew something was wrong. I was trying to put it back together, you know, because I’m tired of failing. That’s too hard too. I’m just tired of failing.

The idea that he needed to pursue an education was reinforced by a counselor in a drug treatment program who suggested that it was his best option for the future. Robert followed the advice of the drug counselor and social workers with the local homeless coalition by enrolling in community college. He came to regard education as the only thing that separated him from other ex-convicts who re-offended after prison:

And I think the only people that really make it upon my group that go back to school because there’s no other way. . . . There ain’t no other way. There ain’t no other way. What am I going to do? But in my heart I know I had an opportunity, or one more opportunity to change, and I didn’t take advantage of it because I wasn’t willing to do the work? And I say the only thing different between me and them is that some of it is environment. Because you know an environment, you know like when you plant a seed that’s in rich soil it has a better chance to grow than a seed over here in some dry ground.

The community college environment became the “rich soil” that Robert needed to change his life course.

Initially Denied Access: “The Only Second Chance I Got Was the One I Created.”

After successfully completing community college, Mr. Jones transferred to a four-year historically Black university. He succeeded in earning a bachelor’s degree in social work (BSW) from this institution. The good grades that he earned in the bachelor’s degree program allowed him to apply to a master’s degree program in social work at a PWI. Robert Jones describes how he was initially denied access to the master’s degree program in social work at the PWI due to his criminal record:

First of all, my card is nonviolent. Second of all, you know, I can identify with them. You know what I'm saying? The next thing, I've got a story. And then and I just got my BSW. How much does you want me to pay? You know what I'm saying? And I think that's when we start talking about second chances. That gets me because I'll tell you something: As far as I'm concerned right now, the only second chance I got was the one that I created.

An academic administrator and professor at Robert Jones' graduate institution remarked on his initial attempt to gain admittance to the graduate program:

I think it did, it got hung up in legal for a little while....They never tell ya. I mean they'll tell ya that there's a committee that meets, but they never kinda tell ya what their criteria are And I think any time they see something that's drug related, the concern is safety on campus, especially somebody that's dealing in drugs, that type of thing. So, those tend to seem to take longer to clear judicial than other types of felonies that we've worked with here.

In addition to concerns about motivation, academic preparation, and campus safety, some faculty and administrators believe that ex-convicts do not belong on a college campus. An administrator describes the disagreement among the faculty in his college about whether felons should be admitted to the university:

Even with the faculty, it's really, we've had some interesting discussions about, you would think in a profession like this, you know, there are people that think that once you kinda cross that line that you shouldn't be afforded the opportunity to go out and represent social work or the university. That's a hard perspective for me to grasp, but it exists.

After Mr. Jones successfully appealed his case, he was admitted to the master's in social work (MSW) program at the PWI. On the theme of second chances, an employee of a community service agency remarked on the importance of providing educational opportunity to all individuals regardless of background:

As far as how in general for universities they could be an asset, I think it even more so speaks to the value of education. Why it's so important, and how it can truly impact someone's life, and what it's like for someone when they're cut off from that and they don't have access to it. It's also a sign of a university stepping up to give people a second chance, and have faith in them that they're worth it. Don't just write them off.

Former prisoners may make positive contributions to a university community. For instance, an employee of a community service organization who worked with Robert Jones described the positive contributions to particular fields of study from former prisoners attending college:

For something like social work, naturally their experiences are extremely important, giving people a better perspective of what people go through, how they get there, and

what obstacles they face when they get out. Social work, psychology, any of those fields that really study human behavior can be a huge asset. Criminal justice, if you're really trying to advocate for a change, I think there's lots of different areas where someone who has those experiences can be invaluable, especially for 18-19 year olds who probably are majority, privileged, and don't understand that type of lifestyle in any way. . . .

I wish it was something that universities focused on more. I wish they helped more in terms of social services, really reaching out to people outside of just prison getting a GED, but really actually trying to build people up in that capacity. I don't think college needs to be just for 18 and 19 year olds who have the money to afford it, but should really be expanded out to people who can use and really benefit in many areas from having education.

The theme of privilege emerged in the data again, suggesting that the presence of former prisoners on college campuses could also serve to broaden the perspectives of college students who have had little exposure to those with backgrounds dissimilar from their own. Another employee of a community service agency remarked about the positive influence Robert Jones might have on peers who hear his story:

He's an amazing testimony, even outside of his criminal background, but I think it makes us more appreciative, reminds us about when we think we have big barriers and big hurdles. I mean, think about what he carries around on his back. So many people take a look at that background, and that's all they see in him. So, I think it's just kind of a life lesson. The more that he can tell his story, I think he will just have such a big impact, not only on the administration, maybe the professors, but his peers, the students that he's with. He's inspiring. He really is. So, absolutely, he's an asset.

Like her colleague, this individual believed that Robert's story had the power to expose college students to realities outside their privileged range of experience.

Seeking Role Models: "I Have People."

While Robert Jones was pursuing his education, he actively sought positive role models in order to emulate the lifestyle he wanted to achieve:

I built up my own network system, and you know, I have people, and not all of them are in recovery, but some people, they just living the life that I want. And that was very important for me to find somebody that was not only professionally or living, doing what I wanted to do, but modeling a family that I would like to have or something. Or people that have morals or more ethics.

Seeking role models and developing a network of support were themes repeated by individuals who knew Robert Jones. For instance, an employee of a community service agency stated that:

He knows how important a support system is. Maybe he didn't realize he was being strategic about it, but he was strategically putting people in place to support him. . . .

People were just really drawn to him. I think that is a big part of his success in pursuing higher education, was that whether he realized he was doing it or not, he knew how to build a solid support system, and not just a bunch of random people, people who really cared to help him and see him succeed.

Echoing these sentiments, another employee of a community service agency described Mr. Jones' help-seeking behavior:

And because he was never scared to ask for help, he also obviously formed connections with his teachers, which I think also is a huge benefit for someone who's trying to get through school, as well. Just making connections, in general, I think really elevated him with school.

Robert Jones was able to overcome these academic challenges through seeking help from others. An employee of a community service agency described his love of knowledge this way:

One thing that I really admired about him and something I think really helps for schooling is that he was never afraid to ask for help. If he didn't understand something, he was willing to try to work on it until he learned it. He was never scared to talk to people and get their perspective and their experiences. He was just very open to knowledge and that was really impressive.

And education, in my opinion, really is the silver bullet to get people to open their minds to new experience, learn and explore and discover and challenge themselves. And for someone to be able to have that opportunity, it can be a miraculous life-changing experience.

Today: "It's Really The Best It's Ever Really Been."

Finally, with the support of his network of role models and his help-seeking behaviors, Robert Jones began to think about serving as a role model for others. From modeling negative coping strategies from childhood and adolescence such as violence and substance abuse, to modeling positive coping strategies such as perseverance and a passion for knowledge, Robert Jones has reached a critical juncture in his life where he would now like to give back to those with backgrounds similar to his own. Thus with each success, Robert's confidence and sense of optimism about his future grow. An employee of a community service agency remarked on Robert's motivation to attain goals:

Fortunately, [Robert] is someone who is willing to put in that effort and was able to really get a start through school and then also managed to find employment, amazingly enough through a vet's place, for someone who has a history of drug abuse, which is very unusual, but I mean that's just the type of person [Robert] is. He had really shown a dramatic change from the way he described himself in the past.... Overall a wonderful person and someone who is very motivated to really restart his life, get connected with his family, and really put together all the components that are necessary for someone to get out of his present situation.

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As a result of finding purpose and clarifying his values, he has developed a sense of self worth. He believes that he can be effective in his life's work:

But I really would like to be able to, I think I do like teaching. You know? And I like sharing my experiences with people, but I've been thinking about where I would be good at... but my history is not with dual diagnosed clients. Mine is like maybe substance abuse or people that have a problem with connecting the dots, or people that might need to just talk so that they can find their way and find their own answers. People that doubt themselves, been abused, any/all of that kind of stuff. I think that's, incarceration, you know, all of that kind of stuff. I think that I, it's like my friends say, I got so much experience. It's like, "Okay, what do you want to pull out?" I just want to be able to be good at either one of them so when I help somebody or help a group or work with a group of people that I'm effective. Now, that's one thing that I'm really big on. Whatever I do, I want to be effective.

Robert Jones demonstrates self-efficacy by accepting speaking engagements and by agreeing to participate in this study. He believes that his story can make a difference in the lives of others: "But they say, '[E]very time somebody ask you to speak, that's your opportunity to share something that might help somebody else, or that might shed some light on something where somebody might be in the dark about.'"

This theme was repeated by an employee of a community service agency who remarked on Robert's motivation in seeking higher education:

The only thing that lingers for me with [Robert] is just me wanting to state that he is different, in my opinion, than most of the folks I've worked with who are homeless and who are moving on to higher education in that he's less looking for a practical skill, like a business degree or computers or getting certification with air conditioning and heating and stuff. He wants to help make the world a better place. He wants to help break a cycle that he went through and is a product of. He's giving back in a way that I don't see as often. I see more education as a means to an end, to be able to better provide for a family, get a higher income, have a more stable, solid career track, and I'm sure he thinks of all those things too, but for him it's bigger than that. I admire him a lot for that. I think that's probably what helps him keep going when he just wants to crawl in a hole and give up.

The notion that Robert has found meaning through giving back to society was shared by an administrator at Robert Jones' graduate institution:

And I think [Robert] has already. . . done a lot of self-reflection, and he's been very introspective about that. And people that are like that, with the education, are I think really great facilitators of change for other people because they can, you know, they can use their experiences. They can hold themselves out as, you know, this doesn't seem possible to you right now, but I'm – look at me. I'm here as an example to show you that this can happen. So, it really. . . can be a powerful tool for a person that's gonna be working with other people. And I think that makes him an asset to the university, as well.

I mean, we like to think that we have some – I don't wanna say, not responsibility. I think that's probably a strong word – you know, part in helping a person on that journey, you know, to use the talents that they have and the experiences that they've had to shape their lives and to help other people shape their lives in a positive way.

Today, Robert Jones displays tremendous optimism. When asked what his life is like right now, he responded that, "It's really the best it's ever really been, I think, as far as seeing the possibilities to be self-sufficient and take care of myself and having some real goals."

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is drawn from constructs from the case as well as Schlossberg's transition theory, which identifies the four S's (situation, self, support, and strategies) as important factors in determining an individual's ability to adapt to transition (see Figure 1; Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981). Re-offending and seeking higher education represent opposing but possible outcomes of the transition period following incarceration (although not all of the possible outcomes). The nature of the situation (role change); the attributes of self, such as hope and optimism; and the student's network of supportive individuals all contribute to the likelihood that Robert Jones will adopt successful coping strategies. The coping strategies utilized by Robert Jones stem from the situation, the attributes of self, and the support available to Mr. Jones. Ultimately, the coping strategies adopted by Robert Jones such as information seeking, social learning, and meaning-making help to determine that Outcome B (seeking higher education) will occur rather than Outcome A (re-offending).

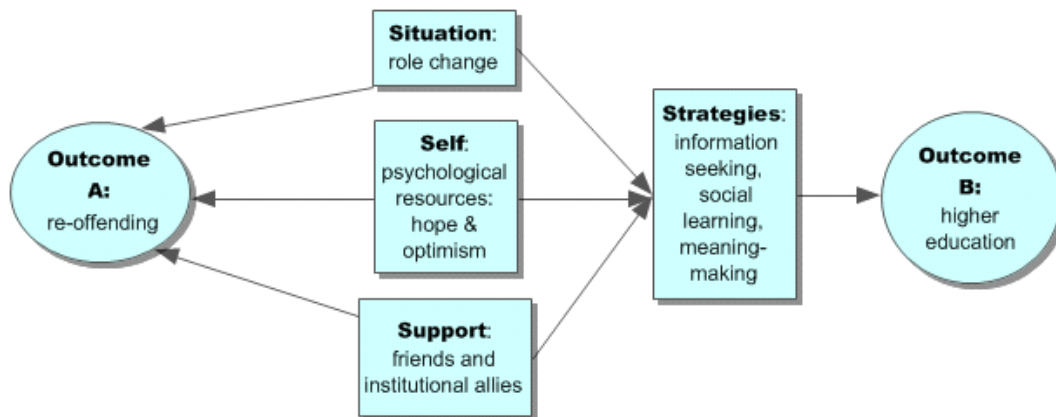


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework. Adapted from Goodman, Schlossberg, Anderson (2006); Schlossberg (1981).

Discussion

The discussion section is grounded in both the interview data and the research presented in the literature review. This section is divided into two parts on psychological and policy implications. I first ground my discussion of the psychological implications of the case in social learning theory, transition theory, and positive psychology. I then explore the institutional policy implications of the case for higher education institutions related to college admissions, student affairs practice, and curriculum.

Psychological Implications

In this section I consider Bandura's (1977, 1986) social learning theory; Schlossberg's transition theory; and constructs from positive psychology such as optimism, motivation, goal attainment, curiosity, and meaning-making as they relate to Robert Jones' life course. Social learning theory provides an important link between the social support that Robert Jones received and the strategies he applied in transitioning from incarceration to graduate school. Throughout his life, Robert Jones demonstrated the first two stages of Bandura's social learning theory, which include close contact and imitation of one's superiors. During his childhood and adolescence, close contact and imitation of his parents reinforced negative patterns of behavior. Thus, the pattern of family violence was internalized through social learning and reappeared later in Mr. Jones' abusive relationship with his daughters' mother. In adulthood, the pattern of socially learned behavior continued during Mr. Jones' incarceration for drug trafficking and after his release; however, during these periods he sought out different role models and model new behaviors.

Constructs from positive psychology provide an important theoretical link between Schlossberg's conceptions of self, particularly psychological resources, that can be used in a transition, and strategies for coping with transitions. In the interview data, attributes of self from positive psychology (e.g., hope, optimism, motivation) provide the mechanisms for effective coping strategies to occur. Mr. Jones' statements about his present situation and future aspirations as well as statements about Mr. Jones from individuals who knew him demonstrate these qualities.

Another important coping strategy for Robert Jones was to pursue knowledge. Thus, the experience of educating himself in prison is consistent both with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory that gathering information is an important coping mechanism (Goodman et al., 2006; Schlossberg, 1981) and the finding from positive psychology that curiosity and information seeking are necessary for human development (Schulman, 2002).

Another coping strategy that Robert Jones employed to deal with the transition from prison to graduate school was to find meaning in his suffering. In the data for this study, the four needs for meaning-making are closely interrelated. Through finding purpose, Robert Jones also clarified his values. Recall from the interview data that he values helping others, learning new things, and staying open-minded.

I suggest that some of the psychological strategies used by Mr. Jones to change his life trajectory have implications for other African American ex-convicts returning to higher education. With respect to role models, this means creating a network of supportive individuals and seeking help from this network whenever possible. Motivation to work towards goals in higher education is achieved in part by maintaining optimism about the future and pursuing areas

of study about which students have genuine curiosity. Perhaps the most important psychological implication of this case for ex-convicts is that they, as Victor Frankl (1976) suggested, must find purpose whether through giving back to society, caring for others, or pursuing a creative endeavor.

Policy Implications for Higher Education Institutions

Higher education institutions that deny access to former prisoners may be considering the safety and welfare of their student body as well as seeking to reduce liability. However, I believe it is important that academic administrators consider the extent to which these policies may disenfranchise African American males. While higher education institutions lament lower enrollment and persistence rates for African American males, they may be excluding these individuals from attending college through policies that deny admission or housing to students with criminal records.

However, admitting ex-convicts to college is not without risks. For instance, some former prisoners may lack the motivation and academic preparation necessary to succeed in college. In addition to problems of motivation and preparation for college, some ex-convicts may present a safety risk to their fellow students. Moreover, some faculty and administrators believe that ex-convicts do not belong on a college campus.

In light of these issues, I suggest institutions adopt a reasoned approach to admissions like the reconsideration of Mr. Jones' admission decision at his graduate institution. This approach to campus safety would involve admitting students on a case-by-case basis in which the nature of the crime is determined (i.e., violent or non-violent, drug-related or non-drug-related) and the risks of admitting an ex-convict are weighed against the benefits of educating an individual who may have an important contribution to make to the institution and to society.

As the incarceration rate in the United States continues to rise, I recommend that institutions of higher education examine institutional supports and services for former prisoners. This is especially relevant for community colleges, HBCUs, and institutions near state or federal prisons. Robert Jones reported that he was enrolled with a number of former prisoners at the community college he attended. Due to the stigma of incarceration, however, these individuals were reluctant to divulge their status as former prisoners in a higher education setting. Thus, this population of students who are also ex-convicts may be considered an "invisible minority" within higher education (Ross & Richards, 2009, p. 97-98).

Student affairs professionals may need to be aware that some students who at first identify themselves as nontraditional students may also have a history of incarceration. Once an institution determines that a population of ex-convicts is enrolled, a number of interventions are possible. Among the most important steps for counselors and student affairs professionals in assisting former prisoners is a comprehensive understanding of the factors that lead to successful reintegration after incarceration and the factors that lead to re-offending. The literature suggests that factors that discourage re-offending include adequate housing; gainful employment; a support system; and abstinence from alcohol, drugs, weapons, violence, and debt (Ross & Richards, 2009). Specific barriers for ex-convicts in higher education may include gaining admission, financial aid, and student housing as well as choosing an appropriate career and college major (Ross & Richards, 2009).

With respect to academic affairs, Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986) developed a highly successful transition course for adults returning to higher education, which included study of the life course, characteristics of adult learners, assessments of academic skills, and explorations of

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the meaning of higher education. Steltenpohl and Shipton describe characteristics of adult learners in higher education:

[N]ew adult learners lack confidence in their ability to study and learn. They are uncertain about expectations for college-level work. They do not understand the aims and purposes of liberal education. They lack information about the structure of colleges and universities and the organization of knowledge into disciplines. Their academic skills may be rusty or inadequate. They are strangers in this new world. They do not feel they belong. They feel marginal. (p. 638)

In addition to describing adult learners, I believe these characteristics accurately depict the marginalization experienced by former prisoners in higher education. In institutions with significant populations of former prisoners, a class similar to Steltenpohl and Shipton's college transition course might be developed to incorporate all of the academic elements of their course as well as strategies for reintegration into society after prison.

Conclusion

Robert Jones, the African American male who felt like Charlie Brown with his head exploding on the first day of community college, returned to class the next day and the day after that. He not only persisted to graduate from community college, but he went on to receive a bachelor's degree and pursue a master's degree in social work. In contrast to the bewildered community college student of the past, today Robert Jones aspires to complete a PhD program. He states, "But I really feel like, and this is how I feel now, but I feel like getting a PhD is a personal goal."

In this paper, I have demonstrated how Robert Jones transitioned from prison to graduate school through a combination of successful coping strategies, which included social learning, hope, optimism, information seeking, and meaning-making. I have also examined some of the policy and research implications of ex-convicts returning to higher education after imprisonment. In describing the challenges and opportunities of an African American male ex-convict who succeeded in pursuing a college education, I hope to focus attention on an often overlooked phenomenon in American higher education.

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