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## “When You’re Done ... You’re Still Part of Our Family”: An Exploration of Gendered Scripts and Relationships in Prison Reentry Programs

Ruth Schultz  
*University of Dayton*

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**An Exploration of Gendered Scripts and Relationships  
in Prison Reentry Programs**



Honors Thesis

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Department: Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work

Advisors: Jamie Small, Ph.D. and Anya Galli Robertson, Ph.D.

April 2020

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**Abstract**

Historically, the criminal justice system has been primarily composed of men; this lack of diversity led services to see offenders as an almost genderless category. The demographics of the criminal justice system has greatly changed, however. In 1990 there were 43,845 women under the jurisdiction of state and correctional authorities in the US (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1995). As mass incarceration took hold in the United States, this population more than doubled; by 2017 the number of incarcerated women grew to 111,360 (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019). Mass incarceration has led to an increase in rehabilitative programs and as the gender demographics of the criminal justice system changes, social services have been tasked with addressing the needs of returning citizens with an increasing focus on gender. Past research has largely focused on gender specific needs within the criminal justice system itself. This project explores perceptions of gender in reentry among social service workers, which will demonstrate how gender is conceptualized and reproduced within these services. I conducted 18 interviews with social service workers to ask about their perceptions on gender in reentry and how their organizations reproduce gendered ideologies. Social service workers often reported diverse gender needs in terms of external barriers such as trauma, community perceptions, social support, and parenting responsibilities. These findings reveal gender reproduction and interactions within the context of reentry and analyze how gender identity intersects with an “ex-offender” status.



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*“I got gang raped when I was 16 and I was left for dead....my boyfriend set me up because he owed these guys a debt. He set me up and I lived that rape for almost 30 years. But as soon as I was able to let it go I felt free because I said I can't keep making these mistakes, I can't keep going back to something that happened 20 years ago. See that's the reason I'm doing this stuff, but because I didn't deal with it in a healthy way I kept using. I just kept pushing stuff down and wasn't letting anything out.” -Salma*

I was halfway through conducting my interviews when I sat down with Salma in her office in the basement of her apartment building. Surrounded by colorful posters and an array of old photographs, we discussed her current experience with reentry as a practicing social service worker and decades ago as a returning citizen herself. In our interview, we discussed how she is grateful to be in an environment where people take her experiences as valid. Even though she may not always have the degrees and certificates people expect her to have, her expertise is without question because the experiences she brings to the table are valuable. When people question her abilities she simply says, “my degree is life, how I deal with it, how I've overcome it, and how I continue to look at it, that's my degree, my love for people and my love for being real and my love for being my authentic self, because I'm crazy as hell.” “Life” is often not considered a legitimate degree because personal experiences can often be devalued and dismissed as unreliable anecdotes. However, Salma’s life experiences allow her to bond with returning citizens in unique ways because they share many of the same experiences. This has led her to value her life experiences and be open about them in her work rather than putting them to the side, even when the latter is typically considered more professional. Her choice to be personal in her work creates an environment that allows for relationships and a broader sense of understanding to occur. In this context, the

personal experiences I have chosen to focus on surround gender because of the ways gendered narratives are created and perpetuated throughout the criminal justice system.

The social service workers I interviewed through this project implemented gendered strategies to address returning citizen's needs. Approaching reentry work through a gendered lens often begins by identifying the barriers returning citizens are facing. In Ohio, the needs of returning citizens are often determined through ORAS, or the Ohio Risk Assessment System, which assigns returning citizens risk scores that correlate to how likely they are to recidivate. ORAS explicitly accounts for gender by making the cutoff score for women lower, as they are less likely to recidivate (Latessa et al, 2013). However, this would not qualify as a gender responsive needs assessment due to this fact alone. A gender responsive needs assessment is a tool that accounts for gendered experiences like domestic violence, in addition to addressing needs that are considered more standard, such as employment. Gender responsive reentry programs often utilize these assessment tools and are characterized by accounting for gender throughout their services. This is a shift from historical considerations of gender in the criminal justice system,

In this paper I will examine perceptions of gender throughout the reentry process as well as the responsive programming that has been created to meet these needs. The conceptualizations of these processes from those working in reentry will reveal the existing discourse on gender in reentry and what that means for returning citizens. Through analyzing a series of interviews with social service workers I expect to find an increased knowledge and support for gender responsive measures in reentry that aim to address the needs of women in new ways. I will also examine the perceived needs of

returning citizens in reentry and where these perceptions come from. Lastly, I wish to assess current knowledge about those who are genderqueer and how these identities and needs are perceived throughout the reentry process.

In this study, I explore the gendered perceptions of social service workers working within reentry services. In this context, I define ideals surrounding gender as the beliefs, goals, and guiding principles of social service workers. I examine how these ideals are constructed and how they influence reentry services, specifically in terms of gender. The specific questions addressed throughout this study are:

1. What are the perceived needs and barriers in reentry among social service workers?
2. Do these perceived needs and barriers differ by gender?
3. How do these perceptions create and reproduce normative ideas about gender?

### **Review of the Literature**

As the issue of mass incarceration exponentially increases in the United States, so has discourse on prisons and sentencing. Ideas about criminal justice reform that would have been considered radical in the past are coming to the forefront of mainstream policy discussions. These discussions often include ideas such as reversing mass incarceration, ending the death penalty, and promoting prison reentry programs (Williams, 2019).

Reentry work in this context entails any service or program open to those who have been in prison and are seeking to assimilate back into the broader community. Reentry programs aim to assist those returning from prison in many ways, including assisting in job searches, addressing mental health needs, finding affordable housing. Through this

process, the rhetoric around reentry services is often framed as asking “what works and what doesn’t” rather than questioning how these systems function and what norms they perpetuate through that existence. Examining how gender is reproduced throughout the reentry process is beneficial because it focuses more on people’s lived experiences rather than simply analyzing programs. Gender manifests itself within reentry programs, and people’s lives, in a number of different ways. In this section I will begin to discuss how gender impacts experiences of trauma and other social barriers related to incarceration and reentry. Then, I will employ an intersectional framework to discuss how gender intersects with other identities and criticize reductionist or additive approaches of identity. Lastly, I will discuss the professional responses of social service workers and begin to examine how they perceive issues of gender to exist within their field.

### *Trauma and External Barriers to Reentry*

Serving time in prison can be a distressing event in itself, and this stress is often heightened or complicated with the coexistence of other social challenges. These challenges are often highly traumatic in nature and could include intimate partner violence, sexual abuse, and struggles with mental health, poverty, or drug abuse. Any of these experiences can make reentry more difficult because the returning citizen must assimilate back into their community while simultaneously learning to cope with these difficulties. Gender is also a factor in whether or not a person is likely to experience certain types of trauma — a phenomenon that is most commonly recognized in terms of sexual assault. It has also been shown that women in prison are also more likely than their male counterparts to experience mental illness and suicidal ideation (Kellett & Willging, 2011). These examples provide evidence for gender-correlated trauma, but it



has also been found that gender affects the way these experiences are perceived by the victim. In other words, the same instance of trauma can affect people differently based on the way they have been socialized through gender norms. Past studies have found that gender roles operate as a framework that men and women use as a basis to understand and describe their experiences (Herrschaft, Veysey, Tubman-Carbone, & Christian, 2009). These findings outline how people comprehend, describe, and navigate traumatic experiences in a gendered way. These gendered experiences are relevant to reentry services because they provide support for using a gender responsive approach.

The intersectional aspect of trauma means that these experiences are perceived differently depending on the corresponding identities and the life history of the person experiencing them. Carlson and colleagues studied parents who had been incarcerated and found that alcohol and drug abuse was significantly associated with having experienced more physical and sexual abuse in the past for mothers. For fathers, alcohol and drug abuse was associated with having experienced victimization by family members as a child. Carlson found that for both mothers and fathers, reentry needs were greater if the returning citizen struggled with drug or alcohol abuse. These findings suggest that mothers are more likely to have needs upon release because they are more likely to experience trauma before their time in prison. It is important that social service workers are aware of needs like these because they show how life histories can differ by gender, and reentry services should be structured accordingly.

The increased likelihood of trauma makes women more likely to abuse substances, which in turn makes them more likely to have needs to treat these issues in reentry (Carlson, Shafer, & Duffee, 2010; Few & Arditti, 2008). These needs can be

addressed by combining multiple services, such as drug treatment, mental health support services, and trauma informed care. The idea that women have broader needs in reentry is supported by Carlson's research, which finds that when inmates were asked to self-report their estimated reentry needs upon release 91.3% of women reported that they needed assistance whereas 80.1% of men said the same (Carlson et al., 2010). In terms of assistance that is received, Few & Arditti found that mothers were likely to receive support in both a professional and personal setting. In both settings, these women were able to address their emotional needs in part because of their status as mothers, so people were more likely to see them as "in need" (Few & Arditti, 2008).

Outside of trauma, public perception can also be a barrier to reentry. Sometimes this is explicitly clear in situations such as employment discrimination, other times negative perceptions work more subtly, such as reentry program design. Garland, Wodahl, and Schuhmann studied public perception of reentry services and found that although most people favored the abstract concept of helping returning citizens, very few were in favor of implementing programs to help them, and even less were willing to use tax dollars to fund those programs (2013). The same participants also reported that they did not think that people who have been to prison should have the same opportunities as those who have not been to prison (Garland, Wodahl, & Schuhmann, 2013). Lack of public support is a barrier to reentry because it treats returning citizens as less deserving of assistance and it punishes them long after their sentence has been served.

The lack of public support for returning citizens also impacts how those working in reentry services view returning citizens. This includes staff members who work in reentry programs directly and social service workers who work in organizations that

serve the general community and just happen to also serve people who are returning from prison. Lurigio and colleagues examined the perceptions of jail staff members to determine how they perceived their female inmates (2016). They found that staff members saw the women as having experienced trauma, and that this trauma was often worsened by experiences with poverty. For this reason, they reported that the greatest needs they saw of women in reentry were trouble finding housing, limited services, parole/probation requirements, substance abuse, mental illness, and trauma (Lurigio, Belknap, Lynch, & Dehart, 2016).

### *Identity Construction and Reproduction*

In studying race and gender, both mainstream feminist theory and criminal justice theory often conceptualize “women” as only white women and “people of color” as only black men (Caputo-Levine, 2010). This produces a limited view of people’s lived experiences and results in practices and policies that do not address the needs or realities of everyone. This is especially true in terms of the criminal justice system, and this habit of misinterpretation and exclusion is evident throughout the reentry process in the United States. Historically, the racist policies of the War on Drugs (including the three strike laws and mandatory minimums) have resulted in a society that cares more about race and class than the crime committed. Many of these racist practices continue to perpetuate inequalities today.

The challenges that come with racism are not experienced by men and women of color in the same way. The convergence of identities such as race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability operate differently based on context. Strategies that only address

one aspect of identity are limited. Efforts that address needs by separating components of people's identities are inadequate because they do not address the complexity of the obstacles people face in the real world (Crenshaw, 1991). This is evident with women of color in the criminal justice system. Women of color do not simply experience sexism in addition to racism, but also a unique societal positioning because of the ways in which their gender, race, and other identity components interact with one another (Hancock, 2007). This intersectional societal location comes with its own structural barriers that men of color or white women do not experience. While it is in no way true that all women of color are single mothers, statistics show that there are more women of color than white women who are the sole caretakers of their children. As a result, their children are more likely to be displaced by incarceration. This creates a racialized narrative that women of color who are incarcerated are "abandoning their children" in a way that white women are not (Brown, 2010).

While race can play a role in how gender is conceptualized and reproduced, it is worth noting that this often positions men and women as the only two categories, and these categories are considered as both opposite and static. This framework does not represent everyone's experiences with gender, and it restricts people from existing outside of the binary or challenging its perpetual reproduction. In both the criminal justice system and society more generally, gender is seen as natural and biological as opposed to socially constructed. These oppositional categories are assumed to be innate and indisputable. As a result, the mere presence of those who are transgender or genderqueer questions that rhetoric. People who are transgender are often assumed to be illegitimate or deceptive if they do not undergo genital reassignment surgery. This bias is

present in general society but is heightened in the criminal justice system. This is due to a heavy focus on “biological gender,” which is particularly problematic within the realm of the criminal justice system as many prisoners are forced to house with the gender they were assigned at birth, without regard for their gender identity. Partially for this reason, rates of physical and sexual assault are high among transgender inmates, particularly if they are also people of color (Buist & Stone, 2014; Griffin, 2016). In efforts to prevent this violence, many prisons and jails will place transgender individuals in protective custody. Although this may stop acts of aggression from other inmates, in reality this process differs very little from solitary confinement, a process which only serves to further punish transgender inmates due to the many mental health effects associated with the measure (Buist & Stone, 2014). If people who are transgender are more likely to be put in solitary confinement and experience the corresponding mental health issues, then they will most likely have greater needs upon release. The additional reentry needs of people who are transgender may be considered a result of their “complex identities” rather than the ways in which social factors create additional barriers for marginalized identities (Sexton, Jenness, & Sumner, 2010).

There are numerous structural barriers that exist for returning citizens upon release, but different identities relate to these barriers in various ways. How people perceive the functioning of the barriers in social institutions is important because it largely determines if they are willing to work within those flawed systems. In her ethnographic research with formerly incarcerated men, Trimbur talked to men of color to examine how they perceived barriers during their reentry process. Some of the men that were interviewed expressed distrust for reentry services because they thought that

desistance from their criminal past would be betraying their true selves. This distrust was often an understandable reaction to racist policies and attitudes, and it stopped many men from accessing resources. Other men in the study took a different route and created a regimented schedule for themselves that they did not allow themselves to deviate from, which they cited as an effort to refrain from criminal activities (Trimbur, 2009). In both studies, Trimbur and LeBel found that people who have been to prison perceive a great deal of stigma from their communities and perceive difficulties in their lives due to their status (LeBel, Richie, & Maruna, 2015; Trimbur, 2009). In this context, the stigma against returning citizens is characterized by a broad societal perception that those who have been to prison are deficient in some way (Goffman, 1997). Some returning citizens choose to keep their criminal past a secret due to the stigma, others chose to embrace it as part of their life path. Those in the latter category often choose to go into reentry work themselves. The people who chose to work in reentry differed from their clients in terms of perceived stigma in that they saw society as more welcoming of their criminal past (LeBel et al., 2015).

### *Professional Responses and Support Systems*

Social service personnel who work with returning citizens have had an emerging challenge in recent years due to the fact that the number of people who are incarcerated is steadily growing, and the demographics of that population is changing drastically. For example, from 1960 to 2011, imprisonment of men in the US increased by 7% while women's rate increased by 14% (Cnaan, Draine, Frazier, & Sinha, 2008; Gurusami, 2017). This has led to the demographics of those in the criminal justice system to change drastically, but there are still far more men incarcerated than women. As of 2017 there

were 1,489,363 prisoners were under jurisdiction of state or federal correctional authorities in the United States; 1,387,003 of these prisoners were men and 111,360 of them were women (Bronson & Carson, 2019).

Some reentry programs have responded to this shift by creating gender responsive programs, which are meant to account for the growing number of women in the criminal justice system. Gender responsive programs differ in their application, but they often feature a needs assessment that accounts for gendered experiences. As previously discussed, gender can make some needs more salient than others. A gender responsive program therefore, would recognize these various needs and make resources accessible even when multiple needs coexist with one another. Reentry programs often begin with a gender responsive needs assessment because they are a concrete way to include gender in the reentry process (Holtfreter & Wattanaporn, 2014; Salisbury, van Voorhis, & Spiropoulos, 2009). Professional responses to gender in reentry are largely determined by staff attitudes because staff members are the people designing programs and implementing day to day changes. Social environments and work positions can play a role in determining these attitudes. Camp and Dagget conducted a survey of treatment staff attitudes in reentry, finding that treatment staff were more likely to value reentry than correctional officers (Camp & Daggett, 2016). These findings reveal the differing rhetoric on the role of personal choice in the criminal justice system.

The emphasis on the idea of personal choice throughout the criminal justice system is a strategy used by those in positions of power to justify and perpetuate traditional methods of control, which shifts the blame away from societal injustices and toward individual ethics. To study the role of personal choice in reentry, Kellet and

Willging conducted interviews with women who had gone through the reentry process to discuss how they had been treated by reentry staff members (Kellett & Willig, 2011). Many of the women reported that language used by staff members caused them to feel guilty and to blame themselves for their struggles with mental health and substance abuse. This mindset was especially detrimental to women who had no other form of support, because the rhetoric of the reentry staff made these women believe that they were completely at fault for their situation (Kellett & Willig, 2011). Reentry staff can also be a negative force during reentry if they exhibit practices that are restrictive on the basis of identity, such as race or gender. This was found to be the case by Gurusami in her study on formerly incarcerated black women who were returning to the workforce. Through ethnographic observations, she found that women were often helped not to become better people, but to become better workers. This heightened value in employment assumes that work ethic leads to morality, which reveals the influence of personal beliefs in formalized services (Gurusami, 2017).

### *Present Study*

In terms of prison reentry services, gender is undeniably an important topic to consider because people's identities can largely determine how they relate to the world. There is a great deal of research discussing gender specific needs from the perspective of women who have been incarcerated, specifically surrounding the role of motherhood in reentry. This is an important topic to consider, but there is a gap in the research studying the discourse on gender among those who work in reentry services. Often when these studies say "gender," more often than not they mean women. Instead, I intend to examine gender as a broader social and cultural process. These studies are also lacking in that they



often do not look at gender as a broad cultural process; they often only account for women's experiences. While it is true that the presence of women in the criminal justice system has increased the dialogue on gender in general, not all institutions that have historically worked within the gender binary have fully come to terms with broader realities of gendered experiences. Gender is an important aspect of reentry to consider because the messages and assumptions of those in charge of reentry services can play a large role in the efficacy and success of those services. If there are few services available for gender specific needs, this can severely impact a person's success in reentry. It is also important to consider how people who do not identify within the gender binary or who are transgender may be impacted by the rhetoric of people working in reentry. If staff members are not educated on the complexities of gender, they could inadvertently become a barrier to reentry, as their attitudes may deter returning citizens from accessing services.

## **METHODS**

The data for this project come from a series of qualitative in-depth interviews that I conducted the summer of 2019. I conducted these interviews in Montgomery County because the reentry programs in this county have transitioned from grassroots organizations to formalized programs within the last 15 years. This is relevant to my research questions because the formalization of these programs have included gender-responsive measures in addressing reentry. Having conversations with social service workers was the most productive way to answer the research questions listed above because the interviewees were able to articulate their perceptions and I was able to ask questions to dig deeper in the specific themes related to my research questions. These

interviews were conducted under a semi-structured framework, but in practice I asked questions in a conversational manner (Lofland and Lofland, 1995). The conversational manner of these interviews was especially useful in discussing the gendered aspect of their perceptions because this style made space for clarifying questions that allowed their answers to be put into a broader context of gendered norms and expectations.

### *Sample*

My interview sample includes people who work as social service workers in Montgomery County, which is located in southwest Ohio. I constructed this sample from a list of reentry resources made available by a county level reentry program on a publicly accessible website. This list separates programs based on the various needs of returners into 14 different categories, such as legal aid, housing, clothing, and employment. From this list, I randomly selected one organization to contact from each category to invite to participate in the study. I then used snowball sampling to determine which organizations to contact after initial interviews. Some of the interview respondents work in reentry directly, since their organizations are designed specifically to address the needs of people returning to the community from prison. Other respondents come from organizations that offer indirect reentry services, meaning that their organization is not specifically designed for reentry, but many of their clientele happen to be returning citizens. For this reason, the respondents' knowledge of the criminal justice system varied, but all respondents were able and willing to discuss how they perceive gender to play a role in their work and interactions with returning citizens. All identifying information of the participants and the organizations they work for are replaced with pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality. Participants were not compensated for participating in the study.

*Location*

All the interviews for this project were conducted in Montgomery County Ohio. This location was ideal for answering my research questions because social services in this area have drastically changed how they address reentry needs within the past 15 years. According to my interviewees, virtually no reentry programs were formalized in the county until about 10 years ago. Up until then, most reentry efforts were grassroots organizations that were often faith based. While I did not talk to anyone from one of these early programs, my interviewees were under the impression that these efforts did not explicitly address gendered needs, in part due to their informal nature. As programs became more formalized however, gender came to the forefront of reentry discussions because social service workers began to recognize that their clients had distinct needs that could not be addressed without considering gender. The social service workers I interviewed often played a major role in determining what gendered needs existed and how their services could respond appropriately. For this reason, Montgomery County was an ideal research location because it allowed me to interview people directly involved with the implementation of gender responsive reentry measures. Conducting my interviews in this location allowed me to learn how social service workers perceived gender impacted their client's needs and experiences as well as the factors that played a role in determining how their organizations would play a role in addressing these needs. I also selected this location in part due to the ease of access which comes from being a student at the University of Dayton, which is located in Montgomery County. As a result, I am very familiar with the location and was aware of many of the organizations my interviewees worked at before this project began.

### *Design and Procedure*

In total, I conducted eighteen semi-structured interviews for this study. Forty-six individuals were invited to participate, which means the invitations to participate had about a 39% response rate. The interviews took anywhere from twenty to ninety minutes. The questions focused on the services offered for returning citizens as well as how the interviewees perceived gender to be a part of the returning process. I transcribed with Nvivo transcription software. I conducted the first round of coding by hand and the second round using QDA miner lite software. Coding by hand allowed me to analyze interview transcripts to identify emergent themes. I then grouped similar claims into broad thematic categories: parenthood as social capital, professional support systems, environmental factors, and effects of the binary. I also divided each into multiple subcategories. These categories were determined inductively based on the interviewee's responses and were developed throughout the coding process.

### *Demographics*

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#### *Gender*

Women: n=11

Men: n=7

#### *Type of Social Service Agency*

Reentry Specific: n= 9

Serves General Community: n=9

#### *Years of Experience in their Field*

Under 20: n= 9

Over 20: n= 6

Unknown: n= 3

#### *Personal Experience with Reentry*

Was a returning citizen themselves: n=4

Has not been through reentry personally: n=14

#### *Role in Reentry Services*

Programming: 3

Works directly with clientele: 15

Based on my own perceptions and observations, most participants were women (n=11), as listed in Table 1. This is relevant because I found that the interviewees who were women were more likely to draw on their personal experiences of gender whereas the men were more likely to discuss gender in broader terms. A few of the participants indicated that they did not work directly with clientele, but instead focused more on programming (n=3). The interviewees in these roles may have had weaker relationships with those going through reentry, but their perspectives are valuable because they provide reasoning for certain practices within the organizations. Interviewees who did work directly with clients (n=15), on the other hand, had more experience with how the returning citizens view their own reentry, which in turn may have impacted their own perspectives on the process. Half of the participants did not work for reentry-specific organizations but instead worked for organizations that serve the general population but happen to have a number of clients who are returning citizens (n=9). The participants who worked in organizations that serve the general community differed from their reentry-specific counterparts because they could directly see how the needs of those going through reentry compare to the needs of the general community. The interviewees displayed a great range of experience in their field, with the fewest years of experience being eight and the greatest being fifty-five. Nine of the participants worked in their field for less than twenty years, with an average of thirteen years total. Seven of the participants had over twenty years of experience, with an average of thirty five years total. Three interviewees did not say how long they had worked in their field. A few of the participants who were working in reentry services at the time of their interview indicated that at one point they were returning citizens themselves (n=4). These

interviewees offer a unique perspective because they knew what it was like to be a staff member and a client firsthand. In the sections that follow, I report social service worker's perceptions of the services they offer, parenthood, trauma, and the gender binary.

## **FINDINGS**

A large number of the social service workers I interviewed stated that they greatly valued forming relationships with their clients. They argued that these connections were necessary because they fostered an environment in which emotional vulnerability was possible, which they considered to be useful in deciding what services to provide. These relationships often allowed social service workers to account for gendered needs that they might not have been aware of otherwise. However, these bonds were also created with the use of many gendered scripts, which can ultimately make the reentry process more difficult.

### **GENDERED SCRIPTS IN REENTRY SERVICES**

Social service workers are not immune to the societal pressures that shape gender norms, and their work does not occur in a vacuum. Participants expressed gender stereotypes that reflect and reinforce binary constructions of gender that position men and women as opposites. These stereotypes informed how social services interacted with and perceived their clients. Women were often depicted as gentle and men were considered to be more autonomous, and both of these qualities were usually considered innate. When asked how gender impacts forming relationships in the community, Donna, founder of a non-profit for impoverished communities, said that in her view, “women tend to be more nurturing, they recognize a nurturing environment when they see it... they are willing to build relationships, the men don't always have the same skill set women do. Or the same predisposition.” After pausing for a moment, she concluded by saying, “especially if

they're moms. And that's just a wild generalization." This view demonstrates the static nature of gender because the reasoning she provides characterizes differences as innate. At first she says that women have more relationships because they are "willing," but this idea shifts slightly when she decides this is actually due to women's unique "skillset," until she finally decides that gender differences are actually a result of different dispositions. The indecisiveness of this quote represents the ways in which gender norms are uncertain and arbitrary, yet pervasive.

The gendered scripts social service workers operate from are relevant because they play a role in how they perceive the needs of their clients and how these needs should be addressed. This was expressed by Amelia, a reentry spokesperson who was a returning citizen in Montgomery County herself when she said:

Women are hard to get along with, they are. We're finicky, we want things our way, where men just want a bed to sleep in and that's it. Give them a bed and somewhere to bathe and they're good. But women, they want more and they're more catty, and that's how people feel.

While women are often seen as nurturing, as seen in the paragraph above, this gendered portrayal can shift to "finicky" and "catty" if women express that they have needs. Portraying women as catty when they are typically seen as nurturing both destabilizes and reinforces typical notions of gender. Women's "cattiness" questions gender roles because it proves that they do not always exist to serve others in a nurturing way. Yet, this idea also reinforces women's roles as caretakers because only women who step out of line and express their own needs are considered catty. Nurturing women are only meant to serve needs, they have none of their own. This is interesting considering that the men in this example are also considered to have only basic needs. Men are portrayed as only needing a bed and a bath, because they are considered above having needs. In

reentry, these portrayals of gender could be harmful because men could be seen as not having needs when they actually do, and women could be dismissed as petty for voicing their needs.

Social service workers can also rely on a gendered framework to justify their clients' behaviors. Sandra, who works at a social service clothing agency, discussed why the women she worked with were "hardened" when she said that, "as women we're nurturers so we're automatically born to nurture. When something dramatic happens in our life and those abilities are taken away from us we can become very withdrawn." This assessment is relevant because it addresses women as "hardened," an adjective usually directed at men, but alleviates the dissonance between how she perceives women and social expectations for women by claiming that their coldness is a result of them losing their abilities to nurture, which places them back within traditional ideas of womanhood. Social service workers also operate within gendered narratives when they interact with men. Holly, a reentry program adviser, expressed a gendered assessment of men when she said that "men tend to operate far more independently than women do... by nature they have this mindset that they're the provider, that they have to take care of the family." Again, this description attributes the perceived characteristics of men as personal and innate rather than societal. This is an important distinction because social service worker's assessment of the source of problems could change how they address issues with their clients.

The gender binary displaces everyone, but this exclusion is often heightened in the criminal justice system because social services are often constructed around the idea that everyone is either male or female. The reality of this framework is often reflected in



perceptions of gender because many social service workers are left without the proper language to discuss existing outside of the binary. This can perpetuate the inaccurate idea that there is no one who lives outside of this social construct. The reality of this erasure is evident in laws that are present in many states that require people to be housed with the gender they were assigned at birth. This system of housing was described to me by Lisa, an officer at a correctional facility in Montgomery County. She disclosed that the facility had learned how to manage with this law and explained that, “we’re not comfortable putting them in their biological units if they’re uncomfortable so we keep them separated so they feel safe, but then that takes away a cell for someone who has a serious medical need.” This effort shows an attempt to push against the mandated gender binary system, but reveals the difficult reality of working within such a structure because this method essentially quarantines a certain population based on their gender. Linda expressed that on a practical level, placing transgender individuals in single cells is inefficient because it takes the space away from those with serious medical needs. The individuals that are displaced in this process are transferred to a nursing home with a guard, which comes with large financial costs.

Social service workers often have to work within the gender binary, and they recognize the ways in which many of their clients have to do the same. Describing her experience in the legal field, Christina illustrated how many individuals who are transgender endure a rigid system that does not account for their existence:

Usually if someone is biologically female, but they present as male, when it comes to the justice system they will revert to being the female knowing that they’re likely to get either a lighter sentence and/or be treated better in a women’s prison than having to face what could happen in a men’s prison to them.

Christina says that people may present with the gender they were assigned at birth rather than their gender identity in order to take agency in how they are going to be perceived and treated and went on to explain that, “it’s a way of trying to maneuver the system in a certain way too, how you present and how the system is going to potentially treat you and consider you, whether you’re a victim or a perpetrator.” While the gender binary forces all returning citizens to consider how the public will perceive their criminal records, those who are transgender have the additional task of having to decide how to present themselves in order to be treated the most fairly. It appears that some social service workers, such as Christina, recognize the presence of these choices and the burden that comes with having to choose between gender identity and justice. However, it is also clear that some social service workers either do not realize the severity of these issues or are not equipped to address them adequately.

Often social service workers are not experienced with people who do not identify with the gender binary, so they may not have the language to discuss these individuals. When I asked Lisa how her agency housed individuals who were non-binary she answered in a confused tone that, “we have not had any... pansexuals at this point?” This lack of vocabulary is reflected in a general attitude of acceptance that is not based on knowledge of real-world experiences. This was exemplified by Sandra, who argued that their clients are encouraged to dress in accordance with their gender identity by saying that, “we allow them to choose what they would like to wear. So if it’s a woman who identifies as a man and she wants to wear a suit that’s fine.” In this setting acceptance is seen as letting people have options to do what they want, but this definition of acceptance

can be limited in that it does not acknowledge the fact that people may be operating from different social positions that come with their own unique needs.

### **PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT SYSTEMS**

There is a call from social service workers for both returning citizens and their families to receive resources to repair and maintain their relationships in the reentry process. However, throughout this process, women are assigned a large emotional burden and men are not given the proper resources they need to fully contribute. Adam, a man who had been through prison reentry himself, worked at a social service agency that offered a class focused on maintaining and repairing relationships between returning citizens and their families. The class taught returning citizens, “what’s expected from a mother, a son, a father, a mate, and a spouse.” Adam emphasized that the focus of this class was to teach women how to adjust “in a family setting without having to go use drugs, go drinking, or just saying forget it and giving up on a family setting.” This relationships class was the only class the agency specified as solely for women, and there was no equivalent class offered only to men. This gendered emphasis on maintaining women’s relationships is relevant considering that many social service workers perceived women to have more reliable pre-existing personal relationships than men.

The access of emotional support systems in the community is largely determined by gender, and social service workers have been tasked with the challenge of helping returning citizens access the relational supports they need with these gendered barriers in mind. Ellen, a social service worker who has worked in mental health services for 50 years, emphasized that in her experience men had less support systems in the community, and this lack of relationships made reentry difficult for them. She gave the example of

one of her client's whom she had been counseling after he was released from a fourteen-year sentence. Ellen was shocked when she got a call from local police officers telling her that her client had robbed a bank and said that, "I thought he was doing a great job, but he was struggling. He was lonely... I went to see him and he said he didn't want to stay out. He wanted to go back." Ellen emphasized that the loneliness her client felt demonstrated that those without opportunities and support systems are the people who are likely to recidivate. Despite widespread agreement among respondents that personal relationships were necessary for reentry, emotional support services were often only suggested if women were involved. I asked Ellen if she knew of any services that helped men develop their personal relationships and she replied that, "nobody would do that because it would be discrimination." This idea suggests that creating spaces for men to develop relationships is exclusionary towards women; yet discrimination was not cited as a concern when discussing the relationships class that was only offered to women.

Interviewees disagreed on whether it was more difficult for men or women to find employment in the reentry process. Carolyn, who works in a reentry program, captured both sides of this debate by arguing that men had more opportunities to find employment as returning citizens, but some employers were likely to be more lenient to men because they perceived the women as violent. She pointed out that women were not always treated with more leniency however, and said that, "females that have theft on their record are treated taboo, treated actually as if a male that may have something violent on their record." Other interviewees argued that differences in hiring was not necessarily due to sexist hiring practices, but the lack of congruence between jobs that are available for returning citizens and women's interests and qualifications. This issue was demonstrated

by Amelia, who explained that it can be frustrating to be a returning citizen as a woman because, “most of the jobs are geared toward men— they’re factory labor jobs, truck drivers. I mean women do those things but not a lady like myself.” Labor jobs are often the most available to returning citizens because they are accepting of criminal records, and Amelia describes this reality. Her statement shows that women may not find these jobs desirable, possibly because they want to find employment that is deemed acceptable by existing gender norms. Amelia makes this move herself by saying that women are capable of doing such jobs, but distances herself from other women by saying that “ladies” like herself do not. Second, labor jobs can be impractical for women who are mothers because these jobs have long and unpredictable hours that can make caring for a child burdensome. Lastly, male dominated fields can also be unsafe for women to enter because they risk entering hostile work environments that may be challenging due to sexual harassment and violence. This can be especially difficult for women who are returning citizens because they may not have the resources to address these acts of violence.

The social service workers I spoke to operate under the mindset that forming personal relationships with their clients is not simply beneficial, but necessary for successful reentry. On an organizational level, they employ strategies that work toward building emotional intelligence and trust between themselves and their clients. Robert advocates for building personal relationships in a professional setting by explaining that, “it is one thing to ask about drug use for example, but you need a lot more than that. But what does that really require if you’re going to ask questions like that? A trusting relationship.” The perceived value of personal relationships suggests that reentry services

cannot simply operate in a formalized and predictable pattern because this immobile structure does not allow necessary personal relationships to form. Robert's approach emphasizes getting to know clients as people so their needs are addressed, and they can become members of the community.

While some social service workers intentionally choose to develop personal relationships, others described relationships that evolved spontaneously. When I asked Donna if her views of returning citizens had changed since she started working with this population so closely, she explained that while she used to be somewhat wary of returning citizens because she had never known any ex-offenders. That changed when she worked with a large cohort of men who were returning citizens as a social service worker, and she was surprised at how close she became with many of them. Donna attributed the development of these relationships to how her team approached the men by saying, "we were upbeat and positive and very nurturing. And they were just great; they responded to our warmth and our caring and it's just kind of who we are." Women are traditionally regarded as "nurturing" in ways that hegemonic definitions of masculinity do not allow for. Donna's statement works within this framework by assuming that the warm and caring features men displayed were not a result of them possessing those qualities, but that they were simply responding to the characteristics women displayed. This was exemplified further when Donna went on to say that, "the relationships that we were able to build really did change our attitudes." The language in this assertion is relevant because she does not emphasize how the men demonstrated good character, or how they performed in a way that disproved her initial nervousness. Instead she asserts that the important factor in changing attitudes was the relationship that existed between

the men and women. This frames the potential warmth and caring that was displayed by the returning citizens as something potentially temporary and situational rather than characteristics they possessed.

The social service workers I interviewed valued personal relationships with their clients not only because it allowed them to assess their needs, but also because it allowed them to provide ongoing support and see their clients become contributing members of their communities. Social service workers who worked one on one with returning citizens said they were proud that they have maintained supportive relationships with their clients even after they have completed reentry services. These personal connections are considered necessary rather than supplementary. Deborah, a reentry case manager, promoted the value of ongoing support by stating that, “with us when you’re done you still have case management and you’re still a part of our family.” Social service workers emphasize their bonds with clients and cite these relationships as the reason they are so passionate about their work. Joshua, who was a returning citizen himself and now works in a reentry program, said that he found meaning in his work because, “when I’m out in the community and I see the folks that I serve, I can see their lives changed for them.” He then went on to describe how he had run into clients at the grocery store and stopped to meet their children, hear about their new jobs, and discuss where they are at now. The maintenance of these relationships outside of a professional setting reveals the ways that, through reentry programming, returning citizens are becoming part of a community rather than simply being provided services.

Social service workers believe the relationships between themselves and their clients are beneficial not only because they help returning citizens become part of their

communities, but also because they help them remain in their communities and not recidivate. Robert provided an example of one situation in which the utilization of established relationships prevented recidivism:

I had one returning citizen who'd been super stable and in a job with a local manufacturer, been promoted several times, was really doing well, achieving a lot... and he got himself in a little bit of trouble. The good news was it was a little bit of trouble. He did reach out to our folks and told them what was going on, got the help he needed and was able to re-stabilize and avoid going back to prison.

In this situation, personal relationships are considered valuable because they are a tool used by both social service workers and returning citizens to prevent “things from escalating,” as Robert put it. Interviewees considered trusting relationships to be useful in scenarios like this one because for a client to reach out to their support systems, they have to have had positive experiences with them in the past. The reliance on past relationships may serve women more positively because their relationships are considered to be more essential due to traditional notions of femininity that primarily see women the context of how they relate to others. While relationships may be promoted more heavily in women, men may receive more recognition for reaching out to their support systems because traditional notions of masculinity do not expect men to form bonds with others. Therefore, men may be considered remarkable in situations where women are considered overly emotional.

### **PARENTHOOD AS SOCIAL CAPITAL**

The support systems available to returning citizens feature gender differences that can affect the ways in which their needs and obstacles are addressed. One of the biggest determinants of social capital for returning citizens is whether social networks are accessed through the position of parenthood. The social service workers who participated



in this study reported that returning citizens may also be coming from communities of low socioeconomic status, which can disrupt the traditional family model and lead women to have a disproportionately high number of dependents. Although it can be difficult to provide for dependents while going through the reentry process, the presence of children comes with benefits because it provides easier access to social and professional support systems. Adam discussed how lacking dependents can be detrimental in reentry and explained that, “those that lack support systems tend to be without children.” For reasons that will be discussed throughout this section, parenthood can be a predictor in the services that are accessible throughout the reentry process.

Social service workers argued that motherhood creates additional challenges for women in reentry because of the emotional strain of reunification. Respondents often described women and their children as a household unit made up of deeply emotional bonds that mothers struggled to amend upon their release from prison. Carolyn described the typical process of family reunification by giving the example of one of her clients who was reuniting with her daughter who had been staying with her grandmother while the client was incarcerated. Carolyn told me that her client said, “I was giving my child her bath and she was like ‘No, I want Mommy to do it.’ Well she was like ‘I am Mommy’ and she's like ‘No I want Grandma to do it,’ and she said it hurt her.” Carolyn explained that the bond between the mother and her child was put under strain when the mother went to prison, and upon her return the mother may have felt a lot of pressure to restore her relationship with her child while simultaneously addressing her own reentry needs. Carolyn responded to her client by saying, “You’re impacting their lives just by stepping back into their lives. And that is going to take time for them... to trust that

you're not going to sacrifice your freedom again to be taken away from them.” This response is meant to frame family reunification as a grueling process for everyone involved, rather than the joyous reunion the mother may have pictured. Carolyn’s response also shifts the attention away from her client’s hurt to her past criminal behavior, which shifts the responsibility from the daughter to the mother.

In some ways, the presence of dependents can be beneficial for returning women because their family and friends may be more willing to support them. This broadened social capital may be the result of people demonstrating heightened concern for the children in these situations. However, caring for children can be an additional burden in the reentry process because it can be a struggle to find affordable childcare when a woman receives short notice from her place of employment or reentry services. The social service workers I interviewed recognized the challenges that come with caring for children and designed the resources they offered accordingly. They reported that it is much easier to gain public support for providing assistance to women because women are seen as victims even when they are the perpetrators. Christina, director of a social service agency that addresses poverty in Montgomery County, went one step further by arguing that “it’s not even that they care so much about the women, it’s the kids they care about.” This statement acknowledges how community support is a factor in how reentry programs are designed and function, and the perceptions the community holds are often gendered. Many programs have to work within traditional notions of gender that the broader community believe in rather than solely focusing on the realities of their client’s gendered needs. Earning community support may mean emphasizing the needs of

children, a group whom the public is sympathetic toward rather than the needs of returning citizens, a group whom the community may see as simply criminals.

Men going through reentry are less likely to be the primary caretaker of children for several reasons, and their lack of dependents relates to how they perceive and interact with social service workers. The contentious relationship that can exist between men and social service workers was described by Christina, who said that many people “see men as just these lone wolf entities who need to pull themselves up by their bootstraps and figure it out.” Social service workers often perceive men who have been through the criminal justice system multiple times as so ingrained in the system that they are numb to punishment. If social service workers see men who are fathers as passive and unemotional, they may also see them as less willing to fight for custody of their children. In Western society care and emotion are often attributed to motherhood rather than fatherhood, so seeing men as lacking these qualities reproduces the idea that they are both unfit and unwilling to be parents. Even though returning men may desire fatherhood, if social services perceive them as unable to do so they may not provide resources to help men be in their children’s lives.

The idea that men are “lone wolves” is often reproduced through the distrust returning men and support services have for each other. Social service workers such as Adam argue that men who have been incarcerated can express distrust for these systems because they associate them with authority, which they consider to be “what got them in trouble in the first place.” When men distance themselves from social services, this reproduces the idea among social service workers that they are lone wolves who simply do not want or need resources. Adam went on to say that the skepticism returning men

hold is one factor that can make men less likely to interact with support services, which reinforces that men are more likely to “throw up their hands” and not take the steps needed to be present in their children’s lives on a daily basis. Whether these men were actually more prone to not take steps to be in their children’s lives is beyond the scope of this study, but it is clear that social service worker’s perception of men as “lone wolves” rather than people with families has real consequences. If men are seen as not wanting to be in their children’s lives, social service agencies may not provide them with adequate resources to do so. This leads them to lack dependents, which is seen as a result of men’s natures rather than limited resources. Men’s lack of dependents also reinforces societal notions that men are standalone violent aggressors in a way that women with children are not. These constructions of masculinity shape the social capital of returning men because communities are less likely to promote supporting men if they are seen as independent persons undeserving of assistance.

### **TRAUMA AND REENTRY**

The social service workers I interviewed perceived gendered differences in both the trauma people experience, and how these individuals report and manage this trauma. However, it is important to note that five out of the eighteen interviewees either said that they did not think traumatic experiences or responses were distinguishable by gender. These perspectives are relevant because they show that this issue is not as indisputable as some social service workers perceive it to be. However, social service workers such as Phillip, a member of the legal profession, found it necessary to address issues through a gendered lens. As he discussed how his reentry programs were designed, he explained: “women have a lot of the same problems (as men), but many problems that men don't

have. It was obvious that we couldn't determine a strategy protocol for helping men and women together, we had to consider them separately.” This assessment shows that social service workers engage with gender when they are creating resources for those going through reentry. In this sense, social service workers view gender as a way to predict what needs their clients are likely to have, which they use to structure their services accordingly. This strategy of recognizing people’s needs and designing gendered responses is echoed by social service workers in the section that follows.

Social service workers often rely on their own personal experiences to shape how they engage with gender in reentry. This is most evident with social service workers who have been through reentry themselves because they can draw on their biographical knowledge to do their professional work. Many cases are not dissimilar from Amelia’s, who was convicted of involuntary manslaughter after she shot her abusive husband. After serving her sentence, she participated in a reentry program in Montgomery County and described the impact it had on her as such:

I was in a bad marriage and I didn’t know how to get out of it. I didn’t know how to do better. I didn’t have no faith in that, he had beat me down so bad, that I didn't have faith in myself anymore. These are the first people in a long time to show me kindness, have given me a direction to go in, and the reason I want to move on. That's so important just to have somebody to believe in you. It's important and that's what re-entry does. It believes that once you've made a mistake you can change, yes.

In this situation, Amelia emphasized personal connections rather than simply discussing services that are offered. Amelia valued relationships in her reentry work and went on to say that her past struggles allowed her to help others find success—because experiences like hers are not uncommon. Amelia’s approach to reentry work challenges the narrative that the victimhood women experience at the hands of men makes them weak. Instead,

she repositions her experiences as a source of strength and knowledge that allow her to form strong relationships. Amelia's emphasis on using her experiences to form relationships reclaims her autonomy and repositions qualities that were once seen as feminine and supplementary as tools that are crucial for successful reentry. Interviewees tended to consider these bonds to be necessary in effectively addressing trauma because they give returning citizens support and a "reason to move on." This is not to say that social service workers are the primary source in which returning citizens find personal relationships, but these bonds can be a beneficial source of support and a useful tool in addressing trauma.

The ways traumatic experiences are addressed differ based on both the availability and ideologies of support systems, as made evident by services aimed at returning citizens who are mothers. Adam explained that a mother's return home to care for her children can be difficult because, "the mother has to take extensive measures to not only acquaint her role in her child's traumatization but also deal with hers too." This additional burden may require access to more resources that specifically address the child's needs. If social service workers are working with mothers who are returning citizens, they may need to address trauma while acknowledging the support systems and children to which these women are returning. Oftentimes, the environment that people are returning to is either not equipped to address past experiences or is perpetuating additional trauma. Nancy, who worked with women experiencing domestic violence, says that in many cases, "women who've been incarcerated may go back to a domestic violence situation because they have no place else to go." It is relevant that social service workers perceive women as more likely to be living under these circumstances because it

may shape the services they make available to them, as well as their interactions with these women.

While some social service workers believed that men and women's experiences of sexual trauma were equally severe, a majority of the participants in this study agreed that men report these experiences less often than women. Holly explained that in her experience, "men become very closed in, even from an emotional aspect sometimes they just aren't that vulnerable to express things. They may have sustained some trauma as well." In this assessment Holly recognizes the emotional difficulty that comes with disclosing trauma but does not attempt to theorize about why it can be more difficult to have these conversations with men. I discussed this question of men's reluctance to discuss sexual trauma with Paul, who worked in addiction services with clients who had been through the criminal justice system. He speculated that men's unwillingness to discuss sexual assault was a result "of the masculinity for one. They are looking at it like I'm less of a man if that happened, or what did I do? Is it something inside of me that makes me gay?" This idea argues that men perceive themselves as having more to lose when they report trauma because they risk troubling their identities in ways that women do not. Sexual assault is often viewed as the victim losing power rather than the perpetrator abusing power. In this framework, women do not risk losing their femininity when they discuss their experiences of sexual assault because their gender is already associated with weakness. Masculinity on the other hand, is considered to be innately linked to strength so when men experience sexual assault, so they may feel that they have lost pieces of their identity. It is worth noting that social service workers perceive this inner turmoil and recognize the additional challenges men have in coming forward to talk

about their experiences. Being emotionally vulnerable is an additional threat to traditional notions of masculinity because men may view asking for help as admitting that they don't have everything that they need, which would make them "less of a man." Paul's recognition of this crisis of masculinity suggests that, as a social service worker, he acknowledges gender when discussing sexual trauma.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, I examined social service worker's perceptions of their clients and how these different approaches to their work constructed and reproduced the gender binary. My analysis of the interviews with 18 social service workers in Montgomery County revealed that many reentry programs in the area are designed with an increased focus on gender. Many interviewees provided reasoning for this shift by explaining that returning citizens were likely to face different challenges based on their gender. This is often described as a reaction to returning citizens' needs, but it also functions as a prescription for interactions between social service workers and their clients.

The ways in which social service workers function is largely influenced by the broader community and thus features many gendered scripts. At times social service workers choose to rely on traditional conceptualizations of gender to explain returning citizen's behavior or to justify how their own services function. This gendered lens impacts how they perceive returning citizens and their potential needs. Although social service workers often operate within the constraints of traditional gender norms, they are also uniquely capable of challenging these norms throughout the reentry process when they see how the gender binary is restricting their clients' lives. At times, this was evident when social service workers discussed the needs of transgender returning citizens; some



were critical of the additional barriers transgender returning citizens had to face and recognized the ways in which the gender binary was restrictive. In other instances, social service workers expressed that they valued open mindedness but used language that still placed their clients within a static binary. This was clear when social service workers discussed their transgender client's because they often used pronouns that applied to their client's assigned gender at birth rather than their current gender identity. The shifting language that social service worker's use to interpret their client's experiences with gender aligns with the literature that describes how people may consider those who do not align with the gender binary as "unnecessarily complex" rather than criticizing how institutional structures create additional barriers for this population (Sexton, Jenness, & Sumner, 2010).

Interviewing social service workers allowed me to examine the ways social service workers designed reentry services that account for gender. These resources ranged from formalized programs that assigned personnel to consider gendered needs to social service workers accounting for gender in their interactions with clients. Even when interviewees were not explicitly discussing gender, the language they used to describe their relationships with clients was gendered because it often demonstrated a reliance on gender roles. The language social service workers use is important because it can determine how returning citizens view themselves in the reentry process (Kellet & Willig, 2011). I also examined the ways that social service workers considered personal relationships necessary rather than just supplementary because they fostered an environment that allowed for ongoing support. Oftentimes, social service workers explained that these relationships helped account for gendered issues because they

allowed returning citizens to be more comfortable with voicing their needs. While these relationships are crucial in the reentry process, they also have the ability to reproduce gender norms that, ultimately, may create additional barriers for returning citizens.

This is not to say that social service workers believe that professional relationships are the most important connections for returning citizens to have; many interviewees emphasized the role of parenthood in reentry. Some interviewees argued that support from the general community is essential to reentry but argue that women who are mothers may receive more of these informal supports because people are more sympathetic towards children rather than the women themselves. Both social service workers and the literature argued that women may be judged more harshly for how they choose to parent than men (Brown, 2010). However, interviewees disagreed upon whether women's increased likelihood to be the primary caretaker of children made it more difficult for women or men to get services in the long run. Some argued that while having children helped women gain access to resources, those supports (whether formal or informal) may not specifically aim to address the needs of the women themselves. Others argued that prioritizing the needs of those who have children over those who do not is gendered and it decreases men's ability to access resources, as they are less likely to have dependents. This process reproduces traditional notions of gender because it leads men and social services alike to believe that men should be "independent" enough to not need resources during reentry.

Lastly, I studied how conceptualizations of gender shape social worker's understanding of their client's trauma and play a role in determining what resources they need. Oftentimes social service workers will draw from their own personal experiences to

provide emotional support when helping clients with highly sensitive issues. Social service workers rely on their clients being open with their experiences of trauma because that is the only way they address their needs. To address this barrier, they emphasize building rapport with returning citizens so that they are comfortable sharing their past experiences. Social service workers consider this to be a gendered process because they see women as more comfortable with discussing traumatic experiences whereas men are more reserved. The interviewees saw their client's as discussing their experiences with and reactions to their trauma differently based on gender; this concurs with the literature that gender roles operate as a framework for people to understand their experiences (Herrschaft, Veysey, Tubman-Carbone, & Christian, 2009). Some of the interviewees considered this difference in vulnerability as a result of social pressures to conform to gender roles, whereas others saw it as linked to innate gender differences. No matter where they believed these gender differences came from, all of the social service workers emphasized that their clients had different needs based on gender and designed their services accordingly.

This study features several limitations. First of all, the small sample size as well as the study's location could limit the generalizability of this study. It is also worth noting that reentry programs across the United States are not always formalized and there is no mandated uniformity across these programs. As a result, the gender responsive perspectives and services described in this study are not necessarily present in other reentry programs. Given the variance in programs, it may be important to examine how reentry services differ in areas that do not account for gender or in places where services are less formalized. Another limitation of this study is that the formal interview schedule

primarily focused on gender and did not explicitly address issues such as race, class, or sexuality. However, discussion of other these topics (as well as others) and how they intersected with gender occurred spontaneously throughout many of the interviews because these issues are intrinsically a part of people's experiences and therefore shape their responses. I recommend that future research takes a more extensive approach in analyzing how gender intersects with other social factors so that identity construction can be examined more in depth.

The final limitation of this study is that it does not verify if the social service worker's perceptions of their clients are correct. It is possible that social service workers do not recognize certain needs that exist within the populations they serve or that their views are inaccurate. Future researchers could examine whether the perceptions that social service workers hold are representative of their client's lived experiences. Furthermore, it is important to note that returning citizens are not simply passive recipients of gender norms. Like anyone else in society, returning citizens are restricted by gendered norms and expectations. Therefore, in many ways, the process of gender construction and reproduction is reciprocal, and this study is limited in that it only addresses the side of the social service workers in this process. Future research could examine how returning citizens create their own gendered understandings of reentry.

The research I conducted is descriptive in that it examines the ways that gender is constructed and reproduced during reentry, but it is also prescriptive in that it has real world implications. Such findings could be beneficial because they could allow future social service workers to take a critical approach in examining how their perceptions shape their interactions with their clients. The findings of this project lead me to

recommend the implementation of gender responsive approaches to reentry because this method supports addressing the specific needs of returning citizens. The first step to this process is working to build relational support systems between social service workers and returning citizens in order to establish lasting connections. The connections formed between social service workers and returning citizens can reproduce gender roles that are limiting. However, these relationships can also allow returning citizens and social service workers alike to create a space for themselves within gendered hierarchies—ultimately allowing people to see each other more fully.

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## Appendix

### *Interview Schedule*

1. How did you first get started in your line of work?
2. What does the re-entry process (through your organization) look like for the average person?
3. How do you determine the needs of an individual going through the re-entry process?
4. What are some factors that affect the resources someone is recommended/given? Is gender ever a factor?
5. What might make some cases more difficult than others? Can you tell me about a time when you had a particularly difficult case? What made it challenging?
6. What is the biggest challenge facing people going through the re-entry process? What does your organization do to address that need? Can you tell me about a time when you were able to help someone overcome some of these big challenges? Are people's challenges different based on gender?
7. (dependent on organization) Does the way your organization addresses the needs of ex-offenders differ from how they address non-offenders?
8. What are the typical qualities of a person who is successful in the re-entry process? What helps a person to be successful in re-entry?
9. What makes someone more likely to seek out reentry services?
10. What misconceptions do you think the general community holds? (employers?) What are some factors that influence this perception?
11. Have your views of ex-offenders changed since you began working with people going through the re-entry process? If so, in what ways do you think they've changed? Was there one case in particular that shifted your views?
12. How does a person's gender play a role in the types of services they may need? Do you have any stories where a person's gender had a significant impact on their re-entry?
13. What are you most proud of in your work here? (or of the org as a whole?)
14. Is there anyone else that you recommend I speak to?