Diffusion of shame: Experiences of sex offender family support networks

Project description

The negative stigma of sex offending and the public nature of sex offender registration can create negative consequences, including harassment and censure, for both sex offender registrants and their family members. While scholars have examined the types of consequences family members face (Tewksbury and Levenson, 2009), to date, no one has delved into how these consequences impact family members in terms of their social relationships and their own self-identities. This neglect is particularly important because scholars suggest strong, positive relationships with family and friends help sex offenders to refrain from future offending (Sampson and Laub, 1993). It is likely, however, that in the face of all the negative consequences and stigma experienced by sex offenders’ family members, the strength of the relationship between them and their sex offender loved ones may weaken, ultimately influencing sex offenders’ future behaviors. Therefore, in order to help reduce sexual offending, a better understanding of how sex offender family support networks are impacted by diffusion of negative stigma is needed. My research plan uses open-ended, qualitative interviews with 40 family members of registered sex offenders in NE to identify how the stigma of “sticking with” a sex offender impacts their lives, including their own self-identities and relationships with others. I believe that, consistent with notions of disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989), this stigma will create further social isolation for family members, eroding their own sources of support beyond their sex offending spouses or children and potentially weakening the quality of the relationships between themselves and their sex offender loved ones. GRACA funds will allow me to conduct and transcribe interviews over the course of the summer, 2014.

Product of funded project / Contribution to graduate studies

This research study is the basis of my dissertation research. Upon successful collection and analysis of data, I plan on defending my dissertation in order to complete my PhD in Criminology and Criminal Justice. The interviews obtained during this research project will also provide me with a qualitative data set that I can use for future publications in criminological and criminal justice policy journals, which will help me in my job search and future tenure applications.

Contribution to the field

Social control theory argues that social bonds to other pro-social people create conformity among criminal offenders (Hirschi, 1969); when attached to others, offenders desist from criminal behavior in fear of losing those attachments. Informal bonds, those voluntary, emotional relationships such as those between spouses and other family members, have been shown to be an effective deterrent from criminal activity (Kruttschnitt et al., 2000; Sampson and Laub, 1993; Fleming et al., 2010). Routine activities theory (Cohen and Felson, 1979) also supports the role of strong social relationships in mediating criminal behavior. Felson (1995) and Eck (1994) identified three types of individuals who could reduce criminal activity: handlers controlled offenders, guardians protected potential victims, and managers protected vulnerable locations. As intimacy is related to control, Felson (1995) argues that
family members with strong ties to offenders have the highest level control over their behavior. Family members likely play a role as handlers, guardians, and managers all in one.

The importance of relationships in crime desistance has led to a focus on the impact of social support of prisoners returning to the community (Visher, 2011; Martinez and Abrams, 2013; Travis and Waul, 2003) and probationers (Hepburn and Griffin, 2004), although few scholars examine the social support network itself (Naser and Visher, 2006). Also, relationship strength is likely not static. Relationship strength and commitment can vary over time, thus creating uncertainty as to the social support available for former offenders. What has been relatively neglected in the literature is the way social support networks are influenced by family members’ relationships to offenders once those offenders return to the community. Former felons within the community are stigmatized, and this stigma may create strain for individuals who play a supporting role for offenders. The degree to which this strain impacts individuals’ relationships to offenders is unknown. Bereavement literature suggests that community stigma may create isolation and suffering for family members of offenders through a process called disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989). Family members that experience the loss of loved ones to death, incarceration, or changes in their loved ones’ self-identities may lose their ability to share their loss, express their grief, and gain assistance in healing if society feels the loss or the changed individual should not be grieved.

One particular offender type that experiences extreme community stigma is sex offenders; information about sex offenders is publicly available, including home addresses, vehicle registration, as well as work and crime information. Family members, particularly those residing with sex offenders, are particularly affected by these laws because by default, their information is shared with the public as well. Scholars have shown that public registration and notification policies cause harassment, loss of relationships, and isolation for sex offender family members (Tewksbury and Lees, 2006; Tewksbury and Levenson, 2009). What remains unknown is the impact that these negative reactions have on family members’ ability to emotionally support themselves and sex offenders. Are family members able to sustain a strong, supportive relationship with their spouses or children in the face of public harassment/condemnation? Routine activities and social bonds theory argue that if they cannot, offenders may be more likely to reoffend in the future. The publications from this research will augment prior literature on social support networks and provide knowledge for programming for family members of sex offenders.

Description of Activity

My research is an exploratory qualitative study about informal social support systems for convicted sex offender offenders, specifically family members residing with or in close contact with registered sex offenders. I plan on using open-ended, qualitative interviews with forty family members of registered sex offenders to examine how their relationships with sex offenders impacts their own self-identities and their relationships with other people, including their other family members, their children, and sex offenders themselves. To date, I have conducted fifteen interviews with family members based on my work as an RA on a larger sex offender study within the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, which demonstrates the utility of my sampling design.
The participants for this study are recruited using snowball sampling techniques from interviews with registered sex offenders. Offenders are asked to refer family members for interviewing, and family members contact me as the RA for the larger sex offender study. At this time, approximately twenty-five family members, including spouses, significant others, mothers, and adult children, have agreed to be interviewed for this project. An additional fifteen subjects will be recruited as sex offenders are continually interviewed for the larger research study. Interviews will last approximately an hour and a half, and interviews will be transcribed verbatim. Consistent with grounded theory, data analysis will be conducted concurrently with data collection (Charmaz, 2006), with follow-up interviews requested as needed. Data collected from the larger study, “Desistance from Sex Offending”, include media accounts, internet blogs, and qualitative interviews with the registrants themselves, which will all be used for triangulation to validate themes found in interviews (Babbie, 2010).

One limitation of the current method is the lack of randomization and the small sample size; this limits the ability to generalize findings from this sample to the larger population (Babbie, 2010). External validity is compromised, however, in order to bolster the internal validity of the study and better understand not only descriptive information on the experiences of family members of sex offenders, but also how their experiences affect their relationships with their offender loved ones and their social relationships with others within and outside their immediate families.

**Project timeline**

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>May 2014</td>
<td>Family member recruitment from larger study continues. I will continue conducting initial interviews with interested family members. The interview content will be transcribed shortly after the initial interview. Open-coding will be conducted on the interview transcript to identify relevant themes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 2014</td>
<td>Family member recruitment from larger study continues. Initial interviews with new participants continue, and follow-up interviews based on new themes will be scheduled.</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2014</td>
<td>Family member recruitment from larger study concludes with N = 40. The final initial interviews will be completed. Follow-up interviews continue as needed. Interview transcription and open coding continues.</td>
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<td>August 2014</td>
<td>A majority of the follow-up interviews are conducted based on themes found during open-coding in June and July. All initial interviews are transcribed and open coding is completed on the initial interview transcripts; transcription continues for follow-up interviews. Open coding continues, and axial coding begins.</td>
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**Project roles**

The primary investigator is Danielle Bailey. This research project will serve as my dissertation research, so I will be responsible for the following tasks: recruiting family members for the project; conducting and transcribing interviews with sex offender family members; grounded theory analysis using interview transcripts and triangulation materials (blogs, news articles, etc.); writing up results for a dissertation defense. The faculty mentor, Dr. Lisa Sample, will be responsible for the following tasks: assisting with literature to review, overseeing data collection procedures, overseeing data analysis, and the writing of results.
References


Proposed Budget

Supplies and Operating Expenses

- Printing fees for printed transcripts  
  50 hours * 50 pages * $0.04 = $ 100.00

  Based on previous transcriptions, I estimate that each hour of interview will create approximately 50 pages of transcript. With 40 subjects, minimum interview time is an estimated 50 hours. These interviews will be printed to provide for the multiple readings needed in open and axial coding.

- Phone calls for follow up interviews  
  Estimated at $ 10

  Meeting arrangements for family members will be made as an expense of the larger research study, but I will be responsible for phone calls to arrange follow-up interviews. Phone calls will be short, roughly 5 minutes each, at .05 cents a minute for an estimated 40 interviewees, costing roughly $10.00

Personnel

- Summer stipend for daily living expenses  
  $ 4,890.00

  My $17,000 stipend does not cover the summer semester, so this money would be used to provide me living expenses while collecting my data and transcribing it over the summer. It takes approximately 6 hours for every hour of transcript. With 40 subjects, the minimum transcript time is an estimated 240 hours of transcription, along with the estimated 50 hours of interview time. This project, therefore, represents a full-time investment for me over the summer months.

Total Requested  
$5,000