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Assessing the benefits of practicing spirituality or religion while incarcerated : a study of formerly incarcerated men in Texas

Jana Lynn Wu

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Jana L. Wu
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored former prisoners' beliefs regarding the benefits of practicing spirituality or religion during their time of incarceration. The prison population is seldom included in mainstream research studies. Additionally, a personal relationship to religion and spirituality is a difficult phenomenon to quantify in a standardized and formulaic way. This research sought to explore if spirituality or religion can be considered a protective factor during a time of incarceration.

This study was conducted with face-to-face interviews, using both demographic and narrative questions. A qualitative, flexible research method design was used to gather and analyze data from 13 former male inmates to allow them to fully express their interpretations of their faith practices during incarceration.

There were a number of significant findings regarding the benefits of practicing spirituality or religion while incarcerated. Of note, all thirteen participants perceived that a relationship with "God" served as a protective factor during their time of incarceration. It is worth mentioning that although the term "God" was not used in the interview guide questions, all participants in this study referenced "God" during the course of the interview. Additionally, 100% of participants reported a mystical experience while incarcerated that they attributed to their personal faith.

ASSESSING THE BENEFITS OF PRACTICING SPIRITUALITY OR RELIGION
WHILE INCARCERATED: A STUDY OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED MEN IN
TEXAS

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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2009

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to assess the potential benefits of practicing religion or spirituality during a time of incarceration in prison or jail. This study sought to explore how males who were formerly incarcerated in the state of Texas perceived their experience of practicing religion or spirituality during their time of incarceration. Research questions focused on participant's perceptions of the beneficial aspects of practicing their faith while incarcerated, how their religious prayer or meditation practices developed during their time of incarceration, and if personal or group prayer assisted in alleviating negative symptoms related to incarceration.

The United States currently imprisons more citizens than any other nation. Incarcerated individuals are a population that is often underserved and at times unable to advocate for their appropriate resources, needs, or rights. These patterns are perpetuated by the lack of political advantage for politicians or lawmakers in writing or passing legislation for those whom are exploited by criminal justice policies (Garland, 2001, as cited in Haslett, 2003).

This study aimed to create a space for the participants to express the meaning of their personal religious or spiritual experiences during their experience with incarceration. This project has asked former prisoners to interpret and make meaning out of their spiritual experience while in prison or jail. Additionally, this research seeks to help others understand the experience of prisoners in a more holistic way that places their

spiritual lives as central. The information gained from these interviews will further social work research about this important and under-examined topic. Social workers and social work research has a responsibility to address and assess the needs of oppressed and disenfranchised people. As advocates, social workers are responsible for examining the policies and the inequalities that may be created through large institutions. Social workers, therefore, are in a position to develop a specialized understanding of the protective factors available to prisoners during times of incarceration.

The current literature indicates that the prison population is in need of mental health, social, and rehabilitative services, and research has indicated that time spent incarcerated would be best spent in rehabilitation-promoting ways. This study aims to explore the relationship between spirituality, rehabilitation and the general wellbeing of prisoners while incarcerated. This type of participatory and participant-driven research will provide important information to social workers, individuals interested in the field of corrections, and individuals interested in the impacts of spirituality and religion on mental health.

A qualitative, flexible research method design was used to gather and analyze data from former male inmates to allow them to use their own words to describe their relationship with their faith- something that is difficult to quantify, deeply personal and individually defined. All thirteen participants were interviewed face-to-face by the researcher. The participants in this study were male, were at least 18-years-old, had been incarcerated within a Texas state corrections institution, and identified as having practiced a form of religious or spiritual faith while incarcerated, including personal prayer and non-formalized religious faiths.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rate of incarcerated people in the United States is at an all time high and is currently surpassing any other nation. As of March 2008, The Pew Center on the States found that the prison population rate was nearing 1.6 million people with an additional 723,000 in local jails (Liptak, 2008). There is a dearth of literature regarding the needs of the prison population (Lonczak, Clifasefi, Marlatt, Blume, & Donovan, 2006). This literature review will examine a portion of the current literature on certain aspects of the United States corrections system: the practicing of religion and spirituality in the corrections system, a brief overview of religious pluralism in the United States, current practices of spirituality and religion while incarcerated, and finally, the interplay between the above mentioned factors in the state of Texas.

Practicing Religion or Spirituality

Religion and spirituality can be differentiated in the following way: Walsh (1999) citing Wright, Watson and Bell (1996), distinguishes "religion, as extrinsic, organized faith systems and spirituality, as more intrinsic personal beliefs and practices" (p. 5). Walsh further elaborates that religion as an organized belief system, "includes shared, and usually institutionalized, moral values, beliefs about God or a Higher Power, and involvement in a faith community... Particular ideas and practices are often considered to be right or true" (p.5). In contrast, spirituality can be expressed as "that which connects one to all there is" (p. 6, Walsh, 1999, citing Griffith & Griffith, 1999). Walsh explains

that one can experience spirituality while being affiliated with a formal religion, or spirituality can encompass practices which include traditional healing, and a more personal and individual faith outside of organized religious structures (Walsh, 1999). Spirituality often includes one's personal moral values as well as their personal way of expressing their faith ranging from prayer, ritual, chanting, meditation, use of crystals, incense or candles.

Decker (2007) citing his earlier work uses the term spirituality in the following way:

To indicate the search for purpose and meaning involving both the transcendent (the experience of existence beyond the physical/ psychological) and the immense (the discovery of the transcendent in the physical/ psychological), regardless of religious affiliation. (Decker, 1993b, p.34) (p. 32)

As noted, one's relationship to religion and spirituality is a difficult phenomenon to quantify in a standardized way, thus for the purposes of this literature review I have chosen to use the words religion, faith and spirituality interchangeably. Although the meanings of these practices may be vastly different on an individual basis, this research is inclusive of all who declare a belief in a power greater than themselves.

Practicing Religion and Spirituality within Correction systems

Many spiritual programs are not formally aligned with an organized religious practice. Twelve- Step programs based on the program of Alcoholics Anonymous, Bo Lozoff 's Human Kindness Foundation, and yoga and meditation programs such as, Yoga Behind Bars in Seattle or the North America Vipassana Prison Project are a few examples of organizations which work within the corrections systems to provide services. Lozoff's Human Kindness Foundation, launched in 1973, is an internationally recognized prison

Ashram project that provides teaching workshops and literature to prison populations about non-denominational meditation and yoga. Lozoff describes the foundation as a "general common-sense spiritual friendship unattached to any particular religion, guru, or doctrine" (Lozoff, 2001, p.viii). Yoga Behind Bars in Seattle provides non-denominational yoga and meditation courses within men's, women's and juvenile facilities in the Seattle area (Yoga Behind Bars, 2009). Since 1997 the Vipassana Prison Project has offered 10-day meditation courses based on teaching principles of S. N. Goenka utilizing meditation techniques in North American correctional facilities (North American Vipassana Prison Project, 2008).

There are many religious programs offered during incarceration, which are affiliated with particular sects, denominations and organizations. Examples include those used in this research: Christ Over Our Life (C.O.O.L.) Ministries in Houston, and Restorative Justice Ministries in Huntsville, Texas.

First Amendment Rights

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. (First Amendment)

The applications of this First Amendment right have often been contested. The United States Government relies heavily on religious spiritual program volunteers to provide faith based services. The volunteer programs must be approved by the corrections administration before implementation. This creates a unique relationship between the individual prison, the state, and the religious organization that seeks to provide services.

The United States Department of Justice's website currently has a link to a document titled "Myths About Collaboration between Corrections and Faith based groups" by McFarland (2007), whom has testified before the Supreme Court about faith based programs in prison. McFarland (2007) states some of the regulations for distribution of religious programs in prison:

The Supreme Court says that the State may permit social service programs... even if they have a religious point of view, as long as four tests are met: 1) the State must have a secular, religion-neutral purpose (e.g., improving reentry rates of inmates) in allowing the program; 2) participation must be voluntary and available to many inmates (regardless of their religion or lack thereof); 3) the inmates must have a genuine, private choice of religious and secular programs; and 4) there must be a secular alternative available to inmates, with benefits that are comparable to the religious option(s)". (p.3)

McFarland (2007) further continues to explain that services offered must be voluntary on the part of the inmates and that it is not a requirement for anyone to attend faith services.

Challenges to practicing during incarceration

The First Amendment has been hotly contested throughout the United States in several legal cases at both state and federal levels. While McFarland (2007) states that "the federal constitution and federal statute require state and federal officials to accommodate any sincere religious exercise, subject to concerns of security, inmate discipline, and budgetary limitations" (p.1), it has been found that different faith practices have had to assert this right by legal means. Bryan (2007) cites several cases that address alleged Native American prisoners' violation of religious rights:

In Maine a group of prisoners is suing over claims that their constitutional rights were violated because they have no access to sweat lodges or ceremonial music and food. In New Jersey, lawyers representing a handful of American Indian prisoners are close to setting an eight-year-old lawsuit involving religious rights (para. 12).

These cases illustrate the complexity of social justice issues, and religious and racial intersections not only in the department of corrections but in the United States at large. Many have questioned if the U.S. federal government and individual states have been more compliant with particular religious faiths needs over others. Duclos and Severson, (2004), contend that Native Americans are disproportionately represented in the United States corrections systems through a history intertwining systematic racism, poverty, drug and alcohol offences. Additionally, “Jails and prisons are mainstream institutions that were imposed on Indian communities” (Bryan, 2007, p. 191), and thus raise larger questions of religion and racial oppression in the United States.

Additional issues of why it can be difficult to adequately meet particular spiritual and religious needs within the structures of incarceration will be discussed in the following section. Several religious organizations that assist and advocate for prisoners’ religious rights will be mentioned.

One of the primary reasons for preventing adequate or equal access to a myriad of spiritual practices in prisons is because there is a fear that privileges may weaken containment and security. Sternbach (2000) quotes a former corrections administrator, “Discipline is peremptory, privileges are a matter of grace” (p. 414). While accessibility to practice spirituality should not be considered a "privilege" but a right, it clearly ranks a lower priority after security, containment and controlling behaviors. This can be evidenced through the lack of funds dedicated to treatment resulting in ineffectual space designated for spiritual practices.

For example, the needs of Native American spiritual practices are not provided for by many correctional facilities that do not allocate funds or have adequate budgets to

employ spiritual advisors or supplies for sweat lodges. As safety and security rule the structure of the prison, many corrections officers are hesitant to allow sacred traditions such as long hair, sweat lodges, access to spiritual advisors, and use of peyote, eagle feathers, and animal parts. This conflict has made it necessary for both State courts, the Congress and the Supreme Court to regulate how Native Americans will be allowed to exercise their right to religious freedom while incarcerated (Vezzola, 2007).

The corrections environment and institutions, in effort to maintain order and security, request specific rules and requirements to those who desire to bring faith based teaching, instruction and practices to inmates. McFarland (2007) offers clarification to some of the complexities of disseminating religiosity in a prison environment:

A prison is not a traditional or designated public forum like a park or the steps of city hall. A citizen's right of religious speech is subordinate to the government's interests: preserving the safety and security of prisoners and staff, maintaining health and institutional order, providing educational programming, as well as accommodating the religious needs of all inmates. A volunteer, thus, may not preach a dogma of racial superiority in chapel or a critique of another faith in the middle of the yard (p.1).

The granting of religious provisions are often advocated for in a multitude of ways and through various channels. The organization website for Jews in Prison, a resource center for those of Jewish faith whom are incarcerated, suggests inmates work with Chaplains of other faiths, the prison administration, and Rabbis to voice the religious needs and concerns particular to Judaism (such as eating kosher food and not working on Jewish Holy days). The website also notes:

Most facilities will make some kind of arrangements for kosher food. If it is really important to someone to have strictly Kosher food, the judge should be told before the sentence. The judge can then instruct the appropriate prison that they will be receiving a Jewish inmate who has special dietary needs. These needs will sometimes be accommodated...Most prisons know about the Jewish Sabbath and

the basic idea that work cannot be done on this day... The Federal Bureau of Prisons has designated all Jewish holidays as work proscription days... However, just like with everything else in prison, one has to make the appropriate arrangements in advance. (Jews In Prison, para. 2)

Practicing religion in corrections is cited as challenging because the culture of prison is radically different from many other places in United States society. Sternbach (2000) refers to prison culture as “oppressive and brutal...the worst kinds of male aggression, dominance, and exploitation” (p. 414). There are both strict formal rules from the state or maintaining agency, and many unwritten rules created and enforced by both the corrections staff and inmates.

The process of working within a facility with many procedures and rules can be difficult; the correctional system has not historically been creative or flexible. Faith based practitioners and volunteers must work with the corrections staff and be open to maintaining and balancing both relationships between the administration and the inmate.

Benefits of faith practices in corrections environments

Roman, Wolff, Correa and Buck (2007) cited studies (e.g. Benda & Corwyn, 1997; Evans, Cullen, Dunaway & Burton, 1995) that have found empirical evidence that "individuals who score high on measures of religiosity and spirituality are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors" (p. 199). Additionally, it has been found in studies such as one by Camp, Klein-Saffran, Kwon, Daggett and Joseph (2006) that incarcerated individual express that they find many benefits such as motivation "to make changes in their lives" (p. 1) while engaging in spiritual practices during their time while incarcerated.

Golder, Ivanoff, Cloud, Besel, McKiernan, Bratt, and Bledsoe (2005) found in their studies of current evidenced-based practices (EBP) in prisons that “incarceration in the best possible sense provides a window of opportunity for psychosocial services and intervention” (p. 102). However, this rehabilitative time for one who is mentally ill or has substance abuse issues to stabilize, obtain treatment, and be able transition to services once outside of prison and back in their community is under utilized. Golder, et al. (2005) continue to cite several other studies asserting that correctional facilities are more likely to focus on managing behavioral systems than rehabilitation and that the “general consensus is that the services that are provided are of poor quality” (p. 102).

Fontana and Rosenheck (2005) report that previous research has indicated that the experience of loss of meaning through decreased predictability and control can increase a veteran’s help-seeking behavior, which includes speaking to mental health and religious professionals. Though the authors were refereeing to veterans, incarcerated individuals also experience a loss of predictability and control. While prison is often notorious for being very predictable, there are many factors of daily living which an inmate has very little control over (e.g., times of family visits and calls, where and when he will be moved to another cell or penitentiary, whom he will share space with, when and what he will eat, wear, sleep and work). Traumatic exposure is also reported in penitentiary situations such as riots, physical violence and abuse both by staff and other inmates. Lonczak, et al. (2006) state, "the prison situation is one of extreme stress, with minimal opportunities to learn or practice coping strategies" (p.173). Thus, it is reasonable to suggest that an inmate might have a similar response to a situation as a veteran who has experienced a loss of predictability and control and also may wish to seek faith and mental health

assistance during and after incarceration. In discussing trauma, Dr. Judith Herman (1992) states the effects of trauma that can be understood in the context of incarceration:

Traumatic events... breach the attachments of family, friendship, love and community. They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They undermine the belief systems that give meaning to the human experience. They violate the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis (p.51).

As previously mentioned, Golder, et al. (2005) have found the systems of incarceration to underutilize this potential time for mental health and substance abuse rehabilitation needs. It is questionable, then, if this is also a time when faith practices as a coping strategy may also be underutilized.

While some research of Native American spiritual practice has found that “enforced separation from one’s ancestral cultural practices” contributes to identity crises and violent behavior” (Vezzola, 2007, p. 200), and that “Purification ceremonies and sweat lodges are credited with teaching important values such as teaching respect, responsibility, and sobriety” to prisoners (p. 200), these practices have repeatedly been subject to denial by corrections institutions. Veazzola (2007) argues that Native Americans, activists, and law makers have had to continuously work to ensure the inmates’ rights are protected stating, “the denial of sweat lodges and medicine bundles for Native Americans continues to garner attention, however, because of the blatancy and frequency with which such denials occur today” (p. 207).

While McFarland (2007) states that federal officials are required to “accommodate any sincere religious exercise, subject to concerns of security, inmate discipline, and budgetary limitations” (p. 1) disparities of accessibility between different religious practices exist. The right to practice religion is not afforded equally within the

corrections system; some religions are deemed more acceptable and practical than others. For example, Native American spiritual practices have been seen as less practical and more of a security risk than other religious practices (e.g., Bible study). The inequality of disparate allowance for religious practices should be examined and addressed by social workers that work to promote knowledge and cultural sensitivity.

The right of religious freedom is a provision granted to all United States citizens including those in prisons and jails. However, the practicing of religious activities can be suppressed due to the maintenance of conformity, security and order. While it is a First Amendment right to practice one's religion, inmates, legal scholars and activists have in numerous cases needed to advocate and assert the rights of inmates to freely practice their religion. Further, the denial of access to religious practice possibly creates a missed opportunity for the time of incarceration to be used in rehabilitative way.

Religious Pluralism in United States

Religious pluralism in the United States has been studied extensively throughout the *Pluralism Project* by Diana Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies and, Frederic Wertham, Professor of Law and Psychiatry in Society at Harvard University since 1991. Eck (The Pluralism Project, 2009) delineates religious pluralism based on dialogue as "the energetic engagement with diversity...the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference". Eck continues that "the encounter of commitments" both our own personal commitments and personal identity are seen in relationship with other's personal commitments and identity including our deepest differences are held "in relation to one another".

Texas Faith Based Corrections Programming

Lonczak et al. (2006) state: "Private religious behavior such as prayer or meditation.... Could benefit for the reduction of depression or other emotional problems...Despite these implications, studies examining the association between religious coping and psychological functioning among incarcerated individuals remain virtually non-existent" (p.173). Some areas that have been researched are through explicitly Christian based prison ministry work such as the research study "An Exploration into Participation in a Faith-Based Prison Program". This study can be found as link on the Federal Bureau of Prisons website and is based on a 2002 Bureau of Prisons (BOP) pilot faith-based Christian program, the Life Connections Program (LPC). Camp, Klein-Saffran, Kwon, Daggett & Joseph (2006) studied inmates in the state of Texas who volunteered to participate in the LPC faith-based program (note that Camp et al. (2006) explicitly state that "the opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the Federal Bureau of Prison or the U.S. Department of Justice"). The LCP study materials, texts, journaling exercises and course work were Christian in nature. In an attempt to ensure that all inmates, regardless of religious orientation, could participate, the LCP had an "explicit multi-faith accommodation" (p. 2) and reported to offer non- Christian programming to those that identified as non-Christian. The LPC provided access to spiritual mentors of non-Christian faith, including Islam, Catholicism, Buddhism, Protestant denominations and Judaism (p.2).

Clear and Cole (1997; as cited in Camp et al., 2006) assert that "religious programs in the correctional setting have been the single most common form of institutional programming for inmate" (p. 4). The authors further extrapolate that the

programs were directed not just for management of inmates while incarcerated, but also with the intention of post-release rehabilitation for reentry in to community. A definitive purpose was stated as "not only spiritual salvation of the inmates but their rehabilitation in the profane world as well" (p. 1).

Camp et al. (2006) assert that those incarcerated whom volunteer to participate in faith based explorations are already motivated "to make changes in their lives and are seeking their way in a religious sense" (p. 1) by in engaging in spiritual practices while incarcerated.

It is difficult to identify and quantify the specific reasons why one would want to participate in or is attracted to a faith-based volunteer program, and thus they are at risk for producing possibly biased results. Additionally, there is the possibility of selection effects biasing the data, since some of the aforementioned studies were funded and directed by faith-based programs in conjunction with the Department of Corrections. Anastas (1999) explains, "If the subjectivity of the researcher influence the case chosen for study, it may also be influencing the findings" (p.102).

Camp et al., (2006) and Lonczak et al., (2006) report that there is a lack of empirical data regarding and limits prohibiting the study of practicing spirituality and rates of recidivism. Camp et al. (2006) suggest that due to the "uneasy," and, at times, conflict-ridden relationship between science and religion, "Many in the faith community openly question whether the evidence-based and logical nature of science is appropriate for dealing with religious issues"(p. 5) Citing Breuilly, O'Brien, & Palmer, 1995, Camp et al. (2006) asserts that "the effects of prison programs upon recidivism are irrelevant as the true goal of the programs is the spiritual enrichment of the inmates" (p. 5).

The State of Texas

Texas is a unique state having a legacy of being under six different flags since 1519 (Spain, France, Mexico, Texas Republic, Texas in the Confederacy, and Texas in the U.S.), and supports a dynamic cultural and racial history. In 1980 the U.S. Bureau of Census created two new ethnic divisions of white: "Hispanic" and "non-Hispanic" (Foley, 2001). This speaks to the longstanding and complex relationship of Latino and Hispanic people in the U.S., and especially in the Southwest. It is interesting to note that due to the U.S. corrections system affecting disproportionate numbers of people of color, people of color are often the participants of prison studies. A study and report published by the Urban Institute Justice Policy Center (2004) titled, *A Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Texas* (Watson, Solomon, Vigne & Travis, with Funches and Parthasarthy, 2004) found that in 2001 the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) released 55,183 men (86%) and women (14%) from prison or jail and back to the community (p.15). The demographics of those released were reported as, "almost half (44 percent) are non-Hispanic black, a third (32 percent) are non-Hispanic white, and a quarter (24 percent) are Hispanic... Nearly three-quarters (70 percent) of all releasees were less than 40 years old at release...Median age at release being 34 (p.15). The corresponding 2000 census data for the state of Texas lists the following demographics: total documented population of 20,851,820, the following racial categorizations of people: 2,404,566 black or African American 11.5%, 6,669,666 Hispanic or Latino 32%, 10,933,313 White/ not Hispanic or Latino 52.4%, Asian 2.7%, and Native American 0.6%; the comparison illustrates some of the racial disparities in the prison population.

The Portrait of Prisoner Reentry in Texas study (2004) found that drug offenses accounted for the greatest share of all convictions former inmates released to Texas. One in every 2.5 releases were individuals who had been incarcerated for either possession or selling drugs; 1 in 3 releases (33%) had been incarcerated for property offenses, and 1 in 6 releases (17%) had been incarcerated for violent offenses. Programs offered by the TDCJ include "educational programs, vocational training, substance abuse treatment, behavior modification programs and mental health counseling" (Watson et al., 2004, p.21).

Mental and Physical Health needs of those incarcerated in Texas

It has been reported by the United States Department of Justice that almost 16% of prisoners in state facilities have a mental illness; in Texas the number prisoners under mental health supervision in 1998 was reported to be 15,716. (Watson, et al., 2004, p.32). The Urban Justice Study (2004) cited the nations' prison population to have four times the rate of confirmed AIDS than the general population in 2000, additionally:

In Texas 1.9 percent of prisoners were HIV positive in 2000. The reentry challenge of HIV/AIDS is particularly significant considering the finding of a 2000 study conducted by Dr. William O'Brien, a researcher at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston (UTMB). This study found that TDCJ prisoners were developing resistance to an HIV/AIDS medication as a result of inconsistency administration of the drug (2004, p.19).

The United States currently imprisons more citizens than any other nation. It is clear that those who are incarcerated deserve and need to have their remaining rights respected. Further, previous research indicates that the prison population is in need of mental health, social, and rehabilitative services. As mentioned above, Golder et al. (2005) have indicated that time spent incarcerated would be best spent in rehabilitation-

promoting ways. The study here aims to illustrate some of the relationships between spirituality and rehabilitation and general wellbeing while incarcerated.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Social work research has a responsibility to address and assess the needs of oppressed and disenfranchised people. The growing prison population in the United States is under assessed and addressed resulting in a dearth of research and literature regarding the needs and state of the current prison population. The goal of this study was to allow formerly incarcerated males to express in their own words their perception of the effects of their spirituality during their time of incarceration. A qualitative, flexible research method design was used to gather and analyze data from former male inmates to allow them to put in their own words this difficult to quantify, deeply personal and individual relationship. Anastas (1999) defines the flexible method research as intended to “define, explore, or map the nature of emergent, complex, or poorly understood phenomena” (p. 55). The prison population is seldom included in mainstream research studies. Additionally, a personal relationship to religion and spirituality is a difficult phenomenon to quantify in a standardized and formulaic way. The research question I sought to explore was: Is spirituality or religion a protective factor while incarcerated? The qualitative methods that were used for this study were flexible with interviews resulting in narrative data.

Sample

In an attempt to obtain eligible participants for a flexible methods research project, the researcher used a convenience sampling method and snowball sampling

strategy that utilized prisoner reentry programs and prisoner support and advocacy groups in the state of Texas. The participants for this study were thirteen males who had been formerly incarcerated in a prison or jail in the state of Texas (N = 13). All thirteen participants were individually interviewed face-to-face with the researcher. The criteria for participation in this study were the following: identify as male, were at least 18-years-old, able to converse in English, had been incarcerated within a Texas state corrections institution and identify as having practiced a form of religious or spiritual faith while incarcerated including personal prayer and non-formalized religious faiths. The intent of this study was to explore a variety of experiences with religious practices and therefore included both men who had been incarcerated for as little as two months in addition to men who had been convicted of more serious felonies with longer sentences. It was not necessary for the participants to have had a previous personal spiritual or religious relationship prior to their incarceration, nor was it a requirement to have continued to actively engage in faith related activities post incarceration.

This criterion was formulated with a goal of obtaining as rich results as possible while completing the research in the specified timeframe for fulfillment of a Master's degree. Since selection criteria consisted of male participants only and stipulated age and sentencing requirements, the study excluded females, anyone under the age of 18, and men that had not served at least two months within one year in a corrections institution in the United States. The minimum number of participants for my sample was twelve men.

The participants' self-identified their racial and/or ethnic identity as follows: four as African American, two as Hispanic, six as Caucasian or white and one male identified as bi-racial white and Native American. The participants' age range was 22 to 62-years-

old. The mean age was 46 and the median age was 47. Participants reported currently residing in the following cities or town in Texas: 54% in Houston, 15 % in Austin, 15% in Huntsville, while one participant was residing in Trinity and one in Brownsville. Four participants reported being married and one engaged to be married, which included two participants whom had previously been divorced. Six participants reported being divorced, and four participants identified as single.

Many Department of Corrections institutions require that researchers participate in an up to a year- long review process to obtain access to clients in prisons. Therefore, it was not feasible to interview currently incarcerated men within the timeframe of this research project. Thus formerly incarcerated men were sought out to participate and reflect on their perceptions of their experiences during their time of incarceration. This study then reflects the men's perception of their past experience which may be different than if the researcher had interviewed them while they were incarcerated.

With a goal of obtaining a diverse sample with regard to race, ethnicity, religion and spirituality the researcher initially intended to interview participants in Texas, Oklahoma, Connecticut, New York and Washington State. Anastas states that "people of color are... typically excluded or underrepresented in research samples" (Anastas, 1999, p.275) However, since people of color are statistically disproportionably represented in the prison and jail population when compared to the general population it was assumed that the participants would be representative of a broad range of men who identified as people of color and white, and of various different faiths. The research had an initial objective of obtaining a diverse religious and spiritual population for this research including Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist, Native American, and Twelve-Step

programs. Native American and Buddhist prison advocacy group organizations such as the Zen Mountain Monastery and the Prison Dharma Network who bring Buddhist tenets to prisoners were sought out with the goal of finding contacts for participants in Texas. It was recognized that contacting Buddhist and Native American organizations would reinforce a bias of having a relationship to those groups. However, as the research project progressed the immense presence, efforts and energy that primarily Christian faith-based reentry programs hold in the state of Texas became apparent. The research then shifted to reflect the dominant religions in Texas and the researcher began to seek prison reentry programs within the state of Texas.

As noted in the literature review most of the prisoners in Texas are released in the Houston metropolitan area and the researcher contacted several organizations with a focus on prison ministry work. After contact with several prisoner reentry programs and working with the community advocacy group TIFA (Texas Inmate Families Association), thirteen participants were obtained from the following organizations: C.O.O.L. Ministries in Houston Texas, Restorative Justice Ministry in Huntsville, and TIFA headquarters in Austin, Texas. It is acknowledged that by using these organizations, two of which identify as having Christian foundations, for recruitment purposes, there was a probability that most participants would have some form of a relationship to Christianity. Anastas (1999) states "Researchers should only get involved in situations in which the research participants are otherwise unknown to them and in which they have no particular professional or personal self-interest" (p.286). The researcher had no previous or personal relationship with any of the organizations contacted and did not state any religious or spiritual affiliation during the interviews. It is acknowledged, however, that

participants could have interpreted the researcher as having a connection to the organization and thus influence their responses as all interviews were conducted on site of organizations. There was also a possibility that because participants were personally recruited by agencies and organizations with religious affiliations that participants would answer questions in a certain way. It was stated that the researcher was not affiliated with the particular organizations. However, it could not be guaranteed that participants would not suspect that the research was related to a certain faith as all interviews were conducted on site at the organizations and with staff present.

Prisoner reentry programs provide formerly incarcerated and often their families with multiple services ranging from: providing job training, housing suggestions, clothing, food and furniture, information about parole and probation.

At each of the previously mentioned organizations, a staff person recommended individuals whom they identified as possible candidates to participate in the study. At Restorative Justice Ministries Network, the Executive Director provided contact information of the appropriate staff to coordinate with and permission to conduct all of my interviews at the ministries headquarters in Huntsville with staff present. The TIFA Board president contacted board members of TIFA whom arranged for interviews at the Austin Corner Stone Church in Austin with a board member on site at the church. The Pastor and founder of C.O.O.L. Ministries suggested participants and allowed me to conduct all interviews with staff present at the Ministry office in Houston.

Data Collection

Upon meeting at the agencies, all participants were given consent forms, Appendix A. It was then verified verbally that they met the research criteria.

The interview guide Appendix B and was created to attempt to determine as best as possible not only how participants self identify religiously or spiritually but also how they perceive their relationship with their spirituality affected, or possibly supported them during the time of their incarceration. As religion and spirituality is difficult to quantify a qualitative method was used. Anastas (1999) states that:

closeness to the experience of participants more than on the representativeness of the sample as the determinants of the value of the conceptual descriptions derived from them. Often in order to understand thoroughly a complex or unusual phenomenon... Data collection methods such as intensive interviewing and participant observation... often produce very large volumes of data even when very small samples are employed (p.285).

The data collection procedure included collecting demographic information about the participants and using an interview guide, which consisted of 27 questions, which were a combination of open-ended and closed questions. Examples of questions asked were: "How do you feel your faith if at all helped you during your time incarcerated? If you were incarcerated now how do you think your faith would play a part in your incarceration if at all? Do you still practice your faith or how has it shifted since your time incarcerated?" A qualitative research method was chosen to identify different voices and perspectives that naturally arise when one analyzes one's personal relationship to religion and also to address the complexity of each individual personal and unique relationship not only to their faith but to their experience of incarceration as well. Participants were verbally assured that they did not have to discuss any topics they do not wish to and could pass on any question. The interviews ranged in length from 18 minutes to one and half hours.

Logistical considerations included the time and traveling expenses incurred by conducting face-to-face interviews in various cities in Texas. The researcher believed that due to the difficulty at times to explain or define the phenomenon of religious or spiritual views, face-to-face interviews would be more appropriate than phone interviews. Sitting face-to-face would allow for the participants' energy and subtle signs such as facial expressions and body language to be present in the interviews.

Data Analysis

All thirteen interviews were conducted, audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The transcribed interviews were then coded with random numbers and separated from identifying information. Outliers and narrative themes or conceptual patterns or categories were found by analyzing the transcriptions of all thirteen interviews. The data was next analyzed across the questions to see what common themes emerged and what elicited unexpected responses and themes not previously considered. Similar experiences were then grouped together to create themes. Dissimilar information and outlying responses were also noted. Results and most salient themes and passages are discussed in the findings chapter.

The data collected was held in confidence to the best of the researchers ability; however it might not have been possible to keep entirely confidential who the participants were due to the nature of the recruitment process. Participants were able to withdraw before the study began or until May 1, 2009 and there was no penalty for withdrawal from the study. Should participants have withdrawn, all materials pertaining to them would have been immediately destroyed. There was no formal compensation provided for participation in this study. The interview data and signed informed consent

forms were stored separately in a locked file cabinet. All data will continue to be kept in the locked files for three years, as stipulated by federal guidelines. At the end of this time period the audio files will be destroyed, and the remainder of the data will be kept in a similar secure manner. Should the data be kept beyond three years, it will be stored securely and destroyed when no longer needed. Only the researcher will have access to the data files. The data will always be attempted to be presented in a manner that preserves confidentiality; individual data will not be presented in papers or presentations, and illustrative vignettes will be scrubbed of potential identifying information.

Safety Issues

The study had concerns about how the researcher should interview participants most safely. As outlined by the Smith School for Social work thesis guidelines (2008):

If the sample is one that includes participants who have a prior criminal history or who may be engaged in illegal activities, students should consult with their research advisor to ensure that appropriate safety precautions are arranged and clearly described in the Human Subjects Review application and related materials (p.19).

While the researcher acknowledges that all that are convicted of crimes are not necessarily guilty and did not want to stigmatize those who were participating as more dangerous than the general population, special considerations in the recruitment and interview process were undertaken. Signs for recruitment were not posted in the general public spaces such as on the walls of prisoner re-entry service organizations. All thirteen participants were recruited as stipulated and all interviews conducted in the manner approved by the HSR. Preventative and precautionary measures to encourage safety included: interviewing the participant in the prearranged location with staff on site and positioning seating to assure access to a readily accessible exit. Additionally, participants

only had contact with the researcher through her field placement address and Smith School for Social email address.

Limitations

This study had some feasibility issues related to: interviewing a sensitive population, concerns that former inmates might not want to discuss their experiences, which may have been traumatic with a female who has not been incarcerated and the possibility of individuals perceiving that participation or answers might affect services rendered through the organizations. The research guide also did not ask participants about highest level of education completed or to define their socio-economic status. Future research might want to ask participants these questions to determine how they factor into this topic.

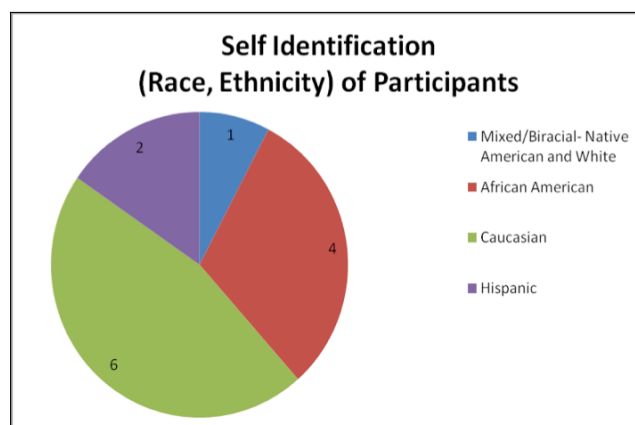
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Major Findings

The major findings of this study assessing the benefits of practicing spirituality or religion while incarcerated were that all thirteen participants, 100% perceived that a relationship with God served as a protective factor during their time of incarceration. It is notable that although the term "God" was not used in the interview guide questions, all participants in this study referenced, "God", during the course of the interview. Additionally, 100% of participants reported a mystical experience while incarcerated that they attributed to their personal faith. All participants responded that they viewed themselves differently now than prior to their incarceration.

The participants of this study were 13 men who were formerly incarcerated in Texas state jails and/or Texas state prisons under supervision of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). The participants self-identified their racial and or ethnic identity as follows: four identified as



African American, two identified as Hispanic, six identified as Caucasian or white and one male identified as bi-racial (white and Native American). The participants' age range

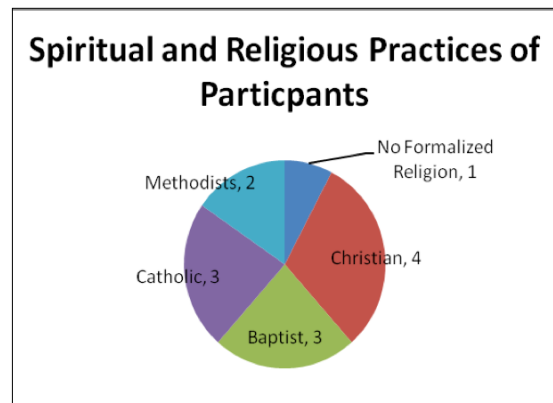
was 22 to 62 years old. The mean age was 46 years old and the median age was 47 years old. Participants were currently residing in the following cities or towns in Texas: 54% Houston (n=7), 15 % Austin (n=2), 15% Huntsville (n=2), Trinity 7% (n=1), and Brownsville 7% (n=1). This study excluded individuals under the age of 18, females, those incarcerated outside of the state of Texas, and those incarcerated for less than two consecutive months within one year. Although not formally inquired about in the interview guide, the majority of participants' self-reported their highest level of education completed through their narrative as the following: 9th grade through a Doctorate Degree in Education. The median level of education reported was a high school diploma. Participants were not required to have a formal religious or denominational affiliation or ascribe to a particular spiritual path to participate in this research study. The only stipulation related to faith or religion was a requirement to have held a belief in power greater than themselves during their time of incarceration.

This often difficult to quantify spiritual or religious relationship with a higher power or source was assessed by asking 13 male participants 27 closed and open ended questions, see Appendix B.

All participants had been formerly incarcerated in the state of Texas. Their sentences ranged from six months to 50 years and death by legal injection (this participant ultimately received a lesser sentence and served 17 consecutive years). With regard to time served, the participant with the least time served in the study was 6 months in a Texas state jail and the participant with the longest time served was 17 years in multiple Texas state prisons. All participants except one had a history of multiple jail sentences. Common responses to the query of how many times they had been sentenced

were: "Numerous" and " Too many times to count!" In comparing the number of times each participant had been jailed one reported that he had been jailed on 150 different occasions, while one stated that he had served one 30 day jail sentence prior to serving his formal committed sentence of 6 months. Although it was not one of the formal interview questions, all participants reported a history of drug and alcohol abuse during the interviews, and 12 out of 13, or 92%, directly correlated their criminal activities and convictions to either drugs or alcohol. Sixty-one percent of participants reported that they did not currently have friends or family that are incarcerated while 31% reported having a brother, uncle, niece or nephew currently incarcerated. One participant responded that he had "hundreds" of currently incarcerated close contacts, referring to his involvement in prison ministry work.

Ninety-two percent (n=12), of the participants identified themselves as having been raised with a spiritual or religious upbringing: 4 Christian, 2 Methodist, 3 Catholic, and 3 Baptist. The participants identified their current relationship to



spirituality in a broad range of ways including statements such as, "I am sold out.", "I am on Fire.", "I am faith filled.", "I am head over heels in love with God. And I love people.", "I serve him with my life. That is all I do", "I am a living witness for Jesus Christ" to lesser-infused statements of religious identification such as "I am a work in progress". Currently, seventy-seven percent of participants identified themselves as practicing a Christian faith, while one identified himself as a Muslim, one professed a

strong relationship with God unrelated to any organized religious faith and one participant identified his faith as being not affiliated with any religious organization or sect and to be "not too good".

The following contradictions were found in the research which were not addressed in the literature reviewed: perceptions of support or encouragement from the correction institution to practice one's faith as a protective factor, the effects of solitary confinement or isolation on an inmate's relationship with religion or spirituality, and any relationship between substance use, conviction and religiosity.

While 46% of participants felt that the Texas Department of Criminal Justice did not support them in efforts to practice their personal faith or religion, participant statements included "not supported but it was offered" and "No, we were allowed to practice but it was not supported", in contrast 38% asserted that they felt supported by the TDCJ to practice, and 16% responded with uncertainty or ambivalence to the question.

It is suggested that future studies assess the experience of solitary confinement and isolation. In this study, 46% of participants noted solitary confinement, perceived social isolation and separation from their family and loved ones as being extraordinarily significant and allowed them time to get closer to God and to use prayer the most powerfully during their incarceration. One participant stated that he felt that the corrections officers were cordial but that "they did not even know I existed," in explaining why prayer and a feeling of contact with God was essential to alleviating his feelings of abandonment during incarceration. One participant reported being "in constant prayer" while in solitary confinement for one month. Another stated he did not perceive himself to be religious but began to pray to God while in isolation because the

Bible was the only book he was allowed. Although times of isolation or solitary confinement were not questioned in the interview guide, 23% of participants (n=3), mentioned their periods of mandatory isolation as a time in which they deepened their connection to their faith. Solitary confinement was described as a situation in which one was segregated due to negative behaviors to a private room and denied regular human contact:

Like I said there were problems in my first incarceration, I was not mentally there... I lost it. And they locked down. They lock you in a room take all of your clothes away from you and you freeze, and I guess they give you medication... naked... naked... it was awful... For about 10 months. The doctor comes by and they look at you through the hole.

Another participant explained:

It was month, in isolation. A guard and an inmate would come by every day- for just the timed minutes; maybe one minute... I was in constant prayer. I was a young Christian and I knew I just got healed... so I was praising God the whole time. No doubting...

One participant described his perceptions of the prison environment in a response to a question of how he believed his faith would play a part in his incarceration if he were to be re-incarcerated:

In prison actually once you walk through those doors life stops. You are separated from society and that is the whole purpose of prison and that is what it does, so then you not only are existing—you are surviving within an environment that becomes a hostile environment and uncaring, you know. So the existence becomes your survival. Once a man is released his survival tactics have to stop and he has to start learning how to live again. And that is starting from the bottom – and it is from the toes to the head. And that is where the mental, physical and spiritual have to take place.

While participants were asked to self define their race and ethnicity it was not asked how they perceived their racial identify had an impact on their sentencing, time served or religion or spirituality. All four of the participants who identified as African-

American mentioned race as a salient factor in their personal identity and related their race as an impacting factor on their life while incarcerated. One participant stated that race impacts sentencing, noting:

The criminal justice system gives blacks and Mexicans a tougher sentence than they do white people. I can get caught with an ounce of crack and a white person can get caught with an ounce of crack and they'll get probation and I'll get prison time. They'll get bond that they can pay, I'll get a bond that can't nobody pay. Are the scales of justice equal? Hell, no! Will they ever be equal? Hell, no. Why? I don't know. Texas prison system makes more money on people being in jail than being out of jail. So to me it is more financial than it is...turning somebody else's life around. They would rather you be caught up in the system. That is why they will let you out on probation; give you five, 10 years of probation, knowing if that is the lifestyle you choose, then you are going to be back eight, 10 times. And out of those eight times you might post bond eight times. You might mess up and they are going to collect that money. So the recidivism rate is always going to be high, cause there are no programs actually for helping someone turn their life around.

Furthermore, another participant asserted:

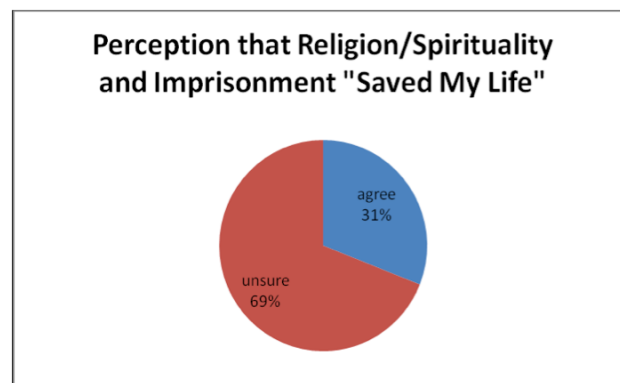
In the middle of a riot they don't look at you or at your religious background. They look at your color. It could be a fight between the Hispanics and the blacks. Where they see you as being black, they don't look at you as being Muslim or Christian or Jehovah Witness—it's just going down.

Additionally, it was stated that racial prejudice is prevalent within the prison environment:

The racial issue or prejudice in jail is awful, but you know there is something about faith and God, it breaks those barriers because, you know as tough as the racial thing is... It just keeps everyone separated and segregated. You just see it...A duck is a duck, a chicken is a chicken, the Hispanics with Hispanics... I had a Hispanic cell mate in prison this is not jail this is prison. , I did not know this. I had to learn. I would have my zoo-zoos and my wham-whams [prison food] and I would fix them and I would invite him and he would never want to eat with me. Then when he had it, he was would just kind of like, he didn't want to... he never wanted to eat with me. So one day I just kind of was like, "*What is it?*" *And they're not allowed to eat with you.* The Hispanics are not allowed to eat with you or they'll get beat up or something like that. True story. And when Pastor --- came in, I did not care that he was white. I really didn't notice.

Participants were not directly asked if they felt that corrections institution or other inmates stigmatized or judged their religious participation or proclamation of faith while incarcerated. Eleven participants, 84%, mentioned that on at least one occasion they felt stigmatized or judged by the guards or other prisoners because of their participation of faith. Observations included " One of the barriers is guards who feel that it is their role to persecute or retaliate against you and not allow you to go to Church services" or " Inmates can be a problem, they be like "no look at him he don't belong here" and "Well, you didn't carry a Bible when you was in the free world, why do you want to carry a Bible now?" One participant further elaborated:

There is always this—it is like a stigma that follows a person around when they find God inside. There are a great number of people who think that, well, that is just a "jailhouse conversion". Ya know, there is NO realness in it. That guy is not really changed-- once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic, once a dope fiend, always a dope fiend, once a thief, always a thief. Ain't no way you are going to tell me that incorrigible repeat offender horribly addicted to heroine and cocaine is going to come out and be something decent in our society. And God says, "Absolutely, yes he will". And when I come out and see now I am over 10 years out of prison, in this community, now I have actual, you know, what you would say, success in being used of God.



Four out of the 13 participants, 31%, perceived that their experience in prison in conjunction with their religion saved their lives. They made statements such as "the penitentiary cured me. And I will never go back". Others attributed many of the positive

aspects of their lives to the time in prison spent building a relationship with God, "I am living the dream... because when I went to prison I had that moment when I came out on the other side, and everything I wanted to do in the world I do now for God". One participant out of the 13 reported he requested to go to prison when he was initially arrested in the following statement:

The day I went to jail, it was like they put me in the car, they ran my I.D., and it came back with a warrant but the cop was like, "you know what? It's time for me to get off. And we're just going to let you go, we're going to give you a warning and turn yourself in". So they told me to get out of the car and I was like, "No, I want to go to jail" and he is like "What?" He was a rookie and he was like "Why do you want to go to jail?" I was like, "Man, I am homeless, I ain't got no where to go, and I am tired of smoking crack." He took the cuffs off me and was like, "Then, tell me what's going on." And we sat there and we talked, and I was like, "If I get out of this car, right now, I am probably going to die out there man. Can you please take me to jail." And he started crying and he was like "Man, this is crazy, why don't you go get help?" I was like, "I don't know how, I don't know what to do. Can you take me to jail?" He was like, "You really want me to take you to jail?" I was like "yeah" and since that day, I knew what I was doing, and I have no reservations about it. I guess that was God just telling me, either you want to die or you want my help. And I needed help at that time, I was spiritually, emotionally, and physically just dying, I was drained. I was to the point of no return. And I was like, do for me what I cannot do for myself. And he's been doing it ever since.

All participants reported that they view themselves differently post incarceration. The description of the changes they have undergone ranged from, "Matured, emotionally, spiritually, and physically" to "I am awake and alive and before I went to prison I was pretty much a walking dead man. That 17 years in prison is when I grew up", and:

I will never be the same. It changed my life; there are some residuals that are clearly negative. I have been hardened, more than I was ever hardened before. I am a lot more skeptical and callous about relationships than I ever was before. Because for those 34 months I was with people that I never really had much contact with even in my addiction. Hardened criminals, people that almost really didn't care about anything or anyone and so I developed a shell that I don't believe I had before. And there is still some left over shell casings that I am... I am different. The penitentiary changed me.

Although not formally inquired about, six participants noted examples and instances of health care needs that were not addressed or addressed inadequately by the corrections institution.

I was asthmatic, I have extreme allergies, I have a lot of problems that would have probably killed me in prison if I was relying on prison medical help. I was left on the floor to suffer an asthma attack because they were convinced that I did not have anything wrong with me. So I laid there for a couple of hours until I could breathe, then I got up and went back to work. I am convinced that God blessed me and saved my life.

Additional reports included:

I was suicidal. And it took them about three months before I got to see a psychiatrist and by then I had withdrawn from the prescription drugs that I had. I was off my meds and I told them. They wanted to put me back on the meds, and I said, "No I am off the meds and I am feeling much better" and they tried to intimidate me saying "Oh, if you go wacko we got to put you in this bad place"...

While all mental and physical health needs should be professionally and ethically met, it is reported that this is not the case. Participants reported that mental and physical health needs were not adequately being attended to by the corrections staff in Texas state prisons and jails. This finding has also been found in other studies. For instance, Watson et al. (2004) document that Dr. William O'Brien found that HIV/AIDS antiretroviral medications were inconsistently administered to TDCJ prisoners (p. 19). Notably, it was reported that all participants (100%) believed that in some way their faith assisted them in alleviating negative experiences of prison, and that faith can be seen as a resource for inmates that can be utilized without relying upon systems that may not be delivering services. Three out of the 13 participants noted that prior to their incarcerations they were morbidly obese. They felt that their spiritual relationship with God while incarcerated cured their obesity and brought them to a normal weight range. One

participant asserted that his religion and "rebirth" cured his primary brain tumor and liver damage:

I am 36, I am dying of a brain tumor and I am facing 3 years, TDC and I am handcuffed to a guy that is fixing to get the lethal injection for committing a murder. And but he has changed, he is not the same person, he starts talking to me about Jesus Christ...So, he knows I am going to prison, he has heard about the brain tumor a little bit, so he starts witnessing to me, he asks me if I want to take the lord Jesus Christ as savior, and I did not know whether to at that time. I was real rough around the edges... I didn't know whether to beat him up or what to do. I thought he was just trying to make fun of me. For some reason I said, "Yeah, I do." And I believed, cause I prayed and praised him. So we got on our knees and we did the sinner's prayer, and it is making a confession of that the Lord Jesus Christ is savior and that you're a sinner, but it is a specific prayer, and for me it did it. It quick did it. It awakened something in me I didn't have. I was saved on that spot- even though I still had massive brain damage from the tumor and I was very incoherent, I couldn't read or write and I couldn't barely speak and have short term, long term memory loss, and he told me what I was to do...I took this as a sign that God wants to heal me. I look back, and I know and as soon as I was saved I believe he has healed me. I am not sure how this works.

Additionally, nine participants attributed their current sobriety and abstinence from drugs and alcohol to directly to their faith. One participant who reported maintained sobriety for almost 16 years stated he was:

Completely delivered in with one prayer, didn't even get sick, didn't get depressed. No withdrawals, instantaneous deliverance from- I was shooting... I don't know generally I would shoot at least one, and maybe two \$50 papers of heroin a day before I prayed the prayer. Before I was arrested, I would shoot \$50 to \$100 dollars worth of heroine a day and as much cocaine as I could possibly get my hands on.

The researcher acknowledges that prayer and meditation are not a substitute for medication, proper medical attention, and drug treatment; however, the power of personal meditation and prayer cannot be scientifically quantified in a truly comprehensive way. As one participant noted "I can just mentally-wise say my Salam, what we call Salam when we pray. If I am in a situation of where I can't, you know, make my rituals as far as

Salam goes and bow down, I can still mentally-wise pray to Allah, God in Hebrew... he knows my prayer". The benefits of personal prayer may not scientifically measurable, but individual assessment should not be undervalued. If personal prayer alleviates some symptoms of drug and alcohol withdrawal and physical and mental health ailments, it can be seen as a positive factor. This notable finding warrants further research.

Additional studies could address mental health diagnosis and coping skills during times of incarceration, and especially during solitary confinement or isolation. Future studies could include a more in depth exploration of participants' drug and alcohol history as all participants self-reported a relationship with drug and or alcohol abuse as a factor in their criminal history. Additionally, participants should be formally asked about their highest level of completed education, as most participants addressed it in the narrative of their responses to other questions asked. The researcher did not require the participants to use their own words to describe their perceptions of what jail or prison is like. The researcher had the bias based on literature and personal experience of teaching yoga and meditation in prison, that prison life is "oppressive and brutal...the worst kinds of male aggression, dominance, and exploitation" (Sternbach, 2000 p. 414), thus a place that one would not willingly submit to. It would be helpful to determine by from previously incarcerated men their perceptions of their time of incarceration.

Biases and limitations of this Study

The researcher is female and acknowledges that there may be bias from both her and the interviewees. Since the researcher has never been incarcerated she might have biases or expectations concerning incarceration. Finally, it is acknowledged that with such a small sample (N= 13); the results of the study and the conclusions of the

researcher may not be reflective of all of the spiritual practices of all men who have been incarcerated.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to assess the potential benefits of practicing a form of religion or spirituality during a time of incarceration in prison or jail. This study sought to explore how males who were formerly incarcerated in the state of Texas perceived their experience of practicing religion or spirituality while incarcerated. Research questions focused on participants' perceptions of beneficial aspects of practicing faith while incarcerated, how their religious prayer or meditation practices developed during their time of incarceration, and if personal or group prayer assisted in alleviating negative symptoms related to incarceration. This study explored the relationship between individuals' belief systems and the impact of those beliefs on making meaning of difficult experiences during the time of incarceration.

This chapter discusses the findings in the context of the previous literature. Major sections are presented in the following order: 1) key findings in qualitative data, describing the relationship between the study results and previous literature; 2) implications for social work practice, discussing how social workers can incorporate the findings from this study and why this is important to the field of social work; 3) strengths and limitations; and 4) recommendations for future research on the intersection between incarceration and spirituality.

Key Findings

There were a number of important findings resulting from this research. This study revealed that spirituality and religion can have a profound effect on one's mental and physical health, though this can be difficult to outwardly quantify or demonstrate. This benefit can serve as a protective factor during a time of incarceration. Another significant finding was that all thirteen participants responded that "practicing any sort of spiritual practice prayer, sweat lodge or ritual" had a positive effect on perceived physical symptoms, psychological states, and experiences while incarcerated. All but one participant also reported having experienced a "mystical" experience while incarcerated. While the interviewer did not use the term "God" in her research interview guide questions, all participants referenced "God" in the personal narrative of their responses. All participants reported that they viewed themselves differently at the time of the interview than before their incarceration. As one participant stated:

I look at my incarceration as a stepping-stone, because it took me to be incarcerated to get where I am at today. If I had a chance to do it all over again, I would do the same thing I did... I wouldn't change what I have for nothing in the world.

As mentioned in other chapters, while periods of isolation were not formally inquired about, participants spoke about the experience of isolation during the time of incarceration.

As one participant related:

When I was in jail, the communication with my family was like non-existent so my last two and half years in jail I did on my own—no money, no visitors, no nothing. So it was like I was on my own. But God provided. I did not want for hygiene I did not want for food or anything, it just seemed like everything was put in place. When I put myself in jail, and from that day I did not want for anything-anything... So that is the same faith I have today. I know God gonna provide.

Alternate hypotheses in the literature regarding the practice of faith while incarcerated were 1) that the experience of incarceration decreased one's faith in spirituality or religion, 2) induced feelings of estrangement from one's spiritual teachings or connections, 3) that individuals would become atheist or agnostic while incarcerated, or that 4) religion or spiritual practice had no perceived effect on participants' experience of incarceration. While the study was not specifically designed to test each of these hypotheses, none of the above mentioned were found to be true in this project.

Implications for Social Work Practice

These findings demonstrate that all participants perceived that practicing their faith allowed them to alleviate negative physical or psychological states during their time of incarceration. This is significant to mental health workers and social workers because faith can be used by individuals to promote recovery in a cost effective, accessible and personally empowering way.

When you are in prison... you have no one to rely on but GOD. You don't have the guards—they could care less about you, the system could care less about you, the people around you could care less about you. So the only one that you rely on to get you through your day is God and Jesus. So it is very easy to come back to God, and to put yourself back into the ministry and start going to Church, reading your bible, but the minute you leave prison everything changes because you got your family, people start caring for you.

Social workers and social work research has a responsibility to address and assess the needs of oppressed and disenfranchised people. Incarcerated individuals are a population that is often underserved, unable to access education resources, and at times unable to advocate for their needs or rights. These patterns are perpetuated by the lack of political advantage for politicians or lawmakers in writing or passing legislation for those

who maybe exploited by criminal justice policies (Garland, 2001, as cited in Hallett, 2003). It is in the realm of responsibility for the practice of social work, and the role of social workers as advocates, to examine the policies and the inequalities which have been generated. Social workers, therefore, are in a position to develop an understanding of the protective factors available to prisoners during times of incarceration.

Dr. Froma Walsh, MSW, (1999) wrote over 10 years ago in the preface to

Spiritual Resources in Family Therapy:

Spirituality is a powerful dimension of human experience, with growing importance and diversity in today's changing world. Yet it has long been regarded as off-limits in clinical training and practice, leaving most therapists and counselors blind to its significance and reluctant to approach it... those who lack training in this area, may underestimate the powerful influence of spirituality in the lives of most clients and in the very process of therapy. (p.ix)

The goal of social work practice and principles are not simply to make clients feel better, but to empathically promote increased self-efficacy and empowerment, and to create a space for a sense of multiple perspectives and meanings. Additionally, good social work practice should assist people in tolerating uncertainty in life. The following statement is an example of how a participant was able to create meaning from his experience of violence in prison:

Well, I was stabbed about three times in prison during a riot. It brought me closer to Allah, which in Hebrew is being God. It brought me closer to Allah to where to realize it don't depend on no faith or what religious stand point you at, it is just what you believe in.

This quote provoked many questions in me as a developing social worker. I wondered if one's resilience and reliance on the power source of "God" could be quantified. If one perceives that no human or institution is available as a protective or supportive factor, can social workers sit with the ambiguity of the perception that "God" can provide support?

How, then, can social work practice foster educational and professional principles and parameters around such personal, diverse, and powerful concepts such as "God" while holding that faith is not a cure-all for violence, subjugation, trauma or mental health needs? Walsh (1999) suggests clinicians develop a "spiritual pluralism with understanding and respect for the varied faith perspective of our clients, which are intertwined with other aspects of culture and life circumstances" (p. x). I believe this space of respect for varied faith perspectives allows clients an environment in which they may own and define their relationship with religion and spirituality and its significance in their lives. This research has shown that an individual's relationship with religion and spirituality has the potential to have profound effects on their mental and physical health. This finding is essential to the field of social work.

As stated in the literature review chapter the ideals of "Religious pluralism" in the United States, Diana Eck, (2009) encourages, "the energetic engagement with diversity, the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference...based on dialogue" (The Pluralism Project, 2009).

Using a framework of dialogue in which participants are listened to, this study has found that all but one participant was able to identify a "mystical," faith-based encounter. Walsh (1999) in referencing Campbell & Moyers (1988) refers to both mystical and holy experiences as "difficult to define or explain in ordinary language and imagery. Spiritual and religious belief systems provide faith explanations of past history and present experiences; for many, they predict the future and offer pathways towards understanding the ultimate meanings of life and existence" (Walsh, 1999, p.6). It could be argued that metaphor and language is used to describe an event that might be difficult to explain with

conventional wisdom or logic. In other words, mystical experiences can often not be proved or quantified other than by individual narratives. In response to interview guide question #20, "Did you ever have a mystical experience while incarcerated that you would attribute to your faith?" one participant responded with tears:

Definitely, definitely, definitely...one night when I was sitting in my bed, by the little bity window by my bed. I was looking out at the razor wire and I asked myself how did my life end up here? How could I have end up in the penitentiary? I mean it was not what my goals were when I was getting my bachelors, masters and PhD. And an experience happened that I call, "I came to the end of myself" at that moment. I recognized that all that I was, was not anything except for him. Without him... that was probably the moment that I... that my life changed, because I got on my knees and I cried out to God and I said, "I can't do this anymore myself, I need you". And he came; he came in a mighty way. And ever since then I have been serving him and I can't tell you what a wonderful life it has been since. Because God has given me so many opportunities and blessed me in so many ways that I know if I had not surrendered my life at that time- I mean it wasn't like lightening bolts flashed or anything but, I will tell you I will never forget that night as long as I live.

Another participant reflected a more visual mystical experience:

For 16 years I didn't even tell the story that I am about to tell you about, I was sitting there, and the light got so bright that it blinded me... One Mexican man, one black man, one white man, other than me, and we were in the very end cell and when this light come in the cell, it blinded them...and poof God was there and he had this long, long, flowing curly black hair, he had a full beard, he had brown eyes... the main thing that God told me—He said, "if you don't kill anyone else, obey my commandments, when you die, you can go see your mom and dad." And that's all I have ever wanted since I was four years old. So, it's the truth.

These narratives speak to the power of creating one's own meaning of experience. A theme of an individual sense of powerlessness, yet a connection to an ultimate source of strength that is with them, can be seen in both. It can be seen not only as a protective factor to have a sense of feeling valued, protected and a securely attached to a powerful entity, but also as a source of empowerment when one lacks social support and secure attachments.

While the role of faith in the lives of clients is something difficult to quantify in social work research, the findings of this study elicit the importance for social workers to keeping open minds in regards to the unknown. By valuing the spiritual development of our clients during their times of struggle, we remain open to frame what may not be familiar in our personal experiences or our own faiths, but important to others. As social workers we can aspire to hold our own religious or spiritual truths while suspending judgment of other's personal interpretations and relationships with faith. Furthermore, a person's sense of "God," like their sense of self, should be held by clinicians with sacred respect. This stance of not knowing who or what someone else's "God" is can provide a space for individuals to create and nourish their personal narratives. It can also facilitate a broader understanding of a person's own history which includes aspects of life for which we do not have words or research to demonstrate or understand.

Strengths and Limitations

This research, by exploring the phenomena of religion and spirituality in a very personal way, allowed former inmates to use their own words to explain their relationship to faith. This type of participatory and participant-driven research will provide important information to social workers, individuals interested in the field of corrections, and individuals interested in the effect of spirituality and religion. This research also provides useful information to the correctional facilities and the organizations providing religious and spiritual work on "the inside," as how to better understand some of the complexities and benefits experienced by inmates practicing faith.

The research process benefited the participants by creating a space for them to create and express meaning of their personal religious or spiritual experiences. This

research sought to offer the possibly allow for a reinterpretation of their experience, or a way to make meaning. Additionally, it might have been beneficial for participants of this study to speak about their experience in the TDCJ with a researcher that that is not affiliated with corrections system. This project ultimately aims to help others understand their experience in a more holistic way; the information gained from these interviews will further social work research about this important and under researched topic.

This study was not without limitations. The time frame of this project required a short duration of data collection (9 months) and small sample size. Nearly all of the participants were recruited from Christian based prisoner reentry organizations (11 out of the 13 participants), and all were men from Texas, which limits generalizability.

Other possible limitations present while interviewing a sensitive population include concerns that former inmates might not have felt comfortable discussing their experiences, some of which may have been traumatic, with a female who has not been incarcerated. Further, there is the possibility that individuals perceived that their participation or answers might affect services rendered to them through the organizations from which they were recruited.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations described above, future studies should directly inquire about the following areas, which could yield important results on the topic: highest level of education completed, socio-economic status and perceptions of stigmatization from the corrections institutions or other inmates towards their religious faith practices. Although times of isolation or solitary confinement were not questioned in the interview guide, participants mentioned their periods of mandatory isolation as a time in which they

deepened their connection to their faith. Finally, personal perceptions of how race affected their sense of self, in relation to their religion or spirituality in the context of being incarcerated would be very important research to the field of social work. Future research should ask participants these questions to determine how they factor into this topic.

Future research inquiring more deeply into how experiences with incarceration challenged prisoners' faith could expand the understanding of spiritual development, or lack thereof, during incarceration. Future studies might include further recruitment of participants of various religious faiths such as Jewish, Buddhist, Mormon, Islamic, Native American. As different faiths require different types of practices, different themes and limitations in regards to religious practices that are not Christian based would mostly likely emerge. Additionally, broadening the study to include different geographic locations would most likely vary responses of the participants based upon the predominant religions of the inmates in different regions. Finally, as noted in the literature review, there is a lack of empirical evidence regarding the relationship of practicing spirituality while incarcerated and rates of recidivism. While it was not within the scope of this study to address practicing faith and recidivism rates, it is an open and intriguing area for future research.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent Form

May, 2009

Dear Participant,

My name is Jana Wu and I am a Smith School for Social Work student pursuing my Master's degree in Social Work (MSW). I am conducting a study exploring how those whom have been incarcerated in a United States jail or prison assess the impact and importance of spiritual or religious practices while incarcerated. While this subject has received much legal attention, very little research exists to explain the personal significance and importance to the individuals, corrections institutions or society at large. Practicing spiritually requires special attention in corrections, as security and maintenance of order are prioritized. I intend to use the research data I collect to write a MSW thesis paper, which will be published and presented at Smith School for Social Work.

You are being asked to participate in this study as a person who has met the following criteria: (1) You have been incarcerated in a United States prison or jail for either at least one month two times during the same year (2) You are over 18 years of age (3) You identify as male (4) You are able to converse in English (5) You must identify as having practiced some sort of faith, religion or spirituality while incarcerated, including but not limited to personal prayer, non-denominational and non-formalized religions.

The purposes of this study are to 1) Identify how inmates interpret practicing their spiritual traditions while incarcerated assists in their rehabilitation, 2) Present what types of spiritual practices are permitted while incarcerated 3) Address the barriers of practicing spiritual traditions while incarcerated 4) Consider the possible security and order risks that spiritual or religious practices present in correctional complexes. A clearer understanding of this topic will not only be an important development for social workers, but also for organizations who advocate for civil rights and prison and correctional complexes that strive to maintain security and encourage rehabilitation.

You are being asked to participate by sharing your experiences and knowledge about spiritual practices while incarcerated as a former inmate. You will participate in a one-hour face-to-face interview, which I will conduct. The interview will address how you assess the types of religious or spiritual practices allowed or performed while incarcerated, the ability and resources needed to plan or create spiritual ceremonies. You

will also be asked to identify the barriers of both inmates and correctional officers and identify strategies for overcoming these barriers if possible.

Although incarceration is a sensitive subject, minimal risk from participation in this interview is anticipated. You may experience distress when reflecting on experiences in the correctional setting or in relation to spiritual practicing. You may be uncomfortable expressing thoughts about this topic in front of the interviewer. I will provide you with resources of organizations that work to support and find services for former inmates that can be contacted should you feel distressed about the material or process of the interviews.

You may benefit from participating in this study by gaining new insight into your spiritual practices, and time while incarcerated. It may also increase your self-efficacy. The information gathered during interviews will help me and others understand the practice of spirituality while incarcerated. There will be no formal compensation provided for your participation in this study.

I may take notes and will be using audio recording to transcribe the interview. I will transcribe the interviews in private to protect your confidentiality. All information gathered during the interview will be coded with a random number instead of your name. This informed consent form and your coded interview information will be stored separately from each other, in a locked file cabinet. All of your responses will be confidential, and used in such a way that it cannot identify you personally. If used in presentations or publications, the data will be presented in a manner that preserves this confidentiality. All the data and consent forms will be kept secure in a locked file for a period of three years as stipulated by federal guidelines, after which time they can be destroyed or continued to be maintained securely. Only myself and my academic research advisor Colette Duciaume-Wright, LCSW will have access to these files.

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you will not receive compensation for your participation. You may withdrawal your participation from the study at any time without penalty. You may contact me at the email or phone listed below for questions or concerns about this study, before or after the interview. If you have any concerns about your rights or any aspect of this study you can also contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at 413-585-7974.

Thank you for your time and willingness to participate in this study.

YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THE STUDY.

Signature of the Participant _____ Date: _____

Signature of the Researcher _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Contact:

Jana Wu
Social Work Intern
Frank M. Tejada Outpatient Clinic
5788 Eckhert Road
San Antonio, TX
jwu@smith.edu
(210) 699-2237

Please keep a copy of this consent for your records.

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

Demographics

1. Town or City you are currently residing in?
2. Marital Status?
3. How do you define your race and or ethnicity?
4. Where did you grow up?
5. Religious or spiritual upbringing?
6. Age?
7. Do you consider yourself to have a faith today?

Questions:

1. How would you describe your faith? (From whatever words participants choose interview will refer to their faith/spirituality/ religion in those terms. For purposes of this interview guide I will use the terminology of: faith.)
2. Do you feel your faith has helped you to survive in a certain way? If so how?
3. Do your family members or those closest to you share your faith?
4. Were you raised with this the faith or did you come to it at some point in your life?

The next few questions will be about your time incarcerated:

5. How long was your prison/ jail sentence or term?
6. When did you serve your time?
7. Location of prison or jail sentence served?

8. Number of times in prison or Jail? How many times have you served time?
9. Do you have any family members or close contacts who are currently incarcerated?
10. If so did you share experiences of your faith with them?
11. Describe your experience of holidays, birthdays and or anniversaries while incarcerated and the role if any that your spirituality played at these times?
12. Was it difficult to practice your faith while incarcerated?
13. Did you feel supported by the corrections institution to practice?
14. If not, can you identify the barriers of practicing and suggest strategies for overcoming these barriers if possible?
15. Do you feel you had access to spiritual materials necessary to practice your faith- ex: literature, spiritual or sacred objects?
16. Did you have access to study groups and/ or services of your faith? Did you feel you had equal access to your spiritual needs as to others did to their spiritual needs?
17. Do you view yourself as differently now from before you were incarcerated?
18. If so how would you describe the change that you've undergone?
19. Do you think practicing any sort of spiritual practice, prayer, sweat lodge, or ritual had any effect on any physical symptoms or psychological states or experiences while incarcerated?
20. Did you ever have a mystical experience while incarcerated that you would attribute to your faith?
21. Where there times you disavowed or were very angry at your faith?
22. How and when did you practice your faith while incarcerated?
23. Did you practice alone or with others?
24. If you found your faith helpful did you share your faith practices or encourage others to get in touch with faith?
25. If you were incarcerated now how do you think your faith would play a part in your incarceration if at all?

26. Do you still practice your faith now? If so, how has it shifted now that you are not incarcerated?

27. Is there anything else you would like to add? Any thoughts, ideas or anything I did not address?

APPENDIX C

Human Subjects Review Approval Letter

February 13, 2009

Jana Wu

Dear Jana,

Your revised Consent has been reviewed and approved. All of your materials are now in order and we are happy to give final approval to your study.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Colette Duciaume-Wright, Research Advisor

APPENDIX D

Recruitment Letter

JERRY GROOM, CHAIRMAN
3401 S. HOUSTON
KAUFMAN, TEXAS 75142
972-962-6574
EMAIL: JERRYGROOMFIRSTAG@YAHOO.COM



EMMETT SOLOMON, EXEC. DIRECTOR
1229 AVENUE J
HUNTSVILLE, TEXAS 77340
936-291-2156
936-291-6260 FAX
EMAIL: ESOLOMON@SBCGLOBAL.NET

April 15, 2009

Dear Sirs:

Ms. Jana Wu has permission to both recruit and conduct interviews for her School of Social Work project on site at the Restorative Justice Ministries Network, 1229 Avnue J, Suite 360, Huntsville, TX. There will be RJMN staff available and on site during all interviews.

I will refer possible subject participants to Ms. Wu based on whom we feel is appropriate. She should feel no threat from anyone whom we select. This may require interviews during after hours. Most will be working during regular hours.

Sincerely yours,

Emmett Solomon, Exec. Director
Restorative Justice Ministries Network
1229 Avnue J, Suite 360
Huntsville, TX 77340

APPENDIX E

Recruitment Letter

Boyd L. Harrell / President



To: Smith School for Social Work
Human Subjects Review Committee
Lilly Hall
Northampton, MA 01060

March 3, 2009

RE: Ms. Janna Wu at C.O.O.L. Ministries, Inc.

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Pastor Boyd L. Harrell and I am the founder and president of C.O.O.L. Ministries,® Inc. which is an outreach ministry founded in the Fall of 1999 by my wife Jan and me. *"Our goal is to put out the fire of addiction and stave an on-fire desire to serve God."* In the past 10-years alone we have reached tens of thousands of people, most of them incarcerated, with a message of hope and change through a complete surrender to Jesus Christ. We have seen many lives changed and healed through the love of God. It is with great honor that we acknowledge partnership with the Harris County Drug Court, S.T.A.R. Program and TDCJ- Institutional and Parole Divisions and Harris County Community Supervision and Corrections Department.

This letter is to acknowledge that Ms. Jana Wu has permission to both recruit and conduct interviews for her Smith School for Social Work Master's Thesis onsite at C.O.O.L. Ministries, Inc., 5005 West 34th Street, Houston, Texas. There will be C.O.O.L. Ministries, Inc. staff available and on site during all interviews.

I will refer possible subject participants to Ms. Wu based on whom we as staff feel is a safe and candidate. We as staff will not discriminate participant referrals based on race, age, or religious affiliation.

If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 281-687-8366.

In His Mighty Grip,

Boyd L. Harrell

P.O. Box 924135
Houston, Texas 77292

1-866-992-COOL
713-592-0134

website: www.coolministries.net
e-mail: we.cool@cfaith.com

APPENDIX F

Recruitment Letter

To Smith School for Social Work
Human Subjects Review Committee
Lilly Hall
Northampton, MA 01060

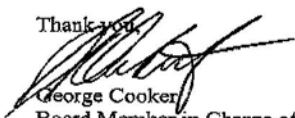
April 28, 2009

To Whom it may concern,

Ms. Jana Wu has permission to both recruit and conduct interviews for her Smith School for Social Work Master's Thesis onsite at the Austin Corner Stone Church, 1101 Reinli Street, Austin, Texas. There will be a representative of Texas Inmates Families Association (TIFA) available and on site during all interviews.

I will refer possible subject participants to Ms. Wu based on whom I feel is a safe candidate for this research project. I as a TIFA representative will not discriminate participant referrals based on race, age, or religious affiliation.

Thank you,



George Cooker
Board Member in Charge of Reentry
Texas Inmates and Families Association
P.O. Box 300220
Austin, Texas 78703-0004
www.tifa.org