A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of the Experiences of Community Reintegration

for Women Leaving Prison

by

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A thesis

presented to the University of Waterloo

in fulfillment of the

thesis requirement for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Recreation and Leisure Studies

Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2022

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners. I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Women are a small, yet growing, increasingly diverse and complex group out of the overall Canadian prison population. From 2005 to 2015, the population of people in Canadian prisons rose by approximately 10% and most of this growth can be attributed to the increase of visible minorities, individuals of Indigenous descent and women in prison. Presently, more than 50% of the women are under supervision in community, thus in need of support as they attempt to socially reintegrate.

Unfortunately, in comparison to the average Canadian, formerly incarcerated women carry a greater rate of mental health and substance abuse issues and are more likely to have a history of sexual or physical abuse. In comparison to men, women are often more vulnerable and likely to experience negative outcomes from incarceration, including continuous stigmatization while re-entering the community. Thus, women leaving prison may face a wide array of constraints to achieving a healthy lifestyle.

Thankfully, decades of research have shown that relationships hold great value in helping women achieve a sense of normalcy in their lives during their transitions from prison into community. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis was to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women reintegrating into community after imprisonment. To do this, I performed a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) on a data set of longitudinal transcribed interviews with six women who have experienced incarceration at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI). The women took part in a community-based restorative justice program, known as Stride Circles, in the Kitchener-Waterloo area.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to my supervisor Dr. Heather Mair, for her support and guidance on this thesis. I would also like to thank Richard Norman, whose work inspired much of my passion for this study. Additionally, I would like to thank my Don Supervisor Delores Lanni for reminding me of what community truly is. Thank you for lighting my path with love, respect, and a sense of belonging. It has truly been an honour to work with you all. Thanks to the many professors, mentors and good friends in the department who shared their expertise, humor, light-heartedness and provided me with loving motivation along the way. Your willingness to be a part of my journey and your enthusiasm for recreation, leisure and life helped fuel my commitment to this study and is very much appreciated. A very special thank you to my Mom, Dad and Lucy for your unconditional love and support. Finally, I would like to thank God – for without God, nothing would be possible.

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1.1 Introduction and Subjectivity Statement

"What is recreation therapy? Do you just have fun all day?" Since I began my undergrad in Therapeutic Recreation at Seneca College in King City, I have lost count of how many times I have been asked this question – by my family, friends, colleagues, peers and even strangers. This question leads me into a conversation about my career path, which is constantly evolving. After completing my Honours Bachelor's degree in Therapeutic Recreation and practicing as a Recreation Therapy Student, Art Therapy Aide and Program Assistant with adults with disabilities, the answer to this question became clearer. After my placement at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health, working with male adults with schizophrenia, drug addictions and sexual offences in a forensic unit, the answer became even more clear to me. Often, with these conversations, I discuss my desire to open a recreation centre for the public, to become a recreation officer, or to become a professor in the field one day. More recently, however, I have been interested in learning about the experiences of marginalized populations, specifically, women leaving prison.

As a young Indo-Canadian woman, thoughts of my own upbringing and oppression cross my mind. These thoughts and experiences of enduring and overcoming my own turmoil are what pave my path and inspire me to gain an understanding of the experiences of women leaving prison. As my interest and work experience in therapeutic recreation grew, I began wondering what marginalized populations encounter. What are the experiences of other women who have been oppressed? Are these experiences being described in women's own words? What obstacles do women across the globe face? What helps to overcome them? How exactly do women end up in prison? What are all the contributing factors? How do women feel after leaving prison? What brings meaning to women's lives? How do women heal? How do women navigate life after release? During community reintegration, do women have enough support to survive? And who, if anyone, is there to support women?

I realized my childhood experiences are what triggered these questions. Throughout my adolescence and young adulthood, I underwent the painful experience of oppression – involving a combination of being physically, verbally, and emotionally abused by my brother for almost ten years. During these years, I felt as if my mother, father, and sister did not protect me from his abuse and instead, painfully silenced me and themselves in the process. For some reason, amid it all, I became what they called a 'rebel,' or 'troublemaker.'

Since a young age, I was skipping class, suspended from school, became exposed to drugs, violence, crime, police encounters, was eventually arrested, left home on multiple accounts, feared for my life and more. As a result, I have felt the daily reality of living in fear, being treated as 'less than,' and losing trust in the people and institutions around me which I thought were meant to protect and support me. At times, this left me feeling very alone, disempowered and hopeless. I know what it feels like to fight for my life, freedom, and respect, only to lose – but to never give up. Thankfully, I was fortunate enough to have the means to overcome, break free and transform into the keen, outspoken, and independent woman I am today.

In light of my journey, and those of my childhood friends and family members, I became curious to know more about women's journeys after leaving prison. More specifically, I wanted to understand women's experiences of community reintegration and how it feels after being released from prison, to be back in our communities. These thoughts have been reoccurring throughout my coursework in my undergrad and have lingered in my mind ever since. In fact, for the final course of my Bachelor's degree, I chose to explore the topic of recreation in prison, and I was deeply disturbed by some of what I had learned about people's experiences with the criminal justice system. At the time, someone had told me that it would be a challenging topic to pursue and that perhaps, no one would care. However, these comments only continued to fuel my curiosity by transforming it into passion – and I became compelled to learn more, so here I am.

The notion of community has always been meaningful to me. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I had the opportunity to explore different recreational programming within the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Additionally, I have experienced the value of community through pet therapy volunteering with my dog, Potter, at the Centre for Addiction

and Mental Health. I have also been a part of the hot yoga community in Markham and through my transition to Waterloo, I expanded to be a part of the Waterloo hot yoga community as well.

After completing my undergraduate degree, I had the privilege of working as a recreation therapist and camp counselor for the YMCA. Based out of Ramara, Ontario and on the shores of Lake Couchiching, I worked with a team of nursing students, psychology majors and personal and developmental support workers on the advancement of recreational programs for adults with disabilities. During this experience, I was given multiple opportunities to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate recreational programs for members of marginalized populations. Some of the recreational programs I facilitated included yoga by the water, meditation, canoeing, paint and sip night on the deck and music therapy. I was overwhelmed with joy to see how recreation and leisure changed and empowered lives, one at a time. Moreover, it is the exposure from academic classes, social networks, discussions, and other relevant experiences that have inspired my ambitions to enter the field of recreation therapy, to further extend my knowledge in this discipline, and to explore the experiences of members of marginalized populations in community.

What underscores my desire to understand these issues are my own life experiences, my understanding of oppression, the innate empathy that I carry for marginalized populations and the need for them to receive more attention and care from leisure practitioners and the community. Along with these understandings, comes the values that I hold and bring to this study. These values include my beliefs that every human being deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, needs to feel secure and supported, should have choices in their life and deserves another chance. I also believe that every person deserves to live a life with purpose.

Thanks to researchers such as Pryor and Outley (2014), I have learned how spaces that offer recreation and leisure hold great value for populations that have been marginalized, and such spaces can become sanctuaries of hope for people in need. These scholars emphasized that more research is needed to clarify how leisure spaces help people respond to larger economic and political forces in community. Economic success is often seen as a primary goal for all citizens. However, the same researchers highlighted how the lives of people who are marginalized are repeatedly conceptualized within the domains of the evolving economic,

social, and political forces in which people and their families battle for mobility, sustainability, and economic survival. By exploring how people respond to these forces, which at times, may cause individuals to feel and appear powerless to others, we can develop a deeper understanding of the root causes of social issues and create unique ways to resist larger political powers (Pryor & Outley, 2014).

Thus, it is critical that policy makers and leisure scholars become aware of the important link between leisure and social justice. Also, in the field of recreation and leisure, it is crucial to explore how leisure is viewed from the perspectives of participants. More specifically within this study, it is important to develop deeper understandings of the experiences of the women who engage in leisure programming throughout community re-entry. Furthermore, turning the knowledge we gain from marginalized populations into practice is a critical future step for leisure practitioners. For the purpose of this thesis, it is essential to understand the experiences of women reintegrating into the community after imprisonment, through their lenses, as this can affect the quality of programming and the quality of women's lives, as well as others within our communities.

1.2. Problem Statement

According to the Government of Canada (2016; 2019), women are a small, yet growing, increasingly diverse and complex group out of the overall population of people in Canadian prisons. Women in prison make up approximately 6% of Canada's federally incarcerated population (Government of Canada, 2019). Presently, more than 50% of women who have been incarcerated in Canada are under supervision in our communities, while attempting to socially reintegrate (Government of Canada, 2020). Thus, more than half of the women leaving prison, may currently be in need of various forms of assistance throughout the process of community re-entry.

In certain circumstances, women may be particularly vulnerable and more likely to experience negative outcomes from incarceration, including continuous stigmatization while re-entering the community (Pedlar et al., 2018). Also, in comparison to the average Canadian, women who were formerly incarcerated carry a greater rate of mental health problems and substance abuse issues (Government of Canada, 2019). Moreover, women are more likely to have a history of sexual or physical abuse (Government of Canada, 2019). As a result, upon re-

entering the community, women leaving prison may face a wide array of constraints to achieving a healthy lifestyle.

The World Health Organization (1999) defines a healthy lifestyle as a way of living that decreases one's risk of becoming severely ill or dying early. However, issues such as addiction, psychiatric disorders, lack of access to adequate resources (e.g., housing and employment opportunities etc.) and the stressful process of encountering stigma often hinder women's abilities to achieve healthy lifestyles upon release (Fortune, 2011). In fact, mortality rates are higher for people in prison in comparison to the general population (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2016). To add, issues experienced before incarceration, which vary from woman to woman, such as abuse and lack of education, only further affect the overall health of women. Feelings of guilt, anxiety, fear, and isolation can contribute to a low self-esteem, putting women at risk of exclusion, alienation, and a lower sense of well being upon release from prison (Fortune, 2011). Thus, the period of transition from prison to community has been identified as an ideal time to provide health promoting interventions, services, and support to women (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2016).

It is important to understand that the risks associated with release apply not only to the woman herself, but to her family members, loved ones, other connections and the community that surrounds her. A study of community re-entry by Yuen et al. (2012), framed in creative analytic practice, a unique form of representation that has been conducted with women in prison, has shown the reoccurrence of two major themes. The researchers stated that the first of these themes included feelings of disconnection from the community prior to and intensified by prison experiences. This indicates a need for women leaving prison to feel more connected to their communities.

The second of these themes was leisure and community re-entry, which depicts the complex meanings of leisure for women in prison and constraints for return to the community (Yuen et al., 2012). This sheds light on the value that leisure can hold for women leaving prison and emphasizes that different factors may be hindering women's leisure participation. As such, practitioners and researchers must continue to make inclusive and woman-centred programs that aid in the social reintegration of women back into our communities.

Many women who attempt to re-enter community after imprisonment have been victimized through various forms of patriarchy and affected by issues such as economic

exploitation, marginalized social opportunities, structure and oppression – explaining nearly all of women's crimes (Radosh, 2002). To add, the lasting impacts of colonization can further complicate the lives of certain women, particularly those who are not white (Indigenous, Black etc.) (Pedlar et al., 2018). Unfortunately, women may encounter many constraints, which stem from these issues, again throughout re-entry, affecting the process of reintegration in unexpected ways.

In addition to the various ways in which women have been marginalized, the disproportionate number of women of colour within the prison system has been an ongoing issue. For the purpose of this thesis, the term "Indigenous" will be used, except when referring to literature in which authors use "Aboriginal" or "Native," and when women in this thesis use the term "Native." Between the years of 2001/02 and 2011/12, the number of Aboriginal women in prison rose by 109% (Government of Canada, 2016). Following this, in 2016, almost one-third of women in prison were of Aboriginal descent, including First Nations, Inuit or Métis (Government of Canada). Moreover, Indigenous women are overrepresented in the Canadian federal prison system, making up a total of 42% of women in prison (Government of Canada, 2019). In fact, over the last decade, the number of Aboriginal women in prison has risen by approximately 90%, leaving them to be the fastest growing ethnic category of people in Canadian penitentiaries (Government of Canada, 2018). Furthermore, mass incarceration of women of colour may be doing more harm than good for people who are incarcerated, people who attempt to reintegrate and for the diversity of our communities overall.

According to the Government of Canada (2019), the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) carries out a woman-centered and holistic approach to meet the needs of women in prison, while prioritizing the safety of the public. However, according to Pedlar et al. (2018), there is a need for more action regarding women leaving prison. For example, penal practice and policy must address the extreme disadvantage imposed upon Indigenous populations and other marginalized communities, where the connection between unfortunate life circumstances and the inevitability of incarceration is too often ignored and yet highly pronounced (Pedlar et al., 2018).

Unfortunate life circumstances do not simply disappear when women leave prison and enter community; they continue to shape women's experiences of reintegration, if we do not address them. Thus, as researchers and practitioners, it is crucial that we study and carry out practices that decrease disadvantages. In a 'democratic' country like Canada, social conditions

are a priority that bring purpose and meaning to everyone's life, especially for people who live on the margins of society. Therefore, understanding the experiences of women entering community, including individual feelings and expectations of adequate social conditions is necessary for researchers to gain more insight into women's lives, and ultimately to learn how women can be better supported by community.

The advantages of successful community reintegration for both women leaving prison and the greater society cannot be overstated (Shipley & Arrigo, 2012). However, one must acknowledge the subjective nature of what it means to resettle 'successfully' – something I deeply wish to understand from women's perspectives. On a broader level, the availability of supports offered to women who are newly released from prison should be of utmost concern to the government, CSC, policy makers and community members with a passion for social justice, because opportunity ultimately reflects the quality of women's lives and the social justice which women may or may not experience (Fortune et al., 2010). Thus, if the quality and availability of the social reintegration supports being offered to women leaving prison are not adequate, it may pose risk towards the health and well-being of the woman, people who surround her and society at large.

The implications of inadequate reintegration supports are extensive for women and the community – and include but are not limited to higher rates of recidivism, substance abuse, mental illness, poverty, and unemployment (Fortune, 2011). Moreover, shifts of public resources from social supports and health to the penal system, can affect the overall health of communities (Gifford, 2019). For these reasons and more, learning what contributes to a successful community reintegration experience for women is of value to a wide range of disciplines. In addition to the need for community supports, women can play a major role in their own resettlement journeys through agency (Fortune, 2011), which is worthy of our attention and deeper exploration as leisure scholars.

Women leaving prison may face a wide range of constraints when re-entering the community after incarceration. Researchers Fortune et al. (2010) explained how some of the constraints encountered by women are issues related to stigma and social exclusion. These prominent scholars also highlighted how feelings of acceptance or unacceptance from the community, can greatly influence a woman's ability to properly reintegrate. Furthermore, stigma

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can be formed when women feel labelled as being 'bad' by others in community (Fortune et al., 2010). It is not uncommon for people to internalize negative feelings associated with being labeled, which is also known as self-stigma, because being belittled by others can affect anyone's self-image and overall ability to function in life.

Relatedly, Fortune (2011) emphasized how women leaving prison are susceptible to experiences of social exclusion, which can be brought on by having a marginal status in society. The same author identified how there is a strong need to create spaces that welcome difference and social inclusion to exist simultaneously in community (Fortune, 2011). This accompanies the need for a deeper understanding of the stigma encountered by women throughout reintegration, how it may limit options and how women and community can better tackle these issues together. Further efforts to gain insight into women's experiences of social inclusion, exclusion, community support, stigma and agency throughout community re-entry are required to grasp a complete picture of their complex needs, which differ from woman to woman (Pedlar et al., 2018).

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) is to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of women reintegrating into the community after imprisonment.

1.4 Research Questions

Three research questions will guide this study:

1. What are the experiences of women leaving prison?
    a) What constraints do women face?
    b) What are women's experiences (if any) of stigma?
    c) What helps women overcome stigma?
2. What role (if any) does community play in the lives of women leaving prison?
    a) What does community mean to women?
    b) What does social reintegration mean to women?

c) What does it mean to be included in community?

d) What does it mean to be excluded in community?

3. What can we learn from women to improve reintegration supports?

a) What types of support are helpful to women?

b) What types of support do women feel community provides?

c) What types of supports do women feel community does not provide/could provide more of?

d) What does an environment that promotes inclusion, while honoring difference look like? (Fortune, 2011)

e) How do women express agency and what role do women play in their own reintegration?

1.5 Context

To address these questions, my supervisor provided me with a database containing transcribed longitudinal, qualitative interviews that were conducted with women in prison and women leaving prison in the Kitchener-Waterloo area from 2015-2018. These interviews served as my data set. The interviews were conducted with women who participated in the Stride Circle program – an intensive program that connects trained volunteers with women who are in prison to provide support during reintegration (Community Justice Initiatives, 2015).

Stride Circles is offered by the organization referred to as Community Justice Initiatives (CJI), and it implements aspects of restorative justice into its process (CJI, 2015). It is important to understand that Stride Circles is a continuation of the Stride program, as Stride is offered only to women in prison. However, the uniqueness of Stride Circles is that relationships, also referred to as Circles, continue during women's journeys of community reintegration after leaving prison.

Stride Circles helps to address crime and conflict by connecting the individual(s) who caused the harm, with those affected by the harm, and the surrounding community (CJI, 2015). In doing so, restorative justice looks for agreement regarding the truth of the crime, reaching an understanding of the impact and an ambition of how to repair the harm (CJI, 2015). The longitudinal interviews which were produced as a result of women's participation in Stride Circles, provided the opportunity for women to reflect upon personal life experiences openly

over time. Reading the transcripts of these interviews allowed me to gain insight into women's experiences of community reintegration by exploring past accounts, patterns of experiences over time, and implications for future research.

Moreover, learning about what constrains and what aids women, through their perceptions, is key to gaining a rich understanding of experiences of transitioning from prison into community. Thus, these interviews help to better understand what women feel is necessary to achieve a healthy lifestyle and strong sense of community. Overall, additional research is needed to gain a rich comprehension of the experiences of women leaving prison through their own lenses, to further identify constraints, what supports the process of social reintegration, what community means to women, and to address current gaps in the literature. More broadly speaking, the outcomes of this analysis can be used directly by women who have been involved with the criminal justice system, to inform policy or program development for women leaving prison, by the prison systems which women have encountered, and community organizations interested in contributing to women's success during reintegration.

1.6 Significance of the Study

Research on the experiences of women re-entering the community after imprisonment is often scattered across various disciplines including recreation and leisure studies, political science, health sciences, psychology, sociology, social work, history, criminology, social justice studies and more. To add, the concept of social reintegration, along with its constraints and effective practice within community, is complex. Social inclusion is often explained in terms of access to services, benefits and other advantages offered by society (Dandurand, 2014). These topics and other key ideas will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two – the literature review. However, social and economic factors, along with the ability of marginalized groups and individuals to access these resources through institutions and social networks, is often overlooked (Dandurand, 2014). For women leaving prison, their capacities to achieve social and economic well-being may relate directly to their overall success in life and are often hindered by various factors.

The concept of well-being is also an intricate construct as it includes psychological, social, and economic components (Wolman et al., 1994). These components are significant to the

overall well-being of the woman, as she attempts to socially reintegrate. Also, the assumptions and stigma associated with the growing population of women in prison indicate a strong need for further study about women's personal experiences. By studying the personal and social experiences of women leaving prison, it may decrease stigma and enhance sense of community, especially during reintegration.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis

The following chapters will present a review of the literature that served as the basis of this thesis and the methodology that I used to understand the experiences of community re-entry for women leaving prison. Specifically, in Chapter Two, I critically review relevant literature from a range of academic disciplines to examine common theoretical perspectives on this topic, constraints, aids and what we know about community re-entry for women leaving prison. In Chapter Three, I explain the methodological framework and analysis process that I used for this study. Chapter Four consists of the findings gathered from the women's transcribed interviews, which includes direct quotes from the women. This is followed by Chapter Five, in which I discuss and interpret the findings by relating them back to the research questions and relevant literature. Lastly, Chapter Six provides the conclusion to this thesis, which includes implications for future research and practice and concluding remarks.

2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of research concerned with women leaving prison and how the population of women in prison is increasing. I also outline the contributions of the unique academic and applied literature relating to women's leisure experiences. This includes a discussion of the various constraints women are known to encounter throughout community reintegration, such as stigma, perceived lack of opportunity and disconnection from the community. Moreover, this review provides an overview of the current academic literature concerned with community re-entry for women leaving prison and women's leisure participation including support and social engagement. Afterwards, I discuss the literature focused on social reintegration, restorative justice, and shared responsibility to explain the importance of these notions in a leisure context and their relevance to this study. I will conclude by discussing women's ideas and meanings of community to demonstrate the link to the purposes of this research project and my specific research questions. Furthermore, I will present a review what is currently known, how we know it, and what else we need to know as leisure scholars, about community reintegration for women leaving prison.

2.1.2 Key Terms

This section consists of key terms that are primarily relevant within the literature on community re-entry for women leaving prison. Important terms such as agency, community re-entry, sense of community, social inclusion, social exclusion, social reintegration, stigma, and well-being will be defined in relation to the population at hand. Defining these terms is necessary to understand the complexity and uniqueness of the processes within community resettlement. Additionally, these concepts are mentioned frequently throughout this thesis. However, disagreement within the literature is inevitable. Thus, the following definitions may provide clarity for the specific population of women leaving prison for the purpose of this thesis.

Agency: refers to one's capacity to negotiate power (Bosworth, 2017). Agency requires a particular self-image as participatory and active, including the individual's ability to make

meaningful interactions with others (Mahoney & Yngvesson, 1992). Researchers have expressed the critical need to strengthen women's agency, especially the clarification of personal goals and taking action to achieve those goals (Donald et al., 2020). These researchers have also emphasized that this is imperative to enhance gender equality and empowerment for women in general. As such, research about women's agency should acknowledge and aspire to create programs and policies that are meaningful and helpful for women, by considering a variety of factors, such as literature that points towards useful interventions, along with women's personal strengths, needs and goals.

Community reintegration: Community reintegration is a course of action involving many simultaneous behavioural, cognitive, and social changes (Doherty et al., 2014). Being integrated into society involves establishing a positive network of social support, acquiring employment skills, recognizing the necessity of community-based assistance, avoiding substance use, along with individuals with substance use issues, and an interpersonal dedication to engage in prosocial behaviour while becoming a member of community who is fully contributing (Doherty et al., 2014).

Sense of community: can be described as the feelings one experiences about belonging to a group and involves the level of attachment individuals feel for their communities (Halamova, 2001).

Social inclusion: is often seen as the opposite of social exclusion and is referred to as participation in the major areas of society (Burchardt et al, 2002). Research on social inclusion tends to focus on poverty alienation, social policy, education, and cultural diversity (Bates & Davis, 2004). Policy makers often search for ways to address issues of social exclusion by promoting social inclusion and supporting a more cohesive society by aiming to remove constraints to participation for devalued social populations (O'Sullivan, 2014).

Social exclusion: refers to the reduced ability of individuals to fully participate in the economic and social benefits of society due to experiences of systemic and structural constraints after being devalued because of differences in gender, race, class, religion, age, sexual orientation, and abilities (Fortune & Yuen, 2015). It is a major social issue in Canada and is the result of unequal power relations that leave specific populations vulnerable to health inequities (Fortune & Yuen, 2015). People who are consistently excluded are often at risk of having their well-being and health compromised by feeling devalued in society (Ponic & Frisby, 2010). Individuals who are excluded often experience limited access to public resources, isolation within community, marginalization from social processes and are left out from civic participation and decision making (Galabuzi, 2004). Although many populations encounter chronic exclusion in Canada, people who have been incarcerated are more vulnerable to exclusion (Wilkinson & Marmot, 2003). Additionally, experiences of loneliness prior to and during incarceration have been linked to poor mental health (Kao et al., 2014).

Social reintegration: The support provided to people leaving prison throughout community re-entry following incarceration is referred to as social reintegration (Griffiths et al., 2007).

Stigma: refers to unfavourable beliefs, attitudes and polices displayed toward individuals perceived to belong to a devalued group (Van Olphen et al., 2009). People who are stigmatized are often treated negatively by being labeled and assigned negative characteristics, thus are set apart from the general population as incomplete humans (Link & Phelan, 2001). Stigma leads to discrimination and prejudice against the group that is being stigmatized, which reinforces existing social inequalities, specifically those with roots in sexuality, race, and gender (Van Olphen et al., 2009). Stigma related to criminal history (also known as incarceration stigma) is a well-known constraint to successful community reintegration – as it can hinder women's opportunities for education, employment, and housing, and even reduce women's access to safety (Goger et al., 2021). For example, a formerly incarcerated woman may be treated as 'less than' by others, denied employment or access to housing due to her criminal history, and/or internalize feelings of worthlessness due to lower expectations of her from others (Van Olphen et al., 2009).

Well-being: may be conceptualized both psychologically and/or subjectively within this study and can be defined as a perception of women's self-esteem, security, happiness, connectedness, and health prior to, during and after incarceration (Wooldredge, 1999).

2.2 Women in Prison

The rapidly increasing number of women entering prison has led to an urgent need to create more effective programs, which help cultivate transformation and success for women leaving prison (Hunter et al., 2016). These programs are currently limited and are often referred to as community re-entry or reintegration supports, as they can include preparation for re-entry (during incarceration and after), help accessing vital resources, and other personally tailored forms of assistance to ease the process of resettlement in community (Hunter et al., 2016). Developing and putting these programs into practice could result in effective reintegration preparation and ultimately lower rates of recidivism for women affiliated with the criminal justice system. As such, the benefits of investing in high quality reintegration supports for women may improve women's lives, including their children's' and families', leading to enhanced levels of safety for people in community.

Due to the severe restrictive and punitive nature of Canadian federal prisons, women are often in need of resocialization upon release, which effective reintegration programs may provide for women (Polaschek & Kilgour, 2013). Interestingly, leisure scholars Pedlar et al. (2018) mentioned how anti-social behaviour, which is often noted in people who have experienced incarceration, is contributed to by threats to individual sense of belonging, as originally explained by Twenge et al. (2007). These threats to women's senses of belonging may occur during negative prison experiences which exclude women from important daily acts of life in society, such as attending to priorities including health needs, finances, employment, family, relationships, education, personal issues and more.

Pedlar et al. (2018) also mentioned that Twenge et al. (2007) highlighted how people are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviour when they experience mutual support and feel as if they are part of a community. Therefore, exclusionary prison environments and the harsh treatment within them directed towards women, seem to be doing more harm than good in

women's lives. Having healthy and positive social interactions are integral to women's healing, success, and well-being after leaving prison, and these social opportunities can be offered through well-developed reintegration programs (Plaschek & Kilgour, 2013). More specifically, restorative justice-focused programming can offer a more peaceful and useful approach for treating crime and its effects, while encouraging participants to develop positive social support networks, a sense of belonging and personal transformations, ultimately helping women stay away from crime and successfully resettle into community (Pedlar et al., 2018).

2.2.1 The Fastest Growing Category of People in Prison

As previously mentioned, a comparison of recent figures suggests that the global population of women in prison is increasing faster than that of men in prison (International Centre for Prison Studies, 2017). Similarly, even in the past, women have been notably identified as the fastest growing category of people in prison across the globe (Pate, 2011). Relatedly, authors Pedlar et al. (2018) have emphasized that this rise in the incarceration of women is significant in Canada. Thus, according to past and recent academic literature, the world-wide population of women in prison is continuously increasing. Given that the number of women in Canadian prisons is growing (Government of Canada, 2016), a deeper understanding of women's life experiences and how these experiences can influence the process of community re-entry is worthy of attention. Although this study is intended to look at integration after discharge from prison, it is also important to understand the aspects that shaped the experiences of women, which have led to this increase. For instance, one may consider how a lack of sense of community or supports prior to being arrested, have led to incarceration in the first place.

From 2005 to 2015, the number of people in prison rose by approximately 10% (Government of Canada, 2015). Most of this growth can be attributed to the steady increase of visible minorities within prisons, along with individuals of Aboriginal descent and women (Government of Canada, 2015). Moreover, the rate of federal imprisonment of Black Canadians is thrice their general representation rate in society (Government of Canada, 2015). Despite commissions advocating for change and public inquiries, these increases continue (Government of Canada, 2015). The implications of these increases are significant for Canadian organizations and

governmental policy, as well as for women leaving prison who are under community supervision and have roles as employees and members of the community.

Additionally, research on the ineffectiveness of the Canadian prison system has become increasingly popular, exposing the dangerous adverse effects of incarceration on people and communities, the absence of care and rehabilitation in prisons, and the racial discrimination that occurs through outdated carceral policies (Ling, 2021). Rather than providing rehabilitation and safety to people who may have previously experienced poor lifestyles and mental health issues, Canadian prisons appear to be uncomfortable, unfriendly, and harmful to people's health (Ling, 2021). Furthermore, being in close proximity for extended periods of time with others who may have untreated mental, physical, and emotional health issues, could potentially worsen people's health, leaving individuals with more issues to deal with upon release.

Clearly, Canada's criminal justice system and its old policies built upon the unpleasant idea of punishment, have resulted in low rates of successful reintegration and high rates of recidivism – indicating that it has repeatedly failed to rehabilitate people (Hwang, 2020). Alarmingly, research shows how our prison system may be increasing crime rates as opposed to decreasing them (Ling, 2021) and that unfortunately, women represent the fastest growing prison population across Canada (Paynter et al., 2021). Moreover, almost 40 percent of women who were previously incarcerated end up having recontact with the police after leaving prison, some of which are rearrested, reconvicted, or reincarcerated (Department of Justice Canada, 2021). These findings help motivate the purposes of this thesis, which include learning about the experiences, needs and suggestions of women who have been to prison. This thesis also illuminates some of the factors that contribute to the rising numbers of women in Canadian federal prisons, ultimately helping understand how to better support and revitalize women's journeys of reintegration.

2.2.2 Social Reintegration

Social reintegration is an important and complex concept pertaining to the notion of community. It is also a major part of community reintegration for women leaving prison. Thus, a clear definition of social reintegration is crucial to gain a deeper understanding of the concept

and its value to marginalized populations, leisure scholars, policy makers and the greater community. For the purpose of this study, the support provided to people leaving prison throughout community re-entry following incarceration will be referred to as social reintegration (Griffiths et al., 2007). More broadly defined, this includes various interventions carried out after conviction to redirect people in prison away from the criminal justice system (Government of Canada, 2018). However, reintegration involves more than structural and organizational support. Fortune (2011) mentioned the value of relationships in supporting women as they encounter the obstacle of departing from the institution and seeking integration, acceptance, and a sense of belonging within community.

The process of community reintegration can involve many simultaneous social, behavioural, and cognitive transformations (Doherty et al., 2014). Being integrated into society means having a positive social support network, gaining employment skills, avoiding substance use and people with substance use issues, acknowledging the need for community-based assistance, and a commitment to participate in prosocial behaviour while becoming a contributing community member (Doherty et al., 2014). According to this definition, I would consider myself to be somewhat of an integrated member of society. Perhaps, even the general population faces constraints to achieving this lifestyle.

However, for women leaving prison, one must understand how attempting to leave an institution of confinement is easier said than done, as it could require personalized support in many forms. Researchers Yuen et al. (2012) explored women's experiences at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) in Kitchener, Ontario. The women took part in Stride, which precedes the Stride Circle program that is discussed throughout this thesis. The authors explored how leisure could potentially support women's reintegration. The researchers found that the Stride program at GVI helped to cultivate social connections between community members and women, while fostering humanity within the prison by providing leisure opportunities reflective of women's personal interests. It is also important to reiterate that the Stride program took place solely in prison, whereas Stride Circles begin in prison, continue after release and during resettlement.

Yuen et al. (2012) concluded that leisure participation can help women feel empowered and find meaning in life, but that depending on the circumstances, it can also result in

oppression, isolation, and marginalization in community. For example, engagement in unhealthy leisure activities or feelings of social exclusion may contribute to this. The authors stressed that over the four-year period of studying women's experiences in prison, it became clear that women felt disconnected from community before becoming incarcerated and that this disconnection often worsened while in prison and even after. A major take-away of their study was that by participating in the Stride program, women gained hope, formed relationships, detached from the 'prisoner identity' and achieved a more positive lifestyle overall – all of which may support women's post-release experiences in community.

Fortune et al. (2020) also explored women's experiences at GVI, specifically in the Stride Circle program. According to their findings, Circle experiences were successful in helping women deal with stigma and stress during community re-entry. These scholars also found that Circles provided support to women that made the process of transitioning from prison to community easier. Since women developed relationships through the program, the researchers found that this could encourage women to build relationships on their own, by depicting what supportive relationships can be like. Interestingly, Fortune et al. (2020) did not specifically explore women's feelings of community belonging, but their findings indicated how women experienced a sense of belonging within their Circles through being valued and accepted by volunteers. Thus, exploring the extent to which women experience a sense of belonging and community within their Circles, as well as during reintegration is imperative to this thesis.

Relatedly, Van Der Meulen and Omstead (2021) analyzed an arts-based program in a women's prison and found it to be successful in helping build community for women. The researchers revealed that women who took part in this program reported increased feelings of joy and excitement each week, while looking forward to expressing themselves artistically. Interestingly, this program did not require women to reveal information about personal crimes (unlike many prison programs) and perhaps, this relaxed approach helped to make the atmosphere more comfortable and enjoyable. The positive outcomes of the program indicated its success in uplifting women and reducing some of the negative effects of incarceration, such as stress and loneliness. All together, the studies conducted by the aforementioned authors reveal the value of effective prison programming and reintegration supports in helping women to resettle and avoid recidivism after leaving prison.

In addition to the benefits of receiving personalized social support and leisure opportunities during incarceration and reintegration, women may prosper from supporting themselves through acts of self-improvement. Relatedly, research with people in prison has shown that women value and seek personal change, and that interestingly, personal change may be perceived differently by women, as opposed to men (Trammell et al., 2018). For example, women may seek social and emotional change, while men may seek to improve employment skills (Trammell et al., 2018). This could also mean that some women in prison view transformation uniquely, and that women may be receiving different types of advice regarding goals about personal change from prison staff.

In Trammell et al.'s (2018) study, very few women seemed to care about becoming financially equipped after leaving prison, which was concerning to the researchers because financial burden is known to be common among women during reintegration. Relatedly, McLeod et al. (2020) identified that throughout the transition period from prison into the real-world, people are at a significantly higher risk of experiencing negative health issues. However, the same researchers also shed light on the power of peer support for women who experience incarceration – explaining how peer mentors can aid women by providing versatile and helpful support that can enhance the ability to reintegrate into community after leaving prison.

Additionally, according to Western et al. (2015), social reintegration should involve building material security along with a sense of belonging in community. These researchers indicated that family connections, secure housing and basic resources allow for full participation within community life and achievement of the socially respected roles of employee, citizen, and kin. For women leaving prison, the time spent in there caused distance from family, housing, and sources of income. This can leave women who have experienced incarceration on the margins of society with limited access to the valued opportunities and social roles that represent full participation in society (Western et al., 2015).

Furthermore, stigma, as mentioned previously, seems to be a frequently experienced constraint which can deter women who are attempting to reintegrate, from achieving opportunities such as steady employment. In fact, researchers Chui and Cheng (2013) have pointed out that when trying to become employed after leaving prison, people are often faced with the stressful decision of either revealing their criminal history to possible employers or

concealing this information. Encountering this dilemma may not always be easy, as employment is vital to one's success during reintegration. These authors also explained how in some cases, women may even feel pressured to withhold knowledge of their incarceration from others (e.g., when attempting to become employed) or reveal it and risk being stigmatized in doing so.

Intriguingly, researchers (Uggen et al., 2013) have also concluded that having a well-developed employment record can help people succeed during resettlement. However, these are only some of the ways that begin to address women's needs after leaving prison. The constraints faced by women during reintegration are often entangled in stigmatic forces exhibited by institutions and members of society and must be dealt with through multifaceted approaches. By understanding these constraints and focusing on how to overcome them, one may find that the image of success following incarceration becomes clearer.

Interestingly, researchers Liu et al. (2020) explored how women develop agency and a sense of self while overcoming stigma during incarceration, and how these skills may assist women during community reintegration. Women's anti-stigma efforts are important to understand, as it is not uncommon to face incarceration stigma after leaving prison. The authors found that prior to imprisonment, women were already impacted by a complicated intersectionality of gender, class, family and more – all of which affected how power was exercised in prison. For example, women who belong to racialized or underprivileged groups, may be treated differently in prison, in comparison to women who do not belong to these groups. These complex differences may influence women's abilities to feel equal and affect the capacity to express agency during incarceration and after. However, Liu et al. (2020) also examined different approaches to achieving personal empowerment for women who have experienced incarceration and found that the use of relationships and language can impact their self-perceptions, while helping to detach from the labels that accompany imprisonment. Therefore, it is important to take steps to avoid using stigmatizing words when discussing women's experiences of incarceration and community resettlement.

Additionally, Rowe (2011) found how women who have been affiliated with crime can rewrite their life narratives by reconstructing their self-identity and self-image, helping to redefine 'the self.' This scholar also highlighted how women frequently enact agency and develop problem-solving tactics in prison, which can help to amplify voices and construct new

meanings about women's journeys regarding imprisonment. Thus, learning to enact agency, reconstruct self-identities and adopt anti-stigma strategies while in prison, may help women to prepare for reintegration by improving 'the self' in advance.

It is also crucial to understand that historically, research on the social reintegration of women leaving prison has been based on the lives of men, overlooking the real-life experiences of women and further contributing to their marginalization (Covington, 1998). Essentially, women leaving prison have encountered a social system that has assumed men's and women's needs are identical. Such a social system may be ignoring the delicate needs of women in prison, who may already come from unfortunate lifestyles, further influencing their reintegration after the fact.

Relatedly, Pollack (2009), who studied the experiences of formerly incarcerated women, found that extended time in prison can worsen issues that women already have (e.g., health concerns, lack of employment and sense of community, etc.). Being removed from the real-world during incarceration leads to serious disconnections from life priorities, family, friends, and sources of support, often leaving women with bigger burdens to attend to upon release (Pollack, 2009). Even prior to this, Petersilia (2001), identified the impacts of prison experiences on people who have been incarcerated, including depression, trauma, suicidal thoughts and more. Thus, more programs that are tailored to women's unique needs should be implemented into the prison regime, to better support women in prison and women who are reintegrating into community (Humerick, 2020).

The population of women in prison are clearly a minority (van den Bergh, 2009), and as a result, women's needs may often go unaddressed. As women are released back into community, the oppression that women face often continues to follow. This suggests that community has a significant role to play in the reintegration of women leaving prison. However, not everyone in community supports women's efforts to reintegrate, especially since the dominant outlook that women leaving prison are dangerous, persists throughout most of society (Pedlar et al., 2008).

Thankfully, over the past decade, Canadian women's prisons have experienced a paradigm shift towards a philosophy of rehabilitation and treatment that is woman-centered (Pedlar et al., 2008). To examine the experiences and lives of women in Canadian federal prisons, the Commissioner of the Correctional Service of Canada established *The Task Force on*

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Federally Sentenced Women in 1989 (Barrett et al., 2010). Their woman-centred approach was explained in their report, *Creating Choices,* and was founded upon the voices of federally incarcerated women and others who expressed the necessity for a stronger understanding of the lives, distress, aspirations and needs of women (Barrett et al., 2010). They discussed new approaches based upon choices that are meaningful, and spoke of shared responsibility between the community, governments, and women affiliated with the criminal justice system, both for the damage done through the crimes committed by women and for measures to prevent and reduce further suffering (Barret et al., 2010). This woman-centred approach includes various techniques that have been tailored towards the population of women in prison. More specifically, it entails interventions and programs that are described in terms of reintegration and rehabilitation of women who have experienced incarceration (Pedlar et al., 2008).

Despite the rigorous efforts made towards creating a more humane and rehabilitative prison system for women in Canada, it is challenging to be certain that the act of incarceration itself does not carry lasting harsh effects on mental health (Foucault, 1975). This is especially applicable for the population of women and people within prisons who may be more vulnerable and have unique needs (Pedlar et al., 2008). Relatedly, Wicks (2017), who studied the impacts of incarceration and community reintegration on people's mental health, revealed how their participants reported inadequate mental health support in prison, and stressed the difficulty they experienced when trying to find such resources independently. Even more recently, Sukmawati et al. (2019), found that women affiliated with the criminal justice system are more inclined to have negative self-images, decreased self-confidence, and diminished self-esteem. These are only some of the unfortunate adverse reactions of incarceration that women are often left to manage and cope with on their own during reintegration.

Due to prison experiences posing a threat to women's mental health, Norman (2017) identified the importance of people in prison engaging in physical activity to enhance overall wellness. However, due to the punitive nature of incarceration, the ability to participate freely in such activities does not always exist. This potential lack of physical activity in prison may have detrimental effects on women's abilities to feel physically and mentally well, both during incarceration and reintegration. In fact, scholars have concluded that punitive measures, such as minimizing women's access to healthful activities during incarceration, do not lower rates of

recidivism (Cullen et al., 2011). Rather, the dangers that exist in prison (such as lack of space, freedom, access to vital resources etc.) frequently induce feelings of alienation and poor health in people who are eventually discharged, leaving these issues to persist and even worsen among their families, children, community members and others (Murray, 2007). As such, it is in the best interest of women who have experienced incarceration, and communities at-large, for prison policy to shift focus from punishment towards genuine concern for the current and future well-being of people in prison – with the overarching goal of reducing recidivism.

It also crucial to understand that women are often at a greater risk in community, thus, much more inclined to experience feelings of social exclusion, loneliness, and sadness – especially when lacking in supportive social relationships (Fortune et al., 2020). Even earlier researchers who explored the experiences of women in prison, such as Hart (1995), identified how when women had stronger relationships while incarcerated, it resulted in higher levels of mental wellness. Similarly, Wulf-Ludden (2013) highlighted how people in prison have explained how friendships can assist with cultivating personal-development, while helping to avoid participating in criminal behaviour. The same researcher concluded that women who are incarcerated often feel as if companions and friendships can serve as sources of support, who may provide constructive advice while helping women feel more comfortable in social situations and creating an overall positive difference in women's lives.

However, Hart and Wulf-Ludden both discussed the value of social connections for people who are in prison – contrary to this thesis, which aimed to explore the role of social support specifically in connection to women's experiences of resettlement in community. This is important to note, as many past researchers have already explored women's experiences of incarceration – time and time again, finding how social restrictions within the prison environment itself can hinder women's well-being while in prison. However, it is also critical to gain a rich understanding of what hinders and what helps women in direct relation to reintegration – as this may assist women in achieving success in community after being released. Furthermore, as is shown in this thesis, these findings could contribute to lower levels of recidivism for the general population of women leaving prison.

Interestingly, the negative effects of punishment inflicted in prison imply that there may be a paradox existing in prison rehabilitation – because a system, which aims to rehabilitate

individuals, often seems to leave people feeling worse. The serious lack of resources and access to healthful activities in prison can leave women feeling severely unprepared to re-enter community. In fact, Wicks (2017) emphasized how prison systems often fail at arranging sufficient resources for people who are discharged. Even more recently, Cheah et al. (2020) outlined how people in prison who have taken part in programming, which is meant to rehabilitate, have reported feeling as if the programs did not prepare them enough to face the overwhelming constraints that often appear during community re-entry. This indicates a critical need for CSC to invest in more effective reintegration planning and techniques for women who are currently incarcerated, as well as for women who will be released soon.

2.2.3 Support

Placing greater emphasis on the importance of supporting women leaving prison throughout the process of community re-entry may play a major role as part of the solutions to women's problems. Pedlar et al. (2018) indicated how this may involve focusing on providing stronger opportunities for education and access to employment. These scholars also discussed how preventative measures, adequate housing, financial security, and a stronger social support system are some of the changes that may begin to address women's social conditions. To add, Bui and Morash (2010) suggested the value of prison and parole programs that establish social networks while women are in prison to meet their unique needs, while ensuring availability and access of these networks for women with differing requirements throughout re-entry. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2019), stressed the crucial necessity of planning and assessing reintegration programs for people who are being discharged from prison – outlining how strengthening social connections while helping people who leave prison to participate in meaningful community experiences is vital to our collective well-being.

Authors Ricciardelli and Mooney (2018) found that although it is apparent that women need support during reintegration, stigma towards people who have been incarcerated is a constant battle that individuals leaving prison must face. In fact, these authors accentuated how encountering stigma in community can severely deter people's chances of landing and keeping jobs during reintegration. This may not only affect the financial security of women who are attempting to reintegrate but may also result in missed opportunities for many companies, organizations, and the overall workforce to employ women who are openly willing to work and

need jobs – an issue, which is largely understudied (Ricciardelli & Mooney, 2018). Feeling socially rejected by employers and people in community can lead to negative health outcomes for individuals leaving prison (Kyprianides et al., 2019). Thus, it is imperative that women are offered diverse types of support in preparation for reintegration, including employment assistance, adequate access to health resources, education, social support and more.

More broadly speaking, researchers Kendall et al. (2018) acknowledged the dramatic rise in incarcerated adults and identified how this is a serious world-wide issue and public health dilemma. These researchers studied the effects of providing social support to people who had already left prison and found that doing so can help individuals to restore and establish relationships with community members, increase personal agency and encourage positive attitude changes while fostering feelings of trust. They concluded that well-developed reintegration programming is a major step towards lowering recidivism and supporting successful transitions from prison into community. These scholars also clearly explained the urgent need for and benefits of investing in effective re-entry planning and social assistance for people involved in the criminal justice system. These findings pertain directly to the population of women leaving prison, as it is already well-known that women carry unique and complex needs, many of which are unmet before entering prison and become exasperated during incarceration.

It is equally important to note that many people who experience incarceration have not yet had the opportunity to be educated, and recent research shows that 'information poverty' is a serious issue in prisons (Bandaranayake, 2021). Thankfully, resources such as prison libraries and other opportunities for education can help meet the educational needs of people who are involved with the criminal justice system, while increasing well-being and empowering people to spend time wisely during incarceration (Bandaranayake, 2021) and perhaps, reintegration. In fact, providing educational support to people in prison may even help prevent individuals from reoffending after being released (Bandaranayake, 2021; Magee 2021). This is important to note, as women's experiences with receiving or not receiving education in prison may be relevant to the quality of their reintegration journeys.

Unfortunately, formerly incarcerated people often express experiencing a lack of support, unequal opportunity, and feelings of social exclusion in community, especially regarding

activities that are known to make people feel productive (Baranger et al., 2018). Some of these activities might include working, studying, and volunteering. In Baranger et al.'s (2018) qualitative study, the researchers analyzed the individual and social benefits of a program, which offers college education to support and empower women in prison. They found that women who participated in this educational program reported feelings of enhanced self-image, along with reduced criminal behaviours and attitudes. After engaging in the program, the women in Baranger et al.'s study also reported feelings of empowerment, especially upon release. Therefore, educational programs could be helpful for women to engage in during incarceration, especially when preparation for community re-entry is integrated into the curriculum. Educational experiences can involve learning in group environments, cooperation between different parties, and the learned responsibility to complete work in a timely manner, all of which may help women gain skills in different areas of life.

Furthermore, poor life conditions and ways of living, in addition to lack of support are common among many women who become incarcerated – thus, the lack of freedom and harsh restrictions presented throughout prison experiences often add to and worsen these issues in women's lives (Sambo & Ojei, 2018). These punitive measures prevent women from living full social lives while incarcerated and can even cause or aggravate trust issues for women, which may stem from past trauma associated with negative social interactions, feelings of unsafety, abuse, or deception (Scott & Gosling, 2016). These negative life experiences and related feelings may continue into community re-entry for women, especially if left untreated while in prison. In turn, there may be a tendency to experience lack of self trust, as well as trust in society, for people who attempt to reintegrate into community after leaving prison (DeLeon, 2000). Therefore, if women are left feeling unsupported during incarceration and reintegration, they could easily return to their previous lifestyles once released, potentially increasing the chances of reengaging in crime, reincarceration and in some cases, even more severe issues.

As such, it is important to understand the relationship between social support, a sense of belonging in community and women's recidivism. Authors Schnappauf and DiDonato (2017) explored this and found that in order to encourage productive and healthy behaviour among women leaving prison, reintegration supports might consider educating the community about women's needs – which could help enhance understanding and reduce stigma, helping the

overall population of women leaving prison to reintegrate more successfully. The same researchers outlined that if members of community were to understand how most women leaving prison are eager to transform, then organizations may offer more opportunities for women to succeed, which could result in positive outcomes for women during resettlement. All things considered, a major shift in society's overall perception and behaviour towards women leaving prison may be necessary, to show understanding, acceptance and open pathways to recovery and success for women.

These concerns may cause one to contemplate that perhaps women's success during reintegration is not determined solely by women themselves, but also by the prison system's obligation to rehabilitate, by members of community to understand and accept, and by community organizations to provide missed opportunities – in order for women to achieve personal goals, transformation and to live life in full potential after prison. Relatedly, researchers Fortune et al. (2020) revealed how restorative justice-focused reintegration programs can foster inclusion for women through feelings of acceptance, love, compassion and understanding from members of community. These scholars also recognized that a sense of community can be built for all parties, when women are open to forming relationships and when community members show support to women during reintegration.

To add, Bui and Morash (2010) explained how prior to becoming incarcerated, women's social connections often fueled criminal behaviour, and that social shifts are needed to reach positive outcomes after prison release. The same researchers also stated that when women have access to adequate social and emotional support in addition to much needed material resources, it can be easier to create positive transformations and attitude changes in life. Thus, the value of social support networks, restorative justice programming and proper access to resources cannot be overstated for women with unique needs during community re-entry.

Relatedly, authors Pedlar et al. (2008) have emphasized the value of relationships in helping women achieve a sense of normalcy in life throughout their transitions, especially after being released from the unnatural world within prisons. In fact, the prison world differs drastically from the real world, and the institutional harm imposed upon women in prison points towards a strong need for positive change to occur (Scraton & Carlton, 2017). Thus, the formation of friendships may serve as potential portals for resistance and power in women's lives

(Fortune et al., 2010). Building a supportive network can provide the opportunity for women to socially engage with one another, working to combat negative issues during community re-entry.

Interestingly, early findings from Miller and Stiver (1997) showed how gaining a supportive social circle, which helps establish positive connections, in addition to taking individual action, are both key components in achieving a reconnection with community. This means that both personal action and support from others are integral to experiencing a successful reintegration. Additionally, Miguel-Calvo (2020) explained how developing strong self-support tactics is vital in order to tackle the adverse effects and obstacles that incarceration can leave one vulnerable to. This scholar also identified that overcoming and mitigating these vulnerabilities may involve strenuous and consistent individual effort, different forms of resistance, and various types of support from family, friends, and peers. However, developing a supportive network may not always be an easy task for women, especially after leaving prison, due to the time spent away from community.

Researchers Markson et al. (2015) mentioned how social bonding and social capital theories shed light on the idea that positive social connections can cultivate resilience for people, especially during community re-entry. Intriguingly, the same researchers also mentioned how the value of social bonding for formerly incarcerated people during reintegration has been understudied, especially longitudinally. Nevertheless, the positive outcomes of having a well-established social support system during times of need, have been known for over a decade now (Galek et al., 2011). Even earlier scholars (Andrews et al., 1978) understood the importance of having a strong social support network in life and highlighted how it can serve to protect one's psychological wellness, specifically by helping people through stressful situations (e.g., coping with relationships, loss, illness, life transitions, goals and more). Relatedly, Bensimon (2021) recently explained how social bonding occurs when one's connections to others grow, ultimately helping to improve levels of support for the individual while enhancing communication skills and building a sense of community within that group or relationship.

Al Zoubi (2020) identified how old punitive measures such as social, time and space related restrictions which are still used in prisons today, often constrain women's abilities to socially bond with others, limiting opportunities to form social connections and reap benefits through them. To add, researchers Tamatea and Wilson (2009) stressed that social networks

serve as assets and protective mechanisms which can lower an individual's chances of becoming reaffiliated with crime. Relatedly, authors Scanlan et al. (2020) emphasized how having a well-established support system is crucial for people in prison to have in preparation for reintegration, as there is mounting evidence that this can assist women in feeling supported and socially connected upon release. Furthermore, the same authors highlighted how there is limited research about the protective mechanisms that can lower one's chance of committing harmful acts towards others. Therefore, learning about women's needs, what helps to avoid criminal behaviour, and what supports reintegration are all essential to understanding how one can achieve a successful resettlement journey.

Interestingly, it has been long known that restrictions imposed upon people by the prison system can limit opportunities to attend to important personal needs (Schupak, 1986). Unfortunately, these restrictions, their adverse effects and continued stigmatization against people leaving prison seem to be present even today. Thankfully, scholars such as those previously mentioned, in addition to Cochran (2014) have outlined the value of social support in helping individuals deal with discrimination related to having a criminal history, as it is not uncommon for people to feel excluded from community after leaving prison.

One would think that arranging social support for reintegration would be of utmost concern in prison policy. However, this is rarely the case, as women in Pedlar et al.'s (2018) book, expressed the severe lack of support experienced upon release from prison. These researchers emphasized the importance of having a sense of belonging and community for women during reintegration, as both help in feeling supported to stay safe outside of prison and can assist people in living life to their fullest potential. Similarly, even earlier researchers (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), clarified how developing a sense of community entails being in a group learning experience, which offers chances for people to feel heard and assisted, while meeting their needs and developing social and emotional connections that help contribute to society.

Relatedly, McLeod (2020) explained how having adequate social support can help bring important resources into the lives of people who are attempting to reintegrate into community after being released from prison. They also emphasized how people are at a much greater risk of experiencing negative health results when transitioning from prison to community. Some of the

resources that women could need during these times may include mental and physical health resources, social and emotional support as well as help to avoid drug and substance abuse. Moreover, general support related to the process of resettlement may be of help to women, such as transportation, financial and employment services, as well as connections to educational resources. These types of support may help women to feel sufficient and achieve personal goals throughout community reintegration.

Receiving adequate support from prison staff, family, friends, and community, is integral to women's well-being and the overall quality of one's reintegration journey. Thus, providing women with various types of support, including through social, emotional and leisure opportunities, as well as encouraging self-support, could be essential parts of achieving a proper resettlement experience. Furthermore, the specific types of support provided through reintegration efforts, including social, leisure, health, financial, employment, education and other opportunities could reduce the chances of women returning to prison after being released. Supporting women in the different ways mentioned, may also disrupt negative social patterns, such as engaging in drug use, crime, holding negative attitudes or alienating oneself. Instead, encouraging friendly interactions between women and community may increase positive outlooks on 'the self,' others and life – by promoting resocialization and eventually helping women settle smoothly into community.

For the growing population of women in prison, social support and connection are both vital, especially for individuals who may be feeling lonely and depressed due to diminished social networks. Upon release, women may experience challenges when attempting to rebuild and establish new relationships, including difficulty finding a sense of belonging in community. However, a combination of women's efforts to improve their social networks and the availability of adequate prison programming in addition to receiving support from community members, can work together to broaden women's access to meaningful social engagement with others through leisure participation, helping women to avoid crime after discharge (Bui & Morash, 2010). To add, Frey and Delaney (1996) clarified the powerful role that leisure participation can play in the lives of people who experience incarceration. Research on experiencing support through social and leisure engagement will be discussed in the next section.

2.2.3.1 Support through Leisure

Through surveys of 1770 people affiliated with the criminal justice system, Frey and Delaney (1996) found that stress can be controlled through well-developed recreation programs, and that therefore, engaging in leisure can enhance safety in the lives of individuals. Similarly, participants in Yuen et al.'s (2012) study, shed light on the value of leisure participation, indicating that it significantly reduced feelings of social isolation in society, which explains how leisure can aid women during resettlement. Additionally, Gallant et al. (2015) found that recreational interventions can help individuals to improve their physical and mental health while managing behaviour, implying that such support could help women to reduce levels of stress during the unpredictable transition from prison to community. Pham (2013), Pedlar et al. (2015) and Marcoux Rouleau (2020) also affirmed the positive support that leisure engagement can provide for people who have experienced incarceration, highlighting how it can improve overall wellness, while helping to develop meaning and purpose in life.

To add, Dionigi (2002) found that recreation and leisure participation can help individuals mitigate the effects of a variety of negative life factors, such as emotional distress, feelings of social exclusion, drug addiction and more, which may stem from experiencing an ongoing lack of support in general. In fact, this researcher also explained how engagement in recreation and leisure activities is known to result in benefits such as enhanced sense of self-control while fostering feelings of empowerment, regardless of why one may choose to engage in the activity. Although the benefits of taking part in recreation and leisure are becoming increasingly recognized for people affiliated with the criminal justice system, women who are reintegrating are often known to face stigma when attempting to access such activities (Yuen et al., 2012). This could limit women's abilities to engage freely in social and leisure activities (e.g., community walks, art classes, swimming, dance programs, gym clubs, reading groups etc.) during reintegration. This is unfortunate, as reintegration may be a time when individuals are seeking to develop a healthy, active, and positive leisure lifestyle.

Even earlier research from Green (1998) explored the meaning of leisure in women's lives and emphasized how it can provide the opportunity for women to re-evaluate their life narratives and resist gender norms. The same researcher accentuated how supportive friendships

between women could serve as ideal opportunities for leisure, perhaps through engaging in social interactions and finding shared interests. Green (1998) also highlighted that when sharing humor in leisure settings, it can emotionally support, empower, and help women to resist harmful stereotypes regarding gender. Thus, the role of leisure in the lives of women who are reintegrating into community is multilayered, as leisure engagement seems to bring positive social change in many ways.

Relatedly, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2020) explained how engagement in one-on-one and group leisure and social interventions can enhance levels of self-respect and self-confidence, and that peer support may be especially helpful for women. More specifically, peer support programs can help aid the recovery of women when peer mentors use the skills and knowledge of people with lived experiences (e.g., incarceration, mental conditions, substance abuse) to support women (SAMHSA, 2020). This administration also outlined how the role of peer mentors is often tailored to women's unique needs – and that engagement in such programs can encourage women to improve in different ways, such as by developing healthy relationships and communication skills, while learning to avoid issues that trigger trauma.

Interestingly, some of these ideas align with values of the Stride Circle program, in which volunteers and staff provide different forms of support to women affiliated with the criminal justice system, both during incarceration and reintegration. More information about the Stride Circle program by Community Justice Initiatives, which is a major area of focus for this thesis, will be described in detail in Chapter Three. SAMHSA (2020) explained how other potential roles of peer mentors may include supporting women during community re-entry, providing transportation, giving encouragement, addressing community-related stigma, helping manage illness(es), connecting women with social support services and addressing negative feelings such as hopelessness.

Furthermore, peer support and engagement in social and leisure experiences has been connected to a wide array of positive results, including enhanced quality of life, reduced feelings of social isolation and reliance on substance abuse, raised levels of stability and hope regarding recovery, lower hospitalizations, and an overall heightened participation in treatment (SAMHSA, 2020). These findings enhance our understanding of the different ways in which women who

have been incarcerated may require support, specifically during reintegration after being released from prison.

Despite different scholars and organizations discussing the importance of engaging in recreation and leisure activities for people who experience incarceration, there are few researchers (Fortune et al., 2010; Yuen et al., 2012; Fortune & Yuen, 2015; Fortune et al., 2020; Pedlar et al., 2018) who have discussed the potential impacts of doing so directly on/during experiences of reintegration for women. As such, women may be left feeling as if they must support themselves (often amid stigma) to rebuild their lifestyles throughout experiences of resettlement, which is not always easily done. Although the injustice in women's lives does not seem to be lessened by the criminal 'justice' system, researchers have revealed other ways that women can do so.

For example, Yuen and Fortune (2020) explored how arts-based leisure engagement can help women to achieve social justice, by creating a space for people who feel socially excluded and marginalized to come together, unite with community, find mutual understandings, express themselves and disrupt the status quo. In fact, Pryor and Outley (2014) have also affirmed the power which recreational and leisure spaces can hold for individuals who have felt socially excluded in community. These scholars emphasized the value of places such as recreation centres in the lives of people who have been marginalized, and referred to them as "just spaces," where individuals may find hope, feel supported, and welcomed, while potentially becoming motivated to deal with economic and political issues in life.

Researchers Humby and Barclay (2018) also studied the benefits of engaging in activities which help support oneself to improve self-confidence, specifically for people who have experienced incarceration. They found that doing so may help with some of the common issues experienced by formerly incarcerated women, such as lowered self-image, anxiety, and depression, simply by encouraging positive self-outlooks. These researchers affirmed the positive influences of helping people affiliated with the criminal justice system to enhance self-confidence through pet-therapy interactions and concluded that it can empower individuals to gain a sense of responsibility, enhance self-image and learn to be patient with oneself, others, and life in general. Therefore, women in prison, as well as women leaving prison could benefit from engaging in recreational and leisure interventions such as pet therapy and even other social

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and leisure activities that can help induce positive feelings of emotional support, in order to ease the process of resettlement.

2.2.4 Restorative Justice

Restorative justice is a complex and deeply debated theory and its meaning is continuously evolving with new discoveries (Van Ness & Strong, 2014). Zehr (2008) explained how this principle carries deep roots in Indigenous practices, feminist theory, and many religions. The same author mentioned how in the 1970's, restorative justice started as a field of practice and by the 1980's it had developed into a theory. Later, it was implemented as an attempt to treat what was once viewed as minor offences (Zehr, 2015). However, today restorative justice provides a balanced approach to understanding justice, which involves repairing harm and healing individuals who have been affected by crime – including those who have offended, their victims and our communities (Van Ness & Strong, 2014). Closely tied to the theory of restorative justice, are acts such as rebuilding 'the self' by healing relationships and forming new ones, reconstructing attitudes, re-evaluating life decisions and reconceptualizing one's purpose(s) in community (Sayers, 2020). Essentially, restorative justice approaches acknowledge that crime leads to wounds for not only the victim, but for the person who offended and the community – all wounds which are in dire need of healing.

The notion of 'the self,' is important to understand in relation to restorative justice approaches, as they aim to rebuild oneself and restore one's life. To add, 'the self,' is a complex concept, which seems to be loosely defined and it is sometimes difficult to encompass its complexity. However, Miller (1991) defined it as a socially constructed concept, which describes one's inner mental perception of themself – often pertaining to ideas of having a 'good life,' with freedom and justice. However, this definition is not universal because each woman defines her sense of self and a 'good life' differently. Thus, it is important to understand the unique self-perceptions of women leaving prison, especially in connection to experiences before prison, during incarceration and throughout reintegration. Like pieces of a puzzle, 'the self' is made up of different life experiences, often broken apart, only to be put back together.

In her book, *After Prison – What?* Booth (1903) wrote:

"When one thinks how this prejudice and marking of discharged prisoners robs them of any chance of gaining a living, and in many instances forces them back against their will into a dishonest career, one can realize how truly tragic the situation is" (p. 119).

More than half a century later, McArthur (1974) explained how one who is released from prison faces a situation upon release, that basically ensures their own failure. Unfortunately, more than twenty-five years after this piece, researchers still felt that enough changes had yet to occur for people leaving prison. Authors Maruna and LeBel (2002) wrote that from the 70's until the early 2000's, situations faced by people leaving prison had not improved – in fact they had deteriorated. Of course, this left many individuals to deal with the stressful process of community re-entry, alone.

However, Holquist (1999) had already begun comparing the punitive measures in corrections to the emerging concept of restorative justice. This author found that restorative justice was more reparative in nature, but that it desperately required a paradigm shift within the world of correctional response. Since then, restorative justice has become its own social movement and an overarching concept, being used and implemented more frequently by researchers and social justice advocates.

O'Brien (2001) conducted a study with 18 women to discover the strengths that women used to manage re-entry following release from prison. The women in this study emphasized that a mixture of individual resiliency, interpersonal abilities and sources of community support helped to facilitate a successful transition. Findings from this study suggested the desperate need for policy and practice changes to occur in order to help women in transitioning from prison to communities. Both Holquist (1999) and O'Brien (2001) stressed the importance of restorative justice concepts, including a belief in individual ability for change and growth, along with self-determination – explaining how these concepts may carry promise in doing better for justice. Despite their realizations, further elaboration on the specific role(s) that community ought to play in reintegration was still necessary for women leaving prison.

Other early literature about recovery and therapeutic care for people affiliated with crime, depicted the need to develop new norms and values to successfully rehabilitate individuals (DeLeon, 2000). In fact, Shetky (1998), who studied the experiences of people affiliated with the criminal justice system, emphasized how many of the people with whom she met had unresolved

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emotional issues, and expressing emotions in prison seemed to be unsafe, often leading to severe punishment. Unfortunately, authors Fortune et al. (2020) have identified how even nowadays, women who are released from prison often attempt to reintegrate amid critical unmet emotional needs. Referring back to Shetky (1998), the author emphasized how sharing painful experiences in social group environments can help ease the process of enduring pain and make people feel less alone, while understanding the commonness of such traumas. As such, helping to restore the emotional health of women who experience incarceration seems to be of major concern to researchers of this topic.

Thankfully, the well-known tenets of restorative justice have become more studied today, than ever before, helping to expand our understanding of it in relation to women who have experienced incarceration. Richards (2011) illuminated its association with Foucauldian theory by emphasizing how its connection to empowerment makes it a suitable response to crime, because the idea of empowerment is already being used to discuss criminal justice in Western areas across the globe. At the same time, Fortune (2011) discussed the reconceptualization of women's social inclusion, which was grounded in her deep concern for social justice. Following this, Walker and Tarutani (2017) studied restorative justice programming, specifically about violence against women, and how such efforts can work to increase healing between people who have offended, and people affected by their offences.

Researchers are increasingly discussing restorative justice as a humane way to treat crime, as it offers a holistic route to understanding issues related to justice (Van Ness & Strong, 2014). By focusing on repairing harm and treating individuals involved with and affected by crime, restorative justice techniques help bring people who have committed crimes, victims, and community members together to reach mutual understandings (Van Ness & Strong, 2014). As opposed to traditional criminal justice methods of punishment, exclusion and harm, restorative justice approaches aim to foster healing for people (Walker & Tarutani, 2017). Instead of targeting the individual who broke the law and focusing on punishing them, restorative justice can help us peacefully respond to crime, while ameliorating its harmful effects and recognizing the responsibilities and needs of everyone involved. In fact, Van Ness and Strong (2014) remind other scholars of the meaningful point that criminal justice should foster healing, and perhaps through restorative techniques, women can be treated holistically and gain opportunities to attend

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to personal issues while building relationships – reaching beyond merely the concept of law-breaking or crime.

Van Ness and Strong (2014) essentially explained how restorative justice offers a new perspective on helping people, which focuses on inclusion, mending issues and providing support to overcome constraints, all of which can be helpful during community re-entry. Interestingly, they also found that it is not uncommon for traditional criminal justice approaches to increase stress, harm, and violence in people's lives, while neglecting the need to treat harm, and failing at rehabilitating individuals. Relatedly, Walker and Tarutani (2017) highlighted how restorative techniques can lower the prison system's reliance on punishment and instead, shift focus towards increasing healing and rehabilitation. Thus, restorative justice-focused programming can be helpful for women leaving prison, especially when trying to understand actions and consequences, in addition to forming personal goals. Through peaceful approaches such as mediation and social circles, restorative justice interventions aim to repair and transform the lives of individuals, especially people with a history and/or risk of experiencing violence and trauma (De La Rue & Ortega, 2019), all in all, helping to combat their effects during reintegration.

As mentioned, rehabilitation is often aimed at by the criminal justice system, as opposed to restorative justice. Therefore, it is important to understand what rehabilitation entails, in relation to the goals of restorative justice. Researchers Ward and Maruna (2007) identified how the aim of rehabilitation should be to advocate for human rights and needs and to reduce or mitigate risks by offering individuals the primary elements to achieve a 'good' life. Thus, social restoration should also be a part of criminal justice. These researchers found that rehabilitation should offer a combination of the necessities and goals of people, practitioners, the community, and policy makers. Unfortunately, this does not always occur in the world of criminal justice, as many people are discharged from prisons without feeling completely rehabilitated, leaving individuals with the obligation to rehabilitate themselves (Cullen & Gilbert, 2012) throughout the uncertain journey of reintegration.

Allowing people to be released from prison without achieving proper rehabilitation can place great risk on the individual, their peers, and the community at-large. Researchers Cullen and Gilbert (2012) acknowledged that despite academics and the public promoting a more

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civilized and therapeutic response to crime, which rejects cruel and inhumane punishment towards people in prison, liberals and conservatives continue to be skeptical about its validity. The same authors identified how advocates of justice have strongly emphasized the need for shorter prison sentences and different approaches to incarceration, contrary to politicians who believe that extended prison sentences are necessary to decrease the crime rate.

Perplexingly, an entire decade after the aforementioned researchers exposed these issues within our governing systems, criminal justice policy does not seem to have shifted its focus towards treating women humanely or helping people achieve a successful reintegration. Instead, it seems more obvious that justice is not the main concern of the criminal 'justice' system, and that being 'tough' towards crime is indeed their goal. Essentially, there seems to be a history of corruption and ignorance within politics behind the lack of care exhibited towards the well-being of people in prison. This has been an ongoing and critical issue, as it is obvious that the criminal justice system needs to re-clarify its goals and put them into practice, in order to attain actual justice in the lives of people who have experienced incarceration.

 Clear (2009) agreed that more harm than good is often the outcome of poor-quality rehabilitative programs facilitated by prison staff and police officers. As such, academics have strongly suggested that criminal policies become more civilized approaches to treating crime and its effects, in order to foster restoration, peace and safety in our communities (Edgar & Newell, 2006). To add, scholars Gelsthorpe and Canton (2020) explained the importance of rehabilitative processes involving reparation of one's social well-being, which may ultimately determine whether the person is ready or not for resettlement, because without a positive social life, reintegration is not fathomable. Essentially, rehabilitation should occur before releasing women into community, because otherwise, women may be left to deal with the mounting neglect imposed by the system itself, all during reintegration.

Researchers Bullock and Bunce (2020) emphasized how despite understanding rehabilitation in prisons as a paradox, research on how people in prison experience rehabilitative care, is limited. In fact, these researchers highlighted how prison programming often lacks material resources and passion in the curriculum, making the prison system's lack of quality and care towards people within, major reasons for its lack of success. This renders prison programming to be a poor use of time and resources, less likely to create positive change in

women's lives and more damaging, rather than useful. Thankfully, there are various types of restorative justice programming continuously being deemed successful by academics, practitioners, community organizations and women themselves.

Even more recently, Ranjan et al. (2020) released a variety of articles rooted in principles of restorative justice. In this issue, which was written in the *International Journal for Crime, Justice & Social Democracy*, topics such as crime prevention, the treatment of victimization and crime, women's safety, social protection, and empowerment were discussed. The researchers also emphasized the need to have police forces which are actually reflective of their principles, such as to serve and protect, as opposed to intimidate and punish, along with the importance of building institutions that promote inclusion, while advocating and enacting the protection of human rights.

Relatedly, Armstrong (2020) found that violence can be exacerbated in women's lives through prison experiences and that the punitive measures inflicted within prisons often occur due to misuse of the court system's perception of rehabilitation. The same author outlined how this misuse leads to extended prison sentences, and shifts focus away from healing, towards punishment. Additionally, Labotka (2014) outlined how women who experience incarceration are more likely to have faced hurdles of challenges and animosity in life prior to entering prison – during which punishment inflicted by the system often further embarrasses and leaves women feeling socially excluded. However, restorative justice provides an alternative approach to treating crime, which tends to focus on restoration and healing rather than detrimental forms of punishment (Brewer & Caldwell, 2021). In doing so, restorative justice methods can both acknowledge and help to mend the historical trauma that women may have endured before incarceration.

In stark comparison to Canada's ancient prison system, different places across the globe, including The Netherlands, Norway, and even the United Kingdom have progressively began adopting restorative justice programming (Van Ness, 2016). Relatedly, Strang et al. (2013) found how restorative justice techniques can reduce the chances of reconvictions or rearrests, up to almost 45%. This emphasizes how such approaches can successfully contribute to reducing crime, while helping to meet the needs of people who are involved, including women, people affected by the crime and the greater community.

Researchers Strang et al. (2013) also revealed that the cost of implementing restorative justice programs can lead to significant benefits for our communities, as the crimes that are prevented can save up to 8 times more in costs. Additionally, Klassen (2021) discussed how restorative justice approaches can greatly reduce levels of fear related to committing crimes as well as post-traumatic stress symptoms in individuals. This further supports the use of restorative techniques for women leaving prison as a form of early prevention, as it could help provide stability, balance, and support for women during resettlement.

To add, Zehr (2015) explained how the theory of restorative justice relates to the idea of social justice, because it carries the goal of preventing formerly incarcerated people from being socially excluded simply due to their criminal history. This author mentioned that this can be achieved by helping people feel socially included through promoting the development of social connections, partnerships, and mutual support in community. The same researcher emphasized how the value of respect is an underlying principle of restorative justice, because if we do not respect one another then we cannot restore justice effectively, regardless of how sincere the practice is. As such, restorative justice helps shed light on our innate human need to feel respected by others, exposing the lack of respect exhibited within Canada's current prison culture. Unlike punitive measures which prevent social interaction between women, restorative justice principles can help facilitate healthy dialogue between women and community members, while acknowledging individual needs and the resources available to help meet those needs (Zehr, 2015).

Restorative justice is also known to empower individuals by helping people face the realities involved with crime, and over time it can work to restore self-confidence, autonomy, and dignity (van Willigenburg, 2018). Connectedly, empowerment is an important aim within restorative justice approaches, which can be understood as the potential determination one holds to take control of their life, in addition to forming goals and making decisions that create positive personal transformation and social change for society at-large (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). Research has also shown how social interventions, which focus on empowerment (e.g., social and healing circles, strength's-based interventions, skill developing workshops etc.) specifically for women who have been incarcerated, can contribute to personal development by highlighting

the positive parts of one's life journey, and inspiring women to reconceptualize their life stories (Allen, 2018).

Interestingly, Richards (2011) explained how, when empowerment is not enacted properly by policy makers, it can actually hold the potential to disempower people who are already marginalized, by placing excessive responsibility on the individual(s). As such, they reference Marshall's (1996) work, who defined restorative justice as a way for people who have been involved in crime to unite with community and those affected by the crime, in hopes of collectively understanding how to deal with the after-effects by making plans for the present and future. This idea of collectively understanding and resolving issues related to crime, does not appear to be a part of current criminal justice policy, making restorative justice a more positive and appealing alternative.

Moreover, researchers (Lemire et al., 2008) have explained how the restorative justice-related principle of empowerment can be attained through others as well as participation in activities, whereas self-empowerment is more related to individually motivated growth and personal responsibility. These researchers also highlighted some of the major principles of self-empowerment, such as self-reliance through individual decision-making and feelings of social inclusion through community support. Relatedly, advocates of restorative justice (Pinto et al., 2014) have indicated that advocacy training can significantly enhance feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy for women who have experienced incarceration, as it may serve as an educational approach to achieving empowerment. The same researchers mentioned that such approaches can support the process of community reintegration, by helping women refine and/or gain personal problem-solving skills, while potentially increasing access to resources in community.

The concept of agency is directly related to empowerment too, as it can be understood as having the ability to clarify one's goals, make positive plans, and take action to attain those goals (Kabeer, 1999). Authors O'Mahony and Doak (2017), reimagined restorative justice by centering the values of agency and accountability at the heart of its practice. They emphasized how exercising agency can help amplify one's voice in criminal justice processes, and accountability can help individuals take responsibility for the outcome(s) of their choices, both of which may help in reducing the negative effects of prison-related trauma. Interestingly, scholars Bove and Tryon (2018) identified how there is limited literature about women's pathways to recovery from

incarceration-induced trauma. However, it is important to note that putting agency into practice can help women affiliated with the criminal justice system gain personal control in life, specifically regarding individual actions and consequences to those actions (Moore, 2016).

Despite the long list of potential benefits that can come from implementing restorative justice techniques, the Department of Justice Canada (2017) outlined how almost half the judges who have been interviewed on this topic, think that most politicians are reluctant to support the use of restorative justice in treating crime, and unfortunately find it to be too 'soft' of an approach. However, the variety of programming offered through restorative justice techniques, which are discussed throughout this thesis, show promise in helping to rehabilitate, heal and transform women's lives. In fact, Wilson et al. (2018) who analyzed the results of 60 studies on restorative justice, found evidence of effectiveness in these programs to be mostly positive – showing a reduction in both criminal behaviour as well as recidivism. These types of reparation may help people who have been involved with crime by contributing to healing from past trauma, mitigating the negative effects of punishment during incarceration, restoring balance, and maximizing individual potential during reintegration. Therefore, it is imperative that governing bodies do not dismiss the helpfulness of restorative justice, merely for viewing it as too 'soft,' and instead start to look at the benefits it can provide for people involved with the criminal justice system (Department of Justice Canada, 2017).

Relatedly, authors Walker and Davidson (2018) conducted a longitudinal study with 58 people who engaged in restorative justice re-entry circles before being released from prison. The participants were studied for at least three years after being released. Outcomes of this study showed significantly lower rates of recidivism among the 58 participants, in comparison to the 50 participants in the control group who did not participate in restorative justice-focused programming. Thus, restorative justice can help individuals who have been convicted of crime(s) to achieve transformation and a better life.

It is interesting to note that even the Government of Canada (2018), acknowledges that restorative justice techniques have been successful in treating people who have experienced incarceration, along with victims and communities-at-large. However, this is contradictory to the harsh treatment of people in Canadian prisons which still occurs today. Unfortunately, regardless of the aforementioned academic literature which supports the use and benefits of

restorative justice programming, it has still not been used enough when it could have been (Shapland, 2014). Hopefully, this will change with more studies, such as this thesis, which sheds light on the benefits of using restorative approaches for people affiliated with crime.

Intriguingly, the different techniques used in restorative justice programming differ greatly in comparison to the cruel effects of segregation imposed on women by the Canadian federal prison system today. Crawford (2001) conducted a study in which participants in a diverse city community engaged in a peace-making circle, and individuals reported feelings of confidence that themselves and the surrounding community would experience positive effects from participation. Results of this study indicated that the circle helped unite members of community while facilitating useful dialogue about treating crime and its effects. Participants also reported feeling an enhanced ability to resolve difficult issues in community.

Crawford (2001) also explained how a lack of safe spaces in community can prevent people from arriving at solutions to larger social problems, by limiting how and where community members can discuss issues and reflect on them together. This highlights the purpose of having safe and judgement free spaces for women leaving prison to discuss personal and community-related concerns with others, and how having these spaces may potentially increase positive interactions and strengthen relationships between women and community members. Relatedly, restorative justice-focused social interventions aim to help provide safe spaces for people to facilitate respectful, honest and useful dialogue related to treating crime, encouraging all parties to arrive at mutual understandings, and eventually, transform negative situations to positive ones.

Essentially, restorative justice techniques can promote positive change and transformation in women's lives. It is also important to recognize how being criminalized itself can place pressure on one to improve their life and future, by accepting reality and feeling the urgent need to change (Trammell, 2018). Thus, the principle of restorative justice is directly related to this thesis, as the women in the interviews were a part of the restorative justice-focused program known as Stride Circles.

Despite the negative outcomes of incarceration in women's lives, scholars Fortune et al. (2010) have stressed that if the criminal justice system made more efforts to facilitate restorative justice, they could do so by partnering with community organizations that are already working to

support women during reintegration. It should also be reassuring for governments to know that researchers have shown how people who engage in restorative justice programming are less likely to be reconvicted or reincarcerated (Walker & Davidson, 2018). Moreover, concepts of restorative justice are explored in this thesis to gain a rich understanding of its unique approaches and how it can support women's experiences of community reintegration.

2.2.4.1 Connections between Leisure and Restorative Justice

Research which specifically examines the connections between leisure and restorative justice seems to be limited and scattered. However, related literature has uncovered the links between the two concepts by referring to their relationship as restorative leisure (Tabet, 2020) or leisure justice (Henderson, 2014). Tabet (2020) explained how restorative leisure has roots in theories of restorative justice, social justice and leisure, and can be described as a way to assist formerly incarcerated individuals while they resettle into community after leaving prison. The same author mentioned how engagement in restorative leisure programming can help people involved with the criminal justice system by promoting feelings of safety and arousal along with autonomy for individuals to try new or familiar activities. Their work describes how restorative leisure participation can help people leaving prison to exercise freedom while refining and developing new skills. This can be achieved through group activities or one-on-ones.

Relatedly, researchers Link and Williams (2017), who had experience in facilitating leisure programs through restorative justice interventions for people who have been to prison, both observed the benefits for participants. These authors found that if leisure participation were to be incorporated into rehabilitation for people who have experienced incarceration, it may increase levels of well-being, improve overall health and reduce the chances of recidivism. Tabet (2020) mentioned that current prison programming in Canada is mostly ineffective, in comparison to restorative approaches, as the punitive measures which are in effect today have been contributing to high rates of recidivism. This author also explained how there is a lack of meaningful opportunities for people leaving prison to engage in positive social activities, and that it is critical for this lack of access to meaningful leisure to be addressed.

Leisure justice asserts that everyone should have the right to engage in leisure, despite their social class, ability, gender, age, ethnicity, race (Henderson, 2014) and in the case of women in and leaving prison, their environment. Although the prison environment may not seem that restorative, incorporating restorative leisure techniques into prison programming could contribute to the overall restoration and well-being of individuals during incarceration and after. In fact, Tabet (2020) stated that by encouraging the building of relationships alongside healthy activity, restorative leisure can help people enhance their spiritual and emotional wellness, while helping to increase positive socialization between people who have been to prison and people who have not. The same author also mentioned how recreation and leisure participation can encourage people leaving prison to build relationships with community members which are fueled by open communication about incarceration, along with shared interests. Such approaches also relate to the concept of restorative justice through the idea of giving back to the community, which is promoted through opportunities to volunteer, collaborate, and help others.

Researchers Yuen and Fortune (2020) have also shed light on the power of engaging in leisure activities for formerly incarcerated women and explained how doing so can help women exhibit agency and achieve social justice, while being active members of community. These scholars also emphasized how participating in leisure activities can help women to reflect upon and digest the reality associated with social injustices in their lives – potentially stirring the motivation to take action to create positive change. Thus, the connections between restorative justice and leisure are of significant meaning to women's experiences of reintegration.

Leisure participation has grown in recognition for the power it holds in helping people advance social justice (Yuen & Fortune, 2020). Similarly, leisure scholar Mair (2002), highlighted how leisure can be reconceptualized as a collective space in which community discussions can happen. As such, these researchers have helped shine light upon the relationship between leisure and restorative justice, emphasizing that both can go hand in hand, especially when responding to issues of injustice for marginalized populations. More specifically, restorative justice principles are meant to encourage meaningful engagement, responsibility, and accountability, while promoting restoration, healing, empowerment, and resettlement in community (Government of Canada, 2021), but only when they are collectively enacted by people, organizations, and institutions.

2.2.4.2 Spirituality in Restorative Justice

Interestingly, restorative justice has spiritual roots (Hadley, 2001) and spiritual engagement seems to help women attend to unmet needs, both during and after incarceration (Aday et al., 2014). In fact, it is known as the traditional Indigenous system of justice based upon restoring balance and harmony in people's lives, which differs intensely in comparison to the punitive European measures currently being used in prisons all over North America (Hand et al., 2012). Indigenous views have also asserted that reality is eternal, and people are continuously evolving, which connects to the ultimate goal of transformation in restorative justice healing approaches (Hadley, 2001). Women who have experienced incarceration and who partook in spiritual practices have expressed how it helps cope with prison related experiences while helping to maintain hope and faith in life (Aday et al., 2014).

The profound connections between restorative justice and spirituality have been explored by many researchers, including Pranis (2001), who explained how it can provide space(s) for individuals to engage in spirituality by practicing different religious acts, which can help cultivate care and compassion for oneself and others. These spaces vary and might include spiritual rooms/centres, Indigenous healing organizations, temples, mosques, churches and more. Pranis (2001) also mentioned how adopting spirituality can help people share and enact their values through real-life experiences with community members, bringing life to their personal beliefs. The same researcher discussed how spiritual groups can also encourage people to take part in group decision making processes, helping to develop effective teamwork, communication, and cooperation skills.

More specifically, spirituality comes across as a meaningful form of leisure which women could potentially use to support and empower themselves and others, both individually and in group settings. Peer mentors can also use spirituality to help women in different ways, especially regarding reintegration. In fact, scholars Pedlar et al. (2018) explained how women have affirmed the value of well-developed prison programming in addition to spiritual engagement. The same authors mentioned how both can empower women with the necessary tools to achieve a successful journey of reintegration. Similarly, researchers Hipolito et al. (2014)

found that for women who have experienced traumatic events in life, regular spiritual engagement can serve as a protective factor. Thus, spiritual engagement could be an especially helpful form of self-support, empowerment and even social connection for women who are reintegrating into community after leaving prison.

Likewise, Gillum et al. (2006), revealed how spirituality can help people reduce feelings of depression, while improving self-esteem, psychological wellness, and life-satisfaction. Earlier leisure scholars Dunn (1961) and Bensley (1991), also explained how spiritual engagement can help people harmonize different parts of their life, and that it is a natural element of human nature. Similarly, Hodges (2002) found that it can inspire individuals to connect with others, while finding meaning, forming values, and discovering self-purpose. This scholar also highlighted how spiritual practice can help enhance emotional wellness, especially for adults, which includes women who have experienced incarceration. To further these findings, researchers Aday et al. (2014) identified how religion can help people find hope in life for the future, while providing an ethical way to live, which strengthens one's connection to the present moment. All these research outcomes show how spiritual engagement relates to restorative justice principles and can help women gain faith in themselves and society during reintegration.

Coyle (2002) also explored the relationship between health and spirituality, outlining the value of spiritual practice in people's lives and how it can improve one's overall health status. More specifically, they found that through spiritual engagement, people can find purpose, meaning, connection, faith and hope in life – all of which may contribute to positive health outcomes related to coping, recovering, and preventing illness. Additionally, Pinheiro and Rocha (2020) highlighted how people can gain wisdom from one another by sharing knowledge about spirituality.

Furthermore, scholar Phan (2003) mentioned how unique opportunities to gain a rich understanding of religion itself, can be presented when people choose to learn about different religions. Intriguingly, the same researcher found that exploring different faiths can help to fuel reconciliation between different religions, such as Christianity and Indigenous spirituality. Phan also mentioned how delving into different religious teachings can serve as a useful technique to understand the well-known crimes of Christianity against Indigenous people. As such, scholars Coyle (2002), Phan (2003), as well as Pinheiro and Rocha (2020) all support the idea that both

independent and group spiritual practices can be beneficial for people to engage in. Thus, given the known constraints that often appear during reintegration, practicing spirituality may be particularly helpful for women leaving prison.

To add, Miller (2001) stated how some theories about spiritual engagement assert how it can benefit society-at-large by improving collective confidence in the power of good, while strengthening people's abilities to succeed in life. The same author emphasized how spiritual engagement in group settings can help people believe in the power of love and individual character, while enhancing both material and spiritual wellness. As such, researchers have made it clear how leisure engagement such as spiritual practice can benefit people and may be particularly helpful for women who have experienced incarceration to gain new perspectives and hope for the future.

Similarly, Hadley (2001) highlighted how restorative justice principles are profoundly embedded in spiritual paths which help individuals, groups, and institutions to heal, recover, and transform. Interestingly, they mentioned that restorative justice-focused programming understands how justice is connected to creating peace, building oneself and repairing harm – and should not only be concerned with legal issues and forensic processes. Hadley (2001) explained the lost relationship between spirituality and criminal justice, and how it is often limited to Christian understandings in law. As such, they stressed the urgent necessity to include and discuss different concepts of restoration, healing, and reconciliation through criminal justice policy, in order to gain a rich understanding of the true role of religion in the penal system.

Bender and Armour (2007) also explored the spiritual aspects of restorative justice programming, highlighting that the relationship between the two is important, but also unclear. These researchers found several different principles of spirituality, which align with restorative justice, including repentance and forgiveness, belonging and connection, social bonding, making wrongs right, balance and harmony, in addition to rituals and transformation. Bender and Armour concluded that by gaining an understanding of the connection between restorative justice and spirituality, practitioners can use a wider range of techniques to strengthen their interactions with people who have offended, victims and the community.

Lastly, Marshall (2020) emphasized the importance of not dismissing the spiritual underpinnings of restorative justice, and how ever since it stemmed from religious principles, it

has expanded into a world-wide movement for social change, which encompasses many diverse peace-making strategies in a variety of settings. With increasing knowledge of the benefits of engaging in restorative justice and spirituality, it is essential that this relationship be further explored, specifically in relation to women's experiences of resettlement in community.

2.2.5 Shared Responsibility

Shared responsibility is a theoretical concept that captures society, its institutions, including businesses, the government, prison systems, and the community as a whole – thus all parties are responsible for the creation, facilitation, and evaluation of services and interventions for women who have left prison (Fortune et al., 2010). The concept of shared responsibility is also a traditional Indigenous method used to resolve disputes and maintain harmony, that has unfortunately been affected by colonial rule and Western governing systems which forcefully attempted to diminish feelings of shared cultural unity amongst generations to form reservation-based communities (Hand et al., 2012). Sadly, this shifting of policies led by Western governments caused Indigenous cultures and ways of living to dissolve and be replaced with more punitive measures (Hand et al., 2012). Beliefs such as shared responsibility that underpin traditional Indigenous systems of restorative justice differ greatly from the European systems (Hand et al., 2012) being practiced within Canadian and U.S. corrections today.

Researchers have used the concept of a collective responsibility to better understand a variety of issues in the past. Some of these issues include child abuse and neglect (Mayhall & Norgard, 1983), how to educate children with learning issues (Will, 1986), issues of individualism and collectivism (Wagner, 1995), building a feminist future for women's prisons (Shaw, 1996), incarcerated women and their children (Martin, 1997), sustainable development, economic growth and environmental protection (Brand & Brujin, 1999), empowering prisons (Hannah-Moffat, 2000), ensuring data security (Lane et al., 2017), the role of activists in reframing corporate responsibility (Girschik, 2020), community engagement (Cooper et al., 2020), social justice and community re-entry (Fortune et al., 2010).

Eshleman (2014) illuminated how the concept of shared responsibility has evolved drastically since the period of 384-320 BCE, when Aristotle is said to have been the first to have constructed a related theory in *Nicomachean Ethics*, referring to the concept as moral responsibility. This researcher also explained how Aristotle said that at times it is appropriate to respond to one with praise or blame, based on the individual's actions. They also mentioned how Aristotle believed that only a certain type of agent qualifies as a moral agent, mainly one who carries the capacity for decision making. He discussed the conditions under which it is appropriate to blame or praise one, based on whether the individual voluntarily performed that action and whether they were aware of what they were doing or bringing about (Eshleman, 2014). With regards to women leaving prison, Aristotle might have viewed them and their situations differently than the prison system and society does, taking into consideration external factors and whether women were truly to be blamed and punished, or not, for their current state of being.

Aristotle's view on moral responsibility may seem outdated, but it set the stage for others to follow. A more recent definition can be found by Gilbert (2006) where they imply that although we may not be morally responsible for what has occurred, we are all held morally responsible for ameliorating the effects of what has occurred. With relation to community re-entry, this author may view reintegration as a moral responsibility for all members of society.

Even more recently, Miller (2015) refers to collective responsibility as a type of joint responsibility. Everyone is morally responsible on their own, on the condition that others are also held morally responsible, due to the interdependence that exists with respect to the idea of shared responsibility. Interdependence involves multiple people depending on one another, a concept that is directly related to the theory of shared responsibility. Relatedly, scholars (Castro & Gould, 2019) have recently emphasized the importance of government representatives, researchers, policy makers and community members actively engaging in public dialogue regarding the improvement of programming for people affiliated with the criminal justice system, as this too, is a shared responsibility.

Hopkins (2015) explained how the concept of a shared responsibility between people who have offended, people affected by the crime and the greater community, underpins restorative justice principles. They also implied that adopting a restorative culture in an organization can

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help to ensure that everyone is working to the best of their ability for the benefit of the people they serve. For example, a restorative justice-focused organization might involve people openly sharing their experiences with one another, how these experiences affected them emotionally, reflections on these experiences and who has been impacted, in addition to arriving at resolutions to attend to unmet needs and forming mutual understandings on what needs to happen next in order for positive change to occur (Hopkins, 2015). Similarly, researchers Fortune et al. (2020) support the use of restorative justice for women affiliated with crime and have emphasized that such techniques can help cultivate healing, hope and reparation in women's lives.

Although definitions and terms used to refer to the concept of shared responsibility vary across disciplines, similarities persist. In Baldry's (2010) study, called *Women in Transition from Prison to...,* the ellipses points imply uncertainty within the title. The author speaks of desistance, and how it must be reconceptualized not only as the woman's responsibility, but instead as a shared responsibility of the state and social agency programs to provide positive spaces for women, girls and their children – enabling opportunity for each. The same researcher shed light on the responsibility of different populations in society coming together to create more opportunities for women to succeed in their transitions from prison to community.

Today, the concept of what Aristotle once called moral responsibility has evolved to be known as shared responsibility. The notion of a shared responsibility implies that all parts of society are responsible in contributing to the lives of those have who have been or are being marginalized. It also emphasizes the necessity for a new shift toward community partnerships, along with the power of women who have been incarcerated in taking individual responsibility regarding reintegration (Fortune et al., 2010). Additionally, and as is shown later in the thesis, analyzing interviews with the theoretical framework of shared responsibility in mind can help to illuminate people's meanings of community, reintegration, support, and agency.

2.2.6 A Review of Relevant Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

The recognition of community re-entry needs for women leaving prison has led to a variety of methodological and theoretical approaches. Interestingly, many scholars with a passion for social justice have discussed the extent to which prison systems are effective in

rehabilitating individuals, along with the different types of support that help women improve in prison and after. It is also important to note that the Government of Canada (2008) claims to be dedicated to 'rehabilitating' people who are incarcerated, which implies that they help prepare women for re-entering the community. The efficacy of their stated goal(s) is examined through the women's experiences in this thesis. To shed further light, Phelps (2011) defined rehabilitation as either a written or spoken practice with the goal of social transformation for an individual or a group, which can include treatment for psychological issues and drug addictions, in addition to assistance with finding and preparing for employment and/or school. Ironically, these are some of the needs that are found to be unmet in women, upon release from prison and during resettlement.

In 1982, Duguid wrote that studying post-release behaviour was one of the most effective ways to understand the efficacy of prison programming. This researcher also mentioned how rehabilitation initiatives through prison education were not very successful at the time, especially if they were measured by people's behaviour during reintegration. The author found no drastic differences in rates of recidivism among people who participated in prison education at three different locations, including Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Newgate, all of which had extensive programs geared towards attitude avalue changes.

However, a Canadian program affiliated with the University of Victoria in British Columbia was also assessed by the same researcher and they found that rates of recidivism were only 14% in students at the prison, in comparison to 52% in those who did not partake in the educational program. This particular program focused on human behaviour theories and began with explaining how one's perception can lead to particular behaviours. Perhaps, through exploring self-perception, students at this prison were able to understand and accept the underlying reasons for their crime(s), leading to greater wisdom of 'the self,' and ultimately, lower rates of recidivism. Duguid argued that the foundation of this program was a prominent factor in these positive results.

In 1996, Sushma Taylor discussed the unique post-treatment needs of women who have been incarcerated throughout their transitions back into community. Three case studies were conducted within this project, each illustrating some of the practical and often unmet treatment needs of women leaving prison. Her work described the distinct skills-training and

psychoeducational needs of women while adapting to live in community, and mentioned particular care interventions that led to successful outcomes. Treatment centred around the connection between the woman and her environment, specifically the bond between distress, coping mechanisms and the capacity to adjust to different conditions.

Findings of Taylor's (1996) study led to the belief that there is often a lack of opportunity for gradual reintegration into the real world. Taylor also found that acquiring social and life skills helped women develop a capability to adapt to the environment. However, developing this capability depends on the fragile balance between brand new constraints and the consequences of past experiences (Taylor, 1996). Suggestions from this study also indicated that providers of treatment for women must remember that the rewards and constraints of finding a new way of living should be equally as compelling as past experiences.

Essentially, the author found that before women are asked to give up their past habits and lifestyle, they need to be given something of equal value to replace it. However, their study was based upon the lives of only three women, limiting findings to only their experiences. Case studies may provide insight into women's lives, but it is crucial to think more broadly about women's needs throughout reintegration. Thus, perhaps more insights into more lives would be beneficial in arriving at conclusions that may be transferrable to the overall population of women leaving prison.

Almost a decade after, Richards and Jones (2004) released a book titled *After Crime and Punishment: Pathways to Offender Reintegration*. This book was especially moving, as it was written by two men who had spent time in prison themselves and engaged in research by gaining insight into the lives of others that could relate – all of which, was clearly reflective of their own life experiences. At the time, these researchers expressed how the most cutting-edge re-entry program would have been focused on preparing people in prison for returning to the community – from the very beginning of incarceration.

However, Bandyopadhyay (2006) explained how instead of preparing people for reintegration, prison experiences, which include social exclusion and punishment, often leave people feeling worse. For example, after attending prison programming, participants in this researcher's study felt as if they were failing to meet the image of success that they believed society holds for them. In many cases, these feelings may extend into reintegration, leading

individuals to believe they are not good enough and feel the need to 'fix' their lives and themselves.

Similarly, scholars Pedlar et al. (2018) emphasized how prison programming often makes people feel as if they need to be 'fixed,' and that this type of thinking could worsen women's mental health by causing women to feel as if they need to meet society's image(s) of success. Thus, it is important to reiterate that the definition of 'success' is subjective, because each woman's perception of it is different. Pedlar et al. (2018) also explained how these types of approaches in prison programming do not entirely acknowledge women's life circumstances, including the past, present, and future. Perhaps, it may be more ideal for women to define success individually and set personal goals for their unique journeys of reintegration.

Richards and Jones (2004) acknowledged the sheer differences between society's attitudes towards men and women who have offended. They mentioned that women who offend are seen to have not only broken the law but also the "gender contract" (2004, p. 195). These authors discussed socially rejecting attitudes towards women who have offended, mentioning that often, women are not only judged on their crimes, but also in relation to their interpersonal, sexual, and family relationships. This could mean that women who offend may be judged upon their potential roles as mothers, wives, daughters etc., often causing people in society to frown upon women from the beginning of their incarceration and unfortunately in many cases, after release as well.

More specifically, research shows how excessive strain is repeatedly placed on women leaving prison who identify as being mothers, many of whom already have a lengthy history of being marginalized – only to be further constrained by the negative effects of incarceration (Breuer et al., 2021). Previous and current studies both accentuate how prison experiences often negatively impact people's self-perceptions, leading to diminished life purposes and negative views of 'the self' (Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Hoskins & Cobbina, 2020). This can be especially challenging for women who have already been subjected to marginalization in society before entering prison.

To add, Freudenberg (2002) noted how past research about women who have experienced incarceration has tended to ignore women's health and wellness, and instead, chosen to concentrate on the safety of the public. This researcher acknowledged how these types of

studies have failed to address the effects of such actions on families in community, often contributing to emotional, health and social problems which are left untreated, for women and other people in women's lives (Freudenberg, 2002). It is important to note that most of the women who are incarcerated have experienced poverty and health issues prior to entering prison, and that such conditions often escalate during incarceration (Harner et al., 2017). In fact, Cooper and Berwick (2001) also highlighted how individuals who are given extended prison sentences are more likely to have negative life experiences, implying that much of the time spent in prison can leave women with more hardship than before.

Authors Pedlar et al. (2018) pointed out that in many cases, women are considered a vulnerable population, rendering women with higher chances of experiencing negative outcomes from incarceration, specifically, frequent stigmatization during the resettlement process. To add, previously, researchers Lewis and Van Puymbroeck (2008) expressed how stigma can be seen as an actively detrimental constraint in people's lives. Thus, stigma can also be perceived as a constraint in women's lives, which may particularly affect the ability to smoothly reintegrate into community. More specifically, Lewis and Van Puymbroeck (2008) underlined how facing various forms of stigma in community can have direct negative impacts on the emotional, psychological, and social well-being of people. It is even possible for stigma to lead to discrimination through the formation of negative stereotypes (Berry & Wiener, 2020) surrounding the 'prisoner identity,' – potentially causing society to develop negative views about women, who may later internalize these feelings, leading them to affect daily life.

It is also important to reiterate how Richards and Jones (2004, p. 195) noted that while, "men often gain prestige amongst their friends for their criminal behaviour, this is rarely the case for women." Their research led to the idea that perhaps for women, relating crimes to the past instead of accepting them as a present reality, may help to cope better with the tensions that rise when society both encourages gender equality and simultaneously condemns women for stepping outside 'traditional gender roles.' On one hand, these researchers clearly addressed the drastic differences between societal views and stigma encountered by women in comparison to men. However, on the other hand, their suggestion for women to leave crimes in the past instead of accepting them as reality, does not reflect the agency that women can truly exhibit during

reintegration. Furthermore, acknowledging the social construction of women who have offended is critical to gain a deeper understanding of women's experiences of community re-entry.

Shortly after this, Darla Fortune (2011) conducted a feminist participatory action research (FPAR) study guided by anti-oppressive research (AOR) principles. Fortune's (2011) study was facilitated to promote dialogue and a reconceptualization of the meaning of inclusion among women transitioning to community after imprisonment. A major purpose of this study was for the researcher and women to find an area of change that was mutually agreed upon and to facilitate action between all participants to work towards that change. However, the author mentioned the complications of attempting to engage in FPAR with women who have experienced feelings of powerlessness, oppression and who take up "marginalized social locations" (Fortune, 2011, p. 96). In accordance, it is critical for researchers to understand that working with women who are released from prison, may mean encountering a lack of motivation, negative attitudes and at times, hopelessness, as these issues and emotions often stem from past experiences in addition to incarceration-induced trauma. Thus, participatory action research may not be the most appropriate methodology to use with this population. Regardless, Fortune's study shed much light on the needs and constraints of women throughout experiences of resettlement.

Although Fortune (2011) hoped for the women in her study to discuss issues of inclusion and exclusion more, she found that instead, some considered safety and housing to be among the most important needs to be addressed during reintegration. The author also admitted to making the assumption that women want to belong in community, only to later arrive at the conclusion that women may simply wish to be left alone in order to live life without any repercussions in a safe and judgement free space. Fortune (2011) also seemed to sense danger in trying to create an inclusive group process, when the only major commonality among the women was their time spent in prison. Additionally, the researcher seemed to feel as if the women in her study lacked a sense of solidarity, but that their level of unity was high when acting collectively to help change the perception of the public towards themselves. This indicated that women seemed to be interested in enacting positive change together to help reduce stigma towards the population. Furthermore, some of the women in this study wished to detach from their prison related

identities and form new positive images, similar to the discussion mentioned previously by Richards and Jones (2004).

Moreover, Fortune (2011) found how many women in prison have hopeful plans of recovery and reintegration upon /discharge but are faced with a variety of constraints including stigma, perceived lack of opportunity and support during re-entry– often hindering this sense of hope. Stigma can be a major obstacle during community reintegration, especially when women may be in search of a new job, house, education, or social opportunities (Keene et al., 2018). Relatedly, Strange (1988), outlined how structural powers in society can constrain individuals by controlling how things are done in institutions, and essentially everywhere. These powers can affect women's abilities to function before, during and even after incarceration. Interestingly, women in Fortune's (2011) study described unique stories, demonstrating how inclusion and exclusion are often experienced differently. The same researcher explained how it can be difficult for women to achieve a sense of solidarity with other women leaving prison, especially when the system discourages people from associating with one another upon release.

It has also been suggested that future researchers should find ways to provide support within community that allow for inclusion and difference to exist simultaneously, while recognizing the necessity for larger systemic changes (Fortune, 2011). This author emphasized the agency that women exhibit to change their own lives. As such, it is also important to understand that everyone carries unique individual powers, and this must not be diminished by our tendency to use certain language and make certain assumptions as researchers. Thus, we must be careful not to perpetuate feelings of powerlessness when working with women leaving prison and should acknowledge women's experiences of marginalization, while focusing on empowerment along the way.

Furthermore, Fortune (2011) realized her own "lack of prior connection," (p. 145) with women and stressed the importance of researchers carrying passion when dedicating themselves to issues of social justice. Interestingly and contrary to this researcher, I feel as if my personal life experiences along with my recovery and attempts to integrate into society after years of abuse, oppression and social exclusion, allowed me to relate more to women's experiences of reintegration. The passion that resides within me for this research stems from overcoming these

issues and contributed to me feeling a deep connection to the women, prior to even beginning this study.

To add, women in Fortune's (2011) study seemed to question her motives, often thinking that the researcher's intentions were solely for the purpose of creating a dissertation. In turn, the author expressed to the women that her study was in fact meant to be a group project, hopeful of creating change for the population. Personally speaking, my purpose for carrying out this research is intrinsically motivated and stems from my desire to better understand women's experiences of reintegration after incarceration. However, I do accept the privilege that I have in writing this thesis. In doing so, I hope to learn about what helps the women in this world who have experienced oppression and a serious lack of belonging in community.

Relatedly, anti-oppressive research (AOR) is an important concept for scholars in this field to understand, as it pertains to the studies of social justice and feminism over the last two decades (Miraftab, 2004). In fact, Baines (2013) explained how AOR embraces the concepts of challenging oppressive systems, achieving solidarity among humans, exercising critical consciousness, connecting with other social organizations and movements and amplifying people's voices through acts of social justice. The same researcher indicated that a major goal of AOR is to equalize power imbalances in society, as these inequities can impact anyone and everyone.

It is clearly important to address power inequities in research, as they can affect all parties involved in the process. For example, Miraftab (2004) studied the power imbalances that have occurred in feminist research over the last twenty years, specifically when Western-educated scholars study topics concerning women who are not originally from Western countries. This researcher discussed the perpetual controversy in feminist methodology regarding the effectiveness of white women's outlooks on the experiences of women who have been racialized. Essentially, this means that the experiences of women who have been racialized are challenging to comprehend accurately through the eyes of anyone who is unable to relate. Also, because feminism aims to create transformation, liberation, and positive social change in the world, it is important for researchers in this field to understand how their individual backgrounds and life circumstances can affect the research process, and participants within.

Connectedly, Potts and Brown (2005) stressed that before engaging in research, it is important for scholars to develop genuine social connections with participants, as this can help gain trust and mutual understandings of goals while encouraging open and effective communication with one another throughout the research process. The same researchers also explained how AOR should entail more than just good intentions, but also dedication to enacting social change, mindfulness towards power inequities and reflexive practices to mitigate them. In their work, one of the authors reflects on what it means to be an Indigenous researcher, as the term 'research' itself, carries an unfortunate association with the historical atrocities of colonization and racism towards Indigenous peoples. Based on the complexity and meaningfulness of these findings, it is crucial for Western-trained scholars who wish to conduct AOR, to understand how their personal history and positions in society can affect marginalized populations.

To add, engaging in reflexive practices is essential for anti-oppressive researchers, in order to reduce the chances of perpetuating any further harm on participants, especially those who belong to vulnerable populations. More specifically, a researcher's consideration of the impact they can have on their participants or themselves during the research process, is defined as reflexivity (Gilgun, 2008). In order to cultivate a steady connection between the researcher's subjectivity and the perspectives presented throughout their research, tools such as analysis, reflection, writing and organization can serve as reflexive practices (Probst, 2015). These tools may help researchers of AOR to become more aware of their own thoughts, biases, and actions, as it is important to centre the voices of participants.

Interestingly, Pecenco (2018) highlighted the importance of amplifying the voices of people who experience incarceration, indicating that there is unique power in personal perceptions. Their study focused on the impacts of arts-based AOR with people in prison and these scholars found that academics tend to concentrate on data collection and scientific results but must also work on centering the authentic voices of participants – to highlight the power of sharing one's own story in one's own words. Similarly, Cross (2020), who explored harm-reduction within AOR, revealed how participants in this field often engage in various politically motivated acts, which help to disrupt the status quo within criminal justice policy, and shed light on the real-life experiences of people who have been incarcerated.

Thus, time and time again, researchers have stressed the value of preserving the authenticity of participants' voices and lived experiences. These understandings have inspired me to include the actual words of women affiliated with the criminal justice system in this thesis. Doing this can highlight the true experiences, feelings and emotions of women who went through community reintegration and were openly willing to share personal stories in hopes of cultivating positive social change.

Researchers Pedlar et al. (2018) discussed ten years of research conducted with women during and after experiences of incarceration. They explained how the conceptual basis of their study was in relational theory, along with other critical theories such as critical race, critical disability, critical feminist, and post-structural concepts. From the years 2002 to 2012, these researchers conducted interviews with women who had been imprisoned in one of Canada's five federal prisons for women. They set out to better understand women's experiences within prison, along with their attempts to meet the expectations of society throughout reintegration. The researchers' findings suggested that although both men and women who have offended encounter stigma from society, women are more vulnerable and likely to encounter continuous stigmatization and to experience negative outcomes after incarceration. Thankfully, in their report, the authors highlighted how social support played multiple meaningful roles in the women's lives.

Pedlar et al. (2018) found that networks which start off as social support, such as those in Stride Circles, often grow and change over time. They discovered that through the arrangement of social support, women's processes of reintegration were eased, but that without the values of reciprocity and mutuality, such support may be inadequate for women to experience inclusion and belonging within community. Essentially, the authors explained that it takes time before women can truly feel mutual support in a relationship. Regardless, some women felt that being a part of a Circle helped to realize their personal capacity to give back and make differences within community (Pedlar et al., 2018). Relatedly, Fortune et al. (2020) found that Stride Circles can help women tackle stigma during community reintegration by providing the space to openly share issues and overcome them together through supportive conversations and empowering experiences. The same researchers emphasized how the restorative approaches within Circles can

help to enhance the reintegration experience by developing positive and helpful social connections in community.

Through community conversation circles and story sharing, Stride Circles provides women with opportunities to foster mutual understandings about personal experiences regarding incarceration (CJI, 2015). Researchers Bove and Tryon (2018) conducted research that aligns with these values by highlighting the positive influence that story sharing can have in women's lives. In their study, women shared personal experiences of incarceration with high school students and teachers in hopes of creating positive change for themselves and community. Their results indicated that story sharing helped women feel valued while building social networks and educating others.

The women in Bove and Tryon's (2018) study also admitted that after engaging in public speaking through story sharing, it helped to release repressed emotions, encourage personal-growth, and foster self-acceptance, ultimately helping women to move forward in life. Reflecting on their findings and in reference to this thesis, it is critical to learn from women's experiences with story sharing in Stride Circles and to gain insight into the influence(s) this can have in women's lives, plus those on the receiving end. Overall, it is important to understand and create awareness of the different acts that hold potential to create positive change in the lives of women who have experienced incarceration.

Due to the stressful situations that can arise during the transition from prison to community, various coping mechanisms have been identified as useful for women. For instance, Tablante (2012) identified how exercising self-motivation can help women cope with issues in community after leaving prison. This can be seen as a form of self-empowerment, and shows how empowering experiences with others, as well as self-empowerment can complement each other, while helping women enhance the ability to cope with constraints (e.g., stigma, social exclusion, mental health issues etc.) during community re-entry.

In fact, in Tablante's (2012) study with 14 formerly incarcerated women, the researcher explored potential coping methods that could help with community-related issues they faced after being released from prison. This study revealed several constraints that the women experienced following release, including feelings of pressure, fear, self-consciousness and shyness, social rejection from neighbours, and being judged as well as labeled by others. The

author found how women used different tactics to help ease the process of resettlement, such as acts of love, positive thinking, engagement in spiritual practices, humor, avoidance, self-motivation, and disproving assumptions. Some of these coping mechanisms can be seen as restorative justice-related approaches, such as spiritual engagement and the transformation of negative thinking into positive beliefs. Tablante's (2012) findings shed light on the actions that women can take individually, to increase self-empowerment and self-reliance during reintegration.

Relatedly, Danioni et al. (2021) studied the role of gratitude in the lives of 104 people (between the ages of 24 and 75) who have experienced incarceration. The researchers found that expressing gratitude served as a positive factor for their participants, as it helped to improve levels of psychological wellness. As such, engaging in acts that help to enhance levels of gratitude in formerly incarcerated people's lives, (e.g., random acts of kindness, gratitude journaling, positive affirmations, thank you letters, giving thanks before meals etc.) may help to induce feelings of appreciation during reintegration.

The same researchers also found that practicing interpersonal forgiveness can protect people who experience incarceration from expressing violent tendencies and antisocial behaviour. Likewise, Ching (2018) emphasized how showing and feeling gratitude can improve the psychological, physical, mental, and social well-being of individuals, especially when practiced regularly. They explained how people who practice gratitude regularly may be healthier and happier than those who do not and may even contribute more to society. Thus, for women leaving prison, practicing various forms of gratitude may help to boost overall levels of health, mood, and well-being – which could make the process of resettlement easier.

Despite the abundance of rich research conducted on women's needs, researchers Pedlar et al. (2018) explained how the number of women who return to prison suggests that something is clearly not working within existing reintegration and rehabilitation mandates. They emphasized the ways in which we can start to address these issues, including by increasing resources within prisons, outside of prisons and in community settings. Other researchers, including Visher and Mallik-Kane (2007) have previously revealed how people leaving prison often have very little guidance in combination with an intense lack of support and access to

resources, which can at times, make community resettlement both an emotionally and financially draining part of life.

Pogrebin et al. (2014) discussed how upon release from prison, many people are known to face financial stress, which can severely hinder the ability to support oneself during reintegration. Being away from daily life and priorities during incarceration seems to contribute to a wide array of women's issues during reintegration, including worsening and even acquired financial burden. In fact, participants in Pogrebin's study expressed having to lean on family, friends, or others for financial support, which was not always easy. Relatedly, Coates (2015) outlined how stigma associated with the 'prisoner identity' often gets in the way of receiving access to critical forms of support, such as public housing, social services and even the help of community members who may exhibit negative attitudes towards formerly incarcerated people. Clearly, lack of resources and support inside and outside of prison can lead to serious life issues for women – from the very beginning of incarceration, all the way to release and onwards.

To add, The John Howard Society of Canada (2019) identified how the condition of prison environments can affect the safety, wellness, and general functioning of people during incarceration and even reintegration, and this has been of continuous concern to researchers. The same organization explained how negative prison atmospheres can increase people's stress levels, often worsening the health of individuals who have already endured stressful lifestyles prior to becoming incarcerated. Interestingly, researchers Davis et al. (2013) have highlighted how women often return to community only to find it drastically changed, as life outside of prison differs greatly from life on the inside; real life is constantly evolving, while being inside can feel stagnant and lifeless, which may lead to a lack of personal growth.

Additionally, scholars Bianchi & Shapiro (2018) have stressed that there is often limited room for open and comfortable conversation when research is conducted with women in prison, so the literature may not always entirely reflect women's real-life experiences. This points towards the need for researchers to conduct more studies with women in prison, as well as women who have left prison, which can protect women's autonomy while depicting lived experiences as accurately as possible. However, with increasing knowledge on the lack of freedom in prisons, as well as after prison (due to continued restrictions imposed upon women

during and after release), this is not always easily achieved, as women may feel supressed to speak the truth while being perpetually surveilled and controlled by institutional powers.

Regardless of the limitations of research with women who have been incarcerated, learning about what affects women's reintegration, including personal life experiences before, whilst and following release from prison, are all integral to this thesis. This is because our life environments can directly affect our well-being. Accordingly, the treatment of women within prison will be of significant concern throughout this thesis, as learning how it enhances or hinders women's abilities to function during reintegration is critical. Healthy environments which are clean, provide fresh outside air, sunlight, trees, and a positive atmosphere can help people flourish and live well, so assessing how women feel during incarceration can help researchers understand levels of comfort and safety in addition to whether women felt respected and were given the resources to achieve positive transformation in life upon release (The John Howard Society of Canada, 2019).

2.2.7 The Impact of Unmet Human Rights in Prison on Women's Reintegration

In addition to the need for gaining an in-depth understanding of women's experiences of community reintegration, it is important to learn about whether women's basic human rights are being met during incarceration, as this can affect women's well-being and quality of life upon release. Relatedly, Beeble and Hampton (2021) exposed how women have a mosaic of needs that often go unmet upon discharge – thus, there is an urgency for the Canadian criminal justice system to acknowledge and attend to the needs of women who are currently incarcerated in addition to women who are attempting to resettle. The same researcher clarified that these needs include but are not limited to priorities such as attending to physical, emotional, and mental health concerns, therapy for trauma, treatment for drug addiction(s), arrangement for housing upon release, transportation when necessary, offering opportunities for education and employment and ensuring the safety and humane treatment of women by the 'justice' system.

Furthermore, it is important to explore the impacts of the limitations placed upon women's social interactions during incarceration. Questions such as "How do the ways in which women are treated, or not treated in prison influence processes during community re-entry?" or

"What are the impacts of unmet needs and human rights in prison on women's abilities to reintegrate?" are important to answer. Relatedly, Pedlar et al. (2018) highlighted how women's futures after leaving prison are often filled with uncertainty, especially when lacking in social support. Conversely, one may ponder "When women are treated well before/in prison, how does this influence experiences of reintegration?"

Again, based on Beeble and Hampton's (2021) suggestions, it is intriguing to contemplate whether the rights to not be subjected to punishment and to have equal opportunity and freedom (United Nations Publications, 2020) are being met for women who are federally sentenced in Canada. Moreover, with the social restrictions imposed upon women in prison, it is imperative to explore whether these restrictions violate women's rights to effective remedies and to not be subjected to interference with family (United Nations Publications, 2020). Accordingly, these issues were explored during the analysis of women's interviews in this thesis.

2.3 Summary of Literature Review

This section provided an overview of the knowledge shared through academic literature which has been published by various researchers, scholars, and professionals, specifically about issues concerning women who have experienced incarceration. Perspectives on relevant topics such as reintegration, support, and restorative justice were also presented. The complexity of community reintegration was revealed, along with the need for greater access to important resources for women leaving prison. Further, it delved into the connections between restorative justice, leisure, and spirituality, as these topics relate directly to experiences of resettlement for women. The theory of shared responsibility was also explained, in relation to treating women's crime. Moreover, this section included information on relevant theoretical and methodological approaches and concepts within, regarding community reintegration for women. Finally, the impact of unmet human rights in prison on women's resettlement was discussed. Clearly, there is a need to centre the humanity of women in research of this nature.

These understandings have contributed to my deep concern for marginalized populations, specifically women who have become entangled in the messy web of the criminal justice system.

As a student of leisure studies, I believe that research with women should be conducted in hopes of magnifying women's truths and lived experiences, with the goals of empowering our participants and enlightening the world. Therefore, respect, love and concern for humanity should be guiding forces in our research with women. To follow, the next chapter explains the methodological approach which I used in this thesis, along with details of the analysis procedure and criteria for identification of important themes and concepts within.

3.1 Introduction

Feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) provided the appropriate tools to gain an in-depth understanding of women's experiences of community reintegration and how the restorative justice-focused program known as Stride Circles supported women during the process. In this thesis, I attempted to learn about the experiences of women leaving prison in relation to resettlement by analyzing a set of transcribed longitudinal qualitative interviews. The interviews were conducted with women in prison and women leaving prison in the Kitchener-Waterloo area from 2015-2018. The 21 women who were involved, participated in the Stride Circle program – an intensive program that connects trained volunteers with women who are in prison in order to support women throughout community reintegration (CJI, 2015).

This chapter begins with an overview of the framework that shaped the analysis of the interviews, explaining epistemological and ontological positioning. I analysed this set of interviews using FCDA, which combines principles from feminist studies and Critical discourse analysis (CDA) to understand the complexities of ideology and power in discourse in maintaining the social constructions of gender (Lazar, 2007). My interpretations were formed from the language which the women in the interviews used to explain personal experiences.

This exploration can provide the opportunity for women who have experienced incarceration, governing bodies, the prison system, leisure practitioners, qualitative researchers, and policy makers to learn from women's experiences of community re-entry. The different approaches used to analyze the interviews will be outlined below. Discursive considerations are also described in this chapter and excerpts from the women's quotes will be used as examples of analysis. In the following sections, readers will be provided with explanations of how the thematic results and implications were established throughout this thesis.

3.1.1 Feminist Approaches to Understanding Community Reintegration

To better understand the experiences of women who are reintegrating back into community after imprisonment, I used an overarching feminist methodological approach. Using a feminist methodological stance helped to shape my critical framework. It is important to note

that feminist penal reformers are critical of how women are treated by Canadian prisons (Hannah-Moffat, 2001). Similarly, this thesis is reflective of this critical approach in analyzing the experiences of women who participated in the interviews, in relation to community reintegration.

As part of my feminist stance, I focus on understanding the contextualised meanings of women's journeys of resettlement after leaving prison. Resettlement, or reintegration is a complex construct, and it is even more complex for the population of women who have experienced incarceration, because women are often considered a non-dominant or 'minority' group. Together, a feminist approach and the use of a critical framework provide an appropriate position to understand its complexity on the surface and beneath, through the analysis of rich data.

Feminisms are theoretical and philosophical frameworks that encompass concepts of empowerment, social change, and equity for women and men (Henderson et al., 1996). To add, feminisms push beyond the documentation and definition of inequalities and instead place emphasis on creating social change (Trussell & Mair, 2010). The epistemological concerns that build the literature on feminist research and community reintegration explain how we know what we know and at whose expense. Therefore, it is critical to the formation of research activity concerned with issues of women leaving prison, along with the ways in which this study may be used, to empower women throughout their daily lives.

Moreover, by using a feminist qualitative approach, it helped to explore the realities of women's daily lives as they were experienced and explained through their personal opinions, thoughts, and feelings. The feminist approach I used during my analysis of the interviews also assisted in illuminating certain issues pertaining to the lives of women leaving prison. Some of these issues included gender oppression, knowledge of women's lived experiences, women's advocacy, and overall transformation in society (McHugh, 2014) for women leaving prison.

Techniques such as analysis of power inequities and the use of reflexivity have also been used when conducting research with women (McHugh, 2014) who have experienced incarceration. To add, one of the common goals in feminist research includes amplifying the voices of women, as shown through extensive work from many researchers (Hannah-Moffat, 2001; Yuen et al., 2012; Pedlar et al., 2018) who have explored the experiences of women who

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have been to prison. Intersectional theory has also been applied when working with this population, as it acknowledges how women frequently experience disadvantages due to a variety of factors that can contribute to oppression, such as race, sex, age, gender, culture, sexual preferences and more (Gueta, 2020). More broadly speaking, feminist approaches to understanding community reintegration promote potential future directions for women, the prison system, governing bodies, policy makers and community reintegration supports targeted towards helping women leaving prison.

Essentially, feminist, and qualitative researchers have the goal of understanding naturally occurring phenomena by attempting to interpret and make sense of the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences (Mayan, 2016). Meanwhile, critical feminist methodologies allow researchers to shed light on the need to embrace and integrate women's lived experiences into the traditional masculinist origins of social science (Nast, 1994). As such, feminist researchers have long been concerned with critically analyzing concerns such as capitalism, patriarchy, racism and the effects they can have on women and society (Nast, 1994). Like past research by feminist scholars who studied the experiences of (in)justice-involved women, this thesis attempts to centre the voices of women leaving prison while illuminating issues, needs and possibilities for the future.

To reiterate, in this feminist and critical framework, the qualitative data analyzed takes the form of longitudinal transcribed interviews collected from women in/leaving prison. These interviews are reflective of women's experiences, feelings, opinions, and suggestions related to incarceration and community resettlement in Canada. Emphasis is placed on women's personal experiences, constraints, what aids in reintegration, sources of empowerment and support and what community means to women. Furthermore, this thesis focuses on how the experiences of women who have been incarcerated contribute to women's paths of community reintegration and how women build (or do not build) a sense of community after leaving prison.

3.1.2 Understanding the Difference Between Feminist Methodology and Feminist Theory

For the purpose of this thesis, understanding the difference between feminist methodologies and feminist theories is crucial. Feminist methodologies can be described as fields of inquiry with roots in advocacy and critiques of traditional practices of social science (DeVault, 1996).

Scholars who use feminist methodologies are connected through a wide range of efforts to include women's lives and issues in societal accounts, to support changes that will enhance women's lives, and to minimize the harms of research (DeVault, 1996).

Alternatively, feminist theory is known to critique the past and place emphasis on work ethic and the productive sphere as the foundations of identity construction of a male dominated view that tends to ignore the daily experiences of women (Wearing, 1998). Wearing implies that scholars who use feminist theories often criticize past historical policy, making it the root of unequal treatment for women. To an extent this may be true, however feminism is not just about critiquing the past. In general, women's experiences often differ from men and the oppression within history has caused limitations that women across the globe continue to fight against – with the overall aim of achieving social justice.

From a theoretical standpoint, a theory may be considered feminist "to the extent it is persuaded that women have been unjustly unequal to men because of the social meaning of their bodies" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 37). Feminist theories view the concept of gender critically as a determinant of chances in life, implying that women can suffer from the distinction of sex (MacKinnon, 1989). Thus, feminist methodology differs from feminist theory, in the sense that feminist theory encompasses a wide range of ideas related to feminism, whereas feminist methodology is concerned with approaches used for conducting research.

The daily experiences of each woman involved in this research including myself, are unique. This study challenged me to think about my own role, experiences, constraints, needs and overcoming as an Indo-Canadian woman in relation to women in this thesis. As a second-generation Indo-Canadian, I was born in Canada and my parents were born in India. For years, feminist researchers have emphasized how many Indian women experience a disadvantage due to widely known ideologies of gender that constrain Indian women's interactions within the home and limit their actions outside of the home (Sharma, 1978). In the Indian culture, male dominance is rooted in the gender divide within labor (Derné, 1994). As such, memories of my own childhood and early adulthood included intense experiences of victimization and resistance against male dominance, eventually leading to experiences of agency – something that is overlooked in the literature (Fortune, 2011). Together, the mentioned feminist stances contribute

to building the rationale for my methodological choices.

3.1.3 Understanding the Work of Community Justice Initiatives

Community Justice Initiatives (CJI) is a not-for-profit organization that is globally known for beginning the first modernized Restorative Justice program (CJI, 2015). As noted in the literature review, restorative Justice is an approach to addressing crime and conflict that includes the individual who caused the harm, the individual(s) affected by the harm and members of the community (CJI, 2015). This approach to addressing crime is unifying in the sense that it connects the individual with the community and may provide both parties with opportunities for healing and growth.

In 1998, CJI launched the program known as Stride Night, in the women's Canadian federal prison located in Kitchener, Ontario (CJI, 2015). This program includes informal meetings for women in prison, providing them with opportunities to engage in positive leisure experiences with other women, triggering relationships to form and even continue after the women are released (CJI, 2015). Previous research has demonstrated that participants of Stride Night have expressed the value they find in it as an independent program (CJI, 2015). Providing women who are incarcerated with the opportunity to meet other female volunteers from the community may help women feel more connected to others and provide a greater sense of belonging.

These bonds are often continued in the form of Circles, another program offered by CJI, throughout which the same volunteers from Stride Night meet women in prison, get to know each other and support women in different ways as they resettle into community (CJI, 2015). Building supportive relationships through such programs can provide women with a sense of support while reintegrating into the community, helping women stay away from prison and increasing the likeliness to lower reliance on the use of imprisonment (Fortune et al., 2010).

3.1.4 Stride Night

Stride night is an activity that is shared every week within the prison, providing women who are incarcerated and volunteers with the chance to meet and come to know each other (CJI,

2015). These encounters are relevant to the study from which I gathered data, and they relate to my exploration of women leaving prison. According to Bui and Morash (2010), strong connections carry a crucial role in emotional well-being, something that women in prison may be in dire need of. Such social interactions may provide opportunities for women to establish positive connections in place of those that have been lost due to incarceration.

Stride staff and volunteers focus on creating safe and healthy spaces with meaningful activities tailored towards building relationships between the participating women and community volunteers (CJI, 2015). The program also encourages individuals from marginalized communities to volunteer with the women, which may help in building a sense of solidarity between various marginalized groups. Women who have participated in Stride Nights have expressed the benefits of engaging in social interactions with community members during meetings (Pedlar et al., 2008). An underlying rationale for this program is to provide the opportunity for relationships to form and hopefully continue after women leave prison (Yuen et al., 2006).

3.1.5 Stride Circles

The interviews which were analyzed in this thesis were based on women's experiences with Stride Circles, which is a comprehensive program that connects the same volunteers from Stride Night with women who are in prison in hopes of supporting women throughout community resettlement (CJI, 2015). This program provides women who are in prison with the opportunity to remain in contact with their Stride Night relationships while re-entering the community. This also gives women the chance to build strong connections with others that develop through close relationships in closed and small social circles, such as close friends who can offer multiple forms of support (Bui & Morash, 2010). In addition, women have the autonomy to participate in Circles and are encouraged to suggest volunteers they have already met to be a member of their Circle (CJI, 2015). The autonomy that exists within Circles may allow women to feel a sense of freedom during transitions from prison into the real world.

Stride Circles continuously exist throughout a woman's experience of incarceration and progress with her throughout her reintegration process to community until the woman wishes to end it (CJI, 2015). Volunteers from Stride Circles provide social and practical support for women

(CJI, 2015). Examples of social support include positive peer interactions and help accessing a variety of recreational opportunities, whereas practical support includes things such as access to community programming and transportation.

The different ways in which Circles provide support to women may offer hope for a more successful transition from prison to community. According to Fortune et al. (2010), Stride Circles has helped encourage women, who might not have made such choices before, to build sound judgement and positive decision-making skills. It is also important to note that according to CJI (2015), Stride Circles is the only community affiliated support program that offers women this continued support from prison into community, in a method that is significantly different than relationships within the prison system. Such interventions often encompass a restorative justice approach (Griffiths et al., 2007). Community-based programs, as opposed to incarceration, are now being used more often, in hopes of stimulating positive reintegration experiences for people leaving prison within our communities, rather than subjecting individuals to the harmful and marginalizing effects of prison sentences (Griffiths et al., 2007).

Essentially, Fortune et al. (2010) explained how prison atmospheres can be disempowering for women, but that supportive connections which carry on outside of prison walls may support the efforts of women to achieve their desired roles and live responsibly as participating citizens after release. Programs such as Stride Night and Stride Circles may offer environments that are suitable for women's complex needs. These programs may do this by promoting feelings of empowerment, encouraging social engagement, and providing women with a stronger sense of community.

Despite the rich literature about women involved with the criminal justice system, there remains a need to develop a deeper understanding of the experiences of women leaving prison during community resettlement, and what role(s) these experiences play in the processes of reintegration. Furthermore, it has been stressed that an important goal of women's prisons is for women to leave stronger than when they first arrived, with a feeling of empowerment and availability to resources required to re-establish life in community (Fortune, et al., 2010). Such feelings and resources may be achieved by building community ties resembling those created during Stride Night and Stride Circles. Gaining a better understanding of the experiences of women leaving prison and the impact(s) that programs of this context have in women's lives, is

of value to women, leisure practitioners, researchers, policy makers, CSC, and the Canadian government.

3.2 Philosophical Framework

As researchers, we constantly draw theoretical conclusions from our research, which influence methodology, and these conclusions are formed through our epistemological claims about how we understand, and our ontological assumptions about how we perceive reality (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Thus, our interpretations of life are impacted by our inquiries regarding epistemology, ontology, methodology and theoretical views (Berryman, 2019). This set of ideologies inspires one's research approaches and impacts how they understand the world and social activity within.

More specifically, in choosing a qualitative approach to my research, I also chose to conduct this study using a critical framework and an overarching feminist approach. Using FCDA, my research is situated in a materialist feminist epistemology and a social constructivist ontology. Materialist feminist approaches tend to focus on political and social issues, the different positions of subjects, and power differences through which social movements begin, thrive, and reimagine life in institutional and discursive practices (Naples, 2002). Moreover, as cited by Fox (1998), Foucault explained discursive practices to be "embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns for general behaviour, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them" (1977, p. 200). Thus, discursive practices are different from, yet connected to discourse, as they are the ways in which discourse is acted upon and spread within culture and community.

Relatedly, gender can be seen as a social construct, and the hierarchy and privileging of our interpretations of men's experiences over our interpretations of women's, influences our social life, resulting in material consequences for people who belong to these groups (Letherby, 2003). To expand, Haslanger (2000) emphasized how material feminists aim to remain grounded within women's material realities, in hopes of showing how gender oppression is affected by both material and cultural influences. This avenue of research promotes the understanding of how issues surrounding gender are constructed by different people, powers and discourses, and

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the impacts this can have on resisting or maintaining power imbalances both phenomenologically and materially in women's lives (Sternberg, 2015).

Furthermore, social constructivism is a theory which assumes that knowledge and meaning are formed through social interactions between human beings (Amineh & Asl, 2015). The most essential components of this theory are: a) the belief that people justify their experiences by forming perceptions of the social world and how it operates, and b) the assumption that language is the most important system which humans use to shape reality (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Therefore, social constructivists believe that learning cannot be possible alone and it must be accomplished together in social settings (Greeno et al., 1996). A combination of these views was used to analyze the women's transcribed interviews. To further support this process, FCDA will be described in detail below.

3.2.1 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA)

Feminist scholar Nartey (2021) explained how FCDA centres emancipation, transformation, and social justice while challenging structures which affect the possibilities for women to function and be treated as fully human, along with discourses which establish social practices as gendered. This researcher also mentioned how FCDA is not simply the deconstruction of talk and texts as an academic study, but it highlights how issues which are researched have both phenomenological and practical impacts for women and groups of women in particular communities. Accordingly, in this thesis, components of FCDA were used to understand the experiences of women leaving prison, along with the impacts of the interview process, both of which were portrayed through the transcribed interviews explored during analysis.

Although some CDA researchers, for example, Wodak and Meyer (2009), have approached CDA by focusing mostly on linguistics, in this thesis I aimed to use a technique similar to Sternberg (2015), who used tenets of FCDA to understand power inequities and gender ideologies in a more abstract way by illuminating the underlying concepts and ideas from interviews, instead of focusing solely on linguistics. Also, as Nartey (2021) emphasized, FCDA is not just the application of existing CDA approaches to analyze gender issues, because it is fundamentally driven by developments in critical feminist theory and importantly, it is shaped by 'feminist political imagination.' This researcher clarified how some of the key principles of FCDA as theory and practice, include feminist analytical activism, the complexity of gender and

power relations, gender as an ideological structure which categorizes women and men, discourse in the (de)construction of gender, and critical reflexivity as praxis – meaning how critical awareness can become a normal feature of people's everyday lives. Praxis-oriented research is concerned with democratically involving participants in the research process to counteract dominance and grow emancipatory knowledge through reciprocity, negotiation, and empowerment (Lather, 1986). Nartey (2021) explained how all these tenets of FCDA lead to the idea of intersectionality, which sheds light on the belief that gender is not a homogenous concept, because it is impacted by a variety of factors that make up social identities.

Also, since FCDA originally stems from CDA, it is essential to understand how in CDA, discourse is viewed as socially conditioned and not the only way through which we interpret the world and create meanings (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997). Thus, FCDA acknowledges that discourse is only one aspect of social practices and one part of the ways in which we form our realities (Lazar, 2005; 2007). This methodology also recognizes how the material realm of our world is separate from discourse, and that it can both affect discourse and be affected by it (Sternberg, 2015). This implies that in FCDA, daily life circumstances are just as important to analyze as language, as both factors contribute to one's existence and being.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the women's experiences of before, during and after leaving prison, were also affected by other people and powers in the women's lives, various environments, and women's social interactions at the time. Furthermore, my interpretations of the women's experiences were inevitably influenced by the material world I was raised in and the constantly evolving world that surrounded me during analysis. Considering these various influencing powers, the purpose of this FCDA is to create space for understanding the realities of women leaving prison during community resettlement by using a lens on transformation and gender to gain knowledge of reintegration discourses, women's experiences, issues and most importantly, women's needs.

3.2.2 Discourse on Non-Dominant Groups

This analysis was broadly situated within the context of a non-dominant group – specifically women who have experienced incarceration. Nartey (2020) emphasized the importance of understanding that people who belong to non-dominant groups, also referred to as 'minorities,' are socially defined (as opposed to numerically), because people within these

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groups are often less favoured by institutions and society. Accordingly, the study of the population of women leaving prison is concerned with social issues such as sex, gender, ethnicity, race, age, environment, oppression etc. It is also critical to note that the population of women in general is often seen as having less power, privilege, and lower socioeconomic status in society (Oritz-Ospina & Roser, 2018), therefore causing women who have experienced incarceration to be subjected to even further marginalization. As a result, women who have been to prison may also suffer from othering, unequal treatment, stigmatization, and discrimination (Pedlar et al., 2018).

Nartey (2021) outlined how research in this area seeks to understand how women are treated, how the world forms discourse about women, how women are affected by discourse, and the identities and perceptions that stem from these associations. This author also mentioned that along with these goals, exclusionist, prejudiced and discriminatory discourses that place women on the margins of society are of major concern to researchers of this topic. Unfortunately, there is a lack of studies which amplify the real voices and agency of women, including their lived experiences of empowerment and emancipation (Nartey, 2021). Thus, research of non-dominant groups, specifically women, seems to have maintained a focus on the perpetuation of powerlessness and discrimination, undermining the ways in which women construct their own identities and work to resist oppressive forces in society. Respectively, this thesis has aimed to call attention to women's voices and the realities of their lives, by analyzing their personal words and experiences.

With recent movements seeking to achieve social justice for marginalized populations, such as Decolonize this Place, No More Stolen Sisters, and Black Lives Matter, it is crucial to centre marginalized voices. This is critical, especially regarding the voices of Indigenous, Black and other non-white women, as part of greater efforts to shape understanding, empowering and supportive attitudes and actions towards people and communities who have endured oppression. Even though women who belong to these groups have historically fought for equal rights and continue to do so, there are still areas in which women experience disadvantages, such as employment, education, moral values, and socioeconomic status (Nartey, 2021), especially women who have experienced incarceration who may have already been subjected to poor life conditions. To tackle these issues, feminist groups and women's organizations have grown in

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recent years, and thankfully, efforts which focus on creating gender equality continue to gain attention.

Interestingly, Orbe (1996) explained how members of non-dominant groups may use silence during social interactions with people who belong to dominant groups (ex. authorities, people in power, dominant races etc.), which can result in communication barriers and a poor understanding of the reality of people's lives. This was expanded upon by Spender (1998), who explained how women may feel pressured to choose between silence or alienation when hesitancy arises during attempts to express personal experiences with dominant group members. In this context, FCDA also helped to shed light on the meanings behind pauses, silences, and hesitations identified in the women's interviews, which were conducted by student researchers.

Overall, FCDA helped to examine the complex ways in which gendered assumptions were discursively produced and challenged in the women's interviews. Thus, by using this methodology, I was able to interrogate the discourses that perpetuate gendered social practices and power imbalances for the non-dominant group of women leaving prison. The knowledge and findings which emerged from this thesis will draw awareness to and the transformation of the power that lays within language structures in both written and spoken communication (Kissack, 2012) about community reintegration for women who have been to prison.

3.2.3 Background on Data Set and Interview Criteria

The data set that was analyzed in this thesis was retrieved from a longitudinal study of the Stride Circles Program. Researchers Silk et al. (2019) explained how Stride is a woman-centred and strengths-based restorative justice program created to connect volunteers from the community with women currently living in or reintegrating from federal penitentiaries, in order to offer supports that help women successfully transition to the community and build relationships. The same researchers mentioned how Public Safety Canada funded the Stride project in 2014, providing $2.7 million to CJI in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario. This project took place over a period of five years and ended in 2019 (Silk et al., 2019).

As a result of the project, a set of longitudinal transcribed interviews with 21 women was recorded from the years 2015 to 2018, which served as my data set for this analysis. A total of 13

interviews were conducted with women who have been incarcerated at GVI and who took part in Stride Circles. GVI is an institution for women who have been federally sentenced, meaning the women at this facility are expected to serve more than two years in federal prison (Government of Canada, 2018).

One woman had a total of three interviews, while five of the women had two interviews each, all of which took place over approximately two to three years. These interviews were purposefully examined based on their content and centering of the voices of women who have been to prison and experienced community reintegration. Based on the framing of the interview guide questions, it can be gathered that some of their aims were to expose negative and constraining gender issues and practices within women's lives, including in the prison system and community in relation to experiences of community resettlement. Other aims of the interview guide seemed to be to reveal effective approaches and women's preferred strategies for empowerment and transformation. These interviews were conducted within the context of Stride Circles as part of a greater movement for restorative justice. The survey, interviews and data used for this thesis was collected by University of Waterloo Recreation and Leisure graduate students. The interviews were recorded. The process of data collection took place from the years of 2015 to 2019.

The original survey was developed by retired Recreation and Leisure Studies professor Susan Arai, with the help of former graduate student, Karren Gallant. Nor me, or my supervisor for this thesis own the survey, so I could not include it in with my thesis as I hoped I could. However, the report by Silk et al. (2019) describes how quantitative analysis was used for any of the tools that needed it and inferential as well as descriptive statistics were created through either Microsoft Excel, or the software known as Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). These authors also indicated that qualitative analysis was implemented for survey questions that were open-ended, by which the data was thematically coded, plus analyzed. This mixed methods approach was used to guarantee a high level of validity and accuracy, as well as to catch any changes that may have happened while the Stride program progressed, because no single method can depict the full research journey (Silk et al., 2019). The use of both quantitative and qualitative methods seemed to help complement each other and produce thorough results during the research process.

3.2.4 The Women's Profiles in Short Narrative Form

Prior to further exploring the methodological approach which I used in this thesis, it is important that a foundation for understanding the uniqueness of each woman's life experiences is established. Accordingly, this section contains profiles of the six women included in this study in the form of short narratives. Within the profiles are characteristics, and observations I made about the women from the interviews. The names used are pseudonyms, as per the interview process and include Jennifer, Ellen, Sara, Leslie, Megan, and Courtney.

Jennifer was 28 years old at the time of her first interview in 2015. She self-identifies as white and Canadian. Jennifer had a total of three interviews (2015, 2016, and 2017). There were three volunteers in her Stride Circle (four people including herself). She mentioned that her mother is her special person with whom she shares her joys and sorrows. Jennifer seems to value humor and have a kind, assertive and confident nature. She also seems light-hearted, as she laughs often during serious conversations with her interviewer. When asked if she has a disability or mental health issues, Jennifer explained that she was diagnosed with Bipolar Depression and received financial assistance from the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP) prior to being incarcerated. She prefers holistic approaches to health and is not taking any medication for her condition. Additionally, Jennifer mentions having a girlfriend and stepchildren.

Ellen was 30 years old at the time of her first interview in 2015. Her second interview was broken into two parts, both of which took place in 2016. She self-identifies as Black with Caribbean descent. She has a previous history of trauma or abuse, which she does not go into detail about. She receives financial support from Ontario Works. Ellen seems empowered, confident, and honest, as she openly shares her experiences with depth. She is also inquisitive, positive, genuine and seems realistic when it comes to her goals. Additionally, she provides constructive criticism about the phrasing of the interview guide.

Sara was 43 years old at the time of her first interview. She was interviewed in 2015 and 2016. She self-identifies as Caucasian and white. She has a family, including a husband and children. Her first Stride Circle started when she was still inside prison in 2008. Sara seems to

have many responsibilities to juggle, and values moral support. Additionally, she says she has previous experiences of trauma or abuse.

Leslie was 55 years old at the time of her first interview in 2015, which was five years after she left prison in 2010. She had a total of two interviews and her second interview took place in 2016. She self-identifies as white and Canadian. She also says she has a disability, as she has an artificial hip. She receives financial support from her Canadian Pension Plan (CPP). Leslie has had her Stride Circle since 2007. Also, she seems to be quite introverted during her interviews.

Megan was 34 years old at the time of her first interview and was interviewed in 2015 and 2016. She self-identifies as Native American, French Canadian and Métis. She is originally from Montreal and is a member of The First Nations. She attends a Native Centre where she practices rituals and her spirituality. Megan is married to her husband. She also had an abortion a few years before her first interview and mentions that she has anxiety. She left GVI in 2011 and her Circle started at the end of 2010.

Courtney was 27 years old at the time of her first interview and was interviewed in 2015 and 2016. She self-identifies as Caucasian and Polish and is a first generation Canadian. Courtney says she has a previous history of trauma or abuse. She seems positive and grateful. Additionally, she says she values family and hope, as both were highly important to her throughout her reintegration into community.

3.2.5 Procedure of Analysis

This FCDA focused on the comprehensions of women's experiences during community reintegration, which included personal descriptions of before, during, and after incarceration. Identification of constraints, needs, sources of support and empowerment techniques was established during close reading of the interview transcripts. Interpretation of these issues and strategies was formed with the given written context and available information in the interview transcripts. This led to explanations of the possible impact(s) of these strategies for women leaving prison.

For my analysis, I began by making note of the women's names and how many interviews each had. After this, I read the interviews one at a time. At first, I began my thematic analysis by using a pencil to underline themes that seemed important to me. During this process, I kept the words love, respect and empowerment next to me on a lined piece of paper in large letters, along with a written version of my research questions to help keep me on track. This helped to ensure that I was only underlining parts of the women's conversations that were directly related to my RQs, while inspiring me to find the beauty and empowerment in the women's words and experiences.

Shortly after beginning this process, I realized that I needed to maintain a longitudinal aspect for my research and decided to shift my focus towards just six of the women's interviews, simply because they each had at least two. I omitted the women who had only one interview, as this would not sufficiently contribute to the longitudinal information I was seeking, because I wanted to learn about the women's experiences of reintegration over time.

By focusing solely on six women, I found it easier to immerse myself in their experiences. Then, I compiled a list of the parts of women's conversations which seemed most pertinent to my RQs in a separate Microsoft word document. I created a chart for each woman, with her own list of quotes. As the themes emerged after reading multiple interviews, I created a legend of those which appeared more frequently. Then, I narrowed the themes down to three major ones (constraints, empowerment, and support). After this, I organized women's quotes by placing them under these major themes.

Initially I thought that CDA would work as a methodology for analyzing the women's interviews. However, after researching, I found that FCDA was more appropriate for the data set provided to me. Some of the reasons being that it centres emancipation and empowerment for non-dominant groups. This methodology helped to illuminate women's needs for emancipation in relation to community reintegration and unveiled issues that are left untreated during incarceration, which carry on into women's lives from before and during time spent in prison.

3.2.6 Criteria for Identifying Constraints, Needs, Sources of Support and Empowerment Strategies

Different criteria were used to distinguish the constraints, needs, sources of support and empowerment techniques in women's lives. For example, expressions of discontent with treatment that exhibited unfairness, stress, challenges, or the hindering of women's progress were used to pinpoint constraints; the rejection of cultural devaluation was used to identify resistance, and the articulation of social justice and transformation, helped to determine women's experiences of emancipation. Similarly, communication surrounding feminist political action, such as engagement in public speaking and the sharing of personal stories among community was used to classify experiences of women's agency. Finally, emphasis was placed on identifying activities and access to different forms and sources of support that seemed to be empowering and inclusive for women leaving prison. This included tactics for self-empowerment and activities which promoted positive social interactions, such as those within Stride Circles. Moreover, participation in employment, education, leisure opportunities, anti-stigma efforts and actions to help avoid recidivism also represented forms of empowerment for the women.

Relatedly, Razack (1993), explained how when people who have been oppressed share personal life stories, it can help to create social change by offering unique perspectives of reality that oppose knowledge which has already been established. However, this author mentioned that without critical reflection of people's stories, it can lead to society's overall failure of acknowledging the real risks experienced by individuals who have been oppressed. Thus, paying attention to the ways in which I know and reflecting on the women's words are both imperative in order to listen, speak to and identify the political actions (Razack, 1993) that women used to create positive change for themselves and the greater population of women who have been to prison.

Given the aforementioned tenets of FCDA, identifying and understanding empowerment and resistance strategies for women leaving prison was a major part of the analysis in this thesis. As discussed, the women practiced various self-empowerment approaches in addition to taking part in empowering activities and conversations with Stride Circles and different community organizations, such as friendship centres, churches, and more. In addition to identifying the

various empowerment strategies that women used, it was important to learn how women critiqued patriarchy, gender oppression, and inequality embedded in the punitive nature of the prison system and in society. These issues seemed to trigger women's needs and cultivate motivation, along with actions towards empowerment.

The women were also found to resist demeaning language and stereotypes exhibited through the prison system, community, and the interview guide. Some of the words, phrases, and stereotypes that women resisted, seemed to perpetuate powerlessness, othering, and devaluation among the population. Women accomplished this by revealing unfair attitudes in the prison system and community in addition to calling out offensive assumptions in the interview guide and discussing how to resist such behaviour. Thus, discussions of how to mitigate stigma-related constraints in community, which oppress women who have experienced incarceration were also illuminated through the interview dialogue. Further, the transcriptions showed that detaching from the stigmatized 'prisoner identity' and (re)building 'the self' appeared to be important to the women. Acts of (re)building oneself were identified through expressions of self-improvement, refining, and acquiring skills.

Through these strategies, the women performed their own acts of critical awareness, which is a form of social activism identified by Michele Lazar (2005;2007). These included experiences of personal empowerment, restoration, rehabilitation, healing, and social justice through time spent with 'the self' and the Stride Circle program. I therefore argue that the information in the interviews does not simply reflect women's actions towards social justice, but constitutes action in themselves, as the women's words and experiences serve as emancipatory evidence aimed at shedding light on the true agency, voices and power of women who have been affiliated with the criminal justice system. Furthermore, the insight gained from the women's interviews helps us understand how women leaving prison shift away from stigmatization and the negative identities regarding people who have experienced incarceration which are perpetuated by the prison system and society. The interviews seemed to depict how women formed new positive life narratives and self-identities instead, in order to cultivate empowerment during community reintegration.

Firstly, I will discuss the women's resistance strategies of critiquing patriarchy, gender oppression and inequality embedded in society and the criminal justice system. Women across

the globe continue to live with patriarchy and it is evident that patriarchal practices are dominant in Canadian women's prisons and in society (Marques & Monchalin, 2020), including at GVI, thereby enabling the presence of traditional gender norms and gender oppression. The women's dialogue in the interviews was found to strongly criticize such systematic gendering of privilege and inequality by elaborating on two issues: 1) women's devaluation and unmet needs prior to, during incarceration and throughout reintegration, and 2) how restorative justice techniques can be used to empower and emancipate women from the gender oppression and inequality ingrained in the prison system and society.

Some of these gender oppressions and sexist gendered norms include the normalization of women being treated unequally compared to men and being abused by men and in relation to the law, the policing of women's bodies and clothing along with the shaming of women due to past crimes. For example, Marquis (2018) revealed how prisons were originally poorly prepared to provide proper healthcare for women, resulting in the gendered double standard that often still exists for women in prison today. This researcher explained how women in prison have continuously received inadequate reproductive care, treatment, and attention, resulting in constraints for women that are non-existent for men.

Similarly, all the women in this thesis seemed to provide evidence of unmet needs and health concerns during and even after leaving prison. Examples include how Jennifer felt that neither her or her mother could deal with her mentality; Ellen exposed the major lack of programs in prison that support and prepare women for reintegration; Sara experienced a continued lack of focus during conversations and felt as if she "would take things too extreme," and Megan felt that incarceration-induced anxiety could lead people "back to old habits." Research by Marquis (2018) on women's experiences with criminal (in)justice has also described how women often struggle to receive adequate care in prison, such as when one woman whose experiences were explored in their research was described to have vaginal bleeding while pregnant yet was refused immediate attention simply because she had not signed up to see a nurse. This triggered her to deliberately slam her thumb between a door and feel the need to visibly bleed, to show that she had an injury which a man could experience, which finally helped her to receive care.

These types of gendered injustices in prison seem to be contributing factors in women's inequitable social standing to men within society. Attitudes in women's prisons and in relation to women's criminal histories may perhaps even magnify the gender violence and sexist behaviours that exist in society. Unfortunately, due to women's unique needs and the lack of adequate treatment provided for this population in prison, women are more likely to suffer from the loss of loving relationships during and after incarceration (Ward & Kassenbaum, 2017). Nevertheless, the same researchers described how prisons were made to directly deprive people of freedom, comfort, needs, belongings, friends, and family – causing psychological and social issues for many individuals who have been incarcerated.

There are many impacts of the demeaning behaviours and assumptions surrounding women's imprisonment, as they can cause people to selectively degrade and devalue women for becoming incarcerated and having a criminal history, especially upon release. As a result, people in society may directly or indirectly cause women who have been to prison to feel less than. This is shown in the findings chapter through Leslie's experiences, when she felt as if her neighbour socially excluded her from conversations on purpose because he was aware of her incarceration. This was detected through Leslie's statement "I have a lawyer over next door that doesn't even want to talk to me or nothing. That's okay." Her words, "doesn't even want to talk to me…" indicate her awareness of being socially excluded. Her words, "That's okay," imply that regardless of his unfair attitude towards her, she accepts that he does not wish to communicate with her.

Another example of this type of behaviour which led to unfortunate events for Megan, is when she explained how she was fired from a job after being hired, due to her employer discovering her history of incarceration. Her words, "Before my name change, I'd get a job, have it for two months and then like sorry we have to let you go, it's not a good fit here cause then they've googled me…" explained how incarceration stigma was constraining for her, specifically when attempting to maintain employment during reintegration. Megan's words also show how members of society may judge women on their past choices, potentially causing women to suffer from financial loss due to stigma, and lack of understanding from society in general. As described, the constraint of stigma eventually caused her to go through the trouble of changing her name in order for her to get and keep a job. As shown through these specific experiences, the

social rejection faced by women leaving prison can be extremely intense and harmful in comparison to what is faced by men leaving prison, explaining why women who have been incarcerated are more likely to experience trauma and anxiety-related symptoms and may be in urgent need of adequate mental health care (Drapalski et al., 2009).

Thus, FCDA was useful in illuminating the women's unique experiences, as it helped to shed light on the gendered issues that women battled before, during and after leaving prison. Some of the women also experienced abusive relationships with men before entering prison. These oppressive experiences were identified through questions in the interview guide, which directly asked women about trauma and abuse, and through women's responses which included the use of certain words such as "yes," "hard, "difficult," "trauma," etc. One example was given by Jennifer who stated, "…we're having a hard time bringing things up, like the trauma that happened when I was younger…I have so much stress going on in my house." Her words, "having a hard time," "so much stress," and "trauma that happened when I was younger," vividly depict her past and present challenges, which she seemed unable to attend to during incarceration, and was left to deal with during reintegration with the help of the Stride Circle program.

Some of the women's dialogue in the interview transcripts also serve to resist socially constructed views that seek to justify men's freedom and women's oppression, given the gender based double standards that clearly still exist today. This will be discussed shortly. Clearly, some of the extracts from the women's interviews reveal how society members often devalue women who have been to prison, and how these negative views and assumptions can create a toxic climate conducive to women's exploitation. I therefore argue that the interview transcripts from which the women's words were extracted, constitute a form of critical reflexivity as praxis by raising critical awareness (Lazar, 2007) and highlighting the voices, agency and power of women who have been to prison, in this context, over their conditions. Although women's dialogue showed how incarceration stigma affected the ability to function after leaving prison, various tactics were used to overcome this, which will be discussed in future paragraphs.

It is obvious and important to understand that even though incarceration stigma still exists for both women and men, this pressure manifests differently because women are often largely socialized to feel pressure to fulfill traditional gender roles such as mothers, wives,

homemakers etc. which are typical outdated indicators of a 'fulfilled life' of a woman (Nartey, 2020). Meanwhile, men are often socialized to view employment and material gains as a necessary part of life that will provide them with freedom. However, the women whose experiences were explored in this thesis have easily debunked these gender norms, as almost every woman discussed actions towards prioritizing financial security upon release from prison. For example, Ellen stated "Cause your debt doesn't stop, your bills don't stop when you're in prison, so you come out and… you've got to start figuring out how much money do I owe, where do I start paying." Her words here showed her concern for finances after leaving prison, contrary to the outdated belief that women may only be concerned with attending to their family and home related duties. To add, Sara's words below not only show her financial constraints, but also how her actions contributed towards her supporting herself in the end:

> "…I went to social services; I couldn't get it…to the rent bank to borrow money. They didn't give it... On my current income, I couldn't sustain the house I was moving into, but…when I went back to work, that was guaranteed, I even had a letter from my employer, saying, you know what I mean?" – Sara

Interestingly, one of the women (Leslie) also explained how her neighbours question whether she needs a man, and her response indicated her curiosity as to why she would 'need' a man for anything: "Like they even question me like, you don't need a guy? No, what would I need a guy for? Little things like that." Such boldness, independence and personal goals for self-reliance reflected through the women's experiences show how the women's interviews serve to fight against toxic gender roles and norms, and help to illuminate the realities behind women's lives, self-images, ambitions, and desired roles in life. In the past, societal views which assumed women as being economically dependent on men, were more common. However, the women's interview dialogue in this thesis clearly contributes to the current literature which supports the fact that today, women are no longer solely dependent on others (Borchorst & Siim, 2018). To add, the view that single women above a certain age may be having trouble getting married is typical in society (Nartey, 2020). Hence, the women's conversations expose and provide counter-narratives to the patriarchal gender ideologies which can make women feel that failure to fulfill traditional gender roles devalues their life. More importantly, these insights offer a transformative perspective of valuing women intrinsically and not based on whether they perform traditional gender roles.

The women's dialogue also showed resistance towards frequently used language and stereotypes in the interview guide, which are also commonly expressed within society and tend to perpetuate powerlessness among women who have been to prison. For example, when Courtney was asked to agree or disagree to any extent with the statement "I feel as though society sees me as less than a human," she responded with resistance and confidence by saying "No. And, also if you're seen as something other than human, that's not necessarily bad! Animals deserve rights and responsibilities too!" Her interviewer remarked that she sounded like a "true activist." Conversations such as this one show how women can resist negative stereotypes and language that can contribute to their oppression. Although it may not always be easy, Courtney's words showed how women can choose to respond to demeaning and stigmatizing attitudes with assertiveness, wisdom, and positivity to educate the world on women's realities.

Thus, another means by which feminist discourse praxis manifests through this analysis of the women's transcribed interviews, is through the uncovering of language and stereotypes which create negative connotations about women who have been to prison. In this way, the women's interviews, and their experiences in the Stride Circle program on which the interviews were focused, function as vessels and spaces for gender advocacy. Both the interview guide statements and women's responses towards them shed light on the structures operating in our society, which somehow leave women to be viewed as imbalanced. This indicates the need for cultivating respect and gender equality to be on the prison system and society's agenda, specifically for women who experience incarceration.

The women also reconceptualized their life narratives and self-identities beyond that of someone who has been to prison. As an example, Ellen had stated "For women, keeping that idea that yes, I am a woman, yes, I am still a human being, yes, I've done something wrong and this is my situation, but I still am somebody." By using words like "human being," and phrases such as "I still am somebody," Ellen showed how women and community members can use dialogue to humanize women, while changing attitudes within ourselves and in society at-large. To add, Sara had said "…people that know me trust me and stuff…I also have my own part-time cleaning business. Which I'm 100% trustable." Her words revealed how she views herself and her life, in terms of her accomplishments and how others hold trust in her. These quotes and others mentioned in the findings chapter, depict how women practiced humanization through personal

empowerment and dialogue in general, helping to reduce the pressures of incarceration-related stigma for themselves.

The interviews revealed how women practiced rewriting negative or demeaning narratives by exercising agency, engaging in public speaking, advocating for the overall population of women who have been to prison and actively detaching from the 'prisoner identity' through restorative, empowering and emancipatory approaches. Some of these approaches were identified through women's use of positive self talk, speaking up for oneself or others, calling out demeaning remarks regarding incarceration, and engaging in public dialogue about the realities of one's pathway towards incarceration and reintegration afterwards. For example, Courtney's words below helped to understand how she uses public speaking and transparency about her incarceration to form a positive self-identity and life narrative. She also shares this with others:

> "…having gone to jail, I give talks in universities about it, so I have to teach people. So, it's a huge part of my identity in that sense… for law school, I talked about incarceration. And I was accepted…I wasn't discriminated against and rejected because of it, which is good. I haven't been hiding my criminal record…" – Courtney

Interestingly, Courtney does not completely change her life narrative, but instead, shows acceptance and self-respect for her experiences of incarceration by educating others. Phrases such as "I have to teach people," "huge part of my identity," and "I haven't been hiding my criminal record," show Courtney's passion and commitment towards sharing her life experiences with community, and they also highlight her positive self-outlook. Further, these words show how she embraces her journey and makes efforts to reduce stigma by speaking openly about incarceration with university students. By showing her confidence and dedication towards teaching people about incarceration, she helps to positively counteract the negative images and carceral punitive narratives surrounding women leaving prison, which are often promoted by the prison system and generalized by society.

As discussed, gendered assumptions, stereotypes and negative views are commonly expressed about women who have been to prison through the media, television, prison system and society. Women in prison have frequently been referred to as an 'invisible' population, therefore, images portrayed through the media directly contribute to society's

(mis)understanding of women who experience incarceration (Cecil, 2007). This may contribute to people's overall failure to understand women's lived experiences and even lead to women being treated differently or being mistreated during reintegration. In fact, Cecil (2007) found that women in movies about prison tend to be portrayed as innocent while entering dangerous prison systems in which they are often physically and sexually assaulted, but oftentimes in the end of these narratives, women are shown as fully able to fight against and escape the corruption, eventually living freely and happily ever after.

Unfortunately, as revealed through the interviews which were explored in this thesis, women's experiences in prison often lead to their harm, and future challenges during reintegration – which almost guarantee that a vast majority of women leaving prison may return to the prison cells from which they were once freed (Cecil, 2007). Society's blindness to women's sufferation and challenges may be contributed to by the stereotypes portrayed through the media, so it is important to acknowledge how the women's words illuminate their true selves, power, and intentions. Historically, it has been argued that women who experienced incarceration were negatively impacted by stereotypes (Schram, 1999), which may affect the way women leaving prison are viewed and treated today. Some of these assumptions might cause people to fear women who have been to prison, view women as dangerous, angry, violent, mentally unstable, or as incompetent to live normal lives – all of which are assumptions that the women in this thesis have proven to be untrue. It is time that society acknowledges women's own words, understands women's actual struggles prior to entering prison, their needs during incarceration and requirements to survive throughout reintegration.

Moreover, gendered stereotypes may cause assumptions surrounding mothers who have been to prison, such as the belief that women in prison who are mothers may be unfit to nurture or unprepared to care for their children upon release (Schram, 1999). For example, Megan explained how her aunt takes care of Megan's son and that her aunt would allow Megan to visit them but would not allow Megan to take her son out. She said "…she lets me see him and lets me come over for weekends and stuff. But she won't let me come and pick him up and take him to the movies, right." Megan's words depict how mothers may be treated differently after leaving prison, and the distance this treatment can cause in a mother's relationship with her child(ren). Thus, once again, the women's words reveal the importance of understanding how language,

stereotypes and images can shape people's perspectives about women and ultimately affect how women leaving prison are treated on a day-to-day basis, by society and in community, during attempts to resettle.

Thankfully, different communication practices can help women resist harmful stereotypes and representations in certain situations. Regardless of the way the prison system, society and even research sometimes normalizes these attitudes about women, the women's interview conversations not only render these various stereotypes untenable, but through them, the women offer more nuanced counter perspectives. For example, some of the interview guide statements implied assumptions that it is normal for women who have been to prison to feel "less than human,' and be "generally treated as an "object." In response, the women strongly disagreed with many of the interview guide statements which carried negative connotations about them, by saying things such as "No," "Disagree," or "Strongly disagree."

During some moments, women seemed silent, hesitant to respond, offended and even uncomfortable after hearing these types of statements. Hesitation appeared to speak volumes, in the sense that it showed the discomfort felt by the women, in response to these negatively framed statements. As mentioned, one woman had expressed how it is not necessarily bad to be treated differently than a human, as animals deserve rights too. These types of responses revealed how women truly feel about themselves and how women can resist gender stereotypes and negative views that are commonly expressed towards the population of women who have been to prison. The women's interviews therefore help to tackle this misinformation and miseducation in a manner that is empowering for women and hopefully helps to correct mindsets that enable and foster gender stereotypes regarding women who have experienced incarceration.

It is also important to restate that one of the main societal narratives, which seeks to silence the voices of women who have been to prison, especially in society, is the view that women leaving prison are to be feared. The underlying ideology here is that to be 'feared' is a devalued state and that it is where women should not be, according to society's standards of social acceptability and traditional gender roles of women being nurturing, caregivers, feminine and/or 'soft' (Nartey, 2020). This is therefore a space that women leaving prison are often pushed into as a mechanism which demeans and 'others', frequently leading to the marginalization of women with criminal histories who reside in community. Such views may

even cause women to fear others. However, this narrative is clearly invalidated through the women's interviews on an intrinsic basis, which is not based on how arbitrary social standards or definitions are advanced.

In fact, each of the women presented a uniquely warm, and kind personality. This was seen through their interview dialogue, as shown through scenarios in which women got along with Stride Circle members and even continued to be nice to people in community who exhibited negative views towards them. For example, in her second interview in 2016, Jennifer explained how she never had many positive or reliable friends growing up, and that Stride Circles provided her with the warm, loving, and uplifting company which her heart always desired. One of her statements was as follows: "Because I never had that. Everybody in my life has either been a negative influence or been an acquaintance and if I did get close to them, there is somewhere in…like at some point the relationship didn't last…" Phrases such as "never had that," "negative influence," and "relationship didn't last," showed how she felt she never had enough positive connections prior to engaging in Circles, and how her past relationships triggered stress and negativity in her life. In the same interview, she also said:

> "I can't say like… I've never been happier to meet anybody in my life that… well I love everybody at Stride, and I've never been able to say that. Everybody is just so heartfelt… like warm and…but the energy that comes when, like all the volunteers that I love…[laughs] I love it, love it! Just love it!" – Jennifer

Jennifer's words above were used to identify the positive impacts of her interactions with Stride Circles, along with the transformation she experienced through her restorative justice-related interventions with Stride. Her kind words and positive attitude also depict how she needed support and uplifting connections in her life and was grateful to experience both through Circles. Similarly, and as mentioned previously, Leslie expressed how although her neighbour socially excludes her due to knowledge of her past incarceration, she continues to be kind to him:

> "…I have a lawyer over next door that doesn't even want to talk to me or nothing. That's okay. And he's a lawyer. Supposed to be non (judgemental) but he had an outing with my landlord… who is actually a preacher's wife. I just continued to be nice to him." – Leslie

Thus, interview dialogue through which women's positive personality traits and cordialness were shown, help to dismantle negative assumptions that women leaving prison are

to be 'feared." The interview transcripts showed how the women were of a friendly nature and held kind and positive attitudes towards fellow community members. These examples and others mentioned in the discussion, show how the women demystify typical negative views surrounding women who have been to prison, which may cause society to unnecessarily fear women.

It is obvious that some of the women endured severely stressful lifestyles both prior to incarceration and during it, but that this was clearly followed by experiences of major personal growth and transformation. Thus, it is important for members of society to understand that although women may have committed crime(s) in the past, which were contributed to by uncontrollable circumstances, women can still have good intentions to live life positively thereafter. The women's interviews, therefore, serve as counternarratives to some of mainstream society's beliefs, and show how women's past crimes should not define how women are treated in the present and future, especially during incarceration and reintegration.

There are also widely held views that men must be tough, while women must be feminine (Nartey, 2020). This social narrative is challenged through the women's interview dialogue, thereby explaining how women who have been to prison can also be tough and represent strength, while still embodying personal definitions of what it means to be a woman, without the fear of having to meet expectations of or lose femininity. For example, one of the women explained how she felt proud and lucky to have overcome her turmoil and still have her family together:

> "…I've been very lucky in that sense; having gone through all I've gone through with my addiction and prison and still have my family in-tact." – Sara

Sara's words above represent how women can feel inner strength and gratitude after leaving prison, and still express care for family. These words and other dialogue in the women's interviews were used to identify how women have unique character traits of both strength and family orientation, encompassing traits which are often interpreted as 'masculine' and 'feminine.' Thus, the women's experiences in prison and during community reintegration align with but are by no means identical to the experiences of many women who have been to prison, which have been explored through research.

The women's words show how inadequate treatment of women in prison and society still exists today, thereby clearly affecting the process of reintegration for women more intensely than for men. Authors Bloom et al. (2004) called attention to the need for criminal justice systems to use more gender-responsive programming and for policies to address the actual problems in women's lives and enhance outcomes for women leaving prison. Also, some of the women whose experiences were explored in this thesis seemed to tackle society's inaccurate perceptions and unfair treatment towards them through the previously discussed tactics of speaking openly about personal experiences of incarceration, educating the public and redefining life narratives in the process. The interviews analyzed through this thesis serve to show how women who have experienced incarceration have done and can do this, in order to achieve self-empowerment and change society's negative assumptions about women, to be more positive, accurate and reflective of women's true selves. The women's and Stride Circle's helpful tactics also provide examples of how CSC and policy makers can help reduce stigma for women and assist women to improve during incarceration and succeed during reintegration.

Furthermore, Michele Lazar's (2005;2007), concept of feminist political imagination was illuminated through the women's experiences. This was shown through women's efforts to redefine 'the self' for both personal and public interest and served as important and effective actions, which enacted social change in the women's lives. Thus, unlearning demeaning gender narratives about women who have been to prison and reconceptualizing various issues that marginalize women seemed to be important to the women.

Through analysis of the women's interview transcripts and as discussed in my reflections of the research design, various social narratives that devalue women who have been to prison were interrogated and reconceptualized to amplify the voices and agency of women who have experienced incarceration. Among other things, and as shown previously through a quote from Courtney, phrases which assume struggles among the women and perpetuate the dehumanization and powerlessness of women who have been to prison were scrutinized. I also discussed the crucial need to reconstruct future interview guide questions to support the feminist goals of social emancipation and transformation.

For example, two of the interview guide's statements which were identified to perpetuate dehumanization were: "I sometimes wonder if people can actually see me," and "Members of

mainstream society do not think that I am a capable person." The women frequently and strongly disagreed with these statements and others like them. At times, these statements also seemed to cause discomfort, hesitation, confusion and/or silence in the women. Thus, the demeaning nature of these statements and women's bold disagreement shown by responses such as "I just, I strongly disagree. It's a weird question," depict how powerlessness and dehumanization can be perpetuated through research with women who have experienced incarceration. Therefore, the counternarratives, redefinitions and interpretations provided through this thesis serve as forms of analytical activism aimed at facilitating learning, unlearning and relearning of the narratives women have been operating by – in hopes of providing a better approach to socialization for women leaving prison. The strong conviction with which the reconceptualization and redefinition of gender issues is presented through the women's interview dialogues, lends credibility to the radical openness used to tackle exploitation and nurture empowerment for women who have experienced incarceration.

Women also called out unfair behaviour and demeaning attitudes exhibited by others in the prison system and community and discussed how to resist such behaviour. For example, Jennifer felt as if her parole officer and her did not get along. Her words were used to identify how her parole officer seemed to neglect/ignore her concerns and did not have enough time to attend to Jennifer: "…like my PO is hard to get in contact with her to get things done. And even if I do, it's time consuming and if she doesn't have time and things don't get done…"

 Luckily, Jennifer had the opportunity to discuss this constraint with her Stride Circle, who encouraged her to look more within herself to understand where there was miscommunication. Her conversations with her Circle also helped her accept the need to effectively communicate with her parole officer while simultaneously inspiring her to speak up assertively, yet kindly about her needs to help improve their relationship:

> "…We are all talking about like being assertive and healthy communication and don't jump going directly into saying I need a new PO… find out how the relationship should be with the PO and… just giving me different ideas like I can change the relationship." – Jennifer

Interestingly, in Jennifer's last interview, her words depicted the positive transformations she experienced through her interactions with Stride Circles. In fact, her dialogue even showed

how her relationship with her parole officer had improved. Words such as "changed," "support," and "encouraging," were used to identify her transformation.

Conclusively, it is important to note that there is a deeply rooted historical complexity of silencing within the world of carceral punishment. The different criteria for identification of themes and concepts within, helped to amplify women's voices and shed light on women's realities in relation to life before prison, experiences within the criminal (in)justice system and processes of reintegration thereafter. The various approaches used in this FCDA also assisted in revealing women's constraints and important areas of need in relation to community resettlement. Further, the tactics used throughout this analysis clearly illuminated vital sources of support and empowerment in women's lives, which are both integral to achieve transformation for women leaving prison in society at large. A summary of the methodological approach and conclusions arrived at are provided below.

3.3 Methodological Conclusions

In summary, FCDA is an appropriate methodological approach towards analyzing the women's interviews and experiences described within, because it allows for the understanding of oppression, discursive tactics for negotiation, solidarity, resistance, and empowerment of women who have been marginalized (Nartey, 2021). Given that this type of analysis is not as common in CDA, FCDA allows for a more intersectional path towards understanding oppression and privilege as real-life processes and experiences influenced by social, material, and political factors. As shown throughout this section, the women's interview dialogue also helped to expose prejudiced and discriminatory attitudes, unfair treatment towards women and harmful discourses and behaviours of powerful members in society, including the government, prison staff, policy makers, researchers etc.

There was a strong sense of specificity with which women reacted to demeaning behaviours or language directed towards women in the prison system and community. Women's reactions towards dehumanizing language in the interview guide and the fact that women discussed strategies of resistance towards these negative views, illustrates their boldness and

openness of conviction in voicing critique against practices and actions that seek to maintain hierarchical gender relations.

The women's interview dialogue also reveals the necessary attitudinal changes which must occur by people in all different areas of society, in efforts to reduce stigmatization and the constraints which stem from it for women leaving prison. Lazar (2014) emphasized how FCDA is especially relevant and necessary to counteract passiveness and inaction and to help mobilize the knowledge gained from such research. Therefore, I contend that by highlighting the courage and bravery of the women, the interviews and experiences within the Stride Circle program both function as a praxis-oriented dialogue and space concerned with social transformation of the existing gender order.

Chapter 4: The Unique Experiences of Reintegration for Women Leaving Prison

4.1 Introduction

The findings from a feminist critical discourse analysis of 13 interviews conducted with six women in and leaving prison at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) in Kitchener, Ontario are presented in this chapter. This will include an overview of demographics, so that readers can better grasp the context of the findings as they emerged. Also, it is important to note that throughout this thesis, I may use parts of the same quotations to support different insights.

This foundation will support readers to better comprehend the real-life experiences and perspectives of the women. This analysis was performed with the intentions of understanding the complexity of constraints to reintegration, what aids reintegration, experiences of stigma (if any) and what helps to overcome stigma. Additionally, I set out to learn what role community plays in the lives of women leaving prison, as it has been well-known for decades that having a sense of community unites us as human beings (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Furthermore, a major aim of this study was to see what we can learn from women to improve reintegration supports. With this work comes an intention to acknowledge the unique pathways to prison, through incarceration and all the way to community reintegration, that women have. Recognizing the unmet needs of justice-involved women is a step towards helping women, children and families improve their quality of life.

The following information may be helpful for women who are in prison or reintegrating into community after prison. Also, this discussion may be useful to CJI. The findings from this study may help guide CJI in tailoring Stride programming to better support women according to their unique needs. Other community programming pertaining to reintegration supports, as well as the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) and the field of Recreation and Leisure Studies, may also benefit from this analysis, as it may serve as guidance for creating leisure programming that can aid women in and after prison, ultimately supporting smoother reintegration. If this information is made available publicly, it will also support women who are reintegrating into society by sharing the lived experiences of participants who were a part of the Stride program. Readers may find a sense of hope, inspiration and empowerment from the women who dedicated

their time, while showing vulnerability and courage as they shared personal, sensitive, and life-changing experiences with the world.

As the analysis progressed, three major themes became apparent: constraints, empowerment, and support. The first major theme, Constraints Faced by the Women, describes women's experiences of constraints to community and successful reintegration. The second major topic, Sources of Empowerment for Women, speaks to the meanings and sources of empowerment that women associated with their journey. Finally, the third major component, Sources of Support in the Women's Lives, describes women's experiences of receiving support from family and the Stride Circle program. Within the last theme, Support from Circles describes how, with time, women develop relationships at Stride Night, carrying onto Stride Circles. Experiences mentioned within the last theme also describe women's experiences of community. Furthermore, the theme of support will cover the commitment of volunteers and Stride staff in supporting women throughout reintegration. This includes the commitment of women to receiving and utilizing support. The discussion of all major themes will conclude with Women's Suggestions for Change before transitioning into feedback on Reflections of the Interview Process and Words of Wisdom from the women.

4.2. Demographics

All six women included in this analysis were incarcerated at the Grand Valley Institution (GVI) for Women in Kitchener, Ontario. The women had just begun or were shortly beginning their journey of community re-entry at the time of their first interviews. Each of the women were involved with the Stride Circle program, a reintegration initiative offered by CJI, which the interviews tend to focus on. The 21 women whose interviews were provided to me to be analyzed for this thesis were originally part of a larger study that took place over the years of 2014 to 2019 with a total of 24 Stride Circle participants (Silk et al., 2019). However, this thesis is focused on only six women who had more than one interview each (two or three), in order to maintain the longitudinal aspect of the study. The women who participated in Stride Circles were involved with the program for an average of two years (Silk et al., 2019). Women in Circles independently chose to participate in the original study and were invited to do so through CJI (Silk et al., 2019).

The age range of the six women in this analysis was between 28 to 55 years old, which is the same age range of women in GVI. In particular, the biggest age group at GVI is 30 to 39 (32.99%), while the second biggest is 20 to 29 (30.96%) (Silk et al., 2019). Regarding ethnic backgrounds, as of 2018 to 2019, the biggest group at GVI was white, (46%), the next biggest group was Indigenous (25%), followed by Black (16%) and Asian (8%) (Silk at al., 2019). In terms of participants whose interviews were used for this thesis, one out of six women self-identified as Native American (Métis), one woman identified as Black (Caribbean) and four out of six women identified as white (Caucasian).

This is not highly reflective of the overall percentage of Indigenous and Black women in federal prisons. In fact, a recent study reported that although Indigenous and Black women make up 4.3% and 3 % of Canada's population of adults (respectively), they account for almost half of the population in women's federal prisons (Lawson, 2020). It is well-known that racialized women are disproportionately imprisoned for their reactions to marginalization (Lawson, 2020). For instance, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada has emphasized the fact that 82 percent of federally sentenced women are imprisoned due to behaviour associated with attempting to cope with abuse, poverty, mental health conditions, addiction and other issues that often occur as a result of the mentioned experiences (Pate, 2018). The same author stated that in every territory and province of Canada, payments related to social assistance are so insufficient that women often become criminalized for doing what they feel must be done in order to support their children and themselves.

Moreover, inquiries such as the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls investigation show how the criminal justice system of Canada has failed to properly protect Indigenous girls and women (Pate, 2018). Consequently, when police fail to serve and protect, Indigenous women and their children are often left with no choice but to take responsibility to prevent being victimized by using force to protect themselves and their families (Pate, 2018). Such scenarios depict the marginalization faced by Indigenous and Black women, which in many cases unfortunately follows full punitive measures of the law. As a result, the sample in this study may underrepresent Indigenous and Black women and overrepresent white women at GVI.

4.3 Six Women's Journeys of Reintegration: Before, During and After Incarceration

4.3.1 Constraints Faced by the Women

Constraints can be defined as issues that limit one's ability to form personal preferences or hinder their participation and enjoyment in life (Jackson, 2000). Each of the six women in this study encountered various constraints to successful community reintegration on their journeys, which will be discussed in depth, along with quotations from the interviews with the women throughout this section. Some of the women's constraints that are mentioned in this section developed in prison, others were present in the women's lives before and had perhaps worsened throughout imprisonment, while some appeared throughout reintegration itself. In many cases, the women, the interviewer, and I refer to the types of constraints in the women's lives using different words such as issues, stress, challenges, difficulties, obstacles etc. Common examples of constraints in people's lives are lack of time, interest, money, or resources (Crawford & Godbey, 1987).

Despite the types of constraints encountered varying among participants, each of the women acknowledged experiencing some degree of constraint throughout their experiences of community reintegration. Constraints are also known to have connections to many other life concerns, such as well-being, health and life-satisfaction (Chick et al., 2020). This can be seen through the women's life events and many of the issues disclosed by the women seem to be typically associated with post prison life. When asked specifically about challenges or difficulties, each of the women agreed that the prison atmosphere itself was constraining and contributed to the stress in their lives. However, as the interviews unfolded, each of the participants also described specific aspects about their Circles that were helpful and stress-relieving in life.

Within the broad topic of constraints, there will be discussion about structural powers. Structural powers are known as the power to control how things are done within institutions (Strange, 1988), which affects people and the spaces we operate and live in. For many women affiliated with the criminal justice system, the structural powers involved with incarceration can create a sense of their own inevitability (Hannah-Moffat, 1995). As a result, the women in this analysis experience a variety of constraints, many of which are influenced by existing structural

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powers, such as punitive measures, segregation, strict rules, and regulations associated with prison life (Weinberg, 1942).

Several other constraints became apparent throughout analysis, including a lack of control over life decisions due to confinement. Being confined also seemed to cause a disconnection between women and community, thus affecting women's overall sense of community, along with access to leisure. Women's past and ongoing personal life experiences also contributed greatly to the constraints in their lives. Challenging situations with others, including relationships with friends, family and parole officers were mentioned as sources of stress. Moreover, personal issues such as health concerns, addiction, trust issues and financial stress were shown to contribute to the strain in women's lives. Lastly, women encountered and dealt with stigma and avoided recidivism in different ways. Each of the major themes, sub-themes, and elements within will be expanded upon with direct quotations from the women.

4.3.1.1 How Structural Powers Constrain Women's Abilities to Meet Personal Needs

Strange (1988) described structural power as the power to control how things should be done and the power to form frameworks within which states relate to one another, corporations, or people. Everyone is subjected to the control exerted on us by structural powers. The women in this study had many experiences in which structural powers affected their lifestyles intensely. Thus, examining constraints to reintegration through the context of power and the structures that reinforce the oppression endured by the women in this study (Yuen et al., 2021) is essential to gaining an in-depth understanding of women's experiences of community re-entry. This section contains quotes from the women showing how structural powers impacted their life experiences and abilities to meet personal needs.

4.3.1.1.1 Lack of Control

Incarceration often involves periods of isolation, leading to women feeling a lack of control in life, which can carry over into experiences of reintegration. When asked about how often participants felt they were unable to control the important things in life, one woman said:

> "Well, that one [laughs] quite often. So, fairly often. It doesn't help with the situation. Yeah… being here gives you that lack of control." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

The lack of control in the women's lives due to incarceration also illuminated innate needs, including emotional support:

> "Um, oh gosh… Off the top of my head…umm… a lot of it would be the emotional support. And… yeah! Because that's pretty much what led me to make a bad decision and come back… it was Christmas Holidays, and I got a 20-minute phone call once a week! That's not exactly an easy thing to deal with. So that might… my emotional state… and they are making me… well, me choosing to decide that I want to have a cellphone which is against the rule and ended up coming back for that. So… like, as long as I am emotionally stable, and able to talk to people when I want to say things, I'm okay. But if I have to literally just isolate and not have that support and be able to get things off my chest when I need to, I end up exploding and make stupid decisions." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

In addition to expressing a need for emotional support, some of the women emphasized the stressful nature of incarceration itself, which can limit the ability to prepare for community re-entry:

> "I think that the system is very taxing, and I feel like it's kind of created that way because it opens up the revolving door…You're completely broke down and then how do you if you are not given the tools to deal with that, how do you come into the community and start to be sufficient?" – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Ellen implies how physically and mentally demanding the prison system is and as if she feels it was made to break people down. She then questions how people are expected to have adequate resources to survive in community, once released. Relatedly, here Sara discusses how she was not ready to take control of her life once she left prison:

> "Accelerated parole release was still, it's no longer um so when I got out in 6 months, I wasn't ready, I had no supports in place or anything. I relapsed, I went back to prison which I had to do one third of my sentence, which was a year. That's when I got all my supports in place. But in the meantime, my two older kids were with my sister-in-law and her husband so they started fighting me for the kids. They kept me directed because I was getting so discouraged so [Stride member] would come to CAS appointments with me, because I would get so emotional and stuff that I couldn't focus on what was being said. And afterwards we would sit down and talk and she said that but this is what she meant. Cause I would take things too extreme you know. Cause I was personally involved and she could kind of sit outside the circle and then tell me how to go about it. Helping me get in good family lawyers and just every time it seems like it wasn't working out, just keeping me going." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Not receiving this support while being incarcerated seemed to further lead to constraints affecting personal control over important life-decisions:

> "…I can't cross the border until I get my pardon… That's peanuts." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "Yeah, it was bad. So, with the half-way house, if you are going somewhere in someone's car, you have to give them the license plate, the make of the car, the person's first and last name. My first date with him. Right…No, it was hard." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "I'll socialize with my friends in six months." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

The women's words above show how experiences of incarceration, the impacts of isolation and continued restrictions induced a lack of control over personal life decisions during and after incarceration. As major sources of constraint to freedom, such issues illuminated the need for greater support in the women's lives.

4.3.1.1.2 Lack of Reintegration Supports Available from the Onset of Incarceration

The women's words also shed light on the major constraint of an overall lack of supports available from the beginning of incarceration. For example, the need to have equal access to exercise equipment in order to be active and feel healthy was identified. It is well-known that exercise is a vital need that must be met in order for human beings to maintain good health (World Health Organization, 2020)**.** Having sufficient access to such equipment in prison can help women mentally and physically prepare for reintegration because exercising regularly can provide immense health benefits for the mind, body, and heart (World Health Organization, 2020), helping to support a successful journey before it even happens. However, a major lack of such supports in prison, along with others were identified by the women:

> "There should be actual fitness programs because the number one thing is that women go into prison. They end up gaining weight. They feel bad." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Additionally, lack of reintegration supports such as the opportunity to make new positive connections within prison that may continue throughout reintegration was identified as a constraint. Here, in Sara's first interview, she described how she was in need of new supports upon release:

"[Pause]…Just how important it was for me to have that connection. Like I said, when I was in for 6 months and got out, I didn't have any new supports or anything on the outside so of course I got and went back to my old ways because I went back to what I felt comfortable with. And drugs and my old connections… So, until I started making new friends and new connections, I was clean like for a couple of years and still felt like I still had crack head written on my forehead." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, in Sara's second interview, she emphasizes how challenging life was for her after leaving prison, because she clearly needed help from the very beginning of her incarceration. Sara's words below outline some of her struggles and how, perhaps, a lack of support in prison had contributed to the strain in her life upon release:

"Like your housing is your number one for security getting out you know whether you're in a half-way house to begin with but where would you go after that? So, that's where I ran into extreme difficulty getting support from my community… so I had to resort to personal support and stuff like that which was difficult because I was getting out and I was needing so much help to begin with so to be asking family and friends for even more support than what they were already offering was very hard. You know what I mean?" – Sara (Interview # 2 in 2016)

From Sara's quote above, it can be gathered that having more support while in prison, could have helped her achieve a stronger start to her reintegration. Below, Leslie highlights her general lack of awareness of available supports. She also implies how unfortunate it is to find out that she could have had help from certain programs after the fact, but instead, struggled while barely getting by:

"…and we can be disciplined but all of a sudden something arises…and what is worse than not knowing about programs, what's worse is to find out you could have had help, but you scraped." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Having awareness of supports that might be available in prison is crucial in order for women to be able to take advantage of them. This way, women can have the opportunity to prepare for reintegration while in prison, helping to feel more confident and secure when re-entering community. Below, Courtney shares her insight on the need for more resources in order for people to have the freedom to make independent decisions:

"Tips for the person or tips for society on how to prevent it? Because basically what people need is the resources to make their own decisions and support with that but that doesn't often happen or work and then people are blamed for not, like basically people made poor and then they are blamed when they do things to try to get out of that poverty. Because playing by the rules doesn't work, so then they are criminalized. What would

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have helped is if I had support as a child and was aware of services that existed. So basically just, yea, if I had more knowledge about supports and more emotional support as a kid, things would have been very different. For people getting out, the message I could give is stay strong despite all of the obstacles that the system will continue to place in your path. Like residency orders, or onerous parole conditions that people are significantly more likely to breach because they are criminalizing non-criminal behaviour. But what people need is basically the funding to make their own decisions." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

The words of the women above explain why inadequate access to the mentioned types of support during incarceration can be constraining for women. As discussed, lack of access to proper support and resources can cause women to neglect their well-being during confinement and this behaviour may carry onto experiences of reintegration. Additionally, awareness of and actual opportunities to take advantage of resources prior to entering community was expressed as a need that was not always met for everyone. Following this, was constraints to accessing leisure programming overall.

4.3.1.1.3 Constraints to Accessing Leisure

Constraints to accessing leisure within the prison environment were identified by several of the women. For example, as the interviews unfolded, more women emphasized the need to have access to a gym in prison for personal leisure experiences. However, obstacles arising within the carceral culture became obvious constraints to accessing such programming.

Here, Jennifer describes some of her issues when attempting to access leisure in prison:

"I like to go to gym. I can't wait to go to real gym! [Laugh]… We have a few machines and the actual gym and it's horrible because you can never get on them. They have… some of the girls are a little ignorant about it… they have a sign-up sheet right above the machine and they've got their names tagged in the same spots every day and don't change it so you can't really get on there… I like going to Goodlife and I like going to YMCA because they have lots of stuff." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, Jennifer sheds light on the challenges that she encountered with other women in the prison, when trying to access gym equipment. Below, Ellen seems to highly agree with Jennifer. Both participants experienced constraints to accessing leisure within prison:

"I was very active before I came back here. And the prison here was like just wasn't the same… they don't have anything here. You can't come out of the house until 8 o'clock. I mean, how does your day start? [laugh] you know, by the time it's 8 o'clock if you are

working, you've got to be at work. They really don't assist in that, as well, as best as they could. Then, you come out and you do. They have some machines that they might buy at the end of the year before their budget is all…and then you go to sign up for that and if you don't get to the place in time, you're not going to get the machine that you want at the hour you want and all this kind of stuff." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Below, in Leslie's first interview in 2015, she mentions the difficulty she experiences accessing the YMCA, which is her preferred form of leisure in this context. The situation seems to be constraining for her:

Interviewer: And I'm still learning that [laughs]. Um, what about help getting into recreation and leisure activities. Do you need any help around that? …Or is that something you are doing on your own?

"No. I can't even get to the Y. and they keep taking 16 dollars and something off." – Leslie

Interviewer: In terms of a membership?

"Yah." – Leslie

Interviewer: Okay. So…

"But I plan… see it's…" – Leslie

Interviewer: You're trying to do that yourself?

"It will come. Once I get my [painting?] done here. That is something I'm going to probably give myself." – Leslie

Interviewer: Give yourself that time. I'm going to put trying to get to the Y on a regular basis.

"Mhm" – Leslie

Interviewer: Once some of these other things have cleared for you. That's. That gym. Oh boy. I'm still, I'm still trying.

Above, Leslie's conversation with her interviewer about her difficulty accessing the YMCA is shown. She mentions how it is a challenge for her to access this gym and although she has not been able to go there, the organization is continuously charging her. Her constraint to accessing leisure seems to be affecting her financially here as well. Additionally, below, in

Megan's first interview in 2015, she discusses the need for financial support in order to fully access leisure:

Interviewer: Um what about help getting into just leisure, like whatever that is for you.

> "I think that was very important…The problem with that area is that um the funding wasn't available." – Megan

Interviewer: Okay, like to support, to pay for these things.

> "Yeah, cause they…have the YMCA... and I was, and [Stride member] kept telling me I'll get you a card, I'll get you a card, as soon as I have them, I'll get you the card, and then all of a sudden, I never heard back about it um so I think she was…really trying hard. I'd say extremely helpful. But due to funding. – Megan

As depicted in the quotations above, women did not always feel as if their needs to access to leisure programming were met in prison or outside of it. Lack of adequate access to leisure programming may cause women to feel as if they are expected to care for themselves (physically and otherwise) but must do so in the presence of inadequate access to programs, resources, and tools. The constraint of not having enough access to the resources women need can have a ripple effect by influencing how women choose (or choose not to) care for themselves during reintegration. Learned habits of neglecting their leisure needs during imprisonment due to lack of support in this context, could carry over into reintegration.

Thankfully, members of Circles were described as being helpful by connecting women to opportunities for leisure programming. This will be elaborated on in the discussion of the major theme of Support. Additionally, funding was identified as a potential route to achieving such resources within and outside of the prison environment. As conversations around structural powers and personal needs deepened, the women seemed to open up more about the various constraints within prison that affected the process of reintegration.

4.3.1.1.4 Disconnection from Community

As the women's constraining experiences in prison often seemed to extend into the process of reintegration, it led to an overall disconnection from community. While community plays an integral role in each of our lives, the women seemed to have a low sense of community after incarceration, which could be partially due to the extended period of time spent being away

from it. Additionally, inevitable life changes and the need to adapt during community re-entry seemed to contribute to disconnection:

When asked to agree or disagree with the statement "I feel at home in society":

"No [laughs] disagree… It's a little bit discouraging with the situation being in here. And I am not really able to give back to the community." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, Jennifer explains how being isolated within prison is discouraging and prevents her from being able to contribute to society. This disconnection seemed to diminish her sense of community. Below, Ellen responds to the same statement in the interview guide mentioned above. Ellen mentions why she disagrees:

"Umm, I disagree. I don't think that is a place to be home?" Ellen (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, Ellen mentions how she feels as if community is not a place to be at home. In her interview, she also described how easy it is for the institution to define you while in prison. She later emphasizes the need to protect your self-image before and while re-entering community. This need for protection seems like a defense mechanism she had to put up against the structural powers of the institution, such as labeling and unwanted stigma related to the 'prisoner identity.' Below Sara disagrees with the same statement presented by the interviewer:

"No, disagree… I still feel kind of like disconnected sometimes in different communities." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Only two of the women seemed to feel at home in society:

"I do…totally…" – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

"Strongly agree." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

However, in Megan's second interview in 2016, she mentions that since she had left GVI, she experienced a disconnection from her Circle members:

"They haven't really been part of my life at all since I've come out." – Megan

The last participant described her fear of moving to a new city after leaving prison. Her goal was to start a new life. However, this fear experienced by her could have been partially due to being confined in prison and feeling segregated from community upon release:

> "I moved to a new city after never ever having been here to start a new life, which is pretty scary." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

The disconnection from community experienced by the women as observed in this section is not uncommon for people leaving prison. Structures within the provision of services tend to constrain and stigmatize as opposed to support opportunities for women to make personal choices (Yuen et al., 2012). As a result, women eventually found different ways to tackle these feelings of disconnection from community, including through empowerment and support. This will be elaborated upon in future sections of this discussion. In addition to feeling disconnected from community, Past and Ongoing Personal life experiences seemed to be significant contributors to constraints. Women's personal life experiences will be described in depth below.

4.3.1.2 Past and Ongoing Personal Life Experiences

Each woman in this thesis encountered a unique set of experiences, some of which seemed to be quite challenging. According to results from the initial study containing interviews conducted with over 60 women, approximately 77% of women experienced some type of trauma or abuse in the past (Silk et al., 2019). Similarly, five out of six women included in this thesis experienced the same. Quotes describing women's feelings and experiences of trauma, abuse and challenges with others are shown below.

4.3.1.2.1 Challenging Times with Others

It is well known that women who have been incarcerated encounter many challenges; some from life before prison and others from criminalization and imprisonment itself (Pedlar et al., 2018). Correspondingly, five out of six women described having challenging experiences with others. These experiences seemed to hinder women's journeys and contribute to their stress. It is also common for traumatic past events to impact the present-day health of individuals, groups and communities (Mohatt et al., 2014). Often, these challenges may impact women by inflicting trauma, fear, and negativity in life that could continue into future relationships. In this

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section, the women explain how obstacles they faced involving other people such as family and friends, affected them. Below, Jennifer describes the impact(s) of experiencing challenges with others:

> "Yeah, it's hard when you get into a lot of people. Like I know I have my addiction but it's the underlying issues that I am trying to work through, and it's still at that point that we're having a hard time bringing things up, like the trauma that happened when I was younger. Yeah… like I have, I have so much stress going on in my house and people get mad because I'm out in the living room laughing with the next person. I don't care. Do your own thing." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Here, Jennifer describes the issues she experienced with her parole officer and some potential coping mechanisms:

> "…I don't get along with my parole officer, and I was attempting to figure out how to go by getting a new PO. But at the same time, I got so much on the go and I don't know if they will actually change my PO so we are all talking about like being assertive and healthy communication and don't jump going directly into saying I need a new PO… find out how the relationship should be with the PO and… just giving me different ideas like I can change the relationship with the PO and … like my PO is hard to get in contact with her to get things done. And even if I do, it's time consuming and if she doesn't have time and things don't get done…" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Ellen shares some of her thoughts about difficult times with others:

> "And it's just the fact that a lot of the women, you're already dealing with women who have had a number trauma, you know a broad base of trauma in their lives. They are dealing with insecurities. They are dealing with mental illness…Dealing with low self-esteem, confidence issues, all these types of things. What is offered in there as a program, or as a support that can build that, break down the barriers?" – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown above, Ellen articulates the common experiences among some of the women, including past trauma, mental illness, and low-self-esteem. She also sheds light on the need for programming within the prisons to break down these barriers that stem from past experiences.

> "And I'm just having a lot of questions now with my kids you know that, and the mistake I made and what they are going though. And obviously I had a huge impact on that. And even though my life's changed now, the past can't change for them. You know? Like my past, I've changed it. No, you can't ever change your past, but I've been able to change things where like I've tried to make up for the past, but they were impacted a lot differently." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown above, Sara explains how she continues to contemplate her past. She still thinks about the impact it had on her children and understands that the past cannot be changed. Leslie was the only woman who said she did not experience any trauma or abuse in her life. Below Megan explains issues stemming from her past and how they continue to affect her:

> "Our marriage kind of got rocky from the abortion we had… We haven't really talked about it, but the other day I really broke down cause this time of year is really hard for me because of the crime…I killed somebody in February, I had both my kids in April and I lost them to CAS. My mom committed suicide, um. Yeah, and then to top it off a couple years ago I had an abortion… yeah, so the other day I spoke to him about it and I said this is how I'm feeling and I said I feel like it's your fault." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Megan describes how she still feels guilty because of her crime. At the same time, she also mentions that she opened up to her partner about her past abortion and admitted she feels it's his fault, which could be contributing to her ongoing trauma and challenges in life. Below, Courtney explains how her troubled past induced trust issues in her:

> "'Cause I know that one kind of struggling point for me was especially growing up because of a crummy past, it was difficult to build trust…" – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

The challenges involved with past trauma often end up carrying over to experiences of reintegration, partially due to the inability to deal with such issues while in prison. However, having a support system is shown to help women with overcoming such struggles, which will be discussed in the last theme called Sources of Support for the Women. Additionally, health concerns were an obvious constraint for several of the women, which will be described in more detail below.

4.3.1.2.2 Unmet Health Needs

Having the support and resources in place to attend to personal health concerns and meet these needs are a critical component of successful reintegration. Out of the initial study, 25% of the women explained having a physical health need, while 30% discussed having a mental health need (Silk et al., 2019). The quotations in this section describe some of the personal and structural constraints women faced prior to, during incarceration and reintegration in relation to

health issues. Below, Jennifer makes an insightful comment about her own mental health needs and the limitations of the supports she has in place:

> "Sometimes my mom can't really deal with my mentality. I can't even deal with it, so I don't know how someone else is going to [Laughs]." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, Jennifer expresses the difficulty she encounters with her own mental health. She also seems to feel as if it is challenging for both her and her mother to deal with her mentality. Below, Ellen explains how she feels about what is offered and not offered to help women in prison:

> "There's nothing there…and now it's only getting worse… because a lot of the programs that were running before have either been cut… or, who's really there to support these women and if you are saying it's about reintegration, it's about all these kind of things, it's, what's there to really help because the government programing that they mandate for us to take is not helpful." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Ellen explains how government programming is not helpful enough for women to break down barriers of mental health issues while in prison. The inadequacy of programming can have aftereffects which may continue into experiences of community reintegration, further affecting the health of women. Here, Sara explains how at times, her emotions take over, causing her to lose focus and take comments too personally:

> "…Because I would get so emotional and stuff that I couldn't focus on what was being said. And afterwards we would sit down and talk, and she said that but this is what she meant. Cause I would take things too extreme you know." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Below, Leslie discusses how she feels as if her health issues sometimes delay personal goals. She also expresses how amid her health limitations she must rely on herself to take action to achieve these goals:

> "Cause I'm not. [pause] I mean I eventually get at things with my limitations and if I plan something and all of a sudden, I have to be on the couch for two days because I'm in pain. It puts a little bit of… but what I try to do knowing that that's always a possibility, when I have capability and able time, [pause] and I know it's one of my goals for the week, I get right on it." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, in Leslie's second interview, she elaborates on how her personal health and healing have been affected throughout her journey. Her discussion continues below: However, she also mentions her sense of personal motivation, which she uses to tackle such obstacles:

"and see I am battling health issues, which, ah, right now I am taking, uh, diatomaceous earth to take toxins out of my body because I, uh, you don't know that it has crossed my mind that maybe I drank something with a bit of something that has come out in my body 'cause a blister that lasts a month on your foot…it's not normal." – Leslie (Interview #2 in 2016)

Leslie's unmet health needs are complex, and she implies that she is fighting them through natural approaches. Regardless, she seems to feel that her symptoms are abnormal. Her untreated personal needs appear to be contributing to her distress regarding her personal health. Below, in Megan's first interview in 2015, she responds to being asked about having any physical or mental health issues:

Interviewer: Physical health issue, mental health issue

"Uh, anxiety." – Megan

Interviewer: I was going to say, you can include anxiety, that's a challenge.

Here, Megan also elaborates on how she feels anxiety can affect a person's ability to function:

"Yeah, and a lot of people who end up going through that revolving door, they themselves, think they are okay, they're like I'm okay, I can do this, I can do this, I can do this, but the anxiety of it all leads them back to old habits." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Megan explains how people with anxiety such as herself, may feel completely capable of doing anything, yet they may also resort back to negative habits when faced with challenges that induce anxiety, especially throughout incarceration and reintegration. Below, in Courtney's first interview in 2015, she mentions her initiatives towards discussing mental health in prison:

"Yah, and working. So, I have a fifty-page paper to write this summer while working full time." – Courtney

Interviewer: fifty pages. Oh my gosh

"That's okay." – Courtney

Interviewer: Well, you seem like you can handle it.

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"About mental health in the prison system about how, it's a charter violation. So, we'll see." – Courtney

Interviewer: My gosh. That's so. And I mean, how relevant is that in terms…

"Exactly." – Courtney

Above, Courtney shows how she has gained insight from her experiences regarding the unmet mental health needs of women in prison. She seems to be using her educational opportunities to share her wisdom of mental health in the prison system with others. When she mentions exploring the idea that mental health in the prison system is a charter violation, it also sheds light on the infringement of human rights that occurs when women experience difficulties with meeting physical and mental health needs throughout incarceration. Courtney shows how she took a leap of faith to create awareness in academia of the struggles that women face due to unattended health issues in prison. Her interviewer's comments also show how they understand the relevance of her researching this topic and how it may relate to her experiences of mental health within prison. The negative effects of these unmet health needs may often carry over into experiences of community reintegration. Additionally, addiction issues are tied in with health concerns. Unmet addiction issues are often known to contribute to physical and mental health problems. This will be discussed in the following section.

4.3.1.2.3 Addiction

Out of the initial study conducted with sixty women, 53% admitted to having at least one addiction issue (Silk et al., 2019). Similarly, 4 out of 6 of the women involved in this thesis had something to say about addiction. When asked about the importance of receiving help with addictions, Jennifer responded:

"It's extremely important." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

She also mentions that she is trying to attend to the root causes of her addiction:

"Like, I know I have my addiction but it's the underlying issues that I am trying to work through…" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Here, Sara discusses how she relapsed the first time she was released from prison:

"Some people have more things to work towards but that doesn't always help either, 'cause I relapsed the first time I was out. You know even though I was fighting for my children and stuff, I relapsed and went back. I am a believer, everything happens for a reason, you'll never understand it at the time but things come around and when I went back was when I really formed my Circle, tightened my supports more, worked on my addiction more and the things like that, yeah... People without family? They relapse back in there, they relapse right back in there unless they are so strong and don't have such strong addiction that they're going back to it on the first problem they encounter which that's how we've coped with our problems, it's drugs mostly you know what I mean? Addicts. There are people in GVI that never touched the drug, good for them! But the percentage of people in there [that] have addiction issues...so for them to get out it's much easier for them to relapse and just go back to prison not to think about that... that they have to work so hard because I had to work ten times harder than a normal person just to keep my head above water." – Sara (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, it can be seen how Sara's Circle and other initiatives to strengthen her support system seemed to help her with her addiction. She also mentions the high amount of people in GVI with issues of addiction. Additionally, she expresses concern over people without family and how they tend to relapse in prison. She ends her discussion by stating how many individuals may choose to relapse and go back to prison rather than work on their addiction issues. Sara also implies how she felt as if she had to work harder than the average person to remain stable. Below, Leslie explains how she is not proud that she resorted back to her addiction of smoking. She goes on to explain the process of giving up addiction and what helps to do so from her personal perception. She also emphasizes the importance of forgiving herself in order to move forward:

"Um, I will tell you I did resume smoking. I'm not proud of that. It's my only addiction...Everything else. I believe... is under control. And really, um, my belief now and I don't mind saying it is you can get all the help you want through alcoholics anonymous, whatever but until [pause] you decide to give it over to someone else...and make a solid commitment to yourself, you're always, when you have anxious feelings or whatever will think or go back ...to something. Or you'll go to something else...Once you get solid with yourself and you're okay with yourself. And you've forgiven yourself...and you recognize there's absolutely no satisfaction that comes out even a mere look at...and when you're anxious there's a substitute that is much more fulfilling, then it's easy to stay focused on what's working and not entering that realm at all because there's no yearning. There's not even a remote thought when things get snagged in the world because...well it doesn't even enter your mind. See once you get habitually fine with who you are in this world...I totally had to admit about the smoking. And that is a bit of selfishness to myself. Yah. Just uh...that's the only thing that I obviously had to come out of denial and tell you straight up... and I recognize too [pause] where we are at one time, we are never in the same spot and how we deal with it, we

might flood ourselves to eating more…a form of an addiction…you know. We can be habitually taken. If we give in to it…and we can be totally aware or we can be subconsciously aware but using that as a crutch, which I know the smoking is. But I keep saying when I get this done, yup. See how we can justify that?" – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, Megan questions why people are paroled by the system to places they have experienced substance abuse before:

"And another thing is people, places and things, if I know that my habits and the people I know that I used to do my habits with were in Hamilton, I wouldn't be in [Hamilton] right. So why parole somebody to a city where they've been using?" – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

The remaining two women said they do not have any issues with addiction. However, one mentioned addiction when she discussed her experiences with role playing various scenarios:

"It's very simple, sometimes we play the same role, sometimes we don't, there's the woman who just comes out of prison, is trying to get a job interview, doesn't get it because they know she's been in trouble. There's the woman who's been divorced. Um, and is not being accepted in the community. There's a person who has addictions and is going to a group." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Although Ellen did not mention going through addiction herself, she seems to be reflective of the experiences of people who she had perhaps encountered before, stating that she role played a person with addiction who attended a group for help. In this section, the women described some of their experiences related to addiction. Additionally, the importance of receiving help with addiction was emphasized as a need for some women. Thankfully, various forms of support, including emotional support from members of Circles seemed to play a significant role in avoiding substance use, relapse and eventually, overcoming addiction, which will be discussed in the upcoming major theme about support. In addition to concerns of health and addictions, trust issues emerged as an accompanying theme. Quotes describing issues of trust experienced by the women are described in the next section.

4.3.1.2.4 Trust Issues

Experiencing a lack of trust in others is not uncommon for women leaving prison, given issues of past trauma, unmet health concerns and the poor conditions within prison that may intensify previous trust issues. The women expand upon experiences of mistrust below:

> "Yeah…yeah. Because I had like a lot of…like my past relationships had been like that like it just ends with absolutely no reason. And whether it be my choice or their choice, or like something that's been done that one of us doesn't agree with or lifestyle changes, or whatever it may be, um it's created that wall and like to let those people in and actually trust them again when that happens again, it kind of...[pauses] Yeah." –

> Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

> "…and I would say when you come out, sometimes you're very skeptical of anyone you're around. So, trust issues are huge. Um. And feeling comfortable in your own skin to be outside because you automatically feel anyone knows." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, both Jennifer and Ellen explain having trust issues. Ellen describes how such concerns can follow into community reintegration, causing her to wonder if others know about her incarceration. Below, Sara provides insight on the value of the support that Circles may bring for women throughout reintegration, shedding light on the overall mistrust that exists in the lives of people affiliated with the criminal justice system:

> "Because people that they are supporting have come from most likely addiction and mistrust and stuff like that, so they definitely have to kind of feel through the waters for themselves. I think." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "But, you know, there is um a reserve part of me that won't give too much until I know more or see more and see the fruit. Cause people can put that façade on." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Leslie explains how she is hesitant to open up to others and skeptical of people's intentions. Below, Megan mentions how she experienced mistrust from a family member who takes care of her son. As a result, the family member will not let Megan take him to the movies:

> "Yeah, my aunt for instance, she has my son. And she lets me see him and lets me come over for weekends and stuff. But she won't let me come and pick him up and take him to the movies, right." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

This shows how unfortunately, people in society including women's family members can carry a lack of trust towards women who have been incarcerated. Meanwhile, the woman may experience difficulty trusting others and the system. It is important to note that trust goes both ways and it seems to be somewhat diminished in women's lives after leaving prison. Of course, after experiencing mistrust and a lack of care during incarceration, it can take time for trust to develop in women's lives. Below, Courtney mentions how trust issues stem from her past:

> "…Growing up…it was difficult to build trust and that kind of thing...so I was at the extremes of either I don't care about anyone, or they have to be really close." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

Courtney's quote above shows how trust issues from the past can affect one's ability to gain trust in others in the present. Trust issues that are unattended to appear to continue on in life and constrain a woman's ability to develop trusting and lasting relationships after leaving prison. Past betrayal or disappointment may be connected to the root of many problems for women who experience trust issues in relationships and the system later on in life. Additionally, stigma associated with people who have been incarcerated is also tied in with this, as it may cause people to experience a lack of trust in the women and vice versa. However, support from Circles, talking openly about incarceration and working on 'the self' through spirituality all seemed to help women gain trust. To add, recreation and leisure participation also seemed to help women cultivate positive feelings and the desire to connect more with others. These experiences will be described in future sections. Along with the mentioned sources of constraints, financial stress was a commonality among some of the women. This is discussed below.

4.3.1.2.5 Financial Stress

Financial stress, such as unpaid debt and a limited budget, seemed to be a concern for five out of six women. Money related constraints are a well-known issue for many women in and leaving prison (Helfgott et al., 2020). It is not unusual for this burden to intensify with limited access to attend to such concerns while in prison, leaving women to deal with their financial issues after release. The quotes below describe the uniqueness of financial concerns that may occur for some women throughout reintegration:

Here, Jennifer explains how she feels as if some leisure pursuits are a waste of her money. This may cause her to want to save and not spend on leisure:

"Yah, now. Never used to. I remember when we just walked in and you just run around with the kids. Now, it's like, I'm not doing it. What a waste of my money." – Jennifer (Interview #1 in 2015)

Ellen explains how financial issues may pile up for women during incarceration, affecting women's quality of life throughout reintegration:

"It's creating new patterns. But it all comes down [to] it. I think the more assistance they can give someone on the inside, that means creating services so that your health card is already in order, if you had a license, getting your license back in order, budgeting and debt, being able to find out how much debt you're in. It costs you money, it costs time to go out and see how much debt you have to deal with. That can be an added stress to somebody but if their connected with somebody, with a worker on the outside, so that they can already walk with somebody then that kind of decreases all the anxieties that go along with. Cause your debt doesn't stop, your bills don't stop when you're in prison, so you come out and you're like well I don't work, I don't have somewhere to live. I'm going to be in this halfway house for six months and when I come out, and while you're there, you've got to start figuring out how much money do I owe, where do I start paying. How do I, you know. Those bills when you look at it... bigger scales there's no way I'm going to be able to pay this. But no one's going to tell you, well don't worry about it right now, go figure something else out. [Laugh] you know what I mean?" – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Ellen explains how debt can accumulate for women while in prison. She also describes the challenges with resolving this debt when re-entering community due to being confined and experiencing a lack of support to attend to such financial issues while incarcerated. She hints towards the idea that if women were to receive adequate support with attending to financial needs while in prison, it would contribute to greater financial security upon release. Below, in Sara's first interview, she describes her experiences with financial issues and how she was rejected by social services along with the bank when she asked to borrow money. She moves on to explain how she managed to make ends meet:

"Yeah, so I was working full time landscaping and you get laid off for the winter, right. So, I was on unemployment, but it wasn't a lot of unemployment and um, I'd be going back to work. The time I'm talking about specifically, um, it was around this time of year, so I would be going back to work in a month or two. So, I could cover [a] month's rent for this new place for me and my kids. I couldn't cover first and last and maintain living for the two months. So, I went to social services, I couldn't get it. I went to the rent bank to borrow money. They didn't give it to me. On my current income, I couldn't sustain the house I was moving into, but in a month when I went back to work,

that was guaranteed, I even had a letter from my employer, saying, you know what I mean?" – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Clearly, a major lack of financial support affected both Sara and her children upon release. One would think that organizations such as 'social services,' and banks would be willing to help a mother leaving prison by providing a loan for her to live sufficiently with her children in community. However, Sara's grim reality at the time was that she was socially rejected by these organizations when in need of financial support. Thankfully, once she was able to return to work, this changed. Here, in Sara's second interview she emphasizes how she fought to get her children back amid financial despair.

> "Like as far as welfare, um I was fighting for my kids at the time so I needed proper housing but nobody would support me getting proper housing but I needed that to get my kids back so it was like a major…I got caught in the snowball effect of not getting help… Like even the Rent Bank couldn't help me, you know what I mean?" Sara (Interview #2 in 2016)

Sara's experiences described above, depict how poor finances can accumulate during incarceration and negatively influence women upon community re-entry – indicating a need for financial supports to be in place for women, prior to leaving prison. Below, Leslie explains how constraining financial issues are for her. It seems as if she expected her tax credit application to be denied at first, yet was hopeful that it would be accepted in the future:

> "I just filled out a form for a tax credit for disability and it of course has been denied at this point but that doesn't mean it would be in the future and that's only if I can't [get] into money that would actually be a write off. I'm the kind of person that once I'm okay where I am, and I'm growing, then I want to learn all about it so I can… Cause my tooth, part of my tooth fell out yesterday too so it's like, there really is nothing, even though I live on a limited budget." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Leslie's words above seem to imply that once she is financially secure, she will be able to learn and grow more easily in that context. She also mentions that her tooth recently fell out and that she lives on a limited budget. This is concerning, as having the ability to pay for health needs such as dental work is important in order for women to live healthily in community. In this sense, financial constraints can clearly affect a woman's ability to take care of her health and well-being. However, she emphasizes that being financially stable would positively impact her ability to reintegrate. Below, Megan speaks to her financial issues:

"So, we had to make an appointment to re-meet and sign in the right place and then give a $100 deposit but I said…I had told them I don't know if I have $200 deposit, $100 deposit on Monday cause I don't get paid until Tuesday and he took it as though I wasn't financially capable so he ended up signing the lease with somebody else so I had to go to the Landlord Tenant Board to get that cleared up…" – Megan (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, Megan shows some of the effects of revealing her financial issues. This included her being rejected for housing. Thankfully, she was able to attend to her needs and concerns by seeking resources independently.

The women's words in this section showed the uniqueness and varying intensity of financial stress that may occur for people who are in and leaving prison. In fact, being financially unequipped upon release seems to lead to issues such as stress, difficulty finding housing, social rejection and challenges with caring for 'the self' as well as one's children. As such, financial support is integral for women to arrange for safe and affordable housing upon release, as without enough money, women can be left struggling to find shelter and in worst-case scenarios, may even be exposed to homelessness. Also, Ellen's words shed light on the challenges associated with fighting debt during incarceration. It was mentioned that receiving support to deal with financial needs while in prison, may help ease this constraint and make for a smoother reintegration process.

Having the opportunity and support to attend to financial needs during incarceration could help women alleviate the burden associated with any unmet financial needs before leaving prison. Such support may also help women to feel more confident and secure in their own well-being, ability to function and support family throughout reintegration. Interestingly, connections to critical resources, transportation and simply making the time to attend to financial issues are important forms of support that Circle members offered to women. This will be seen in future sections, within the theme of Support. In addition to financial stress, women encountered stigma from society throughout reintegration. These experiences will be described below.

4.3.1.3 Encountering & Dealing with Stigma

Each of the women involved in this study encountered and dealt with some form of stigma throughout community reintegration. These experiences were described to be constraining, especially when trying to achieve a goal, such as getting a job or even doing

something as simple as attempting to socialize with others in community. However, some of the women found ways to deal with stigma, which helped to ease its negative effects during re-entry. The quotes in this section depict the different types of stigma women experienced in life, along with women's perceptions of stigma in general. The following experiences point towards the relevance of stigma as a serious constraint (Lewis & Van Puymbroeck, 2008) to reintegration for women:

> **"**Yeah, because it's like, for a lot of women here, it's about that judgement, so when you're sitting there facing somebody who has no idea about anything about the jail system or, you in general, like, if you say, 'Oh I just came out of a federal prison,' they're like, "oh woah, woah, what, what?" And they're, it's like that wall is being built instantly." – Jennifer (Interview #3 in 2017)

Above, in Jennifer's third interview, she describes how a social barrier is often built between her and other people, whenever she reveals her incarceration to someone who she feels may be unknowledgeable about the prison system. In this context, stigma against women in prison may constrain a woman's ability to develop relationships during community reintegration. Below, Ellen explains her intricate view on the stigma that individuals may hold regarding imprisonment. She also explains the complexity of stigma and implies that a person can have different identities such as appearance, race, etc. that others may find problematic. Essentially, Ellen's view explains how stigma can work in society and how it can appear at any point towards anyone, potentially contributing to marginalization for people in and leaving prison, but also others:

> "Maybe it's not a surprise to you that we're getting at kind of potential stigma that people carry around incarceration, but any person carries multiple identities obviously that could be problematic for other people or be perceived as problematic. Some of that can be race, some of that could be they are very tall, some of that could be they've got a certain personality." – Ellen (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Sara explains how she feels as if others may judge her if she were to reveal her incarceration to them. From her quote, it can be seen that trust goes both ways, as it is an essential value that society must develop in people leaving prison in order to provide room for positive change and successful transitions. Similarly, some women may benefit from working on developing trust in others after incarceration. Sara also draws importance to the idea that this judgemental nature resides within all of us, in different forms:

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"No, it's just because people that know me trust me and stuff but if I was just to tell strangers, is what I'm thinking. Like I work full time at Ford but I also have my own part time cleaning business. Which I'm 100% trustable, but if I was to tell people I was in prison, I don't think half of them would let me in their house to clean… I think like for the most part, I mean even me. I judge people differently too. Even me having been in prison myself. Sometimes you, even though I don't like to judge people and stuff, like your first reaction is to judge. You know what I mean?" – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, Leslie describes how she feels when her neighbour does not want to communicate with her because of her history of incarceration:

"…I have a lawyer over next door that doesn't even want to talk to me or nothing. That's okay. And he's a lawyer. Supposed to be non (judgemental) But he had an outing with my landlord… who is actually a preacher's wife. I just continued to be nice to him." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Despite the stigma she encounters, Leslie chooses to be kind, which shows her maturity and cordialness. Below, Megan explains how she chose to change her name after leaving prison, due to encountering stigma and rejection:

"And I changed my name so from when I had my maiden name I was able to get a job…Getting a job and keeping a job after my name change. Before my name change, I'd get a job, have it for two months and then like sorry we have to let you go, it's not a good fit here cause then they've googled me and the first thing pops up when you put in [my first name and last name] is guilty of murder." – Megan (Interview #2 in 2016)

Megan's decision to change her name seems directly related to her need to counteract social stigma due to her past crime. Thankfully, after changing her name, she was able to achieve employment and maintain it. However, before this she had trouble doing so. In this sense, stigma in the workplace constrained her ability to be employed and support herself financially. As shown through the quotes above, encountering stigma can constrain different parts of a woman's life and in some cases, affect her entirely. Below, Courtney discusses her ability to speak openly about her incarceration, which seems to help her and those around her overcome stigma towards women in prison:

"But because of interest in law and you know all that is because of having gone to jail, I give talks in universities about it, so I have to teach people. So, it's a huge part of my identity in that sense, but people wouldn't know unless they either talked to me or

attended one of those events. So, like, I am sort of like a mainstream mom or student or whatever. But at the same time my past really influences the work that I do and the talks that I give. But peoples' reactions have always been fairly positive. People see the headline of my case, then they would have a different perception. Because it was high profile, but that doesn't generally happen anymore. That was mostly, like, prejudice while in prison…And even for my application forms for university and stuff, like for law school, I talked about incarceration. And I was accepted, so it wasn't… I wasn't discriminated against and rejected because of it, which is good. I haven't been hiding my criminal record, I guess." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

As seen through the quotes in this section, stigma is known to be one of the unintentional consequences of imprisonment (Saunders, 2018). It is obvious that most of the women seem to encounter stigma in society due to having a criminal history. Despite these differences that exist between individuals in society, people have found ways to deal with the stigma they encounter, including by maintaining relationships with peers, protecting privacy, self-exclusion, self-reliance and in some cases, withholding information (Saunders, 2018). One of the women even went through the lengths to change her name in order to avoid stigma when searching for jobs. This seemed to help battle stigma and open doors for new opportunities while letting go of her past identity. To add, Courtney had shed light on the agency that each woman potentially holds to openly share experiences of incarceration with others, in hopes of fighting against stigma in society. In addition to encountering stigma throughout reintegration, women leaving prison may face the battle of trying to avoid recidivism. This will be discussed in the following section.

4.3.1.4 Avoiding Recidivism

Although all the women expressed wanting to make life-style changes, avoiding criminal activity and those involved is not always easy. Thus, making efforts to avoid returning to prison seemed to be constraining for each woman in different ways. In some cases, women may feel as if it is challenging to stay away from crime and people involved in it. Also, being under continued restrictions during parole may feel constraining and can add to women's stress while women are trying to being mindful of every action – as any wrong-doing could lead to consequences. Thus, having to avoid recidivism is an obvious challenge that people leaving prison face. In this case, the fear of returning to prison and an obligation towards avoiding that outcome, potentially affected women's abilities to achieve an easier journey of reintegration.

The women tackled this constraint in different ways. The topics of the dialogue in this section range from experiences of trying to avoid recidivism to advice on how women can do so and how the system can help. Unfortunately, decision-making during imprisonment and after release can be highly limited and is known as a constraint on women's abilities to participate freely in society (Henderson et al., 1988). With limited room for making personal decisions in and even after prison, the women encountered some difficulty when trying to stay away from criminal activity and out of prison. The following quotes describe some of the women's experiences that are associated with efforts to avoid recidivism:

> "I get random letters from people I know and it's like I don't even want to talk to you. The joy of being in here. They are still involved in criminal activities so there's lots too that I just need to take a step back." – Jennifer (Interview #1 in 2015)

In the quote above, Jennifer explains how while in prison, she is constantly contacted by people who are involved in criminal activity whom she does not wish to associate with anymore. She expresses wanting to part from them. However, her limitations during confinement do not seem to allow her to avoid people who are still involved in criminal activity. Below, Ellen explains what she feels are the most helpful tips for staying out of prison:

Interviewer: If you had to identify the two most important things in not returning to prison, what would they be?

> "I would say, first and foremost, proper programming within the prison.
> Proper programing and support. Um, I think that would look like some of the programs they were doing were like boundaries, healthy relationships, family dynamics, fool proofing your life, which is just being able to recognize the people in your life that are fools that you shouldn't have in your life. Um I know they have houses of healing which is a program they were running at one point as well. And that was supposed to be very in depth as well where it kind of goes through your, all your stuff, but they pick, very particularly for that because it can be so in depth. Um, so those types of programs. That I think are very, very crucial... yah. And if there's a way to create programing that's accessible for people coming out regardless of what area they are in to deal with these types of things and to kind of more walk along the sides with them, I think there would be more, uh, more success in not returning." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Ellen describes the need for adequate programming in prison which promotes healing, healthy relationship building, and more. She also emphasizes how providing one-on-one support to women leaving prison, regardless of location, would be one of the most important things in helping women not return to prison. Below, Sara mentions some of the struggles she

encountered during reintegration. These struggles are not uncommon for people who are reintegrating into community after prison. Such constraints may hinder a person's ability to stay out of trouble by provoking them to find other means necessary to live:

> "…every door that should have been open for me, wasn't. I'd just keep falling through loophole after loophole with the housing, with the rent, bank, with social assistance. Everything." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Sara explains how a previously discussed constraint (financial stress) contributes to the challenge of trying to live comfortably and sufficiently after prison, which is critical for survival. Not being able to live comfortably could affect one's ability to avoid recidivism, as people may lean on other means of survival. Below, Leslie reminds us of our innate human need to live in safety and the lengths that women may go through to do so:

> "So, I need to confront this someday, because I am living on $200 over my rent, but I would rather live in safety…" – Leslie (Interview #2 in 2016)

Although Leslie says she only has $200 to live on after paying her rent, she implies that she'd rather do so, if it means living in safety. In such situations, women may resort to living on the edge with uncertainty and anything can happen. Such strain could affect one's ability to care for themselves and live a self-sufficient life. In some cases, this could lead one to end up back in prison, especially if it becomes a struggle to sustain a safe environment. Below, in Megan's second interview in 2016, she mentions the two most important things she feels are helpful in trying to avoid recidivism:

> "Umm…self-motivation… Wanting to do it for myself…" – Megan

Interviewer: love it!

> "And the people that you surround yourself with…surround yourself with positive people, not people that are gonna drag you down… re-evaluate relationships". – Megan

Above, Megan highlights the importance of surrounding yourself with people who bring positive presence to your life as a tactic to avoid recidivism. Below, Courtney sums up what she believes the system needs to invest in, in order for people to avoid returning to prison:

"They need to prevent the social situations where people are more likely to have to do things to survive that may appear dangerous to those in power who don't have to ever face those situations." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

Courtney implies that when life and structural powers push people to the edge, it is not uncommon for people to resort to engaging in activities that seem dangerous to people with power. She also feels that people who have power may not understand as they may never need to do such things to survive. Her recommendation to the system is to help prevent such situations from ever occurring. The prison system, people involved in it, their families and community may benefit if those in power were to pay more attention to what people who are marginalized are initially in need of.

The quotes above illuminate women's agency in helping to avoid recidivism. These quotes also place emphasis on what women need from the system in order to achieve a successful journey of reintegration into community. This section summarized the constraints to community that each of the six women described facing. Due to structural powers, women encountered constraints such as a lack of control over personal life decisions and disconnection from community. Constraints to accessing leisure and lack of reintegration supports from the very beginning of incarceration were also highlighted as some of the women's challenges. Moreover, past and ongoing personal life experiences included constraints to community. Challenging experiences with others and trust issues were common obstacles the women had to face as well. Lastly, addiction, health concerns and financial stress seemed to have a strong presence in some of the women's lives. Then, after being released, women faced the unfortunate constraints of stigma and avoiding recidivism by trying to stay away from crime.

Every woman faced her own unique and challenging battles, none of which seemed easy to overcome. Nor is there any certainty that the women felt supported enough to have successfully overcome each of these constraints. In many cases, women had to rely on themselves. Furthermore, the obstacles encountered by women that were presented in this section, may have led women to seek different sources of empowerment to help gain some control in life. This brings us to our next major theme, which is Empowerment.

4.3.2 Sources of Empowerment for Women

Women's empowerment is known to include the potential for self-determination that one may hold to take control of their personal life circumstances, while realizing their aims in order to live a life with value (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). Empowerment can be facilitated through oneself or others. When discussing self-empowerment, it is seen as being mostly independently cultivated by women. The women seemed to gain self-empowerment through participation in recreation and leisure activities in addition to spiritual practice. Empowerment will also be described as contributed to by members of Circles and family. Additionally, the concept of agency is often emphasized in discourse on women's empowerment (Anderson, 2008; Pollack, 2000; Schuler et al., 2010) and is depicted through the women's actions in this section. Overall, empowerment played an important role in successful community reintegration for the women. This section is comprised of the sub-themes: Self-Empowerment, How Stride Circles Empowers Women with a Sense of Self, Empowerment through Recreation and Leisure and Empowerment through Spirituality. The following quotations speak to the meanings and sources of empowerment that women associated with their life experiences.

4.3.2.1 Self-Empowerment

Self-empowerment is a widely used concept in feminist theory and can be understood as the development of personal responsibility and involvement (Lemire et al., 2008). Two commonly known concepts of self-empowerment that relate directly to the women's experiences include self-reliance through personal life choices and social inclusion through collective forms of support (Lemire et al., 2008). It was also found that personal empowerment played a significant role in women's healing processes. The women's words below describe concepts of self-empowerment that were helpful throughout experiences of reintegration. Here, Jennifer expresses her agency in response to a statement in the interview guide. She mentions being able to tackle many issues on her own, despite being in prison:

Interviewer: So, all in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

"No, if you asked me a year ago, I would say yes, but now… no, definitely not. Even with being in here I've overcome a lot of obstacles, so no… yeah… I think I got 2 credits. I got a college credit. So, I'm good!" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Ellen seems to practice personal empowerment too. She provides insight on how she values herself, despite the obstacles she may face:

"For women, keeping that idea that yes, I am a woman, yes, I am still a human being, yes, I've done something wrong and this is my situation, but I still am somebody and sometimes that may look like on the outside as just having a little bit of makeup, dressing nicely sometimes, putting on heels like I'm not going anywhere and just having fun. [laugh] right." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Below, Sara explains how she feels lucky to have overcome her turmoil, and still have her family. Showing gratitude seemed to be a form of self-empowerment for her:

"…I've been very lucky in that sense, having gone through all I've gone through with my addiction and prison and still have my family in-tact." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, in Leslie's first interview in 2015, she mentions how she feels others question her, yet her own enjoyment for life propels her to not give up:

"…I know a lot of the neighbours look up to me and they probably wonder. Like they even question me like, you don't need a guy? No, what would I need a guy for? Little things like that. And so, every once and a while when they're not feeling well…I get uh. I'm sure it is happening because of them seeing me happy. And they aren't there…" – Leslie

Interviewer: and that's inspirational for people. Especially people who might be struggling. Just to see a bit of a different model. A bit of a different life. A bit of a different outlook than they might have had. Than they themselves may have, than they may be surrounded by.

"Mhm. But you see with all of that. I'll never give up. Doesn't matter what is thrown at me." – Leslie

Interviewer: That's strength

"It's just stuff. I mean it hurts to be violated. Everyone knows that. It is just stuff. And it actually makes me stronger just to [pause]. It may put a dint in my mood for, to be violated…" – Leslie

Interviewer: It's human

"but then I have to look at it and …" – Leslie

Interviewer: It's the big picture.

"Say well if I want to give up, I was going to give up a long time ago, so I enjoy life too much…" – Leslie

Also, Leslie describes how personal time management brings her grace throughout her journey. She mentions how dealing with her most important tasks first enables her to de-stress quicker:

"Yes, there's always a grace that comes out of utilizing your time well…When I used to not only did I not confront things. I procrastinated more. I'm trying to get more organized but part of it is I'm okay being more relaxed and how I am and who cares about what they think. And the other part of it is well [pause] I guess if I hit the big things first, that alleviates my stress sooner and I can … I am. And the best way I feel able to now." Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, Megan explains how wanting to do things for herself is what truly empowers her to make positive life changes:

"…You have to do it for you or else you will never do it at all. That's my number one." – Megan (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Courtney describes how she takes the opportunity to share her journey with others to help break down stereotypes. She says this is rewarding:

Interviewer: What has been your experience of choosing to reveal to others (or not) your incarceration?

"I use it as a tool to break down stereotypes (I don't look like a 'violent offender') and to educate students. Overall, it has been rewarding." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown from the quotes in this section, each of the women used different tools to attain self-empowerment and healing. Women's tactics included agency, self-motivation, enjoyment, gratitude, self-confidence, time-management, and resistance. By developing a passion to create positive change in life and personal responsibility, the women practiced a variety of self-help strategies throughout reintegration. In addition to exercising self-empowerment, the women gained empowerment through experiences with Stride Circles. These experiences are described below.

4.3.2.2 How Stride Circles Empowers Women with a Stronger Sense of Self

Experiences with Stride Circles were shown to help foster empowerment by supporting women to develop a stronger sense of self. The well-known concept of "the self" seems to widely hold the underlying notions of freedom, justice and a "good life" (Miller, 1991). Circles presented women with an opportunity to regain the ability to connect with others more freely, during and after incarceration. Throughout experiences with Circles, women seemed to improve individual quality of life through learning experiences with others and self-improvement, helping to achieve a stronger sense of satisfaction and freedom. Being treated with love and respect by Circle members also seemed to help grow the justice in women's lives.

Sadly, it has been well-documented that many male correctional staff have subjected women in prison to uncomfortable experiences including groping while conducting body searches, sexual assault and even rape and sexual extortion (Ritchie, 2017). Thus, perhaps the positive and wholesome interactions which women experienced in Circles, helped to compensate for any freedom and respect that women may have lost during incarceration. To add, taking the initiative to connect with one another, learn and enhance positive self-attributes seemed to help women function better by encouraging the embracing of 'the self,' while accepting flaws and realizing strengths.

Spending quality time with each other in Circles seemed to help women feel supported and exercise self-support as well. As the concept of a better life is subjectively defined by individuals, it is important to note how each woman had her own experience with gaining a stronger sense of self on her journey. Women described how participation in Circles helped to value individual abilities, while illuminating personal beliefs and interests. Being a part of the Stride Circle program also seemed to strengthen women's connections with members of community, and even nurture self-connection. The quotes in this section describe how participation in Circles helped to advance social connections in the women's lives, nurture motivation to succeed in life and contribute to a more positive self-image overall. Here, Jennifer explains how being a part of Circles brought her happiness, positive energy and love – all feelings that would contribute towards a stronger sense of self and a more positive reintegration process:

> "I can't say like… I've never been happier to meet anybody in my life that… well I love everybody at Stride and I've never been able to say that. Everybody is just so heartfelt…

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like warm and…but the energy that comes when, like all the volunteers that I love…[laughs] I love it, love it! Just love it!" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Ellen describes how Circle members can support women by helping bring clarity to life goals and personal values:

"To the volunteer and to the woman having that underlying commitment from that very get go, um identifying who she is as an individual before and after and who she wants to be and supporting her in that transition because eventually it comes down to who am I as an individual and what do I stand for." – Ellen (Interview #2 in 2016)

Meanwhile, Sara shows how Circles kept her feeling grounded and strong, while empowering her to resolve personal family issues:

Interviewer: How has your Stride circle helped you work through any addiction or recovery issues?

"Um. I would say pretty good. Like I say, they kept me strong and kept me grounded. Um, I met my husband around the same time as I got out through a mutual friend and what not, so he kept me really grounded as well. So, he was like a real added bonus on top of my Stride Circle… Like even still, when I have problems, you know with my older kids, you know, 'cause they aren't my husband's, sometimes when we have an issue and stuff, I'll call [volunteer] up cause she is like a book of knowledge. You know what I mean? Bounce stuff off of her and stuff [both laugh]." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, in Leslie's first interview in 2015, she explains how her Stride Circle helped her gain a sense of self, and trust towards herself as well as others:

Interviewer: How has your Stride circle improved your sense of who you are?

"I would say that because none were judgmental…and surety of who they are [pause] gave me a real sense and stride towards being able to trust others [pause]…Also trusting myself." – Leslie

Below, in Megan's first interview in 2015, she describes how her Stride Circle helped her feel worthy:

Interviewer: So, the question that kind of goes with that, is how has your Stride Circle helped you to improve your sense of self, or how you feel about yourself?

"They just supported me and made me um, feel like I'm worth something." – Megan

Interviewer: Yeah, that confidence piece. That's very important.

> "Congratulate me when I do something good." – Megan

Here, Courtney mentions how her Circle helped her work through issues with others in her life, as opposed to pushing people away, which was gratifying for her:

Interviewer**:** How has your Stride Circle helped you to work through a difficult decision?

> "They helped me keep friends in my life and work through issues with those friends, rather than my initial reaction, which is to push people away. Resolving problems is far more rewarding." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

It is well-known that experiences of displacement, such as imprisonment can change a person's sense of self and belonging (Vandermark, 2007). In such cases, being empowered by others through the sharing of resources, encouragement and opportunity may strengthen one's sense of self, while promoting growth and self-satisfaction in life. As shown through the quotes in this section, each of the women felt uniquely empowered by Circle members. The empowerment fostered through Circles seemed to leave women with a stronger sense of self, thus a greater ability to tackle constraints faced during reintegration. Circles also provided women with opportunities to become involved with recreation and leisure activities. This will be described in the upcoming section.

4.3.2.3 Empowerment through Recreation & Leisure

Participation in recreation and leisure activities is known to provide people with the ability to resist negative life factors (such as stress, anxiety, depression, paranoia, obesity etc.) and gain a stronger sense of self-empowerment (Dionigi, 2002). In the following set of quotes, the women describe personal leisure interests, which highlight the value that engagement in recreation and leisure activities can bring to women's lives:

> "I'm already in horticulture and I love it. But at the same time, there's so many doors that can be open with welding." – Jennifer (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, in Jennifer's first interview she describes her leisure passion of horticulture, which seems to bring her joy. In addition, she mentions how she feels about her interest in welding and how it may provide her with unique life opportunities. Below, in her second interview she explains how the simple activities she enjoys, such as watching TV and listening to music help bring her calmness and clarity when dealing with life's issues:

> "For the most part, because I listen to music and watch TV and it makes me calm down and I can deal with things in a better level." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Ellen explains how a passion for sharing her story through public speaking and the use of humor helps her and the people she shares with. Story-sharing seems to help Ellen practice self-empowerment while empowering others:

> "When I go out and I speak, it's a choice to go out and speak and share my story. I choose very particular what I will speak about to whom I'm speaking to, um, and humour always makes a good vehicle." – Ellen (Interview #2 in 2016)

Here, Sara describes how going for walks with her Stride Circle provided her with the confidence she needed to be more active in community:

Interviewer: And can you tell me a little bit about how your Stride Circle helped you get into recreation and leisure activities?

> "Um, sometimes it was like with me and my kids like we'd go out together walking. One of my Stride Circles lived very close so we would meet up and go for walks together and stuff like that and kind of just give me the confidence to get back out in the community doing things." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Below, Leslie explains how practicing yoga and going to the gym provide her with a rich quality of sleep, while stimulating her body in ways she feels she needs:

> "I found in that I learned to, and I'll tell you. I will be honest. It's almost like the first time I go to yoga, I sleep for 10 to 12 hours straight after and the first time when I went to yoga. When I did join the Y, the same thing happened… It's like the stretching different areas…There's something meditatively [pause] stimulating to my body because I am... and so it shows me that is um. A necessity." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Interestingly, over here in Megan's first interview in 2015, she reveals how she was inspired by a Stride Circle volunteer's passion for running:

"Speaking of that, I should probably send [volunteer] a text to find out how his run went this weekend." – Megan

Interviewer: Oh, that would be a little thing to reconnect

"Yeah." – Megan

Interviewer: Does he do marathons or anything like that?

"Yeah." – Megan

Interviewer: That's cool

"Yeah, I'd love to do a marathon." – Megan

Interviewer: Well, maybe that's something you could do when you have a little bit maybe when you are done school, you and [volunteer] could work on training for a marathon or something.

"Yeah." – Megan

Interviewer: That'd be fun to have that buddy, to have that motivator.

"He keeps telling me though, you know you're going to have to quit smoking right. And I'm like no I'm not. [laughs]" – Megan

Interviewer: [laughs] but that would affect your running though.

"I know [pretends to breathe heavily] [laughs] Wait for me [volunteer]! I'm coming!" – Megan

By the end of the conversation above about the volunteer's leisure passion for running, Megan seemed interested in doing a marathon. The volunteer's interest in running even seemed to hold the potential to encourage Megan to quit smoking if she'd like to eventually participate. This shows how individuals can be inspired and empowered to create positive change in life, simply by gaining interest in leisure activities, through others. Below, Courtney shares one of her experiences with recreation and leisure:

"So, Stride really helped with just kind of finding the balance… acquaintances are cool too and you can spend an evening doing crafts with someone and never see them again and still learn something and profit and benefit from the experience." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Courtney explains how spending a night doing crafts with another person can benefit one in different ways, such as by gaining positive outcomes from the experience itself though learning and connecting with one another. As illustrated through the quotes in this section, the women gained a sense of empowerment through recreation and leisure in various ways. Stride Circles were able to connect women with opportunities to practice some of their leisure interests. This seemed to help enhance the quality of leisure experiences in women's lives, while empowering women to keep their passions alive and even grow new interests. In addition to recreation and leisure, spiritual engagement seemed to play a significantly powerful role for the women throughout reintegration. These experiences will be described below.

4.3.2.4 Empowerment through Spirituality

Studies show how spirituality can serve as a protective mechanism for women who have suffered trauma (Hipolito et al., 2014). Interestingly, most of the women in this thesis admitted to having experiences of trauma in the past, along with their own unique spiritual path. To expand, spirituality can be defined as an interest in spirit and its effects of healing on one's well-being, health, life and community (Tacey, 2004). It is also well-known that spirituality plays a positive role in addressing trauma within mental health approaches to achieve enhanced levels of self-esteem, greater psychological well-being, life-satisfaction and lower levels of depression (Gillum et al., 2006). This section sheds light on the women's experiences with spirituality and how it helped throughout reintegration. For example, below, Jennifer explains how her knowledge of "being Native," allows her to answer some of her girlfriend's questions regarding spirituality. She also implies how the emotional support that comes along with spirituality is meaningful to her. Treasures such as crystals and feathers hold meaning to her and it makes her feel good inside that her Circle recognizes this:

> "Well…It's just like having like emotional support, um [pauses]…I am not really the most spiritual person, like with my girlfriend we talk about… like she is Mohawk, but I know more about being Native than she does! [laughs]. It's funny! I am not even Native and she's like always asking me questions and she goes and asks her Mom and her Mom agrees with me and I'm like I've already told you the answer! But I don't know… It's like… It's pretty much like emotional support I would say… yeah… And I am right into like the Aboriginal culture. My girlfriend is Aboriginal. So, kind of makes a little sense! …Um, but that, and then I had like a feather and whole bunch of crystals, and a book on crystals and I was like… it made me cry a lot that day. And like just knowing that they

can see those kinds of things in me, made me feel so good because we hadn't actually discussed that at that point but ever since then we have discussed a lot. So, they know a lot." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Here, Ellen mentions how transformation starts on the inside, which can also be thought of as one's spirit. She implies that this tactic helps her manifest change:

"I always say everything starts first from the inside, if you kind of have your mind where you wanna be or what you wanna do and you're ready on the inside, um you're most likely…" – Ellen (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Sara explains how being connected to the church community helped to expand her social network, join different programs, be involved in community activities and become more confident overall:

"So, [volunteer] I used to go to her church with her and she connected me also with a church while I was still in the half-way house. So, I could kind of go out into the community and sometimes it wasn't just church based, it was different programs like community and stuff like that I could go to. And again, building my confidence just to meet new people, um you know 'cause I came from a totally different life than that I was wanting to live…They've been really helpful. Like I said when I got out, [volunteer] connected me with her church, was also willing to go to different churches with me as well. You know?" – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, two quotes by Leslie are shown. Her spirituality seems to have grown from her first interview to her second:

"I know the dates, everything. Because it was a violation. But I also looked at it as a very small… and what was someone trying to do. How do we handle it while you don't say nothing to no body unless it's somebody you can trust and give it to God… and so I had to be alone for a while. Well, I was never alone. God, you know I'm very spiritual but [pause] through all of that I had huge expansion of beautiful I believe…" – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

"I, I, I feel, I feel very, um, strong in my walk that God is showing me wisdom now but kept me very... uh, safe and vulnerable and naïve then." – Leslie (Interview #2 in 2016)

As shown above, in Leslie's first interview in 2015, she discusses the issue of violation and the importance of sharing concerns with people she can trust and God. She also implies giving her worries to God. Then, in her second interview in 2016, she expresses attaining strength in her journey through God and mentions how she feels God has kept her safe. These two quotes show Leslie's positive transformation of gaining strength and faith through her

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engagement in spirituality. Below, Megan shares her experience of being prayed for during her abortion and Courtney mentions how she visited Native friendship centres on her own.

> "I had, I was pregnant and [pause] I had to have an abortion, um because the baby, the fetus had some sort of a problem with it that it could grow three arms or like a hand instead of a foot. Um so they just kind of prayed for me, and you know." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "I was part of or I visited like Native friendship centres but that was also on my own, not with Stride." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2015)

As shown in the quotes above, a sense of spirituality was experienced among all the women. Spirituality can be defined as an inner journey that can help one understand their life purposes and unanswered questions about life, while strengthening their relationship with a divine force (Hipolito et al., 2014). Having an interest in some form of spirituality seemed to help motivate and empower women to overcome obstacles more fearlessly in life. Spiritual practices also seemed to help women strengthen their faith in themselves, especially throughout reintegration after having been incarcerated. In times of need, for example, when women felt that family and friends may not have had a positive presence in their lives, having a sense of spirituality seemed to bring solace, inner peace, and strength, while sometimes, even enhancing sense of community. This was evident throughout the women's journeys, as spirituality was seen as a helpful form of empowerment before, during and after prison. In addition to gaining empowerment through practices of spirituality, women had different sources of support during re-entry, including from Circles and family. Supportive experiences are expanded upon below.

4.3.3 Sources of Support in the Women's Lives

Over time, the women had developed multiple sources of support, which seemed to help to make reintegration easier. This section describes how women built social support systems with the help of others, including family and members of Stride Circles. There were varying lengths of support for each of the women as every relationship evolved. This section also describes the commitment of volunteers and Stride staff in supporting women throughout community reintegration. Also, the commitment of women to utilizing these types of support was an integral part of receiving it. This section will end with a discussion of the transformation that occurred in women's lives along with women's personal suggestions for change.

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4.3.3.1 Support from Family

Studies indicate that there is a serious need to create ways that provide support for people who have been to prison, in order to strengthen their connection with community (Thomas et al., 2019). Luckily, all six women included in this study already had some sort of family connection. Thus, support from family was helpful to every woman in some form or another throughout reintegration. Family support also seemed to enhance women's lives through natural social connection and meaningful participation in valued life roles (Thomas et al., 2019). The following quotes show how women felt supported by family members:

Interviewer: So, what supports (if any) have you accessed in the community, separately from your Circle?

> "Umm… I really haven't! Like that's the hard part. Like I have like my girlfriend and my Mom but those are the only actual supports I have…" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

When asked "Overall, what level of support have friends, family and special people in your life (not members of your Stride Circle) provided to help you with your community reintegration? Such as helping you to access housing, providing friendship and social support? And the options are None, Low, Medium, High and Very High," Jennifer responded:

> "I think it is high for the most parts because like my Mom's boyfriend found… like his friend offered me a job working at a Honda shop, I have a place to live, I have food, everything I can possibly need when I am out…" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

> "Um, I think for myself, I was fortunate. I have a good family, I have good supports. Um, I was coming to this area. Um. So, Stride was possible. It was a possibility for me and I've just. It's been a very fortunate thing for me in terms of where I am in my life. I haven't been out that long. It's been 2 and a half years and within that time I've got my own place, I'm in school…yah. So, it's possible for anybody. Some may just need more help than others. That's what it comes down to." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "My family… I have a very large family. They are all in Nova Scotia, most of them but they are all very supportive no matter if I'm having issues with the kids or when I first got out and I was still having addiction issues and stuff like that, struggling and stuff like that, or getting my kids back. Like when I first went into GVI and lost my kids, like my family like my sister-in-law, my brother, my mother, my sister, all flew out here and had family group decision making. That was something that just started. I was the first on in

Waterloo region to do the family group decision-making, so they were very supportive from the very beginning. So, I've been very lucky in that sense, having gone through all I've gone through with my addiction and my prison and still have my family in-tact." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown above, support from family was important to Jennifer, Ellen and Sara throughout reintegration. Whether it was help with addiction, emotional support, responsibilities or simply raising levels of comfort, family was cherished by all the women. Only one of the women felt partial to receiving support from family. When asked to which degree she agrees or disagrees with the following statement:

Interviewer: I get the emotional help and support I need from my family

Leslie responded:

"Uh, neutral. Yes and no. I get a lot of love texts from my daughter. Two of them. Not the third one. No. She's not ready to forgive." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

In such cases where women may have felt that support was not adequate from family, Circles were seemingly able to provide some of the emotional support that women needed, which will be elaborated upon in the next sub-theme of Support from Circles. Here, Megan describes how her husband supports her:

Interviewer: So, if you were to take non-Circle members, friends, family, and husband overall, what would you kind of say their support has been in helping you reintegrate?

"My husband is here right… Very high… Uh, he's supportive, he motivates me to do better, you know he lets me make mistakes and picks me up when I fall and… we'll get go this place together… we do almost everything together. We bought these couches together, we clean the house together." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown above, Megan explains how she does everything with her husband, including finding her place and taking care of it. This form of partnership is often helpful in many ways. He also seems to accept her flaws and uplifts her when she needs it. Her husband seems to be her sole form of support outside of Circles. Below, Courtney mentions what she feels is the most important in helping her reintegration:

Interviewer: If you had to identify the two most important things in helping your reintegration and not returning to prison, what would they be?

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"Family contact and hope for the future… I have a good network of friends and family who are readily available to help me talk problems out and to provide emotional support." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Courtney emphasizes that family contact and hope for the future were among the top two most important things in helping her reintegrate and avoid returning to prison. Maintaining reliable and loving family relationships, along with appreciating assistance from family was something almost all the women valued. Support from family seemed to help each of the women emotionally by enhancing their capacity to endure and overcome obstacles. Examples of obstacles that family members helped the women overcome included battling stress and help with taking care of daily life responsibilities. Family was also complex for some of the women, as one woman had mentioned how her aunt tried to control how often she could see her son and whether she could take him out, and another woman explained how her daughter has not yet forgiven her. Regardless, overall, family seemed to play a significant role for most of the women by supporting their reintegration in multiple ways and often, by enhancing the love in their lives.

4.3.3.2 Support from Circles

The Stride Circle program assists women in prison by forming casual support networks that assist women upon release and during reintegration (CJI, 2015). This section includes dialogue describing the various types of support women received from Circles. This includes overall help with community reintegration, personalized positive social support, helping women access recreational opportunities, assistance with transportation and connecting women with the community programming they seek and resources that they personally need.

4.3.3.2.1 How Circles Help Women with Community Reintegration

Circle staff members and volunteers aim to help support women during reintegration in a variety of ways. The different ways in which they show support are often tailored to women's unique needs. The quotes in this section depict the various methods in which women felt supported by members of their Stride Circles:

"Extremely important. Yes, they would come see me and they were very, very supportive. Like I only got visits there, once every 6 weeks so that was hard with my family or whoever came… and with them it was more of a business meeting, so they got

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to come more often… It was nice though. Like, having that support system in place that you can see those people. It was something that made things a lot easier." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

"It's hard. And even for me, they would always say, you're not our usual case of someone coming out. So, I am quite self-sufficient on my own in terms of doing whatever… advocating for myself or all those kind of things, but they also give me that added support and just support me in any thing I'm doing…So they're your cheerleaders and they will continue to be like if there is anything we'll go with you. [Circle Member] did assist in finding the listing, because there is listing that you can get from [location] that updates all the time… Um, so she did give me that listing just to take a look, to call those places and line them up but for myself, like I looked into those places myself and lined everything up…so we just went together and looked at stuff. Just so happened that I found this place online and it didn't have any pictures and I was so against, I was like I don't want to go anywhere that doesn't have pictures…but um, we decided to check it out. And after, and I had a bit of a crunch time, because when she told me the funding was open, there was only about maybe a month or two months of losing the funding and it going to another agency…and making that decision and finding a decent place. Because they won't just allow you to go anywhere just because you found a place." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown above, women felt supported by Circle members in different ways. These included visits while in prison, assistance with house hunting and accompaniment throughout the process.

When asked, "Can you complete the following sentence: My Stride Circle is important to me because…" Sara replied:

"They gave me confidence and strength when I needed it the most. Um, they were always there to lend a listening ear or shoulder to cry on, which I'm sure happened quite a few times. And they were always able to kind of keep me directed towards the goals that I had."– Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Leslie replied:

"I think they've been extremely helpful…I think they are the backbone to where I am today… and support. It keeps me constantly away from wanting to relapse." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, it can be seen how Circle members shared strength and confidence with Sara in times of need. They listened to her and provided her with direction in life, keeping her feeling

supported. Additionally, Leslie mentions how support from Circles kept her away from relapsing with drugs. Circle members seemed to assist women in multiple ways, including with emotional well-being and overall health. Below, Megan mentions how her Circle members were there for her and provided her with friendship, along with unconditional love. In return, she says she was there for her Circle. The give and take within her relationship(s) seemed to form a healthy sense of reciprocity between her and her Circle members:

> "Um, because they are there for me. They have unconditional love for me. You know in a friendship sense. And they are there for me if I call. I'm there for them too." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Below, Courtney makes an insightful remark about how Circles provided her with "subtle socialization training." She expresses her appreciation about how members helped to enhance her levels of comfort and confidence with communication. Also, her time spent with Circle members made it easier for her to make friends in general. When she was asked to answer the statement "My Stride Circle is important to me because…" her reply was as follows:

> "Because it offers stability and emotional support…I think the main thing that [Circle member] has helped me with is building confidence. Because I've always been kind of very nervous and awkward around people and she helped me realize that, you know, you don't have to fit a certain image for people to like you. That if you're just yourself and cool about it, people will also realize that you're cool. And then just kind of helping me be a bit more laid back umm which has been helpful with making friends. Like, very helpful. And also [Circle member] has been really good at helping me enjoy almost the child like things. Because her absolute favourite holiday is Halloween so every Halloween she and her husband like deck their entire house out, and you know, it's like the coolest house on the block kind of thing, and especially when I was younger I would have "poo-poo'd" such things as kind of dorky. And now I realize it's okay to have things that you like, like that. And yeah, to be quirky. And people will still like you. And so, I guess it was almost like subtle socialization training, but it was a lot of just helping me be much more confident which has helped with meeting new people and having new, making new friends." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

As portrayed within the quotes in this section, Stride Circles offered different forms of support for the women, including emotional support, empowerment, connecting women with resources and simply offering the company and social interaction women required in times of need. In some cases, Stride connections eventually turned into lasting friendships. Together, the women and Circle members seemed to be actively working towards building closer connections

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with one another. The support received by women seemed to be helpful while in prison as well as throughout reintegration. Overall, each of the women were found to benefit from being involved in Stride Circles, in some form or another.

4.3.3.2.2 Personalized Positive Social Support

Research in the field of correctional rehabilitation has emphasized that the formation of positive social support systems enhances the reintegration process for people leaving prison (Thomas et al., 2019). Similarly, Stride Circles help build personalized support networks for women, which can provide them with easier access to help during re-entry. By personalized support, I mean that the type of support offered to women is dependent upon what women may individually express needing help with. Having peer mentor support helps increase access to community resources while simultaneously facilitating integration itself (Thomas et al., 2019). This section describes women's experiences with receiving positive social support from Circles. Below, Jennifer explains how having Circle members in her life, helped her to release and feel less judged by others. Having a friend is of importance to her because it's what she feels she previously lacked in her life:

> "I think it's more like helping like getting it out to somebody that isn't gonna judge me or pretty much put me down for something that I have no control over. I think just being the friend is the main thing in this because it's one thing that I lacked in my life when I was outside." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016).

Here, Ellen explains how the presence of Circle members in her life was helpful in many forms, including the added level of support that seemed to increase her trust in others. She seemed to have a strong sense of connection with her Circle. Ellen also felt that they were there for her whenever she needed:

> "Um, because I feel that without them, I would have struggled a lot more. Just in finding a sense of self [pause] even though I am, that I am a self-sufficient person and very determined in doing well and doing things I think would be best. It's always helpful to have a group a people who are always going to cheer you on that are going to be a source of support in many different areas… regardless if it has to do with housing, has to do with whatever, you just pick up the phone and they're willing to be there for you.
> That's. And someone you can trust. That you don't have to worry about. They were my first source of trust in people that I connected with coming out." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Ellen mentions how she found Circles to be her initial form of trust in others after being released from prison. Below, Sara describes how her Circle helped her in ways which she didn't even expect to receive. She also mentions how her overall experience with Circles was positively supportive:

> "I had a really good experience with my Circle. They were able to help me in a lot of ways that I didn't even know they'd be able to be there to help me with and stuff. So, I had a very positive support Circle." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Here, Leslie states how having ongoing mentorship from Circles was reassuring to her:

> "Um, well. [pause] I believe it's an ongoing thing. Knowing that I have had mentors all the way through." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Megan mentions how positive motivation from Circles helped her avoid resorting to old habits:

> "Just motivating me… If I feel like using, they talk me out of it." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Lastly, Courtney states how Circles helped her gain comfort in communicating with others:

> "Yah and just helping me with being more comfortable with different levels of interaction, so from a point of a close friend." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown above, each of the women received forms of personalized positive social support from Circles. Having different types of support tailored to the women's needs was essential in achieving life goals throughout reintegration. Stride Circles played a significant role in organizing this support for the women and the women played an important role in expressing individual needs and utilizing the support. Conclusively, personalized support from Circles seemed to help women achieve a smoother transition into community.

4.3.3.2.3 Helping Women Access Recreational Opportunities

The social and recreational opportunities offered to women through Stride Circles encompass a restorative justice community-based approach (CJI, 2015). This is carried out by bringing women and members of the community together through active participation in recreation and leisure programs (Fortune et al., 2010). Studies show that when women in prison and community volunteers connect through leisure, there is the presence of growth, respect and humanity that develops for the women (Pedlar et al., 2008). These important values seemed to

flourish in the women's lives throughout their journeys with Circles. The quotes below show how women received and used help from Stride Circles in accessing various recreational opportunities:

"Yeah, I get the social supports too. Like, we are very active and open and we talk a lot and it's good because I am out doing things and they encourage me to be more involved and like doing arts and crafts and stuff. Sometimes, I don't even feel like I want to do it and somehow they get me doing it! They'll be doing something and I'll be watching them and that just makes me want to do it! [Laughs]." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, Jennifer explains how Circle members motivate her to be more actively involved in recreation and leisure activities such as arts and crafts. Although she may not feel like participating, she mentions how her Circle successfully manages to encourage her to participate. Below, Ellen mentions how a Circle member joined her on casual leisure outings:

"So actually, when I moved, cause I'm close to all the trails, me and [volunteer] would get up early in the morning and go walking…yah. So, we were doing that in the summer, which was great." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Ellen describes how a volunteer from her Circle would accompany her on summer walks in the trails near her new home. This simple form of encouragement and company can provide women with comfort and motivation to be more active on a daily basis. Below, Sara describes her casual leisure experiences with Circles as well:

"Um sometimes it was like with me and my kids like we'd go out together walking. One of my Stride Circles lived very close so we would meet up and go for walks together and stuff like that and kind of just give me the confidence to get back out in the community doing things." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, Sara explains how one of her Circle members would come for walks with Sara and her kids. She goes on to emphasize that this form of support helped enhance her confidence to be more active in her community overall. Below, Megan mentions her recreational experience with Circles:

"Well, I guess here you've got arts and music. They've been very supportive with my guitar…yeah, I play guitar. I paint a lot. They fully support me for that." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Megan mentions how Circle members supported her leisure passions of playing guitar and painting. Below Courtney explains how Circles helped motivate her to participate and feel more comfortable with doing so. They also assisted by listening to her ideas and helping her brainstorm.

> "…Like while at GVI, they helped with just participating and feeling really comfortable…You know it's okay if you, you know, work with other peers, um. If you meet a new face every week, that's, like the balance…So they helped with that, which is really cool. And then afterwards, they were just very supportive of me in terms of being a sounding board for any ideas I had…and brainstorming and that kind of thing." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

Courtney also describes having fun with her Circle member, especially when being given the opportunity to explore and eat together:

> "Most recently when [volunteer] and I met, it was last month…and it was here so we got to walk around a bit and check Ottawa… It's also when we meet, it's fun…had cake [laughs]." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown through the quotes in this section, the Stride Circle program supports women by connecting them with opportunities to engage in recreation and leisure activities of different kinds. These include conversation circles, walking, exploring, eating, arts, crafts, painting, playing guitar, and simply encouraging women to become more comfortable with participating and being more actively involved in community and leisure programming. Only one participant, Leslie said that she did not need help with getting into recreation and leisure activities as she does this on her own. However, overall, five out of six participants felt that the Stride Circle program helped to connect them with recreation and leisure opportunities, which benefited each woman in different ways.

4.3.3.2.4 Assistance with Transportation

Women released from prison often require various forms of support in order to reintegrate into community effectively while addressing personal life needs (Beeble & Hampton, 2021). Research shows that upon release, many of these needs often go unmet, especially the requirement of transportation, which appears to be one of the most critical needs for women

(Beeble & Hampton, 2021). The quotes in this section describe how women received help from Circles with transportation, contributing to an easier and more supported reintegration process. Here are some of the women's responses when asked if help with transportation including rides to places, buses and cabs was important and if they received help with this:

> "She, they were very helpful with that, even when I was in Dundas, helping me get back and forth with my family, when I need to look for housing, they were helpful with that, accommodating with that…If I need to go somewhere, even if we need to meet, they come to you. And we'll go. Let's go for coffee, let's go here, let's go there, and they'll drive you. If I need to go sometimes, that ends up just being grocery shopping, you know?" – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "Um so, [volunteer] was really good if I needed a ride somewhere or um my kids sometimes, picking them up from school if I wasn't going to be home from work on time or if they had to be somewhere." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "If I knew that I had an appointment to give them some money towards gas or something…For the most part, I do muster up and know that I can pay two bucks, go down get four bags of groceries. It's going to be a load coming home, but I really think it out and plan in advance so that I'm not doing that so." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, it can be seen how Ellen, Sara and Leslie all benefited by having support with transportation from Circles. Whether it was for groceries, house hunting, picking up the kids from school or just a casual social outing, Circle members were there to support the women by providing a ride or access to one. Below, Courtney mentions that help with transportation is important to her, but she was fortunate enough to have help from school:

> "Yeah, but I had a 'U Pass' so that was taken care of from the school." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

Two women, Jennifer and Megan said they did not have any transportation needs, experience any struggles with or require assistance for transportation, as they were sufficient in this area. Meanwhile, four out of six women had transportation needs that were either met through Circle members, themselves, or their institution. Three out of the six women required and received help from Circles with transportation. The quotes in this section show the uniqueness of each woman's situation with transportation needs and how they were able to satisfy these needs. As studies show how transportation is one of the most critical unmet needs of

women leaving prison (Beeble & Hampton, 2021), Circles played an important role in meeting this need for the women who needed it most.

4.3.3.2.5 Connecting Women with Community Programming

As mentioned in *Creating Choices,* the holistic programming and unique opportunities that create an environment where women can feel empowered can only be formed through the responsibility of a wide range of members of community (TFFSW, 1990). One of the ways the Stride Circles program aids women in need, is by connecting them with different types of community programming. The type of community program offered to women is often based on individual needs and preferences in addition to available options within the surrounding community. The quotes in this section describe the women's experiences of being connected with community programming through Circles. When asked how she would rate the helpfulness of Circles in connecting her with community programming, Jennifer responded:

> *"*Umm... I'd say quite helpful right now. It is about the only resource that I have to get any information from…Like, we always come up with new ideas about what we want to do when we get out… and like, just having opportunities 'cause like I know there is pow-wows and stuff and sweat lodges and just drumming circles we can just do here so, we've been talking a lot in regards to that, and how it'd be something we'd all enjoy doing." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

When asked to provide more details about experiences with being connected to community programming, the women provided the following responses:

> "And [volunteer] was assisting me with that. We went to the food banks together. We went to St John's Kitchen. We went…She took me everywhere to go. She let me know. She found out about this place called the Barnabas program that is offered at. I can't remember the name of the church now, but it's a Mennonite church… in Waterloo and they offer, they will give you grocery cards every four months. We went there. She let me know about the program I found out about it and met up with the person so I could get the grocery cards from them. Connected me with other people. They also helped connect. They sent out a letter to all their volunteers in terms of whomever." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

> "Kind of getting me connected with job banks and stuff like that, telling me and encouraging me. Which fields maybe best suited me and stuff like that as well." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

"The one that was most important. About my future needs question is the one about my daughter and that was definitely very extremely helpful…the location. Different location for help. Aid for her in Toronto…yah, she couldn't even fill out forms so I asked if there was a couple agencies that would even come into the house or that would be close by for her to get assistance…and they were very knowledgeable and getting back to me with a couple more than one." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

Only one woman, Megan, seemed to not have received much help with accessing community programming from Circles. However, she seemed to receive help in the form of motivation from her Circle members:

"If I need to talk, I'll call them and say this is what's going on. They'll be like you're fine, you rock." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Megan also had strong opinions about the programming offered to women in prison:

"What they are doing is in jail, what they do, they force you into these programs, they're like you have to go to this program and if you don't go to this program, you don't get out…which is understandable…But if you are forcing someone to do a program, they are not getting anything out of it and they are going to be right back within the next three months after you release them." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Megan seems to feel well supported by her Circle members in general. However, above, she also explains how she felt about the support offered by Circles in comparison to programming in prison. She feels that programming within prison is highly enforced, which can be less effective, causing some women to return to prison after release, as their needs may remain unmet. Below, Courtney shares her positive experiences with receiving encouragement through group discussions in her Circle:

"I'd say very helpful. So, like a 4/5 I guess. She's always been very encouraging and also good at kind of helping take the anxiety away out of situations. So, when I was afraid of being released because after a while you know you're institutionalized, and everything seems scary. She was very good at just calming me down and saying why it will be okay even if it is a bit scary and that kind of stuff. So, it has actually been very helpful… I think so as far as I've gleamed from many of our discussions, it's all been about kind of helping me reach what I think is... or like with [Volunteer] helping me reach my goals. Like, I guess it helps that my goals are fairly pro-social. Like, save the world through social justice legislation. So, she has never had to, other than if I was angry with my friends, she has never had to say like 'whoa, whoa, whoa you need to seriously revisit this goal.' Umm. So, it's always felt more like teamwork." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

Above, Courtney describes how she was offered the opportunity to engage in constructive conversations within Circles. This was a simple, yet effective part of her group programming that she says helped her to reach her life goals by providing her with the support she needed after being released. As shown through the quotes in this section, Circles helps support women by connecting them with different types of community programming based on individual needs. The women seemed to gain insight into their own life circumstances through meaningful group interaction and learning experiences. The support offered to women by Circles seemed to help them transform their lives in powerfully positive ways. This brings us to our next section about the transformation that occurred in the women's lives throughout their journeys of social reintegration.

4.3.3.2.6 Transformation: Life after Circles

The women's journeys shed light on the important concept of transformation as a fundamental goal throughout the process of community reintegration. Studies show how when women gain access to necessary emotional and material support, they experience transformation and new life perspectives, which helps nurture the determination needed to change one's lifestyle (Bui & Morash, 2010). This section speaks to the positive transformation experienced by women throughout participation in Stride Circles on their pathways of reintegration back into community. Below, Jennifer explains how she has had many negative relationships in her life that did not last long. Thankfully, she emphasized how refreshing it is to have members of her Circle who provide reliability and consistency:

> "Because I never had that. Everybody in my life has either been a negative influence or been an acquaintance and if I did get close to them, there is somewhere in…like at some point the relationship didn't last. So, this is… it actually makes me feel better that I have people that are going to be there, not just come and go whenever they please…yeah!" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, Ellen describes how easy it is to resort to old habits after leaving prison. She also explains how having morals, values, and a positive self-image helps to achieve a better reintegration experience over time. She goes on to emphasize the importance of learning to be humble and not being afraid to ask for help:

"I think having your mind focused on what you want, because then at least you know that you're prepared about thinking outside…It's a matter of having goals, something, attainable, having a plan, um, and something that is manageable to follow through that makes sense, right?…with your values, your morals and what you see for yourself, um, the image that you see for yourself and that being said how do you view yourself is the biggest piece…you come out and then you go back, right back to your same friends.. you are either gonna be… you're liable at getting back into the same behaviour, the same mentality, the same actions and potentially committing the same crimes, um, but if you come out and recognize that you are a different individual and that you are about different things, you're gonna seek those things and those sure about those things…Don't be afraid to ask for help, humble yourself, um, I think the biggest piece out of that is a lot of times we isolate ourselves and say you know, I can either do it on my own or we go back to what we know." – Ellen (Interview #2 in 2016)

Here, Sara mentions how having Circle members to talk to and feeling reassured by them about the changes she's made since leaving prison, helps her believe that it will eventually have a positive impact on her children. This shows how having better support can lead to more positive thoughts on transformation:

"So, I would say a lot. Just affirming that… So just um like talking to me and assuring me that all the changes I've made since I've been out and since I'm not addicted to drugs anymore and stuff will eventually have some impact on my kids, you know what I mean?" – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Below, in Leslie's second interview in 2016, she discusses her confidence in resisting old habits. It seems as if she experienced a positive transformation in this area, in comparison to her interview in 2015, where she had resumed smoking:

"And so, so then… I'll allude the fact that … I let no addiction control me because I have the confidence in who I am and then…yeah, but I will make the exceptions (chuckles) that I still enjoy the odd cigarette….and yeah, that is, yeah, and I am working on that." – Leslie (Interview #2 in 2016)

Below, we can see how Megan's relationship with a Stride member has evolved from her first interview to her second. She was seeking to remain friends with this Circle member in 2015 and by 2016, she had achieved that goal by maintaining her connection with them online. The use of social media platforms such as Facebook can be a helpful method of staying in touch, and transforming Circle relationships into friendships:

"I'd like to be able to be like Facebook friends with my Circle." – Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Interviewer: oh okay. That's a cool one. And is that. Is that still possible?

"Um I don't know. Cause the reason why I didn't become Facebook friends with (Circle member) in the first place is because he is a police officer." Megan (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, it seemed as if Megan was unsure if she would be able to maintain a connection with her Circle member online, given that he works in enforcement. However, below, in Megan's second interview, we can see how she was able to accomplish this:

Interviewer: Um, ok and then how helpful have the Stride staff… so this would be [staff member] previously, been in supporting your Circle?

"Oh, yeah. I still talk with [staff member]…Yeah, we are now Facebook friends." – Megan (Interview #2 in 2016)

When asked to finish the sentence: "My Stride Circle is important to me because…" Courtney responded:

"They have shown me unconditional support while still demonstrating which behaviours are appropriate. Inappropriate. They support me but are not afraid to call me on my sh*t, which is extremely helpful…They are a good zone for grounding myself, a safe space to discuss frustrations and find positive solutions." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

Above, we can see how Courtney has developed open relationships with her Circle over time, allowing her to receive guidance and support when she needs it. Additionally, she expresses that Circles provides her with a safe space to discuss issues and find helpful solutions together. As depicted in the quotes in this section, participation in Circles helped encourage women's transformation during reintegration in unique ways, including tailoring methods of support to help meet women's needs. Over time, as relationships developed, they also evolved. Some of the women stayed in touch with Circle members, while others moved or drifted apart naturally. Overall, it was seen that each woman had experienced a positive form of transformation and change throughout her time with Circles. In some cases, the support continued beyond women's pathways of reintegration, blossoming into lasting friendships.

4.3.3.2.7 Issues Experienced by Women in Relation to Support from Circles

Although Circles was found to be mostly helpful for the women, a few issues did arise for some participants. These issues included unreliability, the need for diversity, geographical distance from Circle members and disorganization. This section contains quotes about the problems women encountered during experiences with Circles. The following experiences may be useful to CJI and other reintegration supports for women. Here, Jennifer explains how one of her Circle members did not have consistent communication with her. This left her feeling unsupported:

> "Umm… I think my only frustration is like right now I was talking to [Circle member] about one of my Circle members which is [Circle member] and she hasn't been in here for quite some time and she is not really getting back to them in regards to anything. So… [pauses]…So, like it makes it a little bit discouraging when it comes to like my trust issue that I've had, because I have let her in and now it's like I just need to take my steps back because obviously she is not here and she is not really actively involved. So, it's hard to know like when somebody wants to get involved with Stride Circles. I think that they need to know that they are going to fully be there…" – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

As shown above, Jennifer explained how her Circle member was unreachable, which intensified her trust issues. She suggested that prior to joining, Circle members clarify their availability and commitment to the program, as the women could need support at any point. Below, Ellen explains the need to increase diversity within Circles, implying that most of the women are white, which could cause discomfort for Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) individuals when trying to discuss important issues concerning racial inequity:

> "It's a need to increase the diversity of their volunteer base for Circles and Stride…You maybe don't always want it to be like you teaching people, right? About the importance of race, maybe that doesn't feel helpful for somebody who has that experience all the time…It's very key, I think also having a more diverse… looking at the diversity of your population and what that looks like in a cultural aspect as well, because I think that is often missed. There are gaps as to how much you can connect with somebody if you're not connecting on a cultural level as well…there's different conversations that you can have from that that will add to a different level of deepness and that opens way. Whereas most conversations, me and you can sit down, and you may not ever talk about race." – Ellen (Interview #2 in 2016)

Two out of six participants said they did not experience any challenges with their Stride Circle. Sara said:

"Um you know, I didn't have any issues with the way the Stride Circle ran because the life I lived before and even being in GVI, and even the life now, I'm not naïve to the way people are and I've seen people take advantage of people in Stride Circles and people being kind and you know what I mean. Just people taking advantage of that." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

When asked about experiencing any challenges with Circles or the way that it runs:

"Not at all." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

However, Megan was one of the women who voiced her concerns regarding challenges in her Circle, in her first interview in 2015:

"Well, it kind of sucks because… They're Kitchener and I'm here. But that was the thing. The reason I got involved with the Stride Circles is because I was going to be moving into the Kitchener area…I ended up, we knew I was coming to Hamilton for the parole, for the halfway house." – Megan

Interviewer: Any challenges or frustrations with people in your Circle or the way the Circle runs? And feel free to be honest about that. So could be…

"It's very unorganized." – Megan

Interviewer: Oh, ok. Let's talk about that.

"Well, I don't think…." – Megan

Interviewer: Circles feels unorganized to you?

"Circles feels unorganized but having [Circle member] as a friend is super cool…So, like the Circle part of it is not so much of a Circle anymore, it's more kinda me and [Circle member] It's not even a Circle anymore…I know we talked about me having CJI giving me like a bus ticket once a month or every other month to come out this way to see [Circle member] and do something out here, that never happened. I know last time we talked about YMCA, they were giving out memberships with that. That didn't happen and I ended up getting myself into my own membership and now I'm owing the money." – Megan

Overall, it seemed as if Megan felt that communication from Circles was unclear and disorganized. She also seemed distressed that she was not able to travel to meet up with her Circle. Megan said Circles promised her bus tickets, but this never happened. The geographical

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distance from her Circle was clearly constraining for her. Below, Courtney also mentions how distance from her Circle is an issue. However, she counteracts this by staying in touch over e-mail:

> "The only difficulty is that I'm in a different city now, but we have other ways of communicating instead of in person (e.g., email)". – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

As shown through the quotes in this section, four out of six women encountered unique issues within Circles, which illuminated the women's individual needs. Based on the problems women faced in relation to support from Circles, some of their needs included reliability, organization, a need for greater diversity for BIPOC individuals and closer proximity to Stride Circle members. In addition to these issues, valuable suggestions for change were made by the women. These suggestions will be discussed below.

4.3.3.2.8 Women's Suggestions for Change

Several areas of improvement for the Stride Circle program in addition to prison programming and social expectations were identified by the women. These areas for change stemmed off the challenges women had in relation to Circles, incarceration, and community reintegration. Aspects that women felt could be enhanced included commitment from Circle members, programming in prison, funding, the scheduling of meetings and actions towards creating awareness about the Stride program in general. The quotes in this section outline the unmet needs of the women and suggestions for change. Here, Jennifer explains the experience she had of one of her Circle members not showing up and being unreachable:

> "Yeah. And I understand that there is obviously gonna be things out of control, but to at least come and say this is like what's going on and I won't be here for a bit, or I need to take a step back, I think that would be a little more respectful than just not coming at all and not saying anything. To me… it's honestly a bit disrespectful and yeah that's my only frustration." – Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2016)

Jennifer's remark seemed to imply that commitment and consistency from Circle members is essential for women in the program. Next, Ellen suggests programming in prison that would help build skills needed for community reintegration such as learning how to cook on a budget:

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"So you never know how that can then, even a simple thing that can um, cooking classes, like you're on a budget when you're in there and a lot of time it ends up people are going to buy the easily processed food that you can cook and sometimes for some women they don't know how to spend the money properly so they're getting a lot of junk or whatever. If you structure program, they have a proper kitchen that you can go in and you can teach or someone comes to the houses and they can do a cooking program like that that teaches them how to cook on a budget. When they come out, they know how to budget themselves." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

Below, Sara mentions that Stride members are not financially supported during training, which could imply the need for more funding to compensate staff members and/or volunteers for their time dedicated to Circles, the women and community:

"So, I kinda was okay with all the rules and regulations. And like I said, as our friendship built, because in the Stride training they wouldn't say like financially help out your Stride person, or your Circle person. You know what I mean?" – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Leslie did not experience any challenges with her Circle. However, Megan wished there was a more structured schedule in place for meeting with Stride members:

"I wish we had like more of a schedule like meeting you know every third week of the month or on the 15th of the month…" – Megan (Interview #2 in 2016)

Here, Courtney expresses her thoughts after the interviewer asks her a question:

Interviewer: How would you like these challenges addressed?

"Nothing more can be done, but e-mail and other forms of communication are a good alternative." – Courtney (Interview #1 in 2015)

Courtney's thoughts transitioned from her first interview to the second. By her second interview, she acknowledged that Stride members provide consistent forms of emotional support for women, while amplifying women's confidence. She also felt that it would be good if more people supported the Stride program and that any way to make it a bigger project would be ideal:

"It would be good if Stride more resources like if more people knew about Stride and supported Stride. Because just the fact that they provide consistent emotional support to give women confidence is the main thing that women need for long term assistance.

Because what you need is to trust in yourself and know that you can solve any situation, because that is the only consistent thing you're going to have in life. You. So, invest in it. And that is what it feels like Stride workers are doing. They are investing in us emotionally so that we can keep doing that and perpetuate the goodness. But it's really hard when there are only 5 federal women's prisons or penitentiaries across Canada. So that means that most women in the jails aren't local. So, it is hard to get a Stride Circle that can capture where you're actually going. Because part of that consistent support, I bet for many women, would be the physical closeness of being able to go out for coffee with your Circle member if you need to. So, yeah. Just any way to enlarge Stride would be great." – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

As shown through the quotes in this section about women's suggestions for change, there is still room for improvement within the Stride Circle program. There is also a need for leisure programming within the prison that is more relevant to gaining skills in preparation for community reintegration. Suggestions included the need for more funding for Stride members, the need for diversity for BIPOC women, providing assistance/making it easier for women to geographically access Circle members, delivering programs to help women budget while in prison and making Stride a bigger, more well-known project for all women in need. These suggestions may be helpful for CJI, other reintegration efforts, leisure practitioners and CSC Canada.

4.4 Summary of Findings

Learning about the authentic experiences of women who participated in the Stride Circle program is central to developing an understanding of how community is built for women throughout reintegration. For women leaving prison, these experiences involve social, emotional, educational, occupational, environmental, recreational, leisure and community related considerations. Social experiences dictated how and why women become involved with the Stride program, facilitated by CJI.

Depending on the unique life experiences of each woman, there may be certain constraints associated with lack of support in areas of access to leisure activities, reintegration efforts, organization, transportation, proper scheduling to access Circles, help with overcoming addiction, past-trauma, and the ability to trust others. For example, it is necessary for women to engage in healthy activities and have a positive environment to support a successful path of reintegration. Therefore, women may find it stressful having to work around restrictions in order to maintain a healthy lifestyle, which is connected to a successful reintegration. These findings

also indicate that there is a paradoxical nature to successful community reintegration within the prison setting. Paradoxes exist in relation to women's needs for equal access to exercise equipment, rehabilitation, and programming to prepare for reintegration from the onset of incarceration. Moreover, social, emotional, and spiritual support, along with physical and mental health needs not being met within the prison environment seem to be of major concern.

It is clear how improving well-being while reintegrating by nurturing relationships and building a sense of community can contribute to developing a nuanced understanding of women's experiences after prison. The presented sub-themes also convey how women rely on themselves, volunteers, and other participants to cultivate and enrich these experiences. It is important to recognize the connections between each of the themes, various sub-themes and elements within discussed above. These connections will be addressed in the discussion chapter to foster a deeper understanding of how reintegration is supported, and community is built for women through the Stride program.

A special thank you goes to each woman who participated in this study, for their willingness, openness, and powerful vulnerability in sharing wisdom from personal experiences with the world. A deep appreciation also goes to every interviewer who dedicated their time and care towards learning about the women's journeys, thus contributing greatly towards the foundation for this thesis. The next section includes Words of Wisdom from the women.

4.4.1 Words of Wisdom

This section was created to highlight some of the most meaningful words said by the women during their interviews. These words can be used as pieces of wisdom and hope for women affiliated with the criminal justice system, Stride Circle staff members and volunteers, and all other readers who simply wish to be inspired by the women's journeys:

"And when you have somebody who believes in you it makes all the difference."
Jennifer (Interview #2 in 2017)

"I am still a human being, yes, I've done something wrong, and this is my situation, but I am still somebody." – Ellen (Interview #1 in 2015)

"No, you can't ever change your past, but I've been able to change things where like I've tried to make up for the past." – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

"But you see with all of that. I'll never give up. Doesn't matter what is thrown at me." – Leslie (Interview #1 in 2015)

"Wanting to do it for myself, you have to do it for you or else you will never do it at all." – Megan (Interview #2 in 2016)

"Sounding board, unconditional acceptance, freedom to be and discover myself, as opposed to presenting social norms or expectations to which I ought to conform." Courtney (feedback on the Stride Circle Program, Interview #1 in 2015)

Chapter 5: Understanding Women's Experiences of Community Reintegration

5.1 Introduction

The study of the experiences of community reintegration for women leaving prison provides many critical insights for women affiliated with the criminal justice system, the Stride Circle program, CSC, the Government of Canada, policy makers, leisure practitioners, and other reintegration supports with the aim of helping women. Thankfully, reintegration programs which aspire to help people leaving prison are receiving greater interest from researchers. However, it is clear that such programs require more funding and awareness in order to implement support, belonging and community into the lives of people leaving prison.

Relatedly, the pieces of wisdom presented by women in this thesis inform our understanding of the range and extent of experiences and programs in women's prisons, or lack thereof, in addition to the value of reintegration supports, staff, and volunteers who are involved. As outlined in the findings chapter, insights were arranged around three major themes that emerged from data analysis: constraints, empowerment, and support. In summary, women highlighted the value and need for emotional support, proper programming within the prison and adequate access to resources. Women also conveyed the importance of self-empowerment, leisure participation, spirituality and empowerment through social opportunities. Additionally, self-improvement while reintegrating, and experiences of gaining (or not gaining) a sense of community were identified as integral to a successful community re-entry. To highlight the new understandings generated from this study, this chapter is divided into five major sections: Community Reintegration, Re(building) the Self, Restorative Justice, Paradoxes of Prison Rehabilitation and Reflections on Research Design.

5.2 Community Reintegration

"I lost everything when I went into prison," Ellen, one of the participants in this study, honestly stated this in her first interview in 2015, regarding her personal belongings. Ellen's experiences are well supported in the literature as there is growing evidence in the era of mass incarceration, with countless people who have been incarcerated losing their belongings (Maruna et al., 2006), social connections, and the ability to have any control over life upon being confined

to the walls of federal prison (Fochi et al., 2017). The implications of being taken away from one's life due to imprisonment are extensive and include potential long-term effects on the positive aspects of one's life, for example: deprivation of personal satisfaction and freedom (Amali et al, 2021) along with disconnection from loved ones and a lack of access to meaningful activities (Pitt, 2021). Eventually, when released from Canadian federal prison, women are often left to deal with these issues alone, which may persist while attempting to reintegrate. Thus, women may encounter a challenging environment that in many cases, can hinder the ability to become functional members of community. The constraints encountered by women will be discussed in more detail shortly.

As previously touched upon in the literature review, it has been well-known how people who are released from prison may face various constraints that could affect the potential to be considered law-abiding citizens (Griffiths et al., 2007). Like Griffith's study, the findings in this thesis highlighted women's intense experiences of constraints, before, during and after incarceration – all of which potentially affected women's abilities to reintegrate in different ways, as each woman's path was unique. In some cases, throughout reintegration women had to fight against various forces, including stigma, continued control during parole, and the adverse effects of incarceration.

Thankfully, the Stride Circle program seemed to significantly help women during incarceration and community reintegration by offering distinct forms of support which were not sufficiently provided by prison programming. These findings align with Fortune et al.'s (2020), who explained how Stride Circles provides opportunities for belonging and inclusion, which appear when women who leave prison experience acceptance from community members and when both parties are supported and willing to form mutual bonds. These scholars' findings further support the idea that effective reintegration programming can enhance the lives of women affiliated with the criminal justice system, along with surrounding community members. Not only can such programs help women during reintegration, but they also seem to assist in the development of mutual connections between women and members of community – helping to fight existing and potential stigma against women who experience incarceration (Fortune et al., 2020).

Previously, in the literature review of this thesis, the term social reintegration was used to refer to women's journeys after prison. However, during and post-analysis, I chose to use the broader term community reintegration due to the knowledge I gained from women's experiences, as I found the term social reintegration seemed to only describe a part of community re-entry. Instead, I discovered how the process of community reintegration is quite complex and includes much more than socially reintegrating. In the literature review, I had used a definition provided by Griffiths et al. (2007), implying how social reintegration is the support given to people who leave prison. However, after analysis, it had become clear how simply being provided support did not ensure that women would feel sufficient in all areas needed to successfully reintegrate into community. In fact, women often require personalized forms of support to gain accessibility to the greater environment and to feel accepted in community. It also became apparent how women often require preparation in prison for community reintegration, as well after being released, but unfortunately do not always receive it adequately.

Doherty et al.'s (2014) definition of community reintegration, which was mentioned in the literature review, seems to be the most relevant description, as it pertains directly to the women's experiences in this study. As such, these researchers defined community reintegration as a complicated process which involves many simultaneous social, cognitive, and behavioural changes. Being sufficiently integrated into community encompasses the development of a positive social support network, employment skills, the need for community-based help, avoiding substance abuse along with people who engage in such acts, and a commitment to take part in prosocial behaviour while becoming a fully contributing community member (Doherty et al., 2014). Each of the women in this thesis took different routes in their paths to reintegration, while supporting themselves, receiving help from family and friends, as well as seeking external support from the Stride Circle program and other community services.

During interviews, women expressed the importance of having a positive social support network, indicating how support from friends, family and Circles all seemed to help ease the stress which is often induced by the process of community reintegration. These findings align with those of McLeod et al.'s (2020) recent study, which emphasizes the importance of using peer health mentoring to help women who have experienced incarceration. In this study, the researchers found that people are at a much higher risk of negative health outcomes during

transitions from prison to community. They concluded that peer mentors can provide women with helpful and adaptable support throughout community reintegration, during which strengthening women's supports is crucial to increase access to social services, health care, and to lower the risks of mortality and morbidity. Essentially, findings from this thesis help to build upon McLeod et al.'s work by showing that not only does peer support help women access vital services and lower health risks, but it can also mitigate stress before it mounts to more serious conditions during reintegration, such as relapse, or recidivism.

Relatedly, the findings from this thesis extend current knowledge about basic and personal needs throughout community re-entry, as women provided advice on how the system can better support reintegration. Some of these suggestions include the need for better prison programming which helps prepare women for community reintegration, to increase awareness of reintegration supports such as the Stride Circle program and others and greater commitment from program members. More flexibility and structure regarding program scheduling, and a strong need to increase funding for reintegration programs was also suggested by the women. To add, by the end of the analysis it had become apparent that if it weren't for the external sources of support received during imprisonment and reintegration (including Stride Circles, family, and other community services), it is not clear as to how or where women would have received sufficient support from. This points towards the need for more programs which help prepare women for community reintegration during incarceration.

Humerick (2020) explored the need for more gender-specific programs to support both currently and formerly incarcerated women in having a successful community resettlement experience. The same researcher highlighted how most programming designed for women affiliated with the criminal justice system has focused on prison re-entry instead of women's transitions from prison into community, leaving a great gap in this topic of study. Similarly, this gap seemed to appear in this thesis, as women expressed the need for stronger and more relevant reintegration supports in general. In doing so, the women's experiences enhance current understandings of the different types of support that women may need to achieve a successful path from prison into community.

Thus, the findings of this thesis extend our knowledge about the quality of current reintegration supports and the need for future supports to encompass a variety of effective

techniques to stop the cycle of repeated crime by offering programs that help prevent recidivism for people leaving prison (Griffiths et al., 2007). By taking women's first-hand experiences and perceptions of community reintegration into consideration, this thesis helps shape our understanding of the notion of community reintegration as an issue that must be looked at and tackled through multiple viewpoints and initiatives. The perspectives presented throughout this discussion have emerged directly from the analysis of women's real-life experiences (prior to, during and after incarceration) and bring together the women's and CJI's perspectives. This exploration of six women's pathways of community resettlement, who were incarcerated in and leaving GVI, also broadens our perceptions of how the CSC, Government of Canada, re-entry programs, and recreation practitioners can improve their practices regarding reintegration supports for people who are currently in and will be leaving prison in the near future.

5.2.1 Understanding Constraints to Community Reintegration

In addition to recognizing how reintegration is a complex process which needs to be more publicly understood and supported, tackling constraints to it came across as crucial in achieving a successful resettlement. Receiving support with priorities such as finding housing, employment, moving, transportation, staying away from drug use, as well as emotional support were all highlighted as areas of need by the women. Unfortunately, constraints such as structural powers within the prison, tight restrictions imposed upon women during release, past and ongoing personal life experiences, dealing with stigma and having to avoid recidivism all became apparent obstacles faced by the women, which came in the way of achieving priorities. It is also important to note how stigma associated with having a criminal record is one of the most significant and well-researched constraints to a successful transition and reintegration, as it can affect women's access to safety, opportunities for employment, education, housing and more (Goger et al., 2021).

Fortunately, women reported having positive experiences with receiving support from family and the Stride Circle program. Learning about women's experiences clarified how reintegration must involve forming positive bonds with community members, while encouraging reciprocity, trust, and support between both parties. However, as women and programs such as Stride Circles attempt to overcome constraints in hopes of building community, we must continue to address the power structures and scarcity of resources that have historically plagued

such initiatives, often hindering the ability of programs and the willingness of various parties to collaborate with one another (Castro & Gould, 2019). Thus, creating awareness of the positive impacts that women experienced in tackling challenges by receiving support from Circles is an essential part of this thesis.

As mentioned previously, women encountered a variety of constraints while re-entering community after prison, including structural powers, which often seemed to come in the way of meeting personal needs. The women's experiences of constraints enhance our understanding of structural powers defined by Strange (1988), who stated it is the ability to control how processes are carried out within institutions and for the people within them. In fact, it seems as if the effects of structural powers often extend from institutions into community and everyday life for women leaving prison. The powers encountered by women in this thesis included the state power of incarceration itself, the punitive measures within prison that often continue after, and systemic inequity in prison and community. For example, some of the women in this thesis emphasized the stressful impacts of imprisonment, including the lack of ability to deal with life responsibilities (e.g., attending to financial concerns, connecting with children and loved ones, or securing a living space) while in prison due to the severity of restrictions imposed during incarceration and at times, upon release.

The overall lack of ability to connect with important external sources of help often caused women to feel unsupported during imprisonment and upon release into community. These power structures, and others seemed to lead women to experience lack of control, lack of access to reintegration supports from the beginning of incarceration, constraints to accessing leisure in prison and community, along with an overall disconnection from community during and even after prison. These findings align with and advance Armstrong's (2020) recent findings on the violent nature of prison experiences, and how an underlying reason is because court systems misuse the idea of rehabilitation and sentence extension to deter focus from the state's responsibility to comply with its duties to protect the rights and deservingness of people in prison. In fact, based on the women's experiences, rehabilitation was rarely implemented during incarceration. To elaborate, the paradoxes of rehabilitation in prisons will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

As mentioned in the literature review, Fortune (2011) discovered the benefits of relationships in supporting women as they encountered the strange experience of having to leave prison and try to reintegrate, while seeking acceptance and a sense of belonging within community. Thankfully, these benefits were seen through the growth and connection women experienced in Circle interactions, as women began to grow trust through experiences and support from members of community. Through cooperation with Circles, women also seemed to re-discover self-potential and enhance self-image while feeling supported in life, making community reintegration an easier process overall. These findings relate to those of Thomas et al.'s (2019), who found that there is an urgent need to plan and critique programs for people leaving prison by improving natural social bonds and helping people who have experienced incarceration to meaningfully engage in community. The real-life experiences of the women in this thesis extend upon Thomas et al.'s findings regarding the need for a stronger understanding of social support for people being released from prison – by revealing the power of positive social connections formed through Circles, and the benefits women gained from participating in this program.

Additionally, Scraton and Carlton (2017) revealed the severely exhausting consequences of the institutional neglect of women in prison, leading into the idea of abolition, which strongly suggests that prison conditions for women must not only be improved, but must be completely transformed for real positive change to occur in the lives of women involved with the criminal justice system. Similarly, Susan Strange – a highly respected British scholar who was well-known for researching structural powers and capitalism, once said, "These barriers need to be overthrown, broken up, and done away with," (as cited in Mytelka, 2018). In this sense, Strange implies that abolition may be more beneficial than reform. Relatedly, today many critical researchers are interested in finding routes to social transformation (Mytelka, 2018). However, as stated by Castro and Gould (2019), we will only understand the need for commitment towards quality of reintegration supports if we facilitate and engage in publicly transparent dialogue that involves the most important stakeholders (e.g., policy makers, funders, and researchers) to foster conversations about high quality practice for programming for people who experience incarceration.

Furthermore, expanding connections beyond those made before and during prison appeared to be a vital need for women, and this process was observed as women's relationships with Circle members evolved. Building community ties is a crucial step that helps foster reintegration for people who are released from prison (Thomas et al., 2019). As such, women highlighted the constraints to forming important bonds in life, which were ongoing from before imprisonment and occurred within the prison system and in community (e.g., trying to avoid people affiliated with crime, experiencing a lack of warmth from prison staff, attempting to secure employment or befriend neighbours with a criminal record after leaving prison, etc.). These experiences and challenges are significant to understanding the complexity of how community transitions are often hindered for women. Initially, women may leave prison with the hopes of feeling liberated and redeemed, but with structural powers, past and ongoing personal life experiences, stigma in society and the ultimate constraint of having to avoid recidivism – successful community reintegration is not always easily achieved.

Opportunities for building social connections and the convenience of social services being offered both seemed to be important factors in determining whether women built a sense of community during reintegration. For example, one woman, Sara, expressed how upon release from prison, she felt as if she had no supports arranged for her. She seemed to feel generally unassisted by others, both emotionally and with gaining protective care of her children. This lack of support may have caused her to feel socially insecure in community, which seemed to contribute to her to relapse and unfortunately, eventually recidivism. After relapsing, Sara ended up back in prison for an additional year on top of her original three year sentence. Relatedly, when Courtney was released, she seemed to be highly fearful of moving to a new city to start a new life, which she described as feeling "pretty scary." The fear she experienced after discharge could have been contributed to by the lasting effects of feeling socially distanced from society during incarceration, leading into an intense disconnection from community.

These findings mirror the work of Shoshana Pollack (2009), who reported on the results from a qualitative study with 68 women who had experienced incarceration in Canada, exploring women's experiences in prison and of community re-entry. Pollack found that extended prison sentences can intensify women's previously held issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, debt etc.) as being away from family, social opportunities, priorities, and employment for long periods of

time can contribute to lack of action, detachment from community and immense feelings of alienation. Similarly for women in this thesis, the stigma associated with incarceration, which includes the label produced by imprisonment and fear of the 'prisoner identity' itself, often seemed to interfere with the ability to develop a sense of community.

For instance, one woman even went through great lengths to change her name after leaving prison to achieve steady employment. She felt compelled to do this because after revealing her history of incarceration, one of her employer's had chosen to let her go. Therefore, the stigma attached to having a criminal record can make it challenging for women to successfully land and maintain employment after prison. Pollack (2009) also found that issues within the prison system contribute to the marginalization and isolation that women experience in community after leaving prison. Interestingly, in this researcher's work, the women had indicated a strong need for the development of more social support networks to help overcome exclusion in community. Thus, it is imperative that members of community work together to create a strong support system for women leaving prison. As Meiners and Petty (2018) emphasized, focus should be placed on resisting harsh forms of punishment in the prison system, and instead, working towards collective support and freedom.

The findings of this thesis bring into effect the suggestions of women in Pollack's study by showing how people can build community and achieve a successful transition from prison into community, by engaging in supportive social and leisure experiences through positive peer support groups such as the Stride Circle program. In this sense, the women's suggestions in Pollack's study were exercised and shown to be beneficial through the six women's journeys in this thesis. These insights enhance our understanding of the well-known innate human need to experience a sense of belonging in community (Lewis et al., 2016), in this case, after being released from prison.

In addition to illuminating the overwhelming constraints faced by women, the analysis in this thesis showed how the experiences and needs of women re-entering community are elaborate. More specifically, women emphasized the importance of receiving adequate emotional support, access to sufficient resources, better programming in prison, and the need for a greater sense of belonging. In fact, sadly, some of the women felt that community was not a place to feel at home. Women explained experiences of incarceration at GVI and the adverse effects of

imprisonment that became apparent after leaving prison. Some of the adverse effects mentioned by women included fear of social situations after prison, lack of trust towards others, and the worsening of mental health conditions due to lack of care during incarceration. Additionally, low self-esteem, decreased self-confidence, poor self image, and lack of supports upon reintegration due to the limited freedom to arrange them during incarceration, all appeared to be some of the negative effects of imprisonment.

The association between experiences in prison and during community reintegration has been well documented in the literature (Wicks, 2017). In Wicks' study regarding the influence of imprisonment and social reintegration on mental health, the participants had revealed that mental health help was not clearly offered in prison, and some even stated that no such services were provided to them at all. Although reintegration allowed for some services to become more accessible, Wicks' participants often emphasized that it was challenging to find mental health services on their own. This researcher's work sheds light on the concern that many people who are released from prison attempt to reintegrate into society with inadequate resources, thus leading to unsuccessful results. The same researcher found that providing access to resources for people returning to community after prison did not seem to be a priority of carceral policy. Instead, prison policies tend to focus more on convicting people of crime and inflicting punishment for their crimes (Wicks, 2017).

Similar to Wicks' work, findings from this thesis indicate how women did not feel adequately supported by the prison system during incarceration and reintegration efforts. Instead, women seemed to rely on support from family and Circles, who helped with needs such as finding important resources, transportation to and from appointments, grocery shopping, emotional support, searching for and arranging housing, plus more. The results from this thesis reinforce the idea that there is an extreme lack of support and rehabilitation provided to women in and leaving prison – further emphasizing the critical need for more well-developed reintegration programs for women who have experienced incarceration.

It is also crucial that high quality well-being and mental health supports should exist within Canadian prison policy and be easily accessible to women, in order to better support proper rehabilitation and understand their effects on reintegration (Wicks, 2017). A more recent study conducted by Cheah et al. (2020) also found that people in prison who participate in the

current rehabilitation programs being offered often feel as if the programs fail to provide the preparation necessary to tackle the challenges of returning to and reintegrating into community. Participants in Cheah et al.'s study admitted to experiencing feelings of powerlessness, hopelessness, and helplessness after encountering various negative post-prison experiences. These negative emotions progressed over time and caused people leaving prison to develop a decrease in self-esteem and self-confidence along with negative self perceptions (Cheah et al., 2020).

Similarly, the women in this thesis reported an extreme lack of helpful programming in prison, in addition to limited control over life during incarceration, and in many cases after. These issues seemed to contribute to poor mental and physical health (e.g., anxiety and feeling physically unfit) in prison and during reintegration. These findings help to advance both Wicks' (2017) and Cheah et al.'s (2020) studies, because with peer support through Circles, women seemed to develop positive self-images while improving upon self-esteem and self-confidence. Thus, results from this thesis highlight the benefits of receiving adequate support prior to and during reintegration for women leaving prison.

It is also critical to recognize the overwhelming constraints that women have faced prior to entering prison, as well as while serving their sentences and how the obstacles faced during incarceration can further affect one's well-being during reintegration (Wicks, 2017). Existing results from various studies show the connection between experiences in prison and anxiety, depression, psychological trauma, suicidal tendencies, and other mental conditions that women may have had previously and have been intensified through imprisonment (Petersilia, 2001). Petersilia stated how people leaving prison are often released into a parole system which offers limited help and enforces conditions that almost always bring failure during attempts to reintegrate. Their article examined the efficacy of parole in correctional systems in North America at the time and found that there was essentially no organized attention paid by policy makers to help people upon release from prison – a problem that had been labeled as 'prisoner re-entry.' Today, the literature refers to this as community reintegration, yet there is unfortunately still a great lack of attention paid by the prison system, policy makers and community to the well-being and security of women during reintegration. This has been shown through the scarcity of reintegration supports offered, as women in this thesis even stated how

they wished there were more efforts like Stride Circles to support women prior to, during, and throughout community re-entry.

In addition, Petersilia (2001) highlighted that it is crucial to develop a better understanding of the key components of successful reintegration, and if this doesn't happen, the gains of reduction in crime may diminish, unless we acknowledge the total effects of people who are newly released from prison – on communities, children, and families within. Findings from this thesis build upon Petersilia's work and many others who have previously identified the need to develop a strong understanding of what women returning to community truly need to live as fully functioning citizens. It is clear that women require more than just parole to reintegrate. Sufficient resources to help with personal needs such as addiction issues, finding housing, employment opportunities, developing supportive relationships, a healthy leisure lifestyle and a positive outlook on life are all some of the important concerns addressed through the Stride Circle program for women. Future reintegration supports can use the knowledge shared in this thesis to develop effective programs that help women achieve a successful reintegration for the betterment and safety of women, their families and community members.

Two important factors that became apparent throughout analysis as being strongly related to women's experiences of community re-entry are the availability of services and opportunities for women to make social connections. Due to the oppressive nature of incarceration, there are limited resources and social opportunities for women in prison, which often continue into experiences of release, partially because of ongoing restrictions during parole. In Pedlar et al.'s (2018) book, it was found how women attempting to reintegrate needed access to the social determinants of health including mental and social healthcare, financial services, shelter, and employment, which some of the women had expressed felt impossible to achieve. Similarly, women in this thesis exhibited experiences of disconnection from community during and after incarceration, making it challenging to make the social connections required to attend to vital personal needs.

For example, some of the women expressed feeling a serious void in their social life while in prison, and even during reintegration. This is important to note, as loneliness in people who experience incarceration has been linked to poor mental health (Kao et al., 2014). Interestingly, the connections between past trauma and loneliness in people who have been

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incarcerated, is largely understudied (Kao et al., 2014), and thus remains a highly unaddressed gap in the literature. Researchers have also highlighted how loneliness in people affiliated with crime, has been linked to increased rates of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal tendencies (Brown & Day, 2008). As such, it is critical to understand the impact of treating loneliness in women who experience incarceration.

Thankfully, women described social voids being filled through interactions with Circles, which emphasizes the positive value of social connections in treating loneliness, and the need for a strong social support system. However, the lack of such services and social opportunities often hindered women from meeting their full potential during imprisonment and even during reintegration, sometimes causing additional stress, relapse, and a return to prison. The women's experiences in this thesis reinforce Pedlar et al.'s (2018) findings, by showing how limitations for women to make the right connections to attend to important needs, unfortunately still exist today. Thankfully, this thesis' findings also extend upon Brown and Day's (2008) as well as Kao et al.'s (2014) outcomes, by shedding light on the benefits that positive social networks can have in women's lives by potentially reducing loneliness, both in prison and after. Emphasis should be placed on forming more programs like Stride Circles to help women transition successfully from prison to community and stay out of prison.

To add to the long list of constraints, several women in this thesis experienced inadequate and unequal access to the opportunity to engage in physical exercise during their time in federal prison. Interestingly, although the right to be physically active is not clearly presented in international human rights, it seems fair to derive it from the well-known human rights such as the right to rest and leisure and the right to health (Messing et al., 2021). Despite these human rights being well-established, one of the women mentioned how she and other women she knows, felt that their physical health worsened during imprisonment, affecting overall well-being and the ability to function during reintegration. She also drew attention towards the struggle of trying to access such resources in prison, implying that there was difficulty attempting to use exercise equipment due to unfairness (e.g., some women placed their name on the sign-up list repetitively, which did not leave room for others to sign up) and the limitations of available equipment. Several women emphasized these points, one of whom mentioned being highly

physically active before entering prison, leaving her to feel physically unhealthy and unprepared for reintegration upon release.

The lack of physical activity experienced by women during incarceration is important to note because regular engagement in physical activity is known to have positive influences on well-being and mental health (World Health Organization, 2016). Interestingly, in Norman's (2017) book about the engagement of physical activity within prisons, the author illustrates how the prison atmosphere itself disrupts women's abilities to participate in physical activity, implying that studying this topic is paradoxical because prison spaces have been designed to physically confine people. Much like Norman's findings, the women in this thesis stressed the impacts of a lack of access to spaces that allow for physical activity in prison.

The lack of equal access to important resources within prison seemed to affect women's overall health and well-being during incarceration and after. This motivated some of the women to join a gym and seek other social and leisure opportunities after release. However, both Leslie and Megan experienced challenges accessing the gym during reintegration as well. This may have been due to a combination of unmet transportation needs, an overwhelmingly busy lifestyle (e.g., many unattended priorities to confront upon release) and financial limitations. A Stride member was willing to help Megan achieve her goal of joining a gym and said they would assist in helping her get a membership. However, Megan stressed how this never worked out, which she believed was due to a lack of funding for the Stride Circle program. Clearly the overarching constraint of trying to resettle into community after prison, impacted women's abilities to attend to physical exercise needs during reintegration. Moreover, the lack of physical exercise women experienced during prison seemed to have lasting effects on women's overall motivation and well-being upon release.

Further, the limitation upon women's leisure lifestyles was identified as a major constraint in prison, with adverse effects on the ability to reintegrate smoothly. Due to the significant lack of opportunity to participate in leisure activities of women's personal choices in prison, women often had no option but to practice leisure in a place with little to no control or autonomy. Restrictions upon leisure in prison, clearly affect the nature of women's leisure choices in prison and reintegration, as many may choose to indulge in unhealthy activities, such

as drug use, as a way to cope with the hardships of feeling excluded and isolated from normal life in community.

Interestingly, it seems as if the limitations on leisure in prison have not changed for almost the last three decades, as is made clear in Frey and Delaney's (1996) work about the role of leisure engagement in prison. The authors found that there was very little participation in recreational activities inside the prison environment. More importantly, in Yuen et al.'s (2012) study, women highlighted the benefits of leisure engagement, which included lower feelings of exclusion in community, indicating leisure's helpfulness in achieving a more successful reintegration. Gallant et al. (2015) also outlined how recreational programs can serve as effective methods to manage behaviour in prison, while helping to enhance mental and physical health. Therefore, depriving women of leisure opportunities in prison, also means to deprive women of some of their coping strategies for stress, potentially causing stress to mount to dangerous levels upon release and during reintegration.

Not having adequate access to healthy leisure while in prison may have adverse effects on the quality of incarceration and reintegration. In fact, denying women the right to engage in the healthy leisure activities they once enjoyed, can also be seen as a moral problem, which relates to an individual's right to pleasure (Gallant et al., 2015). Sadly, this could reduce women's future interest in beneficial leisure activities. Consequently, it is crucial to recognize how women in this thesis emphasized the value of engaging in leisure with Circle members during and after prison.

Some of the activities which seemed to bring women joy while relieving stress from the negative impacts of incarceration and life in general, included role playing, knitting, arts and crafts, community walks, talking to one another, coffee house meetups, listening to music, playing guitar, practicing spirituality and more. The women's experiences in this thesis, along with research from Gallant et al. (2015), Pedlar et al. (2005) and many other scholars, including Pham (2013) all clearly indicate the benefits of leisure participation for women in prison and during resettlement. Not only does healthy leisure participation enhance mental and physical wellness (Gallant et al., 2015), but it also helps people find purpose and meaning in life, while helping to discover themselves (Pham, 2013).

In fact, even more recently, Marcoux Rouleau (2020), highlighted how we must reconceptualize the importance of leisure for women in prison, as it contributes to well-being, provides social benefits, and even falls in line with current prison policies of coercion, while increasing normativity. Therefore, it is imperative that women be offered the opportunity to engage freely in healthy leisure activities (such as the ones previously mentioned) during prison, to help relieve stress induced by life and the prison environment itself. Clearly, positive leisure engagement can provide women with healthy ways to cope with personal issues, including anxiety, depression, loneliness, lack of meaningful activity and more.

For these reasons, it is essential to understand that without sufficient access to healthy leisure while in prison, women seemed to feel deprived of meaningful experiences during incarceration and even upon release. These, and many of the other constraints discussed in this thesis, often extended into women's experiences of community reintegration. To add to the adverse effects of imprisonment, women also encountered, endured, and dealt with stigma in society after release, which seemed to intensify previous feelings of social exclusion induced by the punitive prison atmosphere. The mentioned impacts of incarceration, in addition to underlying issues from before entering prison, can both affect women's well-being and ability to reintegrate after release.

As shown, women in this study seemed to experience a lack of meaningful and helpful activities to engage in during incarceration, which, in many cases, directly affected reintegration negatively. These findings align with a recent study by Stephenson et al. (2021), who suggested that during imprisonment, spending less time out of the cell and in purposeful activity is associated with higher risk of suicide and worsening mental health conditions. These adverse effects, caused by barriers in Canadian federal prison atmospheres (and other countries who have yet to adopt sufficient restorative justice approaches), can have continuous negative impacts on women's abilities to function in society after leaving prison.

Alternatively, one of the women in this thesis, experienced positive outcomes from engaging in light physical activity (specifically walking trips in community) after prison with members of her Circle. She reported feeling more comfortable being in community on her own, after taking walks with her Circle members, and she felt a positive impact on her general mood. Accordingly, shared participation in leisure between women and community members seemed to

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help to increase feelings of confidence and comfort in social situations during reintegration. This thesis helps to expand upon Stephenson et al.'s (2021) work by showing the importance and benefits of engaging in meaningful and purposeful activity during and after prison, and how doing so may contribute to better mental and physical health conditions as well as a more positive reintegration experience for women.

Overall analysis of the women's words showed how a great lack of attention was paid towards meeting women's personal needs during incarceration, by both the prison system and women themselves. For women, the lack of freedom, motivation and resources during imprisonment seemed to be major factors contributing to the inability to meet personal needs, given the prison system's punitive and restrictive nature, which is yet to be changed. It is critical to note that the severe lack of self-care and social opportunity in prison, often carried into experiences of reintegration, delaying women from reaching personal goals and full potential.

Being in prison and away from society with limited resources and support clearly has adverse impacts on women's abilities to live sufficiently after prison. Also, during resettlement women are often faced with stigma when attempting to attend to personal needs. Pedlar et al.'s (2018) in-depth work on issues of community re-entry mentioned how women in transition often face stigma directly due to the 'offender identity.' Stigma is particularly at play during scenarios in which women may seek employment, education, housing, or social connection and feel rejected based on history of incarceration (Keene et al., 2018). Thus, for people who have been to prison, facing incarceration stigma in community can be severely exhausting and constraining (Keene et al., 2018), and the issues it causes for women will be discussed in more depth shortly.

Moreover, extra pressure is often placed on many women leaving prison who are mothers, for which reintegration can be extremely stressful (Breuer et al., 2021). In fact, almost two thirds of women in prison are parents to at least one child (Lobo & Howard, 2021) and have historical patterns of being disadvantaged, which is further aggravated by the trauma inflicted during incarceration (Breuer et al., 2021). Also, some of the women in this thesis experienced immense feelings of fear upon release from prison, similar to Pedlar et al.'s (2018) findings where leaving prison triggered fear for women and presented staggering obstacles. The same authors found that while undergoing such emotional turmoil, women were also trying to find a

sense of belonging in community and attempting to re-learn how to connect with children, family, and others.

Thankfully, as shown in this thesis, Circle members helped women communicate with their children while in prison by being liaisons between the two and showing support to women during experiences of emotional turmoil. This is an important form of assistance that many women who are currently in prison and in the middle of reintegration may need. Appreciatively, support from Circles seemed to successfully lift women's spirits to help attend to priorities and daily activities. Thus, women's experiences explored in this thesis extend the work of Pedlar et al.'s (2018) and others, by showing how personalized peer support is integral to the process of reintegration.

These findings also mirror Visher and Mallik-Kane's (2007) work, which explained how people released from incarceration receive minimal guidance and inadequate resources and support, often causing community resettlement to be a highly stressful experience. Similarly, Coates (2015) indicated how a criminal record may limit people's access to social services, public housing assistance and other important resources. As shown through the quotes in the findings, women in this thesis also experienced limitations in community, partially due to lack of support from the onset of incarceration, in addition to battling incarceration stigma. By reinforcing these researcher's findings, the insights from this thesis help to strengthen our understanding of women's experiences of community reintegration after prison – specifically regarding the critical need for women to receive sufficient access to resources which promote health, well-being, self-improvement, and a sense of belonging and community. More research is needed to better understand the relationships between reintegration programs and federal prisons, social services and the government, to learn how to increase funding for existing and future reintegration supports for women.

5.2.2 Negative Effects of Incarceration and the Need for Mitigation

In addition to experiencing a lack of guidance, support and access to resources, there is mounting evidence of new and ongoing challenges faced by women upon release, reiterating the adverse effects that incarceration can have on individuals. In fact, both past and recent research shows how there is pain associated with imprisonment, and how incarceration negatively affects

a person's identity, resulting in a loss of meaning and purpose in life along with negative self-images (Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Hoskins & Cobbina, 2020). Scholars continue to expose how the punitive nature of prisons tends to lower the potential positive impacts that rehabilitative programs in prison may have on people (Hoskins & Cobbina, 2020).

Interestingly, some of the women in this thesis felt that prison experiences helped to build emotional strength and greater understanding while providing time for self-reflection. For example, women reported feeling highly disciplined and as if time spent in prison allowed for reflection upon personal life decisions and plans for the future. However, the lasting impacts of constraint over freedom of choice, contributed to women's lack of control and the inability to meet personal needs in prison and even after. The diminished capacity to satisfy personal health needs in prison seemed to affect some of the women's physical and mental health during and after their sentences. Thus, some of the women reported feeling unhealthier upon release from prison, in comparison to upon arrival.

As mentioned, being away from community in prison also seemed to strictly limit women's abilities to attend to finances, which for some, resulted in financial burden upon release. Women mentioned the pressures of dealing with unpaid debt immediately after leaving prison, adding to the already stressful process of reintegration. This aligns with Pogrebin et al.'s (2014) study, in which the researchers found that people leaving prison often face financial issues which can seriously prevent the ability to be economically equipped to deal with important expenses during re-entry. These scholars found that due to the commonality of facing such economic struggles, many people returning to community from prison believe it is impossible to be financially successful in life at all – further affecting hope for the future and the overall capacity to successfully reintegrate into society.

Participants in Pogrebin's (2014) study often seemed to rely on family members for help, which was expressed to be embarrassing at times, as well as acquaintances or friends to help find employment. Fortunately, women in this thesis mentioned receiving support from Circles with job searches, which helped ease financial burden for some. One woman also received grocery gift cards from her church as donations, which helped make food more accessible. When possible, Circle members even provided transportation to attend to women's needs. Hence, these findings help extend upon Pogrebin et al.'s by showing how having a strong social support

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system during incarceration and reintegration can help ease financial and employment challenges for women, making it somewhat less complicated to deal with certain obligations upon release.

Some of the women's experiences also shed light on the fear that women may have of returning to community after leaving prison, for a variety of reasons, including undealt with responsibilities. It is clear how incarceration often tends to put a hold on women's sources of income, while limiting future income by potentially impacting the ability to achieve employment after release (Freudenberg, 2002). In total, five out of the six women in this thesis experienced financial-related stress including increasing debt during imprisonment and restricted budgets – both of which women were left to deal with through help from Circle members, family, or friends during incarceration, or independently after release. Overall, financial stress seemed to be a noteworthy negative effect of incarceration, as a steady income is necessary to meet basic human needs (e.g., food, shelter, bills, care for dependants etc.) during community reintegration. With the potential for a piling burden of debt and the lack of ability to attend to such issues while in prison, receiving financial support during incarceration came across as a critical need for women.

Women emphasized how receiving help to deal with finances during incarceration would make the transition from prison to community much easier. For women, gaining the ability to attend to unmet financial needs prior to leaving prison is necessary, to ease this hardship during reintegration. Like outcomes of this thesis, researchers, Harner et al. (2017), found that most women in prison are poverty-stricken, and suffer from unmet health issues from before and during imprisonment. Underpaid work, reliance on others and difficulty maintaining contact with friends and family were only some of the financial related issues that women discussed in Harner et al.'s (2017) study conducted with 95 women in prison. The women in the mentioned study were found to be at extreme disadvantages and had no choice but to make consequential sacrifices with limited finances.

The findings from this study reinforce Harner et al.'s (2017) outcomes by showing how women in prison still suffer from financial stress today. However, the women's words in this thesis help bring clarity to the situation by showing the potential value of readily available financial help in prison. Women's experiences with the Stride Circle also portray how the burden of financial stress can be lifted during incarceration and reintegration, with the use of a well

developed and reliable social support network. As such, this thesis provides valuable insight into how prison programming can be tailored to help women attend to financial needs prior to being released into community, thereby supporting women to be more financially stable during reintegration.

Furthermore, research with women leaving prison has often maintained a focus on public safety and justice rather than women and health (Freudenberg, 2002). However, imprisonment also affects families in community by separating women from their children, loved ones and dependents, often leaving all parties vulnerable to social and health-related issues (Freudenberg, 2002). For example, Jennifer had said "Mom's the best friend…but we weren't allowed to talk cause she, when I got arrested, she was in the car with me, and they charged her with everything…" In this situation, Jennifer's mother was directly affected by her arrest, as she also had criminal charges laid upon her due to simply being in the same vehicle at the time. Consequently, Jennifer was separated from her mother during incarceration, whom she described to be her best friend. Experiencing such shocking and abrupt separation from family and support can lead to a serious disconnection from community, while causing women to feel indifferent and unsupported upon release. The same woman, Jennifer, had opened up about her mental health conditions during her first interview in 2015: "I'm bi-polar and depression." Later in the interview, she admitted: "When I get out of here, I don't want it to become too overwhelming," indicating her apprehensiveness of re-entering community after discharge.

Freudenberg (2002) discussed how increased rates of imprisonment are directly affecting the well-being of women, by taking women away from their communities and putting them in very close proximity to people with high rates of mental and physical health conditions. Results from this thesis also showed how there is a severe lack of support in prison – specifically inadequate attention being paid to financial, mental, and physical health. Further, the prison system pays little attention towards women's needs for social connection, leisure, and preparation for reintegration in general. Freudenberg also indicated how in many worst-case scenarios, the adverse effects of such punitive measures in prison can even lead women into homelessness upon release. Thus, the women's experiences in this thesis show how the current restrictive nature of prison atmospheres in Canada, seem to be doing more harm than good, and resulting in more burden than 'rehabilitation' in women's lives. Unfortunately, opportunities that

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connect women with necessary services such as health, financial support and housing are often missed due to the very nature of incarceration (Freudenberg, 2002).

Ellen and more women in this thesis shed light on the complexity behind the negative effects that prison environments can have on women, including the lack of programming that can exacerbate the long list of women's potential previous issues and even multiply them. Sara said "Anxiety, mental health…. addiction issues will be a lifetime," implying that her mental health concerns along with her addiction would last forever. Her diminished hope and negative outlook on life seemed to have been significantly contributed to by incarceration and the negative effects induced by the inhumane prison environment. This aligns with Cooper and Berwick's (2001) findings, which indicated how people with longer prison sentences have a higher tendency to carry negative attitudes in life. More specific ways to mitigate the adverse effects of incarceration will be discussed in the summary and conclusion chapter.

5.2.3. Stigma and its Relationship to Community Reintegration

As discussed throughout this analysis, women are often known to be an especially vulnerable population and are therefore more likely to encounter negative effects from imprisonment – particularly, repeated stigmatization while attempting to reintegrate into community (Pedlar et al., 2018). These authors shed light on how upon release from prison, it is common for women to be faced with various forms of stigma that accompany the label of being criminalized. It is unfortunate that women in this thesis also admitted to feeling socially rejected by community members, based on their criminal history. Some of the women implied hearing responses of shock, dismay, and even fear when revealing their incarceration to others. In many cases, women may internalize these feelings. Perhaps, most people in society are unaware of how easily negative life factors can lead one to end up in prison – and that disproportionate life sentences are even inflicted upon people for petty crimes (Mauer & Nellis, 2018), such as stealing what one may feel is a life necessity (e.g., money, food, cars, etc.)

However, it is possible that sharing knowledge of women's experiences through casual conversation with peers, may work to reduce the harms of stigma for people who have been incarcerated. Thus, it is important to carry empathy for people who have been to prison, as those who are unfamiliar with such unfortunate life circumstances may not yet have the insight to understand women's lives, and thereby may be blindly contributing to stigma against women in

community. Just like experiences in Stride Circles, where volunteers are willing to understand women's experiences from before, during and after prison, community members can also help to fight against current and potential stigma in society – ultimately supporting women's success in life for the greater good.

At the same time, it has been well-documented that cruel stigmatic responses towards formerly incarcerated individuals from various people, organizations and employers are known to affect the ability for one to gain and keep employment after leaving prison (Ricciardelli & Mooney, 2018). Interestingly, these researchers also indicated how the consequences of rejecting people for carrying a criminal record is understudied regarding its impact on the labor force and community in general. It is possible that every time someone is rejected for having a criminal record, a negative ripple effect occurs in the surrounding community.

For instance, one woman in this thesis experienced strong rejection from her own neighbour who expressed not wanting to talk to her because of her history of incarceration. Encountering such stigma from neighbours during reintegration can affect the viewpoints of others in the community and limit social opportunities for women. Another woman felt the need to withhold knowledge of her incarceration from her clients, in order to maintain her job security. This can be a difficult decision for women to make and may leave lasting impacts on one's trust in society and self-image with respect to their history of incarceration. Lastly, and as mentioned previously, one woman went through the lengthy process of changing her name to achieve employment, as prior to doing so she was rejected from several job opportunities.

The added struggle of encountering, enduring, and eventually fighting against stigma in community after leaving prison, is yet another constraint that women face while transitioning. Researchers Kyprianides et al. (2019) explained how experiencing social rejection from different sources in society can also have detrimental impacts on individual health and well-being. In fact, these researchers surveyed 199 formerly incarcerated people and findings indicated that experiences of rejection significantly reduced the well-being of participants.

Similarly, in this thesis, stigma appeared to have a direct influence on women during the route from prison to community, often interfering with the ability to have equal opportunity in certain situations (e.g., employment, housing etc.) and form positive social connections (e.g., with neighbours, family, and people in community). However, the negative effects of

encountering stigma seemed to be mitigated for women in this thesis by participating in positive social interactions with Circles, which included empowering and open communication about incarceration. This is a noteworthy finding, because if restorative justice approaches like those used in Circles help to decrease stigma against women leaving prison, more efforts to develop such programs may show promise in helping us to collectively reduce incarceration stigma in society.

From the women's experiences in Pedlar et al.'s (2018) book, as well as Kyprianides et al.'s (2019) study, and the women's journeys in this thesis, it is clear how stigma can be a serious constraint (Lewis & Van Puymbroeck, 2008) to achieving successful reintegration after prison. As explained in this section, stigma was faced and dealt with by each woman uniquely. More importantly, experiences of stigmatization often seemed to deeply constrain women's abilities to reach essential goals such as employment, inclusivity in community and even simpler acts such as attempts to befriend others, thereby limiting social connections and vital life needs (e.g., having a job, feeling a sense of belonging, forming positive social relationships).

Authors Lewis and Van Puymbroeck (2008) outlined how stigma can negatively affect the social, emotional, and psychological functioning of individuals in community, which can be seen through the women's stories in this thesis. Encountering stigma was not easy, and often left women feeling less than, disrespected and at a disadvantage in comparison to everyday citizens in community. The women in this thesis seemed to feel that stigma was a major constraint in accessing services and achieving important goals in life during reintegration. As such, after leaving prison, women may intend on turning a new leaf. However, in the face of stigma, reintegration is much easier said than done.

As mentioned previously, Coates (2015) also indicated how carrying a criminal record can place limits on people's access to important resources, including social services and public housing assistance. With the expanding evidence of the adverse effects of incarceration and the stigma that comes along with it, many researchers and politicians are suddenly eager to abolish the failing prison system that has left North America with the biggest population of people who are incarcerated in the entire world (Coates, 2015). Also, having to battle stigmatic forces after serving a federal sentence seems unfair to women who have respectfully served their 'time' in prison.

Fortunately, experiences in Stride Circles seemed to offer women a judgement free space to feel at home, be accepted and respected by members of community. Women described experiences in Circles to feel warm, loving, fun, enjoyable and stress-relieving, helping to support experiences of reintegration in diverse and positive ways. As such, the women's experiences explored in this thesis help to advance research by scholars mentioned in this section, by showing how having a well-developed and trustworthy social support system can help to reduce negative feelings that may be internalized because of stigma.

Being around people who cared to understand their personal experiences, hardships, victories, and goals in life, seemed to empower women to face stigmatic forces, and improve with confidence in community. Having a positive support system also helped women to care less about stigma and overcome it through resistance. Experiences of empowerment, understanding and empathy from Circle members even seemed to help women release frustrations associated with stigma, feel grateful for overcoming obstacles, and arrive at positive conclusions to move forward in life.

Conclusively, it is important to understand that forces of stigma may cause people leaving prison to feel as if they are simply surviving as opposed to living a fulfilling life during attempts to reintegrate. Findings from this thesis help to reinforce the previously mentioned studies by Coates (2015), Pedlar et al. (2018) and Kyprianides et al. (2019), who all highlighted the negative impacts that stigma can have on people leaving prison – many of whom simply yearn to feel included in community, after being taken away for so long. It is equally important to recognize that incarceration stigma is known to increase women's needs for social and health related assistance, while simultaneously restricting the ability to access these essential services (Van Olphen et al., 2009). As a result of facing unwanted stigma, women leaving prison are often forced to create social change and individual progress in various ways, such as the efforts which took place during meetings with Circles. It is clear, how the women in this thesis had to work to battle and mitigate the negative effects of incarceration and stigma that accompanies it, all while attempting to transition into community. Anti-stigma efforts led by women will be discussed in more depth in the next section called (Re)-building the Self.

5.3 (Re)building the Self

After learning about the unique constraints faced by women in this thesis, in addition to the negative effects of incarceration itself, followed by the battle of stigma in community – the theme of having to build upon, or rebuild oneself after prison emerged and became recurrent. This seemed to fall in line with the basic tenets of restorative justice, as repairing relationships, revitalizing oneself in community and reconstructing life all seemed to be closely knit in the process of rebuilding oneself (Sayers, 2020). Firstly, it is important to note that most of the women in this thesis faced obstacles prior to entering prison, such as abusive relationships, drug addictions, and lack of a supportive social network, etc. Women's pre-existing issues were often intensified by spending time away from attending to important life concerns due to imprisonment.

In fact, women's underlying issues were often contributed to by the adverse effects of incarceration, in combination with the lack of overall rehabilitation being implemented in prison. As Labotka (2014) identified, women involved in crime are known to endure overwhelming challenges in life, along with the disturbing reality of punitive measures in a criminal justice system known to shame, humiliate and alienate people. Thus, with the astounding number of forces acting against women, before, during and after incarceration – it is inevitable that women must work to rebuild themselves and restructure their lives during reintegration. Consequently, women in this thesis used adaptive strategies, self-empowerment, goal-setting, and social support from Circles as well as other community services, to rebuild 'the self' in hopes of achieving a better future, and ultimately avoiding returning to prison.

Time and time again, research shows how the vicious cycle of punishment inflicted in federal prisons does not reduce recidivism (Cullen et al., 2011) and that instead, it often results in negative health effects and social exclusion for people leaving prison, and even their children, families etc. (Murray, 2007). This also seems to result in segregation between women and some community members, causing further reason for women to have to rebuild relationships and form new bonds. Thence, after prison it is common for women to have to improve their lives to function in community.

In this case, rebuilding the emotional self – particularly one's self-confidence, self-esteem, trust, and self-image played important roles in reintegration. These healthy, beneficial, and

positive traits often seemed to be diminished by the negative impacts of imprisonment, leading to women needing to replenish themselves after prison. Consequently, rebuilding skills which may have been weakened/lost due to incarceration, and learning new skills were assets to reintegrating successfully. Thereby, this chapter will discuss some of women's efforts which helped foster self-improvement during and after imprisonment. It is essential to recognize that a portion of these efforts were taken due to the adverse effects of incarceration mentioned in the previous section, imposed by the oppressive prison atmosphere. The various actions women took to rebuild themselves in the face of stigma after leaving prison will be discussed below.

5.3.1 Self-improvement, Refining and Acquiring Skills

In addition to rebuilding oneself after being released from prison, women in this thesis seemed to express the need and value of refining skills, acquiring new ones, and improving upon overall quality of life. Being convicted of crime and becoming incarcerated inspires people in prison through the idea of life crisis, forcing individuals to accept their situation and perhaps look for ways to enhance their lives and futures (Trammell et al., 2018). As mentioned in the literature review, reintegration is a path which involves building material security, including resources that allow one to fully participate in community life and achieve the socially respected roles of citizen, employee, and kin (Western et al., 2015).

In this case, personal transformation was a major goal and strategy that women used to help rebuild 'the self' during reintegration. Unfortunately, for women who have completed federal sentences, the time spent imprisoned often leads to distance from friends and family, sources of money, education, and housing, often leading to marginalization and limited access to the valued social roles and opportunities which resemble full participation in community (Western et al., 2015). The detrimental impacts that incarceration can have on people are endless, as removing one from society not only diminishes their existence in community but can also weaken one's sense of meaning and purpose in life. Further, spending time away from the real world, may cause one's skills and interests to decline, providing even greater reason for women to want to seek social, intellectual, and professional growth after leaving prison.

After analysis, my understanding of what community reintegration can involve has expanded, illuminating its relationship with self-improvement, and gaining skills. Perhaps self-improvement and gaining skills are understudied gaps in the academic literature on community reintegration for women. In fact, in the previously mentioned and recent study conducted by Trammell et al. (2018), self-improvement was most defined by women in prison as personal change, and by men as job-related skills, and there is a possibility that prison staff provide different advice to women and men in this context. This indicated that men and women may view rehabilitation differently and are potentially treated with different approaches to rehabilitation in prison. Interestingly, in Trammel's study, the researchers expressed concern over the fact that such few women talked about how to successfully go through parole and develop steady economic sources. This was disturbing to the researchers, because so many women in prison encounter severe economic struggles outside of prison and will have to face these hardships during reintegration (Trammell et al., 2018).

Findings from this thesis contradict those of Trammell et al.'s, as women in Circles openly expressed wanting to improve upon finances and job skills in addition to attaining personal and emotional growth. As a positive response, Circle members seemed to encourage and promote women's growth in different ways, such as by listening, motivating women to achieve personal goals, helping provide transportation to important places and sharing resources. For instance, women expressed how Circle members helped with finding jobs, as some of the women were interested in opportunities for career growth and development. Circle members were even willing to meet up randomly to discuss plans in life or help women deal with tough situations. Women's emotional and social growth could be seen through such situations, through the ability to reach out to members of the Circle.

Engaging in conversations with Circles seemed to help women clarify goals in life, discover interests, and discuss how to achieve them. Women also reported participating in a variety of recreation and leisure activities with Circle members, which helped to feel more comfortable and socially active in community. Women seemed to feel at ease during experiences with Circles, and open enough to discuss hopes and dreams, such as owning a business, acquiring physical strength, improving upon oneself mentally and strengthening relationships. Additionally, the need to engage in meaningful conversations and gain social self-confidence,

both came across as areas in which some of the women expressed wanting to improve. Thankfully, Circle experiences seemed to help women improve upon self-confidence, communication skills and re-discover old passions, plus find new passions in life.

Overall, Circle members seemed to be highly encouraging of women to achieve personal goals and provided emotional support when possible. The women's experiences with Stride Circles show the potential value of Trammell et al.'s (2018) suggestions of having prison staff promote gender equality from an occupational or economic point of view. However, in this thesis, it was interactions with Circles which helped to illuminate such areas of growth (and others), along with self-improvement, while in Trammell et al.'s 2018) study, discussion circulated around interactions with prison staff. Thus, findings from this thesis help to shed light on women's areas of need, regarding personal growth. These findings also emphasize the benefits of promoting occupational, economic, and self-development for women – as holistically attending to these dimensions of wellness during Circle interactions seemed to positively support women's paths of reintegration into community.

Moreover, although newly released women often wish to centre growth and well-being at the core of re-entry experiences, this is not always easily achieved, as constraints such as the need for transportation, or finances may get in the way. Other constraints which often seemed to hinder women in achieving self-improvement were stigma and lack of self-confidence. Regardless, when women felt motivated to improve through self-empowerment and Circles, it positively impacted the reintegration process. Thoughts of self-improvement helped women open up to Circles, make plans, and work on 'the self' in the process.

Women expressed interest in and the value of improving upon communication skills, education, and occupational skills. To add, physical, and mental health, relationship building, self-confidence and leisure interests were areas of desired growth identified by the women. Many of these areas of need and interests were worked upon during Circle meetings, such as the refining of social skills and the motivation to expand and increase work-ethic. Social interactions with Circles also seemed to help grow self-confidence, as women seemed encouraged to step outside of comfort zones when speaking about personal issues. The idea of having a safe space and trustworthy social network to converse with seemed to help women identify areas of self-

improvement, potential areas to work on and take action to do so with the help of community members.

Interestingly, Bandaranayake (2021) explained how prison libraries play an important role in meeting the unique needs of people in prison, by helping to deal with stress, enhancing well-being through reading and empowering people to spend time effectively during imprisonment. The same author, as well as Magee (2021), both emphasized the value of effectively delivering educational services for people in prison to help avoid reoffending, and ultimately, in reducing overall rates of recidivism. Similarly, in this thesis, skill building opportunities such as educational programs, social events, workshops, and leisure activities seemed to help women feel happier, more supported, and secure throughout reintegration. This thesis builds upon Bandaranayake's findings and extends our understanding of what women need to transition. More specifically, providing women with opportunities to acquire and build upon skills not only in prison, but also during reintegration can positively influence the overall process of community re-entry.

During interviews with participants, women were also asked to provide feedback on the Stride Circle program. The results showed how women appreciated volunteers who remained in contact with them through leisure participation, which promoted healthy activity and enhanced social skills. Some of the women also valued the freedom to engage in Circle meetings and work on personal growth on their own time. The combination of learning new skills and refining previous ones during social interactions with Circle members seemed to be of significant interest to women in this thesis, as this helped maintain focus on self-improvement in community. Such interactions also seemed to help increase feelings of support for women, while fostering the self-confidence and motivation needed to achieve personal goals during the transition from prison into the real world.

Women did not seem to have as many positive opportunities to work on personal development during incarceration, as they did within Circles. This means that helping women to acquire and enhance a variety of skills, both in prison and during reintegration is critical for women to achieve positive transformation in life. Women expressed the value of gaining and expanding upon a variety of skills, including job and house hunting, prioritizing, budgeting, and educational growth. Also, improving upon social skills, leisure participation, physical wellness,

health, and activity, all seemed to be of value to women's reintegration journeys. Lastly, developing skills to establish a healthy leisure lifestyle, a positive self-image and strong communication also appeared to help women lead a fulfilling re-entry experience. Therefore, self-improvement, refining skills and acquiring new ones were all of importance to women and it is suggested that future reintegration supports take these areas of growth into consideration by providing the right opportunities for women to flourish.

5.3.2 Anti-stigma Efforts

Understanding the complexity of the various forms of stigma faced and dealt with by women leaving prison, along with their efforts to battle them, are both intensely meaningful parts of my analysis in this thesis. The stigma of incarceration can be understood as discrimination or exclusion against people who have been to prison, which can severely hinder individual efforts to access vital services and make it extremely challenging to succeed during reintegration (Van Olphen, 2009). When eventually freed from incarceration, women may feel pressure from society to establish themselves as self-sufficient and 'well-behaved' citizens, while having to shed the stigmatized identity associated with imprisonment (Keene et al., 2018).

After leaving prison, women are often expected to attain and maintain housing, employment, education, healthy relationships, and overall stability in life, while facing potential discrimination and rejection from employers, organizations, and people in community. Fortunately, the women in this thesis were found to take part in a medley of empowering anti-stigma efforts to help battle social exclusion in society, and to instead motivate themselves to achieve a more successful reintegration. However, it is important to note that this may not always be the case, as women leaving prison often experience lowered self-esteem, poor self-image, and a lack of self-confidence (Sukmawati et al., 2019). By creating awareness of the few anti-stigma efforts that women in this thesis took part in, it may inspire the population of women who have been affiliated with the criminal justice system, as well as reintegration programs to gain knowledge of these tactics and use them to battle stigma in their own way.

Ongoing stigma can restrict women's access to crucial resources (Keene et al.,2018). Therefore, it is important to understand the difficulties that women may face during reintegration due to encountering stigma from various people. For example, it was unfortunate that even after

serving her time in prison, Megan had to go out of her way to change her name to fight stigma against her in the workplace. One would think that after strenuously and faithfully completing a prison sentence, that they could live life freely and be offered equal job opportunities in society. However, employment efforts are not always successful for women leaving prison due to stigma. In interviews, Megan openly shared the additional steps she took to mitigate the unfairness she was experiencing. Thankfully, her efforts to deal with the stigma she encountered in the work sector seemed to work well for her, as her name-change helped her to part from the stigmatized identity associated with prison. This act may be common among people who have been to prison, as in doing so, individuals may be successful in hiding their past from potential employers. However, not everyone may be interested in doing this, as many may wish to keep their original name, and unfortunately may risk facing stigma.

It is clear how in some cases, withholding knowledge of incarceration in order to protect one's self-image and potential opportunities in community, can help women avoid encountering stigma. Although it may not feel morally correct to do so, women may feel compelled to hide their criminal history from others to escape the negative effects of stigma. For example, in Sara's case, she chose not to reveal her incarceration to others, in hopes of protecting herself and her employment status. The choice to hide such personal information can feel like a suppressing decision to make, in and of itself, potentially restricting liberation for women.

This is only one of the difficult decisions that women leaving prison may have to make, to protect themselves from the limitations that stigma may cause in life, especially regarding employment. Interestingly, a study by Skardhamar and Telle (2009), found that people who become employed have a 63 percent less chance of becoming reincarcerated. This means that it is important to help women fight against stigma in the workplace and elsewhere to expand job opportunities, the potential for growth and eventually help to reduce recidivism. This thesis helps build upon Skardhamar and Telle' study by showing how protecting one's privacy and choosing not to reveal incarceration in certain situations (although controversial), may help women to gain employment and even reduce recidivism after leaving prison.

Interestingly, past research from Chui and Cheng (2013) also shows the difficult choice that people leaving prison often encounter – of deciding whether to reveal their past incarceration to potential employers, because companies commonly demand individuals to disclose their

criminal records to them (Henry & Jacobs, 2007). This also begs the question of whether it is morally acceptable to require one to reveal such personal information after they have already sincerely completed their prison sentence. Although the anti-stigma effort of changing one's name after leaving prison is controversial, Megan's experiences help advance Chui and Cheng's (2013) study as well as Henry and Jacob's (2007) work, by showing how it can be a successful method for many people who wish to overcome stigma in community.

Perhaps wider awareness of anti-stigma efforts made by women leaving prison such as the ones discussed in this thesis, can help empower currently incarcerated women in preparation for challenges that could be faced during reintegration. Megan's anti-stigma effort to achieve her job is just one of the ways women may choose to tackle the issue of attaining employment after leaving prison. It has also been well-known for over a decade that formerly incarcerated people who have developed a steady work history, experience easier transitions to community than those who have not (Uggen et al., 2013). This reflects some of the other women's situations in this thesis, as having prior work experience also seemed to help achieve employment, either through past connections or new ones who were open and accepting of women.

Other effective efforts that women made towards fighting stigma included speaking openly about incarceration and educating others on the (often) grim realities of women's lives in general. Practicing forgiveness, gratitude, kindness and understanding (both from women and community members) were also highlighted as actions which seemed to help decrease stigma for women. Intriguingly, many people who engage in public speaking and teaching on violence against women often begin their speeches by reminding audience members that anyone can be a victim of such situations (Richie, 2000), thus anyone at any point may have to fight back, resulting in unexpected criminalization. The women who practiced public speaking as an anti-stigma effort in this thesis, also seemed to share their own truths about being criminalized, which appeared to help foster mutual understandings between women and community on the (sometimes) uncontrollable realities behind going to prison.

Essentially, public speaking came across as one of the strongest anti-stigma efforts led by two of the women in this analysis, Ellen and Courtney. For Courtney, perhaps public speaking helped to detach from the stigmatized 'prisoner identity,' and rebuild a new identity, contributing to her personal transformation after prison. Both Ellen and Courtney chose to openly share their

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stories with others, which seemed to help fight social stigma in a courageous, confident, and publicly respected manner. The women also mentioned that when sharing their personal stories with others, reactions from the audience were mostly positive. These findings imply that for women who have been criminalized, engaging in sharing personal stories or public speaking may help to overcome stigma as a barrier. The power of sharing life stories also seems to allow the community and women to come together in an effort to understand the real-life experiences of women who have been imprisoned.

Interestingly, Bove and Tryon (2018) recently explored the power of women sharing their personal stories of incarceration. The mentioned researchers were fueled by the idea that literature on women's pathways to rehabilitation and recovery is limited, despite the growth in knowledge of social stigma and crucial mental health needs for women affiliated with the criminal justice system. In their study, women who were incarcerated shared their life experiences with students and teachers in high school, as part of a community out-reach initiative about personal transformation. The researchers found that public speaking through story telling helped to educate others while making women feel valuable, helping to form social connections, and rebuilding relationships.

To add, Bove and Tryon (2018) outlined how sharing their stories helped women to learn about themselves and nurture self-growth by confronting buried emotions, accepting themselves for who they are and moving forward positively towards the future. Findings from this thesis align with and extend upon Bove and Tryon's study, by adding to the existing literature supporting women's pathways to recovery and rehabilitation after prison. In fact, the women who practiced public speaking in this thesis showed how sharing their stories not only helped themselves to release and grow, but also worked as tool to decrease stigma among community members, towards the population of women leaving prison as a whole.

Ultimately, the narratives presented in this section show the different ways in which women and community can collectively fight existing and potential stigma against people who have been to prison. The importance of working together to reduce stigma should not be underestimated. This is because the added hardship of facing and enduring stigmatic forces alone in society after leaving prison can be overwhelming and potentially interrupt women's abilities to access vital life opportunities and resources (Keene et al., 2018). In Keene et al.'s study, the

researchers mention the obstacles faced by women in accessing resources and how this disrupted the ability to detach from the stigmatized identity related to imprisonment. This is an important note to take away, because if encountering stigma blocks women's access to crucial resources and prevents one from letting go of their past of incarceration, it may lead to further trauma and even reincarceration, exacerbating the long list of previous constraints women face.

Moreover, this can also result in ongoing stigmatization, further contributing to the previously mentioned negative effects of incarceration (Keene et al., 2018). Thus, it is imperative for us to learn from women's experiences and heighten awareness of the various anti-stigma efforts being used by people and organizations, regardless of how large or small these efforts may be. This thesis helps to advance Keene et al.'s findings by showing how women can share their stories, engage in public speaking and positive social and leisure experiences (like those in Circles) to help mitigate the effects of stigma in community post-prison. Engaging in these acts seems to empower women and help take action to lessen the negative effects of incarceration and disassociate with the 'prisoner identity.'

These findings also align with those of Fortune et al.'s (2020) study by reinforcing how Circles are helpful in assisting women to deal with the stigma and distress that is often encountered during the transition from prison to community. Speaking openly about stigma and how to overcome it with Circle members seemed to help women not internalize it as much, thus reducing potential negative impacts. Therefore, this thesis provides further evidence to support the idea that the Stride Circle program is an effective model for restorative justice-focused approaches that help women overcome stigma before and during reintegration, while simultaneously growing mutually supportive relationships and helping to ease the process of reintegration (Fortune et al., 2020).

In Fortune et al.'s (2020) study, the women were not asked about community belonging – however, the project on which this thesis was based included this question, and the women reported feeling an enhanced sense of belonging in their Circles by being offered a safe space of respect, hope, acceptance and appreciation from staff and volunteers. By engaging in socially empowering activities women seemed to be able to rise above the negative impacts of stigma. However, it is clear how in some cases, women may have felt unsafe to reveal their incarceration and chose not to do so. This may not work in the long run, so working to overcome stigma

against women leaving prison through research, conversation and public dialogue is essential to ease the process of reintegration and achieve collective well-being.

Outcomes from women's experiences here show how restorative justice techniques can help to battle and reduce stigma against women who have been to prison, while promoting a sense of belonging in community. This makes Circle experiences constructive forms of rehabilitation, which support anti-stigma efforts for women who are eager to reintegrate after leaving prison. Further research is needed to clarify the types of anti-stigma efforts that go hand in hand with fighting against particular forms of incarceration stigma in society, as will be discussed in more depth in the conclusion to this thesis.

5.3.3 The Value of Empowerment for Women during Reintegration

Women's empowerment can be defined as the capability for self-initiation which one carries to take control over personal life decisions, while recognizing goals in hopes of living a life with purpose (Galiè & Farnworth, 2019). Several notions of empowerment were found to be helpful and life-changing for the women in this study. These included self-empowerment, how Stride Circles empowered women with a stronger sense of self, empowerment through recreation and leisure and spiritual empowerment. Women's experiences with these forms of empowerment seemed to help promote personal growth, while transforming livelihood.

Interestingly, recent research shows how group interventions that use empowerment for women who experience incarceration, can help women rebuild their lifestyles by illuminating the empowerment in their life-stories, and encouraging women to construct new life narratives (Allen, 2018). Further, the well-known concept of agency was brought to light through the women's unique experiences. Women were found to empower themselves, share empowerment with others and feel empowered through the variety of mentioned sources, which helped in gaining self-confidence, the strength to overcome and control over challenging life circumstances. The value of empowerment in reintegration will be discussed and tied into the academic literature in this section.

Self-empowerment, also known as empowerment through 'the-self' was found to be a major self-help tool that women used throughout their pathways of community reintegration. Self-empowerment differs from empowerment, as empowerment can be achieved through

various sources. The term self-empowerment can be used when referring to initiatives that people take on their own to empower themselves, while empowerment can also be discussed as a factor achieved through external sources and people. Relatedly, self-empowerment is widely known as the expansion of involvement and individual responsibility (Lemire et al., 2008). Authors Lemire et al. also highlighted several key aspects of personal empowerment which are common in the literature, including social inclusion through collective support from community and self-reliance through personal choice. The women in this study empowered themselves in unique ways, including through personal initiatives, self-confidence, self-motivation, agency, and enjoyment. Women also practiced gratitude, spirituality, time-management, and resistance against disempowerment.

Furthermore, authors Humby and Barclay (2018) discussed how people involved with the criminal justice system can benefit by working to improve their self-confidence. This can be done independently or with the help of others. Some of the women in this thesis explained how they practiced self-empowerment individually. For instance, one woman used positive self-talk and another practiced time management – both of which seemed to help enhance self-confidence. As mentioned previously, a couple of the women engaged in public speaking and story sharing to empower themselves by improving their outlooks on their situations, while simultaneously educating others. In relation, researchers have explored different ways in which empowerment can work to help people involved in crime. For example, Humby and Barclay (2018) chose to take the unique route of helping people in prison increase self-confidence through pet-therapy interactions, which empowered individuals to develop a sense of self-esteem, patience, and responsibility.

Similarly, in this thesis, women seemed to enhance self-confidence through social interactions with community members in the Stride Circle program. Engaging in positive communication and leisure activities such as social circles, spiritual engagement, coffee meetups, casual walks, and exploration in community etc. seemed to provide women with uplifting company, motivation, and empowerment to move forward. Intriguingly, Yuen and Fortune's (2020) study highlighted how women who have been to Canadian federal prisons use leisure to achieve social justice and enact advocacy, along with community engagement. Their study explained how leisure participation can hold the potential for women to acknowledge the significance of social injustices which have occurred in their lives, and be encouraged to take

action, as a result. This is understandable, as in apartheid times, individuals and groups were often deprived of opportunities for leisure, which led to injustice in many people lives (Butler & Richardson, 2015). Therefore today, leisure engagement may very well contribute to overall social justice for individuals and populations who have been marginalized.

Findings from this thesis about women's experiences with empowerment through 'the self,' as well as through other forms, align with Yuen and Fortune's (2020) study, by showing how taking part in personal, social and leisure experiences can promote self-reflection and the energy to create positive change. Authors Pedlar et al. (2018) also discuss, in more depth, how with social support, adequate resources, information, and understanding of the consequences of personal choices, women can make responsible and meaningful decisions in life. The benefits experienced by women in the Stride Circle program, reinforce work like Yuen and Fortune's study and Pedlar et al.'s book, by further demonstrating how women can empower themselves through self-initiative, and experience empowerment by engaging in positive interactions and recreational activities with community members.

Spending time with members of community also seemed to help women practice open communication, focus on personal strengths, and simply take the time to enjoy life, especially after being separated from these opportunities in prison. Pedlar et al. (2018) shed light on these concepts by emphasizing that circles of support can take different forms and can help women through practical and emotional resources. By developing socially empowering connections with community members, both during incarceration and reintegration, the women in this thesis were presented with opportunities to come to personal realizations, accelerate self-growth, revive past interests, and develop new passions, while setting realistic and achievable goals for re-entry.

For example, in her first interview in 2015, Leslie shared how she felt about connections with her Circle and explained how they were very helpful in providing a foundation for her to reach her goals today. She also mentioned how having Circle members in her life, kept her away from wanting to use drugs. This is especially important to note, as researchers Kendall et al. (2018) identified how providing social support to people leaving prison helps to promote attitude transformations, individual agency, develop trust and strengthen relationships with community members. Therefore, the presence of positive social connections in women's lives is of great importance to reintegration, and the findings from women in this thesis help to reinforce Kendal et al.'s, by showing how a strong social support system not only helps women in the present, but

also in the future, as Leslie's positive feedback towards Circles seemed to grow by her last interview.

Leslie also practiced and encouraged others to enhance self-confidence in life. She emphasized her decision to always support herself, regardless of any external threats to her existence, including incarceration stigma and the issues that may arise from it. The boldness and strength that came across in these words showed how she uses positive self-talk, encouragement, and motivation to improve her confidence, in order to tackle life's obstacles, especially during reintegration. She also implied the value of enjoyment in her life, and how she embraced opportunities for enjoyment during reintegration. Leslie expressed the gratification that she experienced, because of the social connections she developed during and after prison. To add, she practiced personal time management to help her feel more secure and confident when trying to accomplish daily goals, stating that managing her time effectively brings her grace in life. Overall, her statements showed how she used self-empowerment, felt empowered through Circles, and even helped empower others.

Interestingly, Leslie was not the only woman that used self-confidence to empower herself. Similarly, Ellen showed how she values herself. She explained how despite the mistakes she made in the past, she knows she is still a worthy human being, just like every other. These findings align with Pedlar et al.'s (2018), who outlined the value of focusing on relationships and personal strengths because experiencing mutually empowering and healthy connections are important factors which contribute to the broad notion of empowerment. Furthermore, even earlier research by Miller and Stiver (1997), stressed that in order for women to experience reconnection, it is critical to take independent action and share experiences within a supportive network that leads to developing new and stronger relationships in life. Connectedly, the women's actions in this thesis (both personal and within Circles) can be thought of as vehicles of independent and collaborative community action – helping to rebuild social networks, while empowering themselves and one another to overcome the challenges of reintegration.

Megan's experience with using self-motivation to empower herself seemed to reflect Tablante's (2012) study, where motivating oneself was found to be an important coping mechanism for women's community related issues. In Megan's second interview in 2016, she revealed how she used the thought of accomplishing tasks and making choices directly for her own betterment to empower herself and cultivate the motivation she needs in life. This depicted

her positive transformation from the first interview to the second. Together, the women's experiences of gaining personal empowerment through positive self-talk and other individual initiatives, along with participating in social and leisure interactions in Circles, help to build upon the current literature which emphasizes the positive impact of empowerment for women during community re-entry. These findings extend work by Tablante (2012), Pinto et al. (2014), Pedlar et al. (2018) and Allen (2018) by showing how although women may feel extremely vulnerable after leaving prison, using empowering approaches through 'the self' and in group settings, can help to improve previously incarcerated women's self-confidence, self-worth, the ability to access resources in community and solve problems during resettlement.

The expression of gratitude also came across as a powerful way for women to practice self-empowerment. Gratitude can be seen as a form of positive thinking, which was identified by Tablante (2012), as a coping mechanism for women's issues post incarceration. The results of the analysis in this thesis align with Tablante's, in the sense that expressing gratitude seemed to help empower 'the self' and alleviate stress during incarceration as well as throughout community re-integration for women. For example, in her first interview in 2015, Sara expressed being thankful to have overcome challenges in her path, and for her family's presence in her life. Her gratitude seemed to help her stay positive towards her experiences, while looking forward in life. As such, the value of gratitude for women involved with the criminal justice system is important to note, as it is well-known how formerly incarcerated women often carry regret about their possible lost selves (Bell, 2020) due to imprisonment. As opposed to expressing regret, Sara's expression of gratitude seemed to enhance her attitude towards herself, and life in general throughout her journey.

Similarly, research over the last decade has highlighted the benefits of expressing gratitude, showing how it can enhance mental, physical, social, and psychological well-being (Ching, 2018). In fact, Ching's 2018 study showed the positive outcomes of practicing gratitude regularly, as people who do so are often found to be happier, healthier, and even more helpful to others. For women who have been to prison, it may not always be easy to feel grateful, especially with the overwhelming number of forces in society acting against them. However, findings from this thesis reinforce Ching's study as well as Danioni et al.'s (2021) work, which explored the role of gratitude in incarcerated people's lives and concluded that it is a factor which not only promotes but improves psychological wellness. The women's experiences in this thesis with

practicing gratitude also help to advance the aforementioned literature, as clearly, practicing gratitude holds great potential to serve as an effective coping mechanism for the difficulties that women may face, both during imprisonment and reintegration.

In addition to the different catalysts for self-empowerment practiced by women, which were discussed above, the Stride Circle program was shown to empower participants with a stronger sense of self. Although there are numerous definitions of 'the-self,' the one most pertaining to this study can be found in the book "Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Centre" written by Jean Baker Miller in 1991. In this profound piece of work, Miller mentions that the concept of 'the self' is widely documented to hold the underlying notions of justice, freedom and a 'good life.' She also discusses 'agency within community,' which she refers to as being active and using all of one's resources without aggression.

Relatedly, Stride Circle interactions seemed to be highly reflective of and helpful in enhancing these values in women's lives. For instance, Circles provided women with opportunities to refine the ability to connect and communicate with community members more freely, both during and after incarceration. Also, as women's relationships with volunteers evolved from acquaintances into friendships, it was observed how women's emotional growth and well-being was accelerated on many levels. These findings expand upon Miller's (1991) work, as women in this thesis seemed to enhance the quality of their lives by gaining the freedom to engage in learning experiences with others, of their own choice and on their own time. Through practicing autonomy, open communication, and willingness to improve, women seemed to come closer to what they perceived as a better life. Also, women's self-improvement seemed to grow as connections deepened, helping to achieve a stronger sense of satisfaction and liberation in life to succeed at achieving personal goals during reintegration.

It is equally important to recognize how the Stride Circle program aimed to centre women's humanity through its interventions. More specifically, Circle members seemed to treat women with great respect and love, which was shown to be significantly rehabilitative and more about fair treatment, in comparison to the punitive measures within prison. Being in safe and judgement free spaces during Circle meetings seemed to help bring peace and justice to women's lives, that was much deserved and longed for, especially after the lengthy turmoil faced prior to and during imprisonment. These findings mirror reports from the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women (1990), which states that even the CSC emphasizes that gender-specific

programming is crucial – in order to help women heal from past traumas and develop the empowerment needed to create positive changes in life.

Interestingly, the topic of healing from past traumas and bettering oneself also begs the question about whether people actually need to be 'fixed,' as women's pathways to crime may have felt unavoidable due to unique, unfortunate and uncontrollable life circumstances. The process of being incarcerated also has the tendency to make individuals feel less than others (Bandyopadhyay, 2006), and perhaps even causes people to feel the need to 'fix' themselves. Authors Pedlar et al. (2018) explored this concept and found out that current approaches to rehabilitation and reintegration tend to carry a mentality of the need for people who commit crime(s) to 'fix' themselves, which could cause further damage in women's lives, as the goal often entails making women conform to dominant social roles.

The same authors emphasized that this approach fails to holistically acknowledge a woman's entire life story, including where she has been, what has happened to her, and her future goals. Accordingly, findings from this thesis extend upon recent research such as Pedlar et al.'s (2018) work, by further conveying the benefits of shifting from punitive measures towards more restorative-justice focused ones in helping women who have experienced incarceration. Essentially, we must consider the past trauma and systemic inequities that women may have faced and are continuing to face in prison, as well as during reintegration, in order to reassess how to effectively empower women to make positive life choices.

Thankfully, experiences with Stride Circles seemed to make women feel valued while providing the space and freedom to be themselves and explore personal interests. Social interactions between women and volunteers often helped strengthen women's sense of self, by magnifying personal abilities, beliefs, morals, values, positive personality traits and the things that motivate women – all of which contribute to women's unique identities. It is also important to know that Stride Circle volunteers consisted of mostly women. As such, when women experienced positive interactions with other women in Circles, it seemed to help increase the presence of confidants, while enhancing the overall level of comfort, trust, confidence, and social connection in their lives.

It is important to note that these feelings of empowerment experienced by women who took part in Circles, are generally uncommon for people who were previously incarcerated, whom society often excludes from equal opportunity in activities related to a productive lifestyle

(Baranger et al., 2018). Similar to one of the women in Baranger et al.'s study, who was fortunate enough to receive education in prison and felt empowered upon release, women in this thesis expressed experiencing compelling transformations during reintegration, as a result of social engagement with Circle members. This shows how this thesis extends upon Baranger et al.'s findings, as not only can education empower women, but positive social networks can also serve to fuel empowerment for women during incarceration and reintegration.

For example, in her second interview in 2016, Jennifer's words depicted how over time she experienced life-changing transformation in her social life through participation in Circles. She mentioned how she was unconditionally grateful to meet her Circle members. This is an important note to recognize, as many women who enter prison may already be consumed and overwhelmed by poor social lifestyles – only to be further restricted from moving freely and living a full social life in prison (Sambo & Ojei, 2018). The positive experiences that women had in the Stride Circle program seemed to help increase social interaction and cultivate positive feelings towards 'the self,' while helping to develop trust in others.

Time spent with Circles also seemed to help women enhance self-image and form positive outlooks on life. Women expressed how spending time with Circles helped to amplify overall levels of trust in their lives and make up for potential trust issues which may have stemmed from past trauma. Helping enhance levels of trust in the lives of women in and leaving prison is a critical form of empowerment which the Stride Circle program seemed to be able to provide.

It is well-understood and long known how people who have been to prison may experience higher levels of trust issues than the average person, and that despite the origins of one's mistrust being complex, they are often reflective of a history of feeling unsafe, deceived, abused, and having negative social experiences (Scott & Gosling, 2016). As a result, people leaving prison may not only experience a lack of trust in others, organizations, and institutions, but also a decreased level of trust in themselves, their own decisions, feelings, and thoughts (DeLeon, 2000). This also relates to findings from Schetky's 1998 study about mourning in prison, in which participants appeared to be highly sensitive to trust issues. This study also shed light on how sharing pain in group settings and understanding that other people have endured similar traumatic experiences, made it easier for participants to bear their pain. Thus, findings from this thesis mirror Schetky's, as women often shared painful experiences with one another in

Circles and during interviews, both of which seemed to help release built up emotions, while growing mutual understanding between women and community. Furthermore, and in relation to Miller's (1991) definition of 'the self,' opening up to Circles about personal experiences seemed to enhance women's relationships with themselves, while raising feelings of justice in their lives and perhaps, compensating for the freedom that was lost during incarceration.

In addition to the empowerment fostered by experiences within Stride Circles, engagement in recreation and leisure activities played a powerful role in women's lives. Research suggests that participation in recreation and leisure provides the opportunity for people to resist negative life factors and achieve a sense of empowerment, despite their reason for participating (Dionigi, 2002). There are a wide range of benefits that people have experienced from participating in recreation and leisure activities, including enhanced mental and physical health, in addition to a stronger sense of perceived self-control in life (Dionigi, 2002). However, it is also well-known that women leaving prison may often encounter stigma when trying to access leisure, further emphasizing the impacts of imprisonment in women's lives as they attempt to reintegrate into community (Yuen et al., 2012). Thankfully, the women in this thesis were able to experience a variety of benefits through participation in recreation and leisure, including a stronger sense of hope in life, feelings of calmness and the learned ability to better cope with obstacles.

By engaging in therapeutic activities with others such as arts and crafts, casual social meetings, or simple walks in the neighbourhood, women also seemed to experience an increase in confidence and clarity regarding boundaries, comfort in social situations and a stronger sense of community overall. In this sense, women used leisure as a vehicle for both personal and social change. This expands Yuen and Fortune's (2020) study, in which leisure was shown to carry the potential to serve as a mechanism for social justice by providing a space for people who are silenced and shamed due to being marginalized, and to fight against the status quo. In their study, the particular form of leisure being explored was arts-based. However, the women in this thesis engaged in a variety of forms of leisure within their Circles (e.g., public speaking, story sharing, casual social meetings, nature outings, music, crafts, role playing, etc.), all of which seemed to help women release frustrations, rebuild themselves and improve in different ways.

Through leisure participation, women reported feeling a sense of group belonging, enhanced communication, and other skills, in addition to raised comfort levels in social

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situations. Thus, this thesis advances Yuen and Fortune's (2020) study by showing how women may not only use art, but also other non-arts-based forms of leisure such as the ones mentioned, to help overcome stigma, achieve self-empowerment and ultimately support reintegration. Through participation in social and leisure activities with Circles, women attained benefits such as companionship, a better quality of sleep and greater inspiration to engage in physical and leisure activities. Ultimately, experiences partaking in leisure with Circles seemed to help women gain skills, motivation, passion, and positivity in life to deal with the obstacles presented during community re-entry.

This leads us into a discussion of leisure's role in the process of rebuilding oneself after incarceration. Previously, in the literature review, Pryor and Outley's (2014) findings were highlighted, which included the idea that spaces which provide opportunities for recreation and leisure offer great value for people who have been marginalized. In their article about using urban recreation centres as spaces for social justice development, the authors emphasized how such sites frequently become welcoming spaces of hope for people.

In the context of the women's experiences in this thesis, the Stride Circle program seemed to become a sanctuary for some of the women, especially during the transition into community from prison. In fact, women seemed to practice rebuilding social skills while exploring different leisure interests with Circle members, helping to meet needs for social connection as well as personal development. Through the women's experiences with Circles, it was easy to examine why such spaces hold meaning for populations that experience exclusion and stigma. In fact, it became apparent how spaces such as those offered through the Stride Circle program, provided safe and judgement free places for women to openly express, explore and rebuild themselves after prison.

Working on social skills, gaining interests such as public speaking, taking risks to engage in activities such as quilting, knitting, playing instruments, and more seemed to help women feel happy, included, productive and at home. The comparison between the comfort experienced in Circles and the exclusion felt in prison and often in community, is stark, yet a sign of great relief for many women – as Circle atmospheres helped provide a place for women to be themselves, to grow, feel loved, valued, respected, find hope, and build themselves once again. The findings from the women's experiences in this thesis help to advance work such as Pryor and Outley's (2014), by showing how spaces that offer recreation and leisure do not only hold value for

marginalized youth, but can also provide meaning and room for growth, particularly for women leaving prison who need support during reintegration. Reintegration programs such as Stride Circles can help people who are marginalized by offering the opportunities, connections, support, and positivity that individuals need to transition into community. Thus, it is essential to develop positive, safe and judgement free spaces which offer social, recreational and leisure opportunities for women who are currently in prison as well as women who were previously incarcerated. This can help foster passion for positive interactions and interests, while encouraging women to heal, set goals, achieve them and grow alongside members of community.

For example, through conversations with Circles, Jennifer expressed her love for horticulture and even recognized new doors that welding could open for her. Her enthusiasm for her career options and openness to learning more were also illuminated through her conversations with the interviewer, which showed how discussing personal interests can help to further inspire women. This aligns with Webber's (2018) views, who explained how social networking can open doors to unique opportunities for people, by offering enriching life experiences that can stimulate career development, passion, and creativity. In fact, findings from this thesis build upon Webber's, specifically by showing how discussing work-related interests through social interactions can inspire one to develop new career paths. Further, Jennifer mentioned how simple activities such as listening to music and watching TV helped her to calm down and cope with life more easily. Interestingly, her experiences with attaining peace through music aligns with David's (2017) views, who mentioned how listening to music can promote relief amidst sufferation.

For Ellen, public speaking was an enjoyable form of leisure which helped nurture empowerment and awareness in community, while encouraging her to draw boundaries to decide with whom she shares her life story. She also valued the use of humour, both in her daily life and during public speaking. Her passion for sharing her story with others seemed to be an effective strategy to empower herself and the community. As mentioned above, this can also be seen as an anti-stigma effort, and interestingly crosses over in the categories of leisure interests and forms of empowerment for women.

Ellen's experiences with story-telling and public speaking as a form of leisure align with Green's (1998) work, who analyzed how spaces that provide leisure for women, can help individuals review their past experiences, while assessing balance and satisfaction in life. Green

also highlighted how sharing humour in leisure settings can promote resistance and empowerment. Essentially, Ellen's experiences help extend Green's findings, by showing how sharing personal stories through public speaking can be beneficial specifically for women affiliated with the criminal justice system. Doing this can create a site for women to share personal views and emotions associated with incarceration, while helping to release frustrations, rebuild identities, educate the public and foster mutual empowerment.

For Sara, engaging in simple leisure activities, such as going on walks outside with her Stride Circle, helped to grow her self-confidence, which she felt was necessary to be an active member of community. For Leslie, going to the gym and practicing yoga both helped her gain a rich quality of sleep and relaxation in life. Meanwhile, Megan seemed to be inspired by one of her Circle member's personal interests of running marathons, which hinted towards her need to quit smoking if she'd like to fully engage in running. Lastly, Courtney found that "you can spend an evening doing crafts with someone and never see them again and still learn something and profit and benefit from the experience." Her experience along with the rest of the women's, illustrate the value that recreation and leisure can hold in the lives of women who are in prison, as well as women who are going through reintegration.

These findings also align with recent statements made by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, (2020), through which it is outlined how women seem to find it particularly helpful to participate in group and one-on-one social and leisure activities, which help to increase feelings of self-confidence and self-respect. Collectively, the women expressed gratitude and held space for members of their Circle and the positive leisure experiences they engaged in together, as well as independently. The women's experiences in this thesis, specifically of partaking in social and leisure opportunities, help to advance those of SAMHSA's (2020), by showing the beneficial impact such participation can have on rebuilding oneself during the transition from prison to community. The women's words also showed how participating in leisure activities helped to provide positive ways to cope with stress during incarceration and reintegration, while mitigating the adverse effects of federal prison sentences, and helping to build a healthy leisure lifestyle overall.

In addition to experiencing empowerment through recreation and leisure, each of the women practiced their own unique form of spirituality, which seemed to help counteract the negative impacts of past trauma and incarceration, while strengthening overall levels of faith in

the women's lives. Relatedly, theorists who studied well-being (Bensley, 1991; Dunn, 1961), found that the dimension of spirituality is an innate part of human functioning which helps to integrate other parts of one's life. Also, Hodges (2002) highlighted how engaging in spiritual practices can help one to attain purpose, meaning, intrinsic values and even form a spiritual community in life. The same researcher emphasized how gaining a sense of spirituality has been shown to relate to emotional well-being in adulthood.

Further, it is also widely known how practicing spirituality can offer a protective system for women who have endured trauma (Hipolito et al., 2014). Along with providing emotional strength for women, spirituality is known to be a positive approach towards acquiring improved levels of life-satisfaction, psychological well-being, and self-esteem, as well as decreased levels of depression (Gillum et al., 2006). The findings from this thesis, specifically of women's experiences with practicing spirituality, seem to align well with past discoveries about spirituality from the scholars mentioned above. In fact, the women's spiritual experiences explored in this thesis help to advance our understanding, specifically by showing how women can engage in spiritual practices tailored to their own needs, in order to heal from past trauma, mitigate the negative effects of incarceration and find purpose, meaning and faith in life – all contributing to success during reintegration after prison.

For example, in Jennifer's second interview in 2016, she explained how previously, she was not a highly spiritual person, but her girlfriend's Aboriginal culture seemed to intrigue her and provided her with a sense of spirituality. In her gradual spiritual journey of enlightenment, she became so knowledgeable about the Aboriginal culture that there came a point when her girlfriend would seek guidance from her in this context. She mentioned the "emotional support" that the Aboriginal culture provided her with, in addition to her Stride Circle for supporting her beliefs. Within her practice, she valued crystals and feathers, and said, regarding the spiritual support she received from her Circle, "Just knowing that they can see those kinds of things in me, made me feel so good." Invoking positive feelings through her spiritual practices, especially after enduring emotional turmoil during incarceration, seemed to lift her spirits and help her gain faith in life once again.

In Ellen's first interview in 2015, she had mentioned that although she lived in "crappy conditions," her "mental spiritual well-being was much better there than it was here," implying that her spiritual well-being was better before entering Canadian prison. She elaborated on that

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by stating "and a lot of that is because of the system. The structure of the system we have in Canada." Unfortunately, her experiences at GVI did not seem to nourish her faith. However, she had mentioned being previously baptized in Panama, and that a group, which shared the same faith, came to visit her in GVI. She also mentioned: "…I used to go…to the church and…when I came out, the church was here in Kitchener, so I would attend…that's where I started doing some of the outreach stuff…" Her involvement with the church, seemed to help her reduce stress, plus feel more supported and optimistic about her life.

To add, Ellen expressed how spirituality is extremely important to her, not only for her own "spiritual walk," but "cause essentially when you find, a lot of people may find faith when they are in prison because a lot of times that's what will keep you going." Her words depict that spirituality did not only increase her faith while in prison, but also after leaving. Ellen helps us recognize the overall power of spirituality and how it can boost faith in women's lives, as well as surrounding people in the prison system and community. These findings align with and reinforce those of Aday et al.'s (2014), who explained how religion does not only represent an ethical code for people to live by, but it also infuses individuals with a greater understanding of the present, by illuminating meaning, and cultivating hope for the future.

Similarly, in Sara's first interview in 2015, she emphasized that spirituality was important to her and how, luckily, one of her Circle volunteers connected her with a church while she was still in a half-way house after leaving prison. She felt that not only did this help her to engage in church-based programs, but that she was also presented with the opportunity to participate in different community programming through her church. Sara's experiences with the church show how she felt empowered through her faith to strengthen her confidence in building new connections, which was clearly helpful during her reintegration experience.

This aligns with Miller's (2001, p. 1) findings regarding how at a social level, spirituality serves to enhance our competence and confidence in "the power of goodness." Miller also mentioned that when spirituality is practiced collectively or in group settings, we can experience higher confidence in the power of character and love, to serve our spiritual and material well-being. Sara's experiences reflect Miller's findings, as her practice of faith empowered her to grow her self-confidence and trust in others when making new friendships. Findings from Sara also help to extend Miller's work, by showing how simply growing individual interest in spirituality can lead women to form socially empowering connections and eventually, develop a

spiritual social network in community. Thus, for women in and leaving prison who are interested, engaging in spirituality may be an ideal form of leisure, as the women's experiences in this thesis show how spiritual engagement can support one to strengthen their faith, self-confidence, trust in their own path, and social connections, ultimately supporting community reintegration.

In addition to the three women's experiences above, the remaining women, Leslie, Megan, and Courtney all seemed to engage in spiritual practices. For example, in Leslie's second interview in 2016, she said that she felt strong in her spiritual path and as if "God is showing me wisdom now but kept me very... safe and vulnerable and naïve then." From Leslie's words, it can be gathered that she feels she is on her own unique path of spiritual growth, in which God is guiding and enlightening her with wisdom. Although she mentions feeling vulnerable and naïve in the past, she also emphasizes feeling as if God was keeping her safe simultaneously. This shows how Leslie feels a strong sense of safety and spiritual empowerment through her faith, helping her to build a positive outlook on her past, gratitude for her present and aspiration for her future. Leslie's experiences with spirituality align with Coyle's (2002) findings on how engaging in spirituality enhances health, along with Pinheiro and Rocha's (2020) findings on the importance of spirituality and how sharing spiritual knowledge helps to gain wisdom. By sharing her spiritual experiences with Circles as well as the interviewers connected to this thesis, Leslie seemed to gain insight into her personal life circumstances and draw more positive conclusions to share with others.

For Megan, her spiritual path began with her own Métis culture, as in her first interview in 2015 she mentioned attending a "Native" Centre in Hamilton where she practiced sacred "Native" rituals. She also mentioned playing online games with people of the Christian faith: "Yeah, with a live community. What really got me addicted to this game were the people. It wasn't just that they were awesome and amazing, but they were also Christians. This group I found." Her experience shows how through connecting with people of other spiritual faiths, one can expand their spiritual community and even find shared leisure interests.

This builds upon findings from Phan (2003), who outlined how exploring multiple religions can offer opportunities such as an enriched understanding of religion itself. Megan's experiences advance those of Phan's, by showing how simply engaging in spirituality and communicating with people of different faiths, can open doors for new social and leisure

opportunities. Interestingly, Phan (2003) also mentioned how exploring multiple faiths can foster reconciliation between religions, specifically between Christianity and "Native" religions. As such, learning about multiple religions can also be a useful tactic to understand the injustices and long-known crimes of Christianity against "Native Americans" (Phan, 2003).

It is also important to note that although the term "Indigenous" is widely used in academia now, many individuals and communities still use different terminology to refer to themselves and their populations. Some may choose to be represented as "Indigenous," whereas some may prefer "Native," which is the term Phan uses in their work. Megan also uses the term "Native" to refer to herself and mentioned how she attended a "Native Friendship Centre." As such, regardless of developing academic standards, it is important to respect the voices and choices of women in this thesis. For Megan, engaging in "Native" practices as well as meeting Christian people and playing games online with them, seemed to contribute positively to her spiritualty and social life, ultimately supporting her reintegration.

Additionally, Megan had explained how she recently decided to have an abortion and that her Stride Circle supported her:

> "Um so… they just kind of prayed for me, and you know… it was kind of like it's your decision, don't let anyone pressure you into that…and that they would support me with whatever I decided."

Megan's quote above shows how through her faith and support from Circles, she found a spiritual community which supported her beliefs and prayed for her in times of need. Her inner faith connected her to others, to help grow her spiritual empowerment, especially through the difficult decision of having an abortion. Having an abortion is not an easy decision or process and can often leave a trail of negative health effects on the individual. However, it seems as if having faith, along with connections to other spiritual beings helped to empower Megan to overcome this and other obstacles in life.

In her second interview in 2016, she said "…I would love to do stuff with my church or the church," implying that she was seeking a local church in her area to visit. Along with Megan, Courtney also had her own unique sense of spirituality, as in her second interview in 2016 she mentioned attending a "Native" friendship centre on her own. Essentially, each of the women had their own unique form of spiritual empowerment that seemed to help increase confidence, faith and positivity while fueling social connection, passion, and dreams in their lives. As such,

the women's experiences with spirituality help to reinforce current literature by a variety of researchers on the topic, including Coyle (2002), Aday et al. (2014) and Pinheiro and Rocha (2020). Also, findings from this thesis help extend Aday et al.'s work, by showing that spirituality and religiosity may not only have positive impacts on women's abilities to deal with adverse effects of prison sentences, but also how it can help women to experience a supported, hopeful, faith-filled, and positive reintegration path.

Overall, empowerment and the various forms of it discussed throughout this section seemed to be highly valued by all the women in this study. Practicing self-empowerment was shown to help women gain self-confidence, self-reliance, independence, trust in themselves and others, and even helped bring clarity towards personal life goals. In addition to self-empowerment, empowerment through the Stride Circle program was highlighted as a major form of help for women; as the program provided women with the opportunity for connection, positive social and leisure experiences, and emotional support from Circle members, in what women expressed as being safe and judgment free spaces. Each of the women also engaged in their own preferred choices of recreation and leisure activities, which helped to enhance the overall quality of leisure lifestyle in the women's lives, while providing empowerment to grow their passions and even develop new interests.

Lastly, spiritual empowerment played an intensely positive and meaningful role for each woman and seemed to help women discover their desires and goals in life, while deepening their connection with themselves, the divine and the spiritual community. These findings align with countless other past studies which were mentioned in the discussion above, including Schetky (1998), Dionigi (2002), Coyle (2002), Gillum et al. (2006), Yuen et al. (2012), Tablante (2012), Aday et al. (2014), Hipolito et al. (2014), Ching (2018) and Pinheiro and Rocha (2020). The frequency, consistency, and depth with which these findings have reappeared in the literature over the past few decades and in this thesis, only further reinforces the critical need for CSC, the government, reintegration programs and leisure practitioners to implement the mentioned forms of empowerment into programming for women who are currently in prison, as well as women who are reintegrating. Doing this can help to provide a safe, positive, and supported transition into community, all for the betterment of women's lives, families and surrounding communities.

5.3.4 Exercising Agency

Agency is widely known as one's self-awareness of their power and rights, along with the potential to have defined goals, make meaningful choices and take action to attain their goals (Kabeer, 1999). Despite encountering such complex conditions of constraint during and even after prison, the women in this study exercised agency in different ways, including through resistance, sharing stories, public speaking, and advocacy. Also, members of the Stride Circle program seemed to encourage and support women to exercise agency in various situations. Although there was no official known form of advocacy training for the women in this study, it should be noted that advocacy training is an approach to empowerment that is not widely used, which can greatly improve formerly incarcerated women's self-efficacy and self-worth, while helping to foster increased access to community resources, strengthen individual problem-solving skills and enhance the process of community reintegration itself (Pinto et al., 2014).

The women's experiences with enacting agency varied depending on the circumstance and environment at the time. For example, women showed agency during interviews when speaking up against negative stereotypes and powerlessness perpetuated by the interview guide statements. This depicted how women were aware of their own power, the right to be respected and the right to be treated as equal to others in society. One of the most powerful ways that women displayed agency was through sharing personal stories and public speaking as mentioned previously, which seemed to enhance self-confidence, while cultivating feelings of empowerment and independence in overcoming the negative impacts of incarceration. Sharing life stories, experiences of incarceration and reintegration, both privately and publicly with the community, seemed to foster positive self-images for women and reassurance from others who offered positive feedback.

Clearly, self-empowerment, empowerment through leisure, and social support all seemed to have direct positive influences on women's abilities to reintegrate successfully by helping to make the process more efficient, comfortable, positive, and enjoyable overall. Women's agency is also identified as a part of self-empowerment; current literature points towards an urgent need to enhance women's agency, specifically women's abilities to clarify goals and act towards them (Donald et al., 2020). In fact, Donald et al. insist that doing so is necessary to advance the

empowerment and gender equality of women. These researchers also identified how current methods for measuring agency among women provide insufficient knowledge of constraints that women may face in exercising agency, and therefore restrict valid and reliable interventions and interpretation of their influence. Their results indicate that future research in this area should work to ensure that policies and programs are purposeful and meaningful in women's lives by considering the different factors involved, such as areas of decision making.

This thesis mobilizes Donald et al.'s (2020) findings and connects to de Miguel-Calvo's (2020) work by showing how women's social engagement helped foster self-empowerment, which was seemingly enhanced by expressing agency while women supported themselves to fight against the vulnerabilities and stigma imposed upon them by the institution and society. These findings also provide a response to Donald et al.'s (2020) work, by showing how stigma can act as a constraint, which women often face when attempting to exercise agency. It is also important to note how women's agency was highly enacted in response to attacks on self-respect (e.g., in response to disempowering interview statements, assumptions made by others and experiences of exclusion in community).

Similarly, women disclosed personal feelings and actions taken in response to restrictions imposed on freedom of choice (e.g., being allowed to meet with Circles, but not contact family frequently enough during incarceration, or confronting one's parole officer about unfair measures), both in prison and during reintegration. By enacting agency, women also seemed to improve the potential to make important life decisions (such as the need to build social connections during prison, or an intimate relationship during reintegration), while embracing independence post-release. At times, social connections were formed through Circles, while at other times, women took the initiative to do this themselves. It is possible that experiences in Circles helped encourage and empower women to take steps to form their own social networks elsewhere, such as with spiritual communities, potential dating partners etc., as the program may have illuminated the importance of social connection in women's lives, especially in relation to achieving a fulfilling reintegration experience.

Recently, de Miguel-Calvo (2020) highlighted how supporting oneself is a critical step in overcoming vulnerabilities that are generated due to incarceration. This action was exercised by Jennifer in her second interview in 2016, where she expressed her agency in response to an interview guide question that essentially asked her to which extent she agrees or disagrees with

the statement: "So, all in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure." She responded and expressed her agency by strongly disagreeing with the statement, standing up for herself and emphasizing how she has overcome issues already on her own within prison, including completing part of her education. Her response can also be seen as an expression of self-support and resistance against stigma in society towards the 'prisoner identity,' as the interview guide statement implied that people who are/have been in prison may feel like 'failures.' Similar preconceived notions were often expressed in the initial interview guide, as more women included in this analysis expressed their agency, specifically against negatively framed statements or behaviour directed towards them. This will be further discussed in the section reflecting on design measures.

Despite the limited literature on women's pathways into recovery from trauma associated with incarceration (Bove & Tryon, 2018), it should be noted that enacting agency can help women who are in and leaving prison to feel a sense of control over their actions and consequences in life (Moore, 2016). In addition to expressing agency through resistance and sharing their stories both privately and publicly, the women in this study selflessly helped to advocate for the population of women who have experienced incarceration, by providing open and honest discussion about some of the injustices which often occur in women's lives. The women also displayed agency by providing suggestions and sharing expertise on how to help women and the system improve, and how to best prepare as well as support individuals throughout reintegration.

Thereby, agency can be seen as a crucial aspect of women's empowerment and the women in this thesis exhibited it in various settings. For example, one of the women, Megan, advocated for herself when she wanted to embark upon a new intimate relationship with someone after leaving prison. She explained how she had been dating a man for about a month and wanted to go to his house, so she had to tell her parole officer. In many cases, women may not feel comfortable revealing their criminal history to others. However, Megan revealed it to her dating partner and even allowed her parole officer to tell him about her crime. In this situation, being open, honest, and confident about disclosing her past crime to her partner, turned out to be a good decision that benefited her in the long run. Through this act, Megan influenced social change for herself, and for the population of women who experience incarceration in general – as

she showed how admitting to past crime(s) may not always result in stigma, and in fact, can lead to beautiful and authentic life experiences, such as a strong and understanding relationship.

Findings from Megan's experiences described above with expressing agency, align well with Liu et al.'s (2020) work, who showed how women's use of language and relationships influenced their self-perceptions, and reconstructed identities beyond that of someone who has been affiliated with crime. In Megan's case, she chose to be transparent and professional about her criminal history with her partner. She was also honest with her parole officer about her desire to date someone. In turn, her openness seemed to help her build a trustworthy relationship and a positive self-image.

This also aligns with Rowe's (2011) work, about women in prison creating narratives of identity and 'the self' in relation to stigma and the overall struggle for defining oneself after being criminalized. This researcher emphasized how women in prison often adopt problem solving skills and exhibit agency, which helps to create new meaning and an influential voice regarding incarceration. Moreover, findings from this thesis about women's experiences with expressing agency, help to advance both Rowe's (2011) and Liu et al.'s (2020) research, not only by showing how expressing agency during incarceration can be helpful to women, but that enacting agency after leaving prison can also have a positive impact on the process of reintegration, as it can create the space to amplify women's voices and construct new identities.

Essentially, when women exercise power in a variety of ways, such as through public speaking, story sharing or personal advocacy, it creates resistance against the structural powers of the institution and incarceration stigma in society. Overall, the women in this study exhibited agency by sharing their real-life experiences of encountering and overcoming constraints. Women also shared specific tactics to enact agency, such as speaking up for themselves, taking initiative, risks and embracing opportunities for social growth in community. Furthermore, the women's experiences of expressing agency which were described in this section can contribute to social movements of helping women everywhere who have been affiliated with the criminal justice system, to live better lives during reintegration and beyond.

5.4 Revisiting the Theory of Restorative Justice

The principle of restorative justice is an essential component of this thesis which will be revisited in this section. Restorative justice is a controversial approach to treating offences, which provides a humane way to understand justice related issues (Van Ness & Strong, 2014). It centres the treatment of people who have been involved in crime, along with an attempt to repair any harm that has been done – which involves bringing together victims, people who have offended and members of our communities (Van Ness & Strong, 2014). Although experiences of women meeting victims were not mentioned in the interview component explored in this thesis, descriptions of women communicating, bonding, healing, and growing through social and leisure interactions with community members through the Stride Circle program appeared many times.

As previously mentioned in the literature review, Walker and Tarutani (2017) delved deep into the concept of restorative justice in their study about violence against women, which focused on efforts to increase healing between people who have offended and victims. This study reminds us how people who have offended are often also victims of crime and may have been bombarded with unfair challenges in life, prior to being convicted. Given the heightened chances of past trauma and violence in the lives of women involved with the criminal justice system (De La Rue & Ortega, 2019), restorative justice related interventions seem highly beneficial when provided for both women who are in prison, and women who are going through reintegration, as opposed to the detrimental punitive measures currently used in federal prisons.

Based on Walker and Tarutani's (2017) work, restorative justice can be seen as a peaceful approach to treating crime, which instead of being punitive by focusing on who broke what law and how to punish them – leans more towards understanding who was harmed, while acknowledging the needs and responsibilities of everyone affected. In fact, the mentioned researchers found that ignoring harm and the rehabilitation needed to treat it, which is often done in prisons, can actually further perpetuate violence. However, applying principles of restorative justice during meetings with people who have offended can maximize the chances of successful rehabilitation by increasing healing and lowering dependence on punishment overall (Walker & Tarutani, 2017).

The findings from this thesis also align with Walker and Davidson's (2018) study, as women seemed to be less likely to be reincarcerated after engaging in restorative justice interventions with the Stride Circle program. These findings advance Walker and Davidson's research, by showing how restorative justice approaches can be helpful for women to participate in during reintegration as well. In fact, not only did the women in this thesis seem less likely to end up back in prison after participating in social and leisure interventions with Circles, but women also seemed less likely to relapse, engage in crime, and even refrained from associating with people affiliated with crime, as participants were encouraged to form new positive connections through the program.

Although studies including this thesis, show the benefits of people who experience incarceration engaging in restorative justice programming, the concept seems to be rarely discussed publicly by policy makers, prison staff and the government, as an ideal route to treating crime. In fact, in one study in which several judges were interviewed, almost fifty percent of the judges felt that there was not enough political support in favor of restorative justice approaches to treating crime, and that many politicians seem to be afraid of it being too 'soft on crime' (Department of Justice Canada, 2017).

However, with the valuable findings of restorative justice presented in this thesis and the abundance of studies mentioned within, it is critical that the government does not allow such helpful approaches to be seen as 'soft,' but instead as beneficial tactics to prevent crime and achieve rehabilitation (Department of Justice Canada, 2017). As such, it is important to understand the wide range of interventions and benefits offered to people who have been involved with the criminal justice system, through restorative justice focused programming. In fact, helpful interventions such as family group conferencing, social circles, peace making circles (Wilson et al., 2018), social assistance, community service, volunteering opportunities, and leisure programming can all be a part of restorative justice (Pedlar et al., 2018).

It is equally important to understand the relationship between leisure and restorative justice, as both are often used together. Even the Government of Canada (2021) acknowledges how restorative justice promotes accountability and meaningful participation, while providing space for reparation, healing, and reintegration. Also, the versatility of restorative justice approaches provides the opportunity for women to engage in unique activities that can foster

growth, connection and creativity while helping individuals to improve in areas of need, within group settings in community. This helps bring together people who have been excluded through incarceration, in a healthy atmosphere, while connecting individuals with members of community to build mutual understandings about incarceration.

Leisure is also increasingly being acknowledged for the important role it plays in achieving social justice (Yuen & Fortune, 2020) which can lead to positive experiences of social change (Mair, 2002). The women's experiences in this thesis serve as examples of social progress made through active participation in restorative justice related interventions, specifically with the help of the Stride Circle program offered by CJI. As women continued to engage in social activities and recreational interventions with Circles, stressful situations seemed to be alleviated, relationships seemed to grow, and healing and justice appeared to be present in women's lives, especially during resettlement.

Furthermore, although Canada's criminal justice system claims to focus on rehabilitation, women in this thesis rarely felt rehabilitated by the prison system and programs within, which in turn, increased reliance on external programming, including from Stride Circles and other resources in community. Discussion surrounding the brokenness of Canada's prison system continues to grow, pointing towards the lack of humanity and care, racial inequity, along with dangers and negative impacts imposed by this old and failing system (Ling, 2021). In fact, instead of being a place for people to be rehabilitated, Canada's federal prison system seems more like a warehouse for people who are already suffering with mental health conditions (Ling, 2021), often worsening upon release, as shown through women's experiences in this thesis.

Findings from the women in this project confirm Ling's work by showing how more than half of the women in this thesis had experienced addiction and mental health issues before and during incarceration, which seemed to be vastly left untreated until after release. In this sense, one of the major failures of the current criminal justice system in Canada is its lack of actual rehabilitation, leading to increased rates of recidivism and low rates of success during reintegration (Hwang, 2020). Furthermore, Ling (2021) argues that much of the available literature and evidence within, shows how the Canadian federal prison system is unsuccessful at decreasing crime among women. In fact, current prison policies may in fact be increasing crime, as women are currently the fastest growing population in Canadian federal prisons (Paynter et

al., 2021) and unfortunately, 39 percent of formerly incarcerated women leaving prison have recontact with the police (Department of Justice Canada, 2021).

Contrastingly, in places such as Norway, The Netherlands, and even England, restorative justice has become more common (Van Ness, 2016). In fact, a particularly significant study was conducted by Strang et al. (2013) in which researchers conducted an analysis of ten different evaluations on restorative justice conferencing. Results indicated a reduction of up to 45% in repeat arrests or convictions – strongly reiterating the effectiveness of restorative justice in reducing crime and meeting the needs of people who have offended, victims and the community. The same study found that there was eight times more benefit in the costs of crimes that were prevented, than the cost of providing restorative justice conferencing itself – indicating that any costs associated with delivering such programs result in greater profits to us as a society in the long run.

To add, techniques involved in restorative justice focused programming have also shown dramatic reductions in symptoms of post-traumatic stress as well as fear associated with committing crime (Klassen, 2021). The women's experiences in this thesis align with Klassen's findings, as restorative justice approaches seemed to help women function better emotionally after leaving prison, which included a reduction in overall anxiety, remorse related to incarceration, in addition to decreased pain and suffering during reintegration. In fact, engaging in Stride Circles not only seemed to help women heal emotionally, but also helped to accelerate success during reintegration, such as with achieving jobs, maintaining focus on goals, and staying away from crime. It is clear how research on recidivism shows promising results for people who have offended when they participate in restorative justice processes – and that individuals who do so are less likely to reoffend than those who do not (Walker & Davidson, 2018).

Although the Canadian federal prison system is inherently a disempowering process for women to endure, researchers Fortune et al. (2010) believe that with adequate commitment towards implementing restorative justice, prisons can develop partnerships with organizations in community and volunteers who help foster true justice in women's lives. Restorative justice approaches also seem to highly promote collective action among different parties, shedding light on the concept of shared responsibility in community. Through this process, women and

members of community can come together to help women succeed, and make our communities safer to live in.

The Canadian Government is well-aware that the goals achieved through restorative justice-focused programming include improved relationships between victims and people who have offended, increased compliance of those who have offended and significantly reduced rates of recidivism. However, despite government websites acknowledging the benefits of restorative justice programming, it has still not been used enough (Shapland, 2014), and it could be used more widely, more often, discussed more publicly, and funded more generously for women, their families, and communities to maximize all the potential benefits. The results from this thesis further support the promising outcomes from Walker and Davidson (2018), Pedlar et al. (2018); Fortune et al. (2020), and many other scholars who have worked tirelessly to reassure us that restorative justice is a safer, more beneficial, and ideal alternative route to treating crime. Furthermore, the following sections will elaborate on the importance of providing social assistance for women who have been affiliated with crime.

5.4.1 The Importance of Social Support for Women

Researchers have long known the benefits of having a strong social support network during challenging times (Galek et al., 2011). Women's experiences, as explored in this thesis, help to build upon studies such as Galek et al.'s, by showing how social support does not only help people who have suffered trauma, but also how it can help women leaving prison to achieve a more well-assisted and secure reintegration process. The women in this thesis depict how being able to rely on family, friends and community members can significantly reduce stress in formerly incarcerated people's lives through different ways, such as by helping individuals change their self-perceptions and alter coping mechanisms. In fact, it has been well-known for over the last four decades how strong social support networks can help to mitigate the effects of stress on one's state of psychological well-being (Andrews et al., 1978). Relatedly, the critical need for effective social supports to be made readily available for women leaving prison has resurfaced through this thesis.

Women highlighted the importance of having financial, housing, employment, training, education, and health needs met, along with equal and sufficient access to recreation and leisure during imprisonment and reintegration. To add, emotional support and casual social bonding were emphasized to be helpful forms of assistance that woman experienced throughout the Stride Circle program. Social bonding can be defined as the growth of one's connection to people, including a heightened sense of belonging within that relationship or group, which helps to expand interpersonal skills and support for the individual who is in need (Bensimon, 2021).

Interestingly, women's feelings about the importance of and need for social connection both during and after prison, align with Bensimon's definition and with Markson et al.'s (2015) research, who found that theories of social capital and social bonding reinforce the idea that supportive relationships help foster resilience for people, especially during reintegration after leaving prison. Markson et al. also identified how the relationship between social bonding and reintegration is rarely discussed through longitudinal research of the reintegration experience. However, the women's transitions discussed in this thesis serve as ideal examples of longitudinal studies of the resettlement process, as women were interviewed between anywhere from two to three years and expressed wanting to maintain relationships with Circles beyond this.

More recent research about social systems within federal institutions, emphasize the injustices which often occur in women's prisons, including restrictions being placed upon women's opportunities for social bonding as well as the limited chance to find a spouse and attend to family, or start one (Al Zoubi, 2020). Women in this thesis also explained having experiences of limited social opportunities within prison, and the emotional turmoil that followed. In fact, one woman felt so distressed in prison because she was not allowed to have family visits for several weeks. This led her to break the rules by obtaining a cell phone in prison, simply to maintain social connection with her loved ones, which she was further punished for in prison, as a result.

Clearly, these types of social restrictions placed upon women during prison seem to lead to excessive need for social support during release. The results of this thesis also align with findings from Abbott et al.'s (2018) work, who noted that women leaving prison have high social support and health needs, yet there is limited evidence in the literature showing reintegration programs which provide connections to social supports, while considering unmet health concerns

or other needs pertaining to women who have been incarcerated. Thankfully, results from this thesis help add to the limited evidence available, by showing how reintegration programs such as Stride Circles can help to foster valuable social connections and meet personal needs for women leaving prison.

Similar to the study conducted in 2010 by Fortune et al., women in this thesis described what it was like to not have enough social support at times. It is important to reiterate how one woman, Ellen, in her first interview in 2015 had emphasized that "the government programing that they mandate for us to take is not helpful." Her feedback on the prison system reminds us of how social supports are an integral part of an individual's protective factors or external assets that hold the potential to mitigate a person's risk of reoffending (Tamatea & Wilson, 2009). Relatedly, a recent study conducted by Scanlan et al. (2020) found that social support is a highly useful and protective mechanism for people in prison as well as people who have been released and are attempting to resettle in community, due to the expansion of evidence in the literature, pointing towards its correlation with successful treatment.

The experiences of women in this thesis who received and utilized social support, align with Scanlan et al.'s research, by showing how having adequate social support throughout reintegration can protect women from the detrimental impacts of stigma, while helping to prevent relapse and recidivism. The Stride Circle program was shown to help provide access to social support for women, which will be discussed in detail in the next section. As articulated by Fortune et al. (2010), the efforts of the Stride Circle program by CJI, can be seen as a movement of social justice within community. The same authors also emphasized that such movements of support are necessary, in order to broadly enhance social support systems and create opportunities for social reintegration, which essentially address deeply rooted issues of injustice for women who have experienced incarceration.

The value of relationships that women developed during Circle interactions should not be overlooked by governments as a helpful mechanism in treating crime. As women became well-acquainted with members of their Circle, volunteers and staff provided support in multiple and unique ways, including help with increasing confidence in social situations and encouragement of prosocial behaviour. Women also received assistance with transportation, gaining access to employment, housing and more from Circles. These findings align with and expand upon current

literature, which informs us of how social connections can help provide critical resources for people returning to community from prison (McLeod, 2020).

Essentially, the women's experiences described in this thesis indicate how the Stride Circle program was successful in helping women both during incarceration and reintegration, to build casual and supportive social networks which assisted in the preparation and process of community resettlement in various ways. Types of support offered to women through Circle connections included overall help with community re-entry and personalized positive social support (e.g., help with moving or seeking housing, assistance finding employment, encouragement to refrain from drug use, engage in healthy activities and practice healthy coping mechanisms etc.). Circle volunteers also assisted women with transportation to important appointments and groceries.

Other forms of support included help to access, plan and engage in recreational and leisure opportunities, which served as forms of positive activity, healing, and restoration in women's lives as well. Circle volunteers also helped connect women with specific resources and community programs tailored to their needs and interests, during incarceration, upon discharge and throughout reintegration. The many types of support arranged by and offered to women from Circles, show the adaptability and versatility of the program itself – while illuminating the wide range of unique needs of women who have experienced incarceration.

One of the most unique aspects of the Stride Circle program that differentiates it from government mandated programs lies in the personalized support aspect, in which Circle members tailored the type of support they provided to the individual needs of women. Unfortunately, the findings of this thesis today (almost three decades later) also align with a 1986 study by Schupak, who emphasized how the restrictions embedded within the prison environment can prevent women from meeting personal needs. This may be the reason why women often rely so heavily on internal ('the self') and external sources of support, such as the Stride Circle program, to help with transitioning into community after prison. As this thesis highlights, each woman's pathway to successful resettlement is distinct. Thus, basic prison programming may not be meeting their individual needs, which could be contributing to women's reliance on external reintegration supports.

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With the support received from Stride, a sense of community seemed to be built between women, members of their Circle and even other people in women's lives. As women's relationships grew, they were presented with more opportunities such as church group invitations, leisure outings, requests for public speaking and more. Relatedly, McMillan and Chavis (1986) described a sense of community as the feeling of being involved in a group learning process that creates opportunities for people to be supported and have their needs met, while forming emotional bonds that allow one to be a member of community with influence. This definition is reflected through the women's social experiences during reintegration, as women seemed to have positive emotional influences on themselves as well as members of community through social interactions. This shows the value that having a sense of community can have for women, especially during the unpredictable process of reintegration. The women's words in this thesis are rich with emotion, passion, and real-life experiences, many of which show how social bonding can help to enhance feelings of community, connection, and solidarity in women's lives after leaving prison.

Stride Circle staff and volunteers helped women feel more comfortable functioning and living in community, making it easier to go about daily activities and achieve a sense of normalcy in life, especially after leaving prison. As McMillan and Chavis highlighted in their 1986 study, it has been well-known for decades how having a sense of community unites us as human beings, and this can be vividly seen through the women's experiences in Circles. The women's journeys and testimonies of receiving social support from the Stride Circle program, help extend our knowledge regarding the idea that strong social support networks can help women to heal, prosper and reintegrate successfully. Therefore, the importance of women leaving prison receiving adequate social support during reintegration is critical to understand, create awareness of and implement into women's lives. Drawing on evidence from the women's experiences along with the literature explored simultaneously, this thesis acknowledges how social bonding and support can enhance women's abilities to overcome constraints, achieve goals and live in harmony among community.

Findings from this thesis also align with and extend Schnappauf and DiDonato's (2017) study about women's recidivism, belonging and social support, with the aim of moving from 'solitary to solidarity.' These researchers found that if women who have experienced

incarceration have greater access to people who can offer social supports and promote their well-being, the population's recidivism rate could not only decrease, but women may be more likely to reach re-entry goals, form a better life and achieve what they perceive as successful resettlement in community. Similarly, this thesis provides evidence of how engaging in consistent positive social interactions and having enough social support can help women who have been imprisoned to gain a sense of belonging, love, and acceptance in community – and begin to repair the harm imposed by past trauma and experiences of incarceration. Furthermore, the upcoming section will describe, in detail, the positive effects that women experienced, as a result of participation in the Stride Circle program.

5.4.2 The Positive Impacts of Stride Circles in Women's Lives

Along with providing help to access social supports and grow feelings of community in women's lives, the Stride Circle program was shown to have other positive impacts for women. Women also reported feeling more comfortable in social situations and having an improved sense of trust in themselves and others after spending time in Circles. These findings align with those of Fortune et al. (2020), who found that circles of support can promote inclusion in women's lives, through experiences of acceptance from community members. The same researchers concluded that when women are supported by members of community, and show willingness to form mutual connections, it can stimulate a sense of belonging for everyone involved. As such, some of the women in this thesis even benefited from lasting friendships that were formed in Circles and continued after; helping to establish reliable and trustworthy social connections for women during incarceration, reintegration and beyond. Women expressed gratitude and reassurance in knowing that Circle members would be there for them upon release from prison, as well as when needed in community.

For instance, when asked about how Stride helped to improve her well-being in her third interview in 2017, Jennifer had responded:

> "That goes back to the like encouragement, empowerment… and openness…like they're great listeners…they're great women in general (laughs). And it helps to boost that self-esteem within me because, I never really had that confidence."

Comments such as these and others show how supportive group environments can help women affiliated with the criminal justice system to enhance their quality of life during and after incarceration. Jennifer's self-esteem and self-confidence had improved immensely throughout her experiences with Circles, especially in comparison to her first interview in 2015, where she had mentioned how disclosing her incarceration to people can "…be uncomfortable at points." However, after engaging in the Stride Circle program for several years, Jennifer seemed to have gained enough confidence to openly and courageously share her personal experiences with others. Thus, although the prison atmosphere may not be a positive environment for women who are federally criminalized, having a supportive network of relationships that go beyond prison can support women's ambitions to live as fully accepted and active citizens in community.

Transformation also came across as an important concept and goal throughout women's experiences in Circles. As Bui and Morash (2010) emphasized, women can gain new outlooks on life, and the transformation required to invoke positive change themselves – especially when provided with the vital material and emotional support they need. As such, transformation was one of the major lasting positive impacts that experiences with Circles had on women. For instance, Jennifer went from feeling as if she only ever had negative acquaintances in her life, to feeling as if she finally had reliable friendships. Ellen felt as if she had strengthened her values and morals, while gaining a better sense of focus towards her life goals. Sara expressed how her positive initiatives through engagement in Circles did not only benefit her, but also gave her hope for positively impacting her children. Leslie stated that she would never let addiction control her again. Megan was able to maintain some of the connections she formed by staying in touch online, which was one of her initial goals in the beginning of her Circle. Lastly, Courtney admitted how she experienced unconditional support through Circles; she was grateful to have formed connections who guided her in the right direction and away from negative behaviours. She also felt that Circle members kept her feeling grounded in a safe space, which allowed her to reveal her issues and form positive resolutions. These are just some of the positive testimonies that women provided about participating in the Stride Circle program.

As shown through their feedback about Circles, women experienced an abundance of positive effects in their lives, especially with respect to reintegration. Transformation, positivity, an enhanced self-image, and outlook on life were only some of the benefits women experienced.

In addition, women seemed to gain focus towards their life goals and control over addictions. Lasting connections, a positive influence on their children and feelings of safety were also noteworthy benefits experienced by women through Circles.

As women continued their journeys of transitioning from prison to community, having Circle members within reach became something to be unconditionally grateful for, and women seemed to look forward to reconnecting with volunteers. These findings help to advance those of Pedlar et al.'s (2018) and Fortune et al.'s (2020), by showing how Circle interactions can have lasting positive impacts on women's social lives, emotional well-being, health, and self-confidence, along with their children, resulting in positive transformation which may not have otherwise been achieved. Overall, the positive influences and connections that women attained through Circles, were shown to be valuable in both the short and long run, by contributing to women's feelings of safety, security, love, acceptance and finally, a successful resettlement in community.

5.4.3 Establishing and Strengthening Social Connections and Friendships

Without supportive networks, women are far more likely to experience loneliness and exclusion, which increases chances of remaining at risk in community (Fortune et al., 2020). Thus, along with the positive impacts of engagement in Circles on reintegration, women expressed the need and value of establishing and strengthening social connections, friendships, and relationships. There is a plethora of existing research, which explores the benefits of having positive social experiences for people in prison. However, there is limited literature on the benefits of building friendships for women leaving prison in relation to community re-integration. This leaves an interesting gap in the understanding and context of social experiences in the lives of formerly incarcerated women who are in the process of community re-entry.

Some of Jennifer's words in the findings chapter, show how she was able to establish social connections and positive emotional support through consistent participation in Circles. These findings align with Hart's study in 1995, where it was found that stronger levels of social support among women in prison positively correlated with mental well-being. It is also important to reiterate that women began to engage in Stride Circles while in prison, and this provided the

opportunity to build connections during incarceration, which continued into the process of reintegration.

A more recent study conducted by Wulf-Ludden (2013) found that people in prison expressed how having friends helped them to avoid engaging in trouble and to achieve different forms of self-improvement. This researcher also found that when people in prison received general advice and companionship from others, it made a great difference in their lives through increased connections to support and raised levels of comfort in forming personal bonds. Furthermore, Wulf-Ludden indicated how women in prison experienced improvement in life by making friends who provided helpful advice and listened to their personal issues.

These findings align with the wisdom shared by women in this thesis, who emphasized that forming social connections and maintaining friendships established through the Stride Circle program helped to positively support and improve their lives during community re-entry. However, it should be noted that both Hart's (1995) and Wulf-Ludden's (2013) study focused on social support among people in prison, as opposed to this thesis which discusses the value of maintaining connections and friendships specifically in relation to community reintegration (after leaving prison). As mentioned previously, some of the women in this thesis did not feel at home in community, especially after leaving prison. However, the safe and judgement free spaces created by programs such as Stride Circles seemed to allow women to build trust in one another, helping to decrease detachment from community that occurred while in prison. Thus, the approaches used by Circles clearly helped to provide the right atmosphere for women to establish helpful connections and friendships, which in turn, supported success during resettlement. As Jennifer noted in her third and last interview in 2017:

> "And I would love to do that (chuckles), like I encourage girls here to get involved in the Circles because it's, it's nice to feel normal and not worry about what you say, or how you act, or you just be you…" – Jennifer

It is comments like these from women who have participated in Circles, which are key to creating awareness of the benefits that women leaving prison can achieve from engaging in restorative justice-focused programming. The importance of establishing and strengthening social connections and friendships during community re-entry requires greater attention. Moreover, the next section will discuss the paradoxes of prison rehabilitation.

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5.4.4 Paradoxes of Prison Rehabilitation

Rehabilitation of individuals involved with crime can be defined as any process, including spoken or written communication, with the aim of socially transforming one's life, including treatment for drug addictions, psychological needs as well as training for work and education (Phelps, 2011). This definition implies that rehabilitation in Canadian prisons for women should be focused on helping individuals to create positive change in their health, while setting and achieving goals that entail self-growth and success in life. However, despite their emphasized goal of commitment towards achieving rehabilitation for people in prison (Government of Canada, 2008), after exploring the academic literature and closely studying the experiences of women leaving prison, it is clear that CSC is not meeting this goal.

Although the Canadian prison system claims to intend on 'rehabilitating' women, it is too often that women leaving prison do not seem to feel rehabilitated at all, nor supported in their transitions into community. This is concerning, as a lack of rehabilitation in prison can directly affect women's abilities to reintegrate into community after leaving. Countless findings from this thesis reveal how prison rehabilitation and overall programming have failed to fully prepare women to achieve a successful reintegration, explaining how it is a paradox in and of itself. In fact, these findings align with those of many well-known researchers of criminology, carceral culture, social justice, leisure, and community reintegration, including Van der Meulen and Omstead (2021), Fortune et al. (2020), Pedlar et al. (2018), Yuen et al. (2012), earlier literature from Duguid (1982) and other scholars who have all exposed that although rehabilitation is continuously aimed at by prison systems, for some reason, it is rarely achieved.

In Ward's and Maruna's (2007) comprehensive review on rehabilitation, the researchers pointed out how rehabilitation should focus on decreasing or avoiding risks, in addition to promoting human needs by providing people with the key components to live a 'good life.' In this review, it was also well-articulated that rehabilitation should include a fine balance of both the needs and wants of individuals, clinicians, the public and the government. In connection to reintegration, this means helping women achieve both their desires and needs, in order to attain significant social progress and positive change in life.

In this context, the concept of rehabilitation for women can be related to the previously discussed idea of working on 'the self,' and should therefore encourage self-improvement while meeting personal needs. Thus, one could argue that rehabilitation in prison should help women improve in ways they approve of, along with ways the state and community approves of, in order to achieve a successful reintegration afterwards. However, this is rarely the case in federal prisons, as it is a well-known and even disturbing fact that parole boards often force people to engage in programs described to be unhelpful, and allow people who have supposedly been 'rehabilitated,' yet do not feel so, to be released into community and left to rehabilitate or re-offend on their own (Cullen & Gilbert, 2012). This can potentially impose danger upon women, their loved ones and the rest of society.

Although the concept of rehabilitation in prisons has been long criticized by researchers, studies which seek to understand how people who are in prison experience rehabilitative care are extremely rare (Bullock & Bunce, 2020). In fact, researchers Bullock and Bunce stressed how the prison system's institutional failure is, itself, responsible for the lack of rehabilitation within. The same researchers emphasized how programs within prisons are thought to be 'rehabilitative' in nature, but are instead, superficial in their approach and lacking in resources, making them unlikely to create social change for women. These scholars also highlighted how prison atmospheres lack in warmth, as prison staff often seem uninterested and unpassionate about helping people in prison. More specifically, these researchers explained how prison staff frequently display an overall lack of care and empathy towards people in prison, and this often causes unfriendly relationships between staff and women, further disrupting any practices of rehabilitation.

Like Bullock and Bunce's (2020) findings, the women in this thesis also confessed to experiencing a serious lack of support from the onset of incarceration. In fact, the women emphasized how there was not enough care and warmth felt in prison, little to no positive social connections with prison staff and poor-quality programming in general. To add to the lack of support from staff, women had reported having unequal access to exercise equipment and lack of access to other essential resources, for example: the inability to attend to finances, addictions, mental, physical, and emotional health, in addition to social needs. Women in this thesis also

reported feeling as if there was not proper access to leisure programming in prison, and experienced insufficient help in preparation for reintegration.

The constraints and lack of care that women admitted to feeling while in prison, often seemed to lead to a deterioration in health and well-being upon re-entry into community. However, thankfully, women who participated in the Stride Circle program experienced a sense of belonging, care and social connection that seemed to promote well-being throughout reintegration. Therefore, the findings from this thesis align with and extend upon Bullock and Bunce's (2020) research by showing how the prison system has once again failed to support women adequately. If women were to receive sufficient care and access to essential resources in prison, it could contribute to a more successful rehabilitation, reintegration and life thereafter.

In addition to the scarcity of actual rehabilitation occurring in Canadian federal prisons, the quality of prison environments is equally important, as it has both short and long-term effects on the well-being and safety (The John Howard Society of Canada, 2019) of women who experience incarceration. Prison can be a stressful place to live and function in, and the atmosphere itself can contribute to the stress of the individual (The John Howard Society of Canada, 2019). Unfortunately, the women in this thesis have provided further evidence to add to the plethora of existing research on the harmful effects that prison environments can have on people. In many cases, the negative effects of incarceration can have dangerous impacts on the individual and their reintegration process following release. Not only is the prison atmosphere immensely different from the outside world, but often, the society that women return to after prison is extremely different than their lives before incarceration (Davis et al., 2013).

During interviews, most of the women provided their feedback on the nature of incarceration. It is important to note that at times, it may not have been easy for women to speak openly about the negative impacts of incarceration, as some of the interviews took place directly in prison, a place where researchers have emphasized there is little protection over free speech (Bianchi & Shapiro, 2018). Women in this thesis had revealed the limitations they experienced regarding receiving visits from family or others while in prison. Also, women emphasized the emotional impacts this had on them, as it was not an easy experience to be socially distanced from family, friends and loved ones who could otherwise provide necessary support through such challenging times. The social distancing imposed upon women in prison can lead to a lack

of connection between women and the outside world, whereby others cannot understand what it feels like to experience life in their shoes (Crawford, 2001), potentially contributing to society's overall lack of insight and empathy into the lives of women who have been affiliated with the criminal justice system.

Thus, with the combined lack of society's understanding, social opportunity, care and empathy being expressed towards women who have experienced incarceration, prison environments seem to be inducing more harm in women's lives, as opposed to cultivating the 'rehabilitation' that the government of Canada claims to enact. Thankfully, as shown through the Stride Circle program, women can benefit from receiving social support from volunteers, friends and loved ones. However, unfortunately, in one woman's case, she was only allowed one visit per six weeks and a twenty-minute phone call per week. Such restrictions imposed upon women by prison policies do not seem rehabilitative, but rather more punitive, as this analysis shows how GVI did not seem to support women to spend enough quality time with family and friends. Some of the women also revealed how their quality of life was much better before entering prison. For instance, several women felt that they were much more physically active before being incarcerated. In addition to the lack of physical activity experienced in prison, women also noticed other women at GVI who experienced the same, along with issues such as worsening mental illness and more.

The prison environment and treatment within is a vital part of achieving a rehabilitative culture, as it shows people how safe they will be in it, and whether or not they will be treated with respect and provided the means needed to positively change their lives after leaving (The John Howard Society of Canada, 2019). Individuals and groups are known to succeed in environments that are decent, offer hope, greenery, fresh air, and views of the outside (The John Howard Society of Canada, 2019). However, this is not what women in this thesis described their prison experiences as, at the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ontario. Clearly, past, current, and emerging research shows how incarceration leaves women feeling insecure, unassisted and much worse. Given that the Government of Canada (2008) has stated its intended goal of rehabilitation in Canadian federal prisons, it is imperative that future prison programming for women be tailored towards helping arrange adequate support in preparation to reintegrate back into community.

5.4.5 The Need for and Advantages of Effective Reintegration Planning

Due to the rise in the number of women involved with the criminal justice system, there is an increasing need to develop more programs that are meant to promote success for women, which specifically involve re-entry preparation, personalized support to achieve a positive transition from prison into community and assistance with the complex processes of reintegration itself (Hunter et al., 2016). As mentioned previously, there is a severe lack of funding towards reintegration programs, and the need for more of such supports for women who have been incriminated cannot be overstated. A major advantage of effective reintegration planning for women includes a significant decrease in rates of recidivism (Hunter et al., 2016), which is not only helpful to women, but also to their families and for everyone in community.

Other benefits of effective reintegration planning include the resocialization of individuals who have been in prison for longer periods of time (Polaschek & Kilgour, 2013), which can promote positive social interactions for women throughout reintegration. This is a noteworthy point, as women may feel the need to refine and develop social skills which could have potentially been lost during time spent away from community, while incarcerated. In fact, women in this thesis reported feeling restricted from giving back to community during incarceration, not at home in community upon release, feelings of fear during re-entry and even continued disconnection in different communities after leaving prison.

Thus, well-developed reintegration programs are integral to the well-being and success of women upon release from prison. Through effective reintegration planning in prison prior to release, individuals can feel higher levels of motivation to develop positive paths towards achieving a more fulfilling life experience (Polaschek & Kilgour, 2013). Clearly, when planned effectively, the reintegration process can reveal women's opportunities to enhance levels of empowerment in their life and improve self-efficacy (SAMHSA, 2020.) Together, the mentioned literature and findings from this thesis, show the promising benefits of effective reintegration planning for women who have experienced incarceration.

While it is understood that resources and access to them within prison are limited, prioritizing reintegration planning during incarceration will help people leaving prison to survive the initial phase of parole, especially when opportunities for employment, forming positive networks of social support and personalized accommodation are provided (Polaschek & Kilgour,

2013). When planning for reintegration, many researchers recommend using a strengths-based approach, which includes working with women to help identify personal goals and form the ideal treatment plan according to individual needs (Hunter et al., 2016). Furthermore, helping women contribute to community while creating opportunities to engage in healthy everyday activities in society (Hunter et al., 2016) is essential to our collective well-being, as healthy women can contribute to healthy communities. With the results from this thesis, in addition to the abundance of past, existing, and developing research provided on the benefits of planning and supporting reintegration, the Canadian government, CSC, affiliated women, community organizations and researchers can work together to ensure that reintegration supports are effective and readily available for women in need.

5.4.6 Summary of Discussion

This discussion covered the findings of a feminist critical discourse analysis of the experiences of six women leaving prison at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI), in Kitchener, Ontario. Specifically examined, were the personal histories of women, experiences leading up to community reintegration (including in prison), needs upon release and how/whether women were able to meet these needs through the restorative justice-focused program known as Stride Circles. Results of this thesis indicate that women present a mosaic of needs which often seem to be unmet upon release from prison, including mental and physical health, addiction, financial, employment, social, emotional, personal and leisure related needs.

Upon reflection of women's experiences, it also seems as if many of the basic human rights were not being met for women during incarceration, including the rights to freedom, equal opportunity, and the right to not be subjected to punishment (United Nations Publications, 2020). Also, the right to not be subjected to interference with family (in this case, through disconnection from community) and the right to effective remedies (United Nations Publications, 2020) did not seem to be met. As shown through both the findings and discussion sections of this thesis, in order for women to experience successful transitions into community, a variety of factors must be considered and attended to. These include women's histories, personal needs, treatment of

women in prison, preparation for community re-entry and adequate assistance during reintegration.

Community reintegration is an intricate process which affects women, families, and communities. It involves meeting many of the important unmet needs of women, both during incarceration and throughout resettlement. More specifically, there is a critical need for the Canadian federal prison system to address the following needs of women who are in prison and going through reintegration: access to meaningful activities, physical health needs, substance abuse treatment, trauma-related mental health care, medical and dental care, employment and educational services, affordable and safe housing, transportation needs (Beeble & Hampton, 2021) and the development of positive social networks.

Positive social supports can be built through restorative justice approaches which involve women and community members, such as those exhibited through Stride Circle experiences. Also, the idea (re)building oneself during reintegration was illuminated as an essential component in achieving personal goals and avoiding recidivism. The women also shed light on how it feels to leave prison and be faced with stigma against the 'offender identity' in community, and the limitations that this can cause. More importantly, having the social and emotional support needed to build a better life during reintegration, was identified as crucial for women to mitigate the negative effects of stigma in society, stay away from crime and ultimately achieve positive transformation.

Thankfully, restorative justice approaches, such as the programming offered to women through Stride Circles show promise in supporting women to achieve a smoother transition into community after prison. By focusing on restoration in women's lives, as opposed to inflicting punishment, women may be able to function better mentally, physically, and emotionally during incarceration and after release. Women's complicated experiences with the law and the evidence drawn from them, point towards an urgent need for more useful rehabilitation techniques within prison, more effective reintegration planning prior to community re-entry and well-developed programs to assist women during reintegration itself.

The paradoxes of prison rehabilitation which became evident through women's collective experiences, help to inform us of the many changes that must occur in our criminal justice system, in order for women to truly achieve successful reintegration and avoid the vicious cycle

of recidivism. Thus, it is critical to understand the complexity and nuances of reintegration experiences for women leaving prison, and equally important to use the information provided by women in this thesis towards tailoring future reintegration supports to align with principles of restorative justice which are known to be beneficial to women's reintegration.

5.5 Reflections on Research Design

This section includes some critical thoughts about the research methods used for the interviews that were conducted with the women affiliated with this thesis. After being transcribed by other researchers (students), the interviews were provided to me for analysis. Upon reflection of the research design, several areas were identified as important topics for discussion, including interview dialogue, women's reactions to language, the importance of reflexivity and first person's language. To support this, this section will begin with a brief overview of the limitations of performing secondary analysis and literature from feminist theories about power imbalances in research. Reflections from scholars who have carried out projects with people who have experienced incarceration will also be reviewed. Within this critique, pieces of the interviews (including those not presented in the findings chapter) will be highlighted to provide evidence of the observations being discussed. Lastly, ideas for future research will be specified as a preview into the summary and conclusion of this thesis.

Firstly, I found that coming into the study with existing data and performing secondary analysis carried its own advantages and disadvantages. As a result, my research questions had to be broader and could not be as specific. In this case, the data set was not collected to answer specific research questions. Instead, I had to form my research questions based on the available data. The data set itself was limited because specific information that I sought was not necessarily always available. For example, I was hoping to accurately pinpoint the women's emotions associated with responses to certain questions in the interviews. However, I was only provided with the transcripts and not the recordings, so this was not always possible. These limitations contributed to the overall quality of the findings in this thesis.

Secondly, it is important to note that the power imbalances that exist in society hold the potential to affect us all (Baines, 2013). This principle can also be applied to the world of research, as power inequities between researchers and participants, specifically western-trained scholars who conduct studies with women who are less privileged – have been a controversial topic in feminist debates on research methods for over twenty years now (Miraftab, 2004). Traditional research methods that distance researchers from participants and create disassociated relationships a requirement for being 'objective,' are often criticized for being male dominated in origin (Miraftab, 2004). Similarly, some of the language portrayed in the interview guide used for this thesis, seemed to distance researchers from the women being interviewed, who we must acknowledge are already a part of the commonly excluded population of people who have been affiliated with the criminal justice system.

Miraftab (2004) emphasized how feminism carries an inherent concern and commitment to invoking social change, emancipation, and transformation in society. The same researcher explained how feminist methodology has also been skeptical of the validity of white women's perceptions, through which their experiences of gender are assumed to extend the unique experiences of women who are/have been uniquely racialized and/or marginalized. Thankfully, several of the women in this thesis openly expressed their feelings about the disempowering statements contained in the interview guide, which helped to nurture a deep reflection on the delicate needs of women who experience incarceration, along with suggestions for researchers in this field.

In research design, there are countless scholars who have conducted projects with people who are or were previously incarcerated. For example, Pecenco (2018) conducted arts-based AOR with people in prison and discovered how scholars often focus on collecting data and revealing results in scientific ways, but it is equally important to acknowledge the power of people in prison in sharing their own perspectives to encourage dialogue between themselves, researchers, and the public. Cross (2020), who studied harm reduction in relation to AOR, found that research participants often partake in different forms of politicized action that collectively challenges the criminal justice system's role in the lives of people who are criminalized.

Going further back in time, Potts and Brown (2005) emphasized how researchers should form meaningful connections with participants before embarking upon research together. It is

unclear as to whether this was the case for the interviewers and women involved in the data set of this thesis. In a few instances, relationships may have been built because of repeated social interactions through interviews. However, students moved along in their programs and new students were hired, potentially affecting the ability for strong relationships to be formed between the interviewers and the women. This seems like an issue which is commonly faced by researchers with longitudinal projects that have student investigators. Regardless, this is a noteworthy point, as the development of prior relationships, or lack thereof, can impact the research process and women's reactions during interviews.

Potts and Brown (2005) also provided deep reflection on what it means to be an anti-oppressive researcher, advising future researchers that it includes much more than altruism. They mentioned how in order to be an effective anti-oppressive researcher, one must acknowledge the action and political purpose in their work, while personally committing to the people you work with in hopes of creating the right atmosphere for research and social change. Further, anti-oppressive research is said to involve paying close attention to developing a nuanced understanding of how power imbalances work throughout the process of conducting research (Potts & Brown, 2005). These powers are often at play throughout women's interviews, as discussed in the upcoming section. To add, parts of interviews may be revisited, and parts that have not yet been mentioned may be provided here for evidence to support observations of power relations.

5.5.1 A Critique of Language used in the Initial Interview Guide

During the interviews, issues seemed to arise between some of the interview guide dialogue and the women's reactions to language. More specifically, the interview guide contained questions and statements that seemed to be dehumanizing and appeared to perpetuate powerlessness among the women. I, and other researchers stress the importance of taking precaution when working with vulnerable populations, such as women who experience incarceration, by emphasizing the importance of words, and the use of respectful and humanizing language (Tran et al., 2018), which is essential to avoid causing any further harm to participants who have already been subjected to marginalization in life.

Nevertheless, the women in this thesis were not afraid to speak their minds and express their feelings regarding any degrading language that was used. In some cases, the interviewer

even apologized to the participant for any offense that may have been taken. This clarifies how the interviewers are not at fault, but rather the language in the initial interview guide itself, which was later changed. Regardless, the conversations and information presented in this section serve to provide examples of dehumanizing language that should be avoided at all costs in future research initiatives.

In the interview guide used, women were provided a series of statements to agree or disagree with (to any extent). In Jennifer's second interview in 2016, her interviewer apologized to her for the potential offensiveness of the interview guide language. Jennifer clearly felt that some of the language was "horrible," as she states below. She also seemed to use laughing as a coping mechanism throughout all three of her interviews:

Interviewer: We didn't come up with the statements and we have some issues with some of them. So, if any of the terms are offensive…I do apologize.

"[Laughs]" – Jennifer

Interviewer: I feel that society views me as an inferior being.

"Umm… I wouldn't say that necessarily. I'd say in some ways like troubled past." – Jennifer

Above, we can see how Jennifer hesitates to agree with the interviewer's statement, which seems to assume that women who experience incarceration may feel as if society perceives them to be inferior. This may be a harmful assumption, that could cause women to feel as less than. Below, another statement which seems belittling is mentioned in the interview guide, resulting in what seems like discomfort in Jennifer:

Interviewer: So, I feel as though society sees me as less than human

"No…" – Jennifer

Interviewer: Sorry, that was a harsh one.

"Yeah, that was horrible. [Laughs]." – Jennifer

Above, we can see how Jennifer's interviewer apologized to her prior to and after reciting the interview guide statements, acknowledging the harshness of the terminology. Jennifer proceeds to describe the statement as "horrible," followed by what seems to be an uncomfortable laugh, which could potentially be a coping mechanism.

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Below, in Ellen's first interview in 2015, we can see how another statement made in the interview guide implies inferiority among women affiliated with the criminal justice system, causing Ellen to hesitate before responding:

Interviewer: Okay. So, I feel that society views me as an inferior being, if they knew of my incarceration. Would you agree with that? Disagree with that, neutral?

> "[pause] again, the scenario just. I think I'll just say neutral just because when you…" – Ellen

Ellen's response to the statement above was unclear and incomplete. Perhaps this was due to the discomfort associated with not wanting to respond to the statement. Below, a longer conversation from Ellen's second interview in 2016 is shown, in which she strongly disagrees with many of the interview guide statements and even expresses that the last one was a "weird" question to ask:

Interviewer: So, we've got our final scale… unless I lied. This is the final one. I actually have said that before and it's like, never mind. Umm, okay. So, this one you may remember. My caveat around it being, again, some more challenging wording that this is a standardized scale that we didn't choose. Umm, but I always feel like what kind of pre-amble is this? People just get scared. By "mainstream society" we mean not your friends, not your social worker, kind of people at the doctor's office, at the bank. Shifting to that. And basically, your perceptions of how true these statements are for you or not. Of your views of other people. So, I am viewed negatively by mainstream society.

> "So, this is me by anybody else in my general…" – Ellen

Interviewer: Yes. So, this is yours and sometimes people will say to me "do you mean if people *know*?" And I say no because that's general not… people won't know. And so, your sense that you carry about how people view you. Of course, we can never know what anyone thinks, but your perceptions of that that you carry.

> "I would strongly disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: I feel that society views me as an inferior being.

> "I strongly disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: I feel that society holds a negative attitude towards me.

> "I disagree. Well, strongly disagree" – Ellen

Interviewer: Society discriminated against me.

"Disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: I feel that I am treated differently during social interactions of mainstream society.

"Strongly disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: I feel as though society sees me as less than a human.

"Strongly disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: That is the wording I am talking about. I feel that I am consistently judged by society on the basis of things other than my personality or my abilities.

"Disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: I feel that I have to work harder than members of mainstream society in order to overcome society's prejudice towards me.

"I would agree with that for other reasons outside of the context of this. If we are looking at it just generally based on no one knows. So, in society, yes, I agree." – Ellen

Interviewer: So, you agree with that. And you can speak to that potentially in a moment. Umm, members of mainstream society do not think that I am a capable person.

"I strongly disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: Members of mainstream society seem to trust me.

"I strongly agree." – Ellen

Interviewer: I feel as though mainstream society views me as having a shortcoming or flaw.

"I strongly disagree." – Ellen

Interviewer: I am generally treated as an object rather than a person. Sorry, I started that in a more chipper tone and realized it wasn't going in that direction (laughs). Did you see my shift there?

"(laughing) You were like 'ohh..'" – Ellen

Interviewer: Not the tone I wanted this time.

"I just, I strongly disagree. It's a weird question." – Ellen

Interviewer: Sorry I was clearly thinking it was going somewhere else and forgot that it was my least favourite question ever. Members of mainstream society are afraid of me.

Above, we can see how Ellen's interviewer apologizes in advance, warning her that the wording in this part of the interview guide is rather challenging and is part of a standardized scale that was not their choice. Ellen strongly disagreed with many of the dehumanizing statements made and ended off by expressing that the last statement was weird. At this point, her interviewer apologized and stressed that it was her "least favourite question ever," yet proceeds to state another stigmatizing statement. The cycle of dehumanization in these statements seemed to progress and cause discomfort for both Ellen and the interviewer.

The aggressiveness with which the statements are presented, almost seemed to discourage Ellen from agreeing with anything, even if she were to possibly agree. The statements provided above from the interview guide, clearly carry negative assumptions and harmful stereotypes that women may internalize, which is far from the initial goal of qualitative and anti-oppressive research. Instead, research with women who experience incarceration, should be aimed at trying to learn more about women's lives from their unique and valuable perspectives. However, some of the interview guide statements which were asked, seemed to make it difficult for women to open up about personal feelings regarding incarceration. Below, Sara disagrees and laughs at what seems like another statement in the interview guide that perpetuates insecurity among women:

Interviewer: I sometimes wonder if people can actually see me.

"Disagree [laughs]" – Sara (Interview #1 in 2015)

Sara did not seem to react to the interview guide statement above very seriously. This is understandable, as it seems slightly belittling and immature to ask a grown woman whether she feels people can see her or not. Perhaps, if some of these statements were worded to be more respectful and open-ended, women would respond more honestly and authentically. Below, in Leslie's first interview in 2015, we can see another statement made in the interview guide which unfortunately, once again assumes inferiority. Leslie disagrees, and the interviewer mentions that they "hate" that statement.

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Interviewer: Just bursting through. I feel as though society sees me as less than human

"Disagree." – Leslie

Interviewer: I hate that one.

At this point, it was obvious that some of the statements contained in this pre-constructed interview guide were inducing discomfort in both the women and the interviewers. In such cases, and generally when working with populations which are vulnerable, oppressed, or marginalized, the interview guide should be discontinued until changed, and these changes should occur earlier on when signs of unease are discovered. The various forms of condescending terminology presented, could in fact set the tone for the entirety of the longitudinal interview process by creating unwanted distance between the interviewers, and the women being interviewed. Consequently, women's responses may end up being more reactionary and defensive, rather than honest and accurate.

Taking precautionary measures (such as reevaluating and adjusting the interview guide early on), or not using such questions in the first place, could prevent causing further discomfort for everyone involved in the research process. One would hope that research which aims to learn about women's personal experiences is intended to create a safe space in which women feel comfortable and respected. However, this does not seem as if it was always the case during the interviews used for this analysis. In fact, the women's reactions clearly depict the discomfort, hesitancy, confusion, and offence that was taken in response to the negative terminology used, and the assumptions made within.

Interviews being conducted with individuals who have been incarcerated should be an empowering experience, especially for participants who are selflessly and willingly sharing their vulnerability and life stories. Thus, respecting the sensitivity of women, when making interview guides of this nature should be of utmost importance. Apparently, the interview guide was changed later in the process. However, this was unobserved through my analysis of all interviews with the six women involved in this thesis. Additional evidence points towards the problematic nature of such language and the discomfort experienced by both women and the interviewers, as a result, below.

Here, Megan's experience with issues in the interview guide are presented from her first interview in 2015. Again, the interview guide language reinforces inferiority, but Megan expresses her self-respect through a strong disagreement:

Interviewer: Um, I feel as though society sees me as less than a human

"Oh, strongly disagree." – Megan

Interviewer: Yeah, I hate that one. I feel as though I'm consistently judged by society on the basis of things other than my abilities or my personality.

"Uh, strongly disagree." – Megan

Above, Megan disagrees strongly with two statements, one after another. The interviewer states that they "hate" the first statement yet proceeds to read out the second one which seemed almost equally dehumanizing. Similarly, below, we can see Courtney's interviewer expressing dislike for an interview guide statement before Courtney even responds. Again, this indicates the interviewer's insightfulness and quick reaction to the disempowering nature of the statement:

Interviewer: I feel as though society sees me as less than a human. That is one I particularly dislike.

"(Shakes head). No. And, also if you're seen as something other than human, that's not necessarily bad! Animals deserve rights and responsibilities too!" – Courtney (Interview #2 in 2016)

Interviewer: Spoken like a true activist!

Above, Courtney makes an intuitive and discerning comment about the statement made in the interview guide. She sheds light on the fact that being seen as something other than human is not necessarily negative. Her comment helps us to understand that as researchers, interviewers, and academics with privilege, we must pay more attention to the type of language being used when working with populations who have been marginalized. Thus, it is critical to create an atmosphere of respect and honor when participants offer their insight for the purposes of research, especially with the lengthy history of unethical research conducted with humans in North America, ever since colonization by Europeans (Hodge, 2012).

It is extremely important for researchers to understand that the language commonly used to describe individuals who experience incarceration, can have serious consequences on people's

wellness, health, and opportunities to access health services and information, yet dialogue presented in research, policies and programs is too often dehumanizing, stigmatizing and derogatory (Tran et al., 2018). Although statements in the interview guide of this project may have been created with good intentions and to develop an understanding of women's feelings, phrases used such as "society views me as an inferior being," "society sees me as less than human" and "I wonder if people can actually see me," were clearly difficult to agree with, implied a lack of understanding of the population of women who have been to prison, and seemed disempowering overall.

These phrases and terminology may have in fact caused further harm than good for the women involved in these interviews and could potentially do the same if used with other populations who have already been marginalized. The women's reactions of hesitancy, resistance, defensiveness, strong disagreement, and discomfort to such demeaning language shows the ineffectiveness of asking such questions for the purpose of research. Perhaps more open-ended questions such as "How does society make you feel with regard to…?" would exhibit more respect from researchers towards participants and help to foster an atmosphere of comfort for women to discuss life experiences more openly.

Health experts from Australia, the United States and Europe suggest that researchers, health care professionals and policy creators who work with people involved with the criminal justice system follow fundamental principles that promote humanizing and constructive language (Tran et al., 2018). These key points involve prioritizing participants over their stereotypes and characteristics, using accurate language that is free of stigma, respecting individual preferences, and fostering self-awareness throughout the process. The concept of self-awareness ties in with reflexivity, in the sense that it allows people who work and conduct research with vulnerable populations to reflect on the process, reframe their approaches and arrive at positive solutions to any issues that may rise.

Moreover, reflexivity can be practiced in the mentioned ways as well as through many others approaches, which include journaling, one-on-one interviews, and group conversations (Fook, 1999). It is crucial that professionals in all disciplines work to cultivate mindfulness, self-reflection, humility regarding culture, and avoid the repetition of negative terminology that devalues, discriminates, and further perpetuates harmful power imbalances and stereotypes (Fook, 1999). This section of the discussion served to provide examples of problematic

terminology, which should be refrained from using in future research with women who experience incarceration, as these terms and phrases fail to show respect for women and may contribute to the normalization of powerlessness among the population. Using appropriate and respectful wording is the foundation of reducing suffering and harm when working with individuals who have experienced incarceration, therefore we must collectively take the necessary steps to end the use of dehumanizing and stigmatizing words (Tran et al., 2018) in this field and beyond. Findings from this thesis help to advance Fook's (1999) work and Tran et al.'s (2018) research, by promoting the use of reflexivity and empowering and respectful language that disrupts oppressive systems, as we do not want to normalize such feelings for women.

5.5.2 Subjective Thoughts and Observations from Reflexive Journaling

In this section, I briefly share some of my subjective thoughts on the research design of the interview guide, which was used for the pre-conducted interviews I was provided with for my analysis. Reflexivity can be described as a researcher's attention towards the influence they have on the people being researched, while understanding how the researcher is being affected by the research journey (Gilgun, 2008). By engaging in reflexivity throughout organizing, analyzing, and writing about research, it promotes a continuous relationship between the intersubjectivity within the research process and the researcher's subjective thoughts (Probst, 2015).

As a researcher, I acknowledge my role in the research process, as well as any biases based on my personal experiences, in addition to the space and empathy that I hold for people who have experienced incarceration. As a student of qualitative inquiry, I understand that I am a part of the research process and naturally experience emotions due to the nature of the work that I conduct. To add, my previous life experiences, values and beliefs may have influenced my interpretations of women's experiences in this thesis. Below, there are three paragraphs of words from my reflexive journal, which I kept alongside me during analysis of transcripts and built upon as my emotions appeared:

"Those were such rude statements in the interview guide! They made me wonder how Jennifer felt hearing them. Especially being confined in prison at that point. Having already expressed feeling a lack of freedom, the last thing I'd want to hear is whether I

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feel as if I'm treated like an object or less than human. It was already clear that she was going through enough when she said her P.O barely pays attention to her, and she feels unable to control her environment. At first glance of this interview guide causing such dehumanizing discomfort for any of the women, it should have been changed immediately to prevent further perpetuating discomfort and powerlessness among the women. People like myself and the interviewers are privileged enough to read her words and have the opportunity to learn from women… so I believe that as researchers, we must learn to show more respect through research. This is an example of how people with power, including researchers may (unintentionally) misuse their power… which can cause pain for others, all at the cost of extraction of information.

If I were to form an interview guide for women who have been to prison, I would create more open-ended questions that allow the women to express their true agency… rather than subjecting them to such harsh and hurtful words of powerlessness. But you know what? On second thought, I guess you would only consider that type of stuff if you've ever been marginalized, racialized, left out, excluded, abused, neglected, misunderstood, discriminated against, treated differently… or felt that way before, which I have. In fact, I've felt what some of the women in this thesis have felt, ever since a young age.

Perhaps, whoever made these statements has never experienced oppression or any of these emotions before. Not sure, but if so… lucky them. But that is not a free pass to perpetuate harm. So why assume through mere statements? Wouldn't you rather ASK? I feel for Jennifer and every woman whose precious words I've read over the past few months, and these feelings may remain with me for years. Will these words impact Jennifer in the future? Or Ellen? Or Sara? Or Leslie? Or Megan? What about Courtney? In the end, I have the utmost respect for the women's struggles, overcoming, agency, self-empowerment, and victories. I can relate to each, deeply. I also have respect for everyone involved in the process and pray that we have all learned what we must."

My own words above from engaging in reflexive journaling serve to represent how problematic and stigmatizing terminology may not only affect participants, but also researchers.

Thankfully, engaging in reflexivity helped me to organize my subjective thoughts and try my best to separate them from the research process. Together, the quotes portrayed in the previous section and my subjective thoughts here, show how the interview guide contained questions and statements that seemed belittling to the women, interviewers, and myself. These statements clearly triggered negative emotions among many involved in the research process.

It is also important to acknowledge that during the research process, I began to recognize the distinction between the survey and interview guide as whole, and the stigma scale, which is a quantitative instrument. I realized that the women were reacting to the stigma scale, which was developed by researchers outside of our department and I was unsure as to how it made it into the survey/interview guide because it wasn't developed by anyone associated with the project. Perhaps it was more clinical, than holistic in my perspective.

Regardless, I personally found some of the statements mentioned in the interviews to be extremely dehumanizing, as they perpetuated inferiority and powerlessness among the women. Upon analysis and self-reflection with the use of my journal and even self-talk in the mirror, I gathered that my emotions stemmed from a combination of my experiences as a woman and my compassion for the women whose experiences I studied. Feelings of pain, sadness, and resentment towards the flaws of our prison system and corruption within the field of research in general, grew within me as I read each word and progressively felt the women's emotions. Through reflexive practices, these emotions did not dissolve, but thankfully, allowed me to deal with them in a healthy manner.

As Gilbert (2000) expressed, I firmly believe that emotions should be central to qualitative research, as researching sensitive topics often includes continuous exposure to the emotional nature of understanding another person's life experiences. In fact, if as researchers of emotional work, we take the value of both participants' and our emotions into deep consideration, then we can explore the spaces within, to open up deeper conversation and deal with our emotions collectively through practical ways (Dickson et al., 2009). Correspondingly, I think that it is inevitable that our inner most feelings will coincide with work which induces emotions in both participants and researchers. Perhaps then, instead of ignoring emotions that arise, setting them aside, or separating them entirely from the research process, it would be more beneficial to use a variety of reflexive techniques to deal with them, which may even lead to a

greater understanding of the topic-at-hand, a deeper analysis, and a richer quality of research overall, for everyone involved and society at large.

It is also important to respect the unique histories, experiences and feelings of women who experience incarceration, as well as our own when we conduct research of this nature. More importantly, I learned that as researchers in this field, we must provide room for each woman to define her own journey, rather than labeling women's lives as inferior or 'less than human' with mere statements, which in turn, may cause unintentional harm. For future studies conducted with women leaving prison, it is imperative to refine all interview guide language to be more respectful, compassionate, empowering, and loving. I also observed how open-ended questions seemed to help women discuss life experiences more intimately and extensively, as opposed to having to agree or disagree with statements. The option to agree or disagree to any extent with such statements seems outdated and rather unhelpful to the overall qualitative research process.

Finally, it is important to reiterate, for the sake of this project and everyone involved in the planning and implementation of the interviews, that the interview guide was changed after the fact to better suit the population at hand. However, as mentioned previously, this was not observed through my analysis. I still believe that the interview guide could have been improved earlier on by creating dialogue, which would provide each woman with more space to speak for herself. Moreover, preserving the autonomy and authenticity of every woman's life experience and words, should be prioritized in future studies conducted with women affiliated with the criminal justice system.

5.5.3 Embracing Person-centred Language

Words are powerful tools, and the ways in which they are used can greatly impact the views and self-perceptions that are created about people in particular conditions, through lasting impressions (Blaska, 1993). How researchers, policy makers and the public use words to refer to people who have been marginalized, is something that we must continue to improve upon with the help of the people we conduct research with. To this day, the criminal justice system and government websites refer to people leaving prison by using harsh and stigmatizing terms such as 'ex-convicts,' 'ex-offenders,' 'ex-inmates' and in many cases, even 'criminals.' One of the problems with using these terms, is that they define an individual solely by their past actions, failing to recognize the entirety of their life and personal circumstances.

Therefore, using these terms has not only negatively affected individuals, but also the general public by creating and perpetuating stereotypes that have become ingrained in society. Unfortunately, women often internalize these labels in prison and even during reintegration (McGuire & Murdoch, 2021), a transition which is meant to provide a fresh new start in life. Thankfully, as a recreation therapist, in my bachelor's program I learned about person-centred language (also known as people-first or person first language) where we place the person before the condition (e.g., disability, diagnosis, environment etc.) in order to avoid labeling people, and in hopes of reducing stigma towards the individual/population at hand (Plans, 2008).

It is time we embrace the principle of first-person's language and apply it to use for people affiliated with the criminal justice system (Harney et al., 2022), as we must remember that women in and leaving prison are equal to those who are in community. Although for many complex, historical, and unanswered reasons, human rights are not centred in prison, I have aimed towards centring the humanity of the women in this thesis, who volunteered their personal time for the greater purpose of research and helping others. For these reasons, throughout this thesis I have attempted to use person-centred language to respect the humanity of women and to bring attention towards the need for greater understanding, compassion, and justice in the lives of people who have been criminalized.

By placing the person before their condition, and saying "women who have experienced incarceration," or "women in prison," as opposed to "criminal," "inmate," "offender," "prisoner," or any other stigmatized label, we can work to reduce harm towards women, and disrupt the oppressive systems that contribute to it. Labels themselves are a form of violence towards our fellow humans and can inflict damage, due to the stigma that may circulate in society as a result of their use (Klingele, 2019). Thus, we must collectively work to undo the harm that has historically been and is continuously caused by such labels, which are brought upon women by the Canadian federal prison system. Labeling can cause women to feel different, less than, non-human, and unequal to other members of community (McGuire, 2021).

Instead of making women feel this way, I have chosen to work on placing the woman before her situation, in hopes of promoting respect, accuracy, empathy, understanding and ultimately the humanization of women who have experienced incarceration. It is crucial to centre the humanity of people who are continuously judged and dehumanized by society and the media.

As such, person-centred language is implemented throughout this thesis and is recommended for use in future studies conducted with people who have been involved in crime. I will try to apply this principle to the entirety of my work moving forward and invite other scholars, leisure practitioners, CSC, the government, and members of community to revaluate the language they choose to use, to convey people's experiences of crime.

5.5.4 Reflections on the Definition of Community Reintegration and related Tensions

The original definition of reintegration I employed was referred to as 'social reintegration' and is defined as the support given to people as they reenter society after leaving prison (Griffiths et al., 2007). As my analysis progressed, my understanding of this and the definition I was using began to evolve into that of 'community reintegration,' as I felt that the aspect of community was missing in social reintegration. I realized that feeling a sense of community is integral to feel and be reintegrated into community.

I noticed how varying definitions of reintegration can contribute to tensions regarding its understanding within relevant literature. I also observed how issues of power, systems and oppressive structures seemed to affect women's abilities to successfully reintegrate into community after leaving prison. As I learned more from the women, it appeared that successful community reintegration was not only dependant on receiving support, but also about feeling safe in community, having access to meaningful activities, forming a positive, healthy, and reliable social circle and much more.

However, accomplishing all this while being highly controlled both in prison and after leaving, seemed to directly impact how women functioned during re-entry. Being completely reintegrated is subjective and is clearly influenced by these forces in society, often triggering tension(s) between women and these various systems at play. Women often seemed to feel as if they were fighting to survive rather than being supported to reintegrate by the prison system. Thus, I grew to understand how the definition of community reintegration that I was using needed to be more specific to the needs of women.

In conclusion, I found that it may be necessary for a new definition of community reintegration to be formed. This definition is specifically related to the population of women leaving prison. This is because women's needs are often different than those of men who leave prison. This was conceptualized by building off Doherty et al.'s (2014) definition and combining it with some of the understanding(s) I gained from the women involved in this thesis:

Community reintegration for women leaving prison can be defined as a complex process involving a series of behavioural, mental, and social changes in one's life which can involve developing a commitment to avoid the use of substances, engagement in crimes and people involved in such acts, along with a genuine ambition to contribute to community (Doherty et al., 2014). The women in this thesis depict how this process requires a need for the individual to want to achieve self-improvement through self-support, by accepting support from others and working towards forming a strong, reliable, and positive social circle. Restorative practices such as self-empowerment, empowerment through others and engagement in healthy leisure activities, either independently or in groups are encouraged to further develop 'the self,' during reintegration. Community reintegration also involves feeling a sense of belonging with others in your life.

5.5.5 Words of Empathy and Encouragement from the Interviewers

Although there were a few issues that both the women and interviewers experienced regarding some of the language in the interview guide, there were also countless moments of empathy and encouragement from the interviewers towards participants. It is important to highlight these conversations, as cultivating an atmosphere of trust, understanding and comfort during interviews shows respect for interviewees (Hermanowicz, 2002), and may also help contribute to enhanced feelings of community among women who are attempting to reintegrate after prison. Also, by exhibiting encouragement and kindness during the interview process, researchers can help regulate stress by responding to participant's emotional needs, building rapport, and promoting an atmosphere of safety and positivity (Risan et al., 2016). Accordingly, words of encouragement and empathy will be discussed briefly in this section.

Below, in Jennifer's final interview in 2017, the interviewer's probing helps Jennifer to open up about her experiences within Circles and arrive at the conclusion that she felt valued:

Interviewer: How do you think your Circle has helped you?

"Just being encouraging and complimentary, like even with my schoolwork, every time I finish a course, they're like, 'oh' they're more ecstatic than I am, but it's just yeah, like having that encouragement at the same time having somebody, not so much praise you for it, but just letting you know you're doing a really good job, and it's, yeah it builds a lot of confidence." – Jennifer

Interviewer: So just them, like, complimenting you on what you are doing, and just, just reminding you that you are doing well

"Yeah." – Jennifer

Interviewer: "How does that make you feel?"

"Um, different (chuckles) I'm not used to it, I'm not used to compliments, like, growing up, I was always put down for something or another and never had that. Like, even my teenagers years, it was, 'you can't do anything. You are never going to do this, you are never going to do that. You're never going to finish school.' And now I can throw that all in their face. And, like I don't have to, with my Stride Circle, they are right there saying, 'You're doing amazing.' You're, yeah." – Jennifer

Interviewer: So, you're feeling valued

"Yes." – Jennifer

As shown in the brief conversation above, the interviewer seemed to guide Jennifer in reaffirming how her Circle members helped her to feel valued. Using simple words of encouragement and open-ended questions that exhibit curiosity to help participants arrive at positive conclusions, may be an important and effective skill to have as a researcher in this field. By using such techniques, interviewers can help contribute to a positive self-image for women, especially when discussing the challenges of incarceration and reintegration.

Below, we can see how in Ellen's first interview in 2015, her interviewer expresses gratitude towards Ellen's willingness to openly share her experiences. The interviewer also emphasizes the overall value of the perspectives of women who have been to prison, as opposed to people who have not. This seems to help Ellen share her thoughts in greater depth (from

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shorter responses in the beginning, to a longer one in the end) and come to positive realizations:

Interviewer: I'm really glad you are open to sharing them because I think you know that [you're] certainly not alone at any level. You know staff at CJI will see certain things, but only certain things, they are not in the prison day to day, you know. That's another perspective. So, their advocacy is something, I think the advocacy of women who have been in that system. So valuable. Right?

> "Mhm." – Ellen

Interviewer: Um okay. So then in terms of, [both laughing]. I love this. This is where I want to go but I also have to bring us back a little bit. But I love that. But in terms of the recreation [laughing] and leisure, how important is help in that area?

> "It's helpful." – Ellen

Interviewer: Very or extremely?

> "I haven't done many other things outside of that but just from that. Just from being able to get out of the house. That was helpful to me because it was something I really wanted to do." – Ellen

Below, in Sara's first interview in 2015, it can be seen how her interviewer exhibits a friendly attitude towards Sara's child, who was present during the interview. Being friendly in general may help participants to feel more comfortable during the interview process, and in life:

Interviewer: Great. Um, how about help getting a job. How important is it to you now?

> "Well, I have a job, so I don't know. Is it…OH no, you can't have that. That's not ours [talking to toddler as she takes the recorder]." – Sara

Interviewer: Thank you very much. I'll let you look at it later, okay? [to toddler]

> "It's not important because I have a full-time job." – Sara

Interviewer: Okay. At the time was it very important?

> "At the time it was very important because getting my kids back as well. Having a job kind of secured my income, as well as a place to live, as well as income to support my children." – Sara

As shown in the conversation above, being close to her children and supporting them is very important to Sara. Thus, by showing kindness and communicating with her child, even slightly, the interviewer seemed to encourage Sara to talk more about the topic at hand. This helped us learn how becoming employed was important to Sara and integral to the well-being of her children during her reintegration.

Below, in Leslie's first interview in 2015, her interviewer provides a statement for her to agree or disagree with to any extent. After Leslie responds, it can be seen how her interviewer expresses empathy for Leslie's daughter's lack of forgiveness:

Interviewer: Well, you don't want, yah. It sounds like you don't want that help. You know, like it's a little bit of both. I get the emotional help and support I need from my family

> "Uh, neutral. Yes and no. I get a lot of love texts from my daughter. Two of them. Not the third one. No. she's not ready to forgive." – Leslie

Interviewer: I'm sorry about that.

> "That's. It is. But I'm willing to wait. I'll wait a lifetime because the CR course I know a lady that was 41 years… estranged from her mother." – Leslie

Interviewer: And then things shifted for her?

> "The opposite. Totally beautiful relationship. So, it is. And I actually told her future mom in law. That's okay if she. Cause I only want her to come back in my life if she's totally forgiven me, otherwise there's no sense." – Leslie

As shown above, Leslie's interviewer expressed empathy for her situation, which seemed to lead to Leslie into a space of understanding and hope for the future. Thus, it is important for researchers and interviewers of this topic to hold space and have empathy for people as they share their experiences with the world. Sharing such personal experiences may cause one to feel vulnerable, however there is power in vulnerability, especially when we feel the people around us understand. Below, again in Leslie's first interview in 2015, the interviewer shows interest and positivity towards Leslie's leisure passion of writing poetry:

Interviewer: Absolutely. If everything. I love the saying, what is it. Smooth seas do not make for a strong sailor.

"Right." – Leslie

Interviewer: If they've only ever got perfect waters [laughs]

"I write all kinds of poetry still." – Leslie

Interviewer: Oh, do you?

"Yah." – Leslie

Interviewer: Wow. Well, that's a beautiful expression, beautiful outlet.

As shown through the conversation above, showing interest in the women's choices of leisure activities may fuel their passion and participation. This is one of the ways interviewers can help support participants to feel confident and comfortable to share more throughout the interview process. Below, in Megan's first interview in 2015, it can be seen how her interviewer uses repetition, exhibits effective listening skills, and reinforces the positive aspect of encouragement that Megan receives from her Circle:

"I got my driver's license and everything on my own." – Megan

Interviewer: Wow, and that's a process for anyone. Because there's just so much, so many steps.

"But they through all of these things, they're always like encouraging." – Megan

Interviewer: Yeah, encouraging. Kind of an overall statement for everything just that in whatever you are doing on your own they are kind of encouraging that.

"Mmhm." – Megan

Interviewer: Which is really great.

Lastly, below, in Courtney's first interview in 2015, it can be seen how her interviewer mentions that Courtney's life circumstances may be stressful. However, shortly after, the interviewer quickly uses terminology to help Courtney feel that her stress is manageable. This shows how researchers can correct themselves during the interview process, if mistakes are made or if language that perpetuates negativity is used. The interviewer also changes the topic quickly, which seems to help Courtney discuss more about her education and life towards the end:

Interviewer: And in terms of wow, you have your plate full. A two-year old. Law school, full-time job. Might be some stress [laughs]

"Yah, but that's okay." – Courtney

Interviewer: Which is normal, very normal

"Yah exactly, like. It's high stress." – Courtney

Interviewer: But I mean it's manageable in terms of managing.

"Or at least." – Courtney

Interviewer: So, what year? I have a friend that just finished at Ottawa um St Catherine's. What year of law school are you in?

"I begin my second year in September." – Courtney

Interviewer: and it's a three year?

"Yah, but I had to split my first year into two years because I had [name], so I did half a year over a year, and then half a year over a year the next time. So, I just finished that and then I'm going back to normal for second and third year." – Courtney

As seen through the quotes in this discussion, interviewer dialogue can hold great power in benefiting participants and the research process. Words of encouragement and empathy were shown to help create genuine connections between the interviewers and women. Showing interest, kindness, support and understanding all seemed to serve as positive forms of engagement from the interviewers towards the women. Women seemed to respond positively when interviewers engaged in these techniques.

Thus, when researchers and interviewers centre compassion, safety, and trust during the interview process, it can aid in regulating stress in the interviewer and the participant's relationship (Risan et al., 2016). To add, when and if distress may appear during the interview process, interviewers are encouraged to redirect the conversation towards safety and understanding in the present moment (Risan et al., 2016). It is understood that if participant's emotions are responded to in these ways during interviews, it may result in enhanced psychological health, and increased rapport between interviewers and participants (Risan et al., 2016). The mentioned forms of encouragement and empathy in this section seemed to help

women discuss life experiences openly and share their wisdom with the world – which has always been a major aim for the qualitative research process itself.

6.1 Overview of the Thesis

The experiences of community reintegration for women affiliated with the criminal justice system should be of major concern at women's federal prisons in Canada and in society more broadly. This thesis provided an in-depth perspective into the lives of women leaving prison at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) in Kitchener, Ontario. Specifically, it explored the role(s) that women, community members and prisons play in women's journeys of resettlement after being released from prison. These findings shed light on some of the complex constraints associated with community reintegration in a society where demands for employment, education, housing, income, and compliancy are ever present.

The extent to which women leaving prison experience a sense of community was also illuminated through the interviews that were analyzed in this thesis. Accordingly, this project depicted how restorative justice has been sufficiently researched regarding initiatives designed to support community re-entry for people leaving prison. However, there are a variety of factors that can influence quality of life for women who have been affiliated with the criminal justice system, including the constraints and life challenges they are faced with before, during and after prison. The nature of the relationships that women have with their loved ones, family, friends, acquaintances, and parole officers can also either hinder or benefit their experiences of resettlement. Moreover, whether women feel a sense of acceptance in community after leaving prison, can play a powerful role in the quality of their reintegration journeys.

In this thesis, a feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) methodology is executed to untangle the nuanced insights from women who experienced imprisonment at GVI. Several analysis methods were implemented to unpack the mosaic of findings. Clarifying the questions pertaining to women's experiences of community reintegration was the first step of this research project. This was followed by a deep exploration of academic literature on this topic. Next, I presented an FCDA of six women's' transcribed longitudinal interviews (ranging from 2015 to 2018). This phase required the most attention, empathy, care, understanding, and reflection.

At points, crystallization – a process of taking time to step away from analysis to digest the research experience and try to uncover themes or patterns (Vik & Bute, 2009) was also

enacted during the FCDA. This technique helped reveal that often, we naturally hold different views on a single topic, and that exploring these views can result in complex, yet deeper understandings (Richardson, 2000). The act of crystallization helped me to embrace the complexity of encountering different meanings that appear through qualitative research and instead of becoming confused, this led me to use them to produce rich outcomes. Reflexive journaling and notes were also often undertaken during these times, as well as throughout the entire research journey, when needed. Through the act of triangulation, in which different qualitative data sources and theories were explored (Noble & Heale, 2019), a rich understanding of community reintegration for women leaving prison was built, as is presented in this thesis.

The following three themes were generated from this thesis and widen the academic literature: (1) constraints faced by the women (2) sources of empowerment for women and (3) sources of support in the women's lives. After analysis and through interpretation of these themes, many critical insights were drawn. Some of these included the negative effects of incarceration, the paradox of prison rehabilitation and the need for effective reintegration planning. These perspectives help to enrich our knowledge of the unique experiences and complicated needs of women who experience incarceration. The findings from this thesis also enhance our understanding of how a sense of community is formed, and in many cases, not formed for women, especially during reintegration. Observational reflections presented throughout this thesis allow us to comprehend the meanings that women affiliated with the criminal justice system associate with life experiences. These findings also inform us of the ways in which reintegration supports such as the Stride Circle program function, and how women, members of community, policy makers, the government and CSC can attempt to help women rejoin community after leaving prison.

Important insights were gathered from this thesis. Essentially, the conditions required to help women fulfill unmet needs, foster a sense of community, and succeed during reintegration are not presented through a cookie-cutter approach. Rather, the results from this analysis provide a messy map to guide those who seek to learn more, who could benefit from learning about the different experiences of women who are attempting to reintegrate. Women who are embarking upon the unpredictable journey of resettlement in community after leaving prison, often seem to thrive in safe and judgement free spaces that offer healthy forms of recreation and leisure.

In spaces like those provided by the Stride Circle program, restorative justice approaches are implemented by volunteers, which offer a supportive and inclusive atmosphere for women. Forming friendships and connections through social interactions, improving, refining, and acquiring new skills in group environments that are supportive, and strengthening bonds with community were all vital to the reintegration of women leaving prison. These findings are integral to inform how reintegration opportunities and programs are developed and delivered to people affiliated with the criminal justice system. However, a paradox exists between the observational reflections and structural needs.

The women in this thesis openly admitted that GVI did not offer enough opportunities for personal needs to be met or reintegration to be planned for effectively. In fact, women reported more negative effects of incarceration (many of which often carried onto experiences of reintegration), as opposed to rehabilitative results. This was in stark contrast to the love, acceptance, support, and many other positive effects that women experienced from engaging in the Stride Circle program. While prison policy and staff continue to impose punishment, lack of freedom, and essentially harm, it seems as if most women value the chance to meet personal needs, deal with life obligations and the freedom to engage in diverse recreational and social opportunities, in addition to more humane approaches to treating crime, such as those presented through restorative justice programs like Stride. A balance must be achieved between creating routines and structured programs for women, and meeting the unique personal, social, and community-based needs for women who are in prison, as well as women who are going through reintegration.

6.2 The Importance of Funding Reintegration Initiatives

Given the rapidly rising numbers of women admitted to and leaving prison, the need for funding reintegration programs to address the unique constraints that women face when re-entering community is more critical today than ever before (Helfgott & Gunnison, 2020). Issues experienced by various reintegration supports such as the Stride Circle program include a lack of long-term funding, which affects the stability of the services being offered to women and the outreach of the program itself. Women leaving prison must be given the opportunity to be functioning citizens, feel at home in society, build a new life, live in harmony with others and be

accepted by community to successfully resettle. There is mounting evidence in the academic literature, which is highlighted in this thesis, that explains the unique and complex constraints encountered by women who attempt to re-enter community after leaving prison. With increasing numbers of women in prison, low numbers of reintegration supports, a lack of funding towards those supports and high cases of recidivism, especially among Indigenous women (Tubex, 2021), it is ever so crucial that we, as a community pay more attention towards helping create positive change in the lives of women who have been to prison.

Funding such programs can hold the potential to not only better the lives of women, but also children and families in community among us. A major goal of this thesis was to raise awareness of these matters and draw attention towards women's unmet needs, in hopes of reducing stigma, bringing community together and helping to brighten the lives of people who are marginalized. Women leaving prison are often in need of reintegration supports, which the government, CSC, policy makers, prison staff, leisure practitioners and community members can provide. Thus, funding reintegration programs for women leaving prison should be of utmost concern to all the aforementioned parties, in order to centre the best interest of women and their surrounding communities. More research is needed to investigate the ideal pathways towards increasing government funding for reintegration programming, specifically for women who are attempting to resettle into community after leaving prison.

6.3 Improving Access to Supports for Women in and Leaving Prison

Based on the findings of this thesis along with the many recent and past studies cited throughout the body, there is a crucial need to improve access to social supports for women who are incarcerated, and upon leaving Canadian federal prisons. The social supports that women seem to be in need of include resources that help with reintegration, transportation, employment, education, health, addiction, finances, and housing. In addition to the mentioned forms of support, women also benefit from opportunities to engage in leisure and social experiences with members of the community.

These findings point towards a high priority for the Government of Canada and CSC to work together to fund the Stride Circle program and others which are designed to build networks

of support which are shown to help connect women with people in community, contributing towards a more positive community re-entry experience (Fortune et al., 2020). The Stride Circle program and others like it can help women to feel more connected, supported, and happier overall, which brings about greater feelings of security and positivity throughout community re-entry. Going forward, it is imperative that the government, CSC, leisure practitioners, researchers, and the community work together through a shared responsibility to ensure that reintegration programming is fully funded and easily accessible for women who are leaving prison.

6.4 What comes next?

Women's reintegration supports, more specifically the programs, interventions and opportunities that are offered in these contexts are intricate, as women's individual needs are unique. As shown through the participants' experiences in this thesis along with the experiences of others, post-incarceration issues experienced by women can include fear, social exclusion, dealing with stigma, and internalized feelings of negativity towards oneself, in addition to resentment of the system, all of which can lead to marginalization in many forms (Tablante, 2012). It is with deep contemplation, empathy, compassion, understanding and hope for a better future that I was able to assess how the Stride Circle program builds community for its women.

The findings of this thesis provide researchers, CSC and the Government of Canada with many insights that can contribute towards positive experiences of community reintegration for women and academic literature on this topic across various fields of discipline. Experiences of women in the Stride Circle program reaffirm the value of social support as women are released from prison and transition into society. Providing women who are incarcerated and upon release from prison with the opportunity to meet, interact and engage in social and leisure experiences with volunteers can help them feel more connected to community, while nurturing a greater sense of belonging. Assisting women in developing supportive relationships through reintegration programming can provide support, hope and faith as they attempt to reintegrate into community, helping women stay away from prison and increasing the likeliness to lower reliance on the use of imprisonment (Fortune et al., 2010).

Furthermore, adequate funding and effective planning are important considerations, which are relevant to current and future development of reintegration supports, in addition to

social opportunities for women who have been affiliated with the criminal justice system. The strength of relationships between women, Stride Circle staff and volunteers, others in community and experiences of constraint and social exclusion inform existing and future literature on community re-entry for women leaving prison. This thesis will end with concluding statements on women's experiences, shedding light on my personal understandings of women's needs regarding community reintegration, in addition to recommendations for the Government of Canada, CSC, leisure practitioners and women affiliated with the criminal justice system.

6.5 Implications for Future Practice and Research

The implications that arose from this thesis are significant to future community reintegration preparation within federal prisons for women, in addition to future research in this area. It is also critical to note that as we mobilize the findings in research, knowledge translation occurs, as everyone interprets language differently. Regardless, I believe that together, the government, prison systems, leisure programmers and women affiliated with the criminal justice system can use these findings to address the increased need for well-being and social support services for women who experience incarceration. Furthermore, leisure practitioners can help identify and explore new and improved ways of serving the overall well-being of people and communities during the community reintegration process by gaining wisdom from women's personal life experiences.

6.5.1 Implications for Practice

This thesis adds to the overall body of knowledge and practice pertaining to women's federal prisons by contributing an in-depth understanding of women's experiences in a restorative justice-focused reintegration program and community-based opportunities. Findings from this thesis can be utilized to enhance prison policy on a federal level. When governments, CSC, policy makers, recreation practitioners and prison staff better comprehend women's constraints, they can promote the appropriate policies to mitigate them. Therefore, organizations and practitioners should consider making policies that help meet women's personal needs for social connection, health issues, financial concerns, access to safe and affordable housing and

opportunities to engage in leisure activities that can enhance well-being. This could be accomplished by partnering with restorative justice programs such as Stride Circles, in order to facilitate interventions in women's prisons, so that women can be well-prepared to reintegrate into their communities, before leaving prison.

Women in this thesis also implied that improved programming in prisons could enhance efforts to reduce recidivism. Although there seems to be a lack of diverse opportunities and programs offered for women at GVI, this presents a chance to bring new programs in. Partnerships with different organizations in community such as churches/temples/healing lodges, gyms, financial supports, employment services, social groups, therapeutic art programs and more could help improve programming in prisons. For example, GVI could increase social and leisure opportunities for women by offering a variety of group recreational activities, such as arts and crafts, exercise programs, and casual social circles, in order to increase healthy interactions with the real-world. Also, prison staff at GVI could develop an event which involves giving and receiving feedback and suggestions, where women can discuss their needs and preferences for activities and treatment within prisons. Increasing autonomy for women in prison could help to mitigate the negative effects of incarceration and support women in feeling socially and emotionally equipped to re-enter community.

Offering experiences that are personalized is a method that prison programming and community-based reintegration supports can use to help build community for women who experience incarceration, through developing diverse social and recreational opportunities, and tailoring these programs for women with specific needs. Future research should acknowledge and address the value of personalizing experiences for women in prison, and how this contributes to reintegration. Social circles such as those facilitated through the Stride program can provide women with opportunities to voice their personal needs and concerns, while helping women to make life choices that address their priorities, health, and recreational preferences. Results from this thesis show how the Stride Circle program was successful in providing positive leisure experiences, emotional support, connections to community programming and personalized social support for women during re-entry. Opportunities to make connections and socialize with members of community can help to fulfill women's needs for support, healing, a healthy leisure

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lifestyle and a sense of belonging, all of which were emphasized through women's experiences with Circles.

Connections between restorative justice techniques and the enhanced quality of life for women after prison were also illuminated through this thesis. If women felt their quality of life was being jeopardized during reintegration in some way or another, it often became apparent though conversations with Circles. Detrimental structural powers can impact women's freedom during prison and reintegration, affecting self-care abilities which can intensely affect women's health and lead to experiences of health depletion (Chatterjee et al., 2019) both during and after leaving prison.

However, positive influences on women's quality of life, which can be provided through the restorative justice approaches facilitated within the Stride Circle program, can leave women feeling healthier, happier, more empowered, and confident during their journeys of resettlement. Along with this, women seemed to avoid recidivism through various approaches to self-empowerment and by using the help and support of Circle members. Such opportunities can also help women engage in social experiences which suit their interests and skills, while promoting safety and well-being, plus allowing for increased accommodation of women's individual needs. The implementation of enhanced prison programming, reintegration planning in prison, and partnerships between CSC and community-based reintegration supports would help women make positive choices in support of a successful reintegration, after leaving prison.

As discussed in the beginning and end of this thesis, social stigma and exclusion are critical issues that affect the population of women leaving prison. Thus, future federal-level practices and policies should quickly strive to identify and help women in prison, who are at risk of returning. In addition to the anti-stigma efforts made by women themselves and the Stride Circle program, it is recommended that more initiatives be made by CSC and the government towards dismantling the stigmatized 'prisoner identity,' that unfortunately still exists in society today, to help women to feel accepted and at home in community after leaving prison.

There is an urgent need for federal prisons and government departments to collaborate with women and community organizations such as Stride Circles, to develop and implement well-constructed prison programming and adequate reintegration supports. For women leaving prison with limited resources and lack of support, often rendering them susceptible to reengaging

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in criminal activity and hindering the ability to reintegrate successfully, social circles can assist in keeping women feeling connected and supported. The Stride Circle program promotes social interaction, healthy leisure opportunities and safe and judgement free spaces for women who experience incarceration. Putting these initiatives into action by prison staff would contribute to decreased social stigma, reduced recidivism, and higher rates of success during reintegration for women leaving prison.

6.5.2 Areas for Future Research

This research on how a restorative justice-focused community-based program supports women affiliated with the criminal justice system raises further questions. To amplify the voices, real-life experiences and stories of women who experience incarceration, we need to see more of the ideas presented throughout research in this area being moved directly into practice. In this section, different areas for research are discussed to help fuel future studies in this field. To start, this thesis resulted in findings involving one women's federal prison in an urban community. Thus, an in-depth exploration of rural federal prisons for women would help to expand on these findings.

Within the breadth of my thesis, I did not find the opportunity to include the voices of friends, family, Stride Circle volunteers, and prison staff. The voices of such individuals are all significant to the experiences of women who have been incarcerated at GVI, who took part in Circles. As an expansion of this research, it would be intriguing to explore the roles of these individuals in women's lives, especially the impacts that they had/have on their experiences of reintegration.

These concepts could be explored in greater depth through understanding how structural powers are carried out in women's federal prisons. As researchers and practitioners in this field, individuals may work with women to discuss the effects of their crimes and make future life choices regarding reintegration. However, researchers and practitioners may unintentionally misuse their power by making assumptions about women and thinking that they know better.

These results illuminate how women who experience incarceration and participate in restorative justice initiatives such as Stride Circles, are unique in ways included but not limited

to individual outlooks, mental health needs, financial status, skills, goals, leisure preferences, cultural and ethnic backgrounds and more. Suggesting what programs may be of interest to women exhibits an assumption of the power that CSC, policy makers and prison staff know better than women who have been to prison. Therefore, more research with women who have experienced incarceration, community-based reintegration supports, and CSC would be beneficial to understand how different powers hinder, and support reintegration. The findings from this thesis contribute to the growing body of knowledge on the roles that restorative justice and community members can play in the lives of women who are reintegrating into community after leaving federal prison. They also indicate an urgent need for researchers, the government and CSC to identify the pathways by which punitive measures can damage women's health.

Moreover, my critique of this project was based on the interviews of only six women. Given the longitudinal nature of these interviews, this FCDA provided a rich understanding of the women's experiences. However, future researchers of this topic should consider including more participants in order to arrive at outcomes which can be more accurate and generalized to the overall population of women leaving prison. Also, it is especially important to gain an in-depth understanding of the reintegration experiences of women who belong to racialized groups in future studies, to reflect the true nature of resettlement for this population. Regardless, analysis showed that FCDA is an appropriate methodology for understanding the words, experiences and needs of women leaving prison in relation to community reintegration.

Lastly, outcomes of this project should help prison systems to acknowledge and become more open to alternatives to incarceration. Such initiatives may help women to address their deeply rooted personal needs in hopes of avoiding the worsening of previous issues and the development of new battles to fight on top of existing ones. For future research in this area, restorative justice programs such as Stride Circles should be explored in depth, as potential pathways towards treating crime in addition to enhancing social lives and well-being, which at heart, can lead to a more successful resettlement journey overall for women leaving prison.

6.6 Final Thoughts about the Research

To summarize, this study focused on gaining an in-depth understanding of women's experiences in relation to reintegration while transitioning from prison into community. This included women's descriptions of the process of community reintegration, constraints that women faced, sources of support and forms of empowerment. Discussions also included tactics on how women dealt with stigma and other issues, and what we can learn from women in order to improve reintegration supports. Thus, I strived to understand the meanings that women leaving prison associate with experiences of resettlement and the role that community, the prison system, policy makers, leisure practitioners, governing bodies, and people in women's lives can play during reintegration. This FCDA sheds light on the need for more qualitative research which captures how women leaving prison associate experiences of resettlement with meaningful social interaction. This analysis also points towards the need for researchers to further the use of feminist methodology to address how social reintegration is achieved within different leisure contexts for women.

The women's interviews remind us that sharing stories about life events is among the first forms of discourse we learn as children and is a universal activity for human beings, as it is used by people of all social backgrounds in a wide range of settings throughout the life course (Riessman, 1993). Moreover, the longitudinal interviews conducted with women provided me with the opportunity to treat women's personal experiences and perspectives as the most reflective and valuable parts of the research process. The challenges throughout this study were in deciding what components of the interviews were most important, relevant to my research questions and how I interpreted them.

Furthermore, FCDA helped me to embrace the challenge of maintaining a focus on social justice, transformation, and women's emancipatory goals by interpreting layers of meaning through talk and text, helping to arrive at a powerful and rich critique regarding political action (Lazar, 2007) that can be taken by and for women leaving prison. Analyzing these interviews with an overarching feminist approach to critical discourse analysis along with the theoretical frameworks of a shared responsibility and restorative justice, helped to illuminate the women's meanings of community, stigma, inclusion, agency, support, and empowerment throughout experiences of community reintegration.

In conclusion, the praxis orientation of the women's interviews depict how 1) positive social change is not a once and for all movement, but that it requires collective and constant efforts from various members of society in order to evolve and have beneficial impacts 2) therefore there is a need for continuous striving informed by feminist perspectives of a 'just' society for women who have experienced incarceration and been subjected to injustice during their experiences, who must also go through reintegration afterwards 3) women's individual forms of activism can be even more powerful if the prison system, governing bodies and society acknowledge the different ways in which women enact agency, transformation and social change through participation in self-empowerment strategies, anti-stigma efforts and restorative justice-focused programming such as Stride Circles.

Thus, if CSC, the government, policy makers and shareholders were to learn from women's words and experiences by following with practical and strategic actions, it could result in positive change for women leaving prison. Such collective action could help women improve their overall quality of life, especially during reintegration, which is essential in order to avoid recidivism. Similar to Dodge and Pogrebin's (2001) study, the women's narratives which were portrayed through this thesis, illustrate the challenges that women leaving prison may face in building and maintaining relationships, parenting, and the overall process of community resettlement. These authors also stressed how important it is for the public to understand how the impacts of incarceration in addition to social stigma can directly harm women and surrounding people through the continuation of external and internal shaming from society.

By speaking out against these negative attitudes and actions, the women confronted the system, institutions and people in society that promote the 'othering' of women and serve to sustain the erasure of women's voices and presence from the public sphere. The women's words and interviews therefore serve as forms of resistance against these oppressive powers in society and help to create social change for the overall population of women who have been to prison. In addition to speaking out against these powers which demean women in research, prisons, and community, some of the women also illustrated the power of public speaking, sharing stories about incarceration and life experiences in general.

In this sense, some of the women's interviews serve to commend women who actively and publicly resist the stigmatization and devaluation of women who have been to prison.

Interviewers also praised women for public speaking, especially when one woman explained how she makes the decision to go out and speak about her experiences, shedding light on the positive impacts it creates for her, the community and women who have experienced imprisonment at large. The social and political activism displayed by some of the women through their interviews, points out how women who have been to prison can and do project their voices and agency in strikingly powerful ways.

The women's interviews and the spaces offered by the Stride Circle program therefore constitute for ways which openly challenge various social systems, including the prison system and society's assumptions, which can both lead to marginalization and oppression for women. Stigma related to incarceration and the tactics used to combat it by women, Circles, community and hopefully the prison system, are important factors in women's efforts to rebuild their social lives and reintegrate into community successfully. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for the emancipatory discourse promoted by the women's interviews to be combined with public education, community outreach programs, campaigns and engagement with relevant institutions and policy makers, in hopes of promoting greater understanding towards and support for women who have experienced incarceration.

To add, it is crucial that the positive change advocated by women in these interviews is not confined to this thesis, or experiences within Stride Circles, but is given practical implementation. It is also integral for our discourse analysists to understand and reflect upon the various ways in which the marginalization of women occurs through text, talk and social practices. Thus, it is necessary for discursive practice to be at the forefront of studies about women who have experienced incarceration and engaged in social and restorative justice programming to support successful reintegration. This study builds upon existing work on the discursive construction of non-dominant groups in general and particularly the population of women leaving prison, by shedding light on aspects of their discursive positioning that has received little attention in the literature.

This thesis highlights work done or being done by social movements for justice, such as the Stride Circle program and women within. The restorative justice approaches used in Stride Circles can help to dismantle the oppressive gender role practices in society, work towards reducing stigmatization for women who have experienced incarceration and promote positive

transformation for women overall, especially during community reintegration. This thesis centres the lived experiences of women who have been marginalized and amplifies the voices of women who have been to prison. The insights gained from this study are also instructive in tackling the gender issues affecting women who have been to Canadian prisons who are attempting and will attempt to go through community reintegration. Finally, by focusing on the context underexplored in the literature, this thesis extends the scope of work on FCDA with respect to women who are resettling into community after leaving federal prison.

6.7 Concluding Remarks

The women whose experiences I had the privilege of reading about while engaging in this research have tested my patterns of thinking. The women, interviewers and Stride Circle program have all inspired me to continue seeking to understand and ask questions about the experiences of women who have been incarcerated across Canada and in all parts of the world. As a result of this thesis, I find myself more interested in the role that community plays in the lives of women who have been marginalized, excluded and 'othered' in society.

This study would not have been possible without the openness, vulnerability and willingness of the women involved with the Stride Circle program, in addition to the selfless staff and volunteers of CJI. I am truly thankful for everyone who opened their doors to invite research to be conducted in this intensely meaningful subject and for the academic opportunity this provided me with. I am also deeply appreciative of CJI's readiness and commitment to provide ways to support women during every unique path of reintegration.

Cooperative efforts between governments, institutions and community-based organizations are necessary for women's successful reintegration into community. It is anticipated that such efforts will eventually lead to less demands being placed on women themselves and more positive changes being made within the prison systems and community. As important as the existence of the Stride program by CJI was to this thesis, much of the credit goes to the women who shared their deeply personal experiences and thoughts, while volunteering their time for the purpose of betterment around research regarding community reintegration for women. Words cannot express my gratitude for the opportunity to learn from

each woman involved in this study. I am extremely appreciative of the richness of the data collected through the women's interviews, which greatly contributed to the depth of my findings. Despite the challenges faced by the women, I am unconditionally thankful to each woman for being so open and willing to share.

I would also like to thank each of the student interviewers for their dedication and commitment to carefully and mindfully conversing with women to learn about their challenges and life-changing experiences before, during and after prison. Lastly, I'd like to take the time to thank Community Justice Initiatives for organizing the Stride program, which brought so much positive support, empowerment, healing, love, respect, and transformation into the women's lives. As shown through the women's experiences with Stride, community-based care can strongly support the holistic thriving of women upon release from prison. The sense of belonging experienced by the women in this study regarding feeling accepted and respected by the staff and volunteers of the Stride program, can perhaps be seen as stemming from the comfort that is associated with being in a healthy and supportive environment.

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