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# Social Cohesion Among Individuals Participating In Re-Entry Groups

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SOCIAL COHESION AMONG INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATING IN RE-ENTRY GROUPS

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Master's Program in Sociology

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SOCIAL COHESION AMONG INDIVIDUALS PARTICIPATING IN RE-ENTRY GROUPS

by

TODD LAWRENCE REISER B.A.

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## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	iv
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Tables .....	vi
Chapter	
1. Introduction .....	1
2. Literature Review .....	4
2.1. Prison .....	6
2.2. Recidivism .....	8
2.3. Transition and Re-entry .....	10
3. Theoretical Framework .....	13
4. Methodology .....	17
4.1. Semi-structured Interviews .....	19
4.2. Extended Case Method .....	21
4.3. Case Study .....	22
5. Research Findings .....	25
5.1. Social Cohesion .....	27
5.1.1. Attendance .....	27
5.1.2. Relationships .....	32
5.1.3. Life Improvements .....	36
5.2. Worldview .....	38
6. Discussion .....	42
6.1. Summary of Findings .....	43
6.2. Limitations .....	45
7. Conclusion .....	46
8. References .....	48
Appendix A .....	54
Vita .....	56

List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographics.....24

## 1. Introduction

When prisoners are released from federal and state incarceration they enter a social landscape that holds unique challenges. One of the ways humans living within social systems understand their place and role is through the mechanism of religion. Kerley et al. (2005 p. 444) state that “Social networks may include friendship circles in local congregations, scripture study groups and relationships with religious leaders who serve as role models for individuals.”

Religious support is a way of making new connections, one that assists people in finding meaning outside of criminal activity; an avenue of study often overlooked by criminological and sociological theory (Stansfield et al. 2017). The relationship between crime and religion is underplayed and undervalued, yet sociology recognizes the importance of a shared worldview that reinforces pro-social behavior and accountability among members. Is a sense of community what is needed by post-prison individuals returning to ‘normal’ life? Norms of civility and compassion can be found within many religious tenets, these norms encourage the development of community and an agreed upon order, what Durkheim referred to as *nomos* (Durkheim 1915). Using participant observations, informal interactions, and semi-structured face-to-face interviews this study investigates how group religious practice establishes a shared worldview among those recently released from prison, a worldview that promotes the creation of positive social networks which contribute to life improvements, social mobility, and social status changes.

Many post-prison individuals struggle with employment and ostracizing by a community for past crimes committed. Family relationships may be strained and friendships lost, social connections once enjoyed by post-prison individuals may have broken down or are no longer available. When released these individuals may find that support is minimal and that there are few systems in place to assist them in the transition into their new lives outside of prison.

Religious support is then a way of making new connections, one that assists people in

finding meaning beyond criminal activity; an avenue of study often overlooked by criminological and sociological theory (Stansfield et al. 2017). The relationship between crime and religion may be underplayed and undervalued, yet sociology recognizes the importance of a shared worldview that a community of belief encourages. This worldview can hold a shared ethic that places value on responsible action, upheld and enforced by members within the same community.

Religion is an important component in the social environment and is one of the ways through which societal norms are transmitted. Kerley et al. (2005, p.444) note that social networks can function as mechanisms of normalcy and “may include friendship circles in local congregations, scripture study groups, and relationships with religious leaders who serve as role models for individuals.” Found in most religions are the norms of civility and compassion that can be compounded by group and community practice. Friendships created through group activities reinforce pro-social behavior and accountability among members of religious groups. The development of community is what is needed by those returning to life outside of prison, one that allows them a system of support.

As of June 2018, there were 459,891 persons on probation, parole, or in prison in the state of Texas (Wainwright, McCombs, and Gambrell 2019: 6). This means that with a total population of 28,701,845 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), .02% of Texas' citizens are in the custody of, or under the supervision of, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). In 2018 145,019 persons were held within Texas facilities or as the TDCJ puts it, 'on hand', receiving 65,710 new inmates and releasing 65,114 individuals into parole or community supervision (Wainwright, McCombs, and Gambrell 2018, p, 1-3). Currently there are a total of 114,401 persons under paroled supervision within Texas and it is from this population that I have chosen to select participants for my study.

My investigation examines re-entry groups utilizing religious vocabulary, tenets, and environments as the enabling mechanism to promote a “consensus and coordination of behaviors” (Friedkin 2004: 418). I explore how shared principles function as a foundation for social processes that encourage social cohesion among group members in the social landscape. The current literature is either focused upon how religious activity can assist in positive life choices for those incarcerated, or it is concentrated on how rates of recidivism increase or decrease by those engaged in some form of religious practice. My goal is to contribute to the nearly non-existent literature in the transitional phase between prison and the successful or unsuccessful adjustment to non-prison life. This area of study is ignored, but the importance of this time of transition in shaping positive outcomes in the lives of those leaving incarceration may be foundational in affecting recidivism rates. Can religion assist re-entry groups in contriving cohesion among members?

My research was conducted through direct observation, participation, and first-hand interaction with a group in El Paso, Texas incorporating religious tenets. Data gathered was intended to evaluate and consider the following questions: how do these groups encourage social cohesion among members; has the use of religion, whether subtle or overt created a sense of belonging; and, has the religiosity underlying the group dynamic aided members in developing worthwhile relationships and beneficial?

## 2. Literature Review

Religion has played a significant role and occupied a valuable presence in American penal institutions, currently all federal prisons employ chaplains offering guidance and religious services (Camp, S. D., Daggett, D. M., Kwon, O., & Klein-Saffran, J. (2008). According to Durkheim religion functions as a social engine; religion is in its very essence social (Durkheim 1915/1965). These statements disseminate two very important qualities underpinning religiosity; religion is an important mechanism that offers a shared communal worldview and a valuable consensus of social forces and social ideals (Mcguire 2002). In the lives of the religious, practice goes well beyond the simplicity of belief and functions as a way to maintain social order. As Bell (1997. p. 24) writes, “Religion contains in itself, from the very beginning, even in an indistinct state, all the elements which...have given rise to the various manifestations of collective life.”

Papers such as *The Moderating Influence of Religion on the Behavioral Health of Formerly Incarcerated Men* by Pezzella and Vlahos (2014) assess the positive effects of religious practice on the health of inmates and former inmates. Due to prisoners being labeled a vulnerable population direct data is difficult to obtain, and when obtained the information is not always conducive to quantitative analysis and replicability because of the population being studied. There is also the failure of criminologists to qualify the effects of religious practice on current crime, recidivism, and the life choices of those currently incarcerated (Camp et al. 2008). Therefore, this research will focus on what Bartkowski and Regis (2003) declare; that religion can foster positive individual outcomes by creating or reinforcing networks, norms, and trust.

When researchers ask how religion affects prisoners there are two distinct polarities researched; institutional application of religion and the effects of religion on recidivism. Understanding how religion can be used to foster group relationships in prison and how many of those within prison seek to attend religious groups for friendships, money making opportunities,

and protection is valuable. Many criminologists and social scientists have found that religion and the role it plays in recidivism is inconclusive and provides inverse data that is dependent upon environment and several other factors.

During my case study I heard from William who told me that he initially began going to a religious group, one that taught positive thinking and visualization techniques, because his brother attended the group as well. Though they were in the same facility they lived in different units and the only way for them to see each other was by attending the religious group, William shared:

I hadn't seen him in such a long time...he was in the same facility but that was the way that we got to meet up...we joined up for that class to go together and so we went to that class (and) as I started going to it, you know - some of the stuff, it was kind of like out there...(ref interview).

As this instance illustrates religion does not need to be about the dogma or a set of specific religious doctrines found in a specific religious philosophy. Religious group participation can also have secular purposes such as strengthening or renewing family bonds or improving communal activity. Because my research focuses on how re-entry groups with a religious theme can help foster social cohesion among members, analysis of the two dominant threads abundant in the literature needs to be confronted.

I begin by examining the literature pertaining to how religious practice, or group participation, within prison has an affect on the lives of prisoners and possibly the environment in which they live. Next, the literature on how religiosity plays a role in recidivism will be discussed, along with some of the major studies that have attempted to show some relationship between them. I conclude by addressing how my research perspective differs from these two dominant fields of social research concerning inmate and post-prison religious programs, and present how they may be limiting the landscape of re-entry studies.

## 2.1 Prison

Religion is a common fixture in U.S. prisons. Religious programs in prison have the highest participation rates when compared with other inmate programs (Dammer 2008). Whether or not religious programs in prison offer participants any benefits is a contested issue. There are few studies that have been conducted to determine the effect of religious participation upon inmates and prison environments. According to Clear and Sumter (2002) in 1984 Johnson and his colleagues collected data on 782 inmates in the Florida prison system, finding that inmates with a 'high' participation rate were less likely to commit infractions. Participants at a 'high' rate of membership “also received more serious infractions than their low participant counterparts but were significantly less likely than their matches to be arrested during the follow-up period” (Clear and Sumter 2002:130).

Clear et al. (1992) conducted a similar, but much broader, study. In the 1992 study 769 inmates in 20 prisons from 12 states were assessed through non-random sampling, this study attempted to determine how religiousness was related to prison adjustment and the number of disciplinary infractions received. Because an individual's degree of religiousness is difficult to quantify prisoners were asked by researchers to self-define their particular religious practices through questions meant to determine how often they attended practices or group events. Researchers also found that religious participation did not predict post-release success. The overall take away from this study was that the data was found to be prison specific. In some locations religious participation meant lower rates of violence and lower instances of institutional infractions, in other prisons it had no affect. Further, a study by Johnson, Larson, and Pitts (1997) confirmed no difference in the amount of prison infractions within a one-year period among those in the prison fellowship programs and 'non-religious' inmates.

Though the consensus of data points to their being no relationship between infractions

and religious participation, there may be other benefits. Dammer (2008) determines several reasons why inmates choose to become members of religious programs while in prison; these he situates under two main headings – *Sincere* and *Insincere*. Dammer found among his study of 1,500 inmates that *Sincere* inmates were members of religious programs because religion gave them hope for the future and a way to keep their religion and beliefs “alive”. *Insincere* reasons for inmate participation have little to do with religious programming and more to do with personal safety, socialization, and business that may include the passing of contraband and access to numerous prison resources such as food that may be obtained from meeting attendance. Whether the reasons for attendance are *Sincere* or *Insincere*, either for physical protection or psychological well-being, Dammer (2008) found that inmates gain real benefits from choosing to be involved with religious groups while incarcerated.

Clear, Hardyman, Stout, Lucken, and Dammer (2000) use a similar protocol called *Intrinsic* and *Extrinsic* to discuss the reasons for religious participation in prison. Though it is difficult to determine why a specific individual may be involved with a group, membership affords certain benefits that are unique within the prison environment. Researchers found the *Intrinsic*, or internal benefits relate to helping inmates deal with guilt, the loss of freedom, and how to create a new life while incarcerated. *Extrinsic*, or external, reasons qualify as personal safety, material comforts, and access to outsiders (e.g., visitors). Here we can see that both Dammer and Clear et al. are defining how prisoners utilize religious programs to their benefit in order to make sense of and confront a possible hostile environment through the vehicle of a social group.

Fetsinger (1950) portrayed social cohesion as a causal system of individuals, a field of forces that encourage members to join and remain within groups. This field of forces can be both the network of individuals within the group and, as I postulate, outside environmental

stresses both social and, in the case of prison, institutional. Whether these forces are internal to the group or external they motivate members toward a system of cohesion. This system of cohesion is an immanent mechanism generated between the active members of groups and strengthened by the ever-present external forces that produce pressure upon members to maintain participation. Many inmates involved with the Dammer (2008) study espouse the idea that prison is a type of monastic living situation separated from the community at large, different in many aspects from general society, offering a unique environment in which to enrich their spiritual well-being. As the external or insincere reasons for religious participation in prison help shape a membership looking for safety, the internal or sincere reasons for membership can help contribute to an inmate's sense of well-being and community.

## 2.2 Recidivism

How well inmates acclimate to the unique environments found while incarcerated is important, but when men and women leave the institution will some return to lives of criminality outside of prison? Recidivism, defined as a “return to criminal or delinquent activity after previous involvement” (Legislative Budget Board, Texas 2019) has an overall rate of 21% in Texas, among the lowest in the country (Wainwright, McCombs, and Gambrell 2018). This number was derived from a ten-year recidivism study found in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) *Biennial Re-entry and Reintegration Service Report* published September 2018 by the Re-entry and Integration Division of the TDCJ. Unfortunately, there is no information on how this 21% was reached or in what manner data was collected in order to arrive at this percentage. However, in January of 2019, the Texas Legislative Budget (LBB) board prepared a document addressing, in more specific ways, how recidivism affects Texas. Recidivism within this document includes several indicators or groupings, including re-arrest rate, reconviction rate, and reincarceration rate. The document by the LBB stated that the overall rates of recidivism

have been stable from 2013-2015.

In the U.S., between 1980 and 2006 the prison population increased by 467 percent, and the parole population by 362 percent (Johnson 2008). There are quite possibly innumerable reasons why recidivism takes place—factors may be social, economic, and/or generational. Most studies find little relationship between rates of recidivism and religious participation. Yet, the literature can be contradictory and is not well established in sociological and criminology circles. Studies do show that church attendance and delinquency are inversely related (Higgins and Albrecht 1977) and religious activity has a direct effect on reducing criminal behavior among adults (Evans et al. 1995). Still, there are few studies and no empirical evidence to determine if religious programs are any more effective than secular initiatives (Dodson et al. 2011).

Byron Johnson (2004) revisited his original data from 1997 in an attempt to show how religious program participation can affect recidivism rates. Data compiled from a sample of 201 men from four prisons in the state of New York involved in the Prison Fellowship (PF) program, which is a non-profit ministry to prisoners, victims, and ex-prisoners was compared to the data of 40,000 inmates previously released from the New York prison system. Johnson looked at the differences in recidivism rates among PF participants and non-PF former inmates by evaluating return to criminal behavior in a 1- to 8-year period following release. Johnson (2004) also assigned members of Prison Fellowship one of three levels of PF participation: low, medium, or high.

Low = Zero attendance of Prison Fellowship study groups over a 1-year period.

Medium = Attendance of one to nine study groups over the course of a 1-year period.

High = Attendance of at least 10 groups over a 1-year period.

Johnson (2004) found that 70.2% of former inmates had been re-arrested, 67.7% of these were PF members and 72.6% were non-PF members. Non-PF members had a median rearrest time of

2.4 years. Former inmates with 'high' levels of PF attendance saw a median re-arrest time of 3.8 years versus those of 'low' or 'medium' at 2.3 years. These instances of re-arrest do not necessarily mean that former inmates were convicted or institutionalized, only that an arrest took place.

Many of these studies fail to discuss a few important factors: does the religion promoted within the programming make a difference, do a combination of proven secular programming and religious programming improve rates of recidivism, and, do results differ between former inmates practicing an organic religious expression as opposed to those practicing an intentional one? Many programs within the prison system may be considered intentional programs as inmates are placed within them or choose to attend them in order to address specific needs associated with their imprisonment (Dodson et al. 2011). The term organic religion is used to define practices that are cultural or learned through family or similar social circles. Because studies determining how religious practice affects recidivism are scarce and non-specific, and since the term religiosity or what it means to be religious is obfuscated by personal definitions and social factors a concise measurement of how post-prisoners are affected by religious programming outside of controlled institutional environments is problematic.

### 2.3 Transition and Re-entry

Is it enough to say that religious programs are effective or ineffective? How can effectiveness be measured? How can religious programs or participation be compared to other options? Studies in the realm of recidivism fail to compare secular programs to religious ones, and if these comparisons take place can a better understanding of participation be seen? Research consistently points to a modest relationship between religion and crime, but perhaps it is not enough to look at merely the end result. A better understanding of the effects may come through examination of religion's ability to create connections. Cochrane et al. (1994) found that

when controlling for the effects of social control the relationship between religiosity and delinquency is nearly insignificant when following cases of assault, theft, vandalism, illicit drug use, and truancy.

This calls for sociologists and criminologists to consider shifting their focus from the effects of religious practice or the implementation of tenets that prescribe or demand 'right' and 'wrong' action in the social environment to one that spotlights the social benefits of religious participation. These benefits may include the following: interaction with others who share a similar worldview, access to a common and beneficial social environment, and, in the case of recently released prisoners, access to a social group that includes those of different social standing and status. In this case study, I address how social cohesion among people attending religiously themed re-entry groups have an opportunity to develop bonds and connections. Religious programs can become part of the fabric of social life and therefore a tool in developing social bonds (McRoberts 2002). Even though the group of men and women of Forward Focus had very little interaction with the church body as a whole, there were instances when church members attended the group and when church officials spoke briefly to group members. Religious themed groups have the ability to offer a support system of conventional prosocial friends and acquaintances (Campbell et al. 2007). Members were also known to attend church services, and were welcomed to do so, though the administrator of the group was sure to acknowledge that the groups location was not meant to push church attendance.

Recent literature attempts to evaluate faith-based programs and re-entry. What exactly a faith-based program is is open to debate and there is no established definition of what components constitute such a program (Mears et al. 2006). Stemen (2002) recognized that even faith-based programs conducted within churches may not include faith as a specific component toward improving post-prison re-entry. Certainly, as in the case of this research project, faith

could not be overtly discussed due to Forward Focus being a state authorized and recognized program. Yet even given the need to remain religiously ambiguous group led discussions were usually couched in Christian morality, attitudes of the administrators were subtly bent toward the redemptive quality of faith, and the group meetings took place at a church. All these components became woven into the group in order to create an environment of faith-based programming.

In addition, there appears to be an assumption that faith-based programming will, without question, lower recidivism and aid those returning to the larger community. This assumption however is not supported by the available literature. It does appear though that indirect benefit may be available to those taking part in such groups. Smith (2002) discusses nine possible 'pathways' between religion and delinquency, these he presents in three categories or factors: moral order (moral directives, spiritual experiences, and role models), learned competencies (community and leadership skills, coping skills, and cultural capital), and social and organizational ties (social capital, network closure, and extra-community skills). These skills or factors quite possibly may lead to less offending and a more active participation in positive outcomes. My research examines how social cohesion can originate within religiously based re-entry groups through the creation of a shared worldview. This worldview may further provide assistance in the creation of relationships or viewpoints that can strengthen many of the factors that Smith (2002) discusses.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

In this study, I will draw upon several theories and concepts in order to elucidate the social significance of group religious practice and participation by former inmates. Primary in its implication is Emile Durkheim's contribution to the understanding of religion in the social context. Durkheim postulated that religion is a collective ideal. This,

“collective ideal which religion expresses is far from being due to a vague innate power of the individual, but it is rather at the school of collective life that the individual has learned to idealize. It is in assimilating the ideals elaborated by society that he has become capable of conceiving the ideal” (Durkheim, 1912).

The collective ideal allows for the creation of community and strengthening of a perceived and agreed upon worldview.

Worldview is an important facet to understanding the power of group religious thought and participation. Durkheim applied the term *anomie* to the social context; a word that describes a break in the social order or the failure of a society to provide meaning (Durkheim 1912). The opposite of *anomie* would be a worldview or *nomos* which perpetuates a known order and an agreed upon symbol set that explains the social environment and humanity's place in a concrete cosmology (Berger and Luckman 1963); the world becomes justifiable, actions become valuable, and the fabric of society is a link to something greater. For those struggling with a new life outside of prison, these ideals, that religion grants, are an important avenue of change and foundational self-esteem. The group dynamic, created by a shared vision of the world through religious tenets, offers those within such groups a meaningful way in which to understand the challenges of life.

To Durkheim (1912/2016) religion provided a coherent way to provide a shared worldview to (a) society; moreover, “religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force” of society (Durkheim 1912/2016, p. 122). We then, as a social unit, are

impressed with fundamental collective ‘knowledges’ that stem directly from religion which constitute ideas of hierarchy, order, and morality. Regardless of how complex this knowledge is we share a “system of ideas” (Durkheim 1912/2016 p.122) that invades nearly every social environment. Durkheim (1912/2016) did not define religion as meaning church a synagogue, temple or any specific institution associated with the act of group worship; instead he viewed religion as a set of symbols, rituals, and practices by a group or community of social actors (Appelrouth & Edles, 2016, p. 123). This definition of religion as a set standard of social norms that inform a group understanding of the world is foundational in my study of post-prison individuals. These persons are seeking to rewrite the symbols and practices that may have promoted negative social behavior in the past, and may still in the present, with those that establish positive ones. In many cases, to be realistic, parole programs require that those recently released from prison seek counseling of some kind, so taking part in such programs is not necessarily a choice. My conversations with re-entry Jorges reveals that many participants request religious group mediation over other more secular options primarily because of the environment in which such groups are held; the religious being less institutional and relaxed. One of my informants also advised that post-prison individuals don’t want to be in government facilities that institutional in their appearance and are actively trying to remove themselves from such places; a religious group then is a good alternative. Unlike a secular based groups religious based groups apply symbols and foster a shared worldview among members that includes a supernatural outlook and possibly tenets that include worship. Religion can become a way in which these individuals relate to one another, enforcing a shared expectation of how to act amongst each other and within their rehabilitation and the outside community. Religion, it is also important to emphasize, is not a solitary act; “Religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church” (Durkheim 1912/2016 p.127). The term Church is used, not too denote a building or a

sanctuary of worship, but a community of “believers in a single faith, layman as well as priests” (p. 127) which is the opposite of what Durkheim (1912/2016) would consider a solitary religious practice and equate with Magic. Magic is the term that Durkheim (1912/2012) used to explain the solitary act of religious practice, usually meant in a primitive fashion.

Shared symbols and practices reinforce positive behavior through ritual and knowledge of what is sacred and profane. These two concepts, Sacred and Profane, come to define the world in which those partaking in religious activity exist. For prisoners this is the polarity of right and wrong, us and them, good and evil; the sacred is the realm of the religious infused with gods and spiritual tenets, the profane is the mundane world of everyday existence. The old life is associated with the profane, the new life that is fostered within the group religious activity, the sacred. My interviews are meant to gauge the power of the religious in the lives of those participating, to judge whether the sacred has been beneficial in influencing a positive change to the mundane. One such participant shared with me that the church in which the group was taking place was for him a ‘turning point’. He had been on the run for various crimes and while ‘on the lamb’ attended a service at the church in question – he turned himself in after the service and returns to the re-entry group on occasion. Religion can be a powerful tool for these men and women; many seem to merely need a new set of *symbols* that provide access to a different social network. Along with this network *nomos* can occur, or a return to a normal sense of life and processes that begin to grant normalcy. *Anomie*, or the sense that something is out of place, or as Durkheim used the term to mean “lack of rule” as found in *Division of Labor*(1893), *Suicide* (1897), and *Socialism and Saint-Simon* (Mestrovic 1985, p.119) occurs for the former prisoner twice; once when going to prison and again when returning to society. Prison is a unique environment that requires adaptation, there are rules in prison that demand that persons act in a certain way, ways that are very different from ‘normal’ society. Once outside prison the person

must adapt to society again, *anomie* can again be a problem. Religious groups therefore can provide a group of peers, a set of symbols in which to believe, and a new network in which to work; a return to *nomos*, and in many cases a completely new normal.

#### 4. Methodology

This qualitative study will utilize observations, informal interactions, and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with post-prison individuals attending religiously themed groups. Group participation is mandatory for those on probation in the state of Texas, many post-prison individuals are attending multiple groups including Narcotics Anonymous, Alcoholics Anonymous, and groups like Forward Focus, a religiously oriented support group. Those electing to be interviewed will be selected from a pool of individuals currently engaged in religious based re-entry groups and programs that meet the study criteria. As an interviewer, I have previous experience with long-term studies, qualitative data gathering methodologies, and in-depth interviews of persons from within the El Paso community. A snowball approach may also be implemented in order to contact others referred through a network of friends, allies, and relatives with similar experiences to those already selecting to take part as research participants.

In my attempt to find and evaluate programs in which to conduct my study I met with several individuals involved in re-entry and restorative justice activities. Various leaders of many faith communities in El Paso, Texas were consulted and contacted through phone conversations, email, and face-to-face interactions. I have found that most active groups within the El Paso area are those working within a Christian framework. As my primary modality of research became the case study I decided upon advancing with two local organizations in order to better focus my work, time, and participation. This focus, which was further limited to one group, allowed me to participate in social events, witness changes to the group and its members, and to experience the social processes taking place in the group environment. This type of single group analysis lent itself to a better understanding of “how ideas, events, and institutions interact and change through time” (Rosaldo 1989). I found early on in my study that the selected population for this project, the post-prisoner on probation who has been forced by the state to attend group

remittance of some type, did not necessarily appreciate an outsider seeking interviews. I therefore made every effort to attend as many group sessions as possible in order to become a common part of group activity, to be cordial but distanced from the administrators so that I may better 'fit in', and to speak with members only when brought into conversations naturally.

My intentions were to employ ethnographic methods such as non-participant observation in order to collect data in an immediate way from observations and informal interactions. I also did not want to only interview those who had, in the past, attended such groups, I therefore made every effort to contact gatekeepers of 'living' or active groups accepting, counseling, and aiding post-prison persons to successfully participate in the community at large. Initially I gained access to two groups in the El Paso area that I felt could provide enough subjects to interview and an environment in which to develop field notes. The first being a halfway house located centrally in the city that was in appearance a single level home in a residential neighborhood. This halfway house required tenants, up to five, to attend a religious service of their choosing once a week in order to maintain their status as residents of the home; "We've even had a Druid stay with us," its director stated in one of our meetings together. The second group I developed a rapport with was a Christian based re-entry group working out of a church on the east side of El Paso, Texas. This well-established group is acknowledged and recognized by the state of Texas, parolees are regularly assigned by parole officers to attend. This group has a fluctuating membership of 12 to 30 members depending on probation requirements, holidays, and work related events that may have prohibited attendance. After having met with the gatekeepers of both of the aforementioned groups, and following discussion of my study parameters, I was invited to attend group meetings and functions as an observer.

Sometime during the first month of attending the Our Redemption Church where the Forward Focus re-entry group met, which would become the primary data collection site of my

study, my observations changed from being strictly non-participant to being that of participant-observer. I would shake hands with members before meetings, talk outside as members shared a smoke, and even after one session helped with a parking lot car repair (or made an attempt to do so). I began to be part of this other world, as Salzinger (as cited in Burawoy et al., 1991) notes of participant observation she was “watching, analyzing, gossiping, matching hypothesis to reality - moment by moment it (participatory observation) is (was) deeply engaging” (Burawoy et. al 1991, p. 158). It was difficult for me not to slip into a different state of thinking when entering the environment of the group and its members, it can be a hyper masculine atmosphere where words are sparse and carefully chosen, where a unique vocabulary had been developed in order to describe events and challenges found in the carceral setting. Caputo-Levine (2013) notes that persons who are incarcerated alter their relationship to the world through the development and adoption of a specific language as they encounter a unique culture of new social categories, authority figures, and social relations. I employed Berk and Adams' (1970, p. 108) recommendation of not adopting the slang style of those being studied; as an investigator and participant observer it is important to “not come on too strong” and gaining trust is more important than being accepted. During many meetings I participated in questions asked by the administrator of the group and I also began to make note of the absence of individuals with whom I had built a rapport. Instead of being solely an outsider overseeing interactions and eavesdropping on conversations, I had consciously made the choice to incorporate a participant-observer mode of interaction while always being aware of how different my history was to the men and women forced to take part in the group sessions.

#### 4.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Having developed thirty-five questions meant to understand how social cohesion and networking was being fostered by the religiously inspired group, I employed semi-structured

interviews. In the first meeting I attended at Our Redemption Church, I was introduced to a group of fifteen men. Prior to the first meeting, I had prepared multicolored note cards to hand out to members of the group. These cards included my name, my position with the university, my office phone number, and a short sentence that told the group participants the point of my study. “It is unethical for a sociologist to deliberately misrepresent the character of the research in which he (or she) is engaged” (Erikson 1967, p.373). I wanted to be sure that my presence in the group began with truth and honesty, and that everyone understood that the study was authorized by UTEP and the Institutional Review Board. That first night three men spoke to me about their interest in participating in my project. The administrator of the Our Redemption Church group also made it clear that anything said to me was confidential and that he would allow anyone to speak with me during group meetings. I was also given access to other areas of the building in order to conduct my interviews behind closed doors.

My questions were divided into two main areas of interest: social cohesion and religious practice. Social cohesion as a theme and area of study was meant to collect data on how participation in the group allowed members to establish relationships within the group and how these connection between members, and also group participation may improve wider social connections and cohesion. “Indeed, the intimate face-to face group is often held to form (a) critical 'primary environment' by which an individual is related to the larger society...” (Laumann, 1973, p. 111). Social *cohesion* is generated by connections made between individuals at the micro level then to the group at the macro level. The group dynamic built upon individual connections allows members to then move into the greater social community outside with a shared set of beliefs and experiences. Ties fostered at the group level are important in that they provide *networking* endeavors that may allow access to friendships, work, and housing opportunities outside of the group environment. The second category, religious practice and

participation is meant to establish how the religious context is used to institute an additional level of shared commonality among participants. Religion, Durkheim concluded, is the means through which people sacralize social structure and the connections of community (Bell, 1997, p.24). Religion offers the men and women in the group common principles of right and wrong that further establish a group bond.

#### 4.2 Extended Case Method

The extended case method is clarified as a means by which a researcher can be reflexive within the scope of ethnography or social research and cognizant of how the move from ‘micro’ to ‘macro’ occurs. This reflexive approach allows for the researcher to adhere to an honest evaluation of gathered data and interaction in order to improve future research and methods of collection (Burawoy, 1998). This method allows the researcher to better anticipate how questions will function within a group setting, and to facilitate a research method that adapts to ongoing inquiry. This instrument grants the ethnographer and researcher working with a semi-structured interview methodology the ability to edit questions, to better clarify what interactions lead to positive participation, and how best to moderate future group interaction. The extended case method reminds the researcher to ‘go with the flow’ and to utilize the data found in one interview or environment to better anticipate questions and reactions in another.

The extended case method makes no pretense to positive science (Burawoy, 1998). Positive science is an attempt to distance the researcher from that which is researched setting aside personal emotions, personal ethics, and values to insure that knowledge is arrived from the accumulation of data which can be replicated (Allan, 2011). My shift from non-participant to participant-observer allowed me to discuss the news of the day with the members of Forward Focus, to shake hands and ask about school plans with others, would not be considered detached. The extended case method reminds the researcher that the social environment is a result of

interaction and becomes verifiable from the social actors taking part in it. The reflexivity of the investigator to evaluate his own bias and actions as a social actor is an important component to the extended case method. Burawoy (1998) writes that “A social order reveals itself in the way it responds to pressure. Even the most passive observer produces ripples..”

#### 4.3 Case Study

Snow and Anderson note that more than any other form of social research case studies allow for the analysis of actual social process (Feagin et. al 1991, p. 160). Being that case studies tend to be longitudinal in scope I chose this method to gather much of my data and applied it as a lens through which I perceived many of the challenges inherent in studying this very closed subset of society. The challenges of finding gatekeepers, then meeting with gatekeepers, then developing a rapport with gatekeepers to allow access to group environments was time consuming and a lengthy first process. Once participating in the group, I found that my presence was not always accepted, and that I would need to attend many sessions in order to chip away at my outsider persona. Many participants chose to not interview with me until I had attended meetings for several months. The Case Study approach asks the researcher to invest himself into a social milieu and to understand the relationships among participants in a group. I chose to patiently adapt to the schedule of the group and to the access its members would allow. Consequently, several sessions ended with me going home with experiential field notes instead of interviews.

As I spent more time with Forward Focus, I began to adapt to the ways in which members spoke to each other, greeted each other, and how they would offer work and life advice to one another. Although I understood that my life experience was very different from many of the participants after two or three months I finally felt that my presence was accepted. I was understanding in a real way that the greater the social distance between the observer and subject,

the more difficult it was to create and maintain rapport (Beck and Adams 1970). During informal conversations I never made an attempt to probe for information related to my study, and while in group sessions if I was asked to participate I would not use such moments to instigate discussion of topics related to my study. I would also not be deceptive about my experience. It may not have been obvious to those in the group that I was an outsider, that I had never been incarcerated, but I never deceived members into assuming that we had a shared experience. My experience did not advise me on how to behave among these men and women. I did not know what was allowed and what was natural when among them. The mental filter guiding and structuring my practices and actions, the habitus based upon my personal history (Appelrouth & Edles, 2016, p.666), had to be supplemented with new material. The case study model, and its longitudinal scope allowed me time to implement new ways of reacting to occurrences within and outside of group sessions.

In August of 2018 the Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas at El Paso granted me the ability to move forward with my study. Over a six-month period I conducted a case study at Our Redemption Church, gathering eight interviews and field notes including experiences and informal interactions with the members of its re-entry program, Forward Focus. All members of Forward Focus were given pseudonyms, the name of the group upon which Forward Focus is based has also been changed, and the name of the church at which Forward Focus is located has also been changed in order to maintain the confidentiality of all persons and institutions.

Table 1: Participant Demographic

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Sentence (Years)	Parole (Years)	Religious
Jorge	M	45	10	2	Yes
Melissa	F	23	1.3	1	Yes
Nick	M	37	15	12	Yes
Robert	M	47	17	12	Yes
Kyle	M	44	50	22	Yes
Dave	M	48	5	2	Yes
Ben	M	36	5	3.5	Yes
Hector	M	40	11	-	No

## 5. Research Findings

During my time with Forward Focus my role was as a participant observer. It did not initially begin this way. My intent at the beginning was to simply interview those willing to volunteer to speak with me and to obtain answers to my questions all within a few weeks. What I found at Forward Focus was a group of allies, most were just trying to get it over with, but there was a core group for whom the group was more than a requirement. I also knew that these men and women were not going to let a complete outsider interview them about prison life. As early as the second meeting I understood that attempting to distance myself from conversations, questions, and the normal courtesies of group interaction would work against my study. I needed to develop a rapport with the members of Forward Focus before anyone was going to take me seriously. In order to gather the necessary data I decided on a case study method that would allow for a certain amount of participation, this meant attending meetings on an ongoing basis and building a place for myself in the group. As Berk and Adams (1970) mention, the less one has in common with the chosen group of study, the more difficult it will be to establish rapport.

Several of these challenges toward building rapport were apparent during my first meeting with Forward Focus; a majority of the men were Hispanic or identified as Mexican, most were blue collar workers, if employed, and all were forced to attend the group. I am a white man, the majority of my career has been in the information technology field prior to focusing on my education and graduate school, and, unlike my respondents I was choosing to attend Forward Focus as part of my research. This was a unique and safe environment I was entering, where members were able to discuss the challenges of the re-entry. Due to the subjects involved in much of the conversations including former criminal activities and distressing prison experiences, I imagined that participants would be suspicious of outsiders. Because of this I knew that conversation with members may not come easy. I met with the leader of Forward

Focus two weeks prior to the first group meeting I attended in order to introduce myself and my study. The first meeting of Forward Focus I attended was in September of 2018 while the last meeting I attended was February 22, 2019.

There are two substantive questions that I address in this study. The first deals with the way in which members of the group experience social cohesion. I had a set of questions that in my interview guide were meant to gauge the relationships being formed through group participation. These questions were molded around some common dimensions that define the degree of social cohesion within a group or between individuals such as what social relations were being established among members that may extend outside of the group, whether individuals identified with the group, and whether members were committed to the group through a common bond (Schiefer and van der Noll 2016). The second set of questions was meant to decipher if a shared set of values had been developed within the group through the use of a religious theme. Even though the groups religiosity was subtle, many members discussed the importance of the groups religious component to help them keep focused on finishing their parole and moving on with their lives. Many of these questions asked participants about any religious practice they may have, the regularity of practice, and if the group had ignited or kept alive such practice. As previously discussed in this piece assigning a scale to religiosity is difficult and determining how religious a person is is a nearly impossible task. I determined a participant was religious if they had a regular practice of prayer – whether this prayer was Christian, Islamic, or Polytheist in nature. Primarily I was hoping to determine if a shared worldview had been generated among the group to further enable cohesion among the members of Forward Focus.

Out of the eight interviews I conducted with volunteers I have selected four individuals and their interviews to discuss below. The four participants selected are Ben, Dave, Kyle, and

Melissa; their responses to various questions were found to best represent the experiences of the participants I spoke with as well as what I heard, observed, and gathered through informal discussions with other members.. As this case study was a lived experience for me, I felt the best way to present the data and experiences of its membership was in the manner in which it was experienced. I wanted to emulate how Gleeson (2016) used a method of detailing the life events of specific participants in order to illustrate how workers lived with and fought through workplace injustices. In my study I felt the best way to understand how the men and women of Forward Focus approached the concepts of social cohesion and group participation was through a similar method of showing their life choices and connections through their own words.

## 5.1 Social Cohesion

My interview guide included a total of 35 questions with eight of them directed toward finding evidence of social cohesion within the group of people I interviewed. I coded these eight questions into 3 categories: Attendance, Relationships, and Life improvements.

### 5.1.1 Attendance

I begin with introducing attendance because I was interested in establishing how people came to join Forward Focus. I wanted to determine if members had been assigned to the group or if they had been able to select Forward Focus over another group option. The reason for this was to help me in considering if members had prior relationships. Many members had either spent time in prisons or in halfway houses together. Some members knew Jorge, the group leader of Forward Focus from another re-entry group in El Paso. Attendance was determined using three questions during one-on-one, semi-structured interviews: why are you attending this group, were you able to select this group over another and how was that decision made, was there an advocate or contact that reached out to you about or for this particular group?

The first of the three questions meant to understand why members were attending

Forward Focus was simply; “Why are you attending this group?”

### Ben

Ben, whose 36 years old, wears a monitor on his ankle. Our interview had to be conducted being mindful of time constraints as he was given a very specific daily schedule of which to adhere. He was fairly new to the group at the time of our interview but had mentioned in our session that he had formed friendships with some of the other members. These relationships had been formed both inside prison and while at an area halfway house. Ben explained to me that he was attending Forward Focus because:

It’s just a requisite, for parole, the type of parole I’m on. The program I think, from what I understand, everybody that’s a part of the ‘X’ Program (program name omitted to preserve anonymity) says it’s mandatory.

The ‘X’ Program allowed Ben to be let out of prison earlier than normal, but he was required to spend time in a halfway house as well as take part in programs like Forward Focus. Ben was given a five-year sentence, had served two and received 3.5 years of parole.

Ben made it clear that he had not requested this group due to its religious theme, but that he attended Forward Focus because meetings were held in a convenient area of town. This group was the closest one to where he was staying with family. Ben did not have an advocate that connected him with the group, but was connected to the group through his parole officer:

I didn’t. My parole officer just basically gave me a group based on my address and gave me options that were located on my side of town – and I didn’t have a vehicle because, you know, I’m gonna have to walk or take the bus or whatever. Yeah so it was location. Even though Ben did have connections to the group having spent time in state facilities with other members of Forward Focus he selected the group primarily because of location. He did not have a car and was concerned about losing work opportunities because of the time needed to travel to multiple group meetings. The important factor in Ben’s group attendance was

the area and the limitations of his monitor and transportation. Ben was also one of the few members I spoke with who was given a choice of which group to attend based on location. Through conversations with other group members I found that this was not common and seemed to be based entirely upon the prerogative of the Parole Officer assigned to the participants.

### Dave

Dave who had grown up in the south was very forthcoming about his history and offenses. He had been brought up in the Aryan Brotherhood, been a teenage runaway, and had run chop shops. He was 48 years old and had served a five year sentence in Texas, with two years of parole. Despite his past, he was now a devoted family man, and deeply religious. I asked Dave to tell me why he was attending Forward Focus and he shared:

Well they have a couple of them here (program options) and I talked to my PO (Parole Officer) and he was telling me that the leader of the group, Jorge has been where I've been and that he'd like me to come here first to see if I liked it.

There were other members who shared this sentiment. Jorge, the leader of the group, had been in the system and had a criminal history. Jorge had been to prison turning himself in after living what he told me was a life of crime. During my interview with Jorge, the group leader, he told me candidly that he was good at 'running' and only because of a turnaround experience did he turn himself in to serve his time. The other members of Forward Focus respected Jorge's opinion and used him as a positive example for what their lives could become as part of the program. Dave made it clear that he and Jorge had formed a friendship and even mentioned that his attendance at Forward Focus may continue after his parole had been completed.

### Kyle

Kyle was a calm man, well-spoken and humble in his demeanor, he was the first to speak

with me and the first to offer his assistance to my study. During the interview we spoke about baseball and joked about how his favorite team and mine were both doing well but would probably choke before the playoffs. He was forthright about his involvement with gangs as a youth, because of it he had spent most of his adult years in prison. Kyle was sentenced to 50 years of prison in Texas and served 20. He will be on parole until 2042. I never asked those I interviewed what their offense(s) entailed only the time imposed upon them. Kyle, along with many of the other participants I interviewed, spoke to me about his contempt of other group programs that seemed to promote open dialogue of what he called “war stories.” Participants told me that war stories often served as a way to one-up each other. This would often take place among the men and women as they tried to outdo others with more violent prison or criminal experiences. I was conscious of some of this before I started my interviews with the members of Forward Focus, so my intent was never to sensationalize what these men and women lived through – a point that I made clear when asked to introduce myself and my research. When I asked Kyle to tell me about how he came to join Forward Focus he said:

There’s another group that’s exactly like this one but I like this one more because, in this one, first off Jorge lets you know that I’m here to help you for a reason cuz I believe in God and he changed my life and he could do that to you, for you to, here we could talk about everything, our problems. “I just helped one of the guys get hired for auto work, you know, we’re here to help each other, hear each other, you know.” Jorge is here to ‘get you’. And then the other one (group) was nothing but war stories.

Kyle’s PO allowed him to pick Forward Focus over the other group. He shared the following about that experience:

No, I came over here because I met the group leader Jorge in the other group. Jorge would attend the other group and that's when trying... Jorge you know just said, “I’m gonna go do my own group because this is getting old, every single session all we hear is war stories.” It was to the point where you would try to out-do what the other person did with war stories and he just felt “what’s the point?” I mean what's the point? We're trying to, you know, move forward and change. It’s the same story and it gets to the point that you’re outside fighting in the parking lot. So once Jorge told me that he was gonna run

his own group I just came over here.

Attendance by Kyle at Forward Focus was a choice. He wanted to follow Jorge to Forward Focus because Jorge had made a conscious decision to eliminate much of what the other group in El Paso was doing. Kyle knew that with Forward Focus he could work toward moving on without having to partake in a game of one-upmanship among fellow post-prisoners.

### Melissa

Melissa was the youngest participant that chose to interview with me. During her first meeting with Forward Focus I spoke to her informally and introduced myself. As was the case with many of those who at first spoke to me informally it would take her several sessions until deciding to ask to be interviewed about her group experience. My frequent attendance at the group, I believe, had made her comfortable with my presence and willing to speak with me. I also found that during the interview she was intellectually curious about the process and excited about telling her story. This was not Melissa's first group program during her parole. In our interview she relayed that she had made some lasting friendships and connections in another group. A tragedy had occurred to one of her friends from that group and it had been disbanded forcing her to attend Forward Focus as an alternative, which was located in the other side of town.

Todd: Why are you attending this group at the moment?

Melissa: Because the one that I was going to, he got killed.

Todd: Like the one who was leading it?

Melissa: Yes, near his barbershop he got run over. We became friends, and it's really sad. And I started coming here; I was going to try some other ones, but the others are really far, I've been coming here August and September, and I've never seen any of the other people here. I'm the only woman here.

At the time of the interview Melissa was 23 years old and the only woman attending

Forward Focus consistently. Most of the time she would come directly from work, she worked two jobs. I've selected her as a representative of some of the interviews that were short and succinct, the interviews with participants who did not elaborate on their answers. Where Melissa differs, however, is that her story had some depth and she had been affected by a tragedy that was difficult for her to articulate. Even though her answers were short, we had good conversations around the questions, and her perspective as a young Muslim woman was unique.

### 5.1.2 Relationships

The development of relationships is the second important aspect to my study of social cohesion among the members of Forward Focus. Relationships are diverse and a necessary component in developing and maintaining social cohesion within a group of individuals. I asked participants to tell me about their relationships with other members of the group. For instance, whether they considered other members as friends and whether they felt they could depend on them. I also asked them to tell me about their relationships with administration.

#### Ben

Ben knew several of the members of the group. He had met them both in prison and while he had stayed at a halfway facility. All of the men and women that I interviewed who had spent time in Texas prisons told me that they had spent time in several different prison locations. Texas does not, according to my interviews, keep prisoners in one facility for the duration of their sentence, but instead ships them around the state. It was not uncommon for many of the participants to spend time in three to four different locations. Hector for example, who had received an eleven-year sentence for identity theft and fraud, mentioned that he had requested to take part in educational programs while serving his time. Once Hector had finished the necessary paperwork, he discovered that he would be moved to a different facility where the

programs were available, one that had a more violent reputation. One of things I found during my attendance of the group was that when a new member attended, more often than not, there was someone familiar to another attendee in the group. People either had been in prison together or had lived in the same halfway residence, or they had ‘run’ together in some manner. When it came to “running” together, this meant that they had been friends in the past or had a relationship that may have included similar illegal enterprises. When asked about his relationships in the group, Ben had this to say:

I do, to a certain extent - not so much because of the interaction we've had here in these groups but because I was with them at the unit where I was at. So a lot of them I know from there. Some of them I spent time with them, at the halfway house – one of them it's the first time coming to this group and it actually makes sense because he got out like about a month after I did. So I just seen him right now outside... so many here I didn't know inside or at the halfway house but they're good people we know from what I...I don't really know too much about them on a personal level... I mean definitely if I can help somebody....

I then asked Ben if he felt he could depend on others in the group. At the time of our interview he had only attended four meetings.

I'm not really sure and I don't really want to find out because I try to depend on myself, but you know what, yeah maybe like you know, I know probably one or two that I know a little better.

This independent sentiment was common among interviewees. Being that attendance to Forward Focus was forced, many members did not do more than was necessary or create unnecessary bonds, some told me they could not trust anyone in the meetings. This meant that many members merely attended meetings, talked or participated as little as possible, and got their paperwork signed so they could leave. When asked about how he felt about Jorge, the group's leader, Ben had this to say:

Sometimes he'll speak on the topic and speak for a while then other times the people that attend the group (will speak) I think like last week it was more letting people vent about... I think it was like about a certain parole officer that everyone had strong feelings

about... Letting shit out, but um... haven't spoken to him that much but he seems like a good guy you know I mean he's taking the time to do it, so I mean...

Even though Ben hadn't yet had much experience with the group, he had already experienced how the environment at Forward Focus was different from other groups. For Ben, as with all of those I interviewed, it was important to them that the group leader was able to relate to the complexities of navigating the parole system.

### Dave

Dave was an interviewee who had seemed to have evolved to see the role of the group in his life as a positive one. He expressed gratitude about having the group and its assistance. He saw Jorge as an example of someone to model himself after. He and Jorge had a friendly relationship and during my first visit to the group, Dave had stayed after class with Jorge to speak with me for a time. It seemed to me that Dave was a central figure in the group, most attendees greeted him and along with Jorge respected his advice to the group. Scheifer and Noll (2016) point out that a cohesive society is not possible unless there is a degree of trust between people and the institutions in which they live. It was easy to see that Dave had also come to a place of trust, or acceptance, of what the group was meant to provide in his life. As I spoke with him about his relationships, friends, and trust in the group he told me:

Well some of them, yes. You know it's uh it's a few of them here that I know from the halfway house. They are actually trying to do their marker, you know at the halfway house people will be smoking cigarettes or drugs, and more serious... But you know part of it is if you want to do right you are going to do right especially if you have a little help in the world with encouragement from people.

Though Dave does have positive things to say about the men and women in the group, in our interview it was primarily from his family that he receives his strength. When I asked him about his family he told me that when he first got out of prison places like Walmart made him

uneasy, he said when you get out “everybody is scared and skeptical”. His daughter would take his hand in situations with crowds, being able to sense his apprehension.

Dave also conveyed that Jorge helps refer attendees to work opportunities. Dave mentioned to Jorge that he had a friend in prison who was wondering about work once released, Jorge had begun to line up work for him. Many of the members of Forward Focus discuss work as part of the meeting; Jorge will usually begin meetings by asking about the life challenges members are dealing with and work is usually the most common topic. Many of the men and women are either working blue collar jobs or as wait staff for local restaurants. One man I interviewed, Robert, was taking care of a home ridden parent and had chosen not to seek employment. The conversations within the group usually center on how reliable and trustworthy the employer is, if they will pay correctly, will not fire them without cause, and if the employer may choose to ignore or at least overlook some of the things that may show up on a background check.

### Kyle

Kyle did not have much to say about his friends at Forward Focus other than confirming he did have them. He also stated he felt he could depend on them if a need arose and even socialized out of the group with a few.

Todd: And you mentioned you and Jorge get along pretty good?

Kyle: I started coming to the church services here.

Todd: How long have you known Jorge?

Kyle: I mean for like three or four years.

Todd: And then you come to church and you see him here?

Kyle: Yes.

Kyle was the only person I interviewed who had decided to attend Our Redemption Church, where Forward Focus is held. Jorge and Kyle had formed a friendship over several

years and their friendship probably helped Kyle's decision to attend. Kyle and Jorge had attended another group together in which Jorge had been a member and not a leader. Some members had considered attending Our Redemption Church but had chosen instead to attend church with family, not to attend services at all, or, as in the case of Melissa, were of a non-Christian faith. When the idea or even an insinuation of attending Our Redemption Church was approached in the group it was usually met with scoffs from the group.

### Melissa

Melissa had only been coming to the group a short time when I first spoke with her. She had not made any friends and told me that she 'doesn't talk to anyone.' Her relationship with Jorge was non-existent, though she did say that his words on drug use being an easily avoidable transgression were appreciated. I also noticed that Melissa had a tendency to not attend every meeting. I did not ask why her attendance was sporadic, being that she had two jobs was probably the reason. In our interview I asked her if she felt uncomfortable being the only woman, and if this may be why she had not formed any relationships with other group members. She said that it did not bother her being the only woman, though I noticed from her time in the group that she was quiet and would normally leave without chatting with other members.

#### 5.1.3 Life Improvements

The last series of questions in the Social Cohesion theoretical framework were meant to gauge how participants saw group benefits. Primarily, I wanted to find if group participation had improved opportunities such as new friendships, work opportunities, family interactions, and if social cohesion had moved from within the group to outside of the group. In other words, I wanted to see if friends within the group found the relationship just as vital outside of the group.

## Ben

Ben felt that his life suffered because of the group, that he was not improving by his attendance at Forward Focus. An overriding part of his interview with me was regarding his belief that his time was being wasted going to so many groups and parole activities. He felt he could be looking for a better job or even moving to a state with better work opportunities if he was able to do so. He, however, liked the fact that he could discuss work opportunities, both informally prior to meetings with other members and during group meetings. Discussions about work and connections were important to most members. On several occasions Jorge asked the group about work challenges and if anyone was seeking employment. Jorge would sometimes have newer members looking for employment meet with him after the meetings, which they did on several occasions.

## Dave

Dave felt as though his family connections had improved due to group participation and being among people with similar experience:

Yeah I can say it has because you know, I don't know if it's just when you get out and everything that you feel 'away' from people, you know, you don't have nothing to do with people then you get here and then you start talking in front of people and it makes you feel more comfortable.”

One of the challenges that Dave told me about later in our interview was his fear of public spaces. Here he mentions being away from people, being separated from others, and though I never asked him directly about his conditions in prison he did mention the ‘hot box’ in our discussion. The ‘hot box’ is solitary confinement, and more specifically in places like Texas this is what solitary confinement is referred to as due to the extreme heat.

## Kyle

Kyle mentioned that he had good experiences with work opportunities in the group, several past members were now supervisors and in management positions around town, so those connections could be important. He had this to say about family connections:

Yeah family interactions, yeah because my brother I and some of my family know about Jorge and cuz I go home and I talk about the group.”

Kyle stated he does not socialize with any of the current members outside of the group, but does socialize with members who have finished the program. Kyle’s work with a utility company in El Paso came about through another member in Forward Focus. It is a job that pays well, and one he said he is grateful to have.

## Melissa

Melissa didn’t believe that the group had helped with any outside connections or had assisted in developing any relationships in or outside of the group.

## 5.2 Worldview

As I began to work with my data and to look closer at the interviews I had obtained, the discussions I had had with Forward Focus participants, and the experience of being part of the group and environment for 6 months I saw that my material may have asked more questions than necessary. My goal was to show how men and women within religiously themed re-entry groups utilized those tenets, of whatever religious stripe they may be, to enhance social cohesion and to better allow them to make positive choices in their lives. This growth of social cohesion, I concluded, needed to come from within the group, and though I asked many questions meant to judge the evolution of participants’ religious ideals, many of them had to be set aside in an attempt to answer my core questions. For instance, does a re-entry group with a religious theme

increase social cohesion among members? Durkheim (1897) postulated that perhaps the influence of religion could be reduced to the action of social bonds, that whether or not religion holds any mythological truth is secondary to how it conveys societal expectations upon the individual and how that person's actions and interactions contribute to anomie or a sense of normlessness or to nomos, the understood normality of rules and everyday existence.

The questions I created to determine how worldview and therefore how social cohesion was established within the membership of Forward Focus were intended to illicit how religious participation was modified due to attendance. Since religious activity can generate socialized activity, even activity outside of the group may equip the practitioner with positive interactions both within Forward Focus and outside in the general public. These questions asked of respondents attempted to address whether a respondent's worldview may have been modified by group participation in Forward Focus. I asked people to share with me whether participation in the group led to changes in their religious activity, whether their sense of what it means to be religious has changed since being a part of Forward Focus, and whether they had a personal religious practice outside of the group or if they attend religious service.

Ben

Being that Ben is on a monitor he told me that he cannot attend religious services, but has been thinking about attending a church that he and his brother attended years ago. He also did not think that his sense of what it meant to be religious changed from attending Forward Focus. He felt strongly that there was a large amount of hypocrisy to be found in the group and did not feel that it led to his religious growth. Ben shared with me that while he does not attend church:

... on a personal level ...I think every day you now, I pray every day, for my family and my loved ones. So I do that daily, I also give thanks, it's kind of weird because I'm just not sure who it is that I'm saying this to...but I still say it because I feel that there is

somebody out there picking up that vibe or whatever.

Ben's challenges were not drug related but he did grapple with anger issues and had a history of violence that we did not discuss. He felt that Forward Focus, along with his other group attendance in Alcoholics Anonymous, improved his control issues. I found that his habit of prayer was probably an extension of how he had come to control his anger.

#### Dave

Dave was a man who had indulged in heroin use for most of his life. He told me that he had a 30-year habit of daily heroin use. He said that when it came to heroin he "never ran out, or anything like that." When I asked about his religious participation it would come back to his drug dependency and his feeling that he never felt as good as he does now. He could not imagine going back to drugs and stated that during those years of addiction he did not understand how people lived without it, or what people did with their free time. When asked about how his religious participation has changed because of Forward Focus he shared:

Well I would say it has changed cuz it makes you...Like when you do community service and everything like that it makes you feel good about yourself and then you just want to help more and more people, the best that you can.

Dave equated the community service that Forward Focus takes part in as part of his religious participation. Jorge asks that members choose to take part in community service several times a year. This is not mandatory, but Jorge feels that it provides members with a way to help others in the community who may have been in the same position as members of Forward Focus. Primarily Jorge sees it as a way to improve members' resumes, a way to tell employers that Forward Focus members are moving forward in their lives and doing positive things in the community. Dave also felt as though his sense of what it means to be religious has changed since participating in Forward Focus:

Yeah I think it has cuz if you don't, it's like, if you can't forgive somebody how am I going to forgive you? And if you don't do the right thing he's (God) still gonna love you but how are you gonna get anything good out of it?

Kyle and Melissa had less to share with me when it came to responding to questions I had sectioned off as Worldview. Kyle began attending Our Redemption Church because of an invitation by Jorge who is also a chaplain at the church where Forward Focus takes place. Kyle's religious participation is directly related to his group participation. He states that he has a personal practice of prayer in the mornings as well as consistent attendance at the church.

Melissa is a practicing Muslim and does not relate her practice with attendance at either Forward Focus or the previous group she attended. The fact that Forward Focus is based out of a church and obviously meant to impose a Christian sense of morality, whether or not it was immediately discussed, did not appear to affect her positively or negatively. She told me that while in prison she did have a practice of prayer and she was given a Quran of her own by a prison chaplain. Melissa does not consider herself to be what I would call a devout Muslim, this only means that she does not hold to a strict prayer vigil or all the dietary constraints. But she did say that one day she hopes to be able to live a good life as the Quran defines it. Melissa currently has a personal practice of prayer and reading of the Quran.

## 6. Discussion

My findings have shown the difficulty in determining the extent to which religion influences social cohesion among re-entry persons. This case study was an attempt to gather first hand data and knowledge of how group participation with a religiously themed re-entry group may assist individuals transitioning from prison life to the ‘outside’ community. Much of the literature is inconclusive regarding the affect of religion upon recidivism, my study of the literature and the many studies focused upon religion and recidivism, and even religion in the prison environment, confirms the nebulous nature of these two variables.

The end result of my extensive time spent with gatekeepers into the re-entry community, meeting state employees, interviewing representatives of re-entry programs, and spending time among the people on parole and placed into such programs is that religion is a tool of convenience. Religion is another social ‘thing’ to throw at the problem of re-entry and recidivism, more specifically. We have an incredibly large portion of the population under some form of state or federal custody, as of June 2018 there were 459,891 persons on probation, parole, or in prison in the state of Texas (Wainwright, McCombs and Gambrell 2019: 6), and citizens want to believe that there is a panacea that may easily turn around delinquency or deviant behavior. My experience confirms the data that religion is an environmentally dependent factor, Johnson (2004) confirms that certain prisons will see a benefit from faith-based programs while others will not. In my case study, I found that some participants in Forward Focus chose to ignore what religious benefits were possibly available while others made an effort to embrace them or even imbue the group with higher levels of religious doctrine than was actually present. Many members seemed opposed to any mention of religious tenets being discussed in group meetings. When Jorge would bring up anything possibly religious it was met with criticism and judgement. My interviews also corroborate that only about half of the membership had changed

or increased their religious participation because of Forward Focus.

Forward Focus, and its administrators, would not outwardly quote biblical text or expound mythological doctrine to the group due to state enforced limitations, but it was evident that the motives behind the group were an attempt to silently say that Christian doctrine could help attendees, the re-entry individual, with the challenges of being ‘outside’ of the prison system. Several things pushed this view onto the members of Forward Focus, members participating because the state of Texas required them to do so. First, Forward Focus is held at Our Redemption Church. The group meetings take place in a congregational setting, on the grounds of a complex of several buildings. Posters, religious images, and publications were easily available and seen throughout these buildings. As would be expected, the images and literature proclaim the story of Christianity. Second, the Jorge has the title of Chaplain in Our Redemption Church, and via our correspondence used the title. This title increased, in my own mind, the fact that this was intended to be a religious event. The title of Chaplain is intended to convey authority in the church and the environment where meetings are held. Third, Jorge’s history was well known to members of the group. Jorge had a religious conversion experience, and to his credit he ‘turned around’ his life, accepted his sentences, and uses his experience to help others. This is to say that his experience with religion as a social medium through which acceptable social morality and ethics were introduced was an important factor in his successful re-entry. These three components are powerful tools influencing members of Forward Focus toward establishing a religious program for themselves, a Christian one.

### 6.1 Summary of Findings

In this case study, my aim was to identify how re-entry persons benefit from religiously themed groups and programs. My interest in religion as a medium through which society attempts to convey principles and morality, right action and wrong action, is at the heart of this

study. There is a reflex in our society by the religious, regardless of religious brand, to assume that morality and justice cannot be understood unless it is through the principles of religion. What my research, and the literature confirms, is that religion may certainly succeed at providing improved self-esteem of those in prison, and it may be an easy medium by which societal values can be distilled, but the effect on prison violence, re-entry, and recidivism are nearly indistinguishable from those not participating in religious activity.

As a participant observer with Forward Focus I saw that many members did not appreciate the religious undertones on display. On one occasion the Jorge mentioned that members would be able to get their papers signed if they came by the church on Sunday because he would be there during and after Sunday services. A groan moved throughout the room, and several members snickered about having to go to church, and one member said that he would not do that. Jorge also had the habit of talking about church attendance, but would always preface it with a statement like, "I'm not telling you to go or to be a church member, but..." One man I spoke with, Hector, was adamantly non-religious, in our interview he stated that he disliked the religious conversations and was uncomfortable with the direction of the group. My experience of the religious at Forward Focus was that it was a subtle underlying theme. The environment, Jorge's history and church identity did far more to convey a religious theme to the group than any words spoken.

My core goal with Forward Focus was to understand it through direct experience. Becker (as cited in Feagin et al. 1991:153) wrote that case studies aim to "arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the group under study." More to the point, this case study asked of me to analyze important questions about who its members were and how they interact and relate to each other. Becker (as cited in Feagin et al. 1991:153) also conveys that this kind of comprehensive analysis is, more than likely, a perfect and probably impossible task. After my

months with Forward Focus I am unable to say if religion helped to form socially cohesive bonds between the members of the group. Even as the group would close with the traditional Alcoholics Anonymous prayer, groans of forced adherence could be heard and there certainly was no consensus that religion had its place in the group as a form of positive reinforcement of beneficial social cohesion.

## 6.2 Limitations

This case study was meant to limit itself to the 'world' found within Forward Focus. Although I presented data and literature from numerous sources and delved into many studies to gain a foothold and familiarity with the history and present challenges found in this field of study I had to maintain an objective analysis of Forward Focus. My perception had to be focused upon the experiences of its members, their growth or lack of it, their attempts at social cohesion or refusal of it. Also, the limitations of time are apparent. Six months with a group of twenty men and women, trying to understand how social cohesion was fostered with religion may not have been enough time to properly determine a negative or positive outcome. However, I do feel that the data and interviews I gathered show that religion was not a viable vehicle through which the state of Texas or the administrators of Forward Focus were developing social cohesion or social bonds that would lead to provable and effective long-term re-assimilation in its membership of post-prisoners.

For a complete analysis of the effectiveness of religious or faith based programs on re-entry individuals other factors such as socioeconomic status, social capital, social status, race, and education would need to be applied to participant outcomes.

## 7. Conclusion

The post prison population is one that straddles two worlds; the one they have left that held its own social norms and the re-entered social environment of the outside world. Religion may yet present itself as a component allowing these men and women a set order of laws as well as a set of boundaries that help establish a community and network of acceptable action and interaction. This qualitative exploration of post-prison individuals incorporating an extended case method and participant-observer involvement in a re-entry support group in El Paso, Texas attempted to show how religious tenets and state prescribed program could assist in forming cohesive connections among members. Using a re-entry support group, this case study allowed for the gathering of detailed descriptions of particular persons, places, and settings (Creswell 2013). Analysis of data through semi-structured interviews with eight participants, field notes, and informal interactions further allowed for in-depth environmental analysis of group social cohesion and the religiously oriented principles incorporated.

My research has shown that religion is not the sole factor in successful prison life acclimation; it neither reduces violence, offenses, or infractions during an inmate's sentence. Religion also has not been shown to improve recidivism rates within the available literature. Post-prisoners who have no religious practice show no better outcomes than those who choose to participate in some form of religiosity.

Through the use of an extended case method I was able to successfully acclimate to the environment found within Forward Focus, though I never felt fully accepted by its members. I was allowed to take part in group conversations that were designed to reflect upon integrity and ethics that hinted at the religious tenets reflected in the environment, the literature, and atmospheric principles found within the program.

These findings are meant to extend the literature in several ways; as a case study of

experiential experience, an exploration of individual interactions among post-prisoners, and as an analysis of the effectiveness of an attempt to impose a religious worldview upon a group of people forced to attend such a group through state proclamation.

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## Appendix A

### Case Study Questions and Discussion Outline

Semi-Structured one-on-one Interview Questions for voluntary participants of study “Social Cohesion Among Individuals Participating in Religiously Themed RE-entry Groups” (2018):

1. Age/Race/Birth Location/Current city of residence?
2. How long have you lived at your current residence?  
What is your current living situation like for you?
3. If you are employed, how long have you been at your current job?  
What is your current employment situation like for you?
4. Tell me a little about your childhood – did you family practice a certain religion?
5. Offense Location?
6. Incarceration Location?
7. Length of Sentence?
8. Did you have a religious practice at the time of incarceration?
9. What is your sense of religion or the divine?
10. How often do you participate in religious activity?
  
11. Were you approached by any religious groups while in prison?
12. What religious group, if any, did you participate in while incarcerated?
13. How often did you participate in religious groups while in prison?
14. How did religious group participation aid you in prison?
15. Did you experience a religious conversion in prison?
16. What is or was your probation period and location?
17. Do you have family members in the location in which you live?
18. In what ways does your family or friends assist you with day to day activities?
19. Why are you attending this group?
20. Were you able to select this group over another? How was that decision made?
21. Was there an Advocate or Contact that reached out to you about or for this particular group? (How did you hear about the group you now attend)?
22. Do you consider the other participants friends?
23. Do you feel you can depend on those in the group?
24. What is your relationship with those who administer the group?
25. How has this group or its members aided in returning to life outside of prison?
  
26. Has participation in the group led to changes in the following:
  - i. Work opportunities
  - ii. Friendships

- iii. Family interaction
  - iv. Religious participation
  - v. Drug/Alcohol consumption changes
  - vi. Dietary modifications
  - vii. Entertainment changes (reading, TV, Movies, bars, activities w/ others)
27. Has your sense of what it means to be religious changed?
  28. Do you utilize any social networking platforms?
  29. Would you prefer an online group to an In-Person Group?  
Do you have an opinion on how re-entry groups could be different?
  30. Do you socialize with group members outside of group activities?
  31. Do you attend a church or religious services on a regular basis?  
How does attendance make you feel?
  32. Do you have a personal religious practice outside of the group or religious service?
  33. Would you recommend this type of group to other re-entry persons?
  34. Any last thoughts or words on your experience?
  35. Do you have any questions about this process or its purpose?

## Vita

Todd Reiser was born and raised in Minot, North Dakota. At the age of 16 he moved with his family to El Paso, Texas where he has lived for most of the subsequent years. Following a career as an IT professional and shortly after experiencing a layoff Todd chose to return to college in 2011. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology with a minor in Religious Studies from the University of Texas at El Paso. Todd completed his MA in Sociology at UTEP in 2019.