Meaningful Change: Exploring the process of change through membership in the 7th Step Society

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Abstract

The 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia is a peer support group for ex-offenders. The role that such groups play in supporting desistance from crime has received little scholarly attention. To address this knowledge gap, this research explored how the 7th Step Society creates relationships, experiences, and meanings, that facilitate desistance, personal growth, and change within its membership. It examined the process of change as it involves both individual and social variables within a reciprocal process of mutual transformation and exchange between ex-offenders and society. The research is particularly unique in looking at the role and experience of non-offender volunteers within the desistance process. It used an ethnographic framework involving participant observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with 17 participants. Through thematic analysis of the data, the following four themes were produced: 1) Trust and Openness: the foundation of accountability, 2) Accountability: the foundation of change, 3) Giving Back: reintegration and the maintenance of change, and 4) Connection: stabilizing change through relationship with others. These themes tell the story of an interconnected process and cycle of personal growth, understanding, and transformation that is created through 7th Step. The findings indicate that a more holistic approach needs to be taken in terms of the rehabilitation and reintegration of offenders, including greater peer support and mentorship within the process of desistance; engaging, empowering, and learning from ex-offenders themselves. The study also points to the need to engage with the expertise and experience of ex-offenders to help develop, deepen, and expand the understanding of desistance, both as a personal path of recovery, and also as a socially mediated process that requires ongoing encouragement and support.

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Introduction

My initial motivation for studying criminology was to look at the ways in which a criminal identity arose. How, when, and why might a person take on this identity, or have it put upon them by society? Through the twists and turns of fate, what I ended up researching instead, was how this identity can be dissolved. I did this through participation in, and research with, the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia, a peer support group for ex-offenders. By looking at the experiences, relationships, and meanings that 7th Step members gain through their participation in the group, I was better able to understand the process of change whereby a criminal identity can dissolve or be transformed, either as it relates to oneself or another.

My original research question looked at the process of change, through the experiences and meanings made by participation in 7th Step. This quickly developed to include the role of relationship in that change, as well. Relationship drives the change process of identity creation and transformation in 7th Step, with a membership that spans the entire spectrum of criminal identity. Membership includes volunteers who have never identified or been identified as criminal, long-term offenders, some of whom were born into the world of criminality, and everyone in-between. What my research found was that a criminal (or non-criminal) identity, as well as one's corresponding perception of others, could be positively transformed through the relationships, experiences, and meanings created by 7th Step. I then considered these findings with regard to the broader theoretical framework and academic literature on criminal desistance.

My research took the form of an ethnography, wherein I became a member of 7th Step and spent over a year in the field, engaging in participant observation. I carried out 17 semi-structured interviews and analyzed three different core documents. My goal, or research objective, was to explore how 7th Step created relationships, experiences, and meanings, to facilitate the process of personal growth and change. I used an inductive analysis to identify four major themes in this data: Trust and Openness, as the foundation of accountability; Accountability, as the foundation of change; Giving back, as a form of reintegration and the maintenance of change; and, Connection, as the stabilization of change through relationship with others. My analysis considered all of these within the broader context of the criminal desistance literature.

The structure of this paper begins with a brief background sharing my pathway into this project, I then situate myself as a researcher, and explain the use and meaning of certain language as it relates to the group being studied. This is followed by a brief summary of the theoretical framework that was used, as well as, an overview of key perspectives in the criminal desistance literature. Included in this section is a brief mention and summary of additional literature pertaining to addictions recovery and peer support. Following this is the methods section, which details the procedures that were used, and how and why various decisions were made. This section also includes a description of the setting and environment of the 7th Step Society, including a summary of its various forms and processes, many of which are later expanded upon and explored. In the findings section, I present the four themes, their subthemes, and how all of these interact to convey the story and experience of membership in 7th Step. This is followed by a discussion, specifically analyzing how 7th Step and the research findings connect to,

and fit within, the criminal desistance literature. The paper ends with an acknowledgment of the scope and limitations of the project, and a conclusion looking at significant insights or take-aways, as well as, opportunities for further study.

Background

This study began in desperation. I had spent a difficult year fraught with personal setbacks and family tragedy, only to have the Research Ethics Board refuse to sign off on my original research proposal. I was frustrated, disheartened, depressed, and terrified. My funding to stay in school was ending, and a year of research and work had suddenly disappeared. I had been so determined to do something meaningful, to not bend to other people's agendas. I had been righteous, stubborn, and narrow minded, and then, suddenly, I was confronting a loss that I did not think I could handle. I was desperate for help, open and willing to accept anything, which is exactly when my journey with 7th Step began.

As my original thesis supervisor gave me the bad news, I remember wondering why she and my secondary advisor seemed so cheerful, as they told me about the death of my research proposal. Almost giddy, they shared their new plan. I would switch supervisors. Jamie would take over. He knew about this group that he wanted to find out more about. It was a similar premise, they assured me, to my previous research; only, instead of looking at the beginning, I would be looking at the end, studying the process of desistance from crime rather than the creation of a criminal identity. The group was called the 7th Step Society, and I cannot remember what was said after that. I was on the verge of tears, overwhelmed with relief, I just said "yes". Yes, to whatever they wanted

me to do, anything to save the situation, and, in that moment, the fact that it dovetailed with someone else's research was a Godsend. It represented time, energy, and work that I could jump into and springboard off of. It gave me someone to work with, if I was willing.

Jamie, my new supervisor, was the golden ticket. He was a beloved figure in the 7th Step community. Though not yet a core group member himself, he had gone to meetings, and had presenters come to his class. 7th Step loved him, so the fact that he was vouchsafing my entry went a long way. He set up a meeting for me to present my research idea to a key member of the group. The response from this member was positive and encouraging, and, because of things he said, I began thinking about the motivations and experiences of volunteers as well as ex-offenders. This member brought my name and my proposal forward to the group, to see if they would let me start coming as a "volunteer". I had no idea what that meant, but I was willing to do anything. My name was brought forward, it was accepted, and I attended my first meeting.

Going to 7th Step for the first time was a mixture of excitement and terror. I was certain that I would somehow fail or be rejected. I felt as though something big was happening, and I kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. That first meeting was a 7th Step business meeting. I introduced myself, and during a section where everyone shared about their week, I spoke awkwardly. I felt shy, exposed, and self-conscious, unsure of who I was, and who I was supposed to be. Then, during the business part of the meeting, I talked about my research and what I wanted to do.

Looking back at it now, I feel like I made an utter ass of myself, and in the moment, I felt that way as well. I was so desperate for it to work out, so anxious to be as

genuine and open as possible, to do it *right*, to offer something, even though I did not know what I could possibly have to offer. At the same time, I was full of excitement and hope, overflowing with naïve opinions and ideas. I have since seen many similar presentations and have felt embarrassed about my own every time. The group was kind to me, however, as they always are, they were patient and encouraging. They challenged me. They asked their questions, and they skilfully burst my bubble of naïve and giddy plans. I did not mind, I was ready to do anything to make it work. The interaction, I now feel, was not in the content so much as the quality of openness and honesty that I was willing to bring to the group and to show. Was I willing to accept feedback? Was I willing to commit to the group and show up?

One of the youngest members, a male ex-offender in his late teens, enjoyed grilling me. I remember, near the end, he confronted me, asking how long I would commit to coming to meetings regularly? I told him that I would commit to coming for the next full year. I thought this was a shabby answer, since it essentially spanned the time that it would take to do my research, but it was this response that seemed to win him over. It received surprise and appreciation from the young man and others. The commitment to keep coming back got their attention. Following through on that commitment over the following months earned me their respect and friendship.

Showing up to meetings is a huge part of membership in 7th Step. Even now, when I cannot go, or have not been to a meeting for a while, I feel it. It is not guilt that I feel exactly, rather, I experience an awareness of what I am missing, and also what I am failing to give. During my research, it was common to have people write emails to the group each week, sending their regrets, or offering explanations as to why they could not

come, or had not been to a meeting in a while, and when they hoped to come again (Field note, 7/3/18). One of the earliest things I realized, was that the ex-offenders especially, noticed when I did or did not show up. They would make little comments, giving me a hard time about it. These comments helped me to realize that this was the answer to what I had to offer: I just had to show up.

In 12 Step recovery programs, like Alcoholics Anonymous, they say that the HOW of the program is in the honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness of the individual (Interview). My journey with 7th Step came about in a similar way. 7th Step came into my life after I had finally decided I needed to change, when I became open and willing to do so. My membership in the group was a constant experience of ever deepening honesty. Engaging in ethnographic research with 7th Step, exposed me to myself and others. It was ultimately, a very timely act of both self-reflection and self-care.

Van Maanen (2011) describes fieldwork in ethnography as reflecting the assumption that "experience underlies all understanding of social life" (p. 3). My research with 7th Step offered me a tangible experience of personal growth and change. It also showed me how my growth could interact with the change and growth of others, through mutual relationship in a shared society. After realizing that I personally needed to change, 7th Step offered me access to insights and supports in becoming the person that I was at my most genuine.

Situating Myself

The process of doing this research demanded that I interrogate who that person was. Who was it that was showing up to 7th Step? Who was it that was doing the research? Tracey (2010) writes, "Sincerity means that the research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher's biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research" (p. 841). Behar (1996) writes, "What happens within the observer must be made known" (p. 6). Throughout the ethnography I tried to do this, to make what was happening inside me at the time known, wherever it felt helpful in contextualizing the data. I tried to do this in a way that did not descend into self-indulgence or decorative flourishes too frequently (Behar, 1996, p. 14). Although it was outside my familiarity as an academic, it felt important, as I was writing and doing the research, to recognize and articulate, as much as I could, who I was as a researcher and a human being. I tried to locate and articulate what emotions and conscious, or unconscious, biases I was bringing to the research, and how these were potentially influencing both the gathering and interpretation of data.

I am a white cis-gendered heterosexual female, low income, graduate student, and practicing second-generation Buddhist. During the course of the research I got married. I also lived at home with my parents and was a caregiver to my father who suffered from Parkinson's disease and dementia. All of these factors played a role in my research.

Behar (1996) encourages a researcher to understand "what aspects of the self are the most important filters through which one perceives the world and, more particularly, the topic being studied" (p. 13). These filters help to create a context for how data is experienced, chosen, interpreted, and understood. The influence of my race and cis-gendered orientation was linked to my education and exposure as a graduate student. As a

student of critical thinking, let alone critical criminology, I entered into this research with a fire to fight the injustices of oppression. My early notes were impassioned advocacies against the need for conformity, challenging the idea that change was even needed; questioning what was being lost through the process of conformity. My research quickly disabused me of the self-referential naïveté that was present in these perspectives. In every interview, the idea that anything could have been lost through the experience of change, represented by 7th Step, was found to be "ridiculous" (Interview).

Because of my education, friends, and upbringing, an awareness of race, gender, hetero-normativity, privilege, and intersectional analysis, were a constant presence in my awareness and interpretive lens. Throughout the research study, I found that I was in a constant space of negotiation within myself around this, balancing the value and inevitable presence of these perspectives in my awareness, with the relative absence of them in the interactions and emphasis of the group.

My personal struggles and frustrations with relative poverty, and my difficulty finding employment, created moments of challenge in the interactions I had with other members of the group. This was one of the first ways that I was able to balance my role as a member with my self-consciousness as a researcher. The material challenges I was facing also created a lens of empathy and understanding that I appreciated having during the research. This was not because of the economic situation other members may or may not have found themselves in, but because of the nearness of desperation and precariousness to the situations in my own life. This awareness often brought poignancy to interactions, which allowed me to better open myself to others and connect.

My father's illness fell within a pattern that I was not able to find an interpretation for, perhaps because I was too close to it. A large number of volunteers described having loved ones or family members with some form of chronic illness. This might have been just a numbers game, but it was noticeable in the frequency with which it arose during weekly shares. My father's illness played its role throughout the research, both as a way that I was able to engage and offer my own struggles and vulnerability, and also as a way that I received support. One of the first friendships I developed through 7th Step was with a member (ex offender) who subsequently became one of my closest friends. She gave me her number at the end of my second meeting, after I had shared very openly about my emotional struggles with family. It was a gesture that stuck with me.

Maruna (2001) describes the contrast between meta-narratives around redemption in Western cultures versus those in the East. He describes how, for example, Japan has "the cultural assumption of basic goodness and belief in each individual's capacity", and how this translates into a cultural belief in the possibility of change (Maruna, 2001, p. 166). This is then contrasted with a general disbelief and cynicism in the West. As a second-generation Buddhist, I held an assumption of basic goodness, and a belief in the fundamental capacity of all individuals to change, throughout this research. This ontology was ingrained within me, through my upbringing as well as my spiritual practice. It had a profound influence on how I engaged with, perceived, and interpreted the world around me. Throughout the research, I often interrogated my interpretations and assumptions, reflecting on how they were being influenced by this deeply held premise of basic goodness. In numerous instances, my belief system inadvertently opened up

conversations to reveal further depths within the data, either because of the commonalities or differences it uncovered between myself and other members.

Although I had a general resistance to putting this spiritual aspect of my life forward in regular interactions, there were a number of meetings where meditation was mentioned and afterward one of the members would give me a little push to go and engage. My spiritual path thus played its role and was a presence throughout the research, one that I regularly reflected upon in my field notes. Ultimately, I did not find that it was overly significant. As a variable, however, it inevitably influenced my research decisions, design, data, interpretations, and analysis.

Finally, the most challenging issue for me as a researcher was looking at the role gender played within 7th Step, as well as, interrogating the role of gender within my own personal experiences, opportunities, biases, and interpretations. This challenge was both compounded and illuminated by the upheavals of the #TimesUp and #MeToo movements of 2018. It was influenced by personal experiences of gendered oppression, as well as extreme upheaval and scandal in my religious community. It was influenced by the process of planning a wedding and getting married, which intensified my sensitivity to the role played by gender in the relationships and interactions, language, and normalizations that I saw occurring in my life and within the 7th Step group.

Gender also, inevitably, influenced the data and my interpretation of it. It influenced the entire process of research, simply through the fact that I was a white cis-gendered heterosexual woman in my 30s. Both my gender and sexuality influenced how I experienced relationships and interactions, and how I found my place within the group as

both a researcher and a member. These influenced the rapport that I was able to create, and, ultimately, my path as a reflexive ethnographer.

The role and influence of gender in this research, let alone in the 7th Step Society, would take a separate and extensive study to do it justice, far beyond the scope of my research question. Its presence and influence, however, flowed throughout and connected to everything I experienced. As a researcher, I alternately worried that I was giving it too much or too little attention, and I was grateful to my secondary advisor for pushing me to look more closely at it from the beginning. Ultimately, it was one of the richest aspects of my research; however, it was too vast to include in a way that would do the topic justice.

Language and Identity

Ethnography is the study of a specific group's culture, forms, and language. In 7th Step, both in its literature and meetings, the words 'offender' and 'ex-offender' are frequently used. Members regularly introduce themselves as being either an ex-offender or volunteer, every time they speak, and often refer to offenders or ex-offenders as being a specific cultural group, or subset of individuals. For many people outside of the 7th Step community, the use of these words, offender and ex-offender, are felt to be problematic, antiquated, and offensive. People with or without criminal convictions can feel that these words are used to label, dehumanize, stigmatize and discriminate against already marginalized individuals. A worry is that 'offender' will become a label that brands a person for the rest of their life, focusing on past negative actions, used to define, limit, and constrain (Ryder, 2013).

The purpose and scope of this study is not to explore the use of the word 'ex-offender', nor its impact in the broad scheme of things. The goal of ethnography is to "get at how members see and experience events … how they describe, classify, analyze, and evaluate their own and others situations and activities" (Emerson, Fretz & Shaw, 1995, p. 147). The 7th Step Society uses the word 'ex-offender' to refer to anyone who has, or has had, a criminal conviction, and the word 'volunteer' to refer to anyone who has not (Brochure, 2017). Because of this, these are the words that I used in this study.

Throughout the ethnography, I have used these words freely, not as a statement, but as being the words that were consistently used by the group that I studied. I have tried to convey the unique and complex meanings these words hold, as they are used and understood within the 7th Step culture, and in this way mitigate some of their potential offensiveness. As well, where I felt it to be analytically significant or useful, I have included an identifier of ex-offender or volunteer, in parentheses, for the purposes of clarification.

Ex-Offender

One of the first things I noticed, through my membership in the 7th Step Society, was how particular the ex-offenders could be about language. This was demonstrated in the way that specific words were regularly used or emphasized during meetings. As time went on, I also began to notice how specific the ex-offenders were with their identifications. Often those who were coming in as guests, but even occasionally the core group members, would introduce themselves with the term "offender", "con", "ex-con", "parolee", or "parolee for life", as opposed to the usual "ex-offender" (Field note,

10/16/18). This kind of linguistic distinction was clarified during one of the weekly shares, when one of the female ex-offenders offered that she questioned whether she should be introducing herself as an ex-offender when she was "still on parole" (Field note, 4/10/18). This was a common issue that arose for people in this situation (Field note, 6/12/18).

Often during meetings there would be a kind of cheekiness that was expressed through the introductions, suggesting both playfulness and self-consciousness. In an early field note I described,

> One of the old-timers introduces himself as an "ex-offender, ex-addict", and laughs saying that "he has a lot of ex's". But then more solemnly adds that it is "a continuing journey". (Field note, 5/15/18)

Other times the specific word 'ex-offender' would be discussed, questioned, or even challenged, not for being contentious, necessarily, but as a form of self-reflection. During one meeting a member (ex-offender) spoke about a discussion he had had with one of the visiting members from the National Committee about how "really, we're all volunteers … [in that] we're all here voluntarily" (Field note, 3/6/18). When issues or questions around the word 'ex-offender' would come up, they rarely received much traction from the group as being a group issue; however, they were occasionally discussed as being part of someone's personal path and contemplation.

Often the linguistic distinction would be challenged by a volunteer, who would talk about there being times in their past when they had done something and just not gotten caught, and how without that luck they too would be introducing themselves as an ex-offender (Field note, 5/29/18). The word "non-offender" was a more contentious term in the group than ex-offender, since it was felt to be unlikely that anyone had gone

through their whole life never having offended or broken the law in some way, rather they had just never gotten caught. Although the word non-offender is used in the 7th Step Brochure (2017), during the span of my research, I was the only person I ever heard use the word with any regularity, most people would just say volunteer.

For many members, the use of the word ex-offender served a function. During an interview one of the members (ex-offender) described it as being part of what first magnetized him to the group:

> What really inspired me about 7th Step was when I heard the word ex-offender, right. Because I was starting to change my thinking as I was recovering - in my recovery - that, I'm no longer an offender, I am an ex-offender wanting to change who I used to be, and become somebody who, in my terms, God wants me to be. (Interview)

In this sense, the word is not representing the past so much as the future. It is seen as an identifier that signals change. For many, the identification during meetings was described as focusing more on the 'ex', rather than on the 'offender', signifying both an aspiration and a point of pride – a departure from past confusion. For one member (ex-offender), it was a part of his desistance process and was experienced as a form of agency:

> Like some of us, I was very good at putting on the façade. If I never told you my past, if you never knew me, you would have thought I was a volunteer. I've had people come up and say, are you a school teacher? And this and that, and I'm thinking, yeah, I AM an educator! Right! So, we're good at putting façades on. (Interview)

In this sense the term is found to be useful in that it counters a habitual pattern of putting on a façade or wearing a mask, which is commonly attributed to the criminal mindset by ex-offenders (Field note, 3/6/18), although it is by no means exclusive to them.

In recognizing that one "wouldn't know without being told", who was an ex-offender and who was not, members (ex-offenders) also described needing to identify as

being an ex-offender, not just for themselves but also for others (Interview). This identification allowed other ex-offenders coming in to see the possibility of change and growth and be inspired. In this way, the identification of oneself as an ex-offender was not just viewed as being a form of non-deception, it was also a means of identifying oneself as an example and role model for others (Interview).

Primarily, the word ex-offender should be understood, within the context of 7th Step, as being a very active and engaged word. It is a word that is not being used casually, even though its adoption can be a form of social conformity to group norms and language usage. The term serves a function at both a conscious and sub-conscious level, best described by the following excerpt:

> AH: How do you feel about that - of, identifying, saying … I am an ex-offender?
>
> R: I would never, other than being in that room, or when I'm speaking at schools, just to get my point across, that I've offended, and I've done this in the community, and you know, I was a bad boy. Right. But I was put in the corner for it. Right. Um. I don't identify myself as that.
>
> AH: So, what is the affect then, when you do that at 7th Step, or through 7th Step?
>
> R: It's humbling. It's very humbling. Because I also, when, I was saying, when I'm sitting across, I'm sitting across from some pretty influential people, volunteers or you know, the whole vast majority of what's actually in that room. It's a humbling experience. But it's the truth. Which is what I need to hear myself say. Right. And by not, by trying to deflect and pretend I'm not, I'm not accepting what my life has done to me by picking up a drink or a drug.
>
> So, by me saying I'm an alcoholic, and I'm an ex-offender, ex-convict, however you want to word it. That's where drugs and drink can take me. It turns me into somebody I don't even know, and somebody I don't want to be. (Interview)

In this way the term is used to convey information to others, whether it be as inspiration, a cautionary tale, or both. It also becomes a means of taking accountability – of being honest with oneself and others. It serves as a reminder helping to support and secure personal growth and recovery.

Ironically, one of the main functions served by the constant vocalization of the two identities in 7th Step is to transcend them. In 7th Step, one is constantly introducing oneself, it starts to be like a word repeated until it has temporarily lost its meaning. In some ways, this serves to point out the ridiculousness of these distinctions, conveying a realization and feeling of commonality and inclusion that could potentially not be experienced otherwise. One member (ex-offender) described:

> Inside this group it doesn't divide us – first time in 25 years I feel proud to identify as an ex-offender, knowing that I won't offend again. And that I have the support. I'm not alone in it anymore. (Field note, 6/26/18)

Regardless of whether you are there as an ex-offender or a volunteer, you still have to introduce yourself, you still have to share and go through all of the forms and processes, you still get challenged, and you still get encouraged and applauded for your successes, you both give and receive support. How you introduce yourself becomes merely informative, rather than marking any practical difference. This equality of membership and exchange helps to dissolve the differentiation between the two identities of volunteer and ex-offender.

7th Step is comprised of these two roles; these two "pillars" that interact and communicate with each other. The onus of the introduction is not so much on whether someone is an ex-offender or a volunteer; it is more often about one's path and identity as being a core group member (Interview).

Volunteer

The term volunteer may seem innocuous, but it is so opaque and obscure that it could mean almost anything. In this paper, as with the term ex-offender, it must be understood within the context and culture of membership in 7th Step specifically. 7th Step exists for the ex-offender: to offer help and support. The role of the ex-offender is, therefore, relatively straightforward. What it means to be a volunteer in 7th Step, however, is less obvious. Volunteers during both interviews and weekly meetings would often express uncertainty around what their role was and how they could help.

For many, the word volunteer carries with it assumptions and expectations, ideas about what one has or does not have to offer, and about how to help through the act of volunteering. Being a volunteer in 7th Step is not so much action-oriented, as it is primarily about learning and showing up. One of the main things I learned from my membership in 7th Step was how to help by just being present, connecting, caring, and relaxing enough to be myself. It took a while, but ultimately, I came to understand that the lesson of 7th Step was not about how to help the ex-offender alone, it was about how to connect and relate to people as human beings. A long-time member (ex-offender), talking about the volunteers, explained:

> They shouldn't come to the group and think it's to go help with getting people back into the community. It should be: "I can help everyone". Even if I help the girl beside me, or the guy beside me, and they're volunteers right. It doesn't matter, you're there to help. (Interview)

Ultimately, whether a volunteer or an ex-offender, most of the members explained that volunteers should come to 7th Step to help and educate in a reciprocal relationship with others.

The volunteers became an interesting mirror for me in that way. Just by being there, making their contributions, talking about their week, or telling their story, volunteers would often demonstrate a likeness or commonality that crossed the boundaries of identity and experience. Just like the ex-offenders, they too experienced doubt and depression, life challenges, they wore masks and had traumas, and had negative habits and patterns that needed to change. Often, it was the volunteers who became more human through their exposure and vulnerability in telling their story. Often, they were the ones who helped me to recognize the ugly face of my own projections, judgements, and invisible biases.

The volunteers at 7th Step engage in various activities. It became clear through the interviews with the ex-offenders, however, that the role of the volunteer involved much more than the volunteers themselves realized. Volunteers offer new and different perspectives, coping skills, ideas and values for the ex-offender (Interview). They also offer the ex-offenders a means of going out into the world and legitimizing their desistance (Maruna, 2001). They offer a way for the ex-offenders to begin to educate society about their experiences and their humanity. Volunteers also offer rides, job recommendations, maybe a phone call from a friend during a rough time. They offer encouragement and challenging feedback. They offer nothing more nor less than the reality of themselves: people who genuinely and unconditionally care about the ex-offender (Interview).

There can occasionally be scepticism and cynicism around the notion of volunteers, both inside of 7th Step and beyond (Interview). What are they after? What is in it for them? What is their agenda? There can be an assumption of arrogance and

judgement, particularly from academics, that if you are entering a situation, as a "volunteer", you are automatically suspect, colonial even. My own field notes were peppered with subtle fears and judgements about the self-absorption of being a volunteer (Field note, 4/3/18). My journey through membership and research was very much the path of learning how to help and what my role and place within the 7th Step Society was as a volunteer. The fact that there was this initial scepticism within 7th Step, however, was also a mechanism for building trust. Over time, as one got to know the human beings behind the various labels of ex-offender or volunteer – trust was created. The initial skepticism and questioning became an opportunity to explore habitual judgements and projections. (Interview).

In 7th Step, volunteers are as much the Other as are the ex-offenders. Most often, in interviews, it would be one of the ex-offenders describing the volunteers as Other or using the language of "us and them" (Interview). While volunteers would acknowledge feeling this way, they were more averse toward articulating it (Interview). Each of the two identities seemed to initially view the other as separate, each was projected upon by the other, and had its share of insecurities, doubts, and feelings of intimidation. One member (ex-offender) expressed:

> It isn't just the ex-offender or the offender that thinks it's *us and them*. It is the other side of the fence where Joe public or Josephine public has got the us and them attitude also. (Interview)

Volunteers and ex-offenders alike would describe their first meeting, walking into a room full of people they did not know, and in some way feeling like they were an outsider (Interview). Bringing forward this underlying commonality of human experience, however, is one of the central roles of the volunteer.

In many ways, it took a year and a half of membership, observation, 17 interviews, and the development of a close personal friendship, before I finally understood what it meant to be a volunteer, what my role was, and how to help in a way that was not all about me. What it primarily meant was that I had to be endlessly open to learning from others, regardless of who they were. I had to be willing to be myself, openly with all of my flaws and ugliness exposed, and to share that. I had to let myself be changed, if I wanted to be able to support the transformation of those around me.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review: Criminal Desistance

The theoretical framework used to inform this research was criminal desistance theory. In criminology, desistance is a body of literature that theorizes around how

criminal offenders stop their offending, since "the vast majority of criminal offenders stop committing crimes" (Sampson & Laub, 2001, p. 1). How this comes about, and, more especially, how it can be understood, supported, and facilitated, is the focus of desistance research.

The following section will briefly introduce desistance as a theoretical framework, followed by an overview of key perspectives within the desistance literature. I will clarify the approach I took to desistance within my research, offer a brief description of the main approaches to desistance within the literature, and conclude with a summary of additional literature on recovery and peer support.

Theoretical Framework

Desistance refers to the cessation of an action or behaviour, over time. To desist means to stop in the moment. Desistance describes the enduring process of having ended, and the maintenance of that stopping. Criminal desistance theory began as a research question: are the causes and/or correlates of getting into criminal behaviour the same as the causes and/or correlates for getting out? As more scholars made this the focus of their research, criminal desistance developed into a larger set of theoretical frameworks and an entire body of literature, looking at the causes of criminal desistance as opposed to the causes of criminal activity (Veysey, 2013, p. 234). Overtime, consensus grew around the need to perceive desistance as being "a process rather than an event" (Kazemian, 2016, p. 52). This notion of process allowed many of the different research findings to work together, acknowledging their combined influence over time.

Criminal desistance proved to be far more complex than just a simple cause and effect equation. Maruna (2001) writes, "Desistance is best understood using a model of co-determinacy, whereby cause and outcome are not conceived as discrete entities", instead they interconnect and overlap (p. 42). It is a process whereby an individual is eventually able to maintain a continual state of non-offending. "Termination is the point when criminal activity stops and desistance is the underlying causal process" (Sampson & Laub, 2001, p. 1). This causal process often begins as, or before, initial decisions to cease criminal activity are made, and it may include numerous relapses of behaviour before a continuous state of desistance can be stabilized (Kazemian, 2016).

The process of criminal desistance includes an initial stage of *primary desistance*, which refers to "the absence of criminal behaviour, [including] any significant lull or crime-free gap" (Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 371). This is then potentially followed by a state of *secondary desistance*, wherein a significant shift or change in an individual's societal role and/or personal identity has occurred, helping to stabilize and support their pro-social attitudes and behaviour. Veysey (2013) explains, "Primary desistance requires the cessation of the behaviour, but secondary desistance is founded upon the assumption of a pro-social replacement identity with new cognitions/attitudes, roles, and social networks" (p. 235). Theoretically, the process of desistance begins with the initial shift away from offending, which ultimately stabilizes into an enduring pattern of non-offence driven by a newfound pro-social identity.

In reality, the process is not always so linear. A lack of consistency and continuum in delinquent behaviour was recognized early on in seminal work done by David Matza (1964), who described a natural sense of "drift", or, intermittent delinquent

activity back and forth across these two boundaries. This has been developed further by subsequent theorists to describe a steady progression whereby people may oscillate between criminality and conformity, however, "complete criminality and complete conformity are, for the vast majority, points never likely to be reached" (Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 383). In my own research, speaking with members (ex-offenders) of 7th Step, who had, by all accounts, developed a new, stable, pro-social identity, their experience of secondary desistance was desistance at a deeper level, because of the change they had accomplished. They continued to be who they felt they had always been, however. When asked, they did not identify as "normal", and did not think that they ever would. Rather, how they were now engaging in the world, and using their "criminal mindset", was different and had changed: "I'm still the same me, but the way I look at myself and the world has changed" (personal communication).

The process of desistance cannot be seen as a simple lack of recidivism or relapse of criminal behaviour, rather it is a dynamic path operating simultaneously at multiple levels: individual, social, and situational (Sampson & Laub, 2001, p. 49). Similar to the process of addictions recovery, things are taken piecemeal, one day, or even one moment, at a time. A brief relapse can be seen as an aspect of a larger ongoing process, rather than as a failure writ large. An offender who is attempting to change may still end up back inside prison, whether it be for a breach or past warrant, or even something new. This does not mean, however, that her desire and commitment to change was not sincere, and in many ways, this may be seen as an overall part of her desistance process and progression (Maruna, 2001).

Desistance theory is a multifaceted framework, often oscillating between an emphasis on either structure or agency, behaviour or identity, in a chicken versus egg causality dilemma. Fundamentally, however, it is always about change: why did change occur? And, how is it maintained? In some sense, every criminal is a criminologist, and within him or herself must eventually attempt to understand the process of desistance. Maruna (2001) explains the serial nature of quitting the criminal life as being comparable to quitting smoking. He points out that the initial decision to quit, and then actually quitting, are two very different things. He writes, "Understanding the rationality of such decisions … should not be confused with understanding the *process* of going straight and *staying* that way" (Maruna, 2001, p. 23, emphasis in original). As with any process of deep behavioural change, support is necessary.

Theories within the criminal desistance literature engage with the need to identify the various mechanisms of change, exploring the social contexts in which change occurs, and recognizing that the challenges facing desistance, and its corollary of community reintegration, are as much societal and structural in nature, as they are internal to the individual (Best, 2016; Maruna, 2012). The objective of criminal desistance research is, thus, determining, not just how criminal desistance occurs, but also, how it can be supported and encouraged.

Criminal Desistance Literature Overview

As criminal desistance began to take shape, both as a theoretical framework and as a body of academic literature, its research focus increasingly centered around long-term offenders, sometimes called "incorrigibles", "repeat offenders", or "career

criminals". These are individuals who have an established identity and lifestyle within the criminal subculture. These "incorrigibles" are also the primary target of 7th Step, even though the group's membership also includes many short-term, one-off, or "mild" offenders.

During a conversation I had with a 7th Step member (ex-offender), as I was discussing the desistance literature, she pointed out how offensive she found the term "career criminal", because it suggested a lack of change. She had changed her "career" and therefore no longer fit into that description. This astute analysis reflects the origins of the term, as it references those who have turned to a career in crime, as opposed to a more pro-social, conventional profession. My friend's point was that it was not an appropriate term to use in association with desistance, since ex-offenders were actively trying to change.

This observation helped me to clarify my own approach to desistance, as being a process of interaction, between two different worlds that need to learn from each other and respond with growth and transformation. My approach looks at the process of change as it involves both internal and external variables, social and behavioural, in a reciprocal process of mutual transformation and exchange between ex-offenders and society. In its focus on the subjective result of social interactions and relationships, my approach aligns most closely with contemporary theories derived from symbolic interaction and labelling theory. It offers the addition, however, of exploring the role of reciprocity in the transformation of both offenders and society in more depth, looking at the role and experience of non-offender volunteers within that process.

The criminal desistance literature has primarily developed from two dominant perspectives, with an emphasis on either structural factors or agency. Arising from an emphasis on structural factors, are social control perspectives. Theories that locate the change process around agency within the individual, are perspectives associated with psychology, identity, and rational choice. More recently these two approaches have been joined by theories that include both structural factors and the internal experiences, identity, and agency of the individual. These perspectives are connected to social interaction and labelling theory.

With social control theories, there is a "behavioural drift toward conformity" and while one's identity may be affected by this drift at a subconscious level, that identity change is neither inevitable or necessary (Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 382). Social control theories often associate desistance with life events such as marriage, children, and employment, all seen as exerting informal pressure and constraint toward conformity. In this way, social control theories include the role that social bonding and relationships play within the change process.

The primary distinction between structural perspectives and the theories that focus on human agency and rational choice is the need for a conscious act or decision to initiate the change process in order for it to be enduring and genuine. Agentic theories argue that there must be a desire and openness to change that facilitates the taking on of a more conformist role in society, a "self-aware cognition" that precedes and drives subsequent behaviour, as well as, the development of pro-social relationships, identities, and even life events, which are not seen as being inevitable (Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 382).

Perspectives focusing on either structural factors or agency are not mutually exclusive. Collectively, the studies in desistance research "show remarkable consistency in their results" (Vesey et al., 2013, pp. 233-234). Social factors work together with the agency of individuals to engage within a process of change. It is important to recognize, however, that regardless of one's theoretical perspective, inequalities are reproduced through the social hierarchies of race, gender, class, ability and mental health, etc. These all play a role in how identity is created, and in how personal agency is understood.

A host of structural variables influence whether an individual has access to supports, possibilities, or even pro-social identities. The intersection of structural oppression and risk factors facing offenders can determine the role played by structure, opportunity, and stigma, as well as the effectiveness of one's agency, and the potential or need for identity change. In this way one's social position must be recognized as influencing the accessibility and probability of a life course development that supports criminal desistance.

Maturation and Desistance

The earliest work on desistance studied change across the life-course, developing age-related theories whereby criminals were seen as eventually growing out of their deviant behaviour. Age-related theories of desistance fall under the heading of structural perspectives because change is seen as being "the effect of life events on the course of development" (Farrington, 2007, p. 125). LeBlanc and Loeber (1998) placed desistance within the developmental context of an inevitable decrease in physical strength and fitness, which comes with aging, and can lead to less ability and interest in deviance or

crime. Gottfredson and Hirschi (1990) "urged that desistance from crime was simply a biological consequence of age" (Paternoster, 2015, p. 2). These theories suggest that eventually desistance will occur, regardless of identity change.

The age-crime correlation remains one of the strongest empirical facts in the desistance literature, primarily based upon quantitative, longitudinal studies made across the life span (see: Glueck & Glueck, 1937; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; 1990; Rocque et al., 2015). Empirical evidence shows that desistance is primarily linked to a transition into adulthood (Bottoms et al., 2004, p. 379). Increasingly, however, criminologists argue that age is not necessarily the dependent variable in that equation: rather, it tends to accompany the process of maturation. Rocque (2015) explains, "maturation is multi-faceted, incorporating social, psychological, and biological changes. These changes happen (or do not happen) at different times/ages for different people" (p. 351). While maturation occurs overtime, it is not an inevitable result of aging.

Maruna (2001) describes the Liverpool Desistance Study, in which he interviewed both active offenders and "desisting" ex-offenders to understand their perspectives around the process of desistance from crime. When asked to explain what maturation meant to them, those who were maintaining their desistance did not describe behavioural manifestations (i.e. the absence of criminal activity); rather, they defined maturity as being "a new way of 'looking at the world' or constructing reality" (Maruna, 2001, p. 35). This suggests that while structural influencers, like life-course transitions, may play a substantial role in desistance simply through their connection to the process of maturation, cognitive factors and transformations are equally as important (Kazemian, 2016).

Social Control Theory

Part of what makes life-course transitions such compelling factors in the process of desistance are the relationships that are developed through them, leading to social bonds, engagement in society through pro-social roles, and subsequently the development of formal and informal social controls. The importance of these factors has primarily been developed through the work of Sampson and Laub (2001), who developed an age-graded theory of formal and informal social control, based on data taken from a longitudinal study of white male offenders. They argued that offenders begin to desist as they take on conventional roles in society and develop social bonds, primarily through marriage, employment, or military service. Their work grew out of earlier approaches that looked at social bonds and the importance of social factors, such as "differential association", and extracurricular activities (Matza, 1964). These theories argued that an individual's association with pro-social or delinquent peers would have a significant influence upon their adoption of criminal behaviour.

Warr (1998) brings these two theories together, arguing that life-course transitions, like marriage, alter criminal behaviour through their effect upon an individual's relationships with their delinquent peers. Marriage, as the example, is shown to produce a significant decline in the amount of time that is spent with friends; this, in turn, is used to explain the association between marriage and a decrease in delinquent behaviour (Warr, 1998, p. 183).

In a response to the work done on the significance of differential association and the influence of delinquent peers, Sampson and Laub (2001) argued that the most

important variable in criminal desistance was the informal social control offered through pro-social role taking and positive social bonds. They described these as being "turning points", events and transitions that took place during the life-course, such as, marriage, employment, or joining the military. They argued that such turning points offered informal social control, structured routine activities, and constraints around criminal associations or opportunities, leading to a form of desistance by default (Sampson & Laub, 2001).

Sampson and Laub (2001) found that "a lack of social bonds to parents, school, and teachers can explain entry into offending and the strengthening of bonds to spouses and occupations can explain exits from crime" (Rocque, 2016, p. 49). Their work built from a series of longitudinal studies done by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck, in the 1940s. The Glueck study examined the recidivism rates of reformatory inmates and juvenile delinquents (Glueck & Glueck, 1950). Based on their analyses of the Glueck data, Sampson and Laub suggested that structural turning points, like marriage and employment, could predict rates of desistance. They argued "what happens in the adult life course matters – a conclusion we believe modifies, but does not deny, the importance of childhood factors" (Sampson & Laub, 2001, p, 23).

Acknowledging the role played within this process by the individual, Sampson and Laub largely viewed the motivations or meanings held by offenders themselves to be either "fixed or irrelevant" (Giordano et al., 2007, p. 1606). This lack of agency within their work has been widely criticized, particularly by Giordano et al. (2002), who challenged the empirical evidence for the Sampson and Laub hypothesis, arguing that turning points like marriage and employment are neither necessary nor inevitable for ex-

offenders. They challenged the methodology of the Glueck study as being too limited in its sample, looking at only white male offenders in the 1940s. Giordano et al. (2002) questioned whether any resultant theory could be assumed to hold true for female and minority groups in a more contemporary context (p. 991).

For short-term and low-level offenders, in certain demographics, there will be a natural tendency to age out of criminal activity, because there are active structural forces and social ties present and working against the adoption or creation of a deviant identity. This is largely contingent, however, upon the availability of pro-social roles and turning points. The central premise of social control perspectives is that social bonds bind an individual to a greater investment in conformity. It may work well for those who have the privilege to access conventional turning points and opportunities, but this cannot be considered the case for everyone.

Sampson and Laub's (2001) findings rely on studies done during a time when employment opportunities were relatively abundant, and the prison population was predominantly white. To bring this theoretical perspective forward into the 21st Century, the role that systemic racism and structural violence, discrimination, neoliberalism, income inequality, and sociocultural micro aggressions play, needs to be considered. Even those with systemic privileges (e.g. white, middleclass, educated) are confronting an economic climate upon release, where getting a good job is difficult, even if you have a graduate degree, and nearly impossible with a criminal record.

The primary critique of social control theories is that they undervalue the role of cognitive transformation within the individual, the development of a new identity, and the subjective commitment toward a new life of desistance that arguably must occur prior to

life's "turning points" being effective. Likewise, people who are systemically marginalized have been found to desist successfully even in the absence of the structural resources and relationships that these social control perspectives rely on (Giordano et al., 2002). This suggests that a variable beyond these structural factors is influencing change.

Giordano et al. (2002) argue that the healthiness and pro-social orientation of turning point relationships is critical to their impact on the process of desistance, and that entering into healthy relationships requires cognitive transformation as a prerequisite (Giordano et al. 2002). For those who have never learned pro-social coping skills, or ways of engaging with others and society in a healthy and constructive way, it is arguable whether they would be able to develop and maintain healthy relationships or employment, in order to undergo the process of desistance that Sampson and Laub describe (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013).

Cognitive Transformation Theory

In a study explicitly testing Sampson and Laub's social control theory, Giordano et al. (2002) undertook a detailed, long-term, follow-up study, looking at both male and female delinquents charged with serious offences. Using life history narratives from their respondents, as well as quantitative data, they identified four factors that more significantly influenced criminal desistance than either marriage or employment. These were described as "cognitive transformations". While Giordano et al. (2002) recognized their theories were far from incompatible with those of Sampson and Laub, they described covering a different "conceptual terrain", looking at the internal shift that was

occurring within the individual, as opposed to just the external life events (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 991).

Giordano et al. (2002) identified four key cognitive transformations, or changes in an individual's mindset, that were necessary factors in the process of desistance. These were: 1) an openness to change: the subjective recognition that change was necessary, paired with the desire to make that change occur; 2) exposure to "Hooks for Change": transformative experiences like marriage or pro-social employment that could have a positive effect on an individual's identity and sense of efficacy in the world; 3) self or identity transformation: a change that occurs wherein the individual no longer identifies as being an active offender, and replaces this identity with a pro-social vision of themselves and their role in the world; and 4) a change in how the individual views antisocial or criminal behaviour: that beyond just a recognition of change being necessary the individual perceives and relates to criminal behaviour and impulses as being destructive, counterproductive, and no longer in line with their new identity and sense of self (Rocque, 2016, p. 51).

Giordano et al. (2002) argue that these cognitive changes build upon each other in association with changes to external action. Relationships and pro-social interactions lead to emotional growth, which influences a change in preferences, which then leads to a change in behaviour. They write, "The desistance process can be seen as relatively complete when the actor no longer sees [criminal] behaviors as positive, viable, or even personally relevant" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 1002). Beyond just solidifying change through the adoption of a new identity, this theory specifically views a basic motivation to change as both preceding, and being necessary for, sustained behavioural change.

Identity Based Theory of Desistance (ITD)

An Identity Based Theory of Desistance was offered by Bushway and Paternoster (2013), connecting desistance with rational choice. They felt that earlier theories, including those looking at cognitive transformation, were still too structural, and that the reliance on social interaction, emotional growth, and preference change, failed to adequately emphasise the importance and role played by rational choice, determination, and human agency. Bushway and Paternoster (2015) argued that greater focus needed to be placed on "intentionality, power, reflexivity, and the capacity for self-examination or monitoring" (p. 3). At its most fundamental level, after all, desistance is about an individual attempting to change.

The Identity Based Theory of Desistance is "anchored in intentional self-change" (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013, p. 63). The theory centers around a process called the "crystallization of discontent", whereby an offender reaches a point of dissatisfaction when the utility of offending is perceived to be offset by the costs. Paternoster and Bushway (2013) theorize that an individual will retain a working offender identity until they reach this point. As an individual increasingly encounters and confronts failure, they will eventually begin to connect this failure to other dissatisfactions in their life – this is the "crystallization of discontent" (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013, p. 63).

This process becomes linked to an anticipation of future and potential failures, which initiates the move to change both the identity associated with that failure, and its corresponding behaviour and lifestyle. The criminal identity is no longer desired and takes on the manifestation of a "feared self", which the offender does not want to

become. This is contrasted with a possible or "future self" that is crime free, which the offender is now motivated and aspiring to become. The crystallization of discontent is the initial stage of desistance, as the offender begins to craft a positive image of their "possible self" (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013, pp. 63-74).

As a new pro-social identity begins to emerge, it shifts and influences the perceptions, preferences, self-image, and behaviour of the individual, from being an 'offender', to being an 'ex' or 'non' offender. More importantly, a new role and identity emerges, that of being a constructive member of society. In the Paternoster-Bushway (2013) theory, this change in identity is necessary for criminalized individuals to magnetize and sustain the healthy and productive relationships that act as turning points within the Sampson and Laub hypothesis (Bushway & Paternoster, 2013, p. 75).

Desistance is thus viewed as an expression of agency and rational choice. By placing the individual as primary to the change process through their will and determination, desistance is viewed as being an agentic movement toward pro-social change, rather than being socially imposed, or based upon external factors.

Symbolic Interaction and Labelling Theory

Increasingly, scholars like Farrall, Maruna, and Roy, are developing theories that look at the role played by identity within the context of society and relationship. Unlike the Identity Based Theory of Desistance and cognitive transformation theories, these theories are not anchored to the idea of identity change needing to precede behavioural change, or as being a causal mechanism for desistance. These theories are not developed

from a critique of earlier perspectives. Instead, these theories are developed using the theoretical frameworks of symbolic interaction and labeling theory as their starting point.

Labelling theory posits that committing to a life or identity of crime is largely a product of societal reaction: a "looking glass self-concept" whereby "a stigmatized individual will come to view himself based upon what he believes other people think he is" (Maruna, 2004, p. 274). These theories focus on identity, but within the social context of relationships and interactions. They view cognition and identity as being fundamentally social in origin.

Applying labeling theory to desistance, as opposed to deviance, Maruna (2004) writes, "desistance may be best facilitated when the desisting person's change in behaviour is recognized by others and reflected back to him in a 'delabeling process'" (p. 274). This is not at odds with the previous identity theories, as Rocque (2016) states, "identity theory suggests that people act consistent with whom they think they are" (p. 48). Labelling theory suggests that once an individual is labelled as 'bad' or 'deviant', they come to accept and internalize that label as an identity, and subsequently act accordingly. In these theories, the role of society as a reference point becomes equal to the role of ex-offenders as agents of their own change. "Until the [ex-offenders] recognize that others recognize *them* as 'success stories', they appear to not quite believe it themselves" (Maruna, 2004, p. 277, emphasis in original). In this way, the internal process of view, identity, and motivation is developed and transformed through exchange and relationship with external factors.

From its origins, desistance research has been about understanding a process that ultimately leads to the reintegration of offenders back into society. What these theories

make clear is that this reintegration process must become a "two-way street between individuals and the wider community" (Maruna, 2016, p. 292). Within these perspectives, desistance, as a process, is about relationship.

Making Good

Shadd Maruna is one of the more prominent desistance researchers working within the theoretical frameworks of labelling theory and symbolic interactionism. In his seminal work, *Making Good: how ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*, Maruna (2012) introduces the concept of "making good", wherein ex-offenders process and transform their identity and sense of self, through the act of giving back and offering their service to benefit future generations. *Making Good*, is based upon the Liverpool Desistance Study, in which Maruna (2012) interviewed both active offenders and "desisting" ex-offenders in order to better understand their lived experiences and perspectives around the process of desistance from crime.

Maruna (2012) views identity as being a socially constructed negotiation between self and other that becomes 'real' through interaction (Maruna, 2012, p. 80). His most prominent construct is around the notion of "making good", whereby offenders do not change their identity so much as reframe it, deliberately reinterpreting their past as offenders. They explain away their past in order to fit it into a favourable view of who they are now, and what they are "really like". They do this through, what Maruna (2001) describes as being, a "wilful cognitive distortion" (p. 9). They reframe their past to fit more consistently with their current view of themselves as a good person and productive member of society.

Much of this reframing, is accomplished through the activity of giving back, and is connected to "the benefits that come from helping others" (Maruna, 2016, p. 290). This "entails claiming one's prior negative experiences as a source of strength, and finding ways to redeem oneself by giving back" (Veysey, 2013, p. 245). Giving back then creates a mechanism for community reintegration that may not otherwise be present or accessible, on account of a lack of opportunity, as well as the shame, embarrassment, and internalized stigma of the ex-offender. Compounding this is the very real doubt, apprehension, and discrimination that exists in society around the trustworthiness of ex-offenders.

As a means of bypassing this stigma, through believing in the essential goodness of their 'real' selves, offenders discover a sense of agency that allows them to resist and overcome their criminal habits and ways of thinking, and even the criminogenic structures that may oppress them (Maruna, 2001). As a way of managing the shame and guilt from their criminal activity, finding ways to offer back or "make good" creates generative pathways that help the individual to come to terms with their past, heal, and move forward (Maruna, 2001, p. 121). While ex-offenders need to be integrated into society, Maruna (2004) argues that this reintegration needs to be felt to be justified by the ex-offenders themselves, through the recognition of their own efforts to 'make good' and redress past crimes.

Often, the narrative of offenders is described as being one of "neutralizing", or rationalization, where they are not to blame, or were justified in their actions, often conflating legitimate reasons with excuses, or using "techniques of neutralization" to diminish the impact of their misdeeds (Bottoms, 2004). Maruna (2001) argues that the act

of "making good" and taking on the role of "the wounded healer stands in direct contradiction to the deviant neutralization" (p. 142). By reconstructing their life story into a moral tale, they are reconstituting themselves, and are, therefore, more resilient and able to meet challenges and take responsibility for their actions, both past and present (Maruna, 2001, p. 105). Munn and Bruckert (2013) describe this sort of engagement and participatory accountability as being a more effective means of "responsibilizing the offender" than current models of punishment and exclusion, which break down capacity rather than building it up.

McNeil (2006) argues that "supporting offenders in the painful process of making good … [requires a] reciprocal need for society to make good to offenders" (p. 54). This stands in opposition to the attitudes and assumptions that typically meet individuals upon release, or when their past convictions are revealed, even after many years of desistance. Maruna (2001) describes an inner "voice of condemnation" whereby those trying to maintain their desistance struggle with the internalization of a stigmatized identity, feelings of intense shame, failure, and worthlessness. This inner voice becomes "the voice of a society that has largely given up on the person. … When offenders say that they 'can't' change, they are reflecting the views of many of those around them" (Maruna, 2001, pp. 79-80).

Rehabilitation is dependent on both the individual accepting and engaging with conventional norms, as well as conventional society accepting and engaging with the individual (Maruna, 2004). This reciprocal relationship acts as a potential bridge between the two theoretical perspectives in desistance, demonstrating "the role of reflexivity in both revealing *and* producing shifts in the dynamic relationships between agency and

structure" (p. 49). Farrall and Bowling (1999) suggest that the focus on either structure or agency creates a false dichotomy, and that in reality there is a middle ground, which they call "structuration". They argue that it is a mistake to consider a person's actions or identity as being independent of the structures within which they are embedded (Veysey, 2013, p. 243). Likewise, it is clearly a mistake to underestimate the crucial role played by personal agency and will within the process of change.

In terms of practical applications, identity-based theories lead to the development of strengths-based approaches, rather than needs or risk-based. These focus on developing offender's strengths through engagement, encouragement, and empowerment, in order to influence self-conception and subsequent behaviour. This is premised upon a view drawn from both labelling and signalling theory, which conceptualizes the "self-fulfilling nature of trust – the more we trust others, the more trustworthy they become" (Maruna, 2012, p. 82). From this point of view, the most effective programs and interventions for supporting desistance are 'client-driven', 'person-centred', and collaborative approaches that rely on a "bond of mutual respect and trust" (McNeil, 2006, p. 52).

According to ex-offenders, the effectiveness of any rehabilitation program comes from the potential it has to empower and support rather than compel change. This can be done simply by acknowledging that the desire for change comes from, and belongs to, the individual, rather than the program or its facilitator (Buck, 2017; Maruna, 2010; Munn & Bruckert, 2013).

Additional Literature: Addiction and Recovery

Beyond these core theories from the desistance literature, it is also important to briefly mention two areas of research that correspond and overlap with criminal desistance. These are addictions and recovery, and peer mentoring and support.

Sampson and Laub (2001) acknowledge the similarity between the process of desistance from crime and the process of desistance from other "problem behaviour". It should not be surprising that there is a significant overlap in the populations involved with both recovery and desistance, as well as, the research itself.

Both literatures explore identity change and are centered around the process of reintegrating stigmatized individuals back into communities. Empirical data suggests that there is often a co-occurrence of offending and substance abuse, where alcohol or drug consumption is explicitly linked to criminal behaviour. There is also a similarity in society's response to these two behaviours, which is one of deep stigma, shame, and exclusion (Best, 2017). Unfortunately, the importance of recovery from addiction has yet to play a prominent role in the discussion of desistance, though it often appears in the testimony of offenders who describe it as being a crucial aspect of their pro-social roles and "non-criminal life" (Vesey et al., 2013, p. 256).

While it seems obvious that the abuse of substances might stimulate criminal activity, the reverse is also true: The rate of substance abuse likewise increases with ongoing criminal activity, or at least with criminal convictions. Looking at prison statistics in the United States at the end of the 20th Century, Belenko (1998) describes: "The more prior convictions an individual has, the more likely that individual is a drug abuser: in state prisons, 41 percent of first offenders have used drugs regularly, compared to 63 percent of inmates with two prior convictions and 81 percent of those with five or

more" (p. 7). One can only imagine how these statistics have increased over the last two decades, particularly given the rise in opioid use and methamphetamines.

Most long-term chronic offenders have issues with substance abuse. For the "vast majority" of the individuals interviewed by Maruna (2001) during the Liverpool Desistance Study, drug use and criminal behaviour were considered to be "inseparable" (p. 64). There has been, however, relatively little attention paid to "the impact of desisting from one behaviour on stopping the other" (Best, 2017, p. 1). Those who look at the intersections argue that desistance needs to be "a study of abstaining from both types of behavior" (Maruna, 2001, p. 64). Many of the ex-offenders in my own research described the experience of going into prison smoking pot and then "coming out a junkie" (Field note, 4/3/18). The vicious cycle of incarceration and addiction feeding into one another was a recurring theme in both my research and the literature (see: Maruna, 2001; Munn & Bruckert, 2013; Best 2017).

Beyond the interconnections and potential interdependences of these behaviours, there are also many commonalities between desistance and recovery research. In both recovery and desistance, the process of identity change is viewed as being "intrinsically social or 'relational'" (Best, 2017, p. 1). Changing one's social network, in both of these instances, is a necessary part of creating and stabilizing the shift in one's behaviour and identity.

While "recovery" is a very personal and subjective process and experience of change, it is also formed and supported by social processes. Recovery groups consist of the lived experiences of people as they come to accept and ultimately overcome the challenges and limits of their addiction, finding a new sense of self and purpose. By

engaging with recovery-oriented groups and individuals, regularly and consistently, a new sense of self is gradually internalized. Through the mechanisms of the recovery group, "the individual comes to embody the norms, values, beliefs and language of recovery", which effectively supplants the old "addict identity" and replaces it with a new social identity that supports recovery (Best, 2016, p. 113). In this way, one goes from being an alcoholic, for example, to a 'recovering' alcoholic, a change that is often acknowledged and respected by society, far more so than that of 'ex-offender'.

Frequency is a key aspect of the recovery process (Best, 2017). Regular attendance at group meetings offers exposure to both values and processes as well as inclusion in a social environment where the emerging sense of a 'non-using' self can be nurtured and take shape, internalizing the values, norms, and expectations of the group. This is similar to the need in desistance of garnering pro-social roles and identities within society. The largest difference between the two is that, in addictions recovery there is a group available to offer this sort of education and support, and, once one has established one's new identity, as being "in recovery" from one's addiction, there is a greater sense of acceptance from the wider community. This acceptance is "essential in providing opportunities for reintegration that allow tertiary desistance or recovery to become stable and sustainable" (Best, 2017, p. 6). Most people cannot go it alone, and the more that an individual immerses themselves in the activities and roles offered by the recovery group, the more they benefit from their membership (Best, 2016).

An important element within the 12 Step recovery program is the principle of "keeping it by giving it away", which is comparable to Maruna's description of the ex-offenders "making good". This element of service to others "speaks to a process whereby

individuals protect their own ongoing recovery by helping others around them achieve this as well" (Best, 2016, p. 118). While research has yet to specifically explore the comparison between sponsorship and making good, the importance of peer support and mentoring in both desistance and recovery is increasingly being developed.

Peer Support

A great deal of the practical and theoretical work done with addictions recovery is centered around the concept and practice of peer support (Best, 2017). This offers an interesting contrast to the way that anti-social and pro-social peers are related to in much of the desistance literature. For example, Sampson and Laub (2001) argue, "the most important factor in desistance is peer associations" (p. 46). They are, however, talking about the need to change and move away from former delinquent peers, to start associating with non-delinquent peers instead. Even in addictions recovery, it is recommended for the addict to change their overall social groups and networks, particularly replacing them with recovery-oriented others. Adding even just one "non-drinking peer" or pro-social friendship, can increase the likelihood of "treatment success" by 27 percent (Best, 2016, p. 112). What "differential association" does not take into consideration, is the important role that can be played by pro-social peers who share a similar background of deviance or addiction, who have gone through their own path of change, and are themselves involved in the process of recovery and desistance.

The key difference between recovery and desistance has been around the centrality of such peers within the change process. Through peer mentorship programs and peer support groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, and other

12 Step programs, the shared experience and mutual support among members is the primary resource and basis for supporting change. The entire process is driven and held by service users. The practical implication this has for criminal desistance theory, is the need to consider involving ex-offenders more prominently in the desistance process of others. This is similar to the notion of working *with* offenders as opposed to *on* them, locating the ownership of that process of rehabilitation with the offenders themselves as opposed to the "experts" (see: Best, 2017; Maruna, 2001; Munn & Bruckert, 2013).

Those who have gone through, or are going through, a process of change themselves, represent both hope and a roadmap for those attempting to change. As with the 12 Step model, peer mentoring becomes "desistance in practice. … It provides a solid opportunity for people with criminal convictions to 'do' and 'make' good" (Buck, 2017, p. 1029). In recovery programs, it is well known that sharing your recovery is the best way to maintain it; likewise, peer mentoring in desistance is a practical and accessible way for individuals to begin to make amends, to realize their strengths, to develop skills, and even to heal (Buck, 2017).

Beyond the occasional forays being made into exploring peer mentoring and its potential for desistance (Best, 2016; Buck, 2017), little scholarly work has been done looking at ex-offender peer support. Often, however, other ex-offenders, particularly those who are actively engaged in a program of recovery, are the ideal (and sometimes only) resource available for those wanting to change. The alternative futures and "shared narratives of recovery" that are available through these relationships create a sense of hope as well as legitimacy and are crucial to the creation and stability of desistance (Best, 2016, p. 113).

Offering peer support to those trying to change is also a natural impulse for those engaged in the desistance process. It arises frequently: "Ex-offenders often discover that they are quite good at counselling other ex-offenders. They find that this is a field in which they can achieve and even excel … [using] their wealth of criminal experience for prosocial ends" (Maruna, 2001, p. 120). Peer support, in this way, will often open up and encourage the taking on of other leadership roles in community groups or volunteer organizations, becoming a source of personal satisfaction, as well as, further stabilization for the desistance process (Maruna, 2001).

There is a subtle difference between peer mentorship, where a more experienced individual offers their advice and guidance to someone new, and peer support, wherein all are part of a common fellowship working toward change. While most of the work in desistance tends to focus on mentorship, this alone is not necessarily enough. Peer mentorship can be inspirational, and also offer "templates for new ways of being" to those who are struggling to change (Buck, 2017, p. 1034). Mentorship can become stuck or confused, however, resentments and grudges based upon the past can arise, causing the mentor to be doubted or seen as inauthentic. The equality and commonality found through peer support can help to maintain the peer connection by encouraging a sense of humility and mutual exchange.

Peer support and mentoring are only as effective as an individual's readiness for change. In both recovery and addiction, there is a "tension between external inspiration and individual 'readiness to change'" (Buck, 2017, p. 1035). If the individual is not ready to change, a combination of defensiveness and unreal expectation can form within the relationship between peers. The inspiration of the peer who has gone through their own

personal transformation must be met, and work concurrently, with a desire and motivation to change. Buck (2017) writes, "There is a complex and unpredictable interplay of social influence and self-direction at work in these relationships" (p. 1037). Issues of resentment or doubt are successfully met, through peer support, because an individual is bolstered through the sense of friendship, camaraderie, and fellowship, and in this way is offered a supportive space to come to the change themselves: "when motivation does not seem to be present, or dips … external help is there" (Buck, 2017, p. 1037). As one finds in recovery groups, support is something beyond just inspiration or advice. It is found in the acceptance, encouragement, and most of all the commonality, community, and the fellowship that is offered – support is experienced from the sense that one is not alone.

One of the most compelling aspects to including peer mentoring and support as a part of the desistance process, aside from its practical results, is the fact that it represents a significant shift in the criminal justice discourse where "the 'prisoner's' version of 'the truth' is located at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge" (Buck, 2017, p. 1028). Through peer mentoring and support, the knowledge, truth, and experience of the ex-offender/ex-prisoner is elevated; it becomes central, not just to the program or intervention, but to the entire process of desistance itself. Ex-offenders are then celebrated and valued, not just for their knowledge and experience, based upon what is otherwise stigmatized as a shameful past, but for their relative success in having changed and stabilized their recovery and desistance. Maruna (2001) writes, "positive acknowledgement can be crucial to the consolidation of a non-criminal identity" (p. 80).

Through peer engagement individuals are able to help, serve, make amends, and also gain recognition, encouragement, and support.

Breaking free from a cycle of shame and punishment, desistance becomes a cycle of belief and possibility whereby the more one is believed in by others, the more one is able to believe in oneself. Hans Toch (2001) writes, "When products of a problem become part of the solution … the process gains credibility. It also becomes less discontinuous, less authoritarian, and more participatory in nature" (xvii). This, in a nutshell, describes the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia.

Research Objective

The initial purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the experience of personal transformation through the process of desistance. The 7th Step Society offered an ideal means of doing so. It quickly became apparent, however, that the group consisted of more than just criminal desistance, and that the research needed to broaden to include the corresponding experience of volunteer members, as well as, the relationship between members. The resulting research question was to look at the experience of membership in 7th Step, and at how the experiences, meanings, and relationships that were created therein created or supported change. The inclusion of volunteers, and of that relationship between ex-offender and conforming/conventional members of society, was something that felt new and exciting in terms of its potential contribution to the desistance literature.

It also became apparent, as I began to discuss my research with others, that the 7th Step Society, while having endured for nearly 60 years, was relatively unknown, under-utilized, and un-researched. This made the use of a qualitative ethnography ideal, as it created the opportunity to increase general awareness, knowledge, and understanding of 7th Step as a group, as well as, research its impact upon members.

Methods

For this research, I used an ethnographic framework, gathering data through semi-structured interviews with members, observation of the group dynamic, reflection upon my own experiences as a participant, and an analysis of documents representing the 7th Step Society to the general public. I decided to use an ethnographic approach in order to focus on 7th Step as a "culture-sharing group" with its own "shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language" (Cresswell, 2013, p. 90). As a member and participant, as well as the researcher, an ethnographic framework was the best way to address the interpretive and subjective nature of my analysis, while also using my access as an insider to obtain a greater level of description and understanding.

The 7th Step Society was an identifiable and well-established group with shared customs, language, and forms, making it an ideal focus for ethnographic research. It also presented a rare opportunity to contribute something unique and valuable to the existing literature on desistance. Maruna (2001) writes about his own research: "Reformed ex-offenders do not belong to any registered organization, and they sometimes go to extremes to hide their criminal pasts. Finding a sample of desisting persons to study this process, therefore, was among the most difficult tasks I faced" (p. 45). My membership in 7th Step offered abundant opportunities for field work and data collection, with an extensive membership to participate in interviews, weekly group meetings, frequent school visits, and a manageable body of printed literature to include in document analysis.

I also felt that ethnography would help to make the study more accessible for those outside the academic community through a more literary style of writing and presentation (Cresswell, 2013, pp. 91-93). Behar (1996) acknowledges that this approach carries with it a risk of "exposing oneself in an academy that continues to feel ambivalent about observers who forsake the mantle of omniscience" (p. 91). I wrote my field notes "about all the things [I had] misunderstood, all the things that later [would] seem so trivial, so much the bare surface of life" (Behar, 1996, p. 8). By presenting my findings through a confessional ethnographic style, I hoped to convey the process of ethnography, which was variously neurotic, insightful, and incomplete (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 91). In this way, I hoped to make the findings more accessible and useful, as an offering to the group, to generate greater awareness and understanding in the community at large, and potentially within the membership as well.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative Research is characterized by Cresswell (2013) as "emerging and [being] shaped by the researcher's experience in collecting and analyzing the data" (p. 22). In this way, it is the most complementary approach to take with ethnographic research, which is "virtually always self-transforming as the fieldworker comes to regard an initially strange and unfamiliar place and people in increasingly familiar and confident ways" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 2). Taking a qualitative approach was an effective way to capture the process of change that happened through my own deepening familiarity and understanding within the group as a member, and as a researcher observing and interviewing others.

Tracy (2010) outlines an eight-fold criterion for "excellent qualitative research" consisting of: A worthy topic, rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence (p. 840). I considered each of these criteria, and their elements, in describing how I thought of and addressed the qualitative aspects of my research. For example, 7th Step represented a worthy topic as it embodied the timely concern of support and community reintegration for ex-offenders.

The timeliness of the group was confirmed as I watched it growing by leaps and bounds each week. Beyond this, the work that it was doing also felt significant. I became convinced that the more 7th Step and its processes were understood, the more enhanced an understanding of desistance and community reintegration would become. In this way, the study of 7th Step connected to a strong theoretical framework, which was a key element in finding a "worthy topic". Through membership, there was a substantial array of data to be accessed, and I felt that rigorous research and methodology would be possible.

How I initially thought I was going to address "rigor", and how I ultimately came to understand it, shifted throughout the course of doing the research. The conceptual ideas and convictions that I came in with, many from my study of desistance theory, were a hindrance. It was only after I had let them go that I was able to connect to what was really happening in the group. After months of data-collection and having met a majority of the ever shifting 7th Step membership (close to 200 people), I returned to the desistance literature and the theory opened up. Ultimately it was not the theory that created the context for my understanding, it was my research that created the context for my understanding of the theory.

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) describe, "Over time, a field worker's personal views and theoretical commitments often change; her stance in writing field notes shifts as she more frequently comes to see and respond to events as members do" (p. 43). I believe that this shift is an important aspect of "rigor" in ethnographic work, that the research and researcher must be receptive to the transformation of plans, expectations, and understanding.

I was often paranoid about my methodology throughout the research, attempting to be as scrupulous, consistent, transparent, and reflexive as possible. It was in allowing myself and my understanding to be shaped and transformed by the data, however, that my research became inductive and authentic. This, I believe, was ultimately the cornerstone of my qualitative approach.

The greatest challenge I faced in terms of sincerity was in feeling that the research should be about the other members and not about myself. I experienced significant resistance and difficulty in understanding how to include my own journey, with both the methodology and membership, as an important aspect of the research study. I decided to write the ethnography as a "confessional tale" in an attempt to facilitate this transparency. I viewed it as being an expression of my responsibility, as storyteller for 7th Step, that the cultural knowledge I gained through data collection and personal experience might be conveyed through the "explicit behavioural norms or interpretive standards the ethnographer learned to follow in the field in order to stay in the field" (Van Maanen, 2011, p. 78). Through the act of becoming and being a member of 7th Step, and allowing that membership to affect and transform me, I was able to gain the understanding to tell my story as both a researcher and a member.

To maintain credibility, I used multiple types of data: observation, interviews, and document analysis. I included various viewpoints and perspectives. I connected to different theoretical frames from within the desistance literature wherever I could. And, I tried to explore multiple facets to both the challenges and accomplishments that presented themselves within the group (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).

The scope of this ethnography was specific to the 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia, and the Halifax chapter in particular. The results around how 7th Step facilitated a sense of connection, growth, and healing, however, were applicable beyond the limits of the group. The findings of the research illuminated ways in which anyone could help and/or engage in their lives and communities, focussing on relationships and other human beings. As one member (volunteer) described:

> I'm more aware of the seven steps as guiding principles for life, than some of the stuff that it took me years to learn in management … if you can live by those seven steps, and be fair to the people, apply them as much to yourself as the others, I think you could be a pretty successful human being. (Interview)

My experience of membership in 7th Step, far more so than the research I did there, helped me to gain a better conceptual, theoretical, and practical understanding of desistance and change. In writing the ethnography, I aspired to represent this as clearly and thoroughly as possible.

I was extremely fortunate with 7th Step because it had a ready-made container to facilitate my ethical engagement. From the moment my name was brought forward there was transparency around my research interests. From that point forward, every interaction I had about the research included feedback from the group. My Hotseat (a ritual form of entry into the group as a core group member) was almost entirely about my

research, motivations, intentions, self-doubts, and concerns. Rather than just talking about what I could offer to the group, my Hotseat challenged me to also consider how I could open to let the group in – let 7th Step help me. While a truly participatory approach was beyond the scope of a master's thesis, the group as a whole, as well as various individuals who became close friends, were with me the whole way. They supported and encouraged me, participated in interviews, chatted with me online or over the phone, at meetings, and, in general, helped to clarify and explore the ideas and interpretations I had found through my analysis. Fieldwork is an interpretive act: interpreting what others have already interpreted and so on (Emerson e al., 1995; Van Maanen, 2011). By letting the group in, I felt and saw my interpretations change, and I gained confidence in the analysis that developed through that process.

With any luck, this ethnography will have achieved its purpose. I believe that I chose the best methodology for my stated goals. In using qualitative methods, I hoped to create a "cultural portrait of the group" that would incorporate and make clear the views and meanings of the other group members, as well as myself, and, in doing so, I hoped to expose the need that exists for further support, exposure, and research (Cresswell, 2013, p. 96).

Setting and Environment: The 7th Step Society

The 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia is the local chapter of a national group, with memberships across Canada. It was developed in the United States, in 1963, by Bill Sands, a former inmate at San Quentin Penitentiary, who later became a performer, activist, and writer (Sands, 1967). In the United States, the organization is called The

Seventh Step Society (writing out the number). It was started inside the Kansas State Prison and was "designed to reach the hard-core convict population, the men and women who are often the leaders within the institutions, with an end goal of reducing recidivism" (Brochure, 2017). It came to Canada in 1967, and the group in Nova Scotia began in the 1980s. The Nova Scotian chapter now has a regular Tuesday night meeting in Halifax, and a fortnightly meeting on Monday nights in the Annapolis Valley. The group consists of "street groups" (held outside of an institution), as well as groups and programs that are facilitated inside various correctional institutions (Pamphlet, 2015).

7th Step is a peer support group for men and women who are working to maintain their freedom, specifically, from incarceration. The group consists of these ex-offenders, as well as non-offender volunteers. The group meets once a week on Tuesday nights for two hours in one of the classrooms at Dalhousie University in Halifax. The use of this room was set up through a friend of one of the members. This is a common way for volunteers to help, by using their various contacts to access resources, like a room to have regular meetings in.

The goal of 7th Step is to create a community and network to help support criminal desistance. Throughout the meetings that I attended, I observed both the subtle and overt supports that the group offered to its members, and particularly to ex-offenders, to help them change and then stabilize a mindset and lifestyle associated with that change. As a volunteer, I felt the group's support in my own life as well.

The format for a typical Tuesday night meeting begins with members taking on temporary positions of chairperson and secretary, and then reading *The Seven Steps to Freedom* and the 7th Step Pledge. The Pledge and The Seven Steps are found on all

documents pertaining to the 7th Step Society: a pamphlet (2015), a brochure (2017), and a bookmark (n/d). The Pledge and Steps read as follows:

> Knowing that my freedom depends upon my thoughts and actions I hereby PLEDGE:
> To face and accept the truth about myself,
> To maintain my freedom,
> To become a useful member of society,
> To help others, as I am now being helped.
>
> <u>The Seven Steps to Freedom</u>
>
> 1. **F**acing the truth about ourselves and the world around us, we decided we needed to change.
> 2. **R**ealizing there is a Power from which we can gain strength, we decided to use that Power.
> 3. **E**valuating ourselves by taking an honest self-appraisal, we examined both our strengths and our weaknesses.
> 4. **E**ndeavouring to help ourselves overcome our weaknesses, we enlisted the aid of that Power to help us concentrate on our strengths.
> 5. **D**eciding that our FREEDOM is worth more than our resentments, we are using that Power to help free us from those resentments.
> 6. **O**bserving that daily progress is necessary, we set an attainable goal, towards which we can work each day.
> 7. **M**aintaining our own FREEDOM, we pledge ourselves to help others as we have been helped.

These steps were collaboratively written among inmates during that first group in Lansing prison, and have remained unchanged. They were designed to be "a set of guidelines to help us in our [realistic] thinking", and represented the steps felt to be most important in "helping a man to change" (Sands, 1967, p. 41). In his book, *The Seventh Step*, Sands (1967) describes how these steps came together through unintentional and auspicious coincidences: it was only after they had been completed and written down that he realized the first letter of each step spelled out the word "Freedom" (p. 44).

After the steps have been read out loud, there is a reminder of confidentiality, and an introduction of new people. Then, the weekly share is conducted as each person goes

around the room and shares from their week. This can take nearly an hour depending on how many people are at the meeting, often between 25 and 40 members. After the share, new names of potential ex-offenders or volunteers are brought forward, which can be brief and uneventful or rowdy. All decisions made at 7th Step, such as the acceptance of a new guest and potential member, require a consensus of those present at the meeting, at the time. There is then usually a short break followed by either a Hotseat, or a discussion of one of the steps. Once a month, during business meetings, this part of the meeting will be used to discuss the "agenda". This is a time when people can raise new business, follow up on old business, and discuss issues that they feel are pertinent to the group at large.

The "Hotseat" takes place after a guest has been to at least four consecutive street group meetings. It is a ritual of accountability that was developed by inmates and is meant to put a person on the spot and to help them "think realistically" (the 7th Step motto). The process is meant to uncover and push the individual to confront any realities from which they may be hiding.

7th Step meetings are set up with members sitting in a circle around a room. During the Hotseat, one chair is placed in the centre of that circle and this is where the person being Hotseated sits. The individual is asked to introduce themselves and tell their story, focusing on their background and "problem areas". At a certain point people begin to ask questions. These tend to be more challenging in the beginning, although each Hotseat is unique. The ultimate purpose of the exercise is to offer a service to the individual, to find and challenge them in all the places that they are, or may be, hiding, or being dishonest with themselves or others. The purpose of the Hotseat is also to

encourage. Often, any given Hotseat will end with a commitment to engage in greater self-care, appreciation and self-love.

The exercise is intense and vulnerable, and, while many find it uncomfortable or unpleasant, there is a general consensus that it is effective. After a person is put through the Hotseat, if they have been honest with themselves and others, an individual is welcomed as a "core group member". The ritual aspects of this trial by fire makes the designation of core group membership quite meaningful. This accomplishment is met with applause and usually ends the meeting.

Beyond these Tuesday night meetings, 7th Step also does a number of school visits and professional presentations throughout the year, where at least two ex-offenders and two volunteers will go to a school, business, or university, and make a presentation. After a brief introduction by the volunteers, explaining what 7th Step is, the ex-offenders tell their personal story, followed by questions and answers. These presentations are usually one to two hours long. At one of the school visits that I went to, a 9th grade boy came up to me afterwards and said, "That was amazing. That just changed my life". These 7th Step presentations are most often done at junior high and high schools around Halifax, although they also occur in university courses, at conferences, and in front of a wide range of professionals.

The 7th Step meeting in Halifax physically represents a meeting of two worlds. In many ways 7th Step is just one of many: "one of the rooms" of recovery, a familiar place for addicts to meet (Interview). The bare empty classroom at night with its florescent lights, the ritualistic forms of introduction each time a person speaks, the drone of acknowledgement and welcome, all feel like a typical recovery group meeting. Yet, each

recovering addict agreed, it wasn't like other meetings. The volunteers and the bustle of the university campus were all tendrils coming in from the conventional world. After her first meeting, one of the ex-offenders to whom I had given a drive said, "I didn't realize it was going to be on campus, at a university!" After this first meeting, she began to dress up and told me that this alone made it the highlight of her week (Personal communication).

Ex-offenders enter the world of 7th Step as people who are valued and seen as being committed to a pro-social identity. They are immediately challenged to vocalize and engage with that new identity and what it means. Along with the volunteers, they are pushed to engage reflexively around their old habitual activities, patterns, and ways of thinking. The ex-offenders, in particular, actively participate in the creation of a new identity within the group, in front of the group, and supported by the group. Hornby (2012) describes, "7th Step … bases its work of offender change on confrontation about thinking errors" (p. 47). However, the volunteers are likewise challenged to confront their role and what it means. What does it mean to be there for someone else? How do you help in a way that is not self-prescribed?

Little research has been done on the 7th Step group, on its format or its effectiveness as a mechanism for change and desistance. Hornby (2012) has written an excellent paper describing the program and contextualizing its place within the history of corrections; however, the lack of further research points to a gap in the desistance literature where 7th Step has a great deal to offer. For my research, 7th Step presented an opportunity to study and explore the overlaps between desistance and recovery from substance abuse. It also provided unique access to the experience of offenders during the

desistance process. Its conscious reflexivity about the change experienced by all members, presented a rare opportunity for research, offering elaboration, support, and challenge to the existing theories of identity change offered by the desistance literature.

Because of its unique format, 7th Step was a setting that offered insight into both the personal and structural/institutional elements at play in desistance. Its utilization of peer support, role modeling, and mentorship offered insight into the needs of individuals trying to maintain desistance, and also the mechanisms of support. To understand needs alone is insufficient when addressing a population or demographic that is characterized by endemic suspicion and mistrust. 7th Step offered me an ability to engage directly with these individuals, within a context of mutual trust, to better understand the needs of desistance from an insider's perspective.

The importance of peer support, and the utilization and value given to the ex-offender's voice and experience through 7th Step, was essential to my research. Bottoms (2004) writes, "the extent of informal social control … can be perceived very differently by those applying it, and those to whom it is applied" (p. 380). It is difficult to know how or why interventions, programs, or general assists are, or are not, working, without exploring the needs, experiences, and realities of those being 'worked upon'. 7th Step provided a unique opportunity to observe the desistance identity as it was actively and consciously being constructed within both a personal and social context of continuous reflexivity.

Prolonged Engagement and Participant Observation

One of the primary methods in an ethnographic approach is the researcher engaging with the topic of their study. For this research, I used participant observation and written field notes. Emerson et al. (1995) writes, "The task of the ethnographer is not to determine 'the truth' but to reveal the multiple truths apparent in others' lives" (p. 3). Van Maanen (2011) describes, "the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others" (p. xiii). My path with participant observation was along these two lines. On the one hand, I felt that I was there to witness and record the patterns of topic, gesture, language, ritual, and interaction that went into creating the 7th Step Society. My job was to pay attention to what was being shared and conveyed by others, as it created a pattern of common experience. On the other hand, I also had to look at my own experience as a researcher and volunteer.

A constant question for me was what my role was within the group as a volunteer. This was further complicated by a paranoia I worked with around my role and influence as a researcher. After having been a core group member for a number of months, it felt clear to me that this paranoia was getting in my way. I had to allow myself to affect the group, to influence and change it; otherwise, I was not truly being a member. At this point, I began to offer push back and share my ideas and opinions during meetings. This allowed me to relax and be myself, which then opened up the space for greater relationship and connection with others. It was after I began to engage in this way that situations and interactions revealed themselves, with a depth of complexity I had not been able to reach previously. I also began to witness the effect I was having upon the group,

as I engaged and offered my own ideas. Rather than this contaminating the data, it brought forward new insights around the role and influence of the volunteers.

Partially, I believe this was influenced by the way that conflict and challenge is related to within the culture of the group. There was a recurring appreciation throughout my research about the way that disagreements or differences, even outright moments of conflict, were handled and related to in 7th Step. Primarily, this was noticed and mentioned by other volunteers who appreciated the ability of the ex-offenders to work through these situations in remarkable ways. Two examples:

> People will say things and there might be a little bicker or just kind of back and forth, and I'd be like, wow, maybe it's getting heated, but then, after the meeting, it's like, they go up to each other and high-five and they're like yes I'll see you next week, it's just like, we're not the exact same person but, like, our differences don't matter, we're all here for one common goal … I just feel like in classrooms and stuff, people will have arguments about things and then it's like walk different directions, and they hate each other for the rest of their 4 years of university, and it's like you don't even know each other's names. Whereas in this it's just like, yeah. You can say whatever you want, I never feel like I'm being judged, but even if I was, like, it's in such an open room that it's still welcomed. Like, everyone's opinions still matter, no matter what. (Interview)

> They have this saying: Principles before personalities. Right. And what that means is there's something bigger than the individuals… and so what I've learned during the last, 4 - 5 year period, is that stuff does happen at a meeting … and what I've really been impressed with is how a group of people who are not accustomed to democratic process are really good at it. You know. They're really good at talking through things, and not falling apart. And doing better, I think, in that way, than other groups that don't have any criminals, and get really petty right. It's amazing. (Interview)

For many of the volunteers I interviewed, there was an appreciation of the ex-offender's honesty and the way that feedback and challenges were handled and valued in the group. A number of them said that membership had made them less conflict averse in the rest of their lives (Interview). One of the members (volunteer) explained he thinks this is

because the ex-offenders "have an approach, they've lived with a lot more confrontation" (Interview). Another described, "you've … got to challenge people because I think that's like a core underpinning of the group" (Interview). This adjustment in how volunteers began to appreciate conflict, through their membership with the group, was a subtle theme within the interviews.

What stood out for me in all of my observations, was that challenge was always seen as something good, either as an expression of concern and ultimately support, or as a step on the path that needed to be taken. Even when a guest during one of the meetings, began to shout and act aggressively, the response from the room was noticeably kind and supportive. When conflict arose in 7th Step, it was not held on to. It was seen as a part of life, maybe even an opportunity to learn and grow.

Because of this, I felt supported by the group to engage in my role as a member without fear of it negatively affecting my research or the group. I found this approach to be validated, as I went further into the literature on ethnographic methodologies (Emerson et al., 1995; Behar, 1996; Van Maanen, 2011). Emerson et al. (1995) write, "the ethnographer remains a stranger as long as, and to the extent that, she retains commitment to the exogenous project of studying or understanding the lives of others" (p. 36). More often than not, it was the conversations I had as a member and a friend that offered the greatest insights into the research. The questions and comments I made as a researcher most often fell flat.

Field Notes

From the beginning, I was most excited and worried about writing field notes. Having never been one to keep a regular journal or diary, writing field notes was a new skill I had to learn. It was a process I found both thrilling and intimidating. I loved the tangible engagement in my research, and the challenge of finding ways to trigger my memory and maintain focus. Emerson et al. (1995) describe, "Writing fieldnotes *processes* experience not only through a researcher's attention in the field but also through a writer's memory and compositional choices" (p. 106). I found that I had to make a conscious effort and decision to notice how I was feeling and what I perceived, as I drove or walked to the meeting, creating a reference point and moment in time that I could return to afterward, like a signpost, to then begin retrieving memories. I would write scratch notes during the meetings, words or phrases, to help guide and remind me afterward when I wrote everything out. I even began drinking coffee or tea in the mid-afternoon on Tuesdays, so that I would be able to remain engaged and focussed for the two hours it would take to write out my field notes each Tuesday night after the meetings.

Memos began to distinguish themselves, as I would start writing field notes during the week, while I was reading, transcribing, or having a conversation. The ideas that I explored reflected "concerns and insights" I was bringing to the research, but also grew out of "reengaging the scenes and events described in the fieldnotes" as I typed them up or read them through later (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 155). Even months after writing a field note, as I was coding or writing the report, an idea in one of these memos, usually one that had fizzled out in the analysis, would trigger the memory of an observation from around the same time that had not been given much notice, but suddenly held a wealth of significance or analytic value.

Issues of consent and confidentiality were originally a very large concern of mine, particularly in regard to the field notes. I did not know how to manage writing them in a way that would help me remember and make connections, but also maintain the ethical boundaries around consent and confidentiality. It was a struggle at first, because of my familiarity and friendships with the other members; it was strange to not refer to them by name in my notes. As I began using the abbreviations EO or V, however, patterns began to emerge, shaping the way I took scratch notes and wrote field notes. The phrases that I captured were never attributed to an individual but were included because they described, explained, or hinted at a pattern of experience or meaning, or stood out as a noticeable outlier or alternative perspective.

Auspiciously, or perhaps it was a "Higher Power" at work, during one of the first meetings where I was collecting data, the issue of 7th Step confidentiality came up in a very specific way, speaking directly to the concerns that I was having in that moment around writing field notes. One of the ex-offenders explained, "7 Step is a non-profit self-help organization, that being said, it is not anonymous, the confidentiality we talk about in the group has to do more with who is or isn't at meetings [what they say], and the personal stories that are shared here" (Field note, 3/6/18). He continued to describe how, "there is also the piece where 7th Step goes out into the community and helps to educate people, to do things in the community" (Field note, 3/6/18). From that point forward, I only wrote down the things that I felt would help me educate. No personally identifying or specific information was collected, and often when going over or typing up field notes, I would remove parts, words or phrases, in case they were too revealing.

Document Analysis

The 7th Step Society of Nova Scotia has a few different documents that interface between the group and the general public. The main one being a bookmark that is handed out during meetings, at school presentations, and elsewhere. These bookmarks are simple, with a picture of the Nova Scotian flag and the 7th Step Pledge on one side, and *The Seven Steps to Freedom* on the other. Beyond this, there is also a Pamphlet (2015) that gives a brief history of 7th Step and describes the overall program, and a Brochure (2017), which goes more in depth describing what constitutes a core group and how to conduct a Hotseat. Both the pamphlet and brochure also include the Pledge and *Seven Steps to Freedom*.

I chose to limit my analysis to these three documents. These were the only documents regularly and consistently used to communicate what 7th Step was to the general public, and I wanted to compare what they described to my own observations, and to the descriptions and experiences of other members. These documents are not lengthy and were easily managed. I converted their contents into virtual files and included them in my thematic analysis, along with my field notes and interview transcripts.

Interviews

For this research, I conducted 17 semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, 8 of which were with volunteers, and 9 with ex-offenders. Interviews were audio recorded and took place in a public and convenient location, such as a café, library, or university, chosen, in most cases, by the member being interviewed. Some members refused to

decide, wanting to be as accommodating to my needs as possible. At first this flustered me as a researcher, but I later came to appreciate the role that it played in creating a sense of equality and exchange within the interviewer-respondent relationship. The interviews lasted anywhere from forty-five minutes to three hours; their length developing organically from the amount the respondents wished to say, and an energetic awareness of whether the interview was being enjoyed or becoming a burden.

Initially, I used convenience sampling. Having obtained approval from the Research Ethics Board to begin data collection, I sent a recruitment email to the 7th Step email list (roughly 90+ people at that time). The criteria for participation was that one had to be a core group member of 7th Step, in Halifax, who had been to a meeting at least once in the past six months. Having received a positive response, with numerous members volunteering to be interviewed, I then switched to a more purposive sampling approach, choosing specific members out of those who had volunteered, to represent a diverse array of membership. This primarily included considerations of gender, age, length of engagement and/or time spent as a member, across both roles of ex-offender and volunteer. The end result was a sample of 11 men and 6 women, all Caucasian, ranging in age between their early 20s and mid to late 60s, with the newest individual having been made a core group member the week before, and the oldest having been a member for 34 years.

I used the same script of interview questions with each respondent, asking probing questions and exploring re-occurring themes as they arose, often asking for clarity and examples. Nearly all of those interviewed found it easier to offer their own interpretations and analysis with their answers, rather than specific examples. The focus

on examples, however, helped to ground me as an interviewer, and seemed to help keep the conversation connected to experience rather than speculation. The entire process of interviewing was a liberating one for me, unlocking a sense of purpose, skill, and meaning that I had rarely experienced before. Conducting the interviews was a new way of listening and connecting to another human being. That experience affected how I understood and engaged in my role as a 7th Step member.

One of the earliest challenges I faced, in the interview process, was the fear that I was directing or influencing the data. I was constantly aware of moments when the respondent would repeat my words back to me, and this caused me to follow up on many such answers, repeating their own words back to them, along with my interpretation of their meaning. Often, I found myself searching for enthusiastic consent and would continue to press and reword my interpretation until I received impassioned agreement. This paranoia may not have been necessary, but it was something I worked with, particularly at the beginning.

Tracy (2010) explains, "research participants may espouse very different values in interviews than the values they enact in contextual interactions – with both sets of data being equally 'true'" (p. 843). My fifth interview was with a member (ex-offender) who had been going for many years. He would occasionally use or repeat my words in his answers, but he would not budge in his own meaning. I then realized that "he is firmly connected to his perspective and is unlikely to be pushed toward anyone else's bias" (Field note, 4/3/18). Indeed, in comparing my field notes and observations with the interview transcripts, there was a remarkable consistency across the views and expressions put forward in interviews, during meetings, and in casual conversation.

Before an interview began, I would have respondents read and sign an "informed consent" sheet, including their consent to be recorded, and whether or not they wished to have their name used. I added this last piece about the name, because, during one of the presentations to the group about my proposal, I had assured them that no identifying information would be included. One of the members had challenged me, "what if I *want* you to use my name?" Only a few chose to not allow their name to be used, however, since my research design was based upon not including any identifying information, this was a moot point. The signing of the consent form tended to be an awkward moment at the beginning of each interview; however, I appreciated the formality and sense of beginning that it brought to the interaction. Many of the respondents seemed irked when I gave them their own copy of the consent form to keep for reference, with a few of them saying "oh I don't need that", or in one case leaving it behind.

Following up

My first two interviews were with very strong and confident members (ex-offenders), so it took me by surprise when I heard one of them talking about his experience during the weekly share at the following meeting:

> He said how emotionally wrecked he had been for days following our interview, but that it was good. He mentioned it a few times during the meeting and it freaked me out. I couldn't believe I hadn't followed up afterward or realized how vulnerable the situation could be. I need to be more careful about following up and making sure people are okay afterward (particularly with EO). I hadn't fully realized or expected how open and deep people might/would go in the interviews, *because* they know and trust me. (Field note, 4/3/18)

That particular respondent had gotten very intimate and emotional in the interview, as many after him would, and he helped set the tone for my future awareness. He did this by

reminding me that I had to increase my awareness and understanding of the vulnerability that comes from going deep, especially when there are issues of trauma and addiction involved. He also helped me to understand how powerful, valuable, and important these interviews were for people. After one interview, where the respondent got very emotional, I asked if he was all right. He responded, "yes, more than alright" (Interview). A week or so after this, again, following one of my interviews, a member (ex-offender) described having relapsed and I checked in with him during the break. I was worried that our interview had been too much and had contributed to his subsequent "slip". He reassured me that no, "*that* is the stuff that helps me" (Field note, 6/19/18).

Transcription

I transcribed all of the interviews using ExpressScribe, a free online app that allows you to create hotkeys to manipulate audio files in order to transcribe them more easily. I began transcribing my first interview the day after it was conducted. I had not really thought about the actual choices and mechanics involved, beyond the need to begin transcription as soon after the interview as possible. The fact that my first interview was with one of the more articulate members in the group, had an impact on the decisions I made about transcription. In an early field note I wrote,

> He is so rich with nuance, character, and insight, I feel so appreciative, I don't want to lose any of it, like every word and moment is solid gold. During transcription, I was immediately struck by the inadequacy of the transcript to capture the full meaning and essence of his meaning and communication. Because of this I am taking a more naturalized approach to the transcription, almost instinctively, just in an attempt to capture as much of the richness and character as possible. (Field note, 4/8/18)

Because of this initial impulse, I became committed to a more naturalized transcription process. It was not purely naturalized, however. I chose not to miss-spell words, and in this way was often correcting mispronunciations. Over time, I became less strict about the naturalized approach and only added habitual articulations and pauses when they were important for contextualizing meaning. In the end, my transcription was balanced between a naturalized and de-naturalized approach, prioritizing the content and meaning of what was being communicated, while remaining as true to the original voice as possible. I made all of these choices based upon my sense of the meaning being communicated, both as the interviewer and as a fellow member who was familiar with the respondent. Wherever possible, I noted these decisions in field notes and memos.

Overall, transcription was challenging – physically, psychologically, and emotionally. The physical act of transcribing over 30 hours of audio, particularly using a semi-naturalized approach, caused me to develop carpal tunnel syndrome and associated pain in my wrists, hands, and arms, neck and back pain, and a series of severe headaches and migraines. These were exacerbated by stressors in my life, occurring at that same time, and it led to an extended period of time where I was unable to move forward with the transcription process. Some of the interviews were psychologically and emotionally challenging because of their content. Many of the interviews, particularly with the ex-offenders, went into very intense and personal areas, and were with people I had come to care for as friends. Transcribing these interviews was at times emotionally upsetting. Because of ethical considerations and confidentiality, I felt unable to discuss this experience with anyone, which was something I struggled with throughout the transcription process.

There were great benefits to doing my own transcription. I was able to gain greater familiarity with the data, and, through the process of transcription, a great deal of analysis began. I was also in control of the myriad decisions that arose around how and what to transcribe, and I was able to shape the transcripts so that they best captured the content and meaning of those being interviewed. The process of transcription took longer, and took a greater toll on me, than I had ever imagined it would.

Data Management and Analysis

All of the data that was collected from interviews, transcripts, field notes, and documents were kept in a locked filing cabinet and/or on a password protected laptop computer. Any information that directly identified participants was removed, and all indirect identifiers were considered in terms of their analytic value, but for the most part were removed.

Originally, I had planned on inviting those interviewed to join an optional discussion group, to act as a kind of member-check around where my analysis and interpretations were going. As the interviews progressed, however, it became clear that this was not necessary, and I decided not to do it. The depth of information and experience being conveyed in the interviews, along with the rapport that had been developed through my membership in 7th Step, felt sufficient and gave me confidence in my analysis and interpretation. I often reached out to friends (ex-offenders), to help me talk through a point or issue, and received a great deal of help and support around my analysis in this way.

Data analysis was managed using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. I employed an inductive and thematic analytic approach. Having transcribed all of the interviews and typed all of my field notes, these, along with digital copies of the 7th Step documents were uploaded to Nvivo, and then I read them as a comprehensive whole. I initially coded by sentence and paragraph, looking for reoccurring words, phrases, or patterns, as well as unique moments, sentiments, expressions, or interactions. I initially coded by phrase, topic, process, description, or idea, and from there began to sort my initial codes into broader themes or categories that I found emerging. This, as well as my subsequent coding, was further guided by referencing analytic memos I had made while transcribing, during my observations, or during the initial coding.

I went through the data as a whole on three separate occasions. The second time, I coded and organizing the data into the various elements or processes of 7th Step, as these had emerged as regularly significant during the initial coding process. I wanted to organize in this way, as a reference point for my emerging themes. I then also went through the data for a third time, coding for prominent ideas and concepts derived from the desistance literature.

As my various cross-coding became unwieldy, I started to link codes in a notebook and on a white board, rather than just through Nvivo. In this way, I was able to visualize linkages as they were written out in front of me, and then refer to Nvivo where there was a depth of categorized pairing, but certain codes remained accessible and distinct. As I began writing, I had three distinct sets of coding: the overall themes and analytic story of the meanings and experiences members had in regard to 7th Step; how these linked up to the various elements, forms, and processes of the group; and how or

where the data either demonstrated or challenged the assertions and theories in the desistance literature. Ultimately, it was the first set of thematic coding that I used as the bases of my findings, however, it was helpful for my analysis and organization to see how these themes, and their related codes, also linked up to the organizational elements of 7th Step, as well as, themes taken from the desistance literature.

Results

My motivation for doing this research was to explore human experience. I sought to capture the subtle experience of transformation that is gained through relationships, interactions, experiences, and meaning. In ethnography, "indigenous meaning" or the meaning attributed to things by those one is studying, is not a static entity; it changes based upon specific moments, relationships, contexts, and interactions. It reflects different positions and concerns as it shifts (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 28). This is what I set out to document in my fieldwork and observations.

I chose to present my findings using a combination of first person and analytic exposition, what Van Maanen (2011) describes as, "the dialectic between experience and interpretation" (p. 93). This approach is recommended by Emerson et al., (1995) "when the ethnographer is also a member of the group she is studying. Seeing incidents through her eyes allows us to see an insider's view of actions, as filtered through her concerns as an ethnographer" (p. 53). By actively participating in and engaging with the lives of the 7th Step members, I was able to witness first-hand and become a part of the fluid processes of insight and uncertainty, by which meaning and understanding emerges and also changes over time (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 4). From this position of insider-researcher I offered my analysis and interpretation.

I produced four main themes during the analysis of the data, which told a story about membership in 7th Step as it related to personal growth and change. These themes

were: 1) Trust and Openness: the foundation of accountability, 2) Accountability: the foundation of change, 3) Giving Back: reintegration and the maintenance of change, and 4) Connection: stabilizing change through relationship with others. Each of these themes had various sub-themes that were part of their role in the process, or cycle, of transformation. These themes tell the story of an interconnected process and cycle of personal growth, understanding, and ultimately transformation that is created through 7th Step.

In some places, I have included excerpts from transcriptions. In these, I use "AH" (Amanda Hester) to designate when I am speaking as the interviewer, and "R" to designate the respondent. I used this system in the transcription of every interview, regardless of whether or not the respondent had given consent for me to use their name.

Trust and Openness: The foundation of accountability

At a 7th Step Tuesday night meeting, trust and openness create an environment where people feel safe and encouraged to open up and begin to share. This lays the ground for an experience and expression of accountability to occur. What and how members are able to share, is where accountability eventually takes place. The sort of accountability that happens at 7th Step is not something that I see in the world regularly. It is special. At 7th Step I heard members (ex-offenders especially) talking about how when they initially walked into that room, they could tell that something different, something special, was happening (Interview). One of my first questions, as a researcher, was about what this "something special" was. I would regularly hear members say that "7th Step is all about accountability" (Interview). If this was the case, then how was accountability happening? What did it consist of? How was it being experienced? Primarily, the answer, I found, was trust.

The way that trust functions – to support a space where accountability can occur – is through an ongoing process of trust-development. In 7th Step, ex-offenders are learning to trust; in some cases, for the first time. One member (ex-offender) described:

> When you're inside [prison], you don't trust. When you're in the [life], like, from the world, you don't trust to begin with right? But when you go inside you learn to trust less…. And [7th Step] it's given me the confidence

> to trust, right. To Trust! I can trust. Like, I never trusted anybody … I never trusted anybody fully, and now there's people, like you, like, I just, I trust. And it's – yeah – and I'm not alone. There's other people like me, and *we're* not alone. And that is such a nice feeling. (Interview)

The community of ex-offenders who are learning to trust are all at a different stage in that process. This helps to support others and creates an environment where trust can occur, regardless of where an individual may be at in their own personal development of that trust.

This is an element of the 7th Step peer support that helps to bridge the gap between ex-offenders who are just coming into the group and the volunteers. One member (ex-offender) described:

> It's like sticking your foot in the water to see what it's like ... it makes it much easier to get in and swim when people you trust are in the water saying how great it is, next thing you know, you're out there swimming like a fish and making friends with everyone. (Personal communication)

The solidarity offered through peer support and mentoring creates an environment where trust can be explored. When an ex-offender comes into the room and see's others whom they identify as being "like them", trusting the space and the volunteers, opening and sharing, they are better able to lean-in, to trust, and to open as well. As one member (ex-offender) explained of the meetings: "I can be as honest as I need to be, you know what I mean, and maybe someone else in there needs to see that you can be that honest" (Interview). He described trust in this sense as being "infectious". Because other ex-offenders have developed trust, a new ex-offender feels like they too can "drop their guard" (Interview).

This ongoing process of ex-offenders learning to trust is facilitated by the act of volunteers demonstrating their trust of the ex-offenders. As one member (volunteer)

pointed out: “nobody trusts an ex-offender, no one is prepared to take a risk on an ex-offender, so it makes it difficult for them to change” (Interview). The fact that the volunteers are there, that they keep showing up, that they share the details of their lives each week, that they expose their own vulnerability and are willing to go on the Hotseat, all of this builds trust for the ex-offenders (Interviews). There is also a subtle layer of trust that comes from the fellowship and acceptance of 7th Step. Many of the ex-offenders described marvelling at the fact that the volunteers were not “afraid” of them, and that this allowed them to relax and trust more (Interview).

A number of the ex-offenders described going on the Hotseat as being a way that volunteers gained their trust. One member (ex-offender) described:

> Who’s going to go in and go through that [the Hotseat] unless they, you know, unless they want to be a part of! Right! … I think a lot of it for me is like, when the volunteers come back and they take the Hotseat, because I know how vulnerable a person becomes up there. I feel, I felt it, right. And I know how hard that is, and when I see one come back after a Hotseat, they feel more a part of the group now, do you know what I mean? (Interview)

This being a “part of” is important to the ex-offenders and came up in a number of contexts at different times, it is essentially the idea of being a “part of” the community, or society, and is connected to the notion of humanity. Finding ways to be “part of” is extremely important to the ex-offenders I spoke with, and was often connected to both their recovery, desistance, and a sense of “giving back” (Interview). Because of this, the volunteer’s willingness to engage and be a “part of” *their* community and society, was a significant gesture. Trust is further developed through the volunteer Hotseat, because it is a trial by fire, forcing an individual to be accountable, to be open, honest, and vulnerable in front of the group.

Confidentiality

Confidentiality is a key component of the group's ability to build trust. Confidentiality creates an environment of trust, especially for the ex-offenders. At the beginning of each meeting someone will offer a reminder and explanation about confidentiality. The most common way that I heard this articulated was: "what is said here, and who you see here, when you leave here, let it stay here" (Field note, 3/6/18). The way that this was responded to by members (ex-offenders) in the group, led me to believe that this particular phrasing was being borrowed from the language of other recovery rooms, such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous, providing a reference point of familiarity that further bolstered trust.

During the meetings, and in the interviews, the issue of confidentiality was a recurring theme, described as being crucial to the entire process of the group. One member (ex-offender) described it as being primary to how 7th Step works, and to how it had worked since the beginning of the Halifax group in the 1980s:

> AH: What is it about the group that you feel works best?
>
> R: The group that you're aware of? Confidentiality. Only.
>
> AH: And how do you feel that that works?
>
> R: That works because they sit in a room and they feel that they can talk freely, about themselves and their problems, to others. And it's a system of venting for them.
>
> AH: So, it creates that sense of trust and safety.
>
> R: Yes. Yeah, that's what it does. (Interview)

In a way, confidentiality could be seen as being a small thing. It showed up subtly in the interviews with the volunteers who would often express appreciation for the way they felt the group held what they shared.

> I think it's really neat to have a room full of people that you can share with and know that it's going to be held and kept confidential. (Interview)

> A bunch of strangers can be pretty anonymous, and *those guys* [meaning the ex-offenders] don't tell stories! (Interview)

For the volunteers who had been members for a long while, however, there was an appreciation for the integrity of the ex-offender, the "solid con", and the large role that confidentiality played in their lives. One member (volunteer) described how "[the ex-offenders] have more skin in the game", often risking their freedom should they share about a slip (relapse) they had, and it get back to their parole officer or to the criminal justice system in some way (Interview).

The volunteers with longer memberships would often display a hyper-awareness and concern for the confidentiality issue, as a means of protecting the ex-offenders. At one meeting, an older volunteer explained to the group that, in the past, there had been a concern that something being shared had made it back to the criminal justice system (Field note, 5/29/18). Another volunteer explained, "people can be breached and sent back for multiple years just from doing the most innocent things, a [volunteer] might not even realize that what they were saying could breach someone" (Field note, 7/5/18).

Confidentiality was often connected to a sense of trust. My interviews with the longer-term volunteers tended to focus on the role that trust played in the group as being all about the ex-offender's experience; however, when prodded, their own engagement with that trust and confidentiality was apparent:

> AH: Would you say that you, in terms of your ability to share your own vulnerability and your own life, would you say that you trust the people in that room?
>
> R: Oh yeah. Like if I needed to like flush my heart out, I don't think anyone in that room would go and like bring it to the press. I think if anything, most of the offenders would be the least likely ones because, again, they've got the most skin in the game. (Interview)

While confidentiality was identified as being central to the container and environment of trust that was created in the room, it also was not harped upon. In most meetings it was only ever mentioned at the beginning. Its presence, however, physically shaped the group.

Confidentiality was one of the main reasons for not accepting a potential member. Most often, this was because of a person's role or employment with Corrections, or a position that required they be an informant to the criminal justice system in some way. When these names were brought forward, the issue was about trust and loyalty, and how this connected to the safety created through an environment of confidentiality in the group. At one meeting, someone brought forward the name of a woman who was currently working with Corrections Nova Scotia, and this was veto-d by one of the members. One member (ex-offender) said, "If she starts coming, I'd stop coming … I'd be concerned about where her loyalties would lie" (Field note, 5/15/18). At a practical level, such individuals are veto-d because of their role as professional informants.

The issue in these cases was rarely, if ever, about the individuals themselves; rather it was about the vulnerability of members, particularly during the weekly share and Hotseat. While one veto was sufficient to deny a name being brought forward, there was often a discussion that accompanied such moments. In each instance that I observed of a name being nixed for whatever reason, there was always an open-ended quality to the

decision, where the name could be revisited when the problematic conditions had changed. In the example of the Corrections officer, it was agreed that, when the woman changed professions, then she could attend (Field note, 5/15/18).

Criteria

When the name of a new ex-offender is brought forward, the member bringing the name will usually mention something about having "run the criteria by them" or say that they "fit the criteria" (Field note, 5/22/18). This means that they are neither a sex offender (sometimes referred to as S.O. or 'skinner'), nor an informant (most commonly referred to as 'rat'). Munn and Bruckert (2013) explain, "The realities inside the prison mediate, for good and for bad, the [ex-offender's] lives outside the fence" (p. 52). Because the focus of support in 7th Step is on the ex-offender, the culture that they are coming from, and have been conditioned by while incarcerated, is accommodated and considered in order to build the trust that is necessary to the process of accountability and change.

Inside of prison, there is a natural separation, whereby sex offenders and informants have their own range and are kept away from the general population (Interview). There is a hierarchy of stigma in prison, where those who have been charged with sex offences are treated with derision and revulsion. Members (ex-offenders) would often express how, when they had heard about this criteria, they instantly felt more comfortable and magnetized to come to the group; it allowed them to be "able to share more", and to begin to trust (Field note, 3/6/18).

Primarily, "the criteria", the exclusion of both sex offenders and informants, is connected to trust. One member (ex-offender) explained how hearing that sex offenders and informants were not allowed "meant that [7th Step] were my kind of people, that I'm used to being around, and then as I participated, then the trust started to grow" (Interview). Without that initial connection, he suggested, he would not have come.

When Bill Sands first started 7th Step, his focus was on the "incorrigibles", the long-term offenders who he called "solid cons". "They were the ones who had the best chance of sticking to a resolution once they had made it, because the same strength they devoted to being incorrigible could also be used to keep them straight" (Sands, 1967, p. 45). By telling people about the criteria, not only are undesired individuals naturally excluded, but also, and perhaps more importantly, 7th Step is able to align itself with those coming from a culture of incarceration. It is like speaking to them in their own language and connecting to where they are at. It communicates that, unlike many of the programs and recovery groups that are more inclusive, 7th Step understands *them* and will provide a safe space for them to come and be vulnerable. This is described in the pamphlet (2015):

> Any person who meets the criteria is eligible to apply for membership of a Core Group, with the following exceptions: The Core Group shall not include any individual as a member, if that membership would in any way, deter the participation of the primary target group, the hard-core, "solid con" from involvement.

While this could be seen as a carry-over from the 1960s when Bill Sands first created the group, the many conversations I had with members, both ex-offenders and volunteers, about the exclusion criteria demonstrated that its persistence continued to be functional.

Sex Offender**,** as the term is used in 7th Step, is a fairly broad category. It is broad in the sense that it is a label that you do not want to catch. One member (ex-offender) told me that even men who are known to beat up "their women" do not fare well in prison, they are not considered to be "solid" (Field note, 3/28/18). Although not charged with a sex offence, I had one friend who had been convicted of stalking a woman, and when I asked if he would be considered a sex offender the answer was yes. Likewise, the allegations of sexual assault made against a member of my religious community were enough to make him a sex offender in the eyes of the ex-offenders.

This broad stigmatization of those who have been either caught or called out for sexualized violence, in some way, stands in ironic contrast to the culture of hyper-masculinity, sexism and misogyny that is cultivated inside of prison; let alone to the normalization of coercive seduction and rape culture that has conditioned society at large. This suggests that the behaviour being demonized in some is statistically likely to be present in the past experiences and relationships of many core group members, men and women, as both victims and perhaps unconscious or inadvertent perpetrators. This, however, remains an unexplored facet of the group's commitment to realistic thinking and accountability.

Sex offender is, thus, rather blindly used as a stigmatized category, although it is important to recognize that there are numerous and complex reasons for this. Maruna (2001) described his interactions with active and ex-offenders: "Concessions of guilt were often tempered with comparisons to others, worse offenders to reinforce the [individual's] alignment with traditional values" (p. 136). In this way, there was a "real criminal" that could reassure and provide a reference point against which their own

humanity and redemption was protected (Maruna, 2001, p. 138). For the ex-offenders at 7th step, there is also the reality of having been conditioned by the deprivation and culture of prison, which intentionally limits space for movement, restricts an individual's communication, induces extreme boredom and then denies sexuality (Munn & Bruckert, 2013, p. 48). Bill Sands (1964) describes:

> Rapos – that is, men convicted of any type of sex crime – were lowest in prison society. They lived in misery … There was no compassion for any sex deviate. There was damned little compassion for anything or anyone in prison. (p. 34)

This conditioning runs deep and is brought back into a society that does not particularly have more compassion for sex offenders than do the ex-offenders.

Questions around the "criteria", and particularly sex-offenders, came up in the interviews with the ex-offenders far more so than with the volunteers. To some extent, this was because I brought it up in those interviews more, but also because, other than one or two of the volunteers who had been coming for a long while, most volunteers responded by throwing the issue back onto the ex-offenders, generally saying that *they* would not like it, and not having much to say beyond that. For the ex-offenders I interviewed, the issue was always a rich topic of discussion, and one that was far more complex than just conditioning. To some, it was simple, yet passionate: such people were considered "morally reprehensible" (Field note, 6/26/18). It was most often phrased as being a personal and vehement dislike: "personally I don't like it. I don't like *them*" (Interview). Many acknowledged the role prison played in that conditioning through the segregation inside:

> I mean the sex offender thing is because it's a no-no inside prison. And if 7th Step was started and continues to [target] the hard-core ex-con, and ex-offender … in prison, sex offenders are segregated. They're in PC where

> they go to certain institutions because that's where they all congregate; they're all accepted there, right. So, it wouldn't work in 7th Step, as it is now. (Interview)

It was clear that having sex offenders present, would, for many, destroy the environment of trust. It could also trigger members who had experienced sexual abuse in their own lives.

It is fairly common in research on female offenders to look at "linkages between women's experiences of victimization and their patterns of offending" (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 995). These linkages can also be found in male offenders. Munn and Bruckert (2013) interviewed a group of male ex-offenders and described, "the frequency to which these men referred to their sexual, physical, and emotional abuse was striking, and the anguish was [palpable]", and yet, in much of criminology and mainstream perceptions the "criminalized men's history of abuse is not only invisible but also implicitly denied" (p. 108). One of the members (volunteer), who has run a 7th Step group inside the women's correctional facility for a number of years, described how 100 percent of these women have trauma and abuse in their past (Interview). For the men, the likelihood of this is also high. One member (ex-offender) guessed that it would be about 8 out of 10 ex-offenders who would be dealing with some sort of childhood-based trauma and abuse (Interview). Indeed, because this is so common, it is a "house rule" that 7th Step does not pry into issues of past abuse or trauma, particularly during Hotseats. Because 7th Step is a safe space that members trust, however, it cultivates vulnerability and openness, which lead to these issues arising on occasion.

Many of the members (ex-offenders) regularly share about their path from trauma through to addictions and into recovery. Their openness then inspires others to do the

same, when they are able to, and this creates another dimension to the peer support that is being offered. For some, it is the beginning of an important process. As one member (ex-offender) described:

> I'm a survivor of sexual abuse – and I won't even say that – I don't classify myself as a survivor. I'm learning how to become a survivor. First thing I had to do was admit to myself that I was a victim. … It's taken me 40-50 years to realize that I was, at a certain point in my life, a victim, and I was victimized. So, I'm working on becoming a survivor. (Interview)

For others, it is something that they have been working with for years, even to the extent of offering counsel and help to others.

> Being a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I worked with sex offenders. Right. Mentally I was well enough to do that, because I understand that if I don't help that individual, they're going to keep doing what they're doing. If they don't see that they're hurting people, then how do you – how can I be a part of change if I don't be a part of it, right? … And in my previous job I've worked with both survivors and perpetrators, and – you know, I had to, I guess, de-stress, you know, afterwards, and think about it, because it is triggering. (Interview)

This is connected, in a very immediate way, to the issue of excluding sex-offenders from the group. One member (ex-offender) described:

> From my experience of being in institutions most of my life, I've always had a problem being around sex offenders, or informants so, with that being a part of the program, not having them there, it really inspired me to get involved. … Because most offenders, like myself, in childhood were sexually abused, so we would always retaliate against sex offenders, so they had to separate us. (Interview)

In this way, the exclusion of sex-offenders is a functional part of creating a space where other ex-offenders can trust and engage in the work and vulnerability needed, to begin to heal from past trauma.

The connection between exclusion and trust came up in nearly every interview where the issue was raised. One member spoke about it being one of the more significant

differences between 7th Step and other recovery groups where both sex-offenders and informants are not only included but often go unidentified, which leads to a sense of general mistrust toward those in the group one does not know personally, and a resistance toward getting to know the rest (Interview). One member (ex-offender) described the creation of at least one space where he did not have to deal with the potential presence of the issue as a subtle level of relief:

> R: Because say you're in the halfway house with me and you're a sex offender, so we're in the halfway house together. It's like I don't like what you've done, but you're there, you've got your own problems, I've got mine. You do your thing, I'll do mine. So that's like eating crow, I've got to be in the same room with you, I've got to put up with you, I don't have to like you.
>
> AH: So, then at 7 Step you don't have to eat crow?
>
> R: No. We don't let them in the door.

While this excludes individuals who could potentially benefit from membership in the group, it also acknowledges and protects the space and process for the healing of others. One member (ex-offender) explained:

> R: Do you ever really totally recover? I mean, if I have triggers because I was molested by a guy and I smell certain smells, like – sweat, and that triggers me, well of course I'm going to think about that trauma, and then I'm going to cop a resentment and I'm going to think about what I'd like to do to that individual.
>
> AH: And then it just cycles
>
> R: You know! *But* because of recovery, I don't take it to the second level, right. I have an opportunity to think about it and to think about the consequences – if I acted upon those instincts.

Many of the members acknowledged that sex offenders were sick and deserved kindness, and had some compassion for the issue; however, this largely resulted in suggesting "they

could have their own, separate group" (Interview). For most, the issue was ultimately tied into the challenges of sustaining their recovery as it was.

In only one instance did a member (ex-offender) acknowledge that based on the mandate of "commitment to change" at the heart of 7th Step, even though sex-offenders "turned [her] stomach", if one wanted to come to 7th Step she would welcome them:

> A lot of my problems started because of two drunk drivers, I'll shoot you before I let you get behind a wheel drunk. I heard a member a few weeks ago, a new member, bragging about how well he could drive when he was drunk. So, do I have any issue with facing a sex offender with my story of sexual assault? If that sex offender is prepared to make change and is open to the accountability that a group like 7th Step brings, then I think, I'm open to it. (Interview)

For her, the issue was whether or not someone was willing to be accountable and committed to change.

Informants are grouped in with sex-offenders as persona non grata; however, the definition of what exactly constitutes an informant, what that means, and one's relationship to informing, varied across members. Almost no two ex-offenders agreed when interviewed, and when asked what constituted an "informant", nearly every volunteer referred me to the ex-offenders. When I first heard the criteria for the group, the exclusion of informants seemed straightforward to me. Without any curiosity or probing I took it to mean no 'known informants', as in those who are working with the police. This was probably influenced by watching too many crime-shows where the cops have their confidential informants, defence attorneys have no morals, and the criminal element are sub-human monsters sneering about how "snitches get stitches".

The reality I met at 7th Step ran counter to all of this. Many of the core group members are defence lawyers; although, members talk about them as though they were

social workers or saints. Their desire to help others, and their grace, generosity, and follow through in actually doing so, is remarkable. One or two lawyers, in particular, were mentioned in almost every interview as having made a giant impact on people's lives. As to the criminal element, many of the ex-offenders are people whom I came to consider the most giving, brave, compassionate, and accepting of my acquaintance; people I trusted implicitly.

To some extent, this is because the ex-offenders who attend 7th Step regularly are "solid cons". They are solid and dependable, so long as they are actively engaging in their own recovery: they are solid gold. This term, "solid con" is the expression of admirable qualities of honour, integrity, and strength possessed by an individual inside prison, allowing them to "do their own time" and not get involved in other people's business. "To keep one's mouth shut under real pressure, not to break promises to other 'solid' people, [and] to die, literally, before letting down another 'solid guy'" (Sands, 2013, p. 34). Through the course of the research, I came to realize that this was the context within which I had to consider and understand the notion of an "informant".

At its most basic, the issue with informants had to do with trust as well. All members had to be able to trust the confidentiality of the group and the space, so that they could share about absolutely anything. Members (ex-offenders) had to be able to share about a relapse, to be honest about their struggles, and to take accountability for their slips without fear of being breached and sent back to prison for having done so. One member described it as being, not just about trust, but also about integrity:

> There is no trust, if you're an informant, that's what it is: there is no trust. If you're an informant, why are you informing? Because you're self-seeking, right … you're informing because you're trying to get ahead for some reason. You either want charges dropped, or you want charges

> lessened or you're looking for a cash pay-out. So, you are *self-seeking*, and that's not going to work when it's a group, when it's a *WE* thing. You've just made it into a *ME* thing. So, do you know what I mean? So, you're not a *part of*, right. So, you couldn't have it, it wouldn't work. Right. It's trust. (Interview)

What is described here as being a problem with self-seeking behaviour speaks to the fact that trust has been built and secured in the group through an appreciation of the underlying altruism, or genuine care and concern for others, which is present and also constantly being developing within the membership.

In this way, the issue is linked to both trust and also a sense of integrity. The integrity associated with not being an informant, however, is deeply linked to the culture of incarceration and a criminal mindset that the group is actively trying to transform. One of the members (volunteer) described:

> R: The institutions are full of informants … so you don't know who to trust, that's you know, your cell mate, or your dorm mate, or roommate, or house mate. So that's a problem. …. The prisoner's dilemma, right, that's real, that's real as anything. The first one that rat's out is the first one that walks out the door. That's how that works. So, you know, the people who were your co-workers could turn on you.
>
> AH: Well and that's how a lot of them end up inside, they were the ones that didn't talk.
>
> R: Absolutely, yeah, or, as the lawyers say, they were the stupid ones. You know. Look I know they're dead on informants and they don't want them part of that program, and I can understand why… So, it's about trust, and you know, it's about reducing the risk of violence in the meetings. If you're in an institution and the only way you can get through is by smoking crack, and someone rats you out, you know, that creates a big resentment, regardless of how you've changed.

The exclusion of informants can be about trust, integrity, and also resentment. Why informants were excluded was ultimately not nearly as revealing, however, as how that term was variously defined.

While every person I spoke with had a different way of describing and relating to what "being an informant" meant, there was a general consensus among the ex-offenders that it was simply not something you did. This was connected to a culture of behaviour, or as many described it "a code" (Interview).

> R: We have a code, it's like a code of conduct, and it's so ingrained in our heads. … Anybody that comes from that underground criminal world, right, you do NOT go to testify in court. You do NOT! You do not press charges! … It's so, I started so young in that life that there are some things that I don't know if they'll ever change. I'm getting better with them.
>
> AH: So, it's almost like it's against your religion?
>
> R: It is, it truly is. Like this is my life this is what I, these are my morals. Right. So, it's really hard. I've never thought of it like religion, but yeah, it's almost like I'd be pissing on my gods.
>
> AH: Right, so not religion in a spiritual sense but like if you'd been raised in a cult
>
> R: Yes! Yeah well, I was, that's exactly what that is, is a cult. (Interview)

For nearly every ex-offender I spoke to, the fact that they had never "ratted", and had adhered to this code of conduct, was a point of pride and honour, reflecting their integrity as "solid", even as they were actively trying to put the associated culture and mindset behind them.

> For a few of the older members (ex-offenders) this code was universal, I was told:
>
> R: It doesn't matter, ex-offender or volunteer, you're always an informant, anybody, because there are other ways of dealing with it.
>
> AH: So, if I got beat up you would say don't go to the cops, come to me?
>
> R: Don't worry about it. I'd just say "don't worry about it. Relax just relax", and then you would find out what happened. That's how I look at it. (Interview)

This was consistent across all of those who connected the taboo around informing with a code of conduct. The issue was not to avoid putting someone in prison, as I had at one

point thought, it was rather to avoid engaging with the criminal justice system. There were, "other ways we handle it" (Interview).

In all of these instances, I followed up by pointing out the inconsistency in trying to change and move beyond that criminal mentality, mindset, culture, and identity, while still holding onto this code of conduct. This was readily acknowledged in every case, as being something that needed to be looked at and worked on. As with the category of sex-offenders, informants also present a stigmatized other to create a reference point around. For many of the members (ex-offenders) I spoke to and interviewed, their status as 'solid' as 'not an informant' was something that they could take pride in, coming from a past that otherwise might hold a great deal of personal guilt and shame.

Respect

Respect is an important component in building and cultivating trust between 7th Step members. Munn and Bruckert (2013) explored the role that respect, and civility, plays within prison, where rudeness at the smallest level can get a person killed. They described the lack of respect, a pervasive experience of rudeness, as being one of the things ex-offenders struggled with upon release (Munn & Bruckert, 2013). At 7th Step, because of the sense of a common goal and purpose amongst the volunteers, to help the ex-offenders, there is appreciation and mutual respect throughout the group's interactions. One member (ex-offender) described:

> It's the atmosphere. Because like, I mean, it's all friendly faces, nobody is in there looking to dig in your pockets. Like you go to AA, NA, soon as you go outside all you hear is, 'you ain't got a smoke, do you?' 'you ain't got a bus ticket, or two bucks so I can get on the bus, do you?' [he rolls his eyes] but you don't hear that here right … people respect each other. Like everybody's not out for themselves, it's a group thing. And basically, most

> of the people, I see sharing. They'll ask *you*, you don't have to say do you have a smoke, cuz they'll be like, you want one? (Interview)

This appreciation of the group-centric nature of 7th Step was a reoccurring theme in the interviews with ex-offenders. In this way, respect was an intrinsic part of creating a safe community because of the trust that it engendered.

Because of this sense of respect, ex-offenders are able to trust the space enough to open up about their past, their present, and their hopes for the future. Without that respect, there can be the desire to change, but not the trust to actually do so. During one meeting, an ex-offender attending for the first time shared about his struggles and said that he was "open to anything that will keep me here" (here meaning alive and out of prison). As this young man introduced himself, however, there was a defensive arrogance in how he shared his story, almost bragging about the horrible experiences that had brought him there. I could feel this making the ex-offenders in the group edgy, and many of them asked the young man questions, challenging him. It was almost like a mini Hotseat. I had not seen anything like it happen before. While he had come to the group looking for support, the idea that he could learn anything from the other ex-offenders present, or that he needed help in order to change, seemed to be triggering for him.

As the meeting progressed, the young man expressed feeling slighted and disrespected in many ways. By the end of the meeting he had become aggressive and confrontational. What was most significant about this interaction, was the response from the other ex-offenders in the group. After he had exploded and said his piece, I expected someone to kick him out. That was, in fact, my own impulse. Instead, the ex-offenders gave him encouragement and told him to come back the next week, to keep coming back. They gave him their phone numbers and offered to help in whatever way they could.

There was a certain quality of sadness to the gesture, however, and I had a sense that they knew he was not going to come back or call (Field note, 4/03/18).

While I connect this interaction to the interdependent relationship between trust and respect, when I spoke to members (ex-offenders) about it, they all agreed that the young man simply was not yet ready; he was not really open to change.

Openness

This quality of being open is a requirement for the trust that is being built and nurtured through 7th Step. It was commonly expressed by ex-offenders that they needed to be ready and open to change before they could engage with 7th Step. Similarly, discussions about potential new members often turned to whether or not they were ready and willing to engage in the process of change. In many of the interviews, members (ex-offenders) described having heard of 7th Step years before they finally began coming:

> I originally heard about it [7th Step] years ago, but I never really knew much about it because I wasn't ready for any change. (Interview)
>
> [A friend] was involved in AA and stuff, and he was telling me that those programs could help me, but I wasn't ready then. (Interview)
>
> It's like banging your head against the wall so many times to make something change and nothing changes. Stop banging your head. You know. (Interview)

The volunteers who had been coming for a longer period of time, likewise expressed this need for ex-offenders coming in to be ready and open to change in some way:

> There's people who come, and like you can just kind of tell, like right off the bat, you're like, eh I don't really think this guy's gonna stick around that long. And then there's other people who are like, they're really raring to go and you're like that guy's got it, like he's got a good shot. (Interview)

The quality of being open, even if it is just that a person is open to the possibility of change, is what allows trust to occur. For most ex-offenders, any level of trust is already a monumental form of personal growth (Interview).

For volunteers, trust is a more familiar concept, and, because of this, their ease and openness can be a precursor for the ex-offender's trust. When a volunteer shares and is open, this allows the ex-offender to trust them, and subsequently open up themselves. One member (ex-offender) described:

> The way the volunteers open up with their shitty days, their whatever, their crap, just as much as we do. So, the fact that they can do that, then I could do it too. (Interview)

Often, however, volunteers regularly described feeling trepidation around opening up, as though it was not the appropriate place for them to do so. Many described feeling like their worries or concerns were too small, too petty and insignificant to share. Many expressed not wanting to take up the space or time, when they had other outlets available to them to talk and vent. One member described:

> It would be so insensitive of me to sit up there and be like, 'oh my god my life sucks so bad, I'm in law school and I don't know how I'm going to get a job and pay off this debt'. Everyone in that room would kill to have that opportunity. So, I'm not going to stand up there and whine about it. I will to my girlfriend (laughs), but that's because, that's the relationship we have. And I have these other outlets, and I just, I don't want to fill up their time. (Interview)

This reticence to share seemed to be a by-product of the perspective 7th Step offered volunteers. As they began to recognize and appreciate the relatively minor nature of many of their concerns, they would become less likely to share their struggles as openly.

For my own part, this was something I never stopped struggling with. However, because of conversations and early interviews, where ex-offenders regularly expressed

appreciation for the volunteers who shared more openly, I began questioning this hesitation and its contradiction with the assertions members made about the volunteer role being to help socialize. During interviews with the volunteers I would ask probing questions, pointing out this contradiction. Often the result was self-reflection:

> Maybe I should talk more. I don't know. That's a very good point. Maybe it would make everybody else more comfortable with me being in the room. …There is a disconnect, there totally is. If I'm just like, well my week's so good, like, there's definitely not going to be that, oh other people have problems too, they're just going to be like, oh his life is like 100% together everything, he's like living on the beach! When really in my mind I'm like 'what the fuck is happening!?' Like I'm totally having stresses too. I think that's a very fair point. But I also think there's that societal politeness thing. (Interview)

This sense of "societal politeness" came up in many of the volunteer interviews, intertwined with a hesitancy around sharing.

Beyond feeling that their worries or concerns were insignificant compared to others, societal politeness, for a number of volunteers, involved a subtle sense of embarrassment around their privilege and good fortune. For many, this made developing a more intimate connection and relationship with the ex-offenders more challenging. One member (volunteer) described:

> I have my own car, and I'm only 20 years old, and it's like, not that I have money, because it's all bank loans. But even the fact that I can get that bank loan! Yeah! So yeah. It's like, embarrassment about the privilege. (Interview)

Another explained that he regularly held back because of not wanting to cross a line by offending or making someone else feel uncomfortable:

> We don't want to like flaunt it. But the problem is we can't really understand, we can't go into that person's shoes and understand where that line is. So, I think a lot of people take the more conservative step back, and just be like I'd rather not play anywhere close to that line, I don't want to even approach it. (Interview)

Feeling self-conscious about his "unearned" privilege created a constant sense of disconnect: "There's definitely a disconnect, like I feel it every day – But I still like going" (Interview). Many of the volunteers I spoke with struggled with this feeling, desiring to connect, and to themselves be a "part of", yet worrying that there was no way for them to truly understand or empathise with experiences that they could not imagine.

Objective differences, as opposed to the recognition of subjective commonalities, seemed to be a common struggle in the volunteer experience. I understood, and occasionally struggled with, these impulses myself. Coming into 7th Step with the intent of doing research, however, allowed me to hear and recognize the benefit and role played by volunteers sharing freely and openly early on. Within the interviews, I was then able to recognize patterns whereby ex-offenders also felt self-conscious around sharing, although they were able to notice and reflect on their reticence without any prodding. One member (ex-offender) described:

> I like the weekly sharing. I like hearing about how different people handle different situations, everything from having a bad cold right up to, you know, the death of a younger brother. Everybody has their different challenges, and I might think that you dealing with the flu for the last two weeks is very insignificant, as opposed to someone who is dealing with the death of a family member, but when you look at it, it's all in how we deal with whatever situation we're dealing with. And how you *share that*. For someone like me, who's never dealt with situations, who has brushed them under the rug and pretended they never happened. So, knowing how other people deal with situations, good, bad, minor, very insignificant all the way up to extreme. … And I'm still really not as open as I should be. … The other week and I didn't share what I should have, because two members down from me had a much worse week [laughs], so it kind of minimized mine. But then I realized afterward, no, that's not the way to think about it, you know, they shared their story and they got some good feedback, and you should have done the same. (Interview)

Meanwhile, with the volunteers, there was often a blind spot in realizing how their self-consciousness was hindering their full participation.

One member (volunteer) during his interview expressed great conviction that the space and the program was, and should be, all about the ex-offender. He thought that volunteers should not take up space by sharing their problems, but, rather, should just be there to observe. While initially this sounded cold and problematic to me, it became clear throughout the interview, that what I saw as a desire to observe the Other, was actually arising from feelings of self-minimization similar to those being expressed by some of the ex-offenders. He later explained:

> Last week, someone shared that they don't take their problems – they decline them as being less worthy, and I think that resonated the most with me because I do tend to – to degrade my own problems, because they aren't worth any attention. … It's that everyone struggles with their own shit. Right. But I don't necessarily come to the group to share my end of the story as much. … Because I want to listen to their stories, because I'm, mine are really not that important. (laughs) I don't know, like I feel that it's a waste of time to - to put my stuff in it, because it's really their time. Right. (Interview)

What became interesting, as the research progressed, was how frequently this personal dynamic played out for both volunteers and ex-offenders. It became clear early on in the interviews that the volunteers were unaware of how helpful their full and open participation was to the ex-offenders, as well as how common their struggles with self-worth were to the membership overall. One member (ex-offender) described:

> I like the sharing part … because I can look at somebody and say, if I'm having a bad day, there's always somebody off worse than me. Or *better* than me, and I look at them and I just like hearing it right. I'm like nice! Nice one! You know what I mean. (Interview)

This was an appreciation that ex-offenders would often express – getting to see, hear, and be a part of people's everyday lives in this way.

The weekly shares were the time when either this openness or reticence was expressed. The section of each meeting where people go around the room and share from their week, is described in the meeting agenda as being "our most important activity" (Agenda, 2017). Every member I interviewed recognized the remarkable value of the weekly shares. The activity of sharing offered new perspective to ex-offenders and volunteers alike, and often would generate a sense of positivity, gratitude, and appreciation – hope even – for all members.

For the ex-offenders, the weekly shares offered coping skills and new pro-social perspectives. For the volunteers, the weekly shares offered a new perspective around the fortunate nature of their lives. Three of the volunteers I interviewed described:

> Whether it was a really good week, or a really bad week, it's nice to be able to, to just talk about it and have people like laugh with you or just be like, oh we're here for you. (Interview)

> I don't know, sometimes, like yeah, what people are sharing is like heavy, heavy shit. And it puts my own life in perspective a lot of the time. (Interview)

> I've got a roof over my head. I'm not dealing with issues like these people are, like [mine] are small problems, [I] should be grateful! So, I think it kind of just grounds me too. And I found it just kind of helped me keep a level head with school … you get to hear about other people's struggles and concepts that they're struggling with, or someone else's success and you can tell that they've been working on it, and you get to celebrate it with them. I found *that* the most enjoyable. (Interview)

In their very ordinary way, the weekly shares offer education, inclusion, catharsis, and socialization to all members. Each individual is constantly being worked upon through the varying degrees of their engagement within the process of sharing, and this has its cognitive influence, producing varying degrees of change.

One volunteer explained that she was most strongly impacted by the group during her first two meetings, and that, since then, the change she had experienced was more subtle and ongoing:

> I mean, like not in this super profound way, but then in some ways in a very profound way, but it's almost as though it's the beginning of a change for me. It's not like I'm changed, it's like – I'm changing. (Interview)

For the ex-offenders, as well as the volunteers, the weekly share is a unique space where they are able to talk about things, give advice, receive advice, and open up about deep issues and struggles they are facing. During one meeting, a guest (ex-offender) talked about needing to "open up" and feeling like he could actually do that at 7th Step, because, as he described, "I have to face things for my recovery and that means making myself vulnerable enough so that I can get some help" (Field note, 4/10/18). The more that members are willing to open up about their lives, the more a sense of trust and community is created, and the more an experience of change can be fostered.

Accountability: The Foundation of Change

7th Step is about accountability. It says this in the 7th Step documents, and it is the consensus among every single member I interviewed or spoke to. The mandate of 7th Step is to help ex-offenders get out, and stay out, of prison; however, the group accomplishes this through accountability. A recognition of this permeated all of the meetings I went to. I would regularly hear members describe what the group does: "we hold each other accountable" (Field note, 3/28/18). This was not always something that I recognized being a direct part of, or witnessing, so much as it was a result of all the various forms, dynamics, and interactions that made up 7th Step. One member (ex-offender) explained:

> It's all about accountability. It's all about change. Positive change. If I'm still doing things that I know are wrong, how can I feel good about myself? Right. It's, the mindset has to change … I have to look at myself in the mirror and ask myself, did I hurt anybody today? … I have to have self-respect, which I didn't for most of my life … so personal self-respect is a big thing, right, and dignity. (Interview)

In offering an atmosphere of positive change, dignity, self-reflection, and subsequently self-respect, 7th Step creates a culture of accountability. This accountability is what creates the foundation and possibility for change (Interview).

Typically, the word accountable is associated with transparent and satisfactory explanations for actions, and responsibility for the results thereof (Oxford English Dictionary). What 7th Step means by accountability is deeper than that. Accountability in this sense is both an individual and relational concept, where, in front of others, a person takes ownership of their actions and behavior, and of the consequences of these actions for themselves and others. This ownership is an act of intense honesty and vulnerability, where a person takes responsibility for themselves and the harm they have caused, completely, without the habitual response of justification, denial, or self-loathing, all of which are mechanisms of avoidance.

This kind of accountability was conveyed to me at my third meeting, during the second Hotseat that I witnessed. It was an extraordinary Hotseat, I later came to recognize. The member (ex-offender) told his story without any form of avoidance. He was honest about the things in his life that had brought him to where he was, about what he had done, about how he felt, and about where he was, emotionally, psychologically, physically, and spiritually in that moment. The experience was raw, intense, and life changing. Indeed, the majority of the volunteers who came to 7th Step during my research, came because of a presentation where this member had told his story.

That quality of honesty, of accountability to both oneself and others, is inspiring. Most, if not all, of the ex-offenders I met through 7th Step had this quality, to some degree. They were engaging with the world, and with themselves, trying to be, or become, accountable. This quality was described by many of the volunteers as being what inspired them most about coming to 7th Step (Interview). Likewise, it became a source of motivation, for me, to understand how I could, myself, become accountable.

Accountability

Accountability at 7th Step is experienced through relationship, through the reciprocal act of sharing and bearing witness. Many ex-offenders described a combination of the insights, knowledge, and experience of other ex-offenders, together with the mere presence of the volunteers, as creating a space where they felt compelled to hold themselves accountable.

> Just look around the room, right, you see it, you know, these people [volunteers] have – the best interests of society, you know what I mean, the best interests of the people sitting in this room, at heart. Right. Just them being there. They *care*. (Interview)

While accountability happens through this exchange, it is also dependent upon an individual being ready, willing, and honest with themselves. One member (ex-offender) was vehement: "the only one who can make you be accountable, is *you*" (Interview). Accountability is the foundation of the change process.

Munn and Bruckert (2013) describe, "the planning done while in prison becomes muddled once the stark reality of re-establishing life on the outside is confronted" (p. 17). At 7th Step, accountability is a combination of honesty and realistic thinking. "Think Realistically" has been the 7th Step motto since the group's inception (Pamphlet, 2015). It is meant to acknowledge and cut through the pattern offenders have of hiding from or avoiding the realities of their past, present, and future. One member (ex-offender) described this pattern of avoidance:

> Just talking, when you're starting to glorify your addictions, and the party scene, and you know the drug scene, and the alcohol scene and you're glorifying your crimes. You know. So, it's basically, you're reliving them in a positive manner when they impacted yourself and society in a negative way. Right. (Interview)

This glorifying of the past was something that he described as being counter-productive to recovery, and a sign that one was avoiding taking responsibility, facing and owning the consequences and the harm that had been inflicted on others and oneself (Interview).

Another member (ex-offender), expressed this realistic thinking as being more about changing one's perspective about crime, and about what accomplishments one started to value instead. He described:

> Like you know if I see you doing something, for lack of words, messed up. I'm like, what are you doing man? Why do this here? [He acts out the interactions he has with presumably younger men] 'I hate it when you're right', they say. 'I hate when you're right, I hate when you get like that'. You know. Because I had so many guys that come into the halfway house and come and sit beside me, and all they'd be saying is 'I want to get out, I want to get out, I might as well go back to jail'. And I just look at them, give them a scenario, and then they look at me and go, 'I hate it when you're right'. You know what I mean. (Interview)

For him, thinking realistically was a way of getting through challenges, but also appreciating what he had already accomplished and how far he, and other ex-offenders, had come.

For the volunteers, being realistic was described as facing things directly:

> The whole thing of think realistic, has been, in my own relationship, has been like – I think probably most people, myself included, have a tendency to um sugar-coat things, or try to, you know, work through a dispute by down-playing certain issues, or just not being real. And I think, just having that in the forefront of my mind – to be real with people, is like, has positively affected my relationships, in this way that's like – because when you're real with someone, then they're real back. And I think, the funny thing is, before being a part of this, I think I thought I was being real. You know. But 7th Step touched something, to be like, you're not totally being real. (Interview)

Many of the volunteers expressed appreciation for this realness and its effect on their lives, often causing them to reconsider their own addictive behaviors and problem areas,

or to appreciate their good fortune or the luck that had allowed them to enter 7th Step as a volunteer instead of an ex-offender (Interview). Ultimately, thinking realistically is a matter of a person being brutally honest; accountability becomes a combination of honesty with oneself and others.

Conventionally, honesty is considered to be an articulation of fact, and this is then considered to be truth. From an ex-offender perspective, however, truth and honesty are expressions of the heart. In all but one of the interviews with ex-offenders, it was explained to me that ex-offenders were like lie detectors: that you could not pull the wool over their eyes, they could tell something was bullshit a mile away, it was impossible to lie to them, and you could not con a con. This superpower was described as being an ability to read energy and gauge sincerity:

> Like when someone's being truthful, it comes from their heart. When someone's fabricating it, it comes from their head. And like I said, I'm a professional, and I can pick up on that kind of stuff. (Interview)

It was an ability that had been developed, they all explained, from years of having been liars themselves, and of having scammed and taken advantage of people. As one member (ex-offender) described: "I spent years and years and years, of, thriving off making other people victims" (Interview). The honesty, even in that statement, comes from the sincerity of his remorse for the pride he might have once expressed, his own pain, and the pain he had caused others (Interview)

I experienced accountability in 7th Step as being a matter of the heart. As I understood it, accountability, especially for ex-offenders, was about feeling and staying with that feeling. When asked about accountability many of the ex-offenders explained to me their personal cycle with addiction. In every instance, it was essentially the same: an

addict ‘used’ either to feel something, or to stop feeling something (Interview). The addiction then took over and became the most important thing. It would become more important than everything else, including one’s family, values, morals, principles, etc. (Interview). When an addict is finally sober, they still have to deal with and confront the feelings and experiences that originally drove them to use, and also everything that they did while high. The challenge, it was commonly described, was in learning “to stay with it -- the feeling” (Field note, 3/08/18).

Confronting and working with these “feelings” is the act of accountability. Saying, or describing truthfully what one did in the past, why one did it, the harm that the action caused, all of it, is simply a means of accessing and confronting the feelings associated with those actions and experiences. This is the “core issue”. Avoiding these feelings, running from them, not being able to cope with them, not knowing how to feel them, getting overwhelmed, are the greatest threat and trigger for relapse and reoffending. One member (ex-offender) explained:

> It’s so weird. Right. Most of us know right from wrong, even, no matter how you were brought up, you know. You had those feelings, right. Like, you *know*, if you hurt somebody – ‘oh that’s bad, that’s, I shouldn’t be doing that’. like you know from a very young age, when your father was hurting you, or hurting y-your mother, you know that’s wrong, because of the feelings you get. Right. You might not be able to put it into words, you might not even know what to do with it, but you KNOW. Those feelings, right. They’re yucky feelings. So why is that.
>
> So, no matter where you’re at in your life, you still have that, it’s still under there, somewhere, right, those feelings are still there, and that’s, that was a big part of it with my drug use, and how it progressed. Because I didn’t know what to do with those feelings. Right. And I’m – I got a big heart, I’m like, I’ve always been that way. But I suppressed it, because it wasn’t cool. That’s not who I’m supposed to be. What’s wrong with me? Right! Man, I was supposed to be *Hard*, right. Why do I feel like this? Right. Why am I trying to protect the little guy? You know, survival of the

> fittest, you know what I mean. And – and I'm like, why, why, so there's turmoil.
>
> So, to suppress it, because the more that I did wrong, the more I had to suppress. It's a vicious circle. See. Because I would, because I would, cause harm, get feelings, suppress the feelings, with drugs or alcohol, have to supply that habit, had to create more harm, to get what I needed, and to live how I was, or thought I was supposed to live, create more feelings, and it would just be a vicious circle. And then as time went, the more things that I was doing, the harder the drugs got, how I used em got harder, because, I had to cover it up. I had to – not feel. Right. And, so. Yeah. (Interview)

The most common quality among the ex-offenders I interviewed was this quality of having a "big heart". It was described in different ways, as being "sensitive", "a big scotch softie", "caring too much", and, in each case, was framed as being repressed because of a need to be "tough", or "hard". In this way, accountability as being an act of feeling, opening, and being vulnerable, represented a change in patterns of self-destruction. Accountability was described as feeling those "yucky feelings" (Interview).

The Hotseat

The primary mechanism, used by 7th Step, to facilitate, even force, accountability in its members, is the Hotseat. The Hotseat is a ritual used to confirm full "core group member" status. It is a process that puts people on the spot and encourages them to confront their past, and present, realistically and honestly, in front of the group. Maruna (2017) describes the need for re-inventing "rituals of reintegration" into the criminal justice system. Through the ritual of the Hotseat, which is a process of intense self-reflection and exposure, an individual becomes officially integrated and welcomed into the group. Significantly, both ex-offenders and volunteers must be hotseated in order to become core group members. Maruna (2017) writes: "These intangible processes of

status elevation may be the most critical component of the reintegration process". By having both ex-offenders and volunteers go through the same Rite of Passage, it creates a sense of camaraderie and fellowship that unifies members despite their different histories, hardships, experiences, and perspectives.

During the chaos of my own Hotseat, I was most put on the spot when one of the ex-offenders asked if I felt like I had the support and affection of the group? In that moment I felt exposed, I had to look at myself honestly. The question was, in its essence, a challenge. Did I trust the inherent and unconditional affection of this group, consisting primarily of ex-offenders and law students, whom, I felt, hardly knew me at all? It was not a conceptual question, it was, rather, challenging me to own my own confusion and bias. Was I willing to trust and let go of my pretence, to share my most flawed and neurotic self, with this group: to trust with the daring and generosity that was required of me as a volunteer?

My Hotseat helped me to realize that, for me, this was the price of entry for 7th Step, and it shifted my understanding of the meetings I had previously attended. It revealed something that I had yet to articulate or fully comprehend about the reciprocity and mutual exchange that was necessary in order to fully embrace and support ex-offenders. Maruna (2004) writes,

> When society's reaction to deviants is to stigmatize, segregate and exclude, such persons are left with limited opportunity for achieving self-respect and affiliation in the mainstream … Hence the vicious circle of persistent offending. (p. 273)

My Hotseat, the questions I was asked and the interactions that occurred, made me feel naked, exposed, and uncertain. For me, it was like a test without any correct answers and I felt like it had been too short and perfunctory. However, I began to realize that it was

not about me being able to answer and know exactly what I had to gain or offer. It was about me showing up and meeting what was needed.

After my Hotseat I felt exhausted, even though the process had only taken twenty minutes. I remember waiting outside the room. It was almost 9 pm and the university hallway was dark and empty. I felt awkward and anxious, waiting. I felt groundless and noticed my tendency to try and reconcile myself with a worst-case scenario, as preparation. It felt strange to know that a group of people was discussing me, discussing whether or not to accept me as a core group member. I could not tell if it was taking longer than usual or if it just felt like it was. I was trying to prepare myself for rejection, even as I felt hopeful and like I had accomplished something. I had survived the Hotseat. This was a moment of threshold as I existed in a liminal state between the ritual and its completion (*cf:* Maruna, 2017).

The desire for acceptance and the fear of rejection was like an ache in my body. I stood waiting in the dark hallway and wondered what it must be like for the ex-offenders when they stood in this hallway waiting, having exposed so much more of themselves and their lives than I just had. How much did they need this win? How much were they expecting rejection? How different and similar were our experiences, and in the end was not that ache of hope and fear, that groundlessness, exactly the same for them as well? I wondered, how much were the forms and structures of this custom, the ritual of the "Hotseat", influencing and shaping our experience?

When I was finally called back in, the blood rushed to my head. I sat down in the middle of the room and one of the members began to tell me I had failed, before revealing the joke. I was in, accepted, a core group member! I suddenly felt just as

exposed as I had during the Hotseat. I felt confronted with my own shyness and responsibility; I had been accepted into the group, yet I did not know or understanding what that meant, what I had to offer. As I returned to my seat, now a core group member, the room was full of smiles, and I reflected on the human need for a sense of belonging.

The goal of the Hotseat is to expose an individual's most vulnerable self in front of the group, with all of the messy history, context, and subtext that may be included. The fact that the group then accepts, recognizes, values, and appreciates that vulnerable self, its history, and its exposure creates the ground and possibility for a deep and meaningful sense of workability and change. Among other things, the Hotseat and the subsequent identity of becoming a "core group member" represents a commitment that is made to the group, which then creates a further sense of responsibility and gives weight to the maintenance of the change process. One member (ex-offender) described this in terms of his relationship to the volunteers, and their role in helping him to feel a part of the larger society:

> People, the volunteers, are people that believe in you, believe in *me*, right! And they verbalize it, and there's an accountability there, you start to become accountable. You start to feel like it's not just me anymore. You know what I mean? … and they're a part of society that hasn't given up on me. That's another part of it, right. Which is a huge factor. Because, a lot of society, when they hear about, that you've been in jail or just like, they take a step back! There's very few that take a step forward. And that's what the volunteers do. (Interview)

By showing up the volunteers take this step forward, towards the ex-offender, it is an act of caring that supports the reciprocal act of accountability. Both volunteers and ex-offenders together offer a community of tough love. If a core group member begins to slip, in terms of their recovery or accountability, they can and often will be called back to

the Hotseat. In this way, the ritual is ongoing and the Hotseat is used as both an initiation and ongoing form of support.

Occasionally the Hotseat process will be described as tearing someone down and then building them back up: however, there is a general consensus that this description is inaccurate and reductive. For example, during one member's (ex-offender) Hotseat, the conversation kept coming back to the issue of his spirituality. While there is often discussion in the group about the need for a "Higher Power", in this instance, it was clear that the focus on spirituality was more about something specifically needed and desired in terms of self-care for that specific individual. In an interview afterward, the member expressed being "blown away" by the impact the Hotseat and its focus on spirituality had had on his life:

> You know I never thought it was going to be based on, you know, my Hotseat kinda went in the direction of my higher power and my belief in God you know. And saying 'belief' and actually showing the gratitude and believing are two different things, you know. So, just the commitments that I had to make, you know, praying in the morning, praying at night. The people that I met [through the Hotseat], you know, I've had so much, so much happen in that one week, that it was just like, it was like a spiritual awakening. (Interview)

This was one of the very few Hotseats I witnessed where spirituality was focused on in this specific way. It was an example of the power of the Hotseat to get at a core issue that was being avoided within the individual's life.

The need for an individual to uncover and engage with the core issues affecting their choices and behaviour is a recurring theme at 7th Step, particularly as it relates to recovery from addictions. While most ex-offenders, and a number of the volunteers, identify as having addiction issues, the focus on core issues is applicable to all members. One member (ex-offender) explained:

> I'm a firm believer in that recovery is much more than just addiction, and addiction is much more than just substance. (Interview)

There is something about the Hotseat that recognizes this and gets at the very human journey each person's story represents. One member (ex-offender) described:

> Those feelings are the same in everybody. It don't matter if you were brought up with a silver spoon in your mouth, or you were brought up sexually abused from the day you were born, those feelings of insecurities, of being human, are still there for everybody, and I think that's probably one of the things that I take away, especially from like the Hotseat, is seeing those same raw emotions. (Interview)

The Hotseat challenges and supports an individual to unpack their habitual patterns in a safe space. It creates an opportunity for self-reflection, insight, and further growth for those sitting around the room as well. One member (ex-offender) described:

> Because of being an alcoholic and addict for so many years … I consider myself a professional liar. And when people are on the Hotseat, and people are firing questions at them, I can sense within myself whether they're being truthful or not, and if they're lying, they're only lying to themselves. So, that is the most powerful part of the program for me, is the Hotseat, because it allows me to see the areas that I need to work on. (Interview)

This sentiment was reflected in many of the interviews with both ex-offenders and volunteers. One member (volunteer) described going home after Hotseats and reflecting on the questions that had been asked in terms of his own life and behaviour. He valued that opportunity for reflection as being a unique part of his week (Interview).

The reciprocal benefit and reflection that takes place during the Hotseat is a key piece in how the process works. It is important to recognize that, before going on the Hotseat themselves, a guest will have both witnessed and taken part in several Hotseats already. Because of this, they will have experienced the self-reflection, personal benefit,

and fundamental motivation of care, love and concern, that holds the entire process of challenge and confrontation.

Hotseats do not in-and-of-themselves uncover a person's core issues, rather the process facilitates a greater curiosity, openness, and self-reflection that can either begin, or further support, that journey. Often, the areas and insights brought forward during a Hotseat are very internal to the individual and may even go unexpressed. These insights get developed through self-reflection, weekly shares, and/or interpersonal discussions that may occur over time. For ex-offenders, the Hotseat is simply about being accountable.

One member (ex-offender) asked to be Hotseated upon their return to the group after a relapse, because, as she said, "I have to be accountable" (Field note, 4/17/18). Another ex-offender described how the Hotseat really forced them to take the necessary next steps with their recovery. Talking about the commitments he made during his Hotseat, he explained:

> I have a home group in NA [narcotics anonymous], which is great, and I have a sponsor and stuff. But you know, I probably wouldn't have held myself accountable - to actually call him up, to go get a Big Book and all that stuff. (Interview)

Another member (ex-offender) describes it as "forcing" accountability:

> The one big thing that I really do like about the Hotseat, is the accountability that it forces on somebody, and it does, it forces it. I really think it forces it. It drives it down your throat. That you're not going to get away with any bullshit here, that this is a group of people that want to move forward, that are working hard to move forward. … If you want to dig a hole and you want to crawl in it go ahead, but we're not going to help you dig it deeper. That being said we're also not going to help you dig out of it. You know. You've got to start that process yourself. So yeah, that's huge. (Interview)

One of the volunteers expressed appreciation for the unique way in which the ex-offenders are able to offer accountability to each other:

> They're able to hold each other a bit more accountable to things, and I just think there's this lesson in observing those interactions, like how important it is, not to just congratulate someone for saying they want to be sober this week but then being like well, yeah, so how are you going to do that? And then following up. Forcing someone to be accountable, which is like coming from a place of love, I think. (Interview)

This "place of love" creates the ground for people to take accountability and ownership of their past.

A large part of this comes from telling their story, openly and honestly. Many of the members (ex-offender) I spoke to said that their Hotseat was the first time they had ever told their story in that way (Interview). One member (ex-offender), in his mid to late 60s, said that during his Hotseat was the first time he had ever been "completely honest" and shared like that, and that it had forced him to take a look at his life and what he was doing (Field note, 4/3/18). Even for the members who did not personally care for the Hotseat, the process was felt to be direct, profound, and potentially healing. During the Hotseat, one's strengths and weaknesses are explored with honesty, and, in this way, accountability includes embracing and being honest about both the negative and positive aspects of oneself.

Change

The honesty and vulnerability involved in being accountable creates the foundation for change to occur. Ex-offenders described the importance of no longer hiding, and no longer being ashamed of their past and who they were because of it (Interview). They described how being able to name their feelings and experience them in

front of others created a "challenge and opportunity to confront my fears and anxiety, to just do it" – move forward (Field note, 5/15/18). This common ground of accountability was also a means of creating trust and mutual respect within the group, it offered a sense of unity despite disparate viewpoints or personalities, and this then encouraged growth: "we are stronger together – as a group we can stay strong to promote positive change" (Field note, 4/03/18).

Through 7th Step, accountability offers the freedom to own and acknowledge one's past. Often, this allowed ex-offenders to share and speak about the shame or guilt that they carried, to process that and heal from it. Accountability was a means by which they could demonstrate having changed. It allowed them to locate their "new" activity and identity around giving back and "making good", as being an indirect amends to the community, while also being a confirmation of their essential goodness (Maruna, 2001). Rather than shame, it was often the heartbreak of realization, which many described as being their catalyst for change. One member (ex-offender) described:

> I overdosed after I was arrested the last time, and I was in detox, and these people were telling me stories about how they'd lost their families, their spouses died, their kids overdosed, all this stuff. I was the one bringing those drugs into the fucking country. The guilt! Oh man, listening to them, watching them drink the alcohol from the hand sanitizer. I *did* that. Right. Like I brought these drugs into this country that were making these people feel like that. And this, I caused them to lose their wife, I caused them to lose their kids, I caused their father to overdose.
>
> AH: So, you carry that.
>
> R: Yeah. And like I have people tell me all the time, if it wasn't you it would be someone else, but that's not the point. The point is, *it was me*. So right now, all I'm trying to do is indirect amends, right. Make good from my wrongs. (Interview)

This is similar to the "making good" that Maruna (2001) describes, except that it does not involve re-writing one's past or becoming "reconstituted" (p. 10). Rather, it is about transforming how ex-offenders view themselves, and how they engage with and offer their strengths to the community.

The change that is most emphasised in 7th Step documents is this personal transformation of the ex-offender. Although volunteers are encouraged to be open to change, by and large, the emphasis is on the ex-offender and the need to change the "criminal mindset". This is how ex-offenders regularly described "the old ways of thinking" that led to and perpetuated their past offenses and criminal lifestyle. One member (ex-offender) explained:

> I have moments, when things get difficult, then the old way of thinking creeps back in, and I think well I know how to make fast money, and that's when I generally pray to my higher power and ask for help, and I get brought back to center and know that there's consequences that come from those behaviours. (Interview)

These impulses and reactions can be so pervasive that the potential for relapse remains, even after decades of recovery and desistance.

The "criminal mindset" was described as being a "self-destructive journey", a "belief system", wherein violence is used as a tool to get what one wants, and "the world is a hostile place" where everyone is out for themselves alone (Interview). The criminal mindset is described as being a habitual way of thinking and perceiving the world: one that is deeply entrenched and engrained within the psyche. It was regularly described as being "neural pathways" that needed to be changed (Field note, 3/28/18).

Because this mindset is so habitual, true change must be gradual, creating new habits of thought and reaction – overlays of positive thought processes, behaviors, and

responses, to replace, or at least override, the old. Repetition is a key component in this. Some members (ex-offenders) would describe "going to meetings the way that I used: every day" (Interview). One member (ex-offender) expressed needing, to "create healthy habits … keeping my brain healthy" and needing to put as much effort into his recovery as he had into his self-destruction (Interview). Often, creating new habits took the form of a repetition of phrases, linguistic reminders, or slogans of sobriety taken from other recovery groups. A number of members (ex-offenders) described how just coming to meetings regularly, seeing the volunteers, connecting with "good people" and "positivity", helped them to challenge their old ways of viewing the world (Interview).

It was through the weekly shares that I witnessed the most significant manifestations of change within members, as they increasingly came to meetings. From young students, who slowly relaxed and went from meek and quite to loud and strong, to older professionals, who came in like a bulldozer with their desire to help and then began to soften and open up. An old man, who had spent most of his life in prison, came in like a grey blanket of smog, closed off, in pain, and anti-social; in the span of four weeks I saw him open up and blossom into the most beautiful, warm, bouncing, lovely man. He would go around the room before a meeting shaking hands and connecting with everyone there. I watched a woman fresh out of prison – a bundle of defensiveness, anxiety, and nerves – relax and share her strong talented self, becoming a leader in the 7th Step community. One ex-offender, who had been coming for a while and often not saying much, but always listening intently, shared during a meeting. He burst wide open like a babbling brook after the thaw, sharing about his struggles with mental health, addiction, hopelessness and despair, and how the loneliness he felt was something he had come to

realize everyone could relate to, even without addiction or social anxiety. He described himself as being a shy person, and yet, suddenly, his weekly shares were loquacious, daring, funny and bold. As he shared the room opened up, encouraging and reflecting back to him how far he had come, and how delightful and well-loved he was. His response to this was one that was common amongst the ex-offenders when they would get an outpouring of love or encouragement from the group: his face became flushed with emotion, embarrassment, poignancy, and joy (Field note, 4/24/18).

The catalyst for my own change, at more than just a superficial level, was heartbreak, connecting, being touched, feeling. Just as this experience of feeling is a part of accountability, I came to believe that it was essentially the turning point or catalyst for change as well. When asked during interviews, what inspired their commitment to a process of change, many of the ex-offenders described an experience of feeling, of being touched in some way:

> It is the heartbreak. It's that – when you *know* that you've done something. That! When you finally feel it, and it takes a lot for that to come through. (Interview)

Many ex-offenders described death as being their catalyst for change, either the death of someone close to them, or a death that they felt they had caused. For some the catalyst of death came through an experience or thought of attempted suicide, and at the last moment finding some realization, or spiritual intervention, experiencing a gesture of kindness from someone, or simply deciding that they actually wanted to live and recognizing that they had to change, or they were going to die (Interview). This was a common sentiment, regularly shared during meetings: ex-offenders being afraid of themselves and not wanting to die (Field note, 5/22/18).

For some, the catalyst for change was something they had read, or heard, or saw, an interaction, something that created a connection and drove them to want to change. Even for those who described their catalyst as being prison and incarceration, it was a specific feeling that was evoked, which drove their desire to change. The importance of this feeling was that it was something real and strong that they could return to and remember, feel again, in order to keep themselves sticking to it. An event alone was not enough to sustain the change process, if it did not also evoke a felt desire. Because the cycle of addiction and crime was so connected to the avoidance of feeling, it required something strong, a different feeling, to offer the strength to sustain that commitment and intention to change (Interview).

Ultimately, trust, openness, accountability, and change, arise in an interdependent and cyclical process. Openness is simply the various forms and degrees of vulnerability. Allowing yourself to be vulnerable and open, offering that vulnerability to others, this is what creates trust. That trust then supports the further development of openness and vulnerability, which meet with accountability to produce real, deep, and meaningful change. As one member (ex-offender) described her experience of the accountability she experiences from other ex-offenders:

> Not only do they say it, but they show it. That it's okay, you don't have to be perfect, but it's okay to be good enough, and yeah you *are* good enough to deserve a halfway decent life … the openness, the honesty the accountability, the safety. It all boils down to the same thing for me. (Interview)

In this way, the process of developing trust, of engaging with accountability, and of sharing that process, its honesty and vulnerability, with others, becomes an act of giving back and helping.

Giving back: Reintegration and the maintenance of change

Change is a process that needs to be maintained. As with fitness and other changes in one's lifestyle, regularity is key. One of the primary ways that 7th Step supports the maintenance of change is through its various mechanisms for "giving back" to others and to society. These mechanisms include the opportunity for ex-offenders to tell their story at schools and other forums, and to share and help others during meetings. This is connected to the recovery notion of "keeping it by giving it away" (Interview). In the *Seven Steps to Freedom,* the final step describes: "Maintaining our own FREEDOM, we pledge ourselves to help others as we have been helped" (Bookmark, n/d). A large part of this helping others is accomplished through education. 7th Step enables ex-offenders to offer education about the conditions of incarceration, the realities of addiction, the lack of social supports for those struggling to survive the criminal justice system, and, most importantly, the humanity of ex-offenders.

School Visits and Presentations

The aspect that most drew ex-offenders to 7th Step was the outreach work it did in the community: "going into schools and talking to young people to try to help break the cycle of crime and stuff like that, that's what I was interested in" (Interview). It was also the aspect of the program that members (ex-offenders) felt was most fulfilling and meaningful. One member (ex-offender) described:

> I took from society for so long. I was such a menace to society! Like to be able to give back and just know that one kid might reach out because their parents are getting high, and they won't live like I did. Or one girl who's into the bad boys is going to turn around and say, I want to do better. Or

> one of the bad boys is like wow, I'm treating my girlfriend like that! Any little impact that we, that I can have, like the positive impact. And to see how these kids are fascinated, even the university students, at how we can change our lives. Go beyond that stigma of "a leopard can't change his spots". It isn't true, right. It's not true! You have to want it. So, to see that people are starting to see that we can be okay, and that we can just *be people*. It's such a good feeling. (Interview)

Through telling their stories and sharing, ex-offenders are able to engage in a reciprocal exchange with society. They experience the healing that comes from telling and having their story heard, and are potentially able to change lives and influence the future in a positive way. They use their past experiences to change outcomes for others. For one member (ex-offender), just mentioning his experience of presenting at schools and telling his story brought him to tears, "in the best way" (Interview).

Ex-offenders gain experience from the Hotseat, which helps them feel more comfortable telling their stories in front of strangers at schools and during other 7th Step presentations. One member (ex-offender) described:

> 7th Step showed me that it's okay to be *me*, right, and it's taught me how to open up to people. I'm still guarded when it comes to a lot of things, but it's okay, it's okay for me to talk about things. My past, it's okay not to be ashamed of my past, right. So yeah. Because there is no way, like a year and a half ago, that I would be able to go and speak at symposiums and schools, there's no way. (Interview)

By telling their stories during the Hotseat, with nothing held back, ex-offenders are able to own their actions, take accountability, and even share their guilt and sadness. Sharing out in the community then allows them to offer that vulnerability as an example and inspiration to others.

A large part of sharing at the schools has to do with a sense of contribution. Giving back and "doing something positive" has the effect of opening people up in new ways. Even though many ex-offenders described the experience of sharing at schools to

be “draining”, and “emotionally and physically exhausting”, they also described it as being one of the most fulfilling and joyful experiences of their life (Interview). That level of exposure and vulnerability has a dark side though, and the group often expressed wariness around ex-offenders sharing at schools too often or too soon. One member (ex-offender) described:

> It’s a really scary thing, you know, in the beginning when ex-cons come in and they first go and start sharing their stories, in schools and stuff, it’s a very dangerous time, right. -- Remember how vulnerable you felt when you took the Hotseat? You know the days that followed, all that turmoil inside, questioning everything. Did I answer this? Should I have said that? So, when a person first starts sharing their story in public, with people they’ve never met before, you can only imagine, and they start digging around in stuff that they might never have spoken about and the problem is, most of ‘em don’t have the coping skills, to deal with that. And they’ll sit there and tell you “oh no man, I’m great, I’m cool, I’m good”, and then a week later you don’t see them anymore, because they don’t know how to deal with it. (Interview)

This vulnerability that came from sharing at the schools was often described as being like an extreme Hotseat. Even though the presentations always went well, and were enthusiastically appreciated and received, the mixture of natural high and vulnerability was described as being a particularly triggering combination. More than one school visit coincided with a relapse (Field note, 3/6/18). One member (ex-offender) explained that after every presentation she had to just “go home and sleep” (Interview).

For many of the volunteers, particularly the college and university students, school presentations were how they had heard about 7th Step and subsequently been inspired to get involved. One member (volunteer) described:

> I had two members come in to my class and share their stories, and that was the first time I ever heard a story of someone and how they got involved with crime, like their whole life story and then how they were trying to rehabilitate and better themselves. I know it’s weird because I was in a class and it wasn’t like they were just speaking to me, but it felt

> like it, and I just was so moved by their stories and their motivations and all the struggles that they're going through. And so, they said that they were looking for volunteers and I was like Yep! Haha that's exactly what I want to do. (Interview)

For the members (volunteer) who have been around longer, the school visits offer a way to further connect with and support the ex-offenders. Many described learning new things each time and being continually impressed and inspired:

> You appreciate how long it can take to change … to develop a brand-new personality. Who can do that?! … To turn into somebody that people like and want to spend time with and come to a group and invite to schools. I don't know how you do that. I mean that to me is just, like, it's the essence of becoming a pro-social person. (Interview)

It was common for the volunteers I interviewed to acknowledge and admire how much outreach work the ex-offenders did in the community, even with all the struggles and challenges that they were facing. This was often described as giving members (volunteers) a sense of perspective and inspiration for their own lives (Interview).

During the course of my research I went on five different school visits and played an active role in four of the presentations, contextualizing 7th Step and introducing the ex-offenders. During one of the visits I was the only volunteer present. I came away from these interactions feeling an increased sense of closeness, connection and relationship with those ex-offenders. Many of the volunteers who had been to school visits described how moving it was to hear the ex-offenders tell their stories within that context, and how each time they heard more, or something new (Interview). Time and again I was struck by the vulnerability and deeply personal accounts of their lives that the ex-offenders were willing to offer to complete strangers, and how meaningful this was to them when younger students were involved. I often heard the sentiment: "I just want to help … the way I wish someone had been there to help me" (Interview).

From the first school visit that I went to, my understanding of my role as a volunteer changed. I was there in a relationship with the ex-offenders, I could feel that my presence was a support. I did not understand at the time entirely what that support consisted of, but I could feel that it was present. During one visit I was with a member (ex-offender) who I had heard share before, this time, however, he had been sharing at a college in front of students whom he took courses with, people he knew. It was touching to note how his story changed, which aspects were emphasized, which were removed. Afterward he talked to me about how nervous he was, and how different that presentation and experience of sharing his story had been: that it had felt more vulnerable and scarier (Field note, 3/28/18). By that point in the research a real friendship had developed between he and I.

Friendship is a significant offshoot of the school visits and presentations. Typically, people carpool and give each other rides to the schools, often this involves going out to lunch together or having long conversations during the ride. Volunteers and ex-offenders alike described how much they enjoyed and benefited from this time spent together. During one of my first school visits, which was in Truro, we had lunch at the home of an ex-offender's mother. He joked, as we were sitting around the table, that it was just like old times – him bringing home a bunch of criminals, however, the irony and pride within that statement was palpable. I felt so touched to be included in the experience. These sorts of ordinary and mundane interactions, going for lunch together, or waiting before a presentation, create friendships. For myself, these were more beneficial, respectful, and healthier than many of the other relationships in my life.

As my friendships with those doing the presentations developed, I noticed a smugness enter my manner and demeanor during school visits. I was proud to know these people and consider them my friends, but also there was a quality of ownership that I started to notice. It took me a while to identify what this was. It was not an ownership over another person, it was a pride in the relationship itself, an ownership of the friendship. The intimate moments, the inside jokes, the knowing glances, the little side conversations, all the accoutrements of friendship were on display during these presentations. These displays of friendship offered a sense of protection, and also a haptic communication of change. My friendship and closeness gave further credibility to the ex-offenders' stories of progress and personal growth, and also to my identity as someone who was giving back as well.

For ex-offenders it is not just the activity of "giving back" but the ability and opportunity to do so that is important. This kind of opportunity was seen as being a primary support that 7th Step was able to offer ex-offenders (Interview). One member (ex-offender) shared that he had finally been approved to go back into one of the correctional facilities to help, and that he was so proud and grateful for the opportunity that he had walked around "feeling high all day" after getting the letter; he described it as being a "big accomplishment" (Field note, 5/29/18).

This issue of ex-offenders not being allowed back inside correctional institutions, was an ongoing challenge for 7th Step. It was a challenge that created a great deal of frustration and was often commented on during meetings. One member (ex-offender) described: "All the places from where I come is where I want to do my service" (Field note, 6/12/18). Many ex-offenders described the importance of offering support to people

when they were incarcerated – that in that moment a person was "self-reflecting and open to change" (Interview). The ex-offenders' desire to step in, at that moment, was similar to their desire to speak to school-age youth, to help and offer support in those moments when they most identified as having needed support themselves (Interview).

Sharing

Much of what 7th Step offers, happens through the weekly shares during meetings. The process of each person sharing about their week can help to shift people's perceptions of one another. The weekly shares create what Maruna (2001) refers to as "a magical opportunity for empathic understanding" (p. 14). This experience of sharing is both about listening to others and being heard. Members regularly voiced their appreciation for the ability to share. One volunteer, during her Hotseat, spoke about how moved she was during her first meeting to have someone ask her about her week, to care, and really listen without judgement or even response – just acceptance. She said that she had never experienced that before in her life (Field note, 7/3/18).

Overall, the weekly share is a time of group reflection (Interview), where people discover insights from others about their own lives, and then offer their own experiences in a similar way to others. It becomes a weekly decompression where the group helps bolster each other through struggles, but also encourages and shares in each other's achievements and joys. Whether it is a graduation from university, a week sober, an anniversary or marriage, or getting off of parole, the group claps and cheers; the look on

the face of every single member in that moment, of having their accomplishment celebrated, is exactly the same. One member (ex-offender) I interviewed explained:

> It's like I said, you see that friendly face, you see people that are positive, and speak positive, right. Like you know how we do that sharing, - like oh I had a good weekend, I did this here, thanksgiving supper with my parents, we did this there, like, we went apple picking down the Valley, but like *everything*! It's like, woah, this is stuff that you don't hear people really talk about, but then when you do hear it you go, oh yeah! Right on! Right on, this is *life*! You know what I mean? You've got to buy into it, or you're fucked. [laughs] (Interview)

Another member (ex-offender) described the ongoing support he had received for going back to school:

> R: It's the group as a whole, right, it's what people want, what we're there for.
>
> AH: To see you succeed.
>
> R: Right! You know, which is, which is, a completely different aspect to what we're used to. It's a complete 180. When you're criminally active and in the drug use, everybody wants to put you down, everybody's trying to - arrest you, and put you in jail, or, people don't want to be around you, you know, it's like that, um, you know, you become detached from society as a whole, and you get used to that. (Interview)

The group's support and encouragement are, in this way, also empowering. Similarly, in Maruna's (2001) study he found that the "process of self-discovery was frequently described in terms of empowerment from some outside source … in fact, the theme of empowerment was one of the most distinguishing characteristics between the [ex-offenders and those continuing to offend]" (pp. 95-96).

For the ex-offenders the weekly share during meetings is a way to offer help to others as well as receive support. As members share about their struggles, they encourage and create a space where others can share as well. While this aspect of opening up about deep issues and struggles offers benefit to the member sharing, as an example, it offers

benefit to others as well. During more than one meeting, a member (ex-offender) would share about a slip or relapse they had, and talk about how and why it happened, how they felt, and how they were working with it, only to have another member (ex-offender) down the line talk about how the previous share had inspired them to open up about their own struggles as well (Field note, 3/24/18). Often there would be acknowledgement, not just between ex-offenders but also between ex-offenders and volunteers, of how a previous share had resonated or inspired someone. This, together with the Hotseat, often resulted in moments where ex-offenders would give advice, either to another ex-offender, or, more often, to a volunteer. One member (ex-offender) described:

> We get so excited about it! Well, I mean, I stay fairly quiet, but they get so excited about it, right … They're excited, they're proud right. They're proud that they have something to offer. (Interview)

This quality of sharing, offering insights and advice, of engaging with the space and offering oneself in that way, creates a sense of community and support for others. Being able to offer their advice, particularly to university students and professionals, or lawyers and judges, creates a unique opportunity to offer and give back for ex-offenders, helping to provide confidence and a path forward for broader social integration.

Education

Through both the school visits and the weekly shares, the primary activity of giving back becomes one of education. This form of giving back is often connected to a sense of frustration. There is the need to educate, for example, the business community so that ex-offenders can get jobs, "because we have a lot to offer" (Field note, 4/3/18). While employment difficulties were a reoccurring and passionate theme in 7th Step, the

desire to educate was connected to the ex-offender's desire to give back and their inability to do so. Giving back, thus, became a form of education aimed at opening up the opportunities to give back further. One member (ex-offender) explained:

> It's an educational piece but it's also a healing piece … the more that I talk about that stuff, the more that I'm okay with it. And then there's the other side of that too, that people want to hear it, right. People are interested in me, in my life. (Interview)

By allowing the ex-offender to give back and to offer, society gains but also offers, in return, both recognition and therapeutic benefit.

The education that the ex-offenders and their stories offer is also about trying to change a system that has failed them. They give a voice to experiences that are otherwise largely unknown or ignored. As people who are engaged in, and offering to the community, who are fully committed to change, ex-offenders recognize the responsibility they have, and the impact that they can have in raising community awareness. As one member (ex-offender) explained:

> There's people out in the mainstream of society that don't realize the struggles that ex-offenders have to go through once they do a sentence. It's like it never ends. It's like, we can't get back into the workforce, we can't do this, we can't do that, because we're all painted with the same brush. And I think that needs to change. My sentence was completed in 2007, and here it is 2018, and it's *still* held over my head when it comes to finding work, or employment. (Interview)

Many of the stories that the ex-offenders tell during their presentations expose faults in the system and, in that way, offer both an education and a challenge. They are taking accountability and being honest about what they have done, but also challenge society to take accountability as well. As one member (ex-offender) described:

> But understanding, if you have 8 out of 10 offenders or ex-offenders, who have childhood-based trauma and addiction issues – well my opinion is, if I'm a product of the system, it's *your* system. It's *your* system that

> couldn't help me, right. That helped foster distrust and mistrust. You didn't help me when I was 8 years old. So, there was no therapy, there was no, it was just like, you'll get better, you'll forget about this. But you never forget about trauma, it's always there. You know. You might push it down inside of you, but as soon as you *use*, then it comes out, and it comes out in negative ways. (Interview)

Many of the ex-offenders I interviewed expressed their frustration and resentment, at having tried repeatedly to tell someone about their trauma and failing to get the help they needed. While none of the core group members blamed their past behaviour on anyone but themselves, there was a unified opinion, that until the system started to offer real support to those who were struggling, particularly with mental health, addiction, and/or trauma, issues such as addiction, criminality, and recidivism would inevitably continue.

The lack of support around mental health was a reoccurring theme in nearly every meeting and interview. This helped to educate volunteers about the realities of struggling within the system, and also gave ex-offenders new resources and ideas for getting the help they needed. During one meeting an ex-offender described a challenge he was having with his current doctor, who was not meeting his needs as someone suffering from both mental illness and addiction. His frustration was that he could not get a new doctor because he already had one. During subsequent meetings a number of members came together to help him, both other ex-offenders and volunteers. They helped him find the name of a specialist who could better address his needs and encouraged him to advocate for himself and get a referral from his physician (Field note, 10/16/18).

Trying to manage their own or a family member's mental health issues placed a significant strain upon many an ex-offender's recovery and sustained desistance. The younger volunteers especially, noted how shocked they were to find so many intersections between mental illness, addiction, and criminality (Interview). For the ex-

offenders, there was often frustration expressed about having had to suffer so long before realizing that they were sick and needed help:

> You know, especially us that have lived with concurrent disorders, and I lived with addiction issues and borderline personality disorder, and we run around most of our lives, because we've been told we're bad … And you know you're living with, you're a survivor of childhood sexual abuse and physical abuse, and mental abuse, and you're being punished, and you don't know why you're being punished … and you spend 30 years of your life in and out of institutions, and you finally realize that you're not a *bad* person, you're a *sick* person. And until you get that, to that point, that's when change, that's when recovery from everything became clearer and easier, for me, that was when, I realized that I was sick. You know. And I needed to get well. And that's when I, that's when the ability to change really came into play. (Interview)

Even after making this realization, most described the reality of help and support not being available and having had to create the support they needed for themselves. This was where 7th Step came in as a resource for that support creation, and also as a mechanism for managing and releasing the continued resentments that were created and carried over from these experiences (Interview).

Resentment

The need to let go of and free oneself of resentments is a central theme in all of the 7th Step literature. It is the focus of the Fifth Step: "Deciding that our FREEDOM is worth more than our resentments, we are using that Power to help free us from those resentments" (Pamphlet, 2015). This is considered to be a necessary part of recovery and desistance. For the ex-offenders, the activities of 'giving back': telling their stories, helping to educate, sharing during meetings, are all considered to be an essential part of their reintegration back into society; however, this kind of reintegration and offering cannot occur if an individual is being governed by their resentment (Interview). Working

with past resentment, as well as the resentments that arose during their day to day lives, was a regular theme during the weekly shares. This process of acknowledging and working to transform resentment, or even just not react in "that old way", was a key aspect of how 7th Step supported the maintenance of personal growth and change.

Ex-offenders are experts on resentment; often resentments from initial experiences of injustice, trauma, or unfairness in their youth will snowball throughout their lives and accumulate inside of prison. It was common to hear this acknowledged during meetings: "I came out of prison with a chip on my shoulder the size of an oak tree" (Field note, 3/28/18). 7th Step considers resentment to be a primary trigger for relapse and reoffending. Because of this, resentments must be transcended in order to experience "freedom". For ex-offenders, there is no choice, many of them described it as being a "matter of life or death" (Interview).

Because of this, the ex-offenders' approach to working with resentment was especially direct and honest, often admired by the volunteers that I interviewed. One volunteer described how he applied what he had learned in 7th Step to an interaction he had with a colleague at work who was negative, rude, and unjust:

> The impulse is to give it back, right, like nobody should be able to do this to anyone! So that's kind of like the default position. And I learned, I decided, you know, toward the end of this, that particular journey, that I would try to be nice to the guy. Right. And I would give up on this natural reaction that I had, and it was really disarming to him. He didn't know how to respond to it. So … I think that was probably from being a member of 7th Step … and learning from the ex-offenders, I think … they may be better at forgiveness. (Interview)

Ex-offenders have a greater appreciation for freedom, at all levels, and have come to recognize that not only will resentment lead them back to prison, but it will keep them imprisoned even "on the outside" (Field note, 4/24/18).

7th Step is not unique in its focus on resentment as being a problem in the perpetuation of negative behaviour. One member (ex-offender) explained that the 12 Step recovery programs also "talk about resentment as being the number one killer of addicts" (Interview). When I asked him how this was different in 7th Step, he described, how the word was being used, and how frequently it was used, was enough:

> It makes me think, right, and if I'm thinking then I'm not acting … not taking it to the next level … and that gives you the ability to start to change your mindset, change your outlook, and then you change your life. (Interview)

He explained that it was not about getting rid of resentment, often the resentments were still there, but it was about managing them so that they did not take over or poison a person's spiritual health. Another member (ex-offender) explained how 7th Step helped him deal with his resentments:

> I have a lot of resentments against my mum, and um I don't hold any against my dad. But my mom's the one that's loved me unconditionally. So that's stuff that I got to work on. (Interview)

Because letting go of resentments is associated with freedom in 7th Step, it then allows and facilitates an attitude of possibility, change, and moving forward. Because they were no longer imprisoned by their resentments, ex-offenders described being able to look beyond themselves, to see and to help others. As one member (ex-offender) explained:

> I will make changes and I *can* make changes. Right. How I live my life today, the choices I make today, my outlook on people places things today, will set me up for how I'm going to live tomorrow. (Interview)

This focus on the future and one's agency within that, cuts through the mechanisms that resentment uses to maintain itself, by locking a person emotionally to their past. It challenges the self-absorption that resentment feeds on and allows for empathy and

consideration of others. As ex-offenders are then able to give back, help, and extend to others, despite experiences of trauma and injustice, this offers an example to others.

7th Step was created around the ideas and processes needed for offenders to work with their resentment, particularly as they were coming out of prison, in order to reintegrate into society and to stay out of prison. In 7th Step, the way out of resentment is through accountability. As Bill Sands (1967) wrote: "My gift is the gift of truth. We have found a way to use truth to help men change" (p. 193). While working with resentment is a crucial part of desistance for the ex-offender, witnessing how they do so can be a catalyst for volunteers to grow and change as well.

Much of what I learned from the ex-offenders, particularly during the first few months of my membership, had to do with managing resentment. The following interaction in particular stands out: One of the members (ex-offender) who had been coming for a long time and was a prominent figure and leader for the group, always helping to reach out and support others in their recovery, had a week or two where he was having a rough time, even to the point where one week he chose not to share. I had only been going for a couple of months at that point and was still trying to figure out my place and my relationship, how to be a member. During the first meeting where I had noticed him not doing well, I had thought about maybe reaching out to see if he was okay. As was usual for me, at that point in my life, I disregarded the impulse, figuring that he was probably just wanting space and to be left alone, and that I did not really feel like I had any help I could offer him anyway. The next week he did not share and was doing worse; I knew in my gut that I had messed up, and that I should have sent him the message.

That night I emailed him after the meeting, acknowledging that I should have done so the previous week, that I knew he was having a rough time, and that I had wanted to reach out and just tell him that I had noticed, that I cared, and ask was there anything I could do. He wrote me back immediately, thanking me, telling me how much it meant hearing from me, and not to apologize, that a number of the volunteers had reached out. He said that he was hurt that the ex-offenders had not, since they knew what it was like to struggle and how important and helpful it was to have people reach out and connect in those moments. I told him that regardless of being a volunteer, I was sorry it had taken me so long to figure it out, but that he had taught me how to be a more decent human being, and that I would not forget it – that I would reach out sooner next time.

I could only imagine the resentment he must have felt toward the other ex-offenders, nearly all of whom he had been there for on many occasions. The next meeting, however, there was absolutely no resentment present. He shared about getting the email from me, and he talked about how many of the volunteers had reached out, and how grateful he was, he talked about his struggles, and then he explained how he alone was responsible for his own emotional well-being. He took total responsibility for his mood, and his resentment, and, in so doing, he demonstrated how accountability works to diffuse the momentum of frustration and hurt. It was powerful for me because I rarely see people do this, let alone do it so openly and honestly. I personally might move on or swallow my resentments, but rarely do I let them go so completely, or work with them in this way; usually they remain with me, in some form, for many years. I hold a grudge, and it does not serve me well. This interaction changed how I understood the power I could have over my own resentment and emotions. Watching how the other ex-offenders

worked with their resentments further supported this change. My ability to see this, and be touched by it, my ability to be changed by it, was due to the vulnerability that the ex-offenders shared on a regular basis.

Learning

My interviews and observations made it clear that ex-offenders assumed that they were contributing by educating others about the conditions and experiences of their past, including topics of criminal lifestyle, mindset, incarceration, stigma, institutionalization, discrimination, and systemic challenges. This was all true, to the extent that a number of the younger volunteers described having shifted their career paths away from the criminal justice system toward social work, after having been to only a few meetings (Interview). What the volunteers I interviewed described as having learned *most* from the ex-offenders, however, was far more personal and profound.

Many of the volunteers talked about learning from the ex-offenders how to better deal with conflict and adversity. They described 7th Step as having given them the confidence to engage in their day-to-day lives differently (Interview). Many described becoming more curious about the people they disagreed with, more interested in understanding why those people held the opinions they did, rather than just writing them off as they would normally have done (Interview). They also described becoming less conflict averse, and more willing to challenge people's assumptions, particularly around stigmatized and/or criminalized individuals.

> I'll tell people: I volunteer with this group, and there's like all these issues and it's not as cut and dry, black and white as you're making it seem. (Interview)

Many of the members (volunteers) also described having learned how to have greater appreciation and gratitude in their life.

More than one member (volunteer) told me that listening to the ex-offenders, getting to know them, and seeing how they dealt with their struggles had helped them with their own struggles around depression: "I go home [after a meeting] and I legitimately feel happier. I don't – I don't know why, but it's a legitimate feeling" (Interview). Another member (volunteer) described doing groups inside the institutions and learning directly from working with the inmates about how to have more of a perspective around the passage of time:

> They have to develop a sense of patience, which is enviable, or they're not going to survive in the institution, you know … So, the notion of patience changed, and I've become, I think, a little bit more patient. A little bit anyway. (Interview)

Patience, generosity, bravery, and compassion were all qualities that volunteers described having learned from their interactions with the ex-offenders.

One of the more practical things that volunteers learn from the ex-offenders is their language: the words, abbreviations, slang, or common phrases. One member (ex-offender) described:

> My biggest thing on the volunteers is, they don't even know the language. They don't know any prison lingo, they don't understand, you know, what really goes on, transpires, from the time that you're convicted of a crime, you're charged, and you go through the process. (Interview)

The 7th Step lingo is an amalgam of words and phrases taken from the criminal justice and legal system, such as WED: warrant expiration date; or breached: in breach of the conditions of one's parole. In one instance, many of us learned along with a new member (ex-offender) as she described having not understood the "radius" in her conditions. She

had been nearly "breached" for having not gotten a "travel permit" to go to the 7th Step meeting in the Valley (Field note, 4/3/18). Other aspects are brought in from recovery programs: words like "slip" for relapse; the use of "birthday" to refer to one's anniversary "in the program"; or the constant vocalization of "huah", which is expressed in response to both volunteers and ex-offenders as encouragement for the ongoing path of recovery and personal growth. Some words are brought in from prison, usually nicknames referring to specific institutions, or aspects, such as: the yard or the shu.

Primarily, the common words, jokes, or phrases, tie into common themes that recur as a sort of group ritual. These are meant to shift away from the old identities, or reinforce the forms, habits, and mindset of recovery. A common joke in the group is the allergy ex-offenders have for any kind of substance use or indulgence; they are allergic because they will "break out in handcuffs" (Field note, 3/28/28). Some phrases are ordinary yet heard at nearly every meeting: "it is what it is", "you're in the right place", "I'm glad you're here", "It's good to be clean, sober, and not in prison", "I'm grateful to be here".

This is another example of repetition as a mechanism for re-habituating one's mindset. It is also a means of creating a supportive culture and environment for sustained recovery and change. One member (ex-offender), who engages in the repetition and phrasing most noticeably, explained to me that his jokes were not meant to be funny (Field note, 6/19/18). Another member (ex-offender) described:

> When you're educating people, what are you doing? You're using the *language*, you're refining your talk-track. Your talk-track starts to become *you*. So, I'm talking wellness and recovery, and lessening recidivism, that's who I become, right. …You're setting an example. And that's why I said, 7th Step needs those hard-core ex-offenders, that are now living life on a daily program and continue to do it on a regular basis. You need that

> structure to be legitimate, right. ... But it's a long road, it's a tough road, when you're building something, but it's worth it in the end. (Interview)

The repetition acts as both an acknowledgement and a reminder that helps promote and maintain recovery while also educating, influencing, and reminding others who are on that path as well.

Connection: Stabilizing change through relationship with others

Members who had been coming to 7th Step for many years described having developed close friendships with one another. These friendships, however, were almost

exclusively between volunteers and ex-offenders. Ex-offenders and volunteers had friendships amongst themselves, but largely these had formed prior to, and outside of, 7th Step. Friendships that arose specifically through 7th Step were between ex-offenders and volunteers (Interview). These friendships serve a purpose within the change dynamic, helping to stabilize the shift in one's view of oneself and the world. The addition of pro-social peers is more than just a change gimmick; it becomes real through the reciprocity of mutual exchange and helps the individuals involved as well as inspires others. During an interview, a new member (ex-offender) repeatedly referenced my own close friendship with one of the other ex-offenders as being something that really inspired him:

> You know, it was you that shared, you got together with an ex-offender and it got *you* through tough times. So, you know, the ex-offender has a lot of experience with tough times, and it goes both ways, right. So, I think it just, you know, it starts out with someone volunteering, and then it starts out as friendship, and then, like I said, I get a feeling of a family, and I've only been there for a few weeks, so. It's special. (Interview)

It is not the existence of the relationship that is inspiring; it is the quality of reciprocity and friendship. It is the mutual exchange of help and care between an ex-offender and a volunteer that inspires people. This is a further extension of trust.

That such friendships are possible is described as being "baffling" to friends and family of both the ex-offenders and volunteers (Interview). I had one friend (ex-offender) laughingly tell me that her family back home could not believe that I was her friend, or that we had anything in common to talk about: "They can't believe you aren't afraid of me" (Personal Communication). The support structure offered by these kinds of friendships helps to challenge internalized stigma, and shift how ex-offenders view themselves:

> I think a lot of it has to do with like, as ex-offenders, being willing to connect with someone. And we have to put the effort in. … There is a wall that's created that keeps people out. We need to learn, I need to learn how to open up a little bit more. But it's that fear of judgement all the time, right. So -- We don't like to be judged. And then when we get judged we get angry, and we pull back, and we, that – that whole mindset kicks in again, and oh – you don't understand me. Where we need to realize that you guys want to understand us. (Interview)

When an ex-offender is able to open up, drop their walls "brick by brick" through their relationships and friendships with the volunteers, they are then able to trust enough to start opening up in terms of society as a whole (Interview).

One of the first insights I had, into the role played by the volunteer, was during a school visit early on when one of the ex-offenders shared about the invaluable offering volunteers gave to her by just sharing their struggles, joys, and the details of their week. She later described during an interview:

> I tell the schools all the time, the volunteers teach me how to deal with my problems as an actual person … the way that you guys live your lives, is so different than what we do, you know, like it's just so, everything is just different. And I like the things that you guys do. Like, what did you do on the weekend? Oh, I went for coffee, or I went for a walk, or whatever. And I'm like, people do that? So, like two weeks ago I said to [boyfriend], I'm like let's go down town, let's go to the public gardens. Let's do this. Let's go for ice cream. I'm like this is what normal people do, people do this. And we loved it. (Interview)

For many of the ex-offenders I interviewed, the volunteers were a crucial part of their ability to feel comfortable with society. One member described:

> The reason I go to 7th Step is not only because of the ex-offenders but the volunteers, the professional people, it makes me feel, within myself, that I am now a part of society, which I never ever felt a part of before. (Interview)

The fact that ex-offenders and volunteers can co-exist, co-mingle, and be equals, helps to dissolve feelings of stigma and differentiation. Maruna (2001) writes: "The ex-offenders

who self-select into these organizations want to change but have little idea of any sort of life besides the life of drugs and crime. These reintegration programs are frequently the only avenue such individuals have to gain exposure to and experience in productive activities" (p. 129). In this way, 7th Step also offers an opportunity to share and learn new coping mechanisms and skillsets, and to develop broader socio-cultural knowledge and awareness.

Inclusion, Acceptance, and Community Support

Part of what happens during meetings is the stretching of social muscles; the demonstration of growth and change through interaction and relationship with others. Members offer advice by sharing what they have seen work for others and what has worked for them. Regularly, members offer themselves as a network and resource to one another, either by getting in touch with someone at a meeting, putting them in touch with someone else, or offering to go with them to a meeting or out for coffee. The distinction between ex-offender and volunteer dissolves within these interactions and activities, becoming interchangeable. McNeill (2006) writes, "Promoting desistance also means striving to develop the offender's strengths – at both an individual and a social network level – in order to build and sustain the momentum of change" (p. 50). Through relationship as members, and the various commonalities and connections that this membership creates and uncovers, ex-offenders are made "part of" a larger group offering positive pro-social support. They become part of a community that cares for them, and a part of society through that process.

One member (ex-offender) explained that, while you experience a sense of "fellowship" when going to other 12 Step or recovery groups, the sense of community is different at 7th Step:

> Because [there] you have your cliques, however, my clique is the whole room when it comes to 7th Step, right. I get to branch out and I have all kinds of avenues that I can go to if a problem pops up … and everybody's playing a very integral part, and you know everybody's got a spoke on the big wheel, that's what's going on there, that's how I feel. (Interview)

For many, the closeness, intimacy, and connection that is created at 7th Step is more than just community. Ex-offenders and volunteers described feeling a sense of "family" within the group (Interviews). For some members, this was described as being their first experience of a family that was not dysfunctional.

Best et al. (2016) writes, "To the extent that people identify with them, groups provide a basis for a sense of belonging, meaning, support and efficacy" (p. 115). Becoming a "core group member" of 7th Step is an involved process of gradual acceptance. First, one's name must be brought forward and accepted as a guest. During each meeting, the distinction between guests and core group members is emphasised through the forms of introduction and an attendance sheet. After attending many meetings and surviving a Hotseat, the individual is asked to wait in the hall while their membership is discussed. Finally, one is brought back into the room and accepted as a core group member for life. At every step along this journey, a single voice is enough to veto inclusion.

The result of all of this, is membership within a group that feels meaningful. Further to this, in the 7th Step Pamphlet (2015), requirements for acceptance as a core group member are qualities of: sincerity; willingness and openness to change; willingness

to engage and accept everyone, both ex-offenders and volunteers, as part of the change process; and a desire and commitment to follow the law, to get out and stay out of the criminal justice system. Becoming a core group member via these various rituals of acceptance leads to a tangible sense of social inclusion as a core group member who embodies these qualities.

After the Hotseat, when the individual is invited back into the room and welcomed as a core group member, the whole group cheers and applauds. Maruna (2001) describes the "looking glass recovery" process whereby others reflecting encouragement and belief in a person's goodness and fundamental worthiness allows that belief to be internalized and confirmed (p. 96). Having this confirmation and inclusion come after so many rituals of trial, makes it that much more meaningful. Members described being a core group member with great pride and emotion:

> I love the fact that I'm a full core group member now. (Interview)
>
> I really felt, from the first meeting on, I was excited to get my first four in so that I could become a core group member. (Interview)
>
> It's funny because, me and my sponsor ended up getting Hotseated at the same night, we became core group members on the same evening. So that's pretty cool. (Interview)

One member (ex-offender) even described going to a meeting in the Valley just so that he would not have to wait as long to become a core group member (Interview).

Business meetings are another way that 7th Step offers a sense of social inclusion. These meetings create an opportunity for individuals to experience and engage with various democratic processes and meeting procedures, acting as a subtle form of socialization and training. Business meetings also create opportunities for members to contribute, to make presentations, to speak publicly, or to get help and support in

exploring their ideas and projects. One member (ex-offender) described having presented during a business meeting, and the profound affect it had on her:

> Excited as I was, two or three times during that presentation I had to pipe back the tears, and say okay keep going, I had to calm myself down because I was just shaking like a leaf. But for the first time I was putting something forward that I really firmly honestly believed in … and nobody made away with me, I wasn't told I was stupid, I wasn't told to sit back down and shut up, I wasn't told that what I was saying was worthless and useless … So, to see that something that I put out there, that I did, was accepted, and discussed … and that I was still liked … It was amazing. (Interview)

Simply being listened to without judgement, interruption, or censor was an empowering and affirming experience for her. These sorts of experiences can be rare for anyone.

The sort of engagement that takes place during the business meetings is ordinary, mundane, even boring (although it can also get quite rowdy). The significant aspect to all of this is that once again there is no separation between ex-offender and volunteer, creating a sense of inclusion and normalcy. Maruna (2001) describes desistance as involving a "redemption script" or "ritual" where "someone has finally 'seen something' in the ex-offender, and now the ex-offender can see the same thing. They have the ability to act positively and be rewarded for it" (p. 162). In 7th Step, the fact that these interactions are no big deal, that they are not being performed with inclusion as the goal or purpose, helps to create an experience of real inclusion. This sense of social inclusion is further stabilized through the interactions and friendships that develop between members.

Relationship

Relationships are a significant part of a person's recovery, but they can also be the greatest triggers for relapse. Many members (ex-offenders) described having to change provinces, leaving their friends and family behind, in order to get clean and stay out of prison. Often, during meetings, members (ex-offenders) would describe the heartbreak of missing their children, of wanting to return home for a visit or a funeral and knowing that doing so would cause them to relapse. While so many of the relationships in ex-offender's lives can be triggers, the most common expression of need is for relationship, and connection. Often, these comments would be followed by an appreciation for 7th Step and the friendships, support, and real sense of family that the group offered (Field note, 4/10/18).

Beyond just a casual association, volunteers can offer an experience of mutual appreciation and reciprocity. Sometimes, during the weekly share, it was a volunteer sharing about a struggle they were having, followed by an ex-offender's good day. These moments allowed the ex-offenders to witness, support, and offer advice. One member (ex-offender) explained how the presence of volunteers made a big difference in his experience with 7th Step, as opposed to other recovery programs. He described:

> NA is about one addict helping another, right? There's one pillar, so to speak, and 7th Step has two pillars. We have the positive peer support, but we also have volunteer support, people that have never been in trouble, people that are in society, that challenge those old beliefs, and old ways of thinking, just by living the way that they do – simply by not having them. Right, so it's like, there *are* good people. (Interview)

The volunteers become stand-ins for society at large. As relationships and friendships are developed, the volunteers are able to temper the years of resentment and mistrust that ex-offenders have developed toward society. The volunteers represent a society that is worth joining, one that will value and accept them as they are.

As a volunteer, I often struggled to find and understand my place in the group, sometimes feeling superfluous compared to the ex-offenders. Interviewing members, however, specifically about the role played by the volunteer, revealed the necessity of this role within 7th Step. One member (ex-offender) explained:

> What volunteers do at the group, it's just amazing, and I just hope and pray that they continue to come and continue to work with us because without the volunteers, and this is my own opinion, I think the offenders would soon lose their way and go back to what they know. (Interview)

In this way the volunteers offer a reference point, and function as an informal social control and emotional bond, or "hook for change" (Giordano et al., 2002).

As mentioned, beyond just socialization and community inclusion, the volunteers serve as a conduit or bridge between the ex-offenders and society. For some, the volunteers can act as very practical supports. Often volunteers, as well as ex-offenders, offer rides to meetings and presentations. On one occasion, I acted as a job reference for one of the members (ex-offender). Most frequently, however, volunteers are able to expand the social networks wherein 7th Step can access exposure, gain support, and offer education. One member (ex-offender) described:

> Everybody has a role to play because we're all in this together, and you know, the people, the volunteers need to take that back to their families, their institutions that they work at, in their daily lives, to say, you know, yeah there is a better way … so, you know, if we don't change our thinking in society, then we're going to – well nobody's, nothing's going to change, right, because we're still going to be labelling, still going to be judging, we're still going to be putting people into silos of us and them. (Interview)

The role of the volunteer is then also one of legitimacy and credibility. The portfolio that the volunteers carry, simply by being "normal" or "non-criminal", acts as a wedge that allows ex-offenders access to society in a way that allows them to be heard and believed.

Maruna (2001) describes this as "normal-smithing" whereby the testimony of "conventional others" bring credibility to an ex-offender's redemption (p. 161). Maruna (2004) writes, "almost all individuals who successfully go straight often seem to rely on a 'personal voucher' – a person of good moral standing who will act as a witness to their reformed character" (p. 275). This normal-smithing can be recognized within the 7th Step presentation format, where one or two volunteers begin the presentation by describing the group, and essentially vouchsafing the integrity of the ex-offenders who are then able to wow the crowd with their vulnerable and compelling stories.

This role of offering credibility was acknowledged by a few of the older volunteers; however, it arose in nearly every interview I had with an ex-offender. One member (ex-offender) described:

> For us to get the message out there that we're trying to carry, the best way to do that is to have it put in the hands of people that are capable, to deal with getting through the red tape. Like people that are very reputable in the community. Now you've got to understand, for me to just go in and talk to a bunch of counsellors, you know, or MLAs or, you know, and for them to know my history, it's just another con. Right. Literally a con trying to con them. So, but when we have somebody reputable, that's where you guys come in. You guys are proof positive that we're actually doing this. (Interview)

Having been discredited within their societal role so completely, it is not just a label or a stigma that ex-offenders confront. They are the first to recognize the precariousness of their recovery and desistance, and, because of this, they value every moment and opportunity that they have to give back and offer. It was a reoccurring and heart wrenching theme during meetings, interactions, and interviews, when ex-offenders who had been working so hard and diligently for so long, to stay clean and "make good", described being met with censor, disbelief, judgement, or scorn.

Judgement is, understandably, a significant trigger for ex-offenders, particularly those struggling with addiction (Interview). It was a common story, among those living at halfway houses, that they would be working hard at their sobriety only to be meet with abuse or an assumption of guilt from a staff member. Members (ex-offenders) described how this was nearly enough to trigger a relapse (Field note, 5/22/18). A fear of judgement was a common reason why members (ex-offenders) appreciated the environment and group at 7th Step, not only because they could share openly in front of other ex-offenders and feel understood, but that they could develop a sense of trust and self-acceptance through sharing in front of the volunteers as well (Field note, 4/24/18). What I found most interesting about this was the corresponding change that then occurred within the majority of volunteers. Nearly every member (volunteer) I interviewed described becoming "less judgemental" as a direct result of their membership with 7th Step (Interview).

Just as heartbreak, in one form or another, was a common catalyst for change among the ex-offenders, this was likewise true for volunteers who often described the emotional impact their relationship with ex-offenders had on their life (Interview). The social struggle that many of the volunteers experienced and described had to do with this relationship and the difficulty and heartbreak of watching those they cared about relapse, fall back into prison, or experience harm in any way.

For some of the volunteers, this was expressed as a sad frustration, and a sense of helplessness:

> The one challenge that I have is that they really want to do all of this and I think to myself, well how come they can't keep themselves going straight, so that they can do it? Because the most disappointing thing for me is when I find out that one of them has slipped … and I'm just saying okay

> what the hell could I have done to maybe – have helped them not do that? (Interview)

For others, it was expressed as a sadness and frustration at the boundary between ex-offender and volunteer, and at the inability to connect and communicate across it:

> It's tough sometimes to watch people have their slips … and there's definitely like the volunteers and the offenders. I think that there's like a barrier, where like someone will disappear for months, and I'll ask, and it'll just be like, oh they're just not coming, they're just not feeling well. Like the ex-offenders aren't going to give you the full hand. So, I find that's difficult sometimes, and then when you do see the person come back, they're in like a really rough place, and so very drastic. So, you just see them operating like totally fine, then they're gone for a few weeks, and then all of a sudden, they're back and you're like, Oh Geez!
>
> I think it's just, difficult because, obviously you've spent weeks with this person, and you've listened to their deepest darkest secrets and then there's just kind of that barrier. I don't think it's bad it's … just more like, you'd like to *know* because you *care.* (Interview)

The emotional challenge, to feel this heartbreak, is heightened for volunteers because of their feelings of helplessness. Many described wanting and wishing that they could help more. One member (volunteer) described:

> I genuinely just want to help them … but sometimes I just feel, like, scared to even offer it because then I don't want them to feel bad … it's like I genuinely want them to feel open and be able to talk to me and, and I feel maybe they can't, maybe they feel like they can't relate to me? Or what, because I understand that, like, but I truly just, even if they just want me to listen, like I would be there for them (Interview)

The remarkable magic of 7th Step, for me, was exactly this, and how simply by going to weekly meetings, the sense of helplessness became transformed into a deeper comprehension of how to help.

Reciprocity and Connection

One of the things I learned from 7th Step was how self-absorbed my desire to help others could be. This was something I came to through my self-reflection during meetings. My desire to help others, while being genuine, was, in some ways, self-serving. I had limited ideas about how or what that help would look like. Throughout my field notes, I made observations about the good intentions of new volunteers, and how challenging I could see their attempts at "helping" were for the ex-offenders. On one occasion, a guest (volunteer) responded to a member's (ex-offender) share about struggling with addiction and his kids, with a story about herself and the intense harm and trauma her father's addiction had caused her (Field note, 3/8/18). During another meeting a guest (volunteer) described how they hoped to offer a different perspective on the criminal justice system from having worked within it for many years (Field note, 6/12/18). After becoming a member and coming to meetings regularly, I watched this attitude shift and relax, and recognizing a similar path within my own journey I was able to appreciate how this relaxation into just being oneself and coming to meetings was where the real help began.

For the ex-offenders, 7th Step helps them to give back and offer their help in clear and tangible ways. For the volunteer, their role is often just to be present, and to allow themselves to be helped as much as anything else. Maruna (2001) mentions 7th Step in relation to the key principle of "reciprocity", where one person helping another offers therapeutic benefit (p. 129). This is recognized as being a powerful component in re-integration programs and could be understood as the generosity of allowing oneself to receive generosity from others. For many of the volunteers, this was where they landed in their ability to help, and how they identified their role within the group:

> I think just even our presence and making them feel, like normal and like you and I. I think that helps them a lot. (Interview)

> I guess in the meetings I feel like I'm helping people, just by being attentive and listening and … I know that I'm going to have the same respect from other people when it's my turn to talk, and I know that I can say anything I want and that they're helping me by listening and then I try to help them by being there and listening. (Interview)

Some volunteers described having learned how to listen in a new way; one that did not involve giving advice or fixing a situation but focused more on being curious and present with the other person's emotions (Interview). Many described gaining a better appreciation for the power of just listening and being present, or of helping others by reaching out.

Reaching out was one of the first ways I discovered I could help. It was one of the first challenges I overcame as a volunteer, and it is the aspect of personal growth and change that I can most readily identify as having gained through membership with 7th Step. Reaching out involves crossing over the barrier between self and other. This threshold is what many of the volunteers described as being the primary constraining factor in their ability to empathise or connect. I needed ex-offenders to reassure me that my reaching out to them was okay, before I could integrate this activity into my habitual behaviour. This need for reassurance, or permission, came up in a number of the volunteer interviews as well (Interview).

For some members (volunteers), learning to reach out to others was described as having had a profound effect on their life outside of 7th Step. One member (volunteer) described:

> Just realizing that I'm not – that I can interact with anyone if I want to. That I'm not limited to just sitting on my own, just being alone all the time. I can go and just talk to someone, and feel free to do that, and not be stressed out about it. (Interview)

For one member (volunteer), the reaching out, to both ex-offenders and volunteers, was what they liked most about the program (Interview).

These simple ways of helping are linked to the experience of connection and belonging, which many of the volunteers described as having taken for granted in their lives before coming to 7th Step (Interview). Ex-offenders regularly described their need for healthy relationships and connections. It offered a perspective around how relatively straightforward societal help and support could be. McNeill (2006) describes a study done on young people, which found that their decisions to either desist or offend were largely related to their desire and need to "feel included in their social world", and, to that extent, the pivotal role that friendships and other relationships played in determining behaviour (p. 51). While various members would discuss their connection to a Higher Power, the ex-offenders, in particular, often related this to the experience of connection that they found in the group and through 7th Step (Interviews). Maruna (2001) writes, "This connection to something larger than the self … appears to be a vital part of the desistance process" (p. 119). This connection is not just found through the process of helping others and giving back, it is also experienced through community acceptance and inclusion.

Connection was the most common way ex-offenders articulated what they needed in order to stabilize their recovery and change. During one meeting, a member (ex-offender) talked about feeling mad that he had "listened to all those people in my past that said I was no good, and a loser, or that I'd end up in prison". He described how the most important thing was "connecting", and that while he used to connect with the

"wrong people", now he was trying to connect with the "right people" (Field note, 3/06/18).

A sense of connection seemed to be what grounded members to their change process, whether it was recovery, desistance, or the personal growth experienced by volunteers. The human connection, found through relationship with others, in an open and honest environment of care, offered validation of an individual's worth and value as a human being. One member (ex-offender) described:

> The cool thing about the whole thing is, you don't have to be in the room very long to understand that – we can take the criminal element out altogether, and we're just a bunch of people sitting in a room talking, right. When it makes us really feel accepted, you know, by the 'normal' people, right. Um when you start being able to conversate with – whether it be a lawyer or yourself, or a volunteer, or people that have done tremendous things in the community and are still doing tremendous things, and they validate our worth, it's – it's a good feeling. Like you know, there's our purpose, like I was talking about, it's being validated, we do have a purpose. (Interview)

From its inception, 7th Step has been based on the need to connect with an ex-offender as a human being, to speak to the best in them, to relate to their strengths without hiding from their weaknesses. From its beginning, 7th Step has been premised on the need for love to be a part of criminal rehabilitation (Sands, 1967).

Being Normal

Love is not something that desistance research discusses outright. Sands (1964; 1967), due to his own experience as an incarcerated felon, and later an ex-offender, realized that it was predominantly the absence of feeling loved, which drove the cycle of violence and resentment, and kept most "incorrigibles" incarcerated. He explained that it was the experience of love that he had gained through a final reconciliation with his

father, and the support and encouragement of his warden, which allowed him to find freedom and transformation; freeing him from a past of resentment, anger, and negativity: "For the first time, I looked inward and found strength. Love had done that" (Sands, 1964, p. 28). The experience of human connection and love was what drove Bill Sands' personal desistance; it informed his approach to the inmates at Lansing, and it guided his development of the 7th Step Society (Sands, 1967). This kind of love is not something extraordinary or romantic, rather it is connected to the experience of freedom, as a sense of inner peace, or an absence of chaos (Interview). It is connected to the quality of simply being, existing, and having value.

During meetings, "feeling normal" was often put forward by ex-offenders as being the goal: "Just to feel like a normal person, you know, a normal human being, not an ex-offender" (Field note, 9/04/18). Often, members (ex-offenders) would describe the "stable normal life" as being something that they had "always wanted" (Field note, 9/11/18). This ideal of "normal", tended to be a way of expressing this desire for peace, with a connection to a common frustration that members shared in terms of working with their recovery: "Why can't I just be?" (Field note, 4/24/18).

The ex-offenders who were interviewed, even those who were relatively stabilized in their recovery and desistance, described themselves as being forever 'Other': "I don't think I'll ever be normal" (personal communication), "What's normal? I don't want to be normal" (Interview). "Normal" was constantly used as a novelty and aspiration, something to put on: "It's fun, being normal boring me" (Field note, 10/16/18), where normal is used to describe something that is conventional and

ultimately Other. This is because what is "normal" to the ex-offender is what they are trying to change, those "old ways of doing and old ways of thinking" (Interview).

An internal dissonance around one's criminal past and the aspiration for a "normal" future was most noticeable in the discussions I had about what constituted being an informant. In the pro-social transformation of ex-offenders, this issue with informants was often present as a carry-over from their past identity and mindset; one that they were unwilling to release.

> While I want to be a normal everyday guy-next-door citizen. There's that element that I take great pride in: that I'll never and have never, ratted on anybody. (Interview)

Insidiously, this code of conduct engrained within the "solid con" is connected to a cycle of criminal behaviour, tethering them to the past they are working so hard to escape.

For many there was a distinction made between what was expected and acceptable behaviour for ex-offenders, versus volunteers or "normies" like myself. In my discussions about informants, many of the members (ex-offenders) I interviewed explained that it would be different for me, if I were to testify, but for them it would go against everything they believed in. In one of the interviews, a member (ex-offender) spoke about struggling with being asked by the courts to testify against an abusive ex-partner who had put her in the hospital. She was uncertain as to whether or not she should testify, even though she had not been the one to call the cops. She described getting encouragement from other members (ex-offenders), however, she ascribed this to their accomplishment as being "further along in their recovery", but that she was "just not there yet" (Interview).

One member described the "criminal code" as being encoded in her DNA (Interview). Another member (ex-offender) expressed concern that while he had no intention of ever returning to prison, were he to slip, he would not want to end up on the "rat range" (Interview). There was often a sense of resignation expressed through these discussions. This suggested an internalization of the criminal identity, possibly due to the stigma instilled through incarceration and the projections and expectations of society, a subtle worry that failure and recidivism may be inevitable; or it may just be that the identity for some was too entangled in their entire sense of self.

> AH: At what point do you let go of that [criminal identity]?
>
> R: I don't know if we ever will, I really don't
>
> AH: Is that from the institutionalization? Is that from like the criminal mindset?
>
> R: That's more the criminal mindset, right. It's more, it's so embedded into us, that this is who we are, and even if we say that we're not, it just, it's there. Right. We can't help it.
>
> AH: So, giving back is a way I see of integrating that into a new helpful direction?
>
> R: Yeah. Like trying to take it and use it for good.
>
> AH: So, it's not actually about changing the criminal mindset but changing how
>
> R: How we use it, yeah. The criminal mindset will always be there, it's not going to go away. … I know it's there. Now what am I going to use it for? (Interview)

For those who have spent nearly their entire lives in that criminal sub-culture, the identity is impossible to transcend completely, instead the change must be applied toward putting that mindset and skillset to a good, pro-social, and positive use.

One of the greatest benefits I witnessed arising from my own relationship with ex-offenders, was the disillusionment of this "normal" ideal. While acknowledging that our past experiences were different, I often found myself pointing out to my ex-offender friends how similar our subjective experiences were. This was always met with some element of surprise, and the acknowledgement that "I guess, really, no one is normal" (Interview). During one conversation with a friend (ex-offender) over coffee, we were discussing our attraction to "bad men" and how difficult it was to change type and go after "good guys" instead. She described her patterns and struggles with romantic relationships and was shocked when I told her how common her experience was among the majority of the women I knew; how often I had the exact same conversation with other friends of mine.

Beyond their social role in the group, volunteers offered this normalization of struggle to the ex-offenders with whom they opened up to as friends. This helped to re-contextualize the agitation of not being able to "just be", which was often connected to stigma and the internalization of a carceral identity (Interview). It also created a human connection, and a sense of acceptance and belonging, which allowed the relaxation of just being friends together to occur more readily.

In some members, the inability to "just be" was more than the common suffering and agitation that I could personally relate with. It was a result of past abuse, trauma, addiction, and/or mental illness, the result of a life spent being told that one was problematic or unworthy. For many of the ex-offenders, their original agitation was compounded by the label of criminality as being somehow monstrous, or inhuman. Munn and Bruckert (2013) describe the impact of consistent themes around criminality within

the media: “Over and over again, the stories have been predicated on the criminal as ‘other’” (p. 9). Because of this, members longed to be able to “relax”, and “just feel normal” (Field note, 4/24/18).

A “pre-occupation” and “quest for normalcy”, is a reoccurring theme within the desistance literature as well (Munn & Bruckert, 2013, p. 105). Many of the ex-offenders at 7th Step expressed a desire to both experience and stabilize “a normal life” through partaking in mundane activities, like getting ice cream or window-shopping (Field note, 5/29/18). However, the experiences of human connection that 7th Step provided, allowed those members (ex-offenders) who had been coming for many years, to find a sense of stability and peace within themselves, and offer this to others (Interview). One member (ex-offender) explained:

> What do I feel I gained from 7th Step? In all honesty, a whole new way of life. I finally feel, within myself, that I finally belong and fit in somewhere, with the normal society, if you will. (Interview)

This inner quality of belonging and essential goodness is freedom. Many members would describe it in relation to a Higher Power; however, when needing to be secular, they would also describe it as being the “energy of the group”, the experience of human connection, or just simply love. This is what 7th Step offers to stabilize the process of personal growth, realization, and change within its membership.

Discussion

Within the desistance literature, 7th Step falls in the theoretical middle, utilizing both structure and agency. The group works through social interaction to create identity change, while also relating to the practical supports needed, offering inclusion at the social and community level. The group offers pro-social peer support, and informal social control through volunteers who both "provide a basis for *social influence*" (Best, 2016, p. 114), and also act as a "socializing force" (Maruna, 2001, p. 129). This is a form of differential association that utilizes both conventional pro-social peers, as well as, other ex-offenders. In this way, both the volunteer and ex-offender are engaged in role modelling to help create "alternative identities where [the offender] can replace the former criminal self with a new identity" (Hornby, 2012).

Through the social bonds that are created, 7th Step is constantly reinforcing, and urging, the need for cognitive transformation through identifying "old ways of thinking", while simultaneously offering new narratives and ways of identifying. Ex-offenders are encouraged to identify their "criminal mindset" and understand the deeply embedded core issues that have driven this mindset's development, while also experiencing a new pro-social identity through their relationships and interactions with others. Giordano et al. (2007) explain: "social experiences are important catalysts for change as they foster new definitions of the situation (i.e. new attitudes) and a blue print for how to succeed as a changed individual" (p. 1607). There is a broad cultural understanding that urges individuals to address their core issues in order to make change, while also offering group inclusion and acceptance (Field note, 3/28/18).

Hornby (2012) writes, "The 7th Step Society provides a way out for chronic offenders – a way out of prison and a way out of the patterns of offending that maintain

cycles of crime and incarceration" (p. 4). It is important to appreciate the value and relative uniqueness that this presents for ex-offenders seeking change. On the one hand, there is the need to see and understand the underlying core issues and concepts that have been driving their criminal behaviour, but there is also the need to have the support of pro-social peers who can help to guide and educate them about non-criminal coping skills and behaviour. As Bill Sands (1964) describes in his auto-biography: "I had to discover what the concept should have been to precipitate the correct move … criminal actions are not the real seat of the trouble. They are but the symptoms of a deeper disturbance" (p. 56-57).

Volunteers and Environment

This desire to get at the heart of the trouble, or the "core issue", plays a significant role in the 7th Step program (Interview). It is paired with, and contained by, the role of the volunteers, to whom this core issue can be shared and expressed. Sands (1964) writes, "To these warm, honest people, who really cared, not only about me, but about everyone inside and outside of prison, I could at least relieve my mind and unload my heart. In time it came out, bit by bit" (p. 72). Identity change is a socially mediated process that includes both the internal world of motivation and self-perception, as well as the external realities of inclusion, exclusion, and societal response (Best, 2017).

Creating an environment where the sharing, learning, reflexivity, and realization that is needed for change can be accomplished, requires a space where ex-offenders can feel safe and supported enough to explore their patterns, concepts, and behaviour, to take accountability and "think realistically" (Pamphlet, 2015). It also requires a space where

ex-offenders can both access and trust pro-social peers, enough to hear feedback, ask questions, ask for help, but also offer, and feel that they have something valuable to contribute. Considering the vulnerability, defensiveness, fear of judgement, and general mistrust that most ex-offenders have developed, or have deeply embedded within their psyche, this is no small feat. Creating an environment comprised of judges, lawyers, students, professionals, and a wide array of individuals, in which an ex-offender can come fresh out of an institution and start to develop enough trust to share, grow, and process openly with the group is remarkable.

In terms of the pivotal role that relationships play in effective desistance interventions, McNeill (2006) writes: "If secondary desistance … requires a narrative reconstruction of identity, then it seems obvious why the relational aspects of practice are so significant" (p. 49). The fact that the group is remarkable in this way, contributes to its efficacy as a vehicle for identity transformation. Ex-offenders sitting around with other ex-offenders talking about change is one thing, the narrative shift in identity is accomplished through the addition of the Other, of university students, professionals, lawyers and judges: volunteers. This inclusion of society into the world of a support group for ex-offenders, is like tempering eggs when baking. It creates a slow process of mutual socialization for both the ex-offenders and the volunteers and helps to ease an otherwise harsh transition. Hornby (2012) explains the inclusion of volunteers is to "offer a non-offender perspective … which is important in challenging offender beliefs". This sets up a unique dynamic within the process of change.

The relationship between members, allows the 7th Step Society to offer support through a sense of community, respect, and inclusion. The trust that is developed is

perhaps the most important aspect of the ex-offender-volunteer relationship (Sands, 1967). In terms of the desistance literature, this relationship offers both a direct and tacit means of reintegrating ex-offenders back into society. It is the "social context within which change occurs" (Best, 2016, p. 111). The subtle elements of this relationship speak to "the reciprocal need for society to make good to offenders" (McNeil, 2006, p. 54). The relationship that develops through 7th Step, between the ex-offender and the volunteer, creates a sense of redemption through societal acceptance. Not only do professionals, lawyers and judges sit down beside ex-offenders as members of the same society, they support, engage, acknowledge, and encourage each other; a rare occurrence in the criminal justice system (Maruna, 2001).

Ex-Offender Success Stories

Hornby (2012) writes, "The crucial element within a peer group which concentrates on forming new identities among its membership is the wisdom of the group about the problem it is trying to correct". Similarly, Maruna (2016) writes, the "expertise of professionals" should be considered alongside an "elevation of the expertise of the individuals themselves", allowing offenders to guide their own rehabilitation (p. 293). While the volunteers provide the social capital and access necessary for ex-offenders to offer their experience as expertise to help others, this in turn reinforces the desistance process. Maruna (2001) writes, "It is a well-known irony that help-givers are often helped more than help-receivers in a helping relationship … counseling similar others can also provide a constant reminder of the purpose of reform" (p. 124). Volunteers offer legitimacy, logistical support, and companionship to the ex-offenders within this process.

7th Step's focus on activities of giving back – through peer support, school visits, sharing, and presentations – connects to what Maruna (2001) calls "making good", which is similar to the recovery concept of "keeping it by giving it away". These activities also "transform public discourse regarding crime and criminality", offering change stories and alternative, redemption narratives of successful ex-offenders (Maruna 2001, p. 167). The condemnation of the criminal other is so ingrained in the moral storytelling of society and the media that simply validating and hearing the stories of ex-prisoners, and attending to them as human beings, can be disconcerting (Munn & Bruckert, 2013).

For Maruna (2012), telling one's story has the quality of redeeming oneself through the signalling of one's desistance (p. 76). It effectively creates a "sense of order out of disorderly lives", which can help to stabilize a felt sense of successful transformation (Maruna, 2001, p. 10). Helping others, either directly or indirectly, helps to internalize and stabilize a pro-social identity, as well as atone for previous transgressions. Telling one's story becomes "a vehicle for maximizing continuity in one's life because it capitalizes on past experience as a transgressor (or sinner) to assist or change other persons in the future" (Toch, 2015, p. xviii).

This aspect, the opportunity to give back and to tell their story at schools, was mentioned most frequently by ex-offenders when asked why they originally joined 7th Step. It was the aspect that was most often described as an ex-offender's favourite part of the program. Often, ex-offenders would explain that the ability to help just one individual would be "enough", making it "all worthwhile" (Interview). One member (ex-offender) explained, if she could help just one person, based on her various experiences, then her life and all the time she had spent in prison, "won't have been wasted" (Interview). 7th

Step presentations create an opportunity to offer in this way, to redeem one's past, and to find value in negative experiences, making them into something useful. This is something that is mentioned in much of the desistance literature (Maruna, 2001; Munn & Bruckert, 2013; McNeill, 2006).

Pro-Social Relationships

Maruna and Lebel (2010) write, "the majority of criminal justice interventions derail rather than facilitate the normative processes of maturation associated with desistance from crime" (p. 69). Through a culture of honesty and accountability, however, through processes of support and encouragement, the relationships that are formed within the 7th Step Society facilitate the development of pro-social roles, identities, and patterns of mature behaviour that create and support the process of desistance. McNeill (2006) describes "the pivotal role that relationships play in effective interventions" (p. 49). For those who are "ready to change", 7th Step is not a program or an intervention, it is a community that can offer help, guidance, support, love, and a sense of family (Field note, 3/3/18).

Munn and Bruckert (2013), among others, describe the importance pro-social relationships have in helping ex-offenders to maintain their freedom (p. 27). It is rare, however, to find a discussion about how this relationship affects or is experienced by the pro-social individual. What stood out within my own research was the positive, enriching, and transformational effect ex-offenders could have upon volunteers. While going into the group I had a conventional idea about how I could offer, what that help ended up looking like was very different than my assumptions about volunteering. The

help I offered was through learning, listening, being present, being vulnerable, and being available, accepting the help and support of others, whom I would typically have considered less fortunate than myself. This shift in the perspective of who has what to give was a significant element within my research, and within my own transformation. It both illuminated and addressed a gap within the desistance literature.

Secondary Desistance

Similarly, my understanding of the way in which secondary desistance involved identity transformation was enhanced by discussions with ex-offenders who had arguably accomplished some level of secondary desistance. For these individuals, their new pro-social identity constituted a shift in their perspective, a reimagining of what their role within society could be, and a redistribution of their strengths, however, their past identity remained an integral part of their sense of self. This was similar to what Rocque et al. (2016) described as individuals learning to "think about themselves and offending in a different way" (p. 66), and Maruna (2001) described as changing one's "definitions of success and assessments" (p. 101). It demonstrated, however, the crucial role that ongoing stigma and societal discrimination played within the internal narrative of ex-offenders, who, for all their hard work, recovery, and desistance, were continuing to be viewed as criminals by employers and society at large. It also begs the question of whether or not the criminal identity, as such, needs to be supplanted or merely transformed.

The key piece that 7th Step offers to ex-offenders, and also to the desistance literature, is that the fundamental acceptance of ex-offenders by society, as being

inherently valuable and productive members of society, is essential to the change process. The notion that, while change is necessary it is also possible and that the fundamental worth, integrity, and humanity of the individual is not in question. One member (ex-offender) described his experience of secondary desistance:

> I feel like it is more integrated, a big part of that is because of 7th Step, I don't feel like a normal, I don't think I ever will, but I don't feel like I have to hide who I am any more. I feel like I'm accepted, and that people want to hear about the things I've been through and how I am coming out the other side. It helps me with my goals and finding where I can fit in and belong out here in society. (Personal communication)

In 7th Step the stabilization of a new pro-social identity includes an appreciation for the strengths and experiences of one's past. Social integration is based upon mutual accountability and respect between ex-offenders and volunteers; the awareness that mutual transformation is required. Identity change then becomes relational as well as internal through a recognition of commonality and friendship, similar to the "looking glass recovery" process described by Maruna (2001) (p. 96). Through the reflection of one's Other, both volunteers and ex-offenders come to have a greater appreciation for the workability and humanity in any given struggle or situation.

Maruna (2001) describes the conventional strategy of "shaming offenders" into some sort of rehabilitation, which often instigates the creation of a "redemption script" (p. 131). The narrative of this redemption script allows individuals to save face through the description of a "core self" or "real self" – that in essence they have always been a good person. While gaining a sense of self-worth is productive, the "redemption script" can also serve to bypass the practice of "owning up" or taking responsibility for past actions (Maruna, 2001, p. 131). By removing this "shaming of offenders", 7th Step creates the space for real accountability to occur incorporating both the sense of self-

worth and responsibility for past actions into an experience of secondary desistance or identity change. Because "confession" is not the goal of 7th Step, ex-offenders often feel safe enough to open up and share about their past behaviours and also about how these have affected them and made them feel. One member (ex-offender) described:

> What came out in my Hotseat, you know, it wasn't essentially a secret, but only a very few people knew. And um it was weighing down on me a lot, and it had a lot to do with … so I had to let it go. (Interview)

Through 7th Step members are able to experience self-worth through the process of accountability and change, supported within a container of acceptance and love.

Maruna (2016) describes the unexpected parallels that exist between the narratives of victims and of ex-offenders who are engaged within a process of desistance; parallels in the recovery experiences of both groups (*cf:* Meyer, 2016; Walters, 2015). Just as 7th Step is able to create mutually supportive relationships between ex-offenders and volunteers, the recognition of ex-offenders as human beings and potential resources within the processes of restorative justice, and offender rehabilitation and reintegration, could benefit the recovery process of survivors and victims of crime as well.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this project was limited to the 7th Step group in Nova Scotia, and the Halifax chapter in particular. When the research began, this consisted of approximately 90+ people, only half of whom were actively engaging with the group on a regular basis. During the course of the research that number more than doubled. Most group meetings had an attendance of between 18 to 35 people. Included on the mailing list, are the members of the 7th Step group in Annapolis Valley, as well as the Halifax group. Due to limited time and resources, however, my research was not able to extend beyond the Halifax group.

The 7th Step group in Halifax is one of the first groups in Canada to include female ex-offenders. This inclusion has been a huge success. Much of my research explored the role of gender within 7th Step, and this was one of the main aspects that people brought up when I asked them about their experiences of gender within the group. Beyond this, however, my research was only able to scratch the surface of gender's role within the group, its culture and dynamics. In many ways, this aspect of the research put 7th Step itself on the spot and was an area that presented the greatest challenge and critique of how the group functioned and where its blind spots were.

The themes that arose from the data in terms of gender, gender roles and dynamics, sexual relationships, sexism, and various experiences and approaches to masculinity were fascinating and extremely valuable. To have included them in this

report, however, would have nearly doubled its length. Ultimately, this topic deserves to be its own separate research question, and to be more thoroughly analyzed and explored. While, many exciting themes and jewels from the data had to be put aside in the narrowing of analysis, this was the most difficult to abandon.

7th Step members are diverse, with a few exceptions. In age, they range from 19 or 20 years old, to late 60s early 70s. There tend to be slightly more female than male volunteers, and more male than female ex-offenders, both genders, however, are present throughout the age range. As yet there have been no openly transgender or non-binary members in the Halifax street group, however, there was a transgender woman in one of the institutional groups. During one interview there was mention of her coming to the street group meeting after her release, but this did not occur during the research period.

While there was, I am sure, a wide range of sexual preference experienced within the group, I only encountered one instance of open acknowledgment or reference to homosexuality. This was during the Hotseat of a volunteer, whom it should be mentioned did not return. While the overall response of 7th Step, as a group culture, to the LGBTQ community warrants further study, it did not arise as an issue during my research. I did not at any point encounter overt homophobia, and primarily the topic of sexual orientation, if it arose at all, was met with acceptance, tolerance, or curiosity. One member (ex-offender) even expressed a naiveté and lack of knowledge around how to use pronouns and asked me for advice (Interview). Very occasionally, during an interview with an ex-offender, there would be reference to the stigma around homosexuality in prison, however, this always arose in reference to masculinity as opposed to sexual

orientation. Along with gender and race, this is a rich area of study, however, it was beyond the scope of the project.

Racially, the 7th Step membership is predominantly, though not entirely, white, however, during the second half of my fieldwork, the membership became slightly more diverse in terms of both ex-offenders and volunteers. The reasons for this lack of racial diversity were never clear to me, and every member I spoke to about it readily acknowledged the issue and expressed a desire to somehow make the group more inclusive.

As the racial diversity of the membership began to increase, near the end of my research, even by just one or two individuals, the issue of race came up more often, and People of Colour, guests and members, started coming more frequently. One member (ex-offender) described appreciating the support and training 7th Step offered him in terms of public speaking and communicating with lawyers, "trying to change that lawyer mentality, which sees a young Black man and thinks guilty before proven innocent" (Field note, 6/19/18). Another member (volunteer), when teased about going on the Hotseat, shot back: "I've been on the Hotseat my whole life, because I'm Black" (Field note, 6/19/18). These instances were refreshing for me as a researcher and were met with appreciation and support from the rest of the group as well.

Because of timing and other research limitations and constraints, there was no racial diversity in the membership I interviewed. I believe, however, that it was only due to this lack of diversity that race did not emerge as a theme within the research. This suggests the need and opportunity for further inquiry and research to be done, which was beyond the scope of this project.

Conclusion

Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) write, "many field workers find it difficult to achieve the sort of emotional distance required to subject to analysis those with whom [one] has been deeply immersed" (p. 145). At the beginning of my research process, this was true and I struggled with feeling like I was going to end up having to choose between my role as a researcher or my role as a member. The 7th Step emphasis on self-reflection and accountability, however, made the process of analysis simple and straightforward. When I had doubts or concerns, friends (ex-offenders) would encourage me without hesitation. Their trust in my honesty and integrity inspired and supported me, but also made me all the more determined to do them proud.

This is the kind of support that society needs to offer the ex-offender, the support of relationship, trust, and encouragement. Sands (1964) writes, "hatred isn't the opposite of love. The opposite of love is indifference" (p. 98). The injustice of our world is that children who suffer the harm of abuse, or even just indifference, a lack of care, grow up to become criminalized and tortured through incarceration. Sands (1967) writes, "our whole system of punishment is based on the concept of revenge – which is why it fails … I, as an ex-con, know more about rehabilitating criminals than most of the experts are

ever going to find out" (p. 75). We do a disservice to ex-offenders, but also to society, when we do not offer them the support they need, and the opportunity to give back and help others, both out in the community but also inside correctional institutions where they can do the most good. Munn and Bruckert (2013) describe, "the silence regarding those who 'make good' [contributes] to the illusion of the dangerous ex-convict", and also makes their path of change "invisible" (p. 2-3).

Many of the volunteers I spoke with described an increased sense of abolitionism after going to 7th Step (Interview). The ex-offenders, however, were often appreciative of the role prison could play:

> I went to jail for something that I did. Had I not gone to jail and broke the cycle, been able to get clear minded enough to be where I am today. It's a shame that I ended up in jail, but it saved my life. (Interview)

Many of the ex-offenders told me that it wasn't the justice system itself that was the problem, it was how it approached rehabilitation, or didn't. It was about how the system was broken, not that it existed (Interview). Many described prison as being the ideal moment to reach out and connect with someone, to support them in a process of change (Interview). My conversations with the ex-offenders gave me more of an understanding about the criminal justice system then all of my criminology courses, and the papers or books I had read.

In return for this education, I offered my friendship and I believed in them, my friends. Maruna (2001) writes, "societies that do not believe that offenders can change will get offenders who do not believe that they can change" (p. 166). Membership with 7th Step allowed me to experience change myself, and also to support the change of others. It gave me a new appreciation for the power of listening and of honest

storytelling, to transform relationships, assumptions, culture and stigma. Sands (1964) described telling his own story:

> It was my life, as I had lived it. The lessons were what that life had taught me. I had hoped that by overcoming my reserve, by laying my heart and soul bare, I might save someone else that frightful tuition … I had wanted to know whether that life stood for anything or not. (p. 181)

This role that storytelling played within 7th Step and the desistance process, creating connections and relationships between people, which then fostered healing and change, was an intriguing aspect of my research that I did not get to fully explore. Along with a myriad of other rich topics and questions, my research only scratched the surface of the wealth that 7th Step and its membership had to offer.

What my research did show, was that the presence, acceptance, and experience of mutual transformation from the volunteers, as representatives of society, played a crucial role in the change process of ex-offenders. It offered insights into what supports are needed for ex-offender reintegration, and how building trust and relationships between people is a necessary part of that. It demonstrated how just simply connecting at a human level could be a profound catalyst for change, particularly when that change involved reciprocity and mutual recognition. This then illuminated the resource ex-offenders could be for society, and the important role that they could play in a collective healing of harm, as they regularly demonstrate the ability to move beyond even the worst mistakes, with vulnerability, accountability, and honour.

My personal experience, as a member of 7th Step, often extended beyond just the people and experiences in the room, to an awareness of all those who were, or had been, criminalized and incarcerated. The love, empathy, and compassion that the ex-offenders inspired within me, extended to all those people I did not know. Sands (1967) described

the end of the first few 7th Step meetings, inside the Kansas State penitentiary, when the vibrant members would line up and go back to being inmates: dehumanized. He writes, "The feeling of exultation is never quite equal to the sadness" (p. 119).

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