Walking the contested terrain: An exploration of the lifer identity post-release and its role in reintegration.

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WALKING THE CONTESTED TERRAIN: 
An Exploration of the Lifer Identity Post-Release and Its Role in Reintegration

by

Catherine L. Brooke

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research 
through the Department of Sociology and Anthropology 
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for 
the Degree of Master of Arts at the 
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2003

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Okay, so if I'm no longer a criminal, why do I have to be an ex-convict? Why can't I go back to society in the same capacity as I came out of society? Why do they have to say, 'Now we're tattooing you with this label...'

He is paroled, but not free of the label.

A quote from an ex-convict on parole. Erickson, Crow, Zurcher, & Connett (1973)
ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to explore the identity of life-sentenced inmates ("lifers") after they are released from prison and the impact of identity on reintegration. This research is based on the literature that argues that inmates develop a convict identity while in prison. Few studies, however, follow these convicts after they are released; thus, little is known about the fate of the convict identity. Based on role exit theory and role transition literature, it was expected that lifers would be required to shed their identity as lifers and assume a straight identity for successful reintegration. Seven lifers were interviewed about their identities. The main findings of this research reveal that a unique lifer identity exists in prison, survives the release date, and that identity plays a role in reintegration. The findings of this research suggest that identity needs to be addressed in correctional programming and policies. Identity post-release is a contested terrain in which lifers struggle between acquiring a straight identity and shedding their lifer identity. The continued connection to a lifer identity poses problems for acquiring a straight identity and successful reintegration--for example, locating and maintaining employment, obtaining housing once fully paroled, acquiring relationships with age appropriate and non-criminal individuals, and re-establishing familial and romantic relationships. This study contributes to both role transition literature and reintegration literature. In particular, the experience of lifers identifies weaknesses in Ebaugh’s (1988) role exit theory and extends our understanding of identity post-release and the role it plays in reintegration.
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the lifers involved in this research. If not for their participation and desire to promote change within the system, this research would not have been possible. Their knowledge and insight have been invaluable.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank the residents of the halfway house for their participation and co-operation. I would also like to thank Skip Graham, Executive Director of the halfway house, for allowing me to conduct the research at his facility. I would also like to thank Mary Lou Dietz, Sandi Miller and Michelle Graham for the many suggestions and guidance they offered. They gave much personal time to assist me in the advancement of research with lifers. Thanks also to Dr. Eleanor Maticka-Tyndale and Dr. Margery Holman for taking the time out of their busy schedules to offer their assistance and to sit on my committee. Finally, I would like to thank my advisor, Janice Drakich. Over the past years, through her guidance, I have become a better writer and researcher. She has also taught me to believe in myself, and my, at times, misunderstood passion for lifers’ rights. Her vast knowledge and expertise have proven to be my most valuable resource.
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VITA AUCTORIS
CHAPTER 1

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The purpose of this research is to explore the post-release identity of life-sentenced inmates (‘lifers’) and the role of identity in reintegration.\(^1\) Research has identified the existence of a convict identity in prison and the significance of this identity to integration into the prison culture (Clemmer, 1958; Goffman, 1961; Hepburn & Stratton, 1977; Macchio, 1994; Moerings, 1984; Schmid & Jones, 1991; Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Thomas, Petersen & Cage, 1981). Parallel to the demands of the prison culture to adopt a convict identity, society requires inmates to adopt and sustain a non-criminal identity in order to successfully reintegrate into society. Research has indicated that in prison, the convict identity is salient; however, little is known about the identity of inmates once they are released into the community. One body of literature suggests that inmates, once released, will realign their identity with that of law-abiding citizens and shed their prison identity (Jones & Schmid, 2000; Macchio, 1994; Wheeler, 1961). Another body of literature, however, suggests that convicts may experience difficulty shedding their prison identity (Cunningham-Huston, 1991; Erickson, Crow, Zurcher & Connett, 1973; Jones & Schmid, 2000). There also exists the possibility that convicts will maintain their convict identity. The majority of this literature, however, is based on what is expected rather than what happens after release. Few studies have been done which actually examine convicts’ identity after they leave the institution. To assess and

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\(^1\) A life-sentence is a term of 25 years to be served within a federal correctional facility. Inmates can apply for parole after one-third of their sentence has been served. See Appendix E for a list of other key terms and their definitions.
clarify the various arguments on post-release identity, this exploratory study undertakes to investigate convicts' identity after they have been released into the community.

The idea for this research was sparked by the noted literature that argues that it is necessary for survival in prison to adopt a convict identity. The findings of this body of research suggest that upon entry into prison, and for the duration of the prison term, survival requires inmates to adopt a convict identity. A lifer serving time at one of the Canadian federal prisons was quoted as saying "if you're not part of the prison subculture, the only time you're confident is when you're locked in your cell" (Macchio, 1994, p. 52). Both anecdotal and research evidence (Flanagan, 1981; Schmid & Jones, 1991; Thomas, 1977; Thomas, Peterson & Cage, 1981) suggest that by taking on a convict identity, the inmate publicly identifies with the prison subculture and acts in accordance with the inmate code system to reduce the likelihood of victimization and conflict. Conformity to the prison culture ensures his survival in prison, his acceptance by others, and the reinforcement of his convict identity.²

The prison is an example of what Goffman (1961) refers to as a total institution, a place of residence where a large number of like-situated individuals are cut off from the wider society and together lead an enclosed, formally-administered life. Upon entering prison, the prisoner is dispossessed not only of his roles but also to a large extent of his individual identity. This stripping of the prisoner's identity is referred to as 'mortification' and is initiated during entrance procedures to prison, for example, through the issuing of standard clothing, the removal of personal items, and the assignment of a number (Moerings, 1984). These are the ways in which the institution can restrict the

² The masculine form is used because male participants were used in the studies cited and because the sample used in this study is also male.
inmates from asserting their individuality, thus forcing them to adopt the role of prisoner.

In this environment, inmates develop a distinct inmate subculture. The inmate subculture serves many functions. It shields the inmates from the harsh environment of the institution by providing inmates with a sense of belonging, and provides justifications for their criminal behaviour (Wheeler, 1961). According to Goffman (1961, p. 58), it also provides “a way of life which enables the inmate to avoid the devastating psychological effects of internalizing and converting social rejection into self-rejection.”

Similarly, Lubimiv (1978, p. 52) states:

He has obtained some success in his status on the basis of a new value system which he shares with other inmates who were also failures of society. The inmate is no longer an isolated misfit in society, but has become part of his own society. The prison subculture, in turn, supports his resistance to the demands of a conventional society.

The inmate's psychological well being and sense of personal worth are also threatened by “pains of imprisonment,” identified by Sykes (1958, p. 64) as “the loss of liberty, deprivation of goods, services, and social relationships.” To lessen or reduce the negative experiences of imprisonment, the prison subculture provides inmates with alternative codes and value systems as a means of enhancing their self-esteem (Hepburn & Stratton, 1977; Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Tittle & Tittle, 1964).

The prison subculture also provides inmates with certain beliefs and attitudes, which help the inmate avoid conflict and to endure the traumas associated with confinement (Flanagan, 1981; Schmid & Jones, 1991; Thomas, 1977; Thomas, Peterson, & Cage, 1981). A new ‘prison identity’ allows an inmate to interact with other inmates and function within the inmate social system by minimizing differentiation among them.
The alignment of one’s identity with the general prison subcultural identity may prevent harassment, assault, or even death (Schmid & Jones, 1991).

Since the adoption of a convict identity is necessary to function within the prison context, it is a logical extension to expect that the adoption of a straight identity be just as necessary to function within the societal context. As discussed, inmates are expected to acquire a convict identity not only to fit in with the prison subculture but also as a means of protection and survival. Released convicts are expected by Corrections Canada and society to adopt a straight identity and to channel their work, activities, and social relationships away from that which is considered criminal. By assuming the identity of a straight citizen, the inmate is publicly identifying with, and conforming to, the expectations of the dominant culture. The inmate has a great stake in being successful in his reintegration. By acting in accordance with society’s expectations, and similar to the reasons for acquiring a convict identity, the inmate ensures his acceptance within conventional society and increases his likelihood of successful reintegration, for example, obtaining and sustaining employment, housing, social relationships, pro-social activities, and consequently, prevents being returned to prison. Based on these expectations held by Corrections Canada and society, it is surprising that little research has been conducted on convicts’ identity after release or on the function that identity serves in reintegration. Instead, researchers have focused on skill acquisition as the central factor in successful reintegration (Amellal & Rankin, 2002; Blanchette & Dowden, 1998; Ekstedt & Jackson, 1996; Gillis, Motiuk & Belcourt, 1998; Mitchell, 1992; Proportion, Fabian & Robinson, 1991). Although skill acquisition is important for employment, this focus by

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3 The term “straight” is used to refer to non-criminal segments or activities of the population.
rehabilitation and reintegration researchers is too narrow and ignores the importance of identity in the pursuit of work, social relationships, and activities. Wayne Ford, a former lifer argues, "you’re not just a lifer, or a convicted murderer . . . you’re a convict who has lived with other convicts and been changed by the experience, you can’t rejoin the ‘square john’ society easily with that psychological headset" (Cunningham-Huston, 1991, p. 4). Ford suggests that convicts do not exit prison and immediately become transformed into a ‘straight john.’ The comment made by Ford has been echoed by other inmates (Jones & Schmid, 2000; Erickson et al., 1973) and alludes to the potentially conflicting nature of the inmate’s post-release identity with his former prison identity. The suggestion is that identity is a contested terrain for convicts. According to role theorists, “if two or more positions are simultaneously activated, the individual may find it difficult, if not impossible, to conform simultaneously to the two distinct sets of role expectations. That is, inter-role conflict may emerge” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 17; see also Allen & van de Vliert, 1984; Moerings, 1984). Role conflict may be especially relevant for released convicts who may be experiencing difficulty shedding their convict identity when simultaneously trying to assume a non-criminal identity. The result is that the convict now possesses two incompatible identities. Neither the contested terrain of convicts’ identity post-release, nor the role of identity in reintegration has been researched.

It is unclear what will be revealed in this study, but it is expected that inmates need to transcend their convict identity and acquire a straight identity to be successful in their reintegration. No evidence exists which indicates that there is a smooth transition
for convicts, but the theory of role exit (Ebaugh, 1988) allows us to examine, in-depth, the process of role transition and role exit.

The work of Ebaugh (1988) is the main body of theory that informs this research and provides the framework necessary to explore the post-release identity of lifers. In her work on role exit, she explores role transitions, in particular, the exiting of a former role and the adoption of a new role and identifies the conditions necessary for a successful role transition. Similar to her role theorist counterparts (for example, Allen & van de Vliert, 1984; Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Meisenhelder, 1977), she has been able to identify stages through which individuals must pass in order to shed their previous role and the potential pitfalls that can corrupt the acquisition of a new role. Ebaugh's work on role exit provides the tools necessary to examine post-release identity and role transition.

Lifers are the sample population used in this study for two reasons. First, based on the assumption that one assumes a convict identity in prison, the longer an inmate is in prison, the longer the identity of convict is enacted and reinforced. As compared with other inmates, convicted murderers serve longer periods of time before being considered for parole and, thus, may have a more entrenched and fixed convict identity than short-term convicts.

Second, this study has an applied aspect for correctional programs and policies with respect to post-release reintegration. Since the abolition of capital punishment in Canada, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of offenders serving life-sentences. Recent prison demographics indicate that the lifer population is increasing and that more will be released into society in search of successful reintegration. As of December 2001, there were 5,036 male and female offenders serving life sentences,
1,912 of whom were either on day parole, full parole, or statutory release (Motiuk & Vuong, 2002). Statistics indicate that the total homicide offender population has increased by 14.6% and as of 2001, represents 23% of the total institution population, in comparison to 18% (n = 4,318) of the total inmate population as of 1995 (Motiuk & Vuong, 2002). The increase in the number of lifers in the prison community means that more lifers than ever before are being released into the community. Statistics also indicate that lifers, in comparison to other inmates, may experience greater difficulty with reintegration. A study by Luciani (2000) of 2,649 lifers revealed that almost half were expected to have difficulty when released into the community, with another 42% expected to experience some difficulty. These statistics may be an indication of the problems faced by lifers who have had to endure lengthy sentences within prison. With lifers making up such a large percentage of the inmate population, and one that is increasing, and who are perhaps, at risk of experiencing difficulties with reintegration, it is necessary to consider the unique circumstances of their sentences and to examine the lifer identity and its effect, if any, on reintegration.

This research also contributes to role theory literature. By examining lifers’ post-release transition experience from a prison-based identity to a community-based identity, this study provides evidence for what is necessary for a successful role exit and highlights some of the problems with the role exit process. The conditions outlined for successful role exit may not apply to all types of exits.

The results of this study also contribute to reintegration literature. What is learned about the conditions necessary for successful role exit and lifers’ experience with role exit may assist the correctional system when designing reintegration programs for
lifers. In addition, by identifying the role that identity plays in reintegration, increased recognition of the importance of post-release identity can be actualized and initiated into current correctional programming. To ensure successful reintegration for lifers and safety for the community, it is necessary to provide lifers with adequate preparation for release and sufficient resources once released into the community.
CHAPTER 2

THEORY AND SUPPORTING LITERATURE

In the following section, theory and literature on role transition and transformations of identity are reviewed, but first it is necessary to establish what is meant by the term identity.

Identity

In order to examine lifers’ post-release identity, it is necessary to first determine what is meant by the term identity. Most commonly, identity is seen as what one answers to the question ‘Who am I?’ Identity, first and foremost, is how individuals see themselves. It can include physical attributes (‘I have brown hair’), personality characteristics (‘I am smart’), and the social roles one plays (‘I am a student’). Identity, however, is more complex than simply how we define ourselves. In fact, identity includes many components, some of which are external to the individuals and their control. Jones and Schmid (2000) offer an alternative definition. They define identity as “the meaning given to the self in a social situation” (2000, p.175). This meaning involves three elements: first (and similar to the discussion of the question ‘Who am I?’), how individuals subjectively see themselves and how they present that self to others; second, the meaning others assign to that individual’s presentation of self; and finally, the context, or social situation, in which they both occur. The consequences of these three elements are integral to an individual’s self-concept.

Identity can be conceptualized as being social in nature, that is, a product influenced and shaped by social interaction (Charon, 1979; Hamachek, 1992; Jones & Schmid, 2000) and, thus, affected by the responses of others. According to Jones and
Schmid (2000, p. 175), identity is a "negotiation between the individual and others, in which the individual presents a meaning of his or her self to others, and others then validate this meaning, fail to validate it, or counter it with another meaning." In other words, other people have great influence on the way in which individuals see themselves.

Identity also includes the roles one enacts within society and can be affected by one's membership in social groups (Erickson et al., 1973; Hewitt, 1991). According to Hewitt (1991), roles are ascribed characteristics that form the foundation for the construction of a particular identity. Ascribed characteristics place limits on one's development of self and also restrict with whom he or she will be able to interact. Consequently, one has no control over who validates or who does not validate his or her presentation of self. In the prison environment, it is the court system that has ascribed the label of prisoner to inmates. In addition, in prison, the majority of interaction is forced and is limited to other inmates who are validating a self that has been constructed for protection and security. Most inmates do not see their prison identities as their 'true' identities, but rather as an identity they must construct in order to survive in the prison world (Jones and Schmid, 2000; Macchio, 1994). What happens, however, when this identity is the only identity that is validated and when one is not able to present one's true identity? It has been argued that this constructed identity slowly becomes one's true identity and the inmate's ability to revive his 'true' identity upon release is diminished the longer he is behind bars (Jones and Schmid 2000).

Ebaugh sees identity as being not merely the sum of roles played, but rather as arising from images of the self formed in the course of role behaviour. The internalization of role expectations and the reactions of others to one's position in the
social structure also shape one’s personal identity. Consequently, each time an individual enters or exits a role, his or her self-identity is threatened. Elements of the new or previous role have to be negotiated and reintegrated into one’s self-concept before stability and security can be re-established. She argues that while the primary and underlying self-concept of a person is formed during childhood, it is continually changing in response to other social contexts in which the person is involved. If social roles are such an important determinant of one’s identity, it is logical to assume that a change in social roles or a ‘role transition’ will have a great impact on one’s identity. The transition an inmate undergoes from prison to the community then should affect his identity and if so, what effect does this identity transformation have on his reintegration? The theory and literature on role transition provide the rationale and foundation for exploring the post-release identity of lifers.

Theory

Theory exists which offers an explanation of what role transition is and how it occurs. Allen and van de Vliert (1984), Ebaugh (1988), Glaser and Strauss (1971), and Meisenhelder (1977) present convincing evidence of the existence of role transitions and transformations of identity. According to Allen and van de Vliert (1984, p. 3), role transition can be defined as “the process of changing from one set of expected positional behaviours in a social system to another.” Role transitions are important to examine, in that the actual transition from one role to another “strongly influences the behaviour and social identity of those who participate in the process” (Allen & van de Vliert, 1984, p. 3). It is the roles that one enacts which determine one’s self and social identity and, thus,
experiencing a transition from one role to another will naturally influence one’s social identity.

Ebaugh’s (1988) theory of role exit is perhaps the most detailed account of identities in transition and provides the main theoretical framework for this research. Role exit theory places itself within the perspective of role theory which argues that “social behaviour is not random and meaningless; rather it tends to be ‘patterned’—predictable, meaningful, and consequential for the participants” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 16). Role theorists do not believe that social behaviour is static or rigid, but rather dynamic. They believe that there exist broad general norms which allow for a range of variation among individuals who are enacting the same roles while at the same time providing everyone with a guide for social behaviour.

Ebaugh draws upon the strengths of two streams of role theory--structural and interactionist. The structural approach to role theory defines social roles as sets of behavioural expectations associated with given positions in the social structure. For structural role theorists, role socialization plays a crucial part in the internalization of the behavioural expectations associated with given social roles. Structural role theorists argue that individuals are in the process of ‘role taking.’ In other words, individuals take on and internalize the expectations that surround a particular social role (Ebaugh, 1988).

In contrast, the social interactionist approach to role theory focuses on the ways in which individuals negotiate emergent meanings in order to discover and enact new roles. Based on the individual’s subjective perceptions, evaluations, and decisions, he or she coordinates his or her actions with the anticipated courses and expectations of others (Ebaugh, 1988). In comparison to the structural approach to role theory, social
interactionists see individuals as engaging in a process of ‘role making.’ This ‘role-making’ process involves constant creative modification as situations change. Role socialization, therefore, consists of individuals forging partial sets of established meanings and behavioural patterns or adaptations within which they can interact. ‘Role-making’ is a constant, ongoing process of thinking, feeling, perceiving, evaluating, and decision-making. Although individuals are constrained by structural conditions generated largely by others, roles are created and redefined as individuals interpret and assume them (Ebaugh, 1988). Ebaugh prefers to draw upon the strengths of both approaches. In her research on role exits, she examines how individuals take on new roles that have pre-existing expectations and scripts for behaviour, yet she also illustrates how individuals are creative in the sense that they can shape and create their new roles.

The idea for Ebaugh’s (1988, p. xiv) concept of role exit theory evolved from Merton’s concept of ‘anticipatory socialization,’ “the adoption of values of a group to which one aspires but does not yet belong.” Anticipatory socialization suggests that there exists a process whereby one begins to make a role change before the actual exiting of one role and entry into another occurs. Ebaugh, however, believes that the decision to exit a role involves much more than anticipating the requirements and values of a new role and is not as simple as being socialized into that new role. Exiting a role is unique in that individuals must disengage from and disidentify with their previous roles, contend with role residue from the previous roles, and be labelled ex-members of a group instead of being considered new members of a group. According to Ebaugh (1988, p. 3), “being an ex is unique sociologically in that the expectations, norms, and identity of an ex-role relate not to what one is currently doing but rather to social expectations associated with
the previous role.” An ex status is defined not by one’s current role behaviour, but from its contrast with one’s previous role.

Role exit, defined by Ebaugh (1988, p. 1) as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity and the re-establishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role,” involves two main processes. The first process is disengagement, “the process of disassociating and disidentifying with the values, ideas, expectations, and social relationships of a particular social role which a person performed for a given period in his or her life” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 10). Disengagement is a complex process in which individuals experience a shift in their reference groups, friendship networks, relationships with former group members, and their self-identities. The second process is disidentification, “the process of ceasing to think of oneself in the former role” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 4). Disidentification naturally flows from disengagement in that individuals who are withdrawing from a previous role begin to shift their self-identities away from those associated with their previous roles and come to identify more with those members of the desired role. The individual, however, must allow for the new identity to incorporate the “vestiges and residuals of the previous role” into the current conception of self (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 4).

Disengagement and disidentification are only two processes necessary for role exit to occur. Ebaugh also argues that in order to be successful with role exit, an individual needs the opportunity to exit, be committed to the exit process, and have the support of significant others. Possessing each of these criteria allows the individual to pass smoothly through the role exit process which, according to Ebaugh, consists of four identifiable phases: first doubts, seeking alternatives, turning point, and finally, the
creation of the ex-role. These criteria for successful role exit are used to examine the lifers’ experiences with role transition.

The first phase of the role exit process is referred to by Ebaugh (1988, p. 41) as ‘first doubts’ and is characterized by the reinterpreting and redefining of a situation that had previously been taken for granted by the individual. This initial phase is a period of great doubt in which the individual reconsiders his or her commitment to his or her current role and becomes aware that role alternatives may exist. The individual, thus, begins to weigh the costs and rewards of meeting his or her current role demands. As stated earlier, significant others who are able to pick up on these initial doubts are key to blocking or promoting the role exit process.

The second phase of the role exit process occurs when the individual begins to engage in the process of ‘seeking alternatives,’ “a comparative process in which alternative roles are evaluated in comparison with the costs and rewards of one’s current role” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 87). The phase of seeking alternatives involves, in addition to the seeking and weighing of role alternatives, responding to social support or lack of it from significant others, the realization of one’s freedom to choose an alternative role, a shift in reference group orientation, and finally, engaging in role rehearsal. Individuals begin to shift their focus from role expectations associated with the previous role to those of the anticipated role and evaluate themselves based on the standards and goals set by those who hold the desired role. In addition, individuals begin to more consciously emit cues that they are deciding whether or not to exit a particular role. Others’ responses can now either reinforce the individual’s initial doubts about the viability of the role exit, or can point out problem areas to the individual involved with exiting the role.
The third phase of the role exit process is said to have occurred when the individual experiences a ‘turning point.’ According to Ebaugh (1988, p. 123), a turning point can be defined as “an event that mobilizes and focuses awareness that old lines of action are complete, have failed, have been disrupted, or are no longer personally satisfying and provides individuals with the opportunity to do something different with their lives.” Previous obligations associated with an individual’s former role are diminished or seen as undesirable, thus opening up the opportunity for the acquisition of new roles. Accompanying the turning point is an external expression or an indication to others that a decision concerning the exiting of a role has been made. This external expression has the secondary function of finalizing the decision for the individual and to reduce any confusion experienced by the individual as a result of having two incompatible roles between which to decide.

In the fourth, and final phase of the role exit process, the individual engages in ‘creating the ex-role.’ In creating an ex-role, the individual becomes involved in the difficult process of managing the tension felt between his or her past, present, and future. Ebaugh points out that the essential dilemma involved in the creation of an ex-role is that the individual involved must not only struggle to become emotionally detached from his or her previous role but also must deal with members of society who are expecting certain behaviours based on the previous identity. An ex-role is not created simply because one now defines himself or herself as ‘ex.’ The individual may still be identified and labelled by society according to his or her previous role.

Even though she has grouped her findings into various stages, Ebaugh acknowledges that role exit varies by historical period, cultural group, and even for
individuals within the same society, and argues that role exit is a social process determined and shaped by various socio-historical factors. Ebaugh does not purport rigid time frames in which the various stages must occur and does not argue that each stage must be ‘mastered’ before moving on to the next. In fact, some individuals in her sample (which consisted of interviews with over 180 different ex’s) may not experience the stages in order and some may even skip certain stages, but will still exit their various roles. Ebaugh’s stage theory does not assume that all individuals pass through the same stages at the same time. Instead, Ebaugh argues that while “the types of roles being exited vary greatly in the sample, the process itself is identifiable and generalizable across roles” (1988, p. 23).

**Supporting Literature**

In the statement of the problem, literature related to the adoption of a convict identity in prison was examined. Although research exists that examines convicts’ identity after they have been released, it is minimal. The majority of research on post-release identity tends to focus on the transformation of convicts’ identity just prior to their release, that is, while they are still in prison. The researchers in these studies speculate as to what occurs once they are in the community. Research conducted by Jones and Schmid (2000) is an in-depth examination of the transition in convicts’ identity from the beginning of the prison sentence to just prior to release. Of particular interest to the current study are their findings concerning convicts’ post-release identity. Their findings indicate that towards the end of the prison sentence, convicts begin to shift their orientation away from the prison and more towards the outside world. Similar results have been noted in the works of Wheeler (1961) who discusses the U-shape distribution
of conformity. Wheeler argues, “inmates who recently have been in the broader community and inmates who are soon to return to that community are more frequently oriented in terms of conventional values... inmates appear to shed the prison culture before they leave it” (1961, p.706). This statement suggests that inmates leave the prison culture behind when they are released and that the prison culture should no longer affect their identity.

According to Jones and Schmid (2000), an inmate begins to construct his post-release image while he is still in prison and this task involves comparing the orientations of the inside and outside worlds. This comparison is done through what Jones and Schmid refer to as ‘identity work.’ Identity work includes: the “dissipation of his maximum security adaptation tactics” (2000, p. 127), for example, impression management and construction of a ‘false’ identity, and “a return to categorical, stereotypic thinking about maximum security inmates and the concomitant process of differentiating himself from them” (2000, p. 127). According to Ebaugh, the process of disidentification with one’s former social group is a necessary step in the transition between roles and, thus, for acquiring a post-release identity.

Jones and Schmid (2000) argue that there are a variety of factors that can influence an inmate’s identity at the time of release, for example, validation by outsiders of the inmate’s pre-prison identity, the inmate’s own recollection of his pre-prison identity, his desire to shed his prison identity, and his reorientation with an outsider’s perspective. They further argue that the extent of this change:

Depends on a balance between the situational adjustments he makes in prison and his continuing commitments to the outside world. His release identity depends, in other words, on the outcome of the dialectic between his prison identity and his suspended identity. (2000, p. 176)
This statement, however, assumes that his pre-prison identity has been suspended and that the transformation in prison was not real.

Similarly, Macchio’s (1994) research on lifer identity revealed that, for the most part, lifers reject the notion that the prison environment has transformed their identity. In fact, her results are reflective of Jones and Schmid’s (2000) research in that most of the inmates believed that they had only suspended their identity when they entered prison and that they would be able to retrieve it upon release. The identity of ‘lifer’ was seen as transitory and that it would be shed once they left prison. The majority of the lifers in her study felt that their ‘true’ identity or ‘pre-prison’ identity had not changed and that they would be able to successfully reintegrate after they were released. Both studies, however, examined inmates’ identity while they were incarcerated and only speculated as to what might occur after release.

One study, which examines convicts’ identity after they have been released, and provides support for the exiting of convicts from their criminal careers, is the research by Meisenhelder (1977). Meisenhelder (1977) found that offenders are motivated to exit their criminal behaviour in order to avoid re-incarceration and in order to gain, or regain, the rewards of social normality. “He is pushed by the deterring threat of ‘doing more time’ in prison, and pulled by a growing desire to ‘settle down’” (Meisenhelder, 1977, p. 322). In Meisenhelder’s study of 20 property offenders, it is the social, psychological, and physical maturation of the offender, and his desire to abandon the hassles and disorientations of his criminal lifestyle, which ‘pull’ him in the direction of conventional society. All attempts at exiting involve a process of decision-making, in which the offender makes an intentional and meaningful decision to exit his criminal career.
For a successful exit to occur, Meisenhelder argues that the offender must first
develop meaningful expressive attachments and behavioural investments, which serve to
bind the offender to conformity and to provide him with significant reasons to not re-
offend. Offenders must also recognize the irreversibility of time and decide to ‘start
anew.’ “Successful exiting was most often the result of a project that avoided the
augmentation of the common desire to ‘catch up’ with lost, or prison, time” (1977, p.
326). Success was linked to the offender’s ability to maintain a good job, peer relations,
and family relations. These economic and social resources allowed the men to construct
a social identity that was non-criminal. The final step in ensuring a successful exit
involves ‘certification,’ “the social verification of the individual’s ‘reform’” (1977, p.
329). Certification occurs when conventional others feel that the offender has truly
changed and is accepted as a reformed individual. While the findings provided by
Meisenhelder offer a view on role transition and identity transformation, his sample
included property offenders; offenders who served little time in prison in comparison to
lifers.

Due to the lack of literature in the area of lifers and their identity, it is unclear
what their post-release identity will be and what role identity will play in reintegration.
Based on role exit theory and supporting literature, it is expected that lifers will be
required to transcend their identity and acquire a straight identity to be successful with
reintegration. Role transition theory and literature will assist in the understanding of
lifers’ post-release identity and the role identity plays in their reintegration.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The qualitative method of unstructured, in-depth interviewing is selected as the methodology for this study. An interview can be described as a “two-person encounter in which one participant directs conversation with a specific purpose and program in mind” (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 213). The exploratory nature of the research calls for a method that allows for a richer quality of data to be obtained. In comparison to quantitative methods, the data that emerge from using a qualitative approach are more descriptive in nature and draw meaning from the participants’ perceptions and experiences; the way they make sense of their lives (Creswell, 1994). According to Seidman (1991, p. 3-4):

The purpose of interviewing is not to get answers to questions, nor to test hypotheses, and not to “evaluate” as the term is normally used. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience. A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience.

Since little is known about what happens to the lifer identity after release, an unstructured, open-ended format is crucial to expose previously untapped areas of relevance to lifer identity. An open-ended format allows for the participants to direct the interview and allows for previously untapped areas of interest to be exposed about which the researcher may not have been aware. The unstructured format not only allows for the lifers to elaborate on their answers but also allows for the clarification, or probing, of their statements, thus ensuring adequate representation of their identity. Interviewing is also selected as it is felt that its conversational style is the most flexible and non-threatening approach when dealing with a sensitive population; many convicts are
apprehensive as to the value of quantitative methods after enduring a host of testing while in prison.

The Sample

The sample was selected from the residents at a halfway house participating in the LifeLine program.\(^4\) At the time of the study, only eight lifers were in residence. To obtain the sample, I contacted and met with both the program director and executive director of the halfway house to discuss the research and obtain their permission to conduct the research. At their suggestion, I volunteered at the house for a period of two years to become better acquainted with the residents, to develop a level of trust, and to become familiar with the LifeLine Program. The lifers were approached independently several days prior to the interview and asked if they would be willing to participate in the study.

The availability sample consisted of seven men who had served the prison portion of a life sentence in one of Canada’s federal penitentiaries. There was a mix of participants who had received either first or second-degree murder convictions.\(^5\) Of these seven participants, one had attained full parole and the other six were on day parole. Their ages at the time of conviction ranged from 17 to 40. Their average age was 26 compared to the federal average of 31.\(^6\) With a range of 33 to 64, the average current age of the lifers is 46 (compared to the federal average of 43). The average sentence was 14

\(^4\) LifeLine is a program that offers assistance and guidance to life-sentenced offenders trying to adjust to indefinite periods of incarceration. In-Reach workers, lifers who are now on full parole, are used to assist lifers with adjustment to prison and to help them work towards parole and safe and successful reintegration in the community.

\(^5\) Due to the small sample size, it is not possible to be more specific in terms of actual numbers without compromising the confidentiality of the participants.

\(^6\) Federal averages presented in this section include all federally-sentenced men and women who have been convicted of homicide (first and second degree murder, manslaughter, and infanticide). (see Motiuk & Vuong, 2002)
years (with a range from 10 to 25). The average number of years actually served was 15 (with a range from 8 to 22). All of the participants in the study went past their day parole dates thus serving more time in comparison to time sentenced. The extension of jail time, for this particular sample, was often due to minor prison violations or political pressure by victims' rights groups. For more than half of the sample participants, this was their first federal sentence, and despite the public's widespread belief that convicts are released before the completion of their sentence, five of the lifers were past the date in which they could apply for full parole. The average time spent on day parole to date is two years. The average number of years the participants were involved with LifeLine is seven years before release and two years after release.

**Ethics**

Prior to the recruitment of the sample and the conducting of the interviews, this study was submitted to, and approved by, the ethics committee of the University of Windsor. Before each interview began, the participants were made aware of the research objectives and what would become of the data upon completion of the study. Due to the captive nature of the population, it was made very clear that participation was voluntary. Participants were told that they could withdraw from the interview at any time or refuse to answer any question without penalty.

Informed consent (see Appendix B) was obtained in writing at the start of the interview to tape record the interview. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of the study and that what they said would not be made available to either the residential program director or their parole officer. Participants were assigned a number to remove their identity from the research. Any notes taken during the interviews and the transcripts
of the interviews were made accessible to the participants at each stage of the research process and they were informed that they could withdraw a particular answer from the interview. The participants were told that they could have the recordings of the interviews once the tapes had been transcribed. It was also asserted that by participating in the research they would not receive any special considerations when applying for full parole. Participants were in no way compensated for their participation. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were given a debriefing form (see Appendix C) in which they were thanked for their participation, reassured of the confidentiality of the research, and invited to attend the defence of the thesis. Participants were also given contact information in case they had any further questions or comments.

Of important note is that I had a legal obligation to report any illegal activity that was disclosed during the interviews. Thus, before each interview began, the participants were told of my obligation to report illegal activity and were advised to monitor the information revealed to me during the course of the interview.

Creation of the Interview Schedule

In developing the interview schedule (see Appendix A), I began by listing the categories of themes that I hoped to explore with the participants. The themes were created based on Ebaugh’s process of role exit, the literature that I had reviewed, and discussions with both the lifers, In-Reach workers, and the staff at the halfway house. From the list of themes, specific sets of questions (including probing questions) were developed. The themes included: the lifer identity, prior to release and in the community, opportunity to exit the lifer identity, commitment to the lifer identity, relationships with

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7 In-Reach workers are lifers who are now on full parole who assist lifers with adjustment to prison and to help them work towards parole and safe and successful reintegration in the community.
significant others, degree of disengagement and disidentification with the lifer identity, the role of the lifer identity in reintegration, and finally, the importance of a straight identity in reintegration. The interview consisted of four separate schedules with a total of 21 questions not including the probing questions. The four schedules were as follows: basic demographics, commitment to the lifer identity, reintegration, and general comments and questions. It is also important to note that proponents of more structured schedules argue that structure is necessary to "guarantee uniformity of questions and completeness of data" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 216). In keeping with this recommendation, the same schedule was used for all participants, but unlike a structured interview, it allowed for the participant to delve into other areas of relevant interest. These detours were necessary to ensure detailed responses and accurate interpretation of the participants' experiences.

The interview questions were worded in a style of language suitable for the population. It was considered whether the interview questions should be worded using key terms ('lingo') with which the participants were familiar, a tactic used to improve rapport with participants. In talking with staff and some of the In-Reach workers, it was decided that lingo should not be used as it would imply that I was part of their culture. There was also the concern that due to my unfamiliarity with the prison subculture and lingo, I might not employ the terms correctly.

Each interview schedule had ample space on the right hand side of each page to record personal and reflective notes and also the body language of the participant. It is important to note, however, that it was not always possible to take these types of notes and that it was of greater benefit to the quality of data obtained that the flow of
interaction with the participant was maintained. In instances where this was not possible, notes were recorded immediately after the interview had taken place.

Data Collection

The interviews were either conducted at the halfway house or in the participants’ place of residence. Full access to the halfway house was granted and the staff was very accommodating of the research process. At the halfway house, the interviews were conducted in one of the offices to assure privacy. The unstructured, open-ended, interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. The interviews typically lasted one-and-a-half to two hours. In two cases, the interviews were shorter because the lifers involved were hesitant in divulging information.

Data Analysis

As stated, each interview was audio taped and later transcribed. To analyze the data from the interviews, I began by briefly reading through all the transcriptions to look for emerging patterns and themes related to the research variables. Once the themes had been identified (for example, the lifer identity, others’ perception of lifers, role transitions, significant others, disengagement and disidentification with the lifer identity, and reintegration problem areas), I developed a coding system (see Appendix D) in which each theme would have a different code (for example ‘EI’ was used to code for evidence of a lifer identity). After I had coded each interview, I developed several databases in Microsoft Word, one for each theme. I was then able to copy and paste excerpts from the interviews into the databases. There were seven categories all together (evidence of a lifer identity, whether or not they identified as a lifer, others’ perception of lifers, evidence of role transition, reintegration, significant others, and disengagement and
disidentification). Once the databases had been developed, I was able to get a better understanding of the data I had obtained.

A second database was developed to keep track of basic demographic information and questions concerning the research variables. This database was used as a reference to quickly establish certain characteristics of the participants (for example, average age, details of their sentence, whether they had support networks in place, etc.).

**Reliability and Validity**

**Internal Validity:**

One of the main problems surrounding internal validity is the extent to which it can be ensured that the results obtained accurately reflect the experiences of the men studied. The participants were made to feel comfortable with the interview process by not being placed in a position in which they would have to disclose any confidential or irrelevant personal information (for example, details of the crime). Achieving a level of comfort and trust was necessary to ensure that the participants felt at ease with divulging personal information. In addition, the open-ended interview format made the participants feel that they had some control over the direction of the interview. As a result, most of the lifers were very open and thorough in their responses. Due to the sensitive nature of the questions asked and their lack of trust in ‘outsiders,’ not all of the lifers may have felt comfortable revealing certain information about themselves and, therefore, may not have given completely accurate responses. They may also have answered in a way that embellished their rate of success with reintegration so as to increase their chances of receiving full parole. As stated earlier, however, the participants were explicitly told that
their participation would not assist them in gaining early release from the halfway house and that any information given was strictly confidential.

Another area of concern was that these men were accustomed to engaging in impression management (Jones & Schmid, 2000). This is not surprising given the nature of their crimes and society’s view of murder and murderers. Being a young, female interviewer with no first hand knowledge of imprisonment, it would have been very easy for these men to ‘con’ me and tell me what they thought I wanted to hear instead of what might actually have been the truth. Fortunately, I have known most of the men for two years and hope that the relationships that I have built with them are ones in which they feel they can be open and honest with me. It is also important that the researcher not express any value judgements or personal opinions. Due to the nature of the population and some of the information that would be revealed, it was crucial that the researcher remain neutral, otherwise the participants’ future responses could be negatively influenced.

To ensure internal validity, during the actual interviewing, some of the men’s answers had to be clarified or further probed to ensure that there was no misinterpretation of their responses. I also checked interviews against the observations I had made of the men since I began volunteering at the house. In addition, some of the information, for example, dates of conviction and release, was double-checked with formal records.

External Validity:

A major concern surrounding external validity was the extent to which the findings from this study could be generalized to other lifers. It has been argued, however, that “the intent of qualitative research is not to generalize findings, but to form a unique
interpretation of events” (Creswell, 1994, p. 158-159). My objective was not to obtain
generalizable results, but rather to understand the identity held by these particular lifers
and how it affected their reintegration. It must be stated, however, that while aspects of
these men’s experiences may also be of relevance to other lifers, the interpretations
drawn from this research can only be deemed representative of these specific men at this
particular point in time and in this particular setting.
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

This chapter presents a discussion of the study’s rich interview data regarding lifer identity and the post-release experience of lifers with role transition and reintegration. The discussion will begin with an examination of the existence and dimensions of the lifer identity in prison followed by the evidence that supports the endurance of a lifer identity. Next, Ebaugh’s (1988) model of role transition will be employed to explore and explain lifers’ experiences with role transition and reintegration. It is the conditions that she and other role theorists (Allen & van de Vliert, 1984; Glaser & Strauss, 1971; Meisenhelder, 1977) claim to be necessary for successful role transition that are of particular interest to this research. Ebaugh’s stages of role exit will also be addressed, but in the context of the outlined conditions for role transition. Finally, a summary of the results will end the chapter.

The Lifer Identity

In order to begin to comprehend the lifer identity post-release, it is necessary to examine how this identity is formed, the various components of the identity, and how the identity is maintained. Since the lifer identity is born out of the prison environment, the following is a discussion of the lifer identity within the prison context. The various components and dimensions of the lifer identity during incarceration will be explored so that a clearer understanding of the lifer identity post-release may be achieved.

A substantial body of research supports the existence of a convict identity in prison (Clemmer, 1958; Goffman, 1961; Hepburn & Stratton, 1977; Macchio, 1994; Moerings, 1984; Schmid & Jones, 1991; Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Thomas, Petersen &
Cage, 1981). Unfortunately very few studies examine the prison identity of lifers. Perhaps the most direct evidence available of a distinct lifer identity is the research by Macchio (1994) on the impact of long-term incarceration on the lifer identity. Although Macchio concludes that “a process of induction into the prison environment and manifestation of a unique identity has not been demonstrated” (1994, p. 158), her interview data provide frequent reference by lifers to their feelings of dissimilarity to the general convict population whom they depict as ‘short-termers,’ ‘punks,’ and ‘anti-authority troublemakers.’ Their stress on dissimilarity suggests that a unique identity is associated with those serving life-sentences. Macchio’s (1994) results, although inconclusive in terms of locating the impact of long-term incarceration on lifers’ identity, allude to the need for clarification of the term ‘lifer’ and provide justification for further investigation of this identity.

The lifers interviewed in this study spoke of themselves as lifers, a separate and distinct entity from the general convict population; in fact, six identified themselves as ‘lifers’ while inside. When asked, “Did you identify as a lifer inside?” some of the responses were: “Did I identify? Yes I’m afraid I did” (Lifer #1); “I was a lifer, but even there, it’s part of what gets pounded into you. In a sense that for you to survive you have to remember who you are” (Lifer #3). When asked, “Are you a lifer, or is lifer a role you play?” some of the responses were: “that almost doesn’t compute because I am [a lifer], you know, I couldn’t have acted or felt any differently because that would be denying reality or the situation” (Lifer #4); “I actually saw myself as a lifer” (Lifer #5). The one participant who did not identify as a lifer went to prison at a very young age and
described himself as a ‘loner.’ He did not participate in the prison subculture and feels that this is why he never claimed the identity of lifer.

An obvious question is how does one become a lifer? According to the lifers, as soon as an inmate is convicted and sentenced to life, he becomes a lifer. As one lifer indicates, “when you get that life-sentence, as soon as you get into the pen [penitentiary] you’re considered a lifer, if you’re doing double digits and you’re in for murder and you’re in for life, you’re a lifer” (Lifer #2). The lifer identity is, then, an ascribed identity, that is, lifers do not have to earn the identity by moulding or altering their identity to fit into the lifer subculture. Rather, the label of lifer is automatically assigned to them as a result of their sentence. The lifer identity is assigned and maintained by the correctional system, including the courts, the penitentiary system, classification and correctional officers, and the parole system. According to one lifer:

The staff label you as a lifer for their own well being, cuz they have to know who the most dangerous are, your file stamps you as a lifer, the parole board stamps you as a lifer, the parole officer stamps you as a lifer, the halfway house stamps you as a lifer, you can’t get away from it, simply because we are the high profile of the justice system, you know, we have the potential to cause the most amount of harm. (Lifer #3)

The assignment of the lifer label involves not only the attribution of stereotypical characteristics such as violent and dangerous but also the differential protocols for the treatment of lifers by the system. Lifers’ files are red-flagged and lifers are handled more securely prior to and after conviction than other inmates. According to one lifer:

Most lifers never act out inside, but those [stereotypes] are assigned to you and your files reflect that, they’re red flagged, you’re handled differently if you’re taken out of the institution for medical reasons or anything, you have two or three guards with you . . . prior to conviction you’re handled differently within the buckets, handcuffed, and shackled. (Lifer #5)
A paradox exists in the prison system. Despite committing the worst crime possible and being portrayed as violent and dangerous and to be handled with care, the hierarchy among prisoners places lifers at the top.

The convict hierarchy has implications primarily for interpersonal prison relationships between lifers and correctional staff, and also between lifers and convicts. For convicts, the life-sentence is an indication of toughness and power. Lifers have committed the ultimate crime and one that carries with it the stiffest penalty. One lifer provides the following description of the differential assessment of sentence length: “the younger inmates who are just doing their, shall we say, sock change of two or three years, or four years and then disappear, hold in esteem the guys who have been convicted of something major, have gotten ‘the book’” (Lifer #4). Another lifer indicates:

They [lifers] are accorded differential status within the system because of the time served . . . the greater the amount of time sentenced, the greater the amount of time served . . . the heavier the sentence, the greater the status. (Lifer #5)

The higher status of lifers in the convict hierarchy is also based on fear, stereotypes, and reputation. According to one lifer, lifers’ high status stems from the mystery and fear that surrounds lifers:

They [lifers] are seen as the guys in the population who have the potential to be the most dangerous and, therefore, need to be respected, don’t break the rules towards them because chances are you’re going to find yourself on the shitty end of a stick and nobody really wants to go out of their way to get killed. I think that has a lot to do with it, it’s the fear factor that somebody has killed somebody. (Lifer #3)

Being respected, whether out of admiration or fear, provides lifers with a sense of security and comfort in the knowledge that other convicts will not viciously seek them out. Lifers are believed to possess what is referred to as ‘free mentality.’ Free mentality
means that if a lifer needed to kill someone for protection, or even out of spite, he was freer to do so since they were already serving a life-sentence. Free mentality removes the barriers surrounding murder. One lifer claims, “I knew that I’m dying in jail, that was my reality, I’m never gonna see the light of day, so if anything happens, you don’t like it, and you gotta kill somebody, do it, get it over with” (Lifer #3). Again, this was echoed by another lifer:

When I was doing my sentence . . . it was a bad way of looking at it, I got a life-sentence, can’t give me anymore time, if I was to do anybody in or kill anybody, that’s all you can do is send me to a max. (Lifer #7)

The length of their sentence leads to high status, respect, security, perks, and membership in a community of lifers. Lifers, seen by staff, other convicts, and themselves, as being distinct from other convicts, affiliate with other lifers. There exists a ‘lifer fraternity’ or a close family of lifers. As one lifer describes his initial experience with other lifers: “as soon as people find out you’re a lifer you were treated differently and you’re accepted into the . . . lifer fraternity” (Lifer #5). Some described being a lifer as being in a gang, which gave them security and comfort. As one of the lifers says: “you’re not centred out because there’s quite a few lifers in the Canadian system, so actually it was like being in a gang [laughs] it was pretty comforting at times” (Lifer #1). Many lifers said that because they had all spent lengthy periods of time together, they acquired many friendships and a deep sense of solidarity.

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8 A life-sentence in Canada is a prison sentence of up to 25 years followed by life parole. Lifers, therefore, do not necessarily spend the rest of their lives in jail. Lifers do, however, feel that regardless of whether they are in prison or under supervision in the community, they are still in jail due to their connection to the correctional system and spending the remainder of their lives on parole with conditions by which they must live. Lifers, however, do prefer being ‘jailed’ in the community in comparison to being ‘jailed’ in prison.
The community of lifers is sustained by the high turnover rate of convicts in prison. According to one lifer, “I didn’t talk to anyone but lifers, I didn’t want to have friends with someone who was gonna get out in six months, two years, three years” (Lifer #2). Another lifer expresses the emotional stress that stems from having friendships with convicts who are serving shorter sentences:

They’re [non-lifer friends] constantly leaving, and that hurts, whether people want to admit it or show it, or whatever, you hang out with a guy for five years and you guys are together for 16 hours a day, you get in trouble together, you get high together, you go have fun together, you know, then all of a sudden he’s leaving, you’re alone again and you’ve got to start all over, and it, that plays on the head. (Lifer #3)

After spending lengthy periods of time inside, and the increasing detachment from the outside world, other lifers become surrogate family.

Lifers’ high status in the hierarchy also has implications for interpersonal relationships with correctional staff. Even though the criminal justice system paints lifers as violent and dangerous, lifers hold a special and privileged relationship with correctional staff. The privileged status with staff stems from the lifers’ behaviour in prison and the amount of exposure between lifers and staff due to lengthy sentences. For staff, the lifer sentence is an opportunity to get to know the lifers better and come to know them as other than just ‘convicts.’ The staff is also able to see a ‘mellowing out’ of the lifers over time due to their lengthier contact with lifers than with short term inmates and can see the efforts they are taking to better themselves and prepare for reintegration.

Lifers argue that because of the length of time they have to serve in prison, they are typically more stable, peaceful, and co-operative than short-term convicts.
Lifers . . . tend to do better time, they’re quieter, probably for simply survival, because, as I used to put it, doing short sentences is like a sprint, it’s a hundred yard dash, where we run a marathon, sentence wise, so you better pace yourself if you’re gonna make it through it. (Lifer #5)

Lifers do not want to spend their prison time constantly battling with staff and other convicts. As one lifer states, “this is your home, this is where you live and you want things to run smoothly, you don’t want complications, you just want to wake up everyday and carry on to the next” (Lifer #2).

Lifers also enjoy security in knowing that because other convicts fear lifers they do not have to act out to assert their toughness. As a consequence, relationships between convicts and lifers are peaceful. Staff therefore see lifers as peaceful and cooperative.

Lifers felt that their reputation as ‘stable peace makers’ gave them more leeway, or ‘breaks’ with staff and prison administration than other convicts received. One lifer says:

You’ve got a lot of latitude as a lifer and you’ve got a lot of space, people give you a lot of space that they don’t give other people . . . you can really carve out your own routine and the expectations are really what you place on yourself, you can do your own time.” (Lifer #5)

The same lifer claims this is especially true for lifers new to the system, “you’re given a little more leeway because you’re new and they know you’ve got a lot of time and you’re just starting out, so you’re given some space . . . you’re probably given a few breaks you otherwise wouldn’t be” (Lifer #5).

Some lifers felt that because of their privileged relationship with correctional staff, they were able to ‘disappear’ from, or blend in with, the institution, and could, therefore, get away with certain behaviours. One lifer believes:
It all comes back to being in one place for so long, like you fade into the woodwork, like you kind of disappear, so naturally you can slip and slide and get around things a little easier, things get more comfortable, you become part of the institution. (Lifer #1)

The lifers found it easier to get around certain things from which other convicts might not have been excused. For example, guards may ‘turn a blind eye’ and not report certain illegal behaviours, for instance doing drugs, because they feel sorry for lifers who have to spend long periods of time in prison and the drugs are seen as a way of coping with their sentence. Also, by being in this privileged position, lifers enjoy greater perks than other convicts do. For example, lifers are allowed to open cash accounts and tend to get the better, more ‘cushy’ jobs, which give them a higher level of comfort in the institution and more free time than other inmates receive.

Being in a position of privilege and high status, however, also means that more is expected of the lifers in terms of their conformity to the staff’s expectations of lifers. According to one lifer, “I could’ve tried to act differently [but] administration or other groups of inmates who are ‘ten plus’ or lifers’ groups would think, ‘what are you doing?’ ‘You’re acting like a punk who’s doing two years’” (Lifer #4). For another lifer, it was simply a matter of survival to adapt to his role as a lifer. He argues, “for you to survive you have to remember who you are” (Lifer #3). Similarly, another lifer explains how he had to adapt to his role as a lifer:

I just blended right in, just went with the flow . . . you have to change, you have no other choice, so it’s like dropping you in a war, everybody is coming at you shooting, what do you do? Do you pick up that gun and start shooting back or do you run and hold your hands up and hope they don’t shoot you? You go with the flow; you just do what you gotta do. (Lifer #2)
The lifers said they felt pressure to mould themselves to the images that staff held of lifers as peacekeepers and stable role-models. The lifers often felt that the staff would try to control them by reminding them of their sentence and high status. For example, as one lifer says, “there were a lot of subtle things placed on you that you’re a lifer, you know, ‘don’t screw up because it’ll affect your parole,’ and all that, and I think that it’s used, in some neurotic instances, just for control” (Lifer #5). Another lifer remembers staff saying things like: “gee, you shouldn’t be doing such stupid things cuz this is going to risk your eventual parole and your eventual release.” Which he interpreted as “you’ve been around long enough to know better” (Lifer #4).

Some lifers felt used by the administration to keep the prison running smoothly.

One lifer argues:

They [the staff] would often come and try to rally the support of the lifers groups, long term support groups, you know, to get you to calm things down cuz, if it got tense . . . So there was, politically, there was a give and take with the administration on that. (Lifer #4)

Another lifer felt that lifers were used to perform tasks that should fall under the job description of staff:

The system perceives lifers, for the most part, as a stabilizing influence within the system and in many occasions they actively court lifers to act as such and to take on responsibility, that in my opinion, should be assigned to staff as far as mentoring young offenders, keeping peace on the ranges, inmate committees, things like that. (Lifer #5)

Again, there is this image of lifers as being calm, peaceful, and manageable. As one lifer describes:

They [staff] expected you to be calmer, you know, a calming influence on the people around you. That’s one of the reasons they didn’t put all the lifers in one area, they like spreading them out in the institution so they can calm down the other inmates because basically you’re there for a long time, you’re not trying to cause trouble. (Lifer #6)
Staff expected lifers who conformed to the peaceful image to serve as role models to the other prisoners in terms of how to behave and how to do their time properly. As one lifer claims:

The administration or staff . . . knew that they [lifers] were role models to the peers, so they [the staff] would be very quick to tell them [lifers] you shouldn’t be doing this because they [the staff] know it would have an affect on peers, on the prison attitude, the whole mood of the joint could get changed drastically if they [the staff] manhandled a lifer, if they [the staff] treated the lifers’ groups unfairly. (Lifer #4)

To recap, the lifer identity is made up of both structural and interpersonal components. The lifer identity is an ascribed status; one that is automatically assigned to the lifer once he has been convicted of murder. Due to the length of their sentence and the type of crime they have committed, lifers are at the top of the convict hierarchy and are, therefore, respected and held in esteem by other convicts. For lifers, holding this identity offers respect, security from other convicts, various privileges from staff, and a sense of community with other lifers. The identity also places various expectations on the lifers, such as, how to behave, to be role models to other convicts, and to play the role of peacekeeper throughout the prison.

The pressure to conform to these expectations, however, is maintained by the rewards they receive by identifying as a lifer. Prolonged exposure and rewards for the enactment of a lifer identity would consequently have an impact on lifers’ self-concept. Lifers enact the role of lifer because of role expectations and the positive rewards associated with the lifer identity. “It is through the process of role-taking that the individual’s behaviour is shaped, in that the individual, to a greater or lesser degree, conforms to role expectations” (Drakich, 1982, p. 28). This process leads to the internalization of the identity. “We become the roles we play” is a well known saying.
that is supported by anecdotal evidence (Gergen, 1971; Griffin, 1961) and role enactment research (Allen & van de Vliert, 1984; Biddle, 1979; Drakich, 1982; Goffman, 1959; Janis & King, 1954; Janis & Mann, 1965; Lieberman, 1956; Lindzey & Aronson, 1968; Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Shaw & Costanzo, 1970). This body of literature suggests that individuals incorporate the roles they enact into their self-concept. Goffman proposes that “individuals deliberately manage impressions showing that they possess the characteristics required for a particular role. However, after the impression is made, the role often becomes an integral part of the individual’s self-conception” (Drakich, 1982, p. 131). Extending this argument to lifers, it is argued that by enacting the role of lifer over time, the men would come to see themselves as lifers, not simply label themselves as lifers.

The lifer identity, despite being beneficial in prison, is predicted to pose problems when released into society due to the clash between the prison image of lifers as calm, peaceful, stable, co-operative, powerful, and respected role models and society’s image of lifers as violent, manipulative, and untrustworthy criminals. What, then, will be the fate of the lifer identity once the lifers are released? In the following section, the post-release identity of lifers and its role in reintegration are discussed.

**The Lifer Identity Post-release**

Little is known about identity post-release. The expectation is that lifers will exit their lifer role. This expectation is held by Corrections Canada and the lifers themselves. According to Macchio (1994), it appears that imprisoned lifers believe that once they leave prison, they will no longer see themselves as lifers and be able to reorient themselves to a conventional identity. As one lifer explains, “I’m a lifer here. On the
street I’m not going to say I’m a lifer. That’s something that has been put on me the day I was sentenced” (Macchio, 1994, p. 138). This expectation is supported by situated identity theory (Gergen & Gergen, 1981; Waddell & Cairns, 1986) and reintegration literature (Jones & Schmid, 2000; Wheeler, 1961) which argues that once an individual leaves a particular context, for example prison, the identity sustained by the context is diminished or altered.

From the data obtained in this research, however, it is apparent that the lifers (although to varying degrees) do in fact continue to identify as lifers after their release from prison. Of the six men who identified as lifers inside, all continued to identify despite their release. According to one lifer:

I feel I’m treated as a lifer and it’s been so long now that it’s just, it’s part of my identity and I can’t shed it. It’s been ascribed to me, assigned to me; there’s nothing I can do about that, so I have to learn to live with that. (Lifer #5)

Another lifer compared his identity as a lifer to that of an alcoholic, “I am who I am, it’s the same thing even with an alcoholic, he will always be an alcoholic. He may be able to distance himself from the substance that he’s abusing, but he will never be anything other than who he is, and I can’t change who I am” (Lifer #3).

It is not surprising that a lifer identity is not fully shed upon release. Wayne Ford, who had been in the community for 16 years when he stated “you’re not just a lifer, or a convicted murderer . . . you’re a convict who has lived with other convicts and been changed by the experience, you can’t rejoin the ‘square john’ society easily with that psychological headset” (Cunningham-Huston, 1991, p. 4). After being in prison for such a long time, and being part of an entirely different culture, lifers’ orientation to the
outside world has been altered. Upon release they have to rearrange and reorganize their perceptions of everyday life.

The lifers in this study talked about the difficulties they were having with their transition from prison to society and highlight the struggle between their desire (and society’s expectations for them) to acquire a straight identity, and the familiarity and security of their lifer identity. There exists a series of pushes on the lifers to transcend their lifer identity; yet there also exist pulls on the lifers to maintain their lifer identity. For example, it is the reinforcement of the lifer identity by the correctional system and society and the comfort and familiarity of the lifer identity that pulls the lifer into maintaining his lifer identity. Lifers feel that their continued treatment as criminals impedes their ability to shed the role of lifer. They ask how are they to move beyond their lifer identity, if they continue to be treated as a lifer? As one lifer indicates:

I have no concept of trying to distance myself from it [lifer identity]. It’s there, it’s fact, it’s reality, it’s part of who I am . . . it’s on pieces of paper in government files and police departments, and parole offices and even in here [halfway house]. I can’t distance myself from it. (Lifer #4)

Because of their lifer status, the correctional system continues to view their actions with suspicion, a frustrating experience for those lifers trying to assimilate. As one lifer argued, “I’m working and I’m not doing nothing wrong . . . but I will always be answering questions” (Lifer #2). He continued by saying:

‘I’m not up to anything, don’t treat me like a kid,” that’s what you want to say to them but you can’t, why? Because then you are being aggressive. You can’t say nothing . . . and that’s not you, you want to tell them ‘hey, listen, back off, I didn’t do nothing wrong, I’m just trying to make it out here and you’re making it hard for me’ . . . It even happens at the parole offices, there’s no way around it, you know, that’s the point of being a lifer, you’re screwed, you know, I try to live my day, it’s normal for me, but at the same time it does bother me when I have to talk to these people or have to go for a urinalysis test, making me look like I’m guilty before
I’ve even peed and I know it’s clean and it always comes back clean, but the fact that being there, it’s like being at the principal’s office. (Lifer #2)

Similarly, another lifer explained, “enough is enough,’ that’s basically what I am saying, like let me get on with my life and they are saying ‘you are getting on with your life, but we’re gonna keep an eye on you’” (Lifer #5). This close monitoring interferes with the lifer’s ability to distance himself from the role of lifer, thus interfering with his ability to acquire a straight identity. Simply put by one lifer:

It’s kind of hard to distance yourself when you’ve got to report to the parole officer and . . . submit the different things that they have you do and you know the stipulations, it’s kind of hard to forget you’re a lifer. (Lifer #1)

Lifers know that the correctional system and society are expecting them to become straight citizens and they are aware of the avenues needed to be taken to achieve straight status, for example, employment, pro-social activities with non-criminal peers, obeying the law and their parole conditions, etc., however, as will be seen in the following section on transition, lifers experience difficulties accessing the avenues to a straight identity. Faced with barriers to assimilation, lifers may seek out environments which are supportive, non-threatening, and familiar. They may be pulled to the lifer identity in search of esteem, security, and community. Remember that in prison they were accorded a privileged position that carried much respect and many benefits. Out in the community, however, lifers are portrayed in only a negative light. Society does not respect or value individuals who have taken a life and when faced with a society that holds the negative preconceptions of them, lifers may seek out supportive contexts that in turn reinforce their lifer identities. Society, in reacting to the stereotypes surrounding lifers, may also reinforce the men’s identities, confirming their lifer status. For example,
many lifers, at some point during their efforts at reintegration, have entertained the
thought of returning to prison. One lifer stated “if it wasn’t for the harsh reality of prison,
I don’t know if I would even want to be out here cuz it seems like fuck, it was so much
easier” (Lifer #3). The same lifer later described, “it’s the life I know . . . I know that life
a lot more than I know this life” (Lifer #3). Similarly, another lifer explained, “it would
be very easy to go back, it’s very familiar, you know it like the back of your hand” (Lifer
#5). This same lifer then indicated, “I relay a lot of anecdotal stories at work about
prison . . . I think I’m still carrying that artificial status with me”9 (Lifer #5). When asked
why he continued to hang on to that status, he replied:

It’s very familiar . . . I have a hard time sort of moving on and leaving
things behind, I carry a lot of stuff with me, so I guess I do carry that with
me and there’s probably a comfort factor there. (Lifer #5)

The concept of comfort was a strong theme in the lifers’ statements. Again, the lifers
know what is expected of them and they know how to meet these expectations, but they
also know what is against them and with that comes the fear of failure, the fear of letting
go of what is familiar.

After you get institutionalized or you get comfortable, you got that
security and you don’t want to let it go because then that security is always
going to be there and I guess that’s what’s probably difficult for some
lifers . . . cuz you have that security and you don’t want to let it go because
you’re stepping into something new that you don’t know what to expect,
that’s change, it’s different, afraid of failure, afraid of falling on your face.
(Lifer #7)

9 The participant’s exact meaning of the term ‘artificial’ is unclear and was not probed during the interview.
This methodological error illustrates the importance of ensuring accurate interpretation of participants’
words through awareness and probing.
For some, thoughts of returning to prison are a means of coping with reintegration stresses, a form of escape; for others, however, returning to prison is a viable option. As one lifer explained:

Guys just give in, they start drinking, they start doing dope and sooner or later, like a number of guys are on a self-destructive path and then you head back to what’s comfortable and my suspicions are, when they end up in the bucket or they end up back in the penitentiary, it’s like ‘whew, I can put my feet up now,’ you know, the pressure’s off. (Lifer # 5)

A disapproving, unwelcoming, and untrusting society and the continuous attribution of a lifer status by the correctional system push the lifer to maintain his lifer identity, an identity which provides security, esteem, and comfort.

Conversely, the pull of correctional and societal expectations to join conventional society and become straight citizens and lifers’ own desire to stay out of prison entice the lifer to leave his lifer identity behind and adopt a straight identity.

Although three of the lifers in this study never experienced a straight adult life, they knew that, once in society, they would be expected to find employment, housing, stay out of trouble, abide by their parole conditions, and establish pro-social relationships with conventional others, in other words, expected to live a straight life. When asked about what was expected of them, some of the replies were:

I don’t drink or do drugs, I don’t go and get into trouble, you’d probably want to have more citizens like me because I am so concerned about other people, my own welfare, my immediate circle of family and friends, business associates and their emotional well being. (Lifer “#4)

Another lifer, when asked what was expected of him, replied, “first and foremost, not to hurt anybody, not to break the law and do those sorts of things, the legal aspect of it which is pretty simplistic, pretty black and white” (Lifer #5). Another lifer indicates: “I imagine they expected me to be a law-abiding citizen and they got the big hammer over
my head” (Lifer #1). This lifer knew what was expected of him and also knew that he was being closely watched to make sure he was living up to these expectations. He also explains, “I never was a good citizen before I went to jail, I can’t remember the last time I was . . . at this stage in the game, I’m probably the best citizen I’ve ever been” (Lifer #1). The comment by this particular man raises a possible issue for some lifers. How are they to live up to these expectations when perhaps they were never straight to begin with?

This particular lifer was a career criminal and never saw himself as straight. For this individual, if he wants to remain outside of prison, he can not return to his pre-prison identity. He is expected to adapt to community life when he has never been equipped with the skills necessary to live a straight life. Overall, what is expected of the lifers is very clear; however, their ability to meet these expectations is blocked by their personal identification as a lifer, and the lifer label applied to them by society and the correctional system.

In terms of their desire to stay out, many lifers agree with the lifer who states: “if you don’t want to go back to jail, you better obey the law” (Lifer #1). Another lifer explains, “I was no angel inside, coming out, if you want out, you’re gonna stay out” (Lifer #2).

The push and pull of post-release life can best be described as a contested terrain of identity. That is, the lifers, while expected to ‘go straight,’ continue to be treated as lifers and when encountering difficulty, surround themselves with a familiar context. The lifers do not want to be associated with the system; however, many miss the rewards associated with being a lifer inside. In order to achieve these rewards, however, lifers must continue to see themselves as such and need to be in contact with a culture that
supports their lifer status. The halfway house, for example, offers the perfect
environment in that it is similar to the set-up found in prison. A variety of convicts reside
together under one roof and again there appears to be a hierarchy among the residents,
although it is less pronounced than in prison.

Ebaugh (1988), in her work on role exit, acknowledges that individuals may
experience 'identity confusion' when the individual has to simultaneously 'wear' two
incompatible roles. "If two or more positions are simultaneously activated, the individual
may find it difficult, if not impossible, to conform simultaneously to the two distinct sets
of role expectations. That is, inter-role conflict may emerge" (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 17). In
the next section, the concept of contested terrain will be further elaborated. Ebaugh's
theory of role exit will be used to explore lifers' experience with reintegration.

**Lifers in Transition**

The literature on role transition, in particular the theory of role exit (Ebaugh,
1988), was used as a guide to examine lifers' reintegration into straight society.
Successful reintegration is assumed to depend on the lifers' transition from a convict
identity to a straight identity. According to role transition literature, in order for one to
successfully exit or transcend a role, one must: have the opportunity to exit the role
(Ebaugh, 1988), develop meaningful attachments and behavioural investments, for
example, employment and meaningful relationships (Ebaugh, 1988; Meisenhelder, 1977),
be committed to the exit (Ebaugh, 1988), have the support of significant others (Ebaugh,
1988; Meisenhelder, 1977), disengage from and disidentify with their lifer role (Ebaugh,
1988; Jones & Schmid, 2000), and accept the irreversibility of time (Meisenhelder,
1977). The discussion of lifers' experience with reintegration will be presented
according to each of these criteria (opportunity, commitment, significant others, time, disengagement, and disidentification).

**Opportunity**

Ebaugh (1988) argues that for a successful role exit to occur one needs the opportunity to exit. All of the lifers interviewed have been released from prison and, in this context, have the opportunity to exit their lifer roles. Conversations with the lifers indicate, however, that the opportunity to exit is not fully open to lifers. Although ‘free’ in the sense that they are not under lock and key during the day, lifers have parole conditions by which they must abide. Lifers, post-release, spend their entire lives on parole, which means that they are allowed to live in the community unsupervised but under certain restrictions and conditions. Naturally they are expected to obey the law and keep the peace, but they must also remain within the county of the halfway house they are residing in, report to their parole officer on a regular basis, and notify him or her of any changes in residence or employment. They are also not to associate with other criminals. Conditions may also include abstaining from alcohol and/or non-prescribed drugs, random drug testing, and attending treatment or training programs (Correctional Service Canada, 2000). A breech of these conditions may lead to the revocation of the offenders’ release and their subsequent return to prison. These conditions limit the amount of freedom the lifers have and the amount of distance they can put between themselves and their lifer identities. As the following lifers explained:

Lifer means that I’m on parole forever. I could be 80, when I’m alive at 80, I’ll still be a lifer, I’ll still be on parole, I’ll still be reporting once a month. When I die . . . I’m on parole for 6 months after and when I’m dead six months into the ground, then I’m off parole, that’s what life means. Life is forever, it’s not ever gonna end, it’s always gonna be life with conditions or keeping the peace. (Lifer #2)
I will always be a lifer, as to what degree it plays a part in my life, I guess that’s up to the people around me [corrections and parole] and how much freedom they allow me to have. (Lifer #3)

Having parole conditions means that lifers are denied things that straight citizens take for granted. For example, as one lifer stated:

Before I came in the system, I didn’t have any conditions okay, you come and go pretty well, I find that a little bit difficult sometimes where you have to ask permission to buy a car, have a bank account, go here, go there, gotta have permission to get married, I didn’t have to do that before. (Lifer #7)

Another lifer discussed the difficulties of taking a trip:

I wanted to go shopping in the States, I want to go on a vacation, I can’t go. Oh, I can go, sure, with tons of paperwork, only to say no. Canada is my home, I can’t go anywhere else or if I want to go on pass, we [have to] call in a pass, I want to go out of town, I got to do the proper paperwork. (Lifer #2)

He also said, “If you’re going to your parents, ‘okay, who’s going with you?’ You know, and ‘what vehicle are you taking?’ And so forth, ‘but we have to make sure the police know’” (Lifer #2). Another lifer technically violated his parole conditions concerning territorial boundaries because he wanted to visit a beach just outside of town. He could have been sent back to prison even though he was not engaging in criminal activity.

I went out to [name of town], if a cop wants to be a prick he can arrest me cuz I’m out of [name of county] and it’s just outside of [name of town], but for me it’s a beautiful place to go and sit and just kind of look out at the water and think when people piss me off and life is pissing me off, it’s a good place to just kind of go and just reflect, but again it could cause me a problem and why? Because I’m a lifer. (Lifer #3)

Research by Ebaugh (1988) and Meisenhelder (1977) argues that in order for one to be successful in his or her exit, they also need to develop meaningful attachments and behavioural investments, for example, employment, financial stability, and positive peer and family relationships. These attachments and investments provide lifers with the
opportunity to rehearse their roles as straight citizens. Lifers, however, because of their status as lifers, and their connection to the correctional system, cannot fully access what is necessary to establish these attachments and investments, for example, employment, housing, and social and romantic relationships, which limits their ability to enact their role as straight citizens and their ability to develop a straight identity. Opportunity to enact the new role is crucial to Ebaugh’s second stage of role exit, ‘seeking alternatives.’ It is at this stage that an individual evaluates alternative roles in comparison to his or her current role to ensure that the exit is desirable. This evaluation of alternative roles is not possible without the individual’s ability to rehearse other roles. If the individual is unable to find an alternative role or be able to rehearse the new role, he or she will not be able to exit his or her role.

The most cited difficulty for lifers was finding employment, and finding employment that would produce a decent salary. Employment is central to a straight identity as it determines lifestyle and means of survival, which subsequently influences future criminal behaviour. The four lifers who were employed, complained of having to resort to work that they normally would not do had they not been imprisoned. The lifers felt that due to their status as lifers, they would not be hired for professional and permanent jobs and that they were restricted to unskilled and temporary jobs. Some lifers were experiencing barriers to re-entry to the types of jobs they had before they went to prison, even though they had experience of skills in these fields. As one lifer explained, “it all depends on what kind of job you’re applying for . . . let’s say I was in for fraud and I went to apply at a bank, okay, it’s not likely I’m going to get the job” (Lifer #7). Another lifer began training for a particular profession while in prison only to find out
that convicted felons could not work in that profession. He said, “I started doing an accounting course, granted it wasn’t the course I should have been doing, I started doing an accounting course, with [name of university], the only problem is I can’t be certified, so I wasted all that time” (Lifer #3). Most lifers agreed that having a criminal record restricted access to employment. As one lifer stated, “my main expectation was that finding work would be very difficult and that’s held up, it’s been difficult, an awful lot is cut off, you’re cut off from a lot of avenues that the ordinary person isn’t” (Lifer #5).

Of the lifers who were unemployed, difficulties included not having a complete or adequate resume or work history due to their length of time in prison. When asked about problems with seeking employment, one lifer responded, “no reasonable looking resume, ‘where’d you work?’ Well you can’t say in [name of institution] for five years” (Lifer #4). Others experienced problems of not wanting to disclose their criminal history when filling out a job application. The problem is that they are required to disclose their criminal history, if asked; however, when they disclose they are usually denied the job. For example, one lifer said:

I can get a job right now 10, 15 dollars an hour at [name of establishment] as a cook, I could work there for two weeks until they run a police clearance and then when they find out I got a criminal record, they got to let me go. Now if I come straight out in the open and tell them, ‘well I got other applications,’ they won’t come right out and say ‘no we won’t take you, I got some other clients I have to interview,’ sluff you off that way. If you lie on the application and they find out, then they have to let you go. (Lifer #7)

This same individual had more problems with finding employment because his parole restrictions narrowed his job options, for example, he could not be found in a place that sold liquor. This stipulation was a barrier to his job search as his previous training was in the service industry. He says, “because I got a drinking restriction they’re [parole]
kind of saying they don’t want me to work in bars . . . they think it’s temptation” (Lifer #7).

In particular there appeared to be one age group that experienced more barriers to employment than others, the middle-aged. For example, as one lifer discussed:

You’re middle aged, you’re too old to be taken into the workplace . . . as a long-term employee and to develop you as a, you know, valued employee of the company, they’re looking for younger people but you’re too young to retire, you’ve still got 15, 20 years, so to speak, until retirement age so somehow you’ve got to fit in there . . . you don’t have the resources or really the time to go back to school and to develop a new career. (Lifer #5)

As a result, their resumes do not cover the period of absence from the workforce and they face the stigma associated with being out of the labour force for an extended period of time.

Employment is a key factor in lifers’ success with reintegration. Not only does a permanent job provide the lifer with a stable work environment and access to relationships with conventional others but also offers financial security. Faced with poverty, lifers may be tempted to return to a life of crime.

Lack of employment or of consistent employment creates the problem of securing adequate, continuous income. Financial difficulties stemmed from either their inability to obtain employment or not being able to live on the salary they earned. Many of the men had loans and little savings to invest in a house or car or even to take a trip to see friends, family and significant others. According to one lifer:

Every time I turn around and take a vacation, a weekend pass to [name of city] to see my friends, I gotta sit around the house for the next 3 months saving up money so I can do it again if I want. (Lifer #3)

He further stated, “my savings to me is like petty cash to somebody else.”
Lifers are also expected to secure housing once they leave the halfway house, but when little money is being earned, it is difficult to save towards rent. Many lifers also experience discrimination when applying for apartments. One lifer, for example, described his experience with filling out an application for an apartment:

When I was first looking for apartments, I know I missed a couple of places because I didn’t know what kinds of questions they’d be asking me. When I went to see apartments and they ask me where I’m staying right now and I’m going ‘oh shit, I didn’t even think about that, what am I gonna tell them’ (laughs), you know, so I told them the truth and of course right away, you know, their whole attitude changed. (Lifer #6)

Thus, poor employment, discrimination on the job and in securing housing, deny lifers access to a straight identity and reinforce their lifer identity.

Although the men in this study have begun to exit the role of lifer, they are experiencing difficulty shedding it because of their connection with the correctional system. Parole conditions and their status as lifers restrict access to a straight identity. Expected by corrections and society to exit their lifer role and to assume a straight identity, lifers are faced with the difficulty of being denied access to those activities that would allow them to enact the role of straight citizen. Although their opportunity to exit is limited, the lifers still attempt to acquire a straight identity, as will be seen in the following section on commitment.

Commitment

Ebaugh (1988) argues that in order to be successful in identity transition, one needs to be committed to exiting the role. This commitment signifies that he or she is experiencing the first stage of role exit, “first doubts,” in which he or she begins to doubt his or her commitment to his or her current role. Meisenhelder (1977) argues that for a successful exit, there must be an intentional and meaningful decision to exit. This section
will discuss lifers’ commitment to acquiring a straight identity. All of the lifers interviewed expressed a commitment to acquiring a straight identity. Their commitment was demonstrated in four main ways: their involvement with reintegration programs, education, getting clean, and responsible decision-making in various anti-social, anti-parole, or criminal situations.

For the lifers in this study, their commitment to a straight identity began in prison. For many this commitment was influenced by the friendships and working relationships they had developed with other lifers, correctional staff, and prison employees, such as psychologists and chaplains. One lifer credits the people he worked for (and with) in prison with his acquisition of a healthier, straight perspective on life:

These were pretty bright, interesting people to talk to and pretty healthy people to be around . . . you learned a lot, you learned a lot about other people, the way they were coping . . . that helped to put things in perspective. (Lifer #5)

Commitment to a straight identity also came as a consequence of being transferred from maximum-security institutions to lesser-security institutions. Lifers saw these transfers as reminders that they were getting closer to release. The hope of getting out motivated them to begin shedding their prison identities. For example, one lifer indicates:

As soon as I had changed, as soon as the physical thing was happening, even during the transportation that day, I said ‘alright, here it comes a new page,’ and boom, started acting, and seeking out roles and functions that would correspond to that, instead of being locked in the old ones. (Lifer #4)

Lifer #4, in seeking out new roles, became very involved in lifers’ groups and activism. For another lifer, being sent to a minimum-security prison was an indication to him that he was on the right path and nearing the end of his prison term.
It wasn’t ‘til I hit [name of institution] where I started to change and I mellowed out and I just did a ‘360.’ I changed, you know, see my kids come up and visit me for p.f.v.’s [private family visits] . . . I started to realize, you know, I don’t want to do this anymore, I’m tired of this, tired of being this tough guy . . . I was working out, lifting weights, and everything else, covered in tattoos didn’t help, people were afraid of me. (Lifer #2)

Commitment to a straight identity for one lifer came as a result of being the victim of a crime himself. Seeing the other side of the coin, so to speak, gave him a new perspective on who he was, “my mom got b&e’d while I was in jail and it never really dawned on me the effect of me committing a b&e against somebody” (Lifer #3). He further explains: “I guess somewhere along the lines I started thinking about what it was that I had done to my victim’s family, and not to mention my own family” (Lifer #3). For this lifer, seeing the effects of crime inspired him to go ‘straight.’ He decided that he would “rather make people laugh than cry” and to do this he knew that he would have to leave his criminal past behind.

Programs and activities designed to assist lifers with reintegration in prison, for example, In-Reach and LifeLine, give lifers the opportunity to actively pursue the acquisition of a straight identity. All of the lifers in this study participated in these programs, demonstrating their commitment to acquiring a straight identity. The lifers pursued this commitment through a variety of activities that reflected self-improvement. Some lifers showed their commitment to a straight identity by deciding to either complete or further their education. Education is a key to successful reintegration; it improves their chances of finding fulfilling employment and relationships. Continuing their education also illustrates their recognition of society’s values and expectations.
Another turning point for many lifers, in their commitment to a straight identity, was ‘getting clean.’ Drugs are one of the main coping mechanisms used to deal with prison life and it is common for offenders to be involved in the drug culture (Brochu, Cousineau, Gillet, Cournoyer, Pernanen, & Motiuk, 2001; McVie, 2001; Roy, 2001). Commitment to a straight identity, however, does not include the use of drugs and is against parole conditions. For two lifers in particular, they spoke of ‘getting clean’ and how for them it was important for their success. As one lifer indicated:

I’m sitting in front of you telling you that I ain’t an offspring of Charlie Manson, I ain’t got tattoos and I don’t drink, I got seven years clean in N.A. [Narcotics Anonymous] on Monday . . . I’ve been there, done that, and gave it all up, I’m finally grown up. (Lifer #4)

Getting clean signifies their conformity to conventional society’s values and their commitment to a straight identity.

Lifers’ commitment to a straight identity is also reflected in responsible decision-making in situations that pose possibilities of criminal, anti-parole or anti-social behaviour. In each of the following examples, decisions are made that affirmed commitment to a straight identity. The first example illustrates a lifer’s commitment to a straight identity when faced with a criminally rewarding situation.

I walked into the Bank of Montreal one day, they had the little safe open, the woman was there, she had a stack of 50’s like that high and there’s gotta be like, I don’t know, 20 grand there, if not more, and I briefly thought of the irony, and thought “yeah, in my day I’d of jumped over the counter, grabbed the friggin money and ran,” and I ended up just looking up, smiling at the cameras going “yeah, things have changed,” you know, and that was the end of it. (Lifer #3)

The next example shows one lifer’s commitment to a straight identity when faced with a difficult situation in which he must decide to seek revenge or turn the other cheek.
Two wrongs don’t make a right . . . if [man’s name] was walking down the street, at one time I had a very vindictive personality, I wanted a pay back, if I was to see him now, I would cross the street or go in the other direction. (Lifer #7)

This same lifer expressed his commitment to a straight identity by respecting the conditions of his parole.

My conditions are to abstain from alcohol and not to socialize with anyone doing criminal activities, now if he [a friend] was doing criminal activities, then . . . I wouldn’t socialize with him . . . I have to respect what the parole board said. (Lifer #7)

This same lifer described an incident where he broke a parole condition and confessed to it without being caught. “I didn’t have to tell them [halfway house staff] that I went to [another city], I went to [city] and came back, there was no incidents, but I told them because I didn’t feel good about it, it bothered me” (Lifer #7).

One lifer spoke of his commitment to a straight identity by changing the way he lived his life and by avoiding those situations and behaviours that he knew might tempt him to engage in criminal activities. He said:

Part of the transition from who I was at [states age] to who I am at [states current age] . . . was I had to change the way I lived my life at [states age] so that I wasn’t going to get caught up in the same shit. (Lifer #3)

Upon entering the community, all of the lifers expressed their commitment to a straight identity as indicated by their desire to find work, secure funds and housing, and to just settle down. As one lifer explained, “I just wanted to get on with my life, get a place of my own, save my money, maybe get my kids to live with me, if they wanted to, buy a house, fix something up that is mine” (Lifer #2). He also stated:

I decided that I wanted to get a job, work, save my money, buy a house. Everything that I thought I was going to do was a long-term plan, but at the same time I had short-term plans and I followed through on all of them. First thing was get my grade 12 and I did that inside, next thing was
get out and get a job, but get to a halfway house and coming to a place where I had no family and still managing. (Lifer #2)

The lifers’ commitment to acquiring a straight identity indicates that they have experienced Ebaugh’s first stage of role exit, ‘first doubts,’ and are questioning their commitment to their lifer identities. Many of the lifers indicated that they wanted to leave their lifer roles behind and ‘get on with their lives,’ and took the actions necessary to live straight lives; for example, attending reintegration and substance abuse programs, continuing their education, and making responsible decisions. In addition, for many, these events (i.e., the friendships, being transferred, being the victim of a crime, getting clean, getting an education, making responsible decisions when faced with temptation) represented ‘turning points’ and signified that they were experiencing Ebaugh’s third stage of role exit ‘turning point.’ As was seen in the section on post-release identity, however, it is apparent that although they are committed to a straight identity, their lifer identity and parole conditions limit the extent to which they can acquire a straight identity.

**Significant Others**

The following section discusses lifers’ ability to establish relationships with significant others. Ebaugh (1988) stresses the importance of significant others at each stage of the role exit process. Significant others’ response to the exiter’s cueing behaviour of dissatisfaction with their current role can either promote or hinder the exit. Ebaugh defines significant others as being anyone the exiting person sees as being of significance in his or her life. This could include anyone from parents and co-workers to other lifers and convicts. Association with convicts is frowned upon by the parole system and would definitely not be seen as a means of promoting role exit. Ebaugh’s definition
of significant others, for the purposes of this research, is, therefore, too broad. For successful exiting, it is necessary for lifers to surround themselves with others who will encourage them to exit their lifer roles. The term significant others in this particular study will be used to describe those individuals who influence the lifers to adopt a straight identity, for example conventional others.

The lifers interviewed were aware of the potential to develop support networks once released into the community, but were experiencing difficulty in both re-establishing former relationships and in establishing new ones. The difficulty in re-establishing relationships and forging new ones stemmed from the lifer identity itself, lifers’ parole conditions, and the status of lifers in the community.

Perhaps the first line of significant others that lifers encounter upon release are the staff of the halfway house. The staff represents straight society and upholds and promotes societal norms. All of the lifers felt that the staff from the halfway house were supportive of their attempts at acquiring a straight identity. One lifer stated:

I think in some sense, because the length of time that I’ve been here, that there’s an element of like, ‘it’s time for you to go, it’s time for you to move on,’ they’re being subtle about it, they’re not [saying], ‘here’s your hat,’ cuz they don’t want to put that kind of pressure on you, they realize that it’s been a long time and I have to build some kind of resources. (Lifer #5)

[The role of the house] is to be a non-formal support group, which they tend to do very well. A couple of the key players that are on the staff here that I do get along with, I have found to be the kind of people and the right types of feedback that I need or want. (Lifer #4)

The difficulty of relationships with staff; however, is that they may see the lifers as exactly that, lifers, and their treatment of the lifers may unintentionally confirm this status.
The second line of significant others is the people of the community, friends, romantic partners, and families of the lifers. One of the most important relationships for lifers is that with their family. Many hope to re-establish these relationships as communication with their families tends to deteriorate while they are in prison. Of the lifers in this study, four had frequent contact (regular phone calls and visits) with their family after they were released. As one lifer describes his family’s attitude towards his crime, “they seem very supportive (laughs) . . . they’re good, they act like it never happened” (Lifer #1).

Of the remaining three, two had minimal contact with their families and one had no contact with his family at all. For many, limited contact was a consequence of distance. It is difficult to maintain familial ties with family scattered throughout the country. For others, they found that once they were convicted of murder their relationship with their family changed. One lifer describes his efforts to repair his relationship with his mother:

I’m working to get my relationship back together with my mother, the chaplain’s going to work on that, he’s going to call me in a month or I am to call back, and we’re going to work together to go see her. (Lifer #7)

While still trying to reconnect with his mother, the message from the chaplain left the lifer with mixed feelings, “she [his mother] said that she’ll never forgive me for what I did, but she will always love me and it hurts a little bit but I have to respect that” (Lifer #7). It is difficult for lifers to connect with their families since parole assigns them to a particular halfway house and one that is not necessarily close to their families. It is also difficult for some lifers to connect with their family when family members have mixed
feelings about the crimes that they have committed. Some families do not want contact with them.

Another key relationship for lifers is that of a romantic partner. Most lifers, after being imprisoned for lengthy amounts of time, hope to one day establish intimate relationships with others. One of the lifers was married, however, only two were dating. The remaining four did not want to be involved in romantic relationships, as they did not feel ready. As one lifer says, “I entertained the idea of getting into a relationship with a woman, but as I’ve been out here and so on, I’ve realized that I have to get my own life together before I can become involved with anybody” (Lifer #5). Another lifer claimed, “I’d like to get married and settle down and raise a family, [but] I think I’m too old for that now” (Lifer #7). Many of the lifers, after their negative experiences with the correctional system, had difficulty trusting others and did not want to tell the women,\(^\text{10}\) they had met, about their criminal history. There also exists the issue of their status as lifers. Most of the lifers felt that they should not be obligated to reveal their criminal past. When they did choose to reveal their criminal history to potential romantic partners, most women did not wish to pursue a relationship. There also exist problems associated with their parole conditions. For example, curfew and alcohol restrictions not only limit the length of time they can spend with dates but also where they can go on a date. Having to go home at 11:00 p.m., not being able to go to a bar or have a woman go back to his place also severely limit the extent to which a lifer can hide his identity. As one lifer, who had deliberately chosen not to date, explained, “hopefully on full parole, with

\(^{10}\) This study does not assume that all lifers are heterosexual, but those who spoke of romantic relationships, identified women as partners.
the freedom of movement and I don’t have to explain to anybody why I gotta be in at 11. 

. . . it’ll [dating] become easier to do” (Lifer #3).

Other key relationships for lifers are the ones they forge with conventional others. According to Meisenhelder (1977), conventional others are crucial in the process of ‘certification,’ which he defines as the social verification of the individual’s reform. It is conventional others who determine convicts’ success on the outside. If conventional others see a lifer as reformed they will treat him as such and promote his exit. If conventional others, however, do not see the individual as reformed, they will treat him according to his lifer status, thus, reinforcing his lifer identity. Conventionals others, then, play a key role in whether the lifer adopts a straight identity or maintains his lifer identity.

Four of the lifers had non-criminal (conventional) friends within the community. These friends typically included co-workers, people they had met at school, people they had met through staff of the halfway house or other residents, and friendships they had from before they went to prison. Although more than half of the lifers were making an effort to establish relationships with significant others, it was difficult to limit their interaction to conventional others as they reside at a halfway house where interaction with other lifers and convicts is inevitable. Only two of the lifers, however, seemed to be bothered by the forced interaction in the halfway house. Those lifers who chose to continue to associate with other lifers and convicts, claimed they did so because they had more in common with others who had served time. As in prison, many lifers considered other lifers as their surrogate family and see them as being more helpful and supportive of their situation than conventional others. Rejection by conventional others may
motivate lifers to seek out relationships that are familiar and that offer comfort and acceptance, that is, their relationships with other lifers and convicts.

Despite the comfort in maintaining relationships with other convicts, most lifers sought relationships with conventional others, but found it difficult to meet people in the community. When asked about trying to meet people one lifer explained:

It’s frustrating . . . there’s an element of it that’s gotten to the point where I probably don’t make the effort in some cases because the inevitable questions come up, and if the relationship is to deepen, then you have to explain things and I’m just tired of explaining. (Lifer #5)

Relationship difficulties stemmed from three main issues: issues related to their status as lifers; issues related to parole conditions; and issues of age.

The first problem in meeting people is their status as lifers. Previous research by Moerings (1984) revealed that even though the inmate is no longer in prison, he might still be defined or labelled according to his previous status as an inmate. In other words, “society does not really give him the chance to exchange his prisoner’s clothing for a new civilian suit. Many people continue to see him as an ex-convict . . . the social role of ex-convict is imposed upon him” (1984, p. 165). Conventional others may not understand what it means to be a lifer and may judge lifers according to stereotypes and media hype that surrounds lifers. Of the lifers, five were able to give instances in which they felt discriminated against or alienated. Lifers face more discrimination or alienation than short-term convicts due to the nature of their crimes. For example, one lifer claimed:

Being a lifer denotes that you’ve committed a murder, so right away everybody thinks that if you’ve committed a murder you are extremely violent. They don’t take into account the circumstances that may have surrounded the crime, how you ended up in that situation, what actually happened. (Lifer #3)
People in society relate to lifers according to what they see and hear in the media. The same lifer argued of people in society:

They have this stereotypical view of the murderer being this burly guy covered with tattoos, really mean and nasty . . . the minute that label comes up though, it’s all the fears that television and the newspapers and all that crap puts into their minds. (Lifer #3)

When asked how they felt when people found out they were lifers, most felt embarrassed or scared that their relationships would change. As one lifer suggested, “you feel embarrassed now because you’re out in society’s world, you’re not back in jail, where inside you may have respect, out here being a lifer is like ‘well what did you do?’ And people are afraid of you” (Lifer #2). Another lifer portrayed peoples’ reactions to his being a lifer as “it’s like as if you have two heads or something” (Lifer #6). The stereotypic images associated with the lifer identity present barriers to meeting others and, therefore, lifers lack the support of conventional others necessary for role exit and successful reintegration. According to Ebaugh (1988, p. 158):

Even though society approves of rehabilitation from what are considered deviant roles to non-deviant ones, individuals making this role change are still subject to negative societal reactions or social stigma based on their previous identities. In fact, the people making such socially desirable changes are often caught in “no man’s land” because they lose the strong primary group association with fellow deviants and find it hard to be accepted in mainstream society (Ray 1964). They are often caught in between the two worlds and find little acceptance from either world.

The second problem is lifers’ parole conditions. Parole conditions make it difficult to meet people and force lifers to lie about their circumstances if they do not wish to expose their criminal status to others. Many lifers found it difficult having to lie to new friends about who they really were and where they were staying. This was especially true for the younger lifers who were embarrassed to make up excuses for their
curfew, where they lived, or why they could not go into establishments that served liquor. For example, one lifer was attending school and tried to hide his criminal background from his school friends, who would pick him up each day:

I had two guys who were picking me up at 7-11 here, driving me to school and dropping me off everyday. One of them is a religious kid, and he drove by the lane-way here in the back and said, “Where do you live?” And I just sort of pointed over there and just, nothing specific, but just the general direction. (Lifer #3)

The third difficulty in meeting people is related to age. Middle-aged lifers seemed to encounter more difficulty in meeting people than younger lifers. The most common question asked by middle-aged lifers was “Who should be my same age group and social peers?” Many lifers go into prison at a young age and come out of prison with that same youthful mentality, therefore, it is hard for lifers to adjust to their age group when they still want to live their lives at the age they went into prison. According to one lifer, “when I first got out, even though I was getting close to [age] years old, I was hanging around with 20’s because that’s where I left off identifying” (Lifer #4).

Middle-aged lifers face the unique problem of trying to relate to people who have never been imprisoned and who have by middle age established themselves and their families. They are facing different societal issues than lifers. As one lifer indicated:

Socially you find yourself at an age when a lot of people are talking about retirement and are starting to plan for their retirement, their kids are off to university, etc., etc. so you don’t have a lot in common with your age peer group out here. (Lifer #5)

He further stated, “most men my age in the community are not operating the way I am and with the baggage I’ve got” (Lifer #5). In comparison to younger lifers, who have more access to social groups and situations and a wider variety of significant others,
middle-aged lifers experience the difficulty of not only trying to meet people but also the
difficulty of trying to relate to middle-aged conventional others.

Role theorists (Ebaugh, 1988; Meisenhelder, 1977) argue that significant others
are necessary for role transition to occur. It is significant others who can either motivate
individuals to exit their roles or push them further into their existing identities. Similar to
the barriers the lifer identity presents to lifers’ opportunity to exit their role, the lifer
identity is also a roadblock to forming relationships with significant others. Their status
as lifers, their parole conditions, and their age can affect the amount of support they
receive from their family, friends, romantic partners, co-workers, and other conventional
others, which according to Ebaugh, is crucial to the process of role exit.

**Time**

According to Meisenhelder (1977, p. 326), “successful exits involve the practical
recognition of the irreversibility of time, and consequently a personal decision by the
respondents to ‘start anew.’” Not being able to move beyond the past is a barrier to
achieving a straight identity. Most of the lifers understood that they could not make up
for lost time and were trying to establish a new life. According to one lifer:

I can remember drinking when I was younger and seeing other people
drink and seeing all the people that abused drugs and alcohol inside, I
don’t want to be like that. What I want now . . . I’m not gonna get back
the nine years I lost, but I can start a new life. (Lifer #2)

When asked if he was trying to make up for lost time, another lifer indicated:

I did at first, yeah, not now, because lost time is lost, so let’s focus on
what needs to be done today, this week, you know, the next couple of
months, whatever, I’m [states age] years old, I’m not going to go back and
relive the 20’s again, can’t do it, body won’t take it [laughs], but not only
the body can’t take it, but the mind couldn’t go back and adopt a lot of
those attitudes again. (Lifer #4)
For another lifer, it was a struggle to accept that those years were gone, but he felt confident that he had accepted, although hesitantly, his current position in life, “I’ve also come to the reality that I will never have what I lost and I will never be back in that situation” (Lifer #5).

Again, all of the lifers acknowledged that they could not go back and relive the years that they were imprisoned, however, two felt a definite need to make up for lost time and were actively trying to do so. Unfortunately, making up for lost time usually included activities not conducive to acquiring a straight identity; for example, alcohol and drug use, missed curfews, money-making schemes, and associating with other convicts. Those who chose to engage in these ‘time catching’ activities were usually not successful and were often sanctioned for their actions, which could include being sent back to prison. This sense of time lost was especially evident among the younger lifers who felt that they had missed out on their youth. When one lifer was asked whether he felt the need to make up for lost time, he replied, “Oh, yeah, wouldn’t you? I think everybody would . . . I still love to party, I think I always will” (Lifer #6). The same lifer, however, knew that his actions were delaying his chances for full parole:

I wasn’t particularly doing things that were conductive to getting out, like I wasn’t saving money . . . I wasn’t budgeting . . . it wasn’t that I was having a hard time . . . I knew everything I needed to know for budgeting and all that, it was just I wanted to party. (Lifer #6)

Feeling a sense of loss over time lost was relevant to older lifers as well; however, their sense of loss was over what could have been achieved. In comparison to younger lifers, who felt they had missed out on dating and partying, middle-aged lifers were preoccupied with re-attaining their standard of living prior to imprisonment. For middle-aged lifers,
the loss was associated more with material comforts rather than relationships. According to one middle-aged lifer:

I'm always doing this 'before and after comparison'—from what I came from, to where I am—and I make the mistake of comparing myself to, as I say, to what I would describe as my age peers and how I measure up to these people, and frankly I don't, but how could I, after a short period of time out, I was in jail for so long. (Lifer #5)

He further added:

I've also come to the reality that I will never have what I lost and I will never be back in that situation... there's too much of that in my head, of comparing to where I was and where I am and that's a deadly game to play. (Lifer #5)

Not being able to accept lost time interferes with their commitment to a straight identity. For those lifers who want to relive the lost years, they may find themselves involved in criminal behaviour or violation of parole conditions. One lifer in particular discussed the various activities he was engaging in to try to make up for lost time. For example, he would associate with younger house residents, go to bars and consume alcohol, and leave territorial boundaries. All of these activities were in violation of his parole. The majority of lifers, however, saw the folly of making up for lost time and were moving on.

Disengagement & Disidentification

Ebaugh (1988) defines disengagement as "the process of disassociating and disidentifying with the values, ideas, expectations, and social relationships of a particular role which a person performed for a given period in his or her life" (1988, p. 10); and disidentification, "the process of ceasing to think of oneself in the former role" (1988, p. 4). Ebaugh argues that one must engage in both processes, for a successful exit is to occur. Disengagement and disidentification are perhaps the best indicators that a
transition has occurred, or is occurring, as they signify a detachment from their previous culture and alludes to their level of commitment to the new identity. The amount of contact between the lifers and other convicts and their involvement in lifer culture provide a window on the process of disassociation.

Five lifers expressed that they were trying to disengage from their criminal peers. This process is complicated by the fact that few have conventional friends or acquaintances and by their living arrangement which restricts interaction to other lifers and convicts in the house. For example, one lifer was anticipating his full parole so he would no longer be around other convicts:

There’s a lot of people in this house I can’t stand to be around, it’s a forced thing . . . you are forced to live with people that you would have nothing to do with, but because you are labelled and grouped into the same thing, you must live with them. (Lifer #1)

Another lifer, when questioned about hanging out with guys from the house, responded that he did not have many friends and certainly none from the halfway house. He didn’t share an interest in their activities or attitudes.

I don’t go out and look out and look for those kinds of activities which includes a large number of guys that are in the house . . . I don’t want to associate with people who are going out drinking every Friday night. (Lifer #4)

Only one lifer, the youngest, had a practice of non-association with other residents at the halfway house. In fact, he chose to spend very little of his time at the house, only those hours that were required, “I just come in and go to bed; basically, I spend a few minutes there every once in a while but not that often” (Lifer #6). He said, “mostly the people I hang out with have nothing to do with the house, I’ve got a few friends I knew

11 It is difficult to determine, however, whether the lifers chose to disassociate because they were trying to adopt a straight identity or because they did not care for any of the residents living at the house.
before I went in” (Lifer #6). When asked if he felt pressure to continue to associate with other lifers and residents, he replied, “I do my own thing anyway so it doesn’t really matter, I’m not around the house much for them to really express their opinions one way or another” (Lifer #6). He felt that by staying away from the other residents, he was able to avoid legal trouble, “[staying away from the house] keeps you out of trouble because, you know, most of the people in there [halfway house] are short-timers, you know, they get into a lot of stuff, the cops follow a few of them” (Lifer #6). He also felt that by hanging around with other residents that he might get caught up in some of the old routines, “I see a lot of people right now, you know, they are stuck in what they used to do” (Lifer #6).

One lifer had not shown any evidence of having disengaged from his lifer identity and exclusively associated with other residents. This behaviour is not surprising given that he had not met any of the conditions necessary for role exit.

Those lifers who felt the need to continue associating with other lifers or convicts claimed that this was because other lifers shared common interests and that they did not have to explain their past or answer personal questions about their situation. As one of them said, “whenever you went for a coffee it was good just to sit and talk . . . we’re not all up to criminal activity . . . but you spend so much time with these guys, it’s like they’re part of your family now” (Lifer #2). It is difficult to break off friendships acquired after lengthy periods of time inside, especially when other lifers and convicts have become surrogate families. For most, this was the only system of support they had. For those lifers who do not have any non-criminal friends or contact with their families, it is the other lifers and convicts who are their only significant others.
Although none of the lifers had disidentified from their lifer identities, most are making attempts at disengaging and disassociating with the lifer and convict populations of the halfway house.

Summary

Role transition theorists, Ebaugh being the most informative to this research, have argued that one needs to have the opportunity to exit, be committed to the role exit, have the support of significant others, recognize the irreversibility of time, and disengage and disidentify with his or her previous identity in order for a successful transition to occur.

Lifers in this research were experiencing difficulty in meeting these five criteria. Their identity as lifers, their life-long connection to the correctional system, and their parole conditions created many boundaries to their opportunities to exit the lifer roles. Their status as lifers, their connection to the system, and their parole conditions placed limits on the amount of distance they could put between themselves and their lifer identities and limited their ability to rehearse the role of straight citizens. Many could not find adequate and permanent employment. While four of the lifers were employed, these jobs tended to be in the temporary and unskilled sections of the workforce. Difficulties with employment consequently affected finances, and many were concerned about being able to find housing once fully paroled. Five lifers felt that they had faced discrimination due to their lifer status and also noted many other obstacles related to parole conditions and their identity when meeting others, either socially or romantically.

Lifers knew that they were expected to acquire a straight identity upon release and were committed to acquiring a straight identity. This commitment was demonstrated by engaging in activities to better themselves, for example, furthering their education,
getting involved with reintegration and substance abuse programs, and simply making responsible decisions. When faced with barriers to reintegration, however, four of the lifers had thoughts of returning to prison and some, in fact, had been returned or were being threatened with reincarceration due to parole violations.

Lifers also experienced difficulties with meeting and establishing relationships with significant others. These difficulties again stemmed from their lifer identity, their connection to the correctional system, and their parole conditions. Relationships with staff members, while supportive, are complex and often reinforce the lifer identity. Lifers have an ‘us versus them’ relationship with anyone related to corrections and it must be questioned how influential these relationships are for lifers. In terms of family, many of the lifers’ families lived far away which made contact difficult and one lifers’ family did not wish to have contact at all due to the nature of his crime. Four of the lifers deliberately chose not to be involved in romantic relationships as parole conditions, such as alcohol and drug restrictions, curfews, and residing at a halfway house, limit where they can go to meet women and where they entertain women. In addition, many do not wish to disclose their criminal history in fear of social rejection. Over half of the lifers had friends other than those at the halfway house, but did cite problems in making acquaintances. Discrimination, social alienation, having to lie and conceal their lifer identity, having little in common with conventional others, and having to abide by parole conditions constrained their ability to establish relationships. For most, their interpersonal relationships were with the residents from the house despite the parole condition that they are to refrain from criminal associations and contacts.
With respect to the irreversibility of time, all of the lifers knew that they could not make up for lost time but wanted to to various degrees. Only two participants were actively making up for lost time. Often, these activities included drugs, alcohol, missed curfews, leaving the territorial boundaries, associating with other convicts, and money-making schemes. For young lifers, they aimed at making up for a lost youth and spent most of their time partying. Older lifers were more concerned with re-attaining material possessions and money that could have been achieved had they not been imprisoned.

In terms of disengagement, two lifers were trying hard to distance themselves from the residents of the halfway house and were very resentful that they were forced to associate with ‘these people.’ For the others, however, rejection by significant others pushed them to the comforts the lifer ‘family’ where they found support for understanding the hassles of the lifer identity.

Despite the apparent difficulties that lifers experience with meeting the criteria necessary for role transition, the lifers also experienced some successes. In terms of their opportunity to exit their lifer identity, some lifers indicated that even though their lifer identity and parole conditions were intrusive and presented many barriers, they were able to function somewhat normally in day-to-day life. Four of the lifers had obtained employment (although it may not have been the jobs they had hoped for or were trained for) despite disclosure of their criminal record and lack of work experience. Two of the lifers had obtained housing even though they reported instances of discrimination. Most were able to access social situations in which they could acquire friendships with conventional others.
With respect to commitment to the role exit, lifers were committed to acquiring a straight identity, and for many, this commitment began in prison with their involvement in reintegration programs. Many lifers also furthered their education, abstained from drugs and alcohol either on their own or with the help of recovery programs such as Narcotics Anonymous, and engaged in responsible decision-making. All of these acts signify their dedication to self-improvement and a straight identity.

In relation to significant others, the lifers were able to form healthy relationships with a variety of conventional others despite their lifer identity, their parole conditions, and the forced nature of interaction at the halfway house with other convicts. Four lifers had friends other than the residents at the halfway house. These friends tended to be co-workers, friends from school, people they had met through staff and residents of the halfway house, or people they had known prior to incarceration. Four had frequent contact with their families in spite of distance and families were supportive and able to look past the criminal history. One of the lifers was married shortly after his release, two casually dated and four chose not to have intimate relationships. They did not feel ready to be in relationships and were more content to ‘work on themselves’ before getting involved in a romantic relationship.

In terms of their recognition of the irreversibility of time, all of the lifers understood that they could not make up for lost time and five were trying to pick up where they left off instead of trying to get back what they had lost.

With respect to disengagement, three lifers chose not to associate with any residents from the halfway house and were rarely found engaging in activities around the
house. They expressed little satisfaction in the lifer culture and chose to isolate themselves from the halfway house and its culture.

Ebaugh argues that these five criteria are necessary to create an ex-role, that is, complete the role exit process. None of the lifers interviewed met these five criteria and, according to Ebaugh, cannot create an ex-role. It has been argued throughout the discussion section that lifers cannot create an ex-role for a variety of reasons related to the difficulties they face with opportunity, commitment, significant others, time, and disengagement. In addition, they are not able to exit their ex-role because of their post-release lifer identity, their parole conditions, and their connection to the correctional system. Although none of the lifers met all five criteria, it cannot be said that they were unsuccessful with reintegration. Is role exit perhaps not necessary, then, for successful reintegration, or is it that lifers experience a form of exit unlike other exiters? Ebaugh does note that exiters whose exits are not voluntary, or which are institutionalized or dependent on others, do not necessarily experience all four stages of role exit. She argues:

First doubts . . . would not occur because the decision to exit was made by someone other that the exiter. Likewise the process of weighing pros and cons of a current role as compared to viable alternative roles is inappropriate because the current role is no longer a possibility. (Ebaugh, 1988, p. 204)

The lifers did experience doubts as to their commitment to their lifer identities, but did not have a say in when they would be released and have no control over the fact that they will be on parole for the remainder of their lives. They must adopt a straight identity in order to be seen as worthy of full parole. Lifers are told what their alternative role is going to be. Lifers can weigh the pros and cons of continuing in their lifer roles as
opposed to acquiring a straight one, but many do not want to return to prison so their choice is made for them; if they are to stay out of prison, they must be straight or at least act straight.

Ebaugh’s theory has provided the foundation for studying lifers’ experiences with role transition, however, their exit seems unique in that they do not entirely fit with her theory of role exit. ¹² Although they do experience various stages of role exit, and do possess some of the criteria necessary for role exit, they are unable to create an ex-role. I would argue that even if the lifers did possess all five criteria, they still would not be able to create an ex-role due to the conditions of their sentence. Lifers are unique from other exiters in that they do not have any control over their exit. It is the correctional system that determines when they will be paroled and it is the system that continues to interfere in their day-to-day lives in the form of parole conditions. A life-sentence, means exactly that, life, and thus they can never separate themselves from that identity; there exists no ‘ex-lifer.’

The initial expectation of this research was that lifers would have to adopt a straight identity in order to reintegrate successfully. The data reveal, however, that lifers do not disidentify once released and experience difficulties in trying to adopt this straight identity. In spite of these difficulties, however, during the research process none of the lifers were returned to prison on parole violations and none had been returned to prison for re-offending. Most were employed, had relationships with significant others, and were living ‘straight’ lives despite continuing to identify as lifers. Is the adoption of a

¹²Ebaugh’s study of 106 ex’s included interviews with only seven ex-convicts, none of whom were lifers.
straight identity necessary then, to be successful in reintegration? In the next, and final, chapter, this question will be addressed.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the post-release identity of men who had served a life-sentence and the role of identity in their reintegration into society. The research demonstrates that men in prison develop a convict identity to survive and assumes that upon release a straight identity will be adopted to survive in society. The literature on identity and roles suggests that the acquisition of a straight identity is a process, not simply the exchange of an old identity for a new one. Guided by these findings, the present research sought to establish the existence of a lifer identity, to determine if the lifer identity extended beyond release, to explore the process of exiting a lifer identity and acquiring a straight identity, and the role of identity in reintegration. Ebaugh’s theoretical framework on role exit provided direction for the exploration of the transition from a lifer identity to a straight identity.

The paucity of research on lifer identity, and Macchio’s (1994) conflicting results on a lifer identity, led to the need to first establish its existence, and second to identify the nature of this identity. The lifers in this study confirmed the existence of a lifer identity in prison and provided a profile of the lifer identity as an ascribed identity that was associated with high status, respect, rewards, and role expectations. The next step in the research was to determine if the lifer identity was maintained post-release. Results from this study challenge the findings of researchers such as Macchio (1994) and Jones and Schmid (2000) who argued that once out of the prison environment, lifers (or convicts with respect to Jones and Schmid’s research) would shed their prison identities. The participants of these two studies, keeping in mind they were interviewed while still in
prison, believed that they would be able to shed their prison identities upon release.
Lifers, according to the present study, however, do, in fact, continue to identify as lifers
after they are released. Their continued identification is reinforced by their continued
accountability to the correctional system, their legal status as lifers, the need to associate
with other lifers for support and companionship and assistance in navigating the
ambiguity of their reintegration.

The expectation that lifers will acquire a straight identity and the maintenance of
the lifer identity by the correctional system and society create conflict for the lifer.
Lifers’ post-release experience is a contested terrain in which they battle between their
desire to go straight and stay out of jail, and their continued identification and
relationship to the lifer identity. Shedding the lifer identity is a difficult process with few
short-term rewards and many barriers to the acquisition of a straight life.

Lifers want to go straight, and are expected to go straight, but the correctional
system, with its continued involvement, for example, through close monitoring, rigid
parole conditions, frequent reporting to parole, random drug testing, and mandatory
programs, complicates the transition process for lifers. Lifers, who are subject to these
conditions for the rest of their lives, feel as though they are “set up to fail” (Lifer #5).

In addition, lifers are trying to go straight in a society that looks at lifers with
disdain. Unlike in prison, where being a lifer was advantageous and rewarded, society’s
view of lifers is quite different. Society considers lifers to be untrustworthy, dangerous,
and to be handled with suspicion. This conflict between the positive prison image of
lifers and society’s negative image of lifers contributes to the confusion lifers experience
surrounding their identity.
The work of Ebaugh (1988), and role transition literature was used as a guide to explore and examine the role transition of lifers. This body of literature provided the criteria for examining lifers’ role exit. It was expected that to be successful with their transition, lifers would need to have the opportunity to exit, be committed to the role exit, have the support of significant others, recognize the irreversibility of time, and engage in the processes of disengagement and disidentification. None of the lifers met all five criteria and may not attain Ebaugh’s final stage of role exit, ‘creation of the ex-role.’ Lifers are a unique segment of the prison population due to the nature of their sentences. A life-sentence carries with it life parole which means that in the eyes of corrections they will always be labelled as lifers. Lifers who have successfully reintegrated and have been on full parole for many years are still suspect when problems occur in the community. For example, in a recent escape at the halfway house, lifers who had been on parole for years were called in for questioning about the incident. Lifers are never truly free of their identity.

The data revealed that even though the lifers were expected to ‘go straight,’ and committed to their role exit, many faced difficulty in doing so. Parole conditions, the involvement of corrections in their daily lives, and the lifer identity itself, were revealed as major barriers to acquiring a straight identity. Although lifers lack many of the resources necessary for successful reintegration, and continue to identify as lifers, many still manage to succeed. All the lifers were committed to a straight identity, some had the support of significant others, many had realized that they could not make up for lost time and many were trying to disengage from their lifer identity. These results suggest that the criteria outlined by role transition theorists may not be necessary for successful role exit
and that fully exiting the role may not be necessary for successful integration. More research needs to be conducted in the area of role exit and reintegration to clarify this relationship.

This study adds to the specific body of research on role transition by offering a view on the unique transition of life-sentenced inmates. It provides support for the conditions, outlined as necessary, for successful role transition but also puts in to question the necessity of meeting these conditions.

This study also contributes to correctional policy and practice. The research raises awareness about lifers and their unique reintegration experiences. It shows that there is more to reintegration than acquiring skills, getting a job, finding a place to live, establishing conventional relationships, and engaging in pro-social activities. It demonstrates that identity also plays a role in reintegration.

One of the main objectives of Corrections Canada is to ensure public safety. More individuals are receiving life-sentences, which means that greater numbers of lifers are being released into the community. To ensure public safety, it is important that lifers are successful with reintegration. Planning for successful reintegration should begin from behind the prison walls and from the onset of the life-sentence. Lifers should be required to attain at least their high-school diploma and vocational training. Lifers should be placed on a scheduled program from the time they arrive in which they receive education, vocational training, substance abuse treatment, social skills training, and the establishment of an investment vehicle for when they are released. These things will ensure a better standard of living once released and provide a buffer for some of the economic and employment difficulties they will surely face. Some of the lifers indicated
that they wished they had received more guidance upon entering prison and a set
schedule that would force them to make the most of their time behind bars. They said
that looking back they should have began sooner planning for their release but since they
were not required to do so they wasted their time inside ‘getting high and hanging out.’

Lifers should also be made aware, through information sharing and counselling,
of the barriers the lifer identity presents after release. According to the lifers in
Macchio’s study, lifers are under the impression that they will be able to shed their lifer
identities and pick up where they left off. Making lifers aware of the harsh reality of the
lifer identity may ease the transition from prison to the community.

Changes in the community should also be implemented to assist with
reintegration. There needs to be second stage financing after release and second stage
housing for community living. Training and education about lifers, their identity, and the
difficulties they face should be necessary for those who work with lifers post-release.
There needs to be the establishment of an alternate community of support for lifers
beyond the halfway house. There is a need for a support group in which lifers at various
stages of parole can interact in a supportive environment. The lifers were pleased with
the efforts of In-Reach but mentioned the inconvenience of waiting for the workers to
come down from Kingston. Some form of local In-Reach is needed and could be
enhanced with changes to the association condition so that lifers could associate with
other lifers who have made a commitment to a straight identity. There also needs to be
community-based support programs that lifers can access once they leave the halfway
house.
To assist with social reintegration and difficulties in locating conventional friends, there should be the establishment of a ‘buddy-system,’ or community ‘lifer fraternity’ in which lifers new to the area are paired up with another lifer who has served time in the community and who can offer advice and support on making it on the outside. This process of induction into the community would be similar to the process of socialization in prison, but for ‘making it’ on the outside. Lifers should be required to get involved, for example, through volunteering, additional education and training, or giving community talks. To reduce the need to make up for lost time, lifers should be required to establish goals for the future and take active steps to attaining them. It is crucial, however, to ensure that the lifer identity is not reinforced. As one lifer indicated, “do not ask us to engage in an identity you are expecting us to disengage from” (Lifer #4).

Corrections Canada has an obligation to society and to lifers to ensure their safe return to society. The results and suggestions of this study should provide some guidance in achieving this end.

There is one key limitation to this research. This research is only able to draw conclusion about this particular group of lifers, from this particular halfway house and at this specific place in time. Future research needs to examine lifers, and a more cross sectional selection of lifers, over time from their induction into the criminal justice system to many years after their release to the community.

My experience in doing this research has been difficult at times, extremely rewarding at others. My eyes have been opened to the importance of identity in transitions that we all engage in, not just the journey of lifers. My knowledge of life-sentenced inmates and the difficulties they face has been greatly increased, and many
myths and preconceived notions I possessed about lifers were dismissed. At times I experienced problems of trust with the lifers, who for years had seen me as a volunteer and as a friend. Now I was seen as a researcher, and potentially 'one of them.' It was necessary for me to ensure that they did not feel used by the research, but view the project as an opportunity for them to present their stories and experiences with the lifer identity and reintegration. I wanted to be seen as separate from corrections and believe I was successful. The lifers opened up to me and offered me a glimpse at what life is like after 'life.'
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A: Interview Schedules

Schedule I: Basic Demographics

1) What was your age i) at time of the life conviction _____ ii) and now? ______

2) What were you sentenced to, Life what? ________________________

3) Was this your first conviction? Yes No

4) When did you join In-Reach? ________________________

5) When did you arrive at St. Leonard’s House? Month_________ Year________

6) According to eligibility dates when can you leave the house? ______________________

7) Is this your first release? Yes No
Schedule II: Commitment to the Lifer Identity

1) There seems to be this notion that lifers are different from other offenders. What do you think?
   a) What's a lifer?
   b) Who labels you a lifer (self, other inmates, the system)?
   c) Is there a labelling process?
   d) What comes with being a lifer (good/bad things, responsibilities, and attitudes)?

2) When you entered prison you were labelled by the system as a lifer, how did you identify with this label?
   a) How did you feel about being labelled a lifer?
   b) How did it feel the first time someone referred to you as a lifer? What about after say 7 or 8 years?
   c) When others in prison treated you as a lifer, how did you feel?
   d) Did you identify as a lifer or did you feel that you had to go along with the identity

   What I hear you saying then, is that you:

   ➢ Identified as a Lifer
     a) Where you expected to identify as a lifer?
        i) If yes
           (1) By whom?
     b) What would have happened if you had not identified as a lifer?
     c) What was there a down side to identifying as a lifer?
     d) Did you make a conscious decision to go along with it?
     e) Why did you go along with the label?
        i) What was the benefit of accepting the lifer identity?
     f) What sorts of things did you do to be accepted as a lifer?

   ➢ Rejected the Lifer Label
     a) How did you see yourself?
     b) Did you experience any conflict over this from the other offenders, other lifers, staff?
     c) Where you expected to identify as a lifer?
     d) If yes:
        i) By whom?
     e) Were there any benefits of not accepting the lifer identity?

3. When you entered the community you again were labelled a lifer, how does this make you feel? How is it different this time than in prison?

   a) What was it like the first time someone in the community referred to you as a lifer?
   b) When others in the community treat you as a lifer, how do you feel?
   c) The term lifer has a different meaning here in the community, how do you feel about the label now?
Schedule III: Reintegration

1. What were your expectations when you got out?
   a) What were your goals for reintegration?
   b) Have they changed now? Why?

2a. When did you start thinking about what would be expected of you when you got out?
   i) What did you think was expected of you?
   ii) What did you do inside to prepare to meet them? And now?

2b. How does being a lifer affect meeting these expectations?
   i) Can you meet these expectations? Are they realistic?
   ii) How has being a lifer prevented you from living up to these expectations?

3) How has the label of lifer affected your ability to integrate?
   a) Do you see yourself as straight? Do you even want to be straight?
   b) What steps are you taking to be straight? Are you trying to change?
   c) Do you feel the need to make up for lost time?
   d) Is it hard to live with the discrepancy between the way you see yourself and the label?

4. Who do you tell about your conviction, when do you tell them, and why do you tell them?
   a) What is their reaction/ do they treat you differently after/ how does this make you feel?
   b) How do you feel about people knowing you are a lifer?
   c) How does it make you feel when people treat you like a lifer?
   d) Did you expect this reaction while in prison?
   e) How do you manage the difference between how others see you vs. how you see yourself?
   i) What problems have you encountered?

5. Are you trying to distance yourself from the lifer identity or do you feel the need to hang on the lifer identity?
   a) How are you trying to distance yourself from the lifer identity? Why do you need to distance yourself
   b) Have you started thinking about release?
   c) What do you do to prepare for release?
   d) Who do you look to for guidance?
   e) What is the other lifers’ and residents’ reaction to your getting ready for release?
f) Is there an element of danger in separating from the group?
   i) Do you act differently around the guys at the house versus when you are out in the community?

g) Do you feel like you have to be two different people?
h) Describe the tension of managing your identity between the two groups? How do you manage this?
i) Is there a difference between the guys at the house and people outside the house in terms of supporting you with reintegration?

6a. According to your eligibility date, when can you leave the house ______________

   i) Do you feel you’ll be prepared to leave? If no, why not?

6b. According to your eligibility date to leave the house, you are past that date

   i) Why do you feel you are not ready to leave the house?
Schedule IV: General Comments/Questions

1) What do you think could be done to assist you with getting back into the community? (support networks, programming, etc.)

2) If you could make a recommendation to Corrections Canada what would it be?

3) Do you have any questions or comments about the interview?
APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

Let me introduce myself. I am Catherine Brooke, a masters student at the University of Windsor, working on a masters thesis under the direction of Professor Janice Drakich, Department of Sociology & Anthropology. The thesis will explore the identity of life-sentenced day parolees.

With this memo, I am inviting you to participate in the study and to indicate your consent to the terms of this memo by signing the memo below.

Your participation in the study will involve a confidential interview that is expected to take 1 to 1 1/2 hours to complete. The interview will be audio-recorded with your consent. You may withdraw from the interview at any time. You may withdraw your consent to have certain information used, if you notify the interviewer immediately after the interview is completed. You may also refuse to answer any questions with which you are uncomfortable.

The interview will be transcribed to allow me to organize the material. You will not be identified with the transcribed material. Your name will never be used in written materials or oral presentations. Further, the information you provide will be confidential and anonymous. No one other than the interviewer and her supervisor will have access to the information. The presentation of any written material will disguise your identity. At the completion of the study, the taped interviews can be returned to you or destroyed. You will also be provided with a summary of the research findings upon request after the completion of the study.

Please note, no benefits will accrue from participation in the study and will not affect your eligibility for full parole. It should also be mentioned that I have a legal obligation to report any illegal activity that I may learn of during the interview. Please monitor the information given during this time.

If I have any questions concerning this study, contact Dr. Janice Drakich, Associate Professor, University of Windsor (253-3000, ext. 3493) or the interviewer, Catherine Brooke.

I __________________________________________ (please print your name clearly) have read and understand the above statements detailing the focus of the research, the nature of my participation, confidentiality and anonymity, and my rights as a participant. I agree to participate as an interviewee under the conditions stated above.

________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant                      Date
APPENDIX C: DEBRIEFING FORM

Dear Participant,

I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your time and insight. Not only have you assisted me in the completion of my master's thesis but also the information you have provided will help me to improve the existing knowledge on lifers and their reintegration. It is important to me that lifers are seen as a distinct group with unique needs and again your participation has allowed me to press on in the area of lifers' rights.

Again I would like to remind you that all of the information you have provided is confidential and anonymous. This means that no identifiable information will be used in either the thesis or in any oral presentation that I may give. Only my supervisor and myself will have access to the information.

If you would like to know the results of the study, let me know and I will be sure to mail you a research summary at the completion of the project. I would also like to extend to you an invitation to the thesis defence to be held at the University of Windsor.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to contact my supervisor, Janice Drakich, or myself.

Thank you again for your time.

Sincerely,

Catherine Brooke
APPENDIX D: CODING SYSTEM

CC = career criminal
D+ = evidence of disengagement, disidentification
D- = evidence of not disengaging or disidentifying
EI = evidence of a lifer identity
EI- = evidence that a lifer identity does not exist
I = identity, their perception of self
I+ = identifies as lifer
I- = does not identify as lifer
IO = their objective view of lifer identity, how they feel others perceive lifers
R+ = successful reintegration
R- = unsuccessful reintegration
RT+ = evidence of a transition
RT- = no evidence of a transition
S+ = they have support networks and significant others
S- = they do not have support networks and significant others
SS = self serving behaviour/attitude, using lifer to their advantage
St = lifer as a status position
APPENDIX E: KEY TERMS DEFINED

CSC: short for Correctional Services Canada

Day Parole: a form of conditional release, which provides offenders with the opportunity to participate in on-going community-based activities. Ordinarily, the offender resides at a correctional institution or community residence. Offenders are also granted day parole in order to prepare for full parole and statutory release.

First-degree Murder: all planned and deliberate murders, as well as the murder of a police officer, prison employee or any other person authorized to work in a prison while on duty.

Full Parole: a form of conditional release that allows an offender to serve part of a prison sentence in the community. The offender is placed under supervision and is required to abide by conditions designed to reduce the risk of re-offending and to foster reintegration of the inmate into the community. Under full parole, the person does not have to return nightly to an institution, but must report regularly to a parole supervisor, and in certain cases, to the police.

Halfway House: otherwise known as a Community-Based Residential Facility, is a place of residence owned and operated either by a non-governmental agency or by CSC. Each agency-owned facility contracts with CSC to provide accommodation for, and counselling and supervision of, 15 to 30 offenders who are usually on day parole. The contract sets out detailed requirements regarding levels of control and assistance.

Homicide: general term applied to all situations in which one person causes the death of another. Justifiable or accidental homicide is not a crime; culpable homicide is a crime (first or second-degree murder or manslaughter) and carries specific parole eligibility dates.

In-Reach: In-Reach workers are lifers who are now on full parole and who assist lifers with adjustment to prison and to help them work towards parole and safe and successful reintegration in the community.

LifeLine: a program that offers assistance and guidance to life-sentenced offenders trying to adjust to indefinite periods of incarceration. In-Reach workers, lifers who are now on full parole, are used to assist lifers with adjustment to prison and to help them work towards parole and safe and successful reintegration in the community.

Lifer: an inmate who has been convicted of a life-sentence

Manslaughter: any culpable homicide that is neither first nor second-degree murder. The judge may sentence a person convicted of manslaughter to any term deemed appropriate, from a number of months to life.
Second-degree Murder: any murder that is not first-degree murder.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA AUCTORIS

Catherine Brooke was born in 1976 in Windsor, Ontario. She graduated from Riverside Secondary School in 1994. In 1999, Catherine received an Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree in Criminology, and an Honours Bachelor of Arts Degree in Psychology (with Thesis option). In 2003, Catherine received a Master of Arts Degree in Sociology from the University of Windsor.

Catherine is currently working in the fields of drug addiction and methadone maintenance. She hopes to one day apply her interests and work experience in the areas of corrections and drug addiction to the correctional system. Catherine also plans to pursue her Ph.D. in the field of Criminology.