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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

RETURNING CITIZENS? THE PATH FROM PRISON TO POLITICS AMONG THE
FORMERLY INCARCERATED

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

BY
QUINTIN WILLIAMS
CHICAGO, IL
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I would like to give thanks and honor to God who is my anchor and strength. I would like to thank the men and women of FORCE as they try to make the world better in the face of extreme constraints. I am continually inspired by the work that they do and I look forward to fighting alongside them for many years to come. I would like to thank Dr. Ed Flores for helping me get started on this project. Without him I would have not known about the work of FORCE. I am grateful for the day that he insisted that I meet with the community organizers for the group, it has truly changed my life for the better. I would like to thank my wife for supporting me when I had to leave to do interviews, or stay up late night typing field notes, or writing drafts when we could have been spending time with each other. I would also like to extend a special thank you Dr. Judith Wittner for showing me how to interview in order to understand what people are actually doing. Dr. Rhys Williams and Dr. Judson Everitt for pushing me to answer the difficult, but important “so what?” question. I hope with their help I can get better at that mentally taxing task. Dr. David Embrick for always being honest, and helpful. Dr. Kelly Moore for the words of encouragement and inspiration, you have a way of making me feel like what I am doing is important and worth it. Thanks to all of the graduate students who read and gave comments on this thesis.

“If we had no faults of our own, we should not take so much pleasure in noticing those in others and judging their lives as either black or white, good or bad. We all live our lives in shades of gray.”

— Shannon L. Alder

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the experiences of a group of formerly incarcerated persons involved in community organizing efforts for felon empowerment. Scholarly works often focus on what is being done on behalf of the formerly incarcerated, this work highlights how men and women with records advocate for themselves. Drawing on 18 months of participant observation and 18 in-depth interviews with a Chicago based group called FORCE (Fighting to Overcome Records and Create Equality) I found that meanings of redemption were essential to advocacy and operated as an imperative. The redemption imperative both constrained and enabled advocacy. It constrained advocacy in its narrow formulation of redemption. In this formulation the redeemed were those who were able to demonstrate qualities such as being educated, persons of faith, and who made the decision to “turn their lives around.” However, FORCE members, through redemption were empowered to engage politically. This engagement sometimes led to expanded rights by exposing discrimination. Redemption also had its limits as a resource for political engagement. FORCE members were not always able to convince legislators, and community members of their redeemed status. These findings call into question the perpetual nature of proving redemption in the lives of the formerly incarcerated, and the irony of its limitations as a resource for empowerment.

THESIS

RETURNING CITIZENS? THE PATH FROM PRISON TO POLITICS AMONG THE
FORMERLY INCARCERATED

Reggie an unassuming man in his late forties dressed in black slacks, a white button down shirt, and matching tie, reached in his pocket and takes out a folded piece of paper at Community Renewal Society's annual MLK celebration. He stepped to the podium to speak and nervously took a deep breath and began his speech, "I was incarcerated for 18 years and while incarcerated I began to be motivated by God to change, I took advantage of programs and education while there, and decided to change my life, but regardless of what I've done I am still discriminated against when it comes to employment." Reggie continued talking about how he is reunited with his son and wants opportunities. During his speech many in the crowd shook their heads in sympathy for Reggie, and when he was done the crowd erupted in thunderous applause. After Reggie's testimony, Jose a former gang member that had done several stints in the penitentiary emerges from the crowd with a microphone and walks to the front of the stage where Reggie had just been speaking. This was also where elected officials invited to the event were seated- Jose proceeds to tell them in a very matter -of -fact way "we just want yes or no answers" and proceeded to ask each of them "will you support legislation to remove absolute bars to employment?" One after another the legislators said "yes," but one elected official did not say yes but rather, "I have to do more research," the crowd

seemed to be very upset and started booing the representative, at this time Jose instructed everyone to stand and to extend their hands towards this elected official, and in unison the crowd all stood, arms extended praying, “Legislator _____ we are all praying that God would change your heart and bend your mind toward justice.” The face of the elected official was beat red and he could be seen fidgeting nervously in his seat. Sitting there I wondered how Reggie and Jose, who had done a collective 20 plus years in prison, ended up with a speaking role in front of hundreds of people, including elected officials. That was the first of many events, meetings, and protests that I would attend over the next year and a half with FORCE (fighting to overcome records and create equality). During this time I observed FORCE canvass the streets of Chicago doing voter registration, carry caskets to elected officials offices, organize die-ins, give testimonies and a number of other practices to make their voices heard. Former prisoners are normally depicted in policy discussions and scholarly literature as victims, or dependent on state government and non-government organizations. These entities are thought to have great influence on how former prisoners are incorporated back into society as citizens. Conversely, during the time I spent with the group I sought to understand how felon led advocacy shapes former prisoners experience of reentry and what these experiences reveal about their incorporation as citizens previously not considered in macro and meso-level analyses of reentry.

Reentry and Prisoner Incorporation

The number of people being released from prison in America has increased dramatically in the last several decades. This increase has led to a heightened focus on “reentry.” Jeremy Travis (2005) defines “reentry”¹ simply as the process of leaving prison and returning to society. In his view this definition highlights the fact that most people who enter prisons eventually come back. Travis distinguishes reentry from goals like rehabilitation and reintegration on the grounds that reentry is not an option. It is true that reentry is often inevitable and not optional, making it distinct social event, however, the idea of reentry is inseparable from the moral undercurrents of rehabilitation and reintegration. In part, this is reflective of what Michel Foucault (1975) referred to as the “carceral archipelago” (Foucault 1975) that refers to the myriad locations of social control that expand beyond the prison into the everyday lives of citizens. This perspective has endured since Foucault’s seminal *Discipline and Punish*. Skeptical of reentry’s intent Loic Wacquant he asks the question, “How could former prisoners be reintegrated when they were never integrated in the first place, and when there exists no viable social structure to accommodate them outside?” (2010:612). He concludes that reentry is merely “myth and ceremony” aligned with state regulation and control of the poor.

Recently, it has been noted that the “carceral” is devolving (Miller 2014). This devolution is characterized by the increased off-loading of state responsibility onto local community actors. Increasingly former prisoners are routed into various local

¹ I place reentry in quotations because scholars have questioned the idea of “re” entering a society where integration historically has not existed.

organizations that seek to reintegrate, and/or rehabilitate former prisoners. Reuben Miller (2014:307) makes this point by stating that, “reentry is both an event that happens in the lives of former prisoners but also something done on their behalf.” Furthermore, Miller contends that

Prisoner reentry is a welfare-state criminal justice hybrid institution that activates the universe of human service actors, criminal justice agencies, and policy and program planners to assist former prisoners make their transition from prison to their home communities. Each of these stakeholders has specific goals, conceptualize prisoners in specific ways, and advocate for specific kinds of interventions in former prisoners’ lives.

The state’s involvement in reentry and its consequences in the lives of former prisoners has been of concern to researchers. Nicole Kaufman (2015) assesses these concerns and adds to them by borrowing the concept of incorporation as used in studies of citizenship in her analysis of prisoner reentry in Wisconsin. From this analysis she develops the idea of “Prisoner incorporation,” a concept she uses to describe the practices through which non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) intervene into the lives of ex-prisoners (Kaufman 2015:535). Her analysis differs from other work that is pessimistic about the relationship between these organizations and the state. She notes two typical arguments. One, she calls the “contain and control” argument, which views NGO’s and the state as partners in efforts to surveille and control poor communities. She refers to the other as the “co-opted productivity” argument, which is said to be a reflection of neoliberalism and welfare state reduction (Kaufman 2015:537). Kaufman argues that the forms of prisoner incorporation that NGOs implement are more diverse and divergent

from state policy than prior work has described (Kaufman 2015:538). She contends that NGO's use a variety of practices to include former prisoners as citizens. Some of these practices resemble what she calls "Classic reentry" that emphasize the development of attributes or skills that ex-prisoners are identified as lacking, and do not offer lasting membership in communities. According to Kaufman the classic reentry approach is the practice most aligned with state policy. Kaufman also notes NGO practices that diverge from state policy and focus on broader incorporation. These practices include, domestic labor, cultural, religious, and political incorporation. In her view, these practices diverge from state policy, especially political incorporation. Kaufman then concludes that

Prisoner incorporation reveals the creativity NGOs exercise in response to the desperation and extreme exclusions in the lives of former prisoners. Prisoner incorporation is both structured by and yet remains peripheral to the penal state. NGO work at the margins of the penal state offers experiences of citizenship to those whom the state deems in need of further preparation to become citizens. Agencies with broader visions of inclusion are also practicing democracy, as expressed in both the diversity of their programs and the fuller participation they offer to ex-prisoners (Kaufman 2015:549).

While revealing variation and innovation by NGO's in the devolving penal field, former prisoners are still portrayed as dependent actors whose incorporation as citizens depend on state and NGO definitions and practices. This view neglects the experience of felons themselves in the incorporation process. In doing so the relationship between state policy, reentry, and citizenship are analyzed without taking into account former prisoners efforts in this work. Instead of asking how do NGO's and the state seek to (or not to) incorporate former prisoners as citizens, or how former prisoners respond as "clients" and

“participants” in reentry programming (Miller 2014). I ask, how do felons themselves participate, understand, and experience incorporation activities in which they are the lead? I argue that the felon led advocacy by FORCE (fighting to overcome records and create equality) rely on “classic reentry” in order to make claims for broader incorporation. Through narratives and practices of redemption FORCE members highlighted personal attributes such as being persons of faith, students, and fathers to make claims for rights. They used these narratives of redemption to expose discrimination in employment, and to address the stigma that comes with having a criminal record. The experiences of former prisoners in the work of their own incorporation reveal the durability of the classic reentry logic. I contend that the moral undertones of felon led advocacy suggest that citizenship is a fundamentally moral category. Therefore, the incorporation of former prisoners must include a re-casting of the felon identity into a morally acceptable citizen. FORCE members made claims of moral acceptability through the narration and embodiment of redemption. The practice of redemption as an enabling and necessary factor in felon incorporation has been lacking in discussions of reentry. Furthermore, by including the experiences of former prisoners in these efforts, I underscore the moral and cultural undercurrents that shape the reentry experience of former prisoners and their reception as citizens.

FORCE members organized their group activities, and often their personal lives around redemptive stories and practices. This was a necessary part of their advocacy, and I observed what I call the redemption imperative. I define the redemption imperative as

the unavoidable, constant need to prove redemption, which I argue is a necessary cultural resource in gaining legitimacy and recognition as citizens. Failure to demonstrate this reform carries with it the risk of further social marginalization and no alternative networks to fall back on. FORCE members stories and practices of redemption were not just personal conversion stories, they were in part shaped by the culture of faith based community organizing, and a response to broader cultural and institutional stigma. The primacy of redemption at times enabled FORCE members to engage politically, and often was leveraged to put forth strong critiques of unfair discrimination. However, redemption had its limitations as a political tool. Despite evidence that would suggest that redemption had indeed taken place in the life of the former prisoner, skepticism and the “mark” of a criminal record (Pager 2010) continues to cast a shadow of doubt in the minds of politicians, employers, and community members. Therein lies the irony of the redemption imperative; on the one hand it is unavoidable, but there is no guarantee that the benefits of being redeemed will be granted. Last, while there is a great deal of optimism surrounding the development of felon led advocacy (Toney 2007; Owens 2014) this case shows both the immense potential and subtle limitations of community organizing led by felons.

Moral Careers, Making Good, and Gang Recovery

Narratives and practices of redemption can serve as a mechanisms to combat stigma. Status groups with “spoiled” identities (Goffman 1986) engage in various practices to manage this negative designation. The foundational work of Erving Goffman

examining the “moral careers” of mental patients revealed how patients navigated this management under the institutional constraints of the mental hospital. More recently Shadd Maruna (2001) described similar stigma management techniques specific to people with criminal records. Maruna’s concept of “making good,” details a process by which former prisoners construct pro-social identities in their lives after prison. A similar process of identity construction was found to be at work in gang members being socialized out of gang life, what Edward Flores (2014) calls “gang recovery.” Taken together these are helpful concepts that show the moral socialization processes that stigmatized groups go through to manage deviant identities.

When talking to FORCE members it became clear that the ways in which they thought about their path from prison, gang life, and the streets, to politics was one with “turning points” (Goffman 1961). These turning points marked significant moral changes that lead them to where they are now. FORCE members used words like “atoning,” “transcending,” “transformation,” and “change” to describe their lives up to their involvement in community organizing. Goffman’s concept of the moral career, entails the process by which a self is developed in an institutional context. Goffman describes the pre-patient phase, impatient phase, and vaguely the ex-patient phase in the “career” of a mental patient. In these stages Goffman outlines the fluctuations within the mental hospital wherewith the patients negotiate “creditable” and “discreditable” identities as deemed by the staff and in some ways larger society. The most helpful aspect of Goffman’s insights for the case of FORCE is his observation that “quite generally, the

person's line concerning self defensively brings him into appropriate alignment with the basic values of his society, and so may be called an apologia" (Goffman 1961:141).

Goffman notes that mental patient's stories were taken and modified and used to the benefits of the patients at times, but were profoundly shaped by the broader cultural context, (what Goffman called culturally acceptable plot lines) and the specific institutional context of the mental hospital.

Goffman describes these narrative moves within the context of the total institutions (a mental health facility) whereas Maruna and Flores describe these processes in the everyday life of the stigmatized. Maruna suggests that these moral tales are used to develop an overall pro-social identity, and Flores describes former gang members socialized out of gang life via displays of "proper" masculinity and religiosity.

Implicit in all three of the above-mentioned concepts is the perpetuity of redemption. In Goffman's work he doesn't elaborate on the ex-patient phase, but does say with regards to the inpatient phase that, "patients in a mental hospital are continually reminded they are "mental patients" and that they have failed in some "over-all way" (Goffman 1961:141). Maruna captures this reminder with regards to the formerly incarcerated when he observes that felons are often obsessed with the authenticity of their reform. Also, Flores notes that "recovering" gang members faced gang embodiment as a significant obstacle in demonstrating reform from gang life (Flores 2014:202). Each work notes the continual struggle that being "reformed" entails. This continual struggle has implications for felon led advocacy, because if former prisoners have to prove themselves

in everyday life, how much more when engaging politically. By attempting to take hold of the moral category of citizenship, FORCE member's constructed narrative identities (Ezzy 1998) that were employed for political purposes. The stories they told were subversive and hegemonic (Ewick and Silbey 1995). Hegemonic in espousing the "classical" mode of reentry, but subversive in using this mode to highlight unfair treatment and discrimination. In sum, former prisoner's part of FORCE live by a different moral code by virtue of their spoiled identities. Former prisoner's incorporation as citizens is profoundly shaped by their ability or inability to combat the deviant identity with a new moral one.

Redemption Narratives and Deservingness

Narratives of redemption are subjective/personal experiences that are shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional contexts (Irving 2013; Goffman 1961). These narratives are often constructed in attempts to establish a moral identity (Goffman 1961; Ezzy 1998). A moral Identity that is markedly different from a former "other" self (Meanwell 2013). Moreover, the construction of identities of self are "a political and power laden process" (Ezzy 1998:250). Leslie Irving, in her examination of redemption stories among homeless pet owners observed that this process often emerges out of life struggles (Irving 2013). In making this point, Leslie Irving departs from psychological examinations of redemption narratives (Namely McAdam's 2006) that suggest that redemption narratives emerge from an individual's measure of generativity. On the contrary Irving argues,

In McAdams's formulation, generativity and its precursors beget narratives of redemption. Without the right background, one's orientation, and thus one's personal narratives, would follow a different course. But the stories told by homeless and formerly homeless pet owners call for another interpretation. Their biographies did not predispose them to tell redemption narratives. Nevertheless, they envisioned brighter futures emerging out of their struggles.

Maruna (2001) similarly shows that "redemption scripts" employed by the formerly incarcerated are in response to the struggles of reentry. What these works show is that while appearing to be merely autobiographical, narratives of redemption have social origins (Irving 2013). These social origins have been shown to be embedded in the very fabric of American culture.

Dan McAdam's (2006) notes that Americans "live by" redemptive narratives. He traces these stories to early Puritan settlers and states that "settlement Americans have long reveled in stories of transformation" (McAdam's 1991:81). As such "among the most influential stories in any society are those that come to be seen as canonical within a society's distinctive heritage" (McAdams 1991:95). He notes that rags to riches stories about the American dream are one of America's most cherished myths.

Louis Decker (1997) like McAdam's traces these sorts of stories from America's founding. He notes that there has been a link between personal success and nation building. Similar conclusions were drawn in Sheila Webb's examination of Life Magazine's visual and narrative portrayals of success in the 1930's and 40's. She finds that Life Magazine made the professional into the ideal American citizen (2006:10) and these individuals were successful based on raw talent, hard work, and application. As a

cherished and acceptable “cultural form” (Poletta 1998) redemption powerfully shapes decisions on who is and is not deserving of rights and privileges.

Scholars have typically examined deservingness in American society using the cases of immigrants and welfare recipients. These two social arenas are hotly contested and the source of much contention. Do immigrants deserve a piece of the American pie? Are they even American? Or with regards to welfare, are they lazy leeches exploiting the system? Who are the people who really need help? The negative perception of immigrants usually emanate from anti-immigrant actors, media, and policy makers (Capetillo-Ponce 2008; Chavez 2008; Yoo 2008). Similar actors are involved in the negative constructions of welfare recipients (Quadagno 1994). Grace Yukich (2013) adds to these observations by noting the ways in which advocates for certain groups can aid in distinctions between deserving and underserving members of a stigmatized group. In her exploration of the New Sanctuary Movement (an immigrant rights group) she revealed that members of New Sanctuary propped up immigrants who best fit the acceptability of dominant culture. She referred to this as the “Model Movement Strategy.” Building on the idea of the model minority, which is an ideology that highlights the supposed hardworking racial minorities, and draws a sharp contrast with “others” who do not display the so called model behavior. She contends that the New Sanctuary movement implicitly portrayed many undocumented immigrants as underserving of rights (Yukich 2013:303). Yukich contends that this case shows how pro-immigrant activists as well as anti-immigration activists play a role in creating

divisions among immigrants in America. Such a strategy was the case with FORCE and redemption narratives were the vehicle by which members demonstrated their model status. Elijah Anderson (2015) notes that people of color, particularly in “white space” have to prove their moral acceptability, or deservingness to be in a particular space. He notes that the burden of proof is on them. FORCE having obtained the negative credential (Pager 2010) the burden of proof that they are no longer defined by their record is on them.

Irving (2013) posits that “Redemption, in general, casts identity in a positive light, portraying the possessor as deserving forgiveness and salvation.” People’s access to narrative resources depends on their social location (Frank 2010: 13). Former prisoner’s part of FORCE occupy a unique social location shaped by the American penal system and reentry. This location is both similar and different from the immigrant experience, welfare recipients, and other stigmatized groups in the fight for deservingness. I argue that redemption is one of, if not the only mechanism for FORCE members to gain legitimacy. Thus, the FORCE cases demonstrates the ways that social structure and culture shape and require particular kinds of personal narratives (Irving 2013). While personal, redemption narratives are not only consequential for the storyteller. In felon led advocacy, there is a hope that these narratives will change the way the group is looked at as a whole.

Community Organizing for Felon Rights

In the effort to fight stigma and discrimination, groups around the country are forging organized efforts at combating the abovementioned challenges. Few works have examined these stigma management techniques in the context of advocacy for and among the formerly incarcerated. In part because there is little known about this relatively new wave of activism among the formerly incarcerated. Some works have examined ex-offender rights movements/organizations, (Toney 2007; Owens 2014) each noting how formerly incarcerated persons are at the forefront of efforts to combat felon disenfranchisement (Toney 2007, Owens 2014, and Flores Under review). In these efforts felons are integrally involved in community organizing and advocate for other people with records. Incubated by larger, usually faith-based organizations (Owens 2014) former prisoners are given leadership positions and form the nucleus of campaigns. Successfully describing the nature, framework, and logic of this work, these scholars have shed light on an understudied dimension of the post-incarceration experience. I add to these efforts the perspective of the formerly incarcerated. Focusing on the moral constructions of redemption in citizenship, and what perspectives felons bring in this construction.

Data and Methods

Alongside the acceleration of the American penal system and its consequences has been the proliferation of reentry service providers. In Illinois alone there are hundreds of such organizations. Which is why FORCE intrigued me so much. When I attended my first meeting it was clear to me that FORCE was not a direct service agency doing resume

writing workshops or job training. Rather, they were discussing strategy around changing existing policies that impacted people with records. Their website describes their goals as follows:

The FORCE (Fighting to Overcome Records and Create Equality) Project is an initiative of Community Renewal Society led by people with records, their families, and faith allies organizing to create change and justice for people with records. By coming together, people with records, their families, and faith allies can change the systems which seek to keep us and our communities' imprisoned. Who is FORCE? FORCE leaders come from all across the Chicago metropolitan area. Some of us have been out of prison for many years, and some are recently returning citizens. We are African-American, Latino, Arab, Asian, and white. We are united in standing against discrimination based on past records and in our belief that all people deserve fair opportunities for decent employment, housing, and education.

The above mission of FORCE is a departure from the typical reentry direct service providers. When I set out to do a research project to learn about this group, I sought to understand how formerly incarcerated persons end up in a room talking about collective action. I wanted to understand the path from prison to politics. In my almost two years conducting participant observations with the group, and through in-depth interviews what became overwhelmingly clear to me, was the central theme of the group and its activities, redemption. To investigate these experiences I draw on qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with 18 core members of FORCE and 60 hours of participant observations that spanned across one year and a half.

FORCE members have meetings once a month, and have sporadic happenings throughout the year such as public protests, lobby days in the state capital, and neighborhood canvassing for recruitment. I tried to be at as many of these events as

possible. Although I was unable to be at all events during my time with the group, I was able to attend a wide range of events. Following a convenience sample, interviewees who expressed interest in participating were met at a mutually agreed upon location and each interview lasted an average of 1 hour.

Three of the eighteen interviewees were female the rest male. Eleven participants were African American, three white, three Latino, and one participant was of Middle Eastern descent. Three participants did not have criminal records, but were an integral part of the group from its inception and serve as liaisons between FORCE and the member's churches of Community Renewal Society. After some hesitancy to include them in the study I realized that their insights would be important since they were at most of the meetings, and gave input on FORCE activities.

In addition to the interviews I conducted participant observations, where I took field notes in meetings, and public events. I developed strong rapport with members of the group. This was in part due to my being up front about my own support, and position regarding some of the group's issues. I shared my own biographical history of contact with the criminal justice system and how it impacted me and my family. As I spent more time with the group I became immersed in campaigns and in many ways became a FORCE leader myself, as I felt my values aligning with those of the group. This meant that I spoke at events describing campaigns and helped in training sessions. My level of participation varied depending on the situation. In meetings I answered questions and gave input when asked, and attempted to interact normally with the group. Becoming this

immersed allowed me to see the process of community organizing in detail, which helped with understanding the overall political/strategic process that FORCE was involved in. My involvement was consistent with the view that carrying out core functions and tasks, “provides special opportunities to get close to, participate in, and experience life in previously unknown settings” (Emerson et. al 1995:4). However immersed I was still able to pull back when necessary. The group knew that I was also a researcher, in fact that is how I was often introduced, as a PhD student from Loyola.

I was often asked to do things for the group that I had to turn down which produced moments of discomfort. My discomfort mostly arose when my status within the group as an insider and outsider became more apparent. Most of their public action is carefully planned and thought out, everyone involved has a role to play even if it is not a formal one. For instance, when coming to take field notes on a public gathering I was asked to speak; I didn’t inquire about what, I just said no, which produced an awkward moment. Despite the drawbacks of this tension, being asked to participate gave me insight into the fact that FORCE often has more work than workers, thus those who are able and willing are at a premium. This point would illuminate competing interests that at times make it hard to be a community organizer with a criminal record.

I transcribed the interviews and field notes myself. Field notes were typed within 24-48 hours of leaving the field. I used a similar process of analyzing both the field notes and the interviews. I started with a round of open coding going line by line, and once I had codes for all of the data I grouped the codes into broad conceptual categories such as

“religion,” or “political.” Once I grouped all of the conceptual categories I looked for patterns, linkages, and negative cases (Brodsky 2008).

Findings

The Redemption Imperative

In all eighteen interviews the idea of transformation and redemption came up. More than that, there was rarely a time in the field where talk of redemption didn't happen. It was the very essence of how FORCE members conceptualized their involvement. Moreover they made sense of their activities as part of a redemption project already in place. As noted above many FORCE members and allies discussed redemption as an imperative, something that “had” to or “must” happen, a taken for granted fact of their existence. Sometimes themes of redemption took on the tradition plot line taken from Christianity, When asked how he got involved with FORCE Mark reflected this way,

Christ! For instance I would have never... never... sat down with you with my old way of thinking—I didn't ask—but I know there is a higher being and I want the truth, and the Lord sent chaplains to my door several times a day, I read the bible several times throughout the day, and with my visitation I knew that Christ the Triune God was there in my life and that has helped me cause I made a covenant-I told the lord you have to take away my love of sex, my love of money, you going to have to take all of that from me.

Mark took his involvement with FORCE to be an act of God, citing the fact that he would never have even sat down with me to do an interview in his “old way of thinking.” By implication without Christ he would have never gotten involved with FORCE. Mark connected his “covenant” with God, and the Lord taking away his love of sex and money

to be precursors to his involvement with FORCE. Mark made a clear distinction between a “profane” past with a “sacred” present (Meanwell 2013) in describing his initial encounter with FORCE. Jose talked in similar terms

I guess it is something within you. If you wanna change you could change. I was tired of living a lie I saw things that were affecting my community, and you get a good feeling from doing good, going from bad to good, it’s better for you to do good.

Jose saw his involvement as a personal choice that comes from within. The feeling of going from “bad” to “good” was deemed a better option. Formerly “living a lie” Jose now sees his involvement with FORCE as a way to “do” good. This journey has not yet completed for Jose however, as he shared that, “I am still evolving, my life aint done yet, I am still polishing myself up.” Jose’s path of redemption is ongoing alongside his participation with FORCE. In addition to talking in redemptive terms with regards to how they got involved with the group, FORCE members also talked about this redemption that was already happening before they got involved, Ali describes a conversion like experience and a deal he brokered with God,

I fucked up... there is nothing to talk about, so that night in the cell I actually prayed kind of hard and I was freezing. I always prayed even when I was banging just not as much...My end of the bargain was to not sell drugs, to help the disenfranchised, the youth so that they don’t suffer the way I did, and then prison it was not cool. I don’t want people to go to prison especially people who have underlying issues. Everybody has problems but somebody has a small problem now they got a big problem when they come out, that was my deal, like God get me out of this one, and I will do whatever you want, whatever you want, but no more drug dealing and I’m working with the shorty’s man that was my commitment.

In a cold prison cell Ali made a deal with God to stop “banging” and dealing drugs. Furthermore, he thought of his redemption as something that would help others. He made a commitment to work with “the shorty’s” so they wouldn’t have to go through the things that he went through. Thus a vehicle of redemption was helping others. FORCE members often had a sense of moral responsibility to “give back” what they felt they had taken from their communities (Flores and Cossyleon under review). Thus commitment was an important part of redemption, and was as Irving (2013:22) states, “a redemptive move from self-interest to interdependence, even selflessness.” Nevertheless Ali’s commitment was bound up in an overall redemption project, going from one “bad” life and entering a new “good” one. Before coming to FORCE Ramone describes his life and subsequent transformation,

Hard trials in tribulations in life, it’s a struggle and it’s still a struggle, however it’s a struggle that I embrace. I do feel that I changed, so it’s like a transformation within itself because I sought the change first, I took initiatives, and I have transformed into something more. I will transcend that with FORCE. Its part of my vision, my vision was to start a movement that was my vision... I don’t regret the path that I took, I made some mistakes, and learned from them that’s why I am here today to talk to you about them. Not to use the term blessing, but it is a blessing in so many ways. I am still growing and I am trying to be around people to help me grow, so in a nutshell to sum it up I transformed.

As noted above social location (Frank) and struggle (Irving) play a major role in narratives of redemption. Ramone tells of a hard life that he has transcended and will transcend further with FORCE. He even talks of his path as being a blessing that he has learned from and wants to be around people to help him grow. Here redemption was

happening prior to coming into contact with FORCE and will presumably grow with further participation.

Last, FORCE members connected redemption not only as something that happened in their former life before FORCE or as a precursor to FORCE, but also as something directly related to the activities of the group. Jackson states the importance of redemption in the work of FORCE this way,

We were one of the main groups, we wrote letters, we made phone calls, and it paid off. Just painting a different picture to legislators that they originally have... they look at us like once a criminal always a criminal, we were able to paint a different picture one that says these guys deserve another chance ...we showed legislators that people change... there are some guys that come home who decided in prison that they don't want to go back to that lifestyle, and despite the obstacles placed before them they persevere. And they push and they take the McDonalds job, they get married, and they take care of their kids, this is what they don't see. Even those who end up in the same environment that they were in before, they rise above it, they make the decision to say I'm not going back. They really learn a lot from us, like it's not all about what you learn in school, when you decide and determine a law. No, they have to look and say these are the people affected by it, these are the people impacted, that can't find a job cause of this legislation and that's often not included in that process.

Here Jackson describes the way that redemption functions as a necessary component of FORCE's activism. He notes that they wrote letters and made phone calls for the purpose of "painting a different picture." This picture was one in which people with records "can change," "persevere," "rise above," and "make a decision" not to go back to prison. According to Jackson, former "criminals," the guys that "legislators don't see," are those who work, get married, and take care of their kids. Jackson alludes to the fact that redemption doesn't merely serve the purpose of fulfilling an individual quest, but rather

one that projects an image that challenges the stigma that accompanies a person with a record. Thus he talks of redemption as a personal decision with social outcomes. Jackson makes a compelling argument that laws need to include the people impacted.

Specifically, to include the now redeemed people who these laws may unjustly impact.

Redemption was a central theme in talking to FORCE members. Some thought it to be the very reason that they were involved in the first place, as was the case with Jose and Mark. It was something that was initiated prior to coming into contact with FORCE as was the case with Ali, and is essential to the group's purpose. This purpose was stated by Jackson at a FORCE meeting, "FORCE is here to change the stigma that follows people with records." The above vignettes appear to be just a matter of personal choice, but it is my argument that the reason why redemption came up so much was because it was viewed as something that must be done. Former prisoners faced with persistent marginality (Flores and Cossyleon under review) necessitates that redemption be the primary vehicle on the road to civic participation. This is demonstrated in the fact that Ali had to change his life before working with youth; Jose had to go from bad in order to do good; Ramones vision of starting a movement was preceded by his "transformation," and as Jackson notes, in constructing a new picture to Illinois legislators, FORCE members had to show that they are willing to "rise above" their circumstances. These narratives of redemption appear on the surface to only rest in the minds of individual FORCE leaders, reflecting the hegemonic cultural norms of American society, however, more than just reproducing dominant norms, I will show later that these redemption narratives enabled

FORCE leaders to act politically. Furthermore, I think of these narratives as existing within structures of power and their practices (Holston 2008). Not only reproducing or resisting, these exist in an entanglement that at times disrupts dominant power relations (Holston 2008:13). Thus, redemption narratives as a cultural form (Poletta 1998) is caught in a web of subjective experience and relations of power. This is especially true for those who have in some way violated the collective consciousness (Durkheim) and must prove their worthiness to engage in a number of social activities including advocacy. In sum, redemption is ubiquitous in FORCE member's understandings of their involvement with the group, in part this was shaped by their own desire to change, but also reflected moral ideals held both within FORCE and in the culture at large.

“For people who have turned their lives around” Redemption in Faith-Based Community Organizing

On a grey gloomy morning I was on a bus with about 100 faith allies on the way to the state capital to advocate for the groups' (FORCE/CRS) proposed bill HB494 that would remove lifetime bars to employment for people with records in the Illinois school code. People were awakened out of their sleep from a nap as they had been up since about five o'clock in the morning boarding the bus. Angelica a new organizer for the Community Renewal Society gets in the microphone and yells, “okay are you ready to work!” there are some muffled replies and then we go into prep for the day's activities at the capital. To prepare people for potential pushback from legislators Angelica asked,

For instance some of them might say I don't want drug dealers teaching my kids, and then what will you say?" so you want to let them know that this law was for people who have turned their life around and would give the employer the chance to make the choice for themselves. Again, you want to make sure the focus is about people who have changed their lives.

Richard Wood (2000) in his study of faith based community organizing (FBCO) argued that religion potentially has the cultural tools to enable political activism. In fact religion has been thought to be inextricably linked to civic participation in America (Bella 1967; Williams and Demerath 1991). Angelica's comments above were a reflection of the particular religious culture that was the context of FORCE activities. In this context redemption was highly valued, and thought to be a FORCE leader's most powerful tool in exposing discrimination. FBCO for felon fights provided a platform for the formerly incarcerated to, in testimony form, prove that they have indeed turned their lives around. FBCO around issues of the formerly incarcerated gave FORCE leaders a stage to perform reform (Flores and Cossyleon under review). Therefore, as the central organizing principle of FORCE, redemption was also a strategic imperative within the group.

One of the mantra's that I heard while observing FORCE activities was "no prep no speaking," which meant that if you could not attend a prep session you could not participate in any public actions. Testimonies of change and reform were often rigorously rehearsed before a public action. At my first prep that I attended I met Ray a young African American male who had just gotten out of the county jail. When it was his time to practice Ray nervously stepped up to the front of the small corridor that led to the

entrance of the church where we were doing the prep, holding a piece of paper containing his prepared remarks. Briane introduced him as “Ray Simmons” (she pauses as if unsure about his name) Ray says, “Jones, its Jones” Briane sheepishly apologizes and introduces him under the correct name. Ray began to describe his experience spending time in the county for a case that was eventually dropped. During this time Ray noted how he was away from his family during this time which was hard for him. Ray presented himself as a family man consistent with the remorseful frame of redemption. After his testimony the moderator of the prep session from Community Renewal Society (CRS) told Ray to remember that “you are powerful” “your testimony and the way that you say it is powerful.” Ray nodded and took his seat. The use of “powerful” testimony was a feature of every public event that I went to in my almost two years with the group. There was never an event that didn’t have someone similar to Ray giving a testimony that was affirmed and encouraged by member churches of CRS and FORCE leaders themselves. It was often decided at meetings who would give testimonies. At a FORCE meeting Lauren a young white female organizer chimes in on the value of testimonies and what should be emphasized, “yeah I think it is important to talk about how this bill will impact you...being vulnerable is okay.” Eventually at this same meeting a testimony template for FORCE leaders was constructed to help properly frame what they wanted to say.²

Jose made it clear what was most important in these testimonies, “You just wanna make

² The written testimony template included three key elements: (1) Introduction, (2) Description of experience of discrimination, and (3) relate your experience to the bills. It was to be kept to one page

sure you paint the picture of who you are now.” Painting this picture inevitably involved adding redemption, as it was part of the subsequent document about how to structure testimonies. At another prep session before CRS’s annual membership assembly Mary a policy advisor gave some advice to Ali and Terrance,

Practice, practice, practice. I know this may seem silly but do it in front of a mirror over and over and over again out loud. And if you guys need help feel free to call me I am willing to go over it with you, it is something that you cannot just get up there and do without practice.

CRS organizers and policy advisors serve in an advisory capacity in relationship with FORCE. One of the ways in which they support FORCE leaders is to help them with how to write and deliver their testimonies. As seen above, high emphasis is put on the delivery and substance of the testimony. The following exchange at a prep session exemplifies this emphasis

Michael walked to the podium introducing himself, “good morning my name is Michael Alex quickly interrupts and asks, “does a powerful speaker walk up to the podium like this?” and he puts his hands in his pocket to show what a powerful speaker does not do- Michael then took his hands out of his pocket and continued. At the end Alex said, “the only thing that I would add is, you should talk about how you want to be a teacher and also slow down when you state that you are in school because there will be applause” Michael then nodded in agreement with his feedback and took a seat.

This exchange shows how FORCE members were to embody redemption in giving their testimony. They were not only to deliver a powerful testimony they were also to look confident as well. Also they were not to exclude core points to their redemption story. In Michael’s case he was a graduate student and Alex’s advice was to make sure the crowd

knew that so that it would get applause. In this way CRS uses their organizing “expertise.” To be clear, FORCE members told their own stories, but they were told how to deliver those stories in the context of FBCO. This was not met without some ambivalence and uncertainty about the delivery of their testimonies, Sharee states,

I used to wonder if I shared too much. I remember at first I used to think that I talked too much, I told Alex I don’t want to talk anymore... wondering what people thought of me and then Jackson would say that it was okay. I’m looking at him like can you tell your story in 2 mins?! I can’t do that! Mine is like a book! He told me I will get there-those coaching’s and getting it down in my head, I am learning it a little better, but I am still learning.

The ways in which testimonies were structured within FBCO left Sharee uncertain and ambivalent. Uncertain in that she wondered if she shared too much, ambivalent in her questioning the possibility of telling her story in a concise 2 minutes. Besides Sharee’s uncertainty and ambivalence what I think her comments show is the particular importance of testimonies, and because of their importance the energy and effort given to ensuring that they are indeed “powerful.”

The lead organizer of FORCE told me when we first met, “we heavily lean on CRS’s power.” The push for FORCE objectives gained much of its steam from the support of CRS member churches. Testimonies of redemption were things that allies and member churches looked for. FORCE members were often asked to come out and speak, so that church members can “put a face” on the issues. David and Lauren CRS allies of FORCE exemplify this point. David says,

Every now and then there is someone on the FORCE team who says that they didn't do it, but most of the time people honestly say I was selling drugs, I shot somebody, and I was just impressed with the honesty of somebody goes to prison for 5 10 15 years and they have a lot of honesty about it. I have heard a lot of educated people someone in our church that can't admit the truth about how they screwed up, but these people say hey I screwed up and I want to change now.

Lauren also was excited to see change in FORCE members, in an interview she stated that she “loves transformation.” FORCE leaders were “surprising” these allies in that they were being honest about their lives and willing to change. David reflected, “It could have easily been me” after telling me a story of how he assaulted someone and was just given a ticket. Thus redemption stories operated as an imperative in yet another way, it was necessary to garner support from much needed allies who had the resources and numbers to help FORCE effectively lobby for their interests.

These first two sections have described the redemption imperative in its ubiquity in the lives of FORCE members, and how it is shaped by FBCO. The next two sections show how the imperative works as an essential tool used in FORCE's organizing activity, and its limitations. It is my argument that the broad imperative in the lives of FORCE leaders shape their advocacy, and that advocacy in part reinforced the imperative.

Redemption in the Claim for Rights

Although FORCE members did use culturally/institutionally acceptable plots they often used them as tools of empowerment. As outlined above, “returning citizen” is primarily used as a normative moral “good” term to present a pro-social (Maruna 2001)

image of people with records. More than that, they were used to change the image of the felon in broader society in hopes of making tangible change.

One such attempt at tangible change was FORCE's push to remove absolute bars to employment in Illinois. Absolute Bars in Illinois are what FORCE members use to describe statutes buried deep in the Illinois School Code, the Park Districts Code, The Park Districts Act, Metropolitan Transit Authority Act, and the Healthcare Workers Background Check Act that bar person's that have certain felony convictions from working within these sectors. FORCE is seeking to remove lifetime bans and lessen lengthy bans of seven years. The unfair application of the law to those who had been changed was the basis of their claims.

FORCE members draw on redemption narratives to expose discrimination in their community organizing. In their stories they noted their possession of some or all of a number of qualities that include having a desire to work, currently working, possessing a disdain for public assistance, law abiding, spiritual, giving back to the community, and are married. Thus on the basis of possessing one or more of the above qualities they deserve fair treatment. Al anticipates discrimination in seeking licensure to be a social worker, "I do social work ya know, one of the things that discouraged me is I want to work with the youth, and with this law I cannot." Here, Al is drawing on his desire to work with the youth and being unable to because of the law. Here Al brings up two aspects of the redemption narrative. He is a student who is educated in the field of social work, and he wants to give back to the community by working with the youth, thereby

showing that he is discriminated against. Sharee, describes her experience as a mother of two boys

Okay now I am going to speak from the heart, I have two boys and I went out of town and got a medical billing and coding certificate, and thought when I came back from Chicago I would be able to find a job but I have not and it's been hard with my two boys, The only income that I have been able to get is public assistance.

Again, Sharee speaks of having obtained credentials that she is unable to use, and the struggles of being a single parent of two boys. She used this story to show clear discriminatory practices based off of Sharee's status as a felon, and the laws that legally bar her irrespective of her credentials.

Al, and Sharee's redemption narratives included them getting educated, being changed, having skills, yet being denied opportunities. They both present a strong cases that would often elicit favorable emotive responses such as crying, head shakes of disbelief, and the sympathetic ear of elected officials. They both used languages of redemption (McAdam's 2006, 1991; Irving 2013).

The changed individual in redemption narratives were constant in the presentation of testimony, one man remarked in a public hearing, "I was taught how to be a productive member of society," another stated that "I used to live off of taxpayers and now I am a taxpayer," I went from a link card to a debit card." Being a productive member of society according to the aforementioned testifiers were being taxpayers, and having a debit card instead of a Link card. Here, not being a burden to taxpayers by working is central to this

redemption narrative, and focused on individual responsibility rather than structural causes of joblessness.

The testifiers all pointed inward in their explanation of the negative outcomes of having a felony conviction. Whereas, some of the narratives expose unfair discrimination, narratives taking this shape highlight individual responsibility in changing these situations. But what remains central in these narratives is the focus. In the opening vignette Reggie uses the word discrimination, Al talks about the law, and Sharee points to the inability to find a job even with the requisite credentials. While containing elements of the changed self, the focus remains on discriminatory practices and the institutions that support them. Thus redemption served an empowering function in making claims for rights. It gave FORCE members a vehicle to get their concerns heard by legislators.

Angel describes this empowering function of redemption

you have FORCE leaders raised out of the ashes, out of nowhere this leader might not have never thought they would talk to an elected official, or this elected official would have never listened to them, is now staring down an elected official, or sitting with them negotiating or letting them know how this is important to me... because people who have been to prison tend to look at individuals or institutions like they have the power over us and then for one brief moment you feel like I am in control and I have the power--and what that does to the body, and the brain it's a different story now.

Here Angel points out that leaders, that have never thought that they could speak to an elected official now can. In his words they have been “raised out of the ashes.” Out of the ashes they make claims for rights and are given voice. The voice empowers them in ways

not previously imagined. Reggie speaks of what he has learned the most since becoming involved with FORCE

after looking, and seeing, and witnessing in Springfield... getting educated about stuff in Springfield, about how legislation stuff work, especially around election time, how politicians cater to us and how we can make a difference so now I believe more strongly now that it's the ordinary Joe's who have the power.

Formerly incarcerated, Reggie now believes that it is the ordinary Joes who have the power. Thus exemplifying the empowering nature of this work, but it did come with its limits. Angel and Reggie's comments highlight the great empowering potential of this work, however at times FORCE members were still met with opposition.

The Limits of Redemption

Redemption is a necessary component in the advocacy of FORCE. It served as a transformational personal tool and a resource used in making claims for rights. It is imperative that FORCE leaders clearly articulate their redemptive path. This work led to the passage of HB 3061, a bill that expanded the number of offenses that could be sealed under Illinois law.³ However successful, redemption at times had its limits. Sometimes FORCE was just outright not believed, and in others they were met with a counter moral imperative, punishment. Last, the propping of the "good" "redeemed" felon created implicit distinctions between those who were deserving and those who were not, and this distinction had some explicit consequences in the lives of a few members worth noting.

³ HB 3061 was an early victory for the FORCE project and became a law 8/2/2013. See <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/BillStatus.asp?DocTypeID=HB&DocNum=3061&GAID=12&SessionID=85&LegID=74914> to read actual bill.

After a day of FORCE leaders giving testimonies a policy advisor describes how they were received by legislators, “I would say that they got excited for about 5 minutes. I heard one of the republican representatives say ‘I don’t believe a word of this’ (referring to testimonies that FORCE members gave). Despite sometimes eliciting favorable responses from politicians, sometimes FORCE members were met with skepticism. Politicians weren’t the only ones who FORCE leaders didn’t convince, Jose describes the suspicion he is met with in his community despite doing outreach with youth

When I was doing a lot of outreach people would see me and at the neighborhood committee meeting they would see me talking to troubled youth and say ‘I thought you changed your life’ and I would just be like ‘I am doing my job’ and they would say ‘oh they are paying you to be a gang member now’. People used to see me talking to these trouble youths I talked to em and they [the youth] would flag cars in front of me, and the community would call me a hypocrite.

Jose’s community work was central to his redeemed status, however this particular act was interpreted by members of the community as hypocrisy, highlighting the seemingly never-ending stigma that felons face. Besides being met with skepticism FORCE was met with moral arguments counter to redemption. For instance, After Michael gave his story about being a student, father, and person of faith an Illinois representative responded that he was sensitive to his story, but cited the heavy lifting it would be when talking about “the kids.” He then went on to tell him about an illustration that he heard in a Sunday school class about a nail going into a table, and once pulled out, the table is never the same. He was saying that people with records were analogous to the table, and the felony that they obtained produced a hole that would forever alter that table.

Herein lie the contradiction of the redemption imperative. The fact that redemption is an imperative, but not received at times, is in my view a subtle form of inequality. More than just discrimination, these mores get at the moral undercurrents that drive policies and sustain their legitimacy. Michael's testimony was met with another moral argument that differs from redemption, retribution and punishment.

The Case of Charlie and Ramone

Charlie was a very eccentric young African American man. When I first met him I was drawn by his energy and magnetic personality. He was excited about FORCE and its prospects as a vehicle for change. He described enthusiastically the role he was playing in FORCE

What I am doing is dealing with the campaign that deals with police brutality, stop and frisk, and basically racial profiling. The rest of it is to stop the targeting going on in the urban community, detectives targeting certain groups and take them through processes that are demeaning and degrading...I'm part of the issue team, so I get together and come up with the issues so that once the campaign is launched I would know effectively what we are targeting and what we will put the action to what I would do is mobilize individuals in churches and the key individuals inside of FORCE and we would mobilize to accomplish those targets to get those people to change their minds and to get the FORCE team to get involved. So that would be my main thing is to get the FORCE people involved.

Charlie was very effective in this effort to get people involved, culminating in a successful "action" at the mayor's office that led to an important meeting between the group, the mayor, and the chief of police. This was quite the feat because the mayor had previously been averse to any such meeting. Charlie's skill as an organizer was apparent and his future within FORCE promising, until Charlie found himself in trouble with the

law again. I started to see him less and less, and I can recall the last time I seen him at a meeting he was conspicuously silent. I inquired about his absence to members of the group, and I would be told, “Man you should talk to em” or “man he trippin right now”

When I asked Charlie if I’d see him again he responded,

what does a man do in the meantime, what do I do, it’s easy if you employed by CRS, but others have to go to dead in jobs, I spend more time at work than home, I’m only home 6 hours a day, where are we setting up our comfort zones?

Charlie was struggling with the competing demands of organizing and other facets of his life, that include working a “dead in” job that took up most of his time, which made it hard to balance. I am not sure of the extent of Charlie’s troubles, but he clearly had some issues in his personal life that did not align with the redemptive patterns discussed above. He went on to tell me in that same conversation, “where is the community? We are supposed to be sharing what is hard, but when you don’t have that, you just like any other place that don’t have no personal relationships.” Charlie hadn’t found community in FORCE, perhaps it was because he did not fit the “model” or it could have been other reasons. However, considering his involvement prior to his sudden disappearance I suspect this may have been the case. Ramone, was another FORCE leader that didn’t exactly fit the model that I have spoken of above, but for a different reason than Charlie. Most FORCE leaders were professing Christians which went well with the culture of FBCO, Ramone however was not, and he talks of his difficulties

I am conflicted now with the trips to Springfield now I think last week it was Jackson had texted me about they were going to do prayer in Milwaukee to advocate for criminal justice and I couldn’t show up because I had to work however

also my dilemma is religion , I know that FORCE is part of community renewal society and that is faith based and its Christian...I can say I am existentialist but it's in a sense I am still searching for that meaning in life and my purpose and I am agnostic in a sense as well I am not a firm believer in prayer I don't pray but I respect others if they do that is their life I respect every man ...I understand in this world especially in America the church is powerful and influential whatever you are trying to do most of the programs that's viable out here are Christian faith based and even though many of them might say if you don't believe you can't set that aside you are still going to be prejudiced and discriminated against when people see you like that, that is another world I travel in- sometime it gets uncomfortable and sometimes it just is what it is.

When I asked him to tell me about a specific time where he felt uncomfortable for this reason he told me

That last event they just had, this Wednesday I wasn't going down their doing no praying I am just not gone do it. I support FORCE but when it comes to praying and all that I am not going to indulge ...so you don't want to run people off who might be good and worthy to the program and when you pretty much you don't want to want anybody to pin their beliefs on you

Both Ramone and Charlie show how narratives of redemption that follow a certain moral plot line can have negative consequences for those who don't neatly fit the story. Charlie's personal troubles conflicted with FORCE as currently set up and Ramone's spiritual convictions differed from many in FORCE. So while Ramone "supports FORCE" he sometimes feels uncomfortable in an environment of redemption where it is sometimes assumed that that redemption has taken place along religious lines, particularly Christian lines.

Redemption enabled FORCE members to engage politically. Some saw their public testimonies as very empowering. Despite relying on dominant norms in claims of

redemption, they at times served as an effective critique of unfair treatment. Conversely, redemption narratives were limited in their ability to convince a certain audience, and by using a moral argument it left the door open to counter-moral arguments. Moreover, the implicit distinctions between redeemed deserving people has the potential to alienate certain members who may not follow the conventional “redemption script” (Maruna 2001).

Discussion and Conclusion

In my findings FORCE members road to politics and community organizing was a tale of redemption. FORCE was a stop on that road for many in FORCE and extended well beyond the confines of the group. They engaged in a number of other efforts as “good” citizens such as getting educated, volunteering, and being family men and women. I argued that these were not just self-imposed, but rather intermingled with broader cultural demands. More than this, these narratives were shaped by religious culture, specifically the methods of FBCO. By emphasizing redemption as the formerly incarcerated person’s strongest weapon, advocates reinforced the imperative. While being an imperative I showed how redemption was used also as a tool to make claims for rights and empower, but also its limitations. In spite of these limitations FORCE members are often committed to the process of redemption. Throughout my time with the group I observed this imperative play out in a number of ways. In the context of faith based community organizing, when members would try and gain access to other spheres of social life, and as a necessity among politicians and advocates. It was made clear that the

laws that both CRS and FORCE members would be advocating for are strictly for people who have “turned their lives around.” Here Goffman’s insights are insightful, “If the person can manage to present a view of his [sic] current situation which shows the operation of favorable personal qualities in the past and a favorable destiny awaiting him, it may be called a success story” (Goffman 1961). FORCE members present favorable views of themselves, but to what avail? Which then begs the question, what is the criteria for a person who has turned their lives around? How will they prove this, and who gets to decide if they have done so in a satisfactory manner? In sum I wanted to show how this process is seemingly never ending. By highlighting the perpetuity of redemption for FORCE members, it is my view that this sheds light on a subtle, but gross form of exclusion. If citizenship is obtained by an at times ambiguous moral code, then minorities and especially minorities with records are the ones that will be overrepresented in this fight for citizenship. Ali sums it up best when he told me during an interview

So there is different layer to it, there is that on the society layer, it’s not done til you can get a job like everybody else, without having to bring extra paperwork, you need a pardon so no it’s never done, and why am I worried about that when I graduated at the top of my class? Why am I concerned about not being able to get the same job as another individual? We always have to constantly prove that we are better, or better people, like we are sick or something you have to have the vaccination papers with you.

I was told by several FORCE members that, “the work of a felon is never done” and this was true in my observations. They were working on advocacy for the rights of felons and so much more. They were going to school while working, volunteering at homeless shelters, mentoring youth, raising kids and a plethora of other redemptive activities, to

prove to themselves and the world around them that they were “normal” people, regular citizens.

Prisoner incorporation is a useful tool to understand the ways in which former prisoners themselves advocate for themselves. They, along with the state and NGO’s engage in practices of incorporation. They follow both the classic reentry model, emphasizing a “readiness” for citizenship as exemplified by their efforts of change, but they use the model to fight for broader incorporation. Kaufman (2015) shows that there is agency among NGO’s involved in incorporation efforts, the FORCE case shows that there is also agency among the formerly incarcerated. Former prisoners are not just dependent on the state and NGO’s; under extreme constraints they forge ahead for themselves making decisions on what issues are important to them. FORCE has used redemption to leverage victories in Illinois legislature, while at the same time creating engaged citizens, who were once on the margins now find themselves with a voice. More analysis and work needs to pay attention to this type of work. This is not lost on Angel, who said once at a meeting, “man I always challenge these people who are at the table discussing issues pertaining to people with records, and aint nobody at the table with a record! I ask them all the time, where are the people with records?” Where are the people with records? Is an important question that both policy makers and scholars should make it a point to ask. In this work the people with records take redemption to the halls of power in an effort to make change. They use it to open the door, and to have a seat at the table, they are “returning citizens” who will not accept anything less than to be treated as such.

Francesca Polletta (1998:155) commented that stories, “like other cultural forms, both reproduce the existing and provide tools for changing it. The key, of course, is to understand how and when they do each.” Redemption stories are no different. However, it would stand to reason that redemption being inextricably linked to deeply held beliefs about morality would do more to reproduce than change. FORCE reproduced dominant American values, but used those same values to change discriminatory policies against people with records. This paradoxical method of advocacy wins *de jure* change, but it remains to be seen if this can translate into *de facto* cultural change for people with records.

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VITA

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Currently Williams is in his third year in the PhD. program, with intentions to focus on the sociological study of race and religion. He currently serves as an academic advocate for 931 Basketball, a youth mentoring ministry in Oak Park, Illinois that uses basketball as a vehicle of empowerment. He hopes to continue the work of uplifting and empowering communities of color through education and social justice.

