The current study surveyed incarcerated women and college students, and examined the stereotypes and expected discrimination of female convicted felons. The results indicate that neither female convicted felons nor students strongly believe that female felons will face stigma or discrimination in most areas upon release. The female felons indicated that they believed that they would encounter discrimination when trying to find employment, and students believed that “most people” view female felons as lazy. Thus, it appears that these are more than mere stereotypes. Many of the responses indicated that incarcerated women and college students significantly differed from one another regarding the extent to which they believe convicted female felons would face stereotyping or discrimination. Incarcerated women seemed more concerned about stigma or discrimination than college students regarding being denied employment and being perceived as untrustworthy. Students were significantly more convinced than offenders that a convicted female felon would encounter discrimination or stigma in the following areas: making new friends, building a new romantic relationship, and being seen as a danger to children, a thief, “crazy,” violent, lazy, unreliable, and a bad influence on others. These results may be helpful in educating both offenders and the community about stereotypes versus reality. Future research is needed to determine if these results are generalizable.

How do female convicted felons’ self-disclosed perceived stereotypes compare to college students’ stereotypes of female felons? There have only been a small number of studies that focus on the stereotypes and prejudices inmates are likely to face upon release (1-3), but even fewer have focused on the stereotypes and stigmas that offenders themselves believe they will encounter (4-6) or that college students hold about offenders (6). There have been no studies that examine the perceptions of female convicted felons by students or female felons themselves. The main purpose of this study is to assess the extent to which stereotypic self-beliefs held by a sample of female incarcerated offenders match the stereotypic beliefs that a sample of college students have regarding incarcerated female felons. In doing so, the researcher will investigate whether the stereotypes identified in previous studies are applicable to females, and will compare the offenders’ own perceived stigmas to the beliefs college students feel “most people” hold about convicted female felons. A secondary goal of this study is to build upon the existing literature by providing a more comprehensive look at the stereotypes that female offenders believe they will encounter, as well as those held by college students about female offenders.

As reported by van den Berghe (7), Gordon Allport defined stereotype as “an exaggerated belief associated with a category. Its function is to justify (rationalize) our conduct in relation to that category” (p. 1). He claimed that “stereotypes are reflections of people’s prejudices, not of an external reality. They serve to justify dislikes…” (7, p. 1). MacLin and Herrera (8) add that stereotypes “typically exaggerate the differences between groups and minimize the differences between members within the same group” (p. 197). The Cambridge Dictionary of American English Online (9) defines stigma as “a strong lack of respect for a person or a group of people or a bad opinion of them because they have done something society does not approve of.”

It is important to understand the stereotypes and stigma that offenders anticipate facing in order to help them prepare for life outside the prison walls. It is also imperative to recognize the beliefs held by those in the community in order to educate offenders on the realities of stigmatization they will likely face, along with determining effective ways to decrease false beliefs among community members. Once beliefs are identified, prison rehabilitation programs that focus on confronting and managing these stigmas can be designed and social programs can be implemented to help dispel inaccurate stereotypes.

Another reason that it is important to understand how someone convicted of a felony perceives stereotypes has its basis in labeling theory and the idea of the self-fulfilling prophecy. In relation to criminal behavior,
labeling theory proposes that when someone commits a crime, he or she receives the label of “criminal” or “felon” and this label in and of itself causes stigmatization and forces him or her to continue to act in deviant ways (10). According to Ramoutar and Farrington (11), the individual adopts a deviant self-image and behaves in ways that are consistent with the label, often leading to more criminal acts. They found that the more female inmates believed that their parents labeled them negatively, the more likely it was that they would participate in violent crimes (11).

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The current study built upon the work of Winnick and Bodkin (6) and Winnick (12). In one study (6), they administered a questionnaire to 450 male inmates that measured demographic characteristics, perceptions of stigma attached to being an “ex-con,” and how they planned to manage adjustment upon release. Outside of the demographic information, the questionnaire utilized a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree) to measure the inmates’ perceptions.

Winnick and Bodkin (6) found that the areas with the highest concern for stigma involved children and employment, including a rejection of “ex-cons” as teachers and childcare providers. They also found that the inmates thought the public would find them untrustworthy and would “think less” (6, p. 316) of them. Additionally, findings indicated that the inmates believed that most people would not find them intelligent, nor want them as friends. They found that most of the inmates did not think they would have difficulty finding women who would date them (6).

Another finding in Winnick and Bodkin’s (6) research was that white men anticipated stigmatization significantly more than minorities. In addition, men who had previously been incarcerated and released expected significantly less stigmatization than those who were experiencing it for the first time. No other demographic factors were found to be related to the expectation or experience of stigmatization.

In another study by Winnick (12), 664 college students’ beliefs were evaluated regarding what “most people” would think about ex-convicts and sex offenders. The study examined beliefs about discrimination and devaluation by administering a 29-item questionnaire that addressed these concepts. The questionnaire included 12 questions that were asked twice, once using the term “ex-convict” and once using the term “sex offender” in order to see if different beliefs were held about the different labels; the other five items gathered demographic information. In addition, a small sample were given a questionnaire that rated beliefs about ex-convicts and sex offenders to see if there were differences when each label was examined independently.

Winnick (12) found that sex offenders were rated significantly more negatively than ex-convicts, specifically that “most people” will see them as less trustworthy, less intelligent, less likely to be taken seriously, less desirable as romantic partners or close friends, and less employable as job candidates. The author also found that both groups were rated significantly more negatively than the median score (indicating neutrality). Another finding of the study was that demographic variables of the participants were correlated with responses. Comparisons showed that being white, female, or a parent was related to more negative expectations of what “most people” would think about either labeled group. Finally, findings suggested that, when not considered alongside sex offenders, ex-convicts were rated significantly more negatively (12).

Other studies focusing on male inmates’ self-perceived stigmas reveal that they commonly believe they will have difficulty finding employment (3-5, 13), difficulty finding housing (13), and difficulties in or loss of personal and social relationships (5). Tewksbury and Lees (5) found that registered sex offenders have experienced harassment by other members of society. Copenhaver and colleagues (14) found that convicted felons who were continuing their college educations upon release from prison feared being “found out” by others on campus, which caused them to avoid building social bonds with other students.
Stereotypes of people who have committed crimes have been documented in several studies. In one such study, women of varying racial and socioeconomic backgrounds generally perceived a “criminal” as being a minority who was poor, on welfare, weird, dirty, tall, immoral, undeserving, inhuman, violent, out of control, and insane (15). In a study by MacLin and Herrera (8), “criminals” were again perceived as being minorities and dirty, but participants also thought that they were angry, sociable, thieves, wore dark, baggy clothes, had long, dark hair, and tattoos.

**HYPOTHESES**

The researcher proposes the following hypotheses:

- The findings of the current study will coincide with the findings of Winnick and Bodkin’s (6) and Winnick’s (12) research on male inmates: inmates and college students will predict that female offenders will face difficulty finding employment and making new friends. Additionally, they will believe the public will view them as a danger to children, untrustworthy, and not intelligent.
- The findings of the current study will coincide with other literature regarding stigma: inmates and college students will predict that female offenders will have difficulty in finding housing, building new romantic relationships, and furthering education. They will also believe they will be perceived as being “thieves” and “crazy.”
- The current study will also look at additional stigmas that are based on the researcher’s lay conversations in the community and will find that inmates and college students perceive that female offenders are lazy, unreliable, violent, bad influences on others, and not hard workers.

**METHOD**

**Instrumentation**

All information requested throughout this research was anonymous. The researcher developed a questionnaire with 15 items, scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (completely). Three items, “trustworthiness,” “intelligence,” and “hard worker” were reverse scored. The items on the questionnaire were developed based on findings from previous research, as well as hypotheses made by the researcher. The questionnaire was originally developed to measure offenders’ expected discrimination and perceived stereotypes. It was then modified by the researcher to be administered to students online to measure how much they believe “most people” will discriminate against and hold stereotypes of convicted felons. This allows for an examination of stereotypes offenders may actually face upon release, while allowing the participants to distance themselves from the questionnaire and feel more comfortable answering honestly.

Demographic information was also gathered, for the purpose of exploratory analysis and potential future research. The demographic information of inmates included age, ethnicity, offense and length of sentence. A separate, optional form was attached to the questionnaire to document this information. For students, demographic information was requested at the end of the online questionnaire, with the word “optional” in boldface following each question. The demographic variables requested from students included age, gender, ethnicity, major in college, and years of college education obtained. All demographic items were open ended, to allow for diversity among the answers.

**Procedure**

**Offenders.** Questionnaires were delivered to the prison intake unit’s counselor by the researcher. The intake unit was chosen in an effort to standardize the length of time served by the offender. Each inmate was given the option of participating in the proposed study upon arrival to the intake unit. If she agreed, she was given the questionnaire to complete. If she was unable to read, the counselor read the questionnaire aloud to her. A secured
drop box was left in the custody of the counselor in order to confidentially collect the questionnaires.

**Students.** Thirty professors, who were randomly selected from randomly selected departments within the university, were contacted to recruit student participants. The researcher asked to either discuss the questionnaire with students during undergraduate class time, or for the professor to inform the students of the questionnaire either in class or through e-mail to decrease disruption of class time. Students were provided with a website address to complete an online version of the questionnaire.

**ANALYSIS**

The relationship between student and offender responses was analyzed using independent samples t-tests, in order to examine the similarity or difference between the perceptions of discrimination and stigma. One-way t-tests were used to analyze each group’s deviation from the neutral response of 3, which represented “in between.”

**RESULTS**

A total of 245 participants volunteered for the current study, including 139 convicted female felons (“offenders”) and 106 students. There were a large number of missing or invalid responses found throughout the completed questionnaires. The majority of the missing or invalid responses were found on the demographic questions, which were clearly labeled as “optional,” so the researcher hypothesizes that participants simply chose not to respond. The maximum number of missing responses for any single non-demographic item was three from offenders and six from students. The items with missing responses were analyzed using the data available.

**Hypothesis One**

It was found that offenders were concerned that they would encounter discrimination in finding employment (M=3.60, SD=1.673), t(138)=4.350, p=.000. The offenders’ responses regarding intelligence (M=2.85, SD=1.508) did not differ significantly from the neutral response of “in between,” t(135)=−1.137, p=.257. Surprisingly, however, the responses on the other three items significantly differed from neutral, but in the opposite direction. Offenders were not concerned about making new friends (M=1.79, SD=1.180), t(137)=−12.043, p=.000, being seen as a danger to children (M=1.63, SD=1.174), t(138)=−13.724, p=.000, or being perceived to be untrustworthy (M=2.59, SD=1.503), t(138)=−3.217, p=.002.

Interestingly, students did not significantly indicate a perception of discrimination or stigma in any of the areas included in hypothesis one. Their responses did not significantly differ from neutral regarding finding new friends (M=3.20, SD=1.061), t(103)=.560, p=.54, or being seen as a danger to children (M=3.16, SD=1.208), t(101)=1.311, p=.193, or unintelligent (M=2.81, SD=1.061), t(99)=−1.791, p=.076. Students’ responses were significantly different from the mean on the other two items. They indicated that they did not believe that convicted female felons would have difficulty finding employment (M=2.26, SD=1.008), t(105)=−7.519, p=.000, or be seen as untrustworthy (M=1.97, SD=1.052), t(102)=−9.927, p=.000.

Offender and student responses differed significantly from each other on each of the items addressed in hypothesis one, with the exception of intelligence, agreeing that convicted female felons are not perceived as unintelligent, t(234)=.244, p=.808. Offenders were significantly more concerned that they would be denied employment than were students, t(243)=7.448, p=.000. Students, on the other hand, were significantly more concerned that convicted female felons would have difficulty making new friends, t(239)=−4.980, p=.000, would be perceived as a danger to children, t(239)=−9.831, p=.000, and would be perceived as untrustworthy, t(240)=3.580, p=.000.

**Hypothesis Two**
Offenders did not significantly endorse concern over any of the items proposed in hypothesis two. Offenders significantly denied concern regarding building new romantic relationships ($M=1.75$, $SD=1.166$), $t(137)=-12.635$, $p=.000$ and furthering their education ($M=2.66$, $SD=1.587$), $t(137)=-2.521$, $p=.013$. Additionally, offenders did not believe that they would be perceived as “thieves” ($M=2.19$, $SD=1.521$), $t(137)=-6.267$, $p=.000$, or “crazy” ($M=2.01$, $SD=1.356$), $t(136)=-8.507$, $p=.000$. Offenders did not respond significantly different from neutral in regard to having difficulty finding housing ($M=3.14$, $SD=1.673$), $t(138)=.963$, $p=.337$.

Students’ responses on items relating to hypothesis two were overall rather neutral. They did not endorse strong feelings regarding whether or not they believed convicted female felons would have difficulty finding housing ($M=2.98$, $SD=1.187$), $t(105)=-.164$, $p=.870$, building new romantic relationships ($M=3.07$, $SD=1.225$), $t(103)=.560$, $p=.576$, or furthering their education ($M=2.99$, $SD=1.287$), $t(102)=-.077$, $p=.939$. Students responded relatively neutral when asked if “most people” would think female felons were “thieves” ($M=3.09$, $SD=1.181$), $t(102)=.751$, $p=.454$. When asked if they believed female felons would be viewed as “crazy,” however, students significantly indicated that they did not think this stigma applied ($M=3.35$, $SD=1.337$), $t(100)=2.604$, $p=.011$.

Offenders and students did not significantly differ in their perceptions about difficulty finding housing, $t(243)=.813$, $p=.417$, or furthering education, $t(239)=-1.733$, $p=.084$. Responses did differ significantly on the other three items. Offenders were less concerned than students about female felons’ ability to build new relationships, $t(240)=-8.538$, $p=.000$. Students responded in a way that would indicate a stronger belief than offenders that female felons will be viewed as “thieves,” $t(239)=-4.980$, $p=.000$, and perceived as “crazy,” $t(236)=-7.534$, $p=.000$.

Hypothesis Three

All of the variables addressed in hypothesis three were found to be significantly different from neutral when analyzing offenders’ responses. They did not indicate belief that female felons are perceived as violent ($M=1.89$, $SD=1.255$), $t(138)=-10.407$, $p=.000$, lazy ($M=1.74$, $SD=1.192$), $t(137)=-12.428$, $p=.000$, or unreliable ($M=2.24$, $SD=1.469$), $t(138)=-6.064$, $p=.000$. Offenders also did not endorse the belief that convicted female felons were viewed as bad influences on others ($M=2.26$, $SD=1.472$), $t(135)=-5.826$, $p=.000$, or as not being hard workers ($M=2.48$, $SD=1.534$), $t(137)=-3.995$, $p=.000$.

Students’ responses to the same items only yielded two results that differed significantly from neutral. Interestingly, results indicated a significant belief that female felons are not viewed as not being hard workers ($M=2.44$, $SD=.967$), $t(99)=-5.789$, $p=.000$, but did indicate a belief that they are viewed as lazy ($M=3.73$, $SD=1.182$), $t(100)=6.228$, $p=.000$. There was no significant difference from neutral when asked whether convicted female felons are viewed as violent ($M=3.05$, $SD=1.106$), $t(102)=.445$, $p=.657$, unreliable ($M=2.99$, $SD=1.245$), $t(100)=-.080$, $p=.936$, or bad influences on others ($M=2.83$, $SD=1.170$), $t(101)=-1.439$, $p=.153$.

Finally, most of the student and offender responses differed significantly from each other. Students indicated a significantly higher belief than offenders that female felons are viewed as violent, $t(240)=-7.450$, $p=.000$, lazy $t(237)=-12.817$, $p=.000$, unreliable, $t(238)=-4.134$, $p=.000$, and a bad influence on others, $t(236)=-3.214$, $p=.001$. Students and offenders did not significantly differ on their views about female felons not being seen as not hard workers, $t(236)=.220$, $p=.826$.

Demographics

Demographic data were collected using open-ended questions. Due to this collection method, responses on most items were so varied that they could not be feasibly analyzed. Descriptive data were analyzed for age, gender, and ethnicity.
Age. Three offenders and 12 students did not answer the item that asked for age. The remaining participant information was analyzed for descriptive information. The age ranges for both groups were very similar. Offender ages ranged from 18 to 63 and students ranged from 19 to 63. The central tendencies for each group differed, however, with offenders’ mean age at 33.12 years old, and students averaging nearly ten years younger at 23.94. The median age was 31 years old for offenders and 21 years for students. There were two modal ages for offenders: 26 and 28 years old; the mode for students was 19.

Gender. All participants in the offender sample were female, because the study was conducted at a prison for women. Regarding students, 11 participants did not respond to the item asking for gender, and one response was invalid. Of the remaining 94 participants, 16 were male, and 78 were female. This drastic difference in number of respondents did not allow for any further reliable analysis based on gender.

Ethnicity. Due to the open-ended method of collection, responses to the item requesting ethnic data varied. The data were viewed and grouped into categories for better analysis. An example of this grouping method was to group “Black” and “African American” into a single group—African American. This method resulted in five groups: Asian, African American, Hispanic, White, and Biracial. Three offenders (2.2%) and 23 students (21.7%) chose not to respond to this item. The ethnic make-up of the groups follows. Offenders: Asian 0 (0%), African American 31 (22.3%), Hispanic: 3 (2.2%), White 100 (71.9%), and Biracial 2 (1.4%). Students: Asian 1 (0.9%), African American 8 (7.5%), Hispanic 1 (0.9%), White 72 (67.9%), and Biracial 1 (0.9%).

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to help determine the stereotypes and discrimination that convicted female felons do and will face in their lives. This is important to understand so that society and institutions can attempt to combat false beliefs, and female felons can try to make life changes, in order to improve the chances of success upon re-entry. It has been well-demonstrated in previous studies that convicted felons (either male or undifferentiated gender) believe that they will encounter stigma within their communities (4-6). It has also been found in several studies that community members do, in fact, hold certain beliefs about convicted felons (either male or undifferentiated gender) that could reasonably be deemed as stereotypes (1-3, 8, 13-15). Studies have not, however, examined whether the same is true for female convicted felons, which is what this study aimed to do.

The results of the present study indicate that neither female convicted felons nor students strongly believe that female felons will face stigma or discrimination in most areas. The female felons who participated in this study indicated they believed that they would encounter discrimination when trying to find employment, and students believed that “most people” view female felons as lazy. It appears, therefore, that these are more than mere stereotypes. The remaining items were either not significantly endorsed by either group, or were significantly endorsed in a direction that would deny negative beliefs. It is important to make special note that these findings do not mean that the stereotypes examined in the current study do not exist for women, as they have been found in studies involving male convicted felons. While efforts were made to select a sample that was representative of the larger population, the current study is still confined to the Midwestern United States, and a Protestant Christian university located there. Additional research is necessary to make more generalized conclusions, and the results of this study may be representative only of the specific sample chosen.

While neither group significantly endorsed most stereotypes or discriminations, many of the responses differed significantly between the groups. Incarcerated women seemed more concerned about stigma or discrimination than college students regarding being denied employment and being perceived as untrustworthy. On the other hand, students were significantly more convinced than offenders that convicted female felons would encounter discrimination or stigma in the following areas: making new friends, building new romantic relationships, being seen as a danger to children, “thieves,” “crazy,” violent, lazy, unreliable, and a bad influence
The results are very interesting and quite different than what was hypothesized. Replication studies will be necessary in the future to see if these results generalize outside of the specific sample studied. While the results are different from the hypotheses, they still have very important implications. It was demonstrated that students do believe significantly more strongly than incarcerated women that female felons will face some difficulties upon release. This discrepancy could lead to an under-preparation by women being newly re-released into the community. They may not be prepared to combat the discrimination and stereotypes they could face, which could lead to a difficult adjustment and decreased chance of success. It seems imperative to educate incarcerated women of the differences in beliefs so that they can better prepare themselves for life after release.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The results of this study have provided valuable information that can be used for both future research and psychoeducation. There were limitations that were evident upon data analysis that provide opportunities to improve upon the current study for future replications. Some specific improvements include: developing predetermined categories for demographic information, such as type of crime committed by the offenders, would allow for more in-depth examination of the demographic variables linked to responses, and possible stereotypes or discrimination feared based on those variables; improve the wording of some of the demographic questions so that respondents can respond in a more definitive manner (for example, students seemed unsure whether the researcher was asking for years completed, or current year in college); remove the “in between” neutral option, as it was utilized much more than expected (it was the modal response on six out of 15 of the items on the student questionnaire). Note—This sentence is 110 words. Please rewrite and shorten. Additionally, there may be other stereotypes that were not examined in this study that would lend valuable information to the body of literature. Research on stereotypes and discrimination faced by female convicted felons is almost non-existent, so it is essential to continue research in this area.

Most parts of the hypotheses were not supported. However, as previously discussed, the results show a difference in the beliefs of students and offenders in several areas. Because of this, re-entry efforts should focus on ways to combat the beliefs that were found to be more common in the community.

In conclusion, there were many surprising results found in the current study, primarily that it does not seem as though college students hold strong stereotypical beliefs about convicted female felons. It also does not seem as though offenders themselves are concerned about stigma or discrimination, and it is unclear whether this is based in unpreparedness, or in actual experience. This study is far from all encompassing, but it is a first step in an area that is lacking in empirical research.

REFERENCES


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