

## “I changed and hid my old ways”: how social rejection and social identities shape wellbeing among ex-prisoners

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**“I changed and hid my old ways”: How social rejection and social identities shape wellbeing among ex-prisoners.**

**Abstract.** Being a member of a rejected group negatively affects wellbeing but can also increase group identification, which can have positive effects on wellbeing. However, this *rejection-identification model* has never been investigated among the highly stigmatized group of ex-prisoners. Furthermore, the potential buffering role of multiple group memberships has never been investigated within the rejection-identification model. We conduct a novel investigation of a combined rejection-identification and social cure model of group-based rejection among ex-prisoners. A survey of 199 ex-prisoners found that experiencing group-based rejection was associated with poorer wellbeing and increased ex-prisoner identification. However, identification as an ex-prisoner magnified, rather than buffered, the relationship between rejection and reduced wellbeing. Furthermore, the negative relationship between rejection and wellbeing was particularly pronounced among ex-prisoners with a higher number of group memberships. Ex-prisoners with a greater number of group memberships experienced greater levels of rejection, suggesting group memberships increase their exposure to rejection. We therefore provide evidence of a boundary condition for the social cure properties of groups: Among members of strongly rejected social groups, multiple group memberships can be a social curse rather than social cure.

**Key words:** social rejection; social identification; well-being; ex-prisoners

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### **1. Introduction**

Ex-prisoners<sup>1</sup> are a rejected group in many societies; highly stigmatized and facing life-long discrimination. Members of the public have been found to hold stigmatizing attitudes about ex-prisoners, making community reintegration particularly challenging after a release from prison (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010), and ex-prisoners face discriminatory restrictions to their rights to vote, work, and access affordable housing in many countries (e.g. the UK, and the US; Flake, 2015; House of Commons, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2004). This rejection effectively extends the punishment of ex-prisoners and reduces their ability to function as normal citizens.

The aim of this study was to explore the impact of this rejection on the social self-concept and wellbeing of people who have spent time in prison and/or who have a criminal record. We do so by merging two theoretical perspectives: the rejection-identification model (RIM) and the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC). Specifically, we examine the relationship between group-based rejection and wellbeing among a sample of ex-prisoners, the mediating role of ex-prisoner identification, and whether multiple group memberships buffers or exasperates the rejection-wellbeing link. Before outlining our study, we first elaborate the rationale underlying our predictions.

#### **1.1 Rejection and wellbeing amongst ex-prisoners**

Although policies vary internationally, in many societies ex-prisoners are marginalized via short and often long term restrictions on employment, housing, voting rights, financial aid, and other facets of societal involvement (Pogorzelski et al. 2005). For example, most US states temporarily forbid parolees from voting; in Virginia, Florida, and Kentucky ex-prisoners permanently lose their right to vote; and in nine other states ex-prisoners are restricted from voting for a minimum of two years (Uggen, Manza, & Thompson, 2006). Furthermore, most US states prohibit ex-prisoners to work in fields such as medicine, education, and law, and six states permanently ban ex-prisoners from holding

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any public employment (Cnaan et al., 2008). In addition, in the US, people with criminal records are frequently denied access to public housing (Human Rights Watch, 2004).

Furthermore, in many countries, this discrimination towards ex-prisoners is often seen as legitimate. This is in stark contrast to discrimination on the basis of other group memberships such as race, gender, or disability, which are typically prohibited by law. For example, whereas an employees' race, gender, or disability cannot factor into recruitment decisions in the US, it is legal for employers to conduct a police check on potential employees and exclude anyone with a criminal record, no matter how minor or irrelevant to the job the infraction may be (US EEOC, 2017). In addition, former offenders endure a great deal of stigma (i.e., negative attitudes from community members). For example, a poll of 2,000 laypeople found that half agreed with stigmatizing statements about ex-prisoners, such as that they are dangerous and dishonest (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010).

These high levels of stigma and discriminatory practices (which we refer to here using the umbrella term *rejection*, see Smart, Richman & Leary, 2009) are likely to have profound and detrimental impacts upon ex-prisoners' sense of self and wellbeing (LeBel, 2012; Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney 2013; Winnick & Bodkin, 2009). A plethora of research examining a wide range of disadvantaged groups demonstrates that group-based rejection negatively affects wellbeing (Kidd, 2007; for a meta-analytic review see Schmitt et al., 2014). More specifically, rejection can reduce social and cognitive functioning and lead to poor mental health, maladaptive behaviors, and struggle partaking in the community (Inzlicht, Tullett, & Gutsell, 2012). However, although these relationships have been consistently shown in *non-correctional* groups (Livingston & Boyd, 2010), little research has been undertaken on people that have spent time in prison or who have a criminal record.

The mainly qualitative research that has been conducted among ex-prisoners suggests that group-based rejection can have negative emotional, cognitive, and behavioral consequences, which can

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hamper community integration after release (Chui and Cheng, 2013; Moore, Stuewig, & Tangney 2016b; Schneider & McKim, 2003). In a rare quantitative study among ex-prisoners, Moore and colleagues (2016b) used questionnaire measures of respondents' perceptions of stigma against convicts—assessed before their release from prison—to predict their community adjustment one-year post release. Their findings showed that offenders who perceived greater levels of stigma had seriously impaired functioning a year after their release, and struggled to participate as a valued member of their community, deemed an essential aspect of the reintegration process. This aligns with the findings of interviews with 16 young men recently released from prison (Chui & Cheng, 2013), which found that men internalized stigmatizing attitudes towards criminal offenders into their own self-concepts experienced low self-worth, shame, and embarrassment, which hindered their reintegration into society.

Based on this literature, our first hypothesis was that ex-prisoners' wellbeing will be negatively affected by the experience of group-based rejection **(H1)**.

Although past research clearly implies that there will be a negative relationship between group-based rejection and wellbeing, it is less apparent what factors may explain, attenuate, or exasperate this relationship among this particular population. These are important areas of investigation, as more than 640,000 people are released from prison every year in the US alone (Carson & Anderson, 2016), all of whom face the challenge of reintegrating into a society in which they are stigmatized and discriminated against, often through seemingly legitimate legal and political systems. We therefore need to better understand the processes through which group-based rejection affects wellbeing, and any potential factors that exasperate or dampen this relationship among this highly vulnerable population.

## **1.2 Ex-prisoner identification as a mediator**

According to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), a person's group memberships can become internalized into the self-concept as *social identities* which, when salient, serve as a basis for self-construal and shape people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. An emerging research approach – dubbed the 'Social Cure' – claims that group memberships, and especially the social identities associated with them, are capable of promoting adjustment, coping, and wellbeing, especially for vulnerable individuals dealing with illness, injury, trauma, or stress (Cruwys et al., 2015; Gleibs et al., 2011; S.A. Haslam et al., 2009).

Researchers have also shown that people can react to group-based rejection with amplified social identification and cohesion with the rejected group (Branscombe, Schmitt & Harvey, 1999). Known as the rejection-identification model (RIM; Branscombe et al., 1999), social identification can strengthen in response to rejection (i.e., stigma and group-based discrimination) because one's group membership becomes highly salient when a person faces group-based rejection. In turn, enhanced social identification counteracts some of the negative consequences of rejection by satisfying psychological needs (Greenaway et al., 2016), widening the pool of potential sources of social support (Haslam et al., 2005), thus protecting wellbeing.

The research suggests, then, that identifying with a social group acts as a psychological resource that group members can draw on when facing stressors such as rejection (Branscombe et al., 1999). Indeed, studies have found support for RIM among ethnic minorities (Branscombe et al., 1999), and women (Schmitt et al., 2002), among other groups including, more recently, mental illness groups (Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016). However, RIM has not yet been investigated in the context of ex-prisoners.

An important caveat, however, is that there has been increasing acknowledgment that there are some

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contexts and/or situations in which social identification may do more harm than good, particularly when groups are highly stigmatized or when norms proscribe harmful activities (Cruwys et al., 2014a). Yet, there has been very little research that has directly investigated this. Two studies, one of people in recovery from substance misuse (Dingle et al., 2015) and one of people with clinical depression (Cruwys and Gunaseelan, 2016), are of particular relevance. Dingle and colleagues (2015) found that people in treatment for substance misuse had better outcomes to the extent that they *disidentified* with previous substance using identities. Cruwys and Gunaseelan (2016) found a direct negative relationship between social identification with a stigmatized group (people who have depression) and wellbeing (also see Crabtree et al., 2010; Walter et al., 2015; Kellezi et al., 2018). Although not investigating ex-prisoner identity, these studies demonstrate that social identification, particularly in the context of stigmatized groups, may not always be beneficial for wellbeing.

We suspect that this negative relationship between identification and wellbeing will be apparent among ex-prisoners because a) ex-prisoners' low-status is perceived as *stable* and *legitimate* by most members of the community, and b) the boundary between 'ex-offender' and 'non-offender' identities is *impermeable* (ex-prisoners cannot change their past and the identity that comes with this), and yet it is a *concealable* group membership. These conditions are likely to motivate ex-prisoners to attempt to use a strategy of *individual mobility*, by distancing themselves from their past and concealing their ex-prisoner identity (Goffman, 1963). However, because ex-prisoners face such strong rejection and are often forced to reveal their group membership, individual mobility is likely to be unsuccessful and their efforts to maintain a positive self-concept likely to fail, with detrimental effects on wellbeing (Barreto & Ellemers, 2009).

In line with RIM, then, we predict that, among ex-prisoners, group-based rejection will positively predict social identification as an ex-prisoner (**H2**); but, following our expectation that the rejected ex-prisoner identity will be corrosive because of the extent of group-based rejection, we predict that

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social identification as an ex-prisoner will, in turn, be associated with reduced wellbeing (**H3**); such that social identification as an ex-prisoner will mediate the negative effect of group-based rejection on wellbeing (**H4**).

### **1.3 The role of multiple group memberships (moderator)**

Recent work emerging out of the social cure tradition has shown that identifying with *multiple groups* (typically those that are not subject to stigma or discrimination) is associated with better wellbeing for those facing life stressors. For instance, Haslam et al. (2008) found that stroke patients reported greater wellbeing if they were able to maintain membership in multiple groups after their stroke. More generally, the benefits of multiple group memberships on wellbeing is supported by a large body of evidence linking multiple group identification and heightened wellbeing (Haslam, Cruwys, & Haslam, 2014; Iyer et al., 2009; Ysseldyk, Haslam, & Haslam, 2013).

There are a number of reasons why multiple group memberships might offer a ‘social cure’ that can enhance wellbeing and health (Haslam et al., 2018). First, if social identification with a single group provides psychological resources that protect and enhance individual wellbeing, it follows that the more group memberships an individual has, the more resources they have at their disposal and the better protected they will be (Jetten et al., 2014). Second, the more groups that an individual belongs to, the less reliant they are on any single group to provide psychological resources; something which is likely to be particularly important for resilience during times of transition and stress (Jetten et al., 2014). Multiple group memberships also enable greater flexibility in dealing with stressors, because they increase the prospect that one can consult a suitable group when facing a particular stressor.

Multiple group memberships have been found to be especially beneficial for people undergoing life transitions. Life transitions, like being released from prison, typically involve changes in a person’s social identity—prisoners, for example, transition from being a prisoner to being an ex-prisoner—and

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even transitions that may seem positive have long been known to be a risk factor for stress and reduced wellbeing (e.g. Praharso, Tear, & Cruwys, 2017). However, the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) shows that risks to wellbeing can be reduced by certain social factors. Iyer and colleagues (2009), for instance, found multiple group memberships provided the resources necessary for new university students to go out and form new, positive social identities in their new context, which helped to buffer them from the negative wellbeing consequences of the transition to university. Cruwys et al. (2014b) found that multiple group memberships scaffolded the development of new group memberships for socially isolated individuals, which led to better mental health outcomes. In fact, having the ability to take on new group memberships following a life changing transition can be a way of protecting oneself from the harmful effects of identity change (Jetten et al., 2012). Dingle, Cruwys and Frings (2016) found that this was the case for people recovering from addiction. We argue that successfully making the transition to “post prison life” will also involve the formation of new, positive, alternative group memberships.

Although past research has shown that identifying with multiple groups can protect people from the health hazards associated with important life changes, it remains to be seen, in any population, whether multiple groups can buffer against the negative consequences of group-based rejection on wellbeing. We merged the RIM and SIMIC perspectives and assessed whether such strategies protect the wellbeing of people who have spent time in prison or who have a criminal record, and predict that multiple identities will buffer wellbeing against the negative effects of group-based rejection in ex-prisoners **(H5)**.

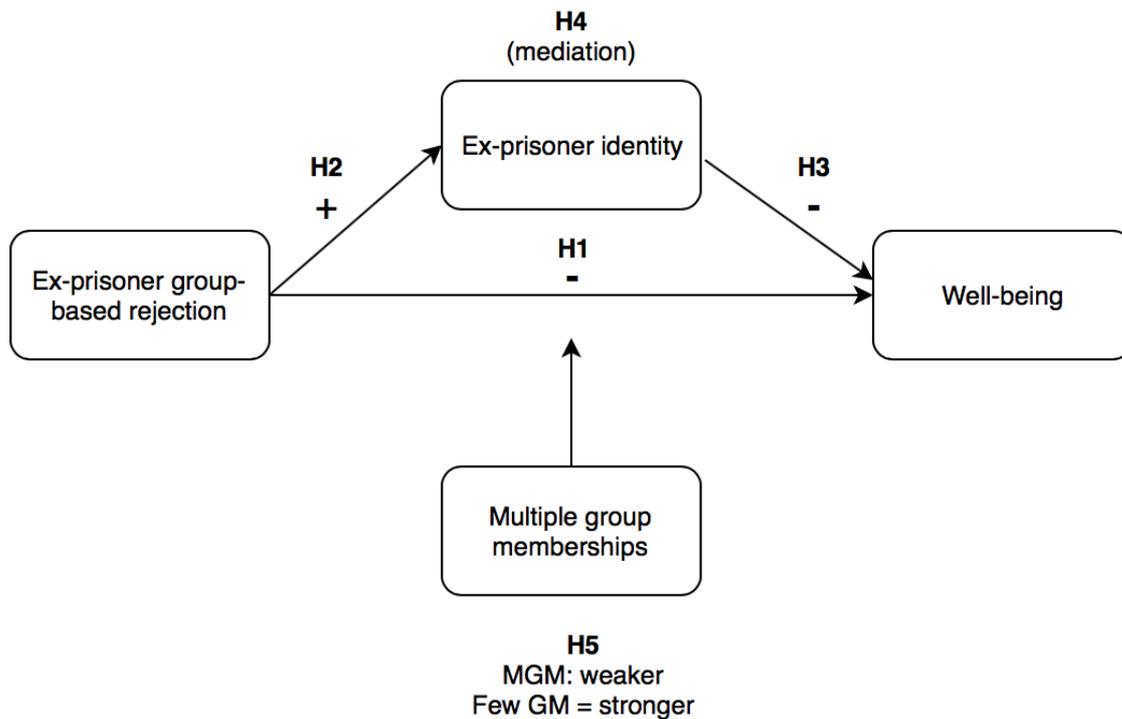
### **1.4 The present study**

This study, informed by the social identity approach to health, aimed to investigate the relationships between perceived group-based rejection among ex-prisoners, ex-prisoner identity, multiple group memberships, and wellbeing among people that have spent time in prison or who have a criminal

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record. Data was collected in the US via an online survey. We also included an open ended question about rejection in order to gain insight into ex-prisoners' actual experiences and thus allowing us to take a mixed-methods approach.

Figure 1. Hypothesized model of the relationship between ex-prisoner group-based rejection, ex-prisoner identity, multiple group memberships, and wellbeing.



As shown in Figure 1, we predict that ex-prisoner identification will mediate the effect of ex-prisoner rejection on wellbeing, and that multiple group memberships will buffer the effect of ex-prisoner rejection on wellbeing.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants and design

US ex-prisoners (N = 199) were recruited to complete an online questionnaire via MTurk. Apart from the measures listed below, the questionnaire included additional measures from the social identity mapping tool and a self-stigma scale. These were not relevant to our present hypotheses and so we do

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not report them further here. The study took approximately 20-30 minutes and participants received \$1.53 compensation for their time.

The research was approved by the ethical review board at the University of Sussex (ER/SK341/8). The online survey included the information and consent form at the beginning, and the debrief sheet at the end – which revealed the aim of the study to participants, and contained references to support organisations.

### **Recruitment procedure.**

We followed Chandler and Paolacci's (2017) advice on how to minimize participant fraud for specific populations on MTurk: First, we put pre-screening criteria in place and set constraints so that participants could only take the survey once. Second, we launched a stand-alone screener survey that paid \$0.03 and included five questions, three distractor questions and two target questions: "Do you have a criminal record? i.e. convicted of a felony which is recorded against your name."; "Have you ever been incarcerated? i.e. spent at least 24 hours in a jail, or a prison, or correctional facility." Answering either of these questions in the affirmative indicated eligibility. Upon completion of the screener, eligible participants were invited to participate in the main study that paid \$1.50, while ineligible participants were directed to the 'end of survey message'. To further improve data quality, participants were asked at the end of the main survey whether or not we should include their responses in our research, specifying that they will receive payment for their participation regardless of their answer to this question ("Do you think we should include your responses in our research? Please select no if you weren't honest in the study, weren't paying attention, or if there is any other reason the data you have provided shouldn't be used.").

3,825 participants completed the screener survey; 331 of whom (8.6%) were eligible to complete the main survey and clicked through to the main survey. Of these, 204 participants completed the main

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survey from start to finish. Five participants ticked ‘don’t include me’ and were excluded from the analysis. Therefore, our final sample was 199 participants.

The fact that 8.6% of participants in the screener were eligible for the full study increased our confidence that we recruited a sample of ex-prisoners with minimal participant fraud because the proportion is similar to US criminal population statistics: In 2016, it was estimated that between 3.2-3.6% of the adult US population were ex-prisoners and 7-8% had a criminal record (Bucknor & Barber, 2016). However, it is important to note that not all people who have spent time in prison have a criminal record, and vice versa. For example, people who are convicted of a crime may not receive jail time, and in many US states people can be incarcerated in local prisons for a significant period before being charged or released with no charges (Wagner & Rabuy, 2017).

## 2.2 Measures

Given the diversity of the sample and the fact that terminology is contested and often stigmatizing, participants were asked to select the group name that best described them from a list of seven options (“ex-prisoners”, “ex-cons”, “ex-felons”, “ex-inmates”, “ex-offenders”, “people with a criminal record”, “people who have been incarcerated”). Their choice was then subsequently piped into items throughout the questionnaire as indicated by square brackets (the largest group was ‘people who have been incarcerated’, which was chosen by 50.3% of the sample).

## Rejection

As our literature review demonstrated, research has tended to use measures of perceived discrimination and stigma interchangeably, and both tend to show similar detrimental consequences. We therefore took a broad approach to measuring rejection and included measures of both perceived discrimination and stigma towards ex-prisoners. We measured perceived discrimination using an adapted version of the Perceptions of Discrimination Scale (Schmitt and Branscombe, 2002; 9 items

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used in Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016;  $\alpha = .91$ ), and measured perceived stigma using the 8-item subscale from the Self-Stigma of Individuals with Criminal Records scale (SSICR; Moore, Tangney, & Stuewig 2016a;  $\alpha = .94$ ). The discrimination scale assesses personal experiences and perceptions of discrimination, whereas the stigma scale assesses perceptions of the attitudes underlying discriminatory behavior. The Perceptions of Discrimination Scale included items such as “I regularly encounter discrimination against [people who have been incarcerated]” rated on a seven-point scale from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree” ( $\alpha = .91$ ). The SSICR uses a distinct clause to capture perceived stigma (“The public thinks most people with a criminal record or people that have been incarcerated are...”), followed by eight statements such as “cannot be trusted” or “are dangerous”. This phrasing was used because everyone in this sample had either been convicted of a crime or had spent time in prison, and thus this phrasing applied to all participants. Responses ranged from “1” Strongly Disagree to “7” Strongly Agree. Items from both scales were combined into a unified measure of rejection ( $\alpha = .91$ ), with all items contributing to the reliability of the scale (‘Cronbach’s alpha if item deleted’  $< .91$ ). Participants were also given the opportunity to provide an optional open-ended response to the question “Is there anything you would like to add about ex-prisoners/people with a criminal record and stigma?”

### **Ex-prisoner identification**

We followed Leach et al.’s (2008) recommendations and measured all five dimensions of ex-prisoner identification using their identification scale. Participants responded to 11 items (11 items used by Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016) such as “I feel a bond with other [people who have been incarcerated]”, and “Being [a person who has been incarcerated] gives me a good feeling” on a seven-point scale from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree”. Although these social identification subscales tend to be highly associated for many groups (Postmes, Haslam & Jans, 2013), research has found that people in stigmatized groups tend to rate the satisfaction facet differently (Jetten, Spears & Manstead, 1997; Kuppens et al., 2015). Therefore, we first followed Cruwys and Gunaseelan (2016) by analyzing the

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relationships of the separate facets to rejection and wellbeing, expecting identity satisfaction to show different relationships compared to the other dimensions. Indeed, all facets ( $p < .01$ ) bar identity satisfaction ( $p > .07$ ) were significantly associated with rejection and wellbeing. We therefore dropped identity satisfaction from the composite measure, which produced a highly reliable scale ( $\alpha = .91$ ), with all items contributing to the internal consistency ('Cronbach's alpha if item deleted'  $< .91$ ).

### **Well-being**

Wellbeing was assessed using four distinct, albeit overlapping, constructs: depression ( $\alpha = .94$ ), anxiety ( $\alpha = .88$ ), stress ( $\alpha = .87$ ), and life satisfaction ( $\alpha = .92$ ). The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales – 21 items (DASS-21) is a well-validated short form of the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). The measure includes three seven-item subscales, assessing depression, anxiety, and stress symptoms respectively. The DASS has excellent validity in both clinical and non-clinical samples and reliability of at least  $\alpha = .88$  (Crawford et al., 2009; Henry and Crawford, 2005). Life satisfaction was measured using the well-validated Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). Participants rated five items such as “If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing” on a seven-point scale from “Strong Disagree” to “Strong Agree”. We reverse coded the DASS items and then, following Praherso and colleagues (2017), combined the items from the four wellbeing measures into a highly reliable composite measure of wellbeing ( $\alpha = .94$  with all items worthy of retention). To confirm the validity of our composite measure, we conducted sensitivity analyses investigating whether the results of our main analyses were robust across all separate wellbeing scales. The results and conclusions did not change depending on whether we used any of the four subscales or the overall composite, suggesting the composite was the most parsimonious way of analyzing these data.

### **Multiple group memberships**

An online version of the Social Identity Mapping tool (SIM; Cruwys et al., 2016; Bentley et al., 2018)

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was embedded into the survey, was used to assess multiple group memberships. The SIM tool is a psychometrically validated instrument designed to provide a comprehensive overview of a person's social world. Participants were given detailed instructions of how to 'draw their social map', which included identifying and naming all of the social groups they considered themselves a part of. We took the total number of groups participants identified as our measure of multiple group membership. We also explicitly asked participants to include their ex-prisoner identity as one of their social groups.

### **Demographics**

Participants were asked to enter their age (in digits), and to specify their gender (male/ female/ other), nationality, and ethnicity (white; black; Hispanic/Latino; native American; Asian; other). They were also asked to indicate their annual household income (on a twelve-point scale; under \$10,000 = 1; over \$150,000 = 12), level of education (on an eleven-point scale; no schooling completed = 1; doctorate degree = 11), and employment status (employed for wages; self-employed; out of work and looking for work; out of work but not currently looking for work; a homemaker; a student; retired; unable to work).

### **Incarceration/ criminal record details**

Participants specified whether they had been incarcerated (yes/no to "Have you ever been incarcerated? i.e. spent at least 24 hours in a jail, or a prison, or correctional facility.") and then provided incarceration details, including the year of incarceration ("When were you incarcerated in prison or jail or in a correctional facility? If you have been incarcerated multiple times, or for multiple years, then specify the most recent year you spent in prison or jail or in a correctional facility"), duration of incarceration ("for how long were you incarcerated in prison or jail or in a correctional facility? If you have been incarcerated multiple times or for multiple years, then specify the total amount of time spent in prison/ jail/ correctional facility." on a seven-point scale where less than a week = 1 and 3 years + = 7), and specified whether they had a criminal record against their name (yes/

no to “Do you have a criminal record? i.e. convicted of a felony which is recorded against your name”).

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Descriptive statistics

Participants were on average 36.32 years old ( $SD=9.59$ , Range = 20-70 years) and White (81% of the sample stated their ethnic group was ‘White’, 9% Black, 8% Hispanic/ Latino, 2% Native American, and 2% Asian respectively) and American (100% of valid responses stated American nationality).

Although our sample is not representative of the prison population, our sample does include ex-prisoners from all major ethnicities and reveals a similar distribution to that revealed by the most recent US prison population statistics (58.2% White (of which 32.2% are Hispanic/ Latino); 38.1% Black; 2.2% Native American; and 1.5% Asian; BOP, 2018). 54% of participants were male, which is not representative of the US prison population (currently made up of 93% males, and only 7% females; BOP, 2018). However, we did not find significant differences across gender groups for each of our key variables (Perceived rejection:  $F(1, 197) = .067, p = .796$ ; ex-prisoner identification:  $F(1, 197) = .078, p = .780$ ; wellbeing:  $F(1, 197) = .239, p = .625$ ).

The median household income was \$30,000 - \$39,999, which is two income groups below the median in the US (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar 2017); the median level of education was ‘Some college credit, no degree’; and the modal employment status was ‘employed for wages’ (55%).

The modal year of incarceration was 2016 and the modal duration of incarceration was less than a week (54.8%). 85% of participants had been incarcerated, 44% of participants held a criminal record, and 29% of participants had both jail time and a criminal record. Given this, it seems like a significant proportion of the sample fall into the US-specific (illegal in many other countries) category of being incarcerated for a significant period and then released without charge (Subramanian et al., 2015).

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Descriptive statistics and correlations of the key measures are presented in Table 1. In line with our hypothesizing, wellbeing was negatively correlated with ex-prisoner identification ( $r = -.31$ ) and perceived rejection ( $r = -.29$ ); and perceived rejection was positively correlated with ex-prisoner identification ( $r = .38$ ) and multiple group memberships ( $r = .16$ ). It is also important to note that the mean of ex-prisoner identification was low ( $M = 2.86$ ).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlations</i>		
			1	2	3
1. Wellbeing	3.33	0.78			
2. Ex-prisoner identification	2.86	1.33	<b>-0.31</b>		
3. Multiple group memberships	4.31	2.48	0.06	-0.06	
4. Perceived rejection	4.52	1.49	<b>-0.29</b>	<b>0.38</b>	<b>0.16</b>

†  $N = 199$  (*bold* =  $p < .05$ )

### 3.2 Qualitative responses

Of those who completed the online survey, 137 participants (69%) chose to provide comments in response to the open-ended optional question “*Is there anything you would like to add about ex-prisoners and stigma?*” We examined these responses to gain insight into ex-prisoners’ actual experiences of rejection. To do this, we undertook a thematic analysis – a qualitative method used for ‘identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Following Braun and Clark’s (2006) suggestions, we coded all participants’ responses and used the whole sample to generate themes, updating and refining these along the way. The following is structured in terms of the main themes which emerged from the responses.

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25% of participants' responses emphasized the *severity of rejection*, stating that ex-prisoners do indeed face a lot of discrimination and stigma from the public, and reported feeling rejected and marginalized by society:

*Many laws and stigmas make it very difficult for ex-prisoners to lead a normal life when they are released, even if their attitude has changed. Even if they have received education in prison it is hard to find people to hire them and they feel as if they have to lie about their past in a lot of situations in order to function in society and to get along with people they meet. This causes a lot of stress and anger.*

(Female, 68)

Participants explained that the group-based rejection that ex-prisoners face often results in recidivism, because, often, the only way to cope with such profound group-based rejection is to return to crime to survive. For example:

*As an ex offender, it has caused multiple hurdles and difficulties in my life. My question is this: if the desire is to reduce the rate of crime, why make it hard for ex-offenders to obtain employment? I believe it's that stigma that leads many people to re-offend.*

(Male, 35)

Others (20% of participants) characterized *America as an unforgiving society* whose system makes it very difficult for people to turn their lives around, but argued that people *can* change and rehabilitate, and that ex-prisoners should be given a second chance. Responses demonstrate that group boundaries are impermeable, in that the 'ex-prisoner' label sticks with people despite attempts to move on. One example is:

*We do understand that what we did was wrong, I went to prison because I made a bad choice, if one of the reasons for prison is rehabilitation then why after I get out I'm still not treated as if I've been rehabilitated, I did something wrong, I was rightfully punished, but in America*

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*society thinks we should be punished for life, other than murder and rape everybody deserves a second chance.*

(Female, 42)

35% of participants expressed strong collective identification and *solidarity between ex-prisoners*, and rejected the negative stereotype of the 'ex-prisoner'. For example:

*Just because you're an ex-prisoner doesn't mean what everyone says, we made a mistake, we shouldn't be continually shamed for it over and over. We did our time, now we should be given a chance.*

(Female, 39)

Contrary to this view, a smaller group of participants (11% of participants) acknowledged the ex-prisoner stereotype but purposefully distanced themselves from it. For example:

*I have known ex-prisoners that stay the same. I have had to cut all ties with them even with them being my best friend. After the fact you see that the person has robbed the men's warehouse ran down the street and jacked a car by knife, living under bridges and preaching about how the system holds him down. I think the public feels he is very dangerous, but I changed and hid my old ways and reintegrated into society.*

(Male, 34)

This participant is a rare example of someone who successfully engaged in *individual mobility* by distancing himself from his past and concealing his ex-prisoner identity. The respondent acknowledges that the identity is still his, but that he has to hide it.

Finally, 4% of participants expressed *regret* (e.g. *It's a bad deal wish I never did it* (Male, 28)) and a need for help and change (e.g. *We need opportunities too. We have families and kids and we need jobs too* (Female, 22)).

In sum, participants' responses suggest that ex-prisoners do indeed face a lot of discrimination from society and stigma from the public, particularly in America which they characterised as an unforgiving

society that hinders reintegration. Some participants suggested that this group-based rejection often results in recidivism. Most participants endorsed the notion that people *can* change and rehabilitate, and that ex-prisoners should be given a second chance, and expressed strong solidarity with ex-prisoners; while a smaller minority endorsed the ex-prisoner stereotype and distanced themselves from this.

### 3.3 Evaluation of the hypotheses

Hypotheses 1-5 were tested using PROCESS (2012, model 5). The model included perceived ex-prisoner group-based rejection as the predictor variable, ex-prisoner identification as the mediating variable, multiple group memberships as the moderating variable, and wellbeing as the outcome variable. The quantitative results are summarized in Figure 2. Each of the individual paths were significant: The experience of rejection as an ex-prisoner was associated with poorer wellbeing  $b = -.17$ ,  $t = -3.19$ ,  $p = .002$ , CI [-.28, -.07], confirming H1. The experience of rejection as an ex-prisoner was associated with stronger identification as an ex-prisoner  $b = .44$ ,  $t = 5.59$ ,  $p < .001$ , CI [.28, .59], confirming H2. Ex-prisoner identification negatively predicted well-being  $b = -.14$ ,  $t = -3.04$ ,  $p = .003$ , CI [-.22, -.05], confirming H3: identification as an ex-prisoner was associated with poorer wellbeing. There was also a significant indirect effect of rejection on wellbeing via ex-prisoner identification, *indirect* = -.06, Bias Corrected CIs [-.11, -.02], confirming H4: Identification as an ex-prisoner mediated the negative relationship between rejection and wellbeing. The model explained 15% of the variance in ex-prisoner identification ( $R^2 = .15$ ), and 17% of the variance in wellbeing ( $R^2 = .17$ ).

In line with the social cure approach, multiple group memberships had a positive effect on wellbeing ( $b = .05$ ,  $t = 2.58$ ,  $p = .011$ , CI [.01, .08]) in our final model; and the interaction between rejection and multiple group memberships in predicting wellbeing was significant ( $b = -.05$ ,  $t = -2.54$ ,  $p = .011$ , CI [-.09, -.01]). However, this interaction was in the *opposite* direction to that predicted by H5.

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Specifically, among those who were below the mean in total number of groups, there was a weak, non-significant relationship between rejection and well-being ( $b = -.05, t = -.70, p = .489, CI [-.20, .09]$ ). That is, people who had few group memberships were less affected by experiences of rejection. Among those at the mean ( $b = -.17, t = -3.19, p = .002, CI [-.28, -.07]$ ) and above the mean ( $b = -.30, t = -4.11, p < .001, CI [-.45, -.16]$ ) on the measure of multiple group memberships, however, there was a significant negative relationship between rejection and wellbeing. Therefore, and in opposition to H5, multiple group memberships moderated the effect of ex-prisoner rejection on wellbeing such that there was a negative relationship between ex-prisoner rejection and wellbeing *only* among those with multiple social identities. These findings suggest that multiple group memberships are both good and bad for ex-prisoners: they are good in that they provide direct benefits for wellbeing, however they also appear to make people more vulnerable to the negative effects of group-based rejection for wellbeing.

< Figure 2. Summary of findings >

We reasoned that one explanation for this unexpected finding – a negative relationship between ex-prisoner rejection and wellbeing that is more pronounced among those with multiple social identities – is that it is an exposure phenomenon: people with more groups perceive more stigma and discrimination towards their ex-prisoner identity because they have a wider social network from whom such negativity might originate. To explore this possibility, we conducted an exploratory post hoc analysis. We used PROCESS (2012, model 4) to specify a mediation model whereby multiple group membership was associated with lower wellbeing via increased group-based rejection. The model included multiple group memberships as the predictor variable, perceived rejection as the mediating variable, and wellbeing as the outcome variable. In line with our explanation, multiple group memberships positively predicted rejection ( $b = .07, t = 2.83, p = .005, CI [.02, .12]$ ), and rejection negatively predicted wellbeing ( $b = -.21, t = -4.02, p < .001, CI [-.31, -.11]$ ). Critically, multiple group memberships negatively predicted wellbeing *only indirectly* via perceived rejection

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(*direct* = .04,  $p = .210$ , CI [-.02, .09]; *indirect* = -.05, Bias Corrected CI [-.09, -.02]). We also tested alternative models that included ex-prisoner identity as a moderator of this indirect effect, but did not find evidence of moderation, suggesting that discrimination is not dependent on whether respondents self-identify as an ex-prisoner or not. Given the correlational nature of the data we cannot make claims about the direction of causality, and the post-hoc nature of this analysis limits the strength of our conclusions, but these results tentatively suggest that the more group memberships ex-prisoners have, the more likely they may be to encounter harmful rejection.

Results of a second post-hoc analysis suggest that another factor that might explain these results is the incompatibility between the ex-prisoner identity and participants' other identities. 94 participants listed the ex-prisoner group in their social map (47.2% of the sample). A one-way ANOVA showed that those that listed the ex-prisoner group in their social map had a higher proportion of incompatible groups ( $N = 94$ ;  $M = .21$ ,  $SD = .25$ ), compared to those who did not list their ex-prisoner identity as part of their social world ( $N = 105$ ;  $M = .14$ ,  $SD = .23$ ):  $F(1,197) = 4.14$ ,  $p = .043$ . These participants also experienced more rejection: a one-way ANOVA showed that those that listed the ex-prisoner group in their social map reported a greater experience of rejection ( $N = 94$ ;  $M = 5.01$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ), compared to those who did not list their ex-prisoner identity as part of their social world ( $N = 105$ ;  $M = 4.60$ ,  $SD = .12$ ):  $F(1,197) = 6.08$ ,  $p = .015$ .

## 4. Discussion

### Summary of findings

This study was the first to test the rejection identification model in the context of ex-prisoner identity, and the first to directly merge SIMIC theorizing with the rejection-identification model by examining whether multiple groups can buffer against the negative consequences of rejection on wellbeing. We found that experiencing group-based rejection as an ex-prisoner was associated with poorer wellbeing. This was also borne out of the qualitative responses that depicted America as an unforgiving society

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whose system makes it very difficult for people to turn their lives around. Importantly, we found that ex-prisoner identification was the mechanism underlying the relationship between group-based rejection and poor wellbeing, and that multiple group memberships moderated this relationship such that there was a negative relationship between rejection and wellbeing only among those with multiple group memberships. Our data suggested two possible explanations for this finding: first, people with more groups perceive more rejection on the basis of their ex-prisoner identity because they have a wider social network from which such stigma and discrimination might surface. Second, people experience an incompatibility between their ex-prisoner identity and their multiple identities.

### **A new perspective on RIM**

This study is the first to investigate RIM in the context of ex-prisoner identity, and consequently the first study to quantitatively demonstrate that social identification as an ex-prisoner is associated with the experience of group-based rejection and *poorer* wellbeing. Furthermore, out of dozens of extant studies of social identity and wellbeing (for review, see Jetten et al. (2014)), very few have found a direct negative relationship between social identification with a stigmatized group and wellbeing. In line with research that has theorized (e.g. Cruwys et al., 2014a) and demonstrated (e.g. Cruwys & Gunaseelan, 2016) that social identification, particularly in the context of stigmatized groups, is not always advantageous for wellbeing, we provide further evidence for *boundary conditions* for the social cure properties of groups – rather than disconfirmation of the rejection identification model – and build on work identifying the circumstances under which groups and social identification can become toxic to health. It is worth noting that the proportions of variance in identification and wellbeing that our model explains are large in comparison to other papers investigating RIM (e.g. Cruwys and Gunaseelan; 2016), which increases our confidence about the implications that we can draw from our findings.

### **A new perspective on multiple group memberships**

Out of the many extant studies that show that being a member of multiple groups can protect wellbeing (for review, see Jetten et al., 2014), this is the first to investigate whether multiple groups can buffer against the negative consequences of discrimination on wellbeing. Consequently, this study is also the first to demonstrate that multiple groups can *hinder* the wellbeing of people who have spent time in prison or who have a criminal record. We also offered and tested an explanation for this: people with more groups are exposed to more negativity in their network about their ex-prisoner identity; and people with more identities experience more incompatibility between their ex-prisoner identity and these other identities. It has been theorized (Jetten et al., 2017), however, and shown (Sønderlund, Morton & Ryan, 2017), that there are conditions under which multiple group memberships could compromise wellbeing, specifically in the context of holding multiple, devalued and visible group memberships; and existing work has linked group incompatibility with poorer wellbeing (e.g. Iyer et al., 2009; Cruwys et al., 2016). Therefore, rather than being a disconfirmation of the social cure, we see these results as providing evidence for *boundary conditions* under which the ‘social cure’ associated with multiple groups can transform into a ‘social curse’.

### **Practical implications**

This study also provides the much needed quantitative evidence to demonstrate that discrimination negatively affects the wellbeing of ex-prisoners. Although research has consistently shown this in *non-offender* groups (for a review, see Livingston and Boyd (2010)), very few studies have been conducted on people that have spent time in prison or who have a criminal record (see Moore et al., 2016b for a notable exception). We found that ex-prisoners experienced high levels of group-based rejection despite our sample’s modal duration of incarceration being less than a week.

Although the negative relationship between group-based rejection and wellbeing that we found was expected, what was less clear from prior research was the factors that might underlie or moderate this

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relationship for this particular population. We found that ex-prisoner identification was a mechanism underlying the relationship between group-based rejection and wellbeing, and that multiple group memberships was a moderating mechanism of this relationship. These findings have important practical implications. The US, with 2.2 million people currently in its jails and prison – a 500% increase over the past forty years – is the world's leader in incarceration (Kaeble & Glaze, 2016); and more than 640,000 people are being released from these prisons every year (Carson & Anderson, 2016). These people are being released into a challenging reality characterized by tremendous discrimination and stigma that is legitimized by the legal and political systems (see e.g. Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010; Pogorzelski et al. 2005). This was also borne out by the qualitative results, where participants characterised America as a very difficult place for people to make changes in their lives once they had been to prison or had a criminal record, indicating that structural change is likely to be needed in order to tackle discrimination and ex-prisoner ill-being.

Our data, which provides an understanding of who among this highly vulnerable population is more and less resilient, contributes to the need to better understand how to best support ex-prisoners. US crime prevention strategies pay much of their attention to the social reintegration of ex-prisoners into the community and reducing recidivism. Resettlement and reintegration strategies are consequently focused around employment, education, housing, mental health, and maintaining family ties, with the objective of assisting prisoners return to normal life, get a home and job, and handle life without re-offending (US Department of Justice, 2017). What is lacking from recent and ongoing reforms, however, is a focus on the group-based rejection of ex-prisoners from society. Our findings indicate that the help provided to ex-prisoners should include strategies to manage the hard reality of discrimination and stigma, such as psychological interventions to develop a positive self-identity and manage how they will be perceived in daily interactions.

### **Limitations and future directions**

These data are the first to show a direct negative relationship between social identification with ex-prisoners and wellbeing, which we theorized was due to the impermeable nature of the ex-prisoner group and its legitimized and stable low status. Our qualitative findings lend support for this proposition, but future research could quantitatively examine identity management strategies in criminal offenders. These data are also the first to provide evidence that multiple groups can accentuate the negative consequences of group-based rejection on wellbeing, and our post-hoc analyses suggested this was because ex-prisoners with more groups were exposed to more negativity from their wider social network. Future research should directly investigate these novel findings among ex-prisoners and other stigmatized populations. Future research should also examine whether our findings are generalizable to more collectivist cultures where multiple group memberships may not provide the same benefits (Chang et al., 2016).

Although our study had several strengths, like all research it was also subject to several limitations. First, we provided correlational data and therefore we cannot claim causality. Second, ex-prisoners are a diverse population with very different legal circumstances, and it is therefore likely that this population experiences diverse kinds of discrimination that we were not able to disentangle using our research design. Third, our findings may not be generalizable to other countries because the US approach to criminal justice and incarceration is relatively unique.

### **5. Conclusion**

In sum, our findings provide a new perspective on RIM, multiple group memberships, and discrimination that has important practical implications for successful community integration and ex-prisoner wellbeing. Using a large US sample of people who have spent time in prison or who have a criminal record, this study was the first to show that the experience of rejection as an ex-prisoner leads to poorer wellbeing, but with heightened identification with ex-prisoners. These data are also the first

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to provide evidence that multiple groups can accentuate the negative consequences of group-based rejection on wellbeing. We provided suggestive evidence that this is because those with wider social networks are exposed to more rejection and struggle with group incompatibility. New directions in resettlement strategies should ideally establish methods of empowering people to disidentify with their past criminal self, and combat the stigma and discrimination they are likely to experience in their social networks about their ex-prisoner identity.

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## Identities and Wellbeing Among Ex-Prisoners

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlations</i>		
			1	2	3
1. Wellbeing	3.33	0.78			
2. Ex-prisoner identification	2.86	1.33	<b>-0.31</b>		
3. Multiple group memberships	4.31	2.48	0.06	-0.06	
4. Perceived rejection	4.52	1.49	<b>-0.29</b>	<b>0.38</b>	<b>0.16</b>

† *N* = 199 (*bold* = *p* < .05)

**Figure legends**

Figure 1. Hypothesized model of the relationship between ex-prisoner group-based rejection, ex-prisoner identity, multiple group memberships, and wellbeing.

Figure 2. Summary of findings: Regression coefficients for the relationship between ex-prisoner group-based rejection and wellbeing as mediated by ex-prisoner identity and as moderated by multiple group memberships.<sup>2</sup>

### Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “ex-prisoner” to include both those with a criminal record and those who have been incarcerated, because our sample is predominantly the latter.

<sup>2</sup> Although we were only interested in the moderation of the direct effect, as depicted in Figure 1, we confirmed that multiple group memberships do not moderate the indirect effect as well using PROCESS models 8 and 15.