

REGISTERED REPORT

Changing public attitudes toward the employment of formerly incarcerated people: The role of “human resources social advocacy”

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Email: Marco.DeSisto@rmit.edu.au**Abstract**

This registered report aims to evaluate the extent to which the human resources function can change public attitudes toward a controversial social issue. Focusing on the employment of formerly incarcerated people, we explore the novel concept of “human resources social advocacy” (HRSA), an interventionist approach through which HR might pro-actively change and/or shape people's minds on social issues via the communication and conveyance of ideas related to HR matters of public interest. We seek to test the effectiveness of two HRSA interventions in reducing public stigma toward the employment of formerly incarcerated people. One makes a moral case (“Changing Hearts”) and the other makes an instrument case (“Changing Minds”) for including formerly incarcerated people in the labor market. We also explore which of the two interventions is more effective at achieving normative change. This research will have important implications for the “societal effects” of human resource management.

Abbreviations: CSR, corporate social responsibility; EEOC, equal employment opportunity commission; GLM, generalized linear model; HR, human resource; HRD, human resource development; HRM, human resource management; HRSA, human resources social advocacy; MANCOVA, multivariate analysis of covariance.

*Stage 1 of a Registered Report is limited to the Introduction, Literature Review and Hypotheses, and Research Methods Protocol. Accordingly, it does not contain any results, discussion, or implications. The latter will be provided at Stage 2 provided “in-principle” acceptance of Stage 1.

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KEYWORDS

CSR, employment, formerly incarcerated people, human resources social advocacy, intervention, stigma, work

1 | INTRODUCTION

Effective management is broadly predicated on the assumption, nonsensical though it may be (Sorell, 1994), that “the customer is always right.” The prevailing view among management educators and practitioners is that successful firms have become so because they cater to consumers' demands scrupulously. This is evidently the case in externally-focused areas of management like marketing (Parasuraman et al., 1991), but it is also true in supposedly internally-focused fields like human resource management (HRM) (Rubery et al., 2016; Swart & Kinnie, 2006). For example, the concept of “aesthetic labor” suggests that hiring managers in the interactive services seek to appeal to customers' visual and aural senses by employing conventionally attractive front-line staff (Timming, 2015; Warhurst et al., 2000), thus creating a conceptual bridge between HRM and relationship marketing (Timming, 2017). Similarly, human resource development initiatives are often aimed at training front-line employees to give consumers what they want and when they want it (Holton III, 1998). The underlying assumption in this literature is that successful firms employ *reactive* strategies to accommodate the needs and wants of consumers. It is less often asked whether organizations should also *pro-actively* seek to shape consumers' attitudes—beyond simply convincing them to purchase a product or service (Parkes & Davis, 2013).

One recent approach to management that ostensibly views firms as potential agents of social change centers around corporate social responsibility (CSR), also commonly referred to as stakeholder theory (see Matten & Moon, 2004 and Freeman, 2010, respectively). Advocates of CSR posit that firms are agential and therefore possess a moral responsibility to effect positive social change by situating the traditional profit motive alongside the equally important interests of wider stakeholders, both within and outwith the organization (Du et al., 2010). But critics of CSR point out that, in practice, such initiatives are hardly altruistic and instead cater, once again most often reactively, to the ethical dispositions of consumers through false virtue signaling (Banerjee, 2008). From this viewpoint, CSR is not a genuine attempt to change consumer attitudes, but rather to exploit them for branding purposes (Hooghiemstra, 2000; Tata & Prasad, 2015).

Against this backdrop, the present study offers an alternative concept to CSR: what we call “human resources social advocacy” (HRSA). We define HRSA as a corporate communication artefact produced and distributed by the human resources function and aimed at achieving normative social change by pro-actively shaping public attitudes toward key HR issues. Unlike CSR, HRSA can place the social license of firms at risk because pro-actively shaping public opinion involves taking a potentially unpopular stand on social issues that may be seen by the general public as “undeserving” or “unworthy” (Parkes et al., 2010). CSR, on the other hand, tends to be a reputation-enhancing endeavor. Through CSR, firms engage with various social issues that have been already mainstreamed by activists. CSR thus aims to exploit campaigns that already conform to emerging or established norms. By contrast, HRSA involves using one's “organizational platform” for “norm entrepreneurship” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998) so that organizations may genuinely contribute to societal change on HR-related matters. In provoking normative change, HRSA involves persuading others to *depart* from standard, socially accepted behaviors.

To explore HRSA, we have designed an experiment, in the context of a registered report (Timming et al., 2021), to test the effectiveness of two different approaches to swaying public opinion—a “moral” form of suasion and an “instrumental” form of suasion. Given HRSA involves leading on (not following, as with CSR) social issues, we take up a deliberately provocative issue: we evaluate the extent to which HRSA interventions can reduce the stigma associated with providing decent employment opportunities in the mainstream labor market to formerly incarcerated people. This is a contentious social issue because many people do not believe that formerly incarcerated people deserve decent jobs, if any job at all (Harley, 2014; Pager, 2003; Uggen et al., 2014). Indeed, formerly incarcerated

people are widely perceived as deserving of employment discrimination because their situation is perceived to have resulted from their own life choices, rather than any immutable characteristics (e.g., race, sex, or disability) or chance (Geiger, 2006). Firms that seek to provide formerly incarcerated people with a “second chance” often harbor concerns of reputational damage (Burns et al., 2017; Pandeli & O’Regan, 2020).

Our study aims to make two key contributions to the field of HRM. First, it seeks to bolster the emerging body of literature by arguing that HR thought leadership can have important external effects on the wider society within which organizations are embedded and operate (Budd et al., 2018). In other words, our research contributes to the theoretical and empirical question of whether HRM can achieve normative social change. Second, our study seeks to understand how the HR function, in practice, might shape public attitudes toward a specific social issue, as we outlined above: the importance of providing decent jobs to formerly incarcerated people (and, by extension, other stigmatized cohorts). The key research questions that lead to these two contributions are: (i) can the HR function pro-actively “shape” public opinion on HR-related matters, and, if so, (ii) what type of HRSA intervention is most effective in influencing and changing the public consciousness?

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES

2.1 | Human resources social advocacy as “norm entrepreneurship”

The concept of HRSA assumes that the HR function in organizations is potentially a values-based agent that can pro-actively change and/or shape people’s minds through the communication and conveyance of ideas related to HR matters of public interest (e.g., pay equity, diversity and inclusion, recruitment and selection, etc.). By “advocacy” we mean an attempt on the part of HR to alter the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of members of the public through persuasion and priming. Advocacy implies leading on issues where traction for change is difficult to gain because of widely shared behaviors that are ingrained and unquestioned; that is, behaviors that have been institutionalized and accepted as “normal.” At the core of HRSA, then, is the concept of norms. HRSA involves what Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) call “norm-breaking” behavior, or “norm entrepreneurship.” As such, HRSA initiatives can potentially elicit disapproval from members of the public, hence our assertion that it may place in jeopardy a firm’s legitimacy—another major contrast with CSR.

To the (limited) extent that HR managers communicate with the public, they typically impart their views indirectly through company spokespersons and press releases, corporate publications, the news media, and social media. The HR function, of course, also indirectly influences the public through its impact on employees, whose experiences at work are communicated to their social networks outside the firm. It is unclear, however, whether the HR function has been actively involved in advocacy-related initiatives, such as Gillette’s stance against “toxic masculinity” (Trott, 2020). The mixed and volatile response of the public to Gillette’s campaign illustrates something important about normative change that has been theorized by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998): that normative evaluations of social issues exist on a continuum. Norms evolve in accordance with a “life-cycle” and may vary in strength across time. For norms to take hold and meaningfully shape behavior, they must be widely shared. Similarly, for norms to break down and lose their hold, people must turn away from them. Norms emerge and decay when they are provoked or challenged, whether intentionally or incidentally. This process is both ideational and emotional in nature.

While norm emergence takes time and may seem like an intangible process, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) maintain that it is possible to trace normative change to the actions of those who are prepared to “call out” issues and reframe them. The “mechanism” of the first phase of the norm life-cycle is “persuasion by norm entrepreneurs” (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998, p. 895). It is this activity that we conceptualize as HRSA. A key objective of our study is to isolate the effects of a specific piece of advocacy of HR, by HR. To do so, we must identify a social issue in which the HR function is implicated (and therefore in a position to advocate for change) and where norm-breaking is needed if change is to be provoked.

2.2 | Employment discrimination against formerly incarcerated people

It is exceedingly difficult for formerly incarcerated people to obtain decent work, especially in individualist liberal societies such as the US, the UK, and Australia (Burns et al., 2017; Lam & Harcourt, 2003). The term “decent” is important. While some advocates claim that being employed is “the best single antidote to (re)offending” (NACRO, 2006, para. 10), it is not true that formerly incarcerated people cannot find any work at all. This cohort tends to be excluded from the *mainstream* labor market, but they are often “tolerated” in the secondary labor market (Peck & Theodore, 2008; Travis, 2005). Statistics also suggest that many people who commit crime are employed at the time of their arrest (Henderson, 2001; Travis, 2005). Employment alone, then, does not necessarily aid reintegration into the community.

What does seem to make a difference between reoffending and reintegration, however, is the quality of the job that formerly incarcerated people are able to obtain (e.g., Uggen, 1999; Uggen & Staff, 2001). By “job quality” we mean skilled work, decent conditions, possibilities for upward occupational mobility, livable wages, job security, the opportunity to form legitimate social bonds, and job satisfaction, amongst other factors. Scholars have found that these, and other dimensions indicative of job quality, make a significant difference to the reoffending rates of formerly incarcerated people (Cook, 1975; Evans, 1968; Lageson & Uggen, 2013; Pownall, 1969; Uggen, 1999; Uggen & Staff, 2001; Wadsworth, 2006). Yet, as Uggen (1999, p. 145) has observed, an intractable problem remains: it is difficult to “justify allocating the best jobs” to those who are seen as “the least deserving members” of society.

HR managers today tend to behave as Uggen (1999) predicted: they actively screen out formerly incarcerated people from candidate pools, with most of these applicants subjected to prejudice and discrimination in recruitment and selection processes (Burt, 2014; Khasni et al., 2021). So severe is the situation that, while employment discrimination is prohibited for individuals with legally protected characteristics, formerly incarcerated people are subject to *openly* discriminatory employment practices (Delgado, 2012; Jacobs, 2015), with many employers making pre-emptive strikes against them, noting in their job advertisements that “ex-offenders” are not welcome to apply (Natividad Rodriguez & Emsellem, 2011; Rade et al., 2016). Indeed, employers can even face a negligent hiring liability when they employ formerly incarcerated people in the event that an employee harms a third party through, for example, violence or theft (McElhatten, 2022).

This dire situation is exacerbated for subaltern, structurally immiserated populations. So overrepresented in the criminal justice system are Black, Indigenous, Latino, and other oppressed communities that many employers engage in “statistical discrimination.” For example, Black job applicants are sometimes automatically ruled out of contention on the assumption that they will likely have a criminal record (Sugie, 2017). Thus, both the prison system and any reintegration possibilities thereafter are disproportionately skewed against people from these communities, with organizations (and HR managers) playing a major role in what might be described as “racialised” organizational practices (Ray, 2019). This “system of stratification” (Pager et al., 2009, p. 160) many scholars have ascribed to institutionalized racism (Pager, 2003, 2007; Pager et al., 2009; Wacquant, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007).

The reasons why employers are often reluctant to hire formerly incarcerated people are manifold. Some scholars suggest that a combination of normative (moral), cognitive (belief-based), and regulative (legal) forces converge to discourage firms from providing employment opportunities to people who have previously been incarcerated (Burns et al., 2017; McElhatten, 2022). Finn (2021) argues that many formerly incarcerated people experience difficulties in finding unsubsidized, well-paid, permanent jobs because so many employers refuse to hire individuals with criminal records, irrespective of the nature of the offence or its circumstances. Of special interest to our theorizing is the view that societal beliefs about formerly incarcerated people are influential, with this marginalized group generally seen as unworthy of opportunities vis-à-vis other disadvantaged groups, where the latter are seen as “genuine job seekers,” and the formerly incarcerated as deserving of their hardships (Gill, 1997, p. 345; Pandeli & O’Regan, 2020; Uggen, 1999; Williams, 2007).

Some scholars have expressly called for community education in order to reduce the stigma experienced by formerly incarcerated people, believing more sympathetic societal attitudes will enable employers to be more open in their hiring practices (Graffam et al., 2004) and could subtly shift the negligent hiring liability (McElhatten, 2022).

In other words, there is a normative basis seeking to change public antipathy toward the formerly incarcerated. Such views create unique challenges for employers about the potential reputational risks of hiring ex-offenders (Fletcher, 2003; Williams, 2007), effectively rendering the employment of formerly incarcerated people a risk to organizations' legitimacy (Burns et al., 2017).

Some scholars have argued that organizations are under public pressure to demonstrate their ethical credentials, and that hiring people with criminal records might be one way of doing so (Obatusin & Ritter-Williams, 2019). But this view misreads the normative landscape. Existing social norms on this issue *dissuade* employers from behaving affirmatively toward formerly incarcerated people. Parkes et al. (2010) identify social movements geared toward helping the formerly incarcerated as being seen by the general public as undeserving. Indeed, *excluding* formerly incarcerated people from the privileges of decent work would seem to be perceived by the broader community as socially appropriate (i.e., ethical) (Burns et al., 2017). Genuine norm-breaking is therefore needed in order for organizations to be widely lauded for hiring the formerly incarcerated.

It is nevertheless true, however, that pockets of support for formerly incarcerated people exist, at least in the US, particularly within the legal community. The US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), for example, has discouraged HR practitioners from using criminal records as the primary basis for determining a person's employment qualification (Griffith & Young, 2017). Instead, the EEOC suggests that several factors be taken into account when considering a job applicant who has a criminal record, including the nature of the offense, their skills, and the nature of the job sought. Fair chance hiring policies, which are championed by the EEOC, such as "ban the box," also suggest that employers only consider the criminal history of job applicants *after* their suitability (or otherwise) for the job has been determined on merit (McKenzie Reed, 2016).

There also exists a range of initiatives designed to financially incentivize employers to hire formerly incarcerated people, such as tax credits. Institutional scholars (e.g., Scott, 2014) would describe these regulative interventions as "coercive," because they force employers to alter their behavior through external inducements and pressures (see also Cumming et al., 2020). However, such interventions do not shape intrinsically the way that employers, and much less members of the public, think and feel toward formerly incarcerated people. They do not ameliorate the cultural or moral foundations of the institutionalized discrimination against formerly incarcerated people, as might "norm entrepreneurship."

As to which of these interventions (coercive or normative interventions) induces deeper, more meaningful change, this has long been an unresolved debate amongst institutional theorists (Scott, 2014). One interpretation of regulative interventions is that they are necessary precisely because the desired behavior (the fair hiring of formerly incarcerated people) is so difficult to socialize. Moreover, some scholars suggest that the legal systems of liberal individualist societies have been largely ineffectual in compelling employers to treat fairly those with criminal records—the law generally upholds the right of employers to hire whomever they see fit (Naylor et al., 2008; Solomon, 2015), and even acts as a deterrent (McElhatten, 2022). This leaves normative social change as perhaps the only viable pathway for advocates of the formerly incarcerated.

Arguably, the coercion of employers would not be needed if affirmative action toward formerly incarcerated people had more widespread acceptance in society. This point reinforces the importance of influencing community opinion in achieving social change, even though public opinions on this matter are diverse and difficult to capture statically (Pickett, 2019). Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) similarly note that not all adopters are equal when it comes to embracing new norms. Deephouse and Suchman (2008), in their elaboration of legitimacy, also make the same point: the social evaluation of various actors is not equal. In this regard, "society-at-large" is commonly accepted as the ultimate arbiter of legitimacy (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008, p. 55). A critical mass of affirmatively-inclined employers is needed if fair hiring is to become the norm, but this may only occur if behaving affirmatively toward the formerly incarcerated is first seen by the community-at-large as a virtue. Thus, it is not "merely" employer attitudes that need changing, but public attitudes more broadly.

Of the three kinds of forces that keep formerly incarcerated people out of decent work—normative, cognitive, and regulative—it is difficult for HRSA interventions to directly change legislative restrictions, such as occupational

licensing and criminal records checking requirements. As to the normative and cognitive forces that shape community attitudes, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) suggest that both can play a role in social change. We therefore propose a moral persuasion intervention to redress public antipathy toward formerly incarcerated people, termed “changing hearts.” To redress the cognitive forces, we then propose an instrumental persuasion intervention, which we term “changing minds.”

2.3 | Changing hearts: A moral persuasion intervention

Normative pressures stem from social judgment and can strongly discourage employers from hiring people who have previously been imprisoned. This pressure leads some employers to fear society's opprobrium, were they to treat formerly incarcerated people affirmatively (Baier, 2020). As noted above, public hostility toward affirmative hiring practices is potentially more impactful on firms than any incentive designed to encourage the hiring of formerly incarcerated people. This is unsurprising, given that the stigma of a criminal record is profound, and compounded by “the mark of race” (Pager, 2003, 2008). Indeed, it has been argued that anyone who has committed a crime will tend to be branded dishonest and untrustworthy (Burch, 2021) because of the “tyranny of is-ness,” a concept whereby the “ex-con” identity becomes the immutable “essence” of a person, with all other characteristics or qualities fading back into irrelevance (Maruna, 2001).

These are judgments about the moral character of so-called “offenders” and normative to their core. So profound is the stigma borne by formerly incarcerated people, their consequent high unemployment rate has been said to contribute to almost 80% of them returning to prison within 3 years (Brown, 2011; Minor et al., 2018). These discriminatory practices ramify beyond the immediacy of employment, pushing people who have previously been imprisoned toward other rejected groups and leading to abandonment of pro-social efforts to reintegrate (Kyprianides et al., 2019; van den Berg et al., 2020; Young & Powell, 2015). These outcomes, of course, have led scholars to call for ways to change employer attitudes toward this especially stigmatized cohort (Petersen, 2015). Companies ought to employ formerly incarcerated people, so the argument goes, because it is the “right thing” to do, since everyone deserves a second chance, rather than a continuation of “prolonged” and “unjustified” social punishment (Bushway & Sweeten, 2007; Obatusin & Ritter-Williams, 2019).

Our moral persuasion intervention is therefore premised upon the assumption that it is possible to reduce normative (moral) aversion toward formerly incarcerated people through persuasive intervention. Should value-laden antipathy toward this group be reduced via HRSA, the theorized outcome is an increase in openness toward affirmative hiring practices. Our study seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of moral persuasion in reducing the public's negative attitudes toward the employment of formerly incarcerated people through an HRSA intervention. The theoretical micro-mechanism at play is proffered by Haidt (2001). In short, his psychological framework posits that moral judgments are not the result of calculative moral reasoning, but rather of “quick, automatic evaluations (intuitions)” (p. 814) based on emotions that are grounded in the wider society and culture within which they live and work. Thus, we propose:

H1. HRSA based on moral persuasion significantly reduces the public's stigma against the employment of formerly incarcerated people.

2.4 | Changing minds: An instrumental persuasion intervention

The underlying premise of the instrumental persuasion intervention is that the rationality of the public is amenable to change, and, specifically, that people's calculation about the risks versus benefits of locking formerly incarcerated people out of decent work may be favorably altered. In this regard, there is compelling argumentation to draw on, and

good reason to believe that an intervention based on the pragmatic merits of providing formerly incarcerated people with a second chance (and in particular decent employment opportunities) might work. The sheer volume of people locked out of the mainstream labor market and recirculating through the prison system has a number of adverse implications which may easily be construed to appeal to the self-interest of the public.

In terms of benefits to the economy, the number of Americans incarcerated has quintupled over the past 3 decades, with a total of over 100 million individuals reported as “offenders” in the US criminal history file (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014). This means that almost 20% of the American population now has a criminal record in a time when labor shortages are rampant. Therefore, employers narrow their talent pool by excluding formerly incarcerated people from consideration (Griffith & Young, 2017). Moreover, many people who have previously been incarcerated undertake rehabilitation programs, which equip them with appropriate and certified skills for the job market, at no cost to the employer (Wiawe, 2021). This means that a company that does not hire them may lose out on skilled labor. Griffith and Young (2017) contend that companies should not overlook this segment of the market, and instead assess applicants who have criminal records according to their skill and other job-related qualifications, rather than carelessly applying a “desk rejection” to anyone with a criminal record. More recently, first-hand accounts from employers (e.g., Pandeli & O'Regan, 2020) testify that hiring formerly incarcerated individuals is not only of broader social benefit, but, with care, support, and judicious hiring, they can be exemplary employees and good for business, too.

In terms of broader community benefits, Peck and Theodore (2008) provide a grim account of the failed reintegration of formerly incarcerated people and the “social decline” of the communities to which many of these individuals return. Seiter and Kadela (2003) similarly speak of the “destabilising” effect that large numbers of returning former prisoners can have on communities when reintegration opportunities are unavailable, linking this situation with “ultimately, higher crime” (see also Schnepel, 2017). In effect, a lack of job opportunities perpetuates a downward spiral of crime and re-incarceration, thereby casting the provision of employment opportunities to formerly incarcerated people as an act of “enlightened self-interest.” Excluding formerly incarcerated people from the labor market thus entails significant individual and societal costs. By drawing on arguments such as these, we hypothesize:

H2. HRSA based on instrumental persuasion significantly reduces the public's stigma against the employment of formerly incarcerated people.

2.5 | Which intervention, moral or instrumental, is more effective?

The path to answering this question is fraught with obstacles. Convincing arguments have been made on behalf of both moral and instrumental persuasion. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998), and indeed many institutional theorists (Scott, 2014), argue that norms and rationality are not disparate shapers of behavior, but rather inextricably linked. Both approaches have been found to be effective (hence H1 and H2), but the matter at hand of which is more effective, particularly in the context of HRSA, is really an empirical question, rather than a theoretical one. For example, Haidt (2001) has argued that judgments are often ineffective when they are only based on reason and rationality; he offers a devastating critique of what he refers to as “the worship of reason,” thus weakening any claims to the instrumental approach. On the other hand, however, public choice theorists, and behavioral economists, like Kahneman (2003) are much more likely to argue that appealing instrumentally to an individual's self-interest is comparatively more effective than purely normative moral (emotional) claims. According to the rationalist approach, people are less likely to be persuaded that the employment of formerly incarcerated people is morally right than by the instrumental argument that facilitating gainful employment for them is more likely to result in reduced crime in the community and savings to taxpayers (Harding et al., 2014). The barriers encountered by formerly incarcerated people, such as difficulties in finding and keeping decent jobs, present a significant challenge for the entire society.

In the absence of evidence that one approach is more effective than the other, but with the expectation that there might be variation in effectiveness across the two interventions, we have opted not to present a third hypothesis, and instead posit a *post hoc* exploratory research question: is HRSA that is based on instrumental persuasion more effective at reducing public stigma against the employment of formerly incarcerated people than HRSA that is based on moral persuasion? Although registered reports were designed to assess a priori hypotheses deductively (Timming et al., 2021), when the literature reaches a stalemate or is insufficiently developed on a particular theme, the presentation of *post hoc* exploratory research questions is acceptable.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS PROTOCOL (STAGE 1)

3.1 | Stimuli

The two HRSA interventions to be used in the experiment will be animated audio-visual stimuli, one of which presents a moral narrative with respect to the employment of formerly incarcerated people and the other of which presents an instrumental narrative. The setting of these animated narratives is a breakfast television talk show featuring a segment during which two guests (an HR executive and a formerly incarcerated person) discuss with the two hosts the merits of an affirmative hiring program run by a fictitious company, Horizon Global Logistics, which provides decent jobs to formerly incarcerated people.

Television is recognized as a powerful socializing tool (Hammer & Kellner, 2005), while a breakfast talk show more specifically provides us with an “audience-oriented” format that engages with contemporary topics and debates via a combination of spontaneous, “purposeful,” and “message-oriented” talk (Ilie, 2006, p. 490). This method of conveyance allows us to craft brief, naturalistic narratives, “geared to public debate” (Ilie, 2006, p. 489), which incorporate multiple viewpoints and are reflective of what HRSA might look like. As breakfast television is ubiquitous and indeed “semi-institutional” (Ilie, 2006, p. 490), it is a format likely to be familiar to respondents and therefore requires minimal exposition. More importantly, however, television talk shows are recognized as a powerful medium that shapes discourse and ideology (Hammer & Kellner, 2005; Peck, 1994). The talk show format allows us to present a discussion on common concerns the public might hold regarding the hiring of formerly incarcerated people. In short, this setting lends itself well to testing the concept of HSRA.

Our “casting” of the characters in our stimuli is informed by our conceptualization of HRSA and other research design considerations, such as potentially confounding variables. We have four characters: Jonas (about 30 years old, an African American man who has been incarcerated); Alicia (an HR executive at Horizon Global Solutions and a Latino woman, about 40 years old); Veronica (a talk show host and an African American woman in her mid-thirties); and William (the other talk show host and a White man, slightly older than Veronica).

We portray Jonas as a young Black man because it is well established that young, Black men are disproportionately affected by the criminal justice system, which many critical criminology scholars maintain is a racist institution (e.g., Pager, 2003, 2007; Pager et al., 2009; Peck & Theodore, 2008; Wacquant, 2000, 2001, 2005, 2007). While some people might not admit that providing a second chance to a Black man is more controversial than providing the same opportunity to a White man, the evidence suggests otherwise: formerly incarcerated Black men are more stigmatized than formerly incarcerated White men (Pager et al., 2009). Casting Jonas as a young Black man thus constitutes a terser test of the effectiveness of HRSA.

We portray Alicia as a Latino HR executive at Horizon Global Solutions because HRM is recognized as a feminized profession (Karoliny & Sipos, 2019; Roos & Manley, 1996; Scarborough, 2017). Latino professionals commonly experience employment discrimination themselves (Chavez, 2019) and are also over-represented in the prisoner population (Harris et al., 2019). This makes it quite believable that a Latino woman such as “Alicia” might occupy an executive HRM role and at the same time actively champion an unorthodox program such as that run by the fictitious Horizon Global Solutions.

Our casting choices in terms of Veronica and William are informed by the fact that White, conservative (or traditionally-inclined) men are said to be over-represented in roles of experts or hosts (but not so much as guests) in daytime talk shows (Hammer & Kellner, 2005). But at the same time, broadcasting and media corporations are conscious of the politics of representation; it is common to see displays of “democratic populism” via the casting of hosts from diverse backgrounds (Hammer & Kellner, 2005). Hence, casting William as a middle-aged White man, and Veronica as a slightly younger Black woman, is uncontroversial in terms of being a realistic representation of breakfast talk show and is not likely to distract respondents from the HRSA issue within the experiment. In other words, we have been careful not to “virtue signal” ourselves in our casting choices so that we may focus respondents on the substance of the interventions.

The content of both stimuli is informed by theory, in terms of the mechanisms that shape people's perceptions and feelings, and existing empirics, which we draw on to construct the practical details of each narrative in as realistic a way as possible. The characters and initial framing of the two narratives are identical, but the substance of the public message in each varies markedly to ensure one narrative exemplifies an instrumental argument and the other a moral argument. Appendix A reports a draft of the “Changing Hearts” HRSA script and Appendix B reports a draft of the “Changing Minds” HRSA script.

3.2 | Research design and item construction

We have opted in this case for a between-subjects design over a repeated measures (i.e., within-subjects) design. The former research design enjoys several advantages over repeated measures, as described in Charness et al. (2012). For example, between-subjects designs avoid harmful “order effects” and “learning effects” that are more common in repeated measures (Day et al., 2012). In addition, a between-subjects approach requires less time to complete the questionnaire, which in turn results in lower attrition rates. Moreover, the sample size (described below) is more than large enough to accommodate a between-subjects design. Finally, between subjects-designs are generally thought to be more conservative, reducing the possibility of Type I error (cf. Charness et al., 2012).

Given the between-subjects nature of the research design, most experiments of this sort employ multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) to evaluate the effect of the stimuli. Although MANCOVA would provide a valuable methodological framework for comparison across groups, we will employ the generalized linear model (GLM) to achieve the same end. The survey will be administered to three separate (independent) samples ($n = 400$ each) and then merged into one overarching study sample ($N = 1200$). Sample 1 will consist of a control group that receives no stimulus; Sample 2 will receive the moral persuasion HRSA stimulus up front; and Sample 3 will receive the instrumental persuasion HRSA stimulus up front.

Independent Variables. The independent variables will be created from the three sample groups. To assess H1 and H2, two dummy variables will be created, with the control group serving as the reference category: (1) moral persuasion versus the control and (2) instrumental persuasion versus the control. To answer the *post-hoc* exploratory research question regarding the relative effectiveness of moral versus instrumental persuasion, a second GLM model will be run comparing only Sample 2 with Sample 3.

Dependent Variables. We aim to measure five dependent variables: (i) “Most people with prior criminal convictions are trustworthy,” where 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; (ii) “Employing formerly incarcerated people can place the public at risk,” where 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; (iii) “People with prior criminal convictions probably don't make reliable employees,” where 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; (iv) “I wouldn't feel comfortable being served by a formerly incarcerated person when purchasing a product or service,” where 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree; and (v) “It is important that decent employment opportunities are provided to formerly incarcerated people,” where 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree.

Covariates. Prior meta-analytic research demonstrates that demographic characteristics can systematically impact the attitude toward hiring formerly incarcerated people (Kyprianides et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2020;

Swanson et al., 2012). Aligned with these studies, we control for *age*, *gender*, *nationality*, *ethnicity* (e.g., White; Black; Hispanic; other), *annual income*, *employment status* (e.g., employed for wages; self-employed; out of work and looking for work; out of work but not currently looking for work; student; retired; unable to work). We also will include the *level of education*, which has been positively linked to the employment of formerly incarcerated people (Wiafe, 2021), as an ordinal variable: 1 = less than high school, 2 = high school or general education diploma (GED), 3 = some college, 4 = college degree, 5 = master's degree, and 6 = doctoral or professional degree. Lastly, we will add a *criminal record* dummy, valued 1 for individuals who have criminal records and 0 otherwise. The same coding has been applied to the last two control variables: *victim of crime* and *working within the criminal justice system*.

3.3 | Data collection

When Stage 1 of this Registered Report is accepted in principle, the survey instrument will be administered to three independent samples. The data will be collected via Prolific, an online crowd-sourcing platform that compensates participants for their time. Each sample will be collected from an IP address based in the United States. To ensure representativeness, the three samples will be "matched" to population demographics, including gender and race. In Sample 1 ($n = 400$), baseline (control) data will be generated; the participants will not be shown an HRSA intervention and will only complete the questionnaire. In Sample 2 ($n = 400$), the participants will first be shown the moral persuasion HRSA and then asked to complete the questionnaire. In Sample 3 ($n = 400$), the participants will first be shown the instrumental persuasion HRSA and then asked to complete the items. Each survey instrument will include one instructional manipulation check (Oppenheimer et al., 2009), a simple math problem: ("What is $8 + 3$?"). Incorrect responses, in addition to incomplete data, will be excluded from each sample. The three samples will then be merged into one overarching sample ($N = 1200$) for analysis.

3.4 | Analytic techniques

As noted, we will employ, as our primary technique, the GLM to assess the effects of our HRSA interventions on public attitudes toward the employment of formerly incarcerated people. In Models 1 and 2, we will compare each HRSA intervention with the control group; in Model 3, we will compare the effectiveness of each HRSA with the other. We will carry out additional robustness tests in the form of *post hoc* analyses to complement our initial models, for example, MANCOVA.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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APPENDIX A: DRAFT SCRIPT OF THE "CHANGING HEARTS" INTERVENTION

Changing hearts: A moral persuasion intervention

CHARACTERS

William: White male, about 45 years old, breakfast show co-host

Veronica: African American woman, mid-thirties, breakfast show co-host

Alicia Perez: Latino woman, late forties, Human Resources Executive at Horizon Global Solutions

Jonas: Employee of Horizon Global Solutions, formerly incarcerated, African American man; about 30 years old

SCENE

The inside of a TV studio set up for breakfast TV.

Fading music; informal interaction between the breakfast show hosts and guests settles; William and Veronica turn to the cameras....

WILLIAM [to the viewers]: And welcome back, everyone. Today we're delighted to be talking about an issue that's really important and potentially divisive. Consider this: if you ran your own business, or if you were responsible for hiring people in your firm, would you hire an ex-offender? And, what kind of job would you give them? Would you give them a *decent* job? One with good pay, security, and good benefits? [Slight pause for effect]. ... Well, that's exactly what Horizon Global Solutions decided it would do. And today, we're pleased to have with us Alicia Perez, who's the Human Resources Manager at Horizon Global Solutions, and Jonas, one of horizon global solutions (HGS's) employees, who had previously been caught up in the criminal justice system. [Turning to Alicia and Jonas] Alicia, if I could start with you: tell us a little bit about Horizon Global Solutions and how the company came to proactively hire people who've been in prison.

ALICIA: Thanks, William. So, Horizon Global Solutions is one of the largest, publicly-listed transportation and logistics companies in the US with approximately 15,000 employees. Therefore, we not only have a lot of *jobs*, we have a lot of *diversity* in our jobs. We're an employer of choice who treats our employees well and provides really good benefit packages. We employ drivers, receptionists, salespeople, warehouse teams ... you name it. And, some of our employees who work in those areas just happen to have a different background than you and I do, meaning they may have a criminal record, or spent time in prison.

VERONICA: What's behind that decision, Alicia? Because it's definitely not how most companies operate these days.

ALICIA: There's a lot of factors, but mainly, we're motivated by our desire to make a genuine difference to people's lives, to have a social impact, and to provide real support to the broader community. Everybody deserves to have a chance or, in some cases, a second chance. We already have an inclusion policy and hire people with different abilities, or people from LGBTIQ + communities, for example. And we thought, do you know who we *don't* hire at HGS? Who we *actively screen out* of our jobs? And that was people with a criminal record—some of the most disadvantaged members of our society. So we started to question our assumptions sitting underneath those hiring practices.

VERONICA: And what were some of those assumptions, Alicia?

ALICIA: Things like “*Ex-offenders are bad people who've done bad things.*” Or, “*Ex-offenders are of poor character; they're untrustworthy.*” “*Ex-offenders have no morals.*” “*Ex-offenders don't deserve our help.*” “*Other disadvantaged people are more worthy.*” And then, initially, because of these assumptions, which are quite widespread, there were also some concerns about what it would do to our brand, if we started to proactively hire ex-offenders. We do have shareholders and customers to think about, after all.

WILLIAM: And what are you finding, in that regard, Alicia?

ALICIA: Well, it took some time, and some self-education, but eventually our senior exec team all arrived at the position where we actually thought providing people with a second chance was the right thing to do. We spoke to reentry support groups, and advocacy bodies—we basically educated ourselves—and we realized that, actually, most people who end up in prison are amongst some of the most disadvantaged people in our community. In most cases, people in prison have endured a lifetime of deprivation and disadvantage. They've grown up surrounded by drugs and violence, they've been victims of terrible crime themselves, they haven't been educated ... After doing our homework, we could see that the stereotyped views we held were simply incorrect. People *do* deserve a second chance. They *do* deserve decent work, that enables them to lead a life of dignity. They're intrinsically worthy of our support.

And that's partly why we're here today—we want to debunk some of those myths. I'm sure when you hear from people like Jonas, a lot of stereotypes and assumptions will be really challenged, and dare I say, for the better.

WILLIAM [reassuring gesture]: Absolutely, absolutely... So Jonas, how long have you been with HGS?

JONAS: So I've been at HGS for nearly 2 years now, and I work in one of the warehouses, helping with the inventory.

WILLIAM: And how are you enjoying work, Jonas?

JONAS: Oh, I'm loving it. I'm loving it. When I started, I was nervous—like *really* nervous. I'd never actually had a proper job before. You need to understand, I'd grown up pretty much on the streets. I was in and out from the age of 14. No education, like Alicia said. Getting up, going to work every day, like just doing normal things, like normal people—I just had no idea about any of that stuff. It sounds strange, but I just didn't see people around me doing that kind of thing. My mother was on drugs, and my father was in prison, there were all kinds of different men cycling through our home. You know, I was abused. Let's just say it was a very, very depressing picture.

VERONICA [looking empathetic]: Obviously your life today is really different than it was, say 2 years ago. Could you tell us a little bit about that turning point for you.

JONAS: The thing is, last time, just before I went back to prison, my partner found out she was pregnant. I was inside when my son was born, and the parallel with my own father, just ... I could see everything unfolding for my son, and I thought, "No." This is not happening. But of course, even though you might have the intent to make good, actually doing it is nearly impossible. Sure, you get hooked up with social support when you leave, but employers, they don't really want to have anything to do with you. I don't think anyone knows how hard it is to find a job—and I mean a job that actually pays a livable wage—when you have a criminal record, unless you've been in that situation yourself.

VERONICA: Which is interesting, because going to prison is meant to be the sentence, right? *That's* the punishment, not exclusion from society forever after.

JONAS: Exactly!

VERONICA: And did you have any training in warehouse management?

JONAS: I had nothing. Nothing. But I got my general education diploma (GED) in prison. And I had determination. And initiative. And a willingness to work hard.

ALICIA: And that's all that we need, really, those personal qualities, to build really good working relationships.

JONAS: Actually now I'm also studying supply chain management and logistics.

WILLIAM: You're doing further study?

JONAS: [Smiling] Yeah, yeah. I'm going alright, too! Who'd have imagined? Me doing further study.

VERONICA: You're all an inspiration to us, and I'm sure both you and Alicia are giving a lot of folks out there hope for the future. Any final comment for our viewers Alicia?

ALICIA: Together, we can genuinely help people turn their lives around, and make a difference not just to people who are leaving prison and hoping to make a go of it, but to their families and their communities. The vast majority of people who wind up in prison are not fundamentally "bad" [gesturing *scare quotes*]. They are fundamentally decent, and they deserve our support so that they can make a go of it. I would say to everyone at home, if you try to understand people's lives, like Jonas' here [placing hand on shoulder], you'll see that circumstance, social forces, and things like discrimination, play a very significant role in shaping people's lives. Each and every one of us needs to ask ourselves: What kind of a society do we want to live in? One that never forgives? That throws away the key? Or one that believes giving people a second chance is just the morally right thing to do?

[Closing niceties etc.] Approximately 5 min.

APPENDIX B: DRAFT SCRIPT OF THE "CHANGING MINDS" INTERVENTION

Changing minds: An instrumental persuasion intervention

CHARACTERS:

William: White male, about 45 years old, breakfast show co-host

Veronica: African American woman, mid-thirties, breakfast show co-host

Alicia Perez: Latino woman, late forties, Human Resources Executive at Horizon Global Solutions

Jonas: Employee of Horizon Global Solutions, formerly incarcerated, African American man; about 30 years old

SCENE

The inside of a TV studio set up for breakfast TV.

Fading music; informal interaction between the breakfast show hosts and guests settles; William and Veronica turn to the cameras....

WILLIAM [to the viewers]: And welcome back, everyone. Today we're delighted to be talking about an issue that's really important and potentially divisive. Consider this: if you ran your own business, or if you were responsible for hiring people in your firm, would you hire an ex-offender? And, what kind of job would you give them? Would you give them a *decent* job? One with good pay, security, and good benefits? [Slight pause for effect]. ... Well, that's exactly what Horizon Global Solutions decided it would do. And today, we're pleased to have with us Alicia Perez, who's the Human Resources Manager at Horizon Global Solutions, and Jonas, one of HGS's employees, who had previously been caught up in the criminal justice system. [Turning to Alicia and Jonas] Alicia, if I could start with you: tell us a little bit about Horizon Global Solutions and how the company came to proactively hire people who've been in prison.

ALICIA: Thanks, William. So, Horizon Global Solutions is one of the largest, publicly-listed transportation and logistics companies in the US with approximately 15,000 employees. Therefore, we not only have a lot of *jobs*, we have a lot of *diversity* in our jobs. Crucially, we offer people *decent* jobs. We're an employer of choice who treats our employees well and provides really good benefit packages. We employ drivers, receptionists, salespeople, warehouse teams ... you name it. And, some of our employees who work in those areas just happen to have a different background than you and I do, meaning they may have a criminal record, or spent time in prison.

VERONICA: What's behind that decision, Alicia? Because it's definitely not how most companies operate these days.

ALICIA: There's a lot of factors, but mainly, we're pragmatic people who want to run a successful business, and we're always looking for good employees who will be truly committed to our company. And, it's important to point out, here, that there's a significant community benefit in providing formerly incarcerated people with decent job opportunities: it helps people reintegrate into society. Now, if you think about that, if we can help keep people out of prison, we're saving you and me (gesturing), and you out there (turning to the camera, and gesturing), as tax payers, a lot of money. Prison is expensive. And in many ways, the government is already spending a substantial amount of money on reentry. Tax credits, for example, for businesses that hire people who have been incarcerated. As an employer, we can access those incentives. Now, there are some employers out there that take the credit, and then sack the employee when the incentive dries up, and just hire the next one. So, ultimately, the prison merry-go-round continues. That doesn't make sense to us. We need to slow down that revolving door. Why not play the longer game? There are commercial *and* social long-term gains to be made by providing people who are leaving prison with decent jobs.

WILLIAM: So you're suggesting, Alicia, that employment helps people stay out of prison?

ALICIA: Yes I am. So, another way to think about what we do at HGS is in terms of crime rates and public safety. If we help people turn their lives around, put food on the table, put their kids through school, in a small way we're contributing to public safety. So, from our point of view it just makes sense, for everyone. We're looking after ourselves as a business, but also the community. Yet, when we wanted to change our recruitment practices, we found, internally, that we really had to challenge some of our assumptions about our existing hiring practices, because despite these benefits, we were screening these people out of jobs.

VERONICA: And what were some of those assumptions, Alicia?

ALICIA: Things that probably you and I and a lot of your viewers might think, without a proper understanding of the situation, and without considering the evidence. So, like, basically, that formerly incarcerated people are not going to be productive employees and are going to be a risk to the company. So, some of those assumptions might be, "*Hiring an ex-offender is inviting trouble.*" "*An ex-offender is going to be violent towards your staff and customers.*" "*An ex-offender will steal from your company.*" "*Ex-offenders won't be good employees.*" "*Ex-offenders*

are drug addicts." "Ex-offenders aren't worth the trouble." You know, all of these kinds of stereotyped views that might make many employers think it's simply too risky and bad for business to invite an ex-offender into their company.

WILLIAM: And what are you finding, in that regard, Alicia?

ALICIA: Well, it took some time, and some self-education, but eventually our senior exec team all recognized the strategic success of our hiring policy. It's hard to find good people! Also, we think at the end of the day our customers just want reliable, excellent service, and even though it may be unbeknownst to them, they are being provided great service by *all* our employees, including those who have spent time in prison. Also, we find that many people who have been in prison honestly just want a "normal" (gesturing scare quotes) life; they want to do an honest day's work and put the hardship of a criminal life behind them. They're ready for change. And we're ready to contribute to the community.

By being open to people like Jonas, we've opened up quite a large pool of potential candidates who we just didn't consider before—and we have this pool of people almost to ourselves, because our competitors don't tend to be able to look past the criminal record issue. On top of that, we're not only making a difference to HGS, by hiring good folk, or a difference to the life of the person who we hire—we're making a difference to our customers, and also the community. That's partly why we're here today—we want to debunk some of those myths. I'm sure when you hear from Jonas, a lot of stereotypes and assumptions will be really challenged, and dare I say, for the better.

WILLIAM [affirmative gesture]: Absolutely, absolutely.... So Jonas, how long have you been with HGS?

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WILLIAM: Which makes it hard to make a go of it, right?

JONAS: Exactly. Without work—I mean legit work—it's extremely difficult to keep going. You turn back to what you know, to the people you know, to what you've done in the past. Before you know it, you're back on that ... what did you call it, Alicia? the merry-go-round. I know, because they've given me a chance, I will never let HGS down. Never.

VERONICA: And did you have any training in warehouse management?

JONAS: I had nothing. Nothing. But I got my GED in prison. And I had determination. And initiative. And a willingness to work hard.

ALICIA: And that's all that we need, really, those personal qualities, to build really good working relationships, and a desire to succeed.

JONAS: Actually now I'm studying supply chain management and logistics.

WILLIAM: You're doing further study?

JONAS: [Smiling] Yeah, yeah. I'm going alright, too! Who'd have thought? Me doing further study.

VERONICA: You're all an inspiration to us, and I'm sure both you and Alicia are giving a lot of folks out there hope for the future. Any final comment for our viewers Alicia?

ALICIA: One of the best facilitators of reentry following time in prison, is employment. People are far more likely to turn their lives around, if they have decent, meaningful employment. And if we can look at this for a moment dispassionately, that's a better outcome for all of us. We are not employing dangerous criminals; we're bringing dedicated, loyal, talented individuals into the firm, who have, I think, an extra degree of commitment to us, because we decided to look past their criminal record. At the end of the day, we find it's pretty simple: if you treat people decently, a social contract kicks in, and people behave decently. Basically, our hiring practices are a win-win situation, all around.

[Closing niceties etc.] Approximately 5 min.