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INCLUSIVE THEORY OF CHANGE DEVELOPMENT FOR A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Graduate School of Leadership & Change  
Antioch University

In partial fulfillment for the degree of  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

Megan A. Bolton

ORCID Scholar No. 0009-0006-4530-6259

June 2024

# INCLUSIVE THEORY OF CHANGE DEVELOPMENT FOR A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

This dissertation, by Megan A. Bolton has been approved by the committee members signed below who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of the Graduate School of Leadership & Change Antioch University in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

## DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

### INCLUSIVE THEORY OF CHANGE DEVELOPMENT FOR A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

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This research aimed to study what occurs when a theory of change (ToC) is co-created in a social enterprise serving individuals facing barriers to employment. The study included the following three objectives: identifying the barriers and facilitators experienced by those implementing the ToC, gathering the perspectives of program end users on the ToC, and exploring how the ToC would facilitate impact measurement. A central feature of this AR study was the engagement of returning citizens in the discussion and development of the ToC, which added to the process and outcomes of this research in important ways. The lived experience of the participants was vitally important to the generation of knowledge and the validity of that knowledge during this AR-anchored ToC development process. The main findings of this research demonstrate the value of providing opportunities for returning citizens to have a safe and welcoming environment for re-entry. They also emphasize the opportunity for returning citizens to be involved in the ToC development alongside staff. The value of being able to reflect together and hear each other's perspectives added greatly to the conversation and generation of knowledge for both groups involved as participants. Finally, the findings suggest that the inclusion of key constituents in the ToC development process improves its quality, relevance, and role. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (<https://aura.antioch.edu/>) and OhioLINK ETD Center (<https://etd.ohiolink.edu>).

*Keywords:* leadership, action research, theory of change, reentry, returning citizens, social enterprise



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## Chapter I: Introduction

Social enterprises (SEs) often have a variety of missions and legal frameworks, especially in the United States. Additionally, SEs' organizational structures are largely based on context, including their geography, political climate, mission, populations served, and grants acquired. To assist SEs with understanding the context of their organizations and delve into how they accomplish their missions, the application and implementation of the Theory of change (ToC) are essential.

It is also important to note that ToC focuses on the inclusion of end users in the creation of programs and services within an organization (Coghlan, 2019). Established ToC approaches emphasize the inclusion of these individuals in the development of the overarching theory of change (Haskell et al., 2009). Additionally, participant-focused research approaches such as action research (AR) are particularly suited for change-oriented organizational research and practice initiatives such as ToC (MacDonald, 2012, Newell, 2020).

For this specific study, *RecycleForce* was the organization of focus, as it is an SE located in Indianapolis, Indiana, and serves returning citizens, or individuals who have been formerly incarcerated, through workforce development, wrap-around services, and a recycling business. ToC was used to assist *RecycleForce* to better understand its mission and approach by having the staff and returning citizens walk through their programs, goals, and activities together. The ToC process functioned as a tool to encourage key constituent voices to be included in its development. The AR methodology also made sure the voices of participants were at the forefront.

## **Positionality**

In 2010, I was involved with a group at Anderson University in Indiana, where I met Father Gregory Boyle from Homeboy Industries. At that time, I started learning more about what SEs were and how they could possibly benefit nonprofit and for-profit organizations and the people they serve. I also learned about liberation theology and how the voices of the people were important to creating a whole and just community.

A few years later, I took a course on social entrepreneurship during my master's in public affairs degree. I learned more about asset-based community development, engaging the community, and making sure that all people's voices were at the table in planning and decision-making. I was working for a nonprofit community center at the time but did not understand how to apply what I had learned from the social entrepreneurship course to my work.

During my coursework at Antioch University for this dissertation, I realized I was very interested in the ways that SEs could help communities and staff better understand how to work with people. After reading through works by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire (1990), Peter Block (2008), and Jean McNiff (2017), I started to gain a better understanding of what it meant to empower people through research. This exposure led me to social entrepreneurship and the ways it is being used in some contexts in the United States. This learning also led me to the ToC framework, which starts with gathering the right stakeholders to begin its development. Finally, these insights led me to AR as a methodology to make sure that the voices of people who are clients of the work are given equal value to those who lead the way.

Currently, I work for a nonprofit organization focused on health policy and the built environment which involves advocacy around public transit, bicycling, walking, and related infrastructure. This organization has focused on the social determinants of health (SDOH) to

address disparities in the world as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The CDC (2021) outlines the five focus areas for SDOH: access to quality healthcare, access to quality education, social and community context, economic stability, and neighborhoods and the built environment. The theory of SDOH suggests that these five areas impact a wide range of health risks and outcomes. To me, addressing these areas includes empowering people and making sure their voices are included.

For this study, I chose to focus on *RecycleForce* largely because of the work it is doing in my own neighborhood and place of work, both located in Indianapolis, Indiana. More importantly, *RecycleForce*'s mission and approach aligned with my study's objectives. It is a SE working with people who are returning citizens or, for the sake of this dissertation, people who have been directly affected by involvement with the justice system.

My background with incarceration includes my father's work as a prison chaplain in Michigan, my brother's work as an accountant for the State of Michigan prison system, and my own volunteer work on several occasions at a re-entry facility in Indianapolis. I have done community work with asset-based community development in the neighborhood where I live, and I had previously met the Executive Director of *RecycleForce*.

Close distance was a factor in selecting an organization to collaborate with for my dissertation. When looking for potential organizations in 2020, the world was experiencing the height of the pre-vaccination COVID-19 pandemic. *RecycleForce* is roughly a 10-minute drive from where I live, so travel was easier for me to manage rather than having to move about the country with the threat of illness and travel restrictions. It also means I had access to the organization in person rather than having to do virtual interviews. It was also important to be

able to interview in person because many of the people who use the organization's services do not have access to the technology needed to engage in virtual conversations.

While the convenience of the organization to my geographical location was certainly a factor in my choice, *RecycleForce* also aligns well with my research interests, as noted above. Its clients face many barriers to employment, which can cause recidivism and relapse into the behaviors that may have led to their imprisonment. It may also be the case that the systems in which these clients exist have given rise to their imprisonment, and that framework needs to be acknowledged. These systems include, but are not limited to, the justice system, welfare, housing, social networks, and the education system.

### **Study Background and Problem Identification**

Traditionally, older adults, people of color, people with disabilities, and those taking on caring roles face many barriers to employment (Aiken, 2007). For example, an individual with a disability may not be able to perform a job due to a lack of accommodation. A person of color may face discrimination because of institutional racism. Also, a returning citizen may not be able to obtain quality work because of their criminal background. To address these barriers, initiatives have been put in place through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Ban the Box movement (All of Us or None of Us, n.d.). Despite these many efforts, barriers persist. Additionally, for returning citizens, challenges related to addiction and homelessness may compound the aforementioned societal and legal barriers (Augustine, 2019).

United States culture is built on a white supremacy mindset which focuses on perfection, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, progress is bigger and better, objectivity, and a right to comfort (Okun & Jones, 2000). This mindset



permeates every aspect of life and creates barriers for individuals who do not fit a certain standard or expectation. When they do not fit the status quo, people are prevented from applying for jobs, holding positions for very long, or rising through the ranks to create a better life for themselves or their families. There are many factors that also prevent employment including education, generational poverty, and lack of access to relationships for networking. When individuals cannot achieve these goals, it impacts their lives and potentially the lives of their descendants.

Returning citizens also have barriers that prevent them from gaining employment once they are released. Whether they have a federal or local offense, the stigma attached to offending often bars them from even getting an interview for a position (Moe et al., 2015). Some of these legal challenges include being required to report their status as an offender on an application, the misuse of background checks to screen potential employees, and being barred from certain professions (Augustine, 2019; Baskaran, 2019). In addition to legal challenges, returning citizens also face a lack of post-prison services, social stigmas, and a lack of positive social networks (Moe et al., 2015). The rate of poor educational attainment among those who have been incarcerated is high, which poses another barrier (Moe et al., 2015). This means that they may not be able to read an application to fill it out. They may also not be able to apply for a job that values qualifications over years of experience. As Augustine (2019) stated,

Employment has been cited as one of the most effective protections against recidivism for formerly incarcerated people; however, job seekers with criminal records face barriers to employment after prison. They find themselves in a legal double bind where they are simultaneously compelled to obey the law (by finding “legit” work) but also legally barred from doing so. (p. 726)

The result of these and other barriers can lead to a high rate of recidivism when returning citizens turn to illegal activity because they cannot find gainful employment.

Studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between maintaining employment after release and avoiding re-incarceration (Baskaran, 2019; Boman IV & Mowen, 2017). Since quality employment is often difficult to find for returning citizens, the creation of low-entry jobs by employers offers work skills and experience. The disadvantage is that low-wage jobs may not allow returning citizens to move upward and be self-sufficient (Cooney, 2016). It is important that returning citizens are supported to enter quality positions and gain certificates and credentials (Moe et al., 2015). Barriers to opportunities for growth relegate individuals to a status where they feel there are no other options than to engage in illegal activity that may lead to recidivism (Evans, 2007). Non-profits can engage in policy advocating on behalf of returning citizens to remove barriers and work through connections with existing employers. However, they find it hard to create positions for them to have steady, quality employment due to a lack of funding and capacity (Baskaran, 2019).

SEs focused on addressing barriers hold a unique position. These organizations' business models are based on offering services or goods, and they sometimes target individuals for employment who may not get hired at other places (Leung et al., 2019). With this support, SEs offer the opportunity for individuals to gain work experience and social skills to assist them in furthering their opportunities elsewhere. A SE that offers job training, counseling, financial stability, and more offers both employment opportunity and upward mobility to returning citizens (Moe et al., 2015). This upward mobility not only impacts the returning citizen but may also impact their family and community.

However, SEs have several challenges to how they function and how they serve the community. While they do intend to generate revenue from the goods or services they provide, the primary mission of a SE is to help its target community (Moe et al., 2015). This creates

tension in the way these organizations function. They sell goods and services while also reinvesting surpluses in the mission of the organization. Indeed, there are some challenges with SEs using double bottom-line approaches (combining purpose and for-profit business models) (Erpf et al., 2019). In some cases, organizations follow money and projects that may provide a profit at the expense of their mission. Additionally, the United States does not offer a standard legal structure for SEs (Bauer & Umlas, 2017; Baskaran, 2019). There are a variety of options that allow a business or nonprofit to become a SE, but they exist on a state-by-state basis. This lack of consistency creates challenges for federal regulations and adherence to the tax code to maintain certain financial status in the country. There does not seem to be a common set of approaches and interventions to addressing social and systemic issues for SEs (Ebrahim et al., 2014). There is also no set of guidelines for an SE to address the need they have determined is important in their community. Many times, an entrepreneur has an idea, and they implement it out of necessity to solve a specific problem they have observed (Blackburn & Ram, 2006). This disconnect and lack of best practices influences program planning, measurement, and impact.

The ToC framework allows practitioners to assess their intended outcomes and systematically determine how to achieve them. It does this by guiding stakeholders through a process of laying out their goals, programs, services, gaps, and assumptions and organizing them into a framework (Taplin et al., 2013). As an organization evaluates how it wants to make an impact, it first needs to understand its end goal. The goal should not be unachievable in a lifetime, like ending world hunger, but should be reasonable for the organization to accomplish given its context. Once this goal or goals have been established, the organization can outline short, medium, and long-term outcomes, determine existing programs that fit into the framework, and identify stakeholders that might be involved (Jackson, 2013; Serrat, 2017; Vogel, 2012).

Thinking through the assumptions the organization is making along the way is also important so that it can potentially uncover gaps in ways of thinking about its goals. Finally, the organization can look at the gaps that exist in programming and interventions, address programs that might not fit into its mission and avoid mission creep, and look at how the organization involves the stakeholders that are part of the work (James, 2012; Connolly & Seymour, 2015; Vogel, 2012).

The ToC offers the potential to address the issues that arise for SE by bringing clarity and focus to the work an organization is attempting to undertake. It can be difficult to balance the profit and social work the organization must maintain. It is not often that nonprofits or SEs turn to their clients first for prioritizing and developing programs and services. Some organizations have been known to enter a community with what they perceive are the answers to everyone's problems. Without asking the community, they implement programming, which often fails even with research to back up the organization's ideas. As previously mentioned, the ToC framework also emphasizes the importance of engaging clients in the development of the ToC.

### **Purpose**

Using *RecycleForce* as a collaborator, the purpose of this dissertation was to examine how the SE might develop a ToC to demonstrate how it achieves desired outcomes. Developing a ToC with *RecycleForce* involved working with their clients and staff. Using AR methodologies, the development of this ToC was driven by the people involved in the process who were the most impacted by the work.

### **Research Aim and Objectives**

This dissertation aimed to understand what occurs in the co-creation of a ToC in an SE serving individuals facing barriers to employment. With that in mind, there were three objectives:

- **Objective 1:** To develop an understanding of barriers and facilitators experienced by those implementing the ToC
- **Objective 2:** To gather the perspectives of program end-users involved in the development of the ToC
- **Objective 3:** To explore with participants how the ToC can be used to demonstrate and measure impact.

A reflexive approach was taken to analyze the data, with particular attention to how findings may be applicable to other organizations co-creating a ToC.

### **Overview of Research Approach**

This study focused on the use of a ToC in an organization that serves people facing barriers to employment to help them better understand their mission and approach. The ToC allowed the articulation of key interventions, causal pathways, and assumptions that form the foundation of future program planning and outcome measurement for the focal organization. The overarching methodology for this study was AR, which addresses injustice and empowers people to make and understand the changes happening to them (Horton & Freire, 1990; McNiff, 2017; Smith et al., 1997; Stringer & Aragón, 2020). It is a collaborative and cyclical process that requires reflection each time a cycle is begun/completed. AR and ToC are complementary as they both focus on participatory processes. Building ToC through the AR methodology allowed for the voices of the returning citizens to be a part of developing the framework.

AR involves extensive pre-research, engagement, and reflection where both the organization, participants, and the researcher are learning. Furthermore, Reason and Bradbury (2005) believed that AR works toward practical knowledge that helps people in their everyday lives. Further, theories that contribute to human emancipation can lead us to different ways of

coexisting and inspire practice. AR, at its core, is a participatory style of research that encourages the engagement and empowerment of the community. Within that participatory style, there are several ways that AR can be arranged. These include participatory AR, practitioner AR, action learning, and appreciative inquiry. The blending of AR and ToC creates a space for careful consideration of the kind of AR being used. For this dissertation, the AR methodology seemed appropriate to facilitate and study the ToC co-creation process.

In working on co-creation with *RecycleForce*, AR helped to create a level playing field for all participants. Martin (2005) explained that this environment of co-creation is one where participants and professional researchers define problems together, co-create knowledge about them, learn and execute research techniques, take actions, and interpret the results based on those actions together. It involves the generation of knowledge through cycles of learning. A researcher engages in AR to improve practices, discover new understandings, and discover the reasons for action and its effects (McNiff, 2017).

Knowledge creation is complicated and difficult work that requires a continuing cycle of research, capacity building, and practice (Senge & Scharmer, 2005). Engaging with a community, no matter the size, involves taking stakeholders' opinions into account. This method of research aims to develop a deeper understanding of how people should interact with one another (McNiff, 2017). Through a collaborative approach, researchers can sometimes use a version of the "think-look-act" routine to systematically work through a problem (Stringer & Aragón, 2020).

SEs that serve returning citizens are intended to be a bridge for them into the labor market and society. These organizations have a social mission and usually a set of programs they use to serve their clients. Each has an implicit or explicit theory about why its mission works for

returning citizens. The theory of change used by each organization is important to understanding that bridge and its success. It is important to know why social entrepreneurship is a vehicle for people facing barriers to employment, specifically returning citizens. For this dissertation, a sample of participants were recruited from the *RecycleForce* staff and returning citizens. This sample made sure that a cross-section of people was involved in the development of the organization's ToC. This group was convened to develop the ToC for the organization.

The ToC approach starts with the end goal of the organization. It then works backward through long-, mid-, and short-term goals and activities (Taplin & Clark, 2012). Steps include actions taken, programs created, and interventions made to reach the end goal. I followed the guidance from Taplin and Clark in my research. The AR cycle followed next to gather perspectives and reflections from participants.

AR and ToC both emphasize including people in research who are the end users of an organization's programs. Through this process, I wanted to understand how to co-create a ToC more effectively. I also wanted to understand the perspective of other individuals who go through the development of this framework. I addressed these objectives by including stakeholders in the creation of the organization's ToC. They were involved in the AR cycle we used to identify the problem, develop a plan of action, collect data, and report the results. An important contribution of this study is that it shows how ToC may be co-developed by a SE to do that planning effectively. Part of the ToC development was to better understand the gaps in the organization's programming and policy and what can be done about them. This process might be a way for an organization to understand its impact and/or success.

## Overview of Chapters

Chapter II specifically discusses SEs and dynamics of re-entry related to returning citizens. While sometimes the barriers people face are self-made, they can be institutional or a combination of both. For these reasons, it is important to understand why this is vital to dismantling systems that have been put in place to discriminate against people. Even in situations where people have committed crimes and have been placed into the justice system, a history of discrimination has existed to set them up for failure. This is not to say that people who have committed crimes do not deserve to be prosecuted.

To delve deeper into this area, Chapter II specifically discusses SE and re-entry. A brief discussion of the school-to-prison pipeline, which targets people of color, follows. This section wraps up with an overview of re-entry programming, how people are discriminated against upon re-entry, and how SEs are a vehicle for change. It is important to understand each of these areas and how they are connected. SEs have a valuable role in assisting returning citizens with the barriers they face to being gainfully employed. Understanding context is important to every part of this research and is a mainstay of the AR process and ToC development. The context of how SEs fit into the legal and social structure of society helps to understand why they are a good fit for this work.

Lastly, the literature review wraps up with a discussion regarding ToC and its uses. There is a brief overview of the definitions of the framework, how it is used to explore change, how it empowers people and asks hard questions, and why this is important. Specifically, it explores the idea that a ToC framework helps a SE to address employment barriers.

Chapter III discusses the research design for the study and includes the rationale for the use of AR and details of the research process. The reasons for the study and why *RecycleForce*



was involved are important to why this methodology and framework were chosen. In addition, an outside group was engaged as critical friends (CF) to check the researcher's assumptions throughout the process. This was important to the research to also check for validity so that the researcher maintained a position of research rather than consultation.

Chapter IV provides the analysis of the data collected through the ToC framework development and AR process. The data includes reflections from stakeholders and notes from the researcher and the CF group. The results of the study are summarized and presented in line with the overall aim and objectives.

Chapter V discusses the research findings and how they relate to the relevant research literature. The chapter also discusses the overall research contributions of this study. Implications of the findings to the specific context are drawn. Limitations and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

## **Definitions**

Several terms need to be defined within the context of this dissertation. They have been included below to provide clarity and a base of understanding in context.

- **Action research:** A set of parameters under which researchers operate, which include the AR cycles, focus on social justice, attention to validity, and involvement of participants from the organization or group within which the researcher is working.
- **Theory of change:** A process and a product of a conceptual framework of how and why a social change initiative works (Clark, 2019).
- **Social enterprise (SE):** An organization that typically pursues a dual mission that combines a social purpose and profit-making. SEs may be organized to deliver products and/or services to serve their missions.

- **Returning citizens:** Individuals who are currently incarcerated but are on their way to being released. It includes those who have been incarcerated in the past and have been released. They may or may not be on parole. Any individual engaged on the re-entry pathway.
- **Stakeholders:** Anyone involved with an organization at any point or may be impacted by its work and activities. It may include clients, staff, community members, municipal officials, and board members.
- **Critical friends:** An outside group engaged to check the researcher's assumptions during the main AR research steps

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This literature review covers the dynamics of returning citizens and the employment barriers that they may face. It provides a general overview of re-entry programming; then, it introduces social enterprises and their potential to address the barriers that some people face in finding employment. The discussion about barriers and an SEs role in that regard describes an important context to understand these aspects from academic and applied perspectives. The chapter then introduces the ToC framework, highlighting its role in strengthening the work of SEs toward addressing employment barriers.

While a ToC can be created and used by any organization, its application for this research was narrowed to people facing barriers to employment and then, more specifically, to returning citizens. The issues faced by returning citizens are relevant to this discussion due to the focus of *RecycleForce* on this population. What follows is an exploration of people who face barriers to employment and the issues they face.

### **People Facing Barriers to Employment**

One challenge in starting a discussion about people who face barriers to employment is how to define them while honoring who they are as people. Some of the language used to define people in this category can lack dignity and be demoralizing (DC Fiscal Policy Institute, 2017; Moe et al., 2017). They are labeled as disadvantaged, marginalized, impoverished, urban, vulnerable, or less-than, rather than people who have had a life experience that may look different from the rest of society. While this language is common in both academic and practice fields, such as grant writing and reporting, that does not mean it is appropriate or cannot be changed.

In addition, barriers like education requirements for a position, physical ability to do work without assistance, and access to transportation are, for the most part, not of a person's own making. Intentional or not, these barriers are socially and institutionally constructed, and they exclude people from employment (Moe et al., 2017). In an effort to reframe the way in which we talk about people who are served through these types of SEs, I use the phrase "people who face barriers to employment" or a variation throughout this dissertation. In addition, I refer to those who have been formerly incarcerated as "returning citizens" out of respect for their status in society.

Certain people within society face barriers to finding, being selected for, and keeping a job. Some issues may include not being paid equally for the same job or not having access to career advancement (Pavel, 2011). People who face these kinds of barriers may include:

- Those with low qualifications
- Black and minority ethnic groups
- Women with children under five years old and single parents
- People over 55
- People with disabilities
- Those with an intergenerational history of unemployment
- People experiencing homelessness
- Those who have been formerly incarcerated (returning citizens)
- People facing problems with addiction
- Any combination of more than one of these. (Aiken, 2007, pp. 2–3)

This list refers to segments of the population often confronted with discriminating attitudes and behaviors or those who need special attention to avoid being exploited (Pavel,

2011). The notion of a person who faces a disadvantage of some sort can be debated. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, the definition above stands for context. Given the focus of this dissertation on returning citizens, the rest of this section provides a brief overview of the state of incarceration in the United States and the resulting challenges for these citizens. The context of the dynamics that contribute to incarceration and the challenges that returning citizens face once they are released from prison must be understood.

The United States incarcerates more of its population than any other nation (Widra & Herring, 2021). This includes people in federal, state, and local prisons or jails, people held by the U.S. Marshal Service, people held in jails on Native lands, youth housed in juvenile justice facilities, and other types of confinement like state psychiatric hospitals due to criminal charges or convictions (Widra & Herring, 2021). Specific to Indiana, where this research took place, the state has a higher average incarceration rate per population than the US average rate (Widra & Herring, 2021). The Indiana Department of Corrections' year-end report for 2019 stated that there were 27,505 men, women, and children incarcerated and roughly 6,500 on parole (Indiana Department of Correction, 2019). These numbers fluctuate from year to year due to new individuals entering the justice system, current individuals being moved between facilities in the justice system, and returning citizens being released by the justice system.

In some cases, a person's experience with the justice system begins very early in life. Since the early 1990s, many schools have adopted a zero- or no-tolerance policy regarding school code violations (Wald & Losen, 2003). These types of policies have repercussions for students, specifically students of color. Essentially, they have increased the number of students being suspended, expelled, and/or arrested in school (Christle et al., 2005; Dutil, 2020; Heitzeg, 2009; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Additionally, the term “school-to-prison pipeline” refers to how youth are guided on a pathway from an early age into the criminal justice system (Dutil, 2020). Whether intentional or otherwise, this criminalization of youth deprives them of access to learning, school engagement, and needed resources. The repercussions of how behavior in school is handled often end with these affected individuals dropping out, being expelled, or entering the criminal justice system. This harms educational achievement. In addition, students of color are disproportionately affected, which disrupts their path to higher education, social advancement, and financial freedom (Christle et al., 2005; Dutil, 2020; Heitzeg, 2009; Wald & Losen, 2003). Essentially, this system of penalization aids in creating generational disadvantages for entire groups of people.

Many incarcerated individuals do not have a high school education, have learning disabilities, and cannot read beyond a fourth-grade level (Wald & Losen, 2003). Once they become returning citizens, it is very hard for them to enter society again and be able to find quality employment (Moe et al., 2017). This also creates generational poverty when it happens to families repeatedly (Moe et al., 2017). All of these issues impact the rate of recidivism, especially in the United States.

Attitudes of employers toward ex-offenders impact the returning citizen’s ability to obtain work and, therefore, increase their likelihood of reoffending (Cosgrove & O’Neill, 2011). These individuals may face discrimination in several ways upon their release due to their status as returning citizens. They face many barriers that communities may be ill-equipped to handle, the first of which is the negative stigma of being unmotivated, disobedient, untrustworthy, lacking in skills, a risk to staff, and being violent which regularly disqualify many returning

citizens from employment in the eyes of employers (Baskaran, 2019; Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011; Geckeler et al., 2019; Moe et al., 2015).

Baskaran (2019) also outlined that returning citizens are released into “disadvantaged spaces,” that are characterized by high rates of crime, older and distressed infrastructure, few employment opportunities, lack of transportation, and high rates of housing insecurity. Other challenges include poverty, homelessness, and mental health. The first year after being released, a returning citizen may have an income far below the poverty line (Seibel, 2019). They will be homeless at some point in their life (Geckeler et al., 2019; Seibel, 2019). They may also face a lack of mental health and substance abuse care and treatment, which is vital to finding and holding a job after incarceration (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011; Geckeler et al., 2019; Moe et al., 2015; Seibel, 2019).

Often people who do not have the ability to aid in profit generation, accumulation of capital, and consumption patterns are left out of the labor market (Pavel, 2011). Essentially, if a person has a quality about them that is perceived to not benefit the company's image and preferences, they are viewed as not fit to work for them. When the group who is in a position of power creates the “rules” for society based on personal criteria without the input of anyone else, these rules become exclusionary. People facing barriers to employment face exclusion from the ability to work in positions that hold value for the labor market.

There are laws that attempt to combat such exclusion, such as Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and others. These are enforced by the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and have been put in place to prevent discrimination in the interviewing process and the workplace. Laws in this area

attempt to directly address the effects of capitalism previously mentioned. However, the societal aspirations and goals of these laws have not been adequately achieved in practice.

### **SEs and People Facing Employment Barriers**

In recent years, SEs have shown great potential in addressing challenges faced by individuals facing employment barriers noted in the previous section. They provide employment, job history, hard and soft skills, and other guidance that individuals may be unable to achieve on their own (Erpf et al., 2019; Lysaght et al., 2017). SEs can provide a culture that is welcoming to people so that they have a chance to excel while not facing discrimination from society and coworkers (Clifford et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2019; Seddon et al., 2013). Some also provide holistic services to assist their patrons back into society like tattoo removal, financial wellness classes, parenting classes, and assistance with gaining a general education diploma if they have not completed high school (Choi & Kiesner, 2007; Geckeler et al., 2019).

To do this work, these kinds of SEs often operate at the grassroots level and close to the population that they serve. They create more trusting relationships, facilitate social inclusion for people, offer multiple ways of engaging with the workforce, and are often highly connected to the local community (Aiken, 2007). SEs can fit into spaces that other organizations have trouble getting into for one reason or another. They meet the needs of people in a way that traditional organizations cannot.

However, Teasdale (2010) pointed out that SEs may only be beneficial to individuals who have less complex social support needs. The complexity of reasons why people become disenfranchised can be a challenge to address. In addition, it may be hard to help a returning citizen through employment alone. Some issues that people face might be considered unsolvable. Blackburn and Ram (2006) emphasized that there is little evidence that SEs alone combat social



exclusion effectively. While there are challenges, a SE has the potential to fit into a space where people are not being served by more traditional methods.

As previously mentioned, some individuals have a difficult time connecting to the mainstream economy. When an SE is the path chosen by a person facing barriers to employment, it helps a person seek resources from the community and become more involved (Pathak, 2018). Bridging the gap between a SE and the mainstream economy is another step that can also be challenging. Turning to one's community also means the separation that was before engaging in work with a social enterprise is maintained. In some cases, SEs further encourage exclusion because marginalization is reinforced. In addition, SEs, in some forms, might be self-perpetuating and keeping people in poverty rather than lifting them out as it is purported to do.

Sometimes, a returning citizen chooses to engage differently to get back to the mainstream. Evans (2007) described the shadow economy where there exists neighborhood self-help, under-the-table work, and the illegal economy. This kind of work exploits individuals who cannot find legal employment by taking advantage of their situation, and it can also lead to recidivism if returning citizens engage in illegal activity because they feel they have no other options. SEs have the potential to aid in breaking people out of this shadow economy by building social capital and connecting individuals to the more mainstream.

Lastly, re-entry is an area of social exclusion that can be addressed by SEs in a way where for-profit businesses often struggle. Due to their social missions, SEs can offer employment and wrap-around services to individuals facing barriers to employment. These kinds of organizations generally do not look at previous criminal history as a barrier and are often seeking such individuals. They meet the needs of people who have barriers by providing programming and services, as well as jobs.

## **General Re-entry Programming**

On the re-entry side of incarceration, programming for returning citizens may include a variety of ways to address the issues individuals face when integrating back into society. Some programs include education, mental health treatment, drug treatment, cognitive behavior therapy, housing support, employment assistance, and life skills assistance (Mizel & Abrams, 2019; Visher et al., 2017). Research has suggested that programs addressing the individual by changing attitudes about antisocial values and beliefs about crime and behaviors are a more effective form of treatment for returning citizens (Visher et al., 2017; Wright, 2017). However, Visher et al. (2017) also suggested re-entry programming is predominately ineffective.

Returning citizens face many hurdles to successfully rejoining society, such as limited occupational and education experience, drug and alcohol addictions, mental and physical health problems, strained family relations, and stigma due to their criminal record (Visher et al., 2017). Returning citizens also face higher mortality rates due to drug overdose, cardiovascular disease, infectious disease, homicide, or suicide (Visher et al., 2017). Sometimes these barriers can be split into two categories. Wright (2017) emphasized that the risks of recidivism can be classified as static or dynamic, meaning, what cannot be changed or what can be addressed. Age, race, and criminal record are considered static. Dynamic refers to attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Changing static barriers and dynamic barriers often have different approaches. For example, according to Mizel and Abrams (2019), young men between the ages of 18 to 24 are at a higher risk of recidivism. While age itself cannot be changed, organizations can address it through programming for this population. Additional static barriers may also include higher mortality rates due to drug overdose, cardiovascular disease, infectious disease, homicide, or suicide (Visher et al., 2017).

The challenge for many people returning from the criminal justice system is the lack of opportunity due to these factors combined with the returning citizen's beliefs about crime in general. People who engage in criminal activity often do not have the same set of positive legal and social options to choose from (Wright, 2017). Surrounded by crime and incarceration, engaging in criminal behavior may be the easiest, most comfortable, and/or only choice available to them (Wright, 2017). Additionally, the attitudes and beliefs of potential employers and community members may create intangible barriers that impact recidivism.

Reducing recidivism is a challenge for many reasons. There is no one intervention likely to eliminate criminal thinking and behaviors because there are too many factors that go into engaging in criminal activity in the first place (Severson et al., 2011). Most people engaging in criminal activity recidivate within two years of returning to society, with the rate going down as offenders age (Mizel & Abrams, 2019). In addition, the influence of peers has a large impact on recidivism (Boman IV & Mowen, 2017; Christle et al., 2005; Mizel & Abrams, 2019; Visher et al., 2017).

Beyond the idea of addressing beliefs and attitudes regarding crime and incarceration, Wright (2017) suggested 10 ways to address reducing recidivism.

1. Replace the reward structure of incarcerated individuals
2. Create prosocial opportunities for formerly incarcerated individuals
3. Distribute re-entry and recidivism efforts across multiple agencies and organizations
4. Recognize that people recidivate for a variety of reasons
5. Start re-entry on the first day of incarceration
6. Foster ties to the outside world within prison
7. Acknowledge victimization among people who are incarcerated

8. Develop alternatives to re-incarceration
9. Empower and reward correctional staff
10. Anticipate setbacks. (pp. 56–57)

Much of the work around re-entry and returning citizens is focused on opportunities to access jobs, housing, transportation, childcare, and other tangible services. It also provides for individuals to make choices that will keep them out of the criminal justice system.

### **Social Enterprises**

The following sections cover an overview of SEs in the United States. A narrower focus includes a discussion of people facing barriers to employment and how SEs impact them. Finally, a discussion of ToC and how it is used is important to the conversation to move forward with embedding it in research practice.

### ***Definition and Forms***

SEs have a variety of definitions, which seems logical given the fluidity of the field. However, a wide range of definitions also creates confusion and misunderstanding (Davister et al., 2004). Research in this area is important to provide an understanding of the similarities, differences, best practices, and how an organization can best benefit society while still adhering to its mission. The central drivers behind a SE are the social issues that are being addressed through the organization (Austin et al., 2006).

A variety of initiatives can be classified as SEs. They include businesses created by nonprofit organizations, social purpose organizations created by businesses, or entities created on their own. They can also be a hybrid model of using product sales to fund a social mission, reducing dependence on donations, grants, and subsidies, as well as an entity created to scale up (Battilana et al., 2012). No matter how it is framed, the purpose of a SE is different for both

business and nonprofit organizations. There are many versions of what constitutes an SE, depending on the country of origin, purpose, and structure. It does not matter what legal form or structure the SE takes; it must fit the criteria that it has a social purpose (Austin et al., 2006).

In addition to varied definitions of SEs, there are also terms that have been used interchangeably in the United States but are not used the same way in Europe. SEs refer to businesses and organizations that follow the definition of providing some good or service to the community for a social purpose (Phillips et al., 2015). Social entrepreneurship refers to the spirit of the concept that can be taught to people as they undertake work for or as they develop these kinds of organizations. The social entrepreneur is the person who creates the SE. As Drayton (2011), founder of Ashoka, stated, “And what defines the social entrepreneur is that, to the core of their being, they are committed to serving the good of all” (p. 36). Social innovations, in turn, are the outcomes produced by the SE and the social entrepreneur (Phillips et al., 2015).

A full understanding of how to operate a SE is challenging in and of itself due to the way it is structured. This gives insight into why a ToC is important and why a ToC aligns with AR and returning citizens. While a brief history is included, a full exploration would be outside the scope of this dissertation and would require more extensive research.

### ***Forms and Structures of SEs in the United States***

Entrepreneurship history in the United States and within the nonprofit sector has led to the development of forms of SEs. SEs in the United States are created for a variety of reasons. They can be used to benefit individuals facing barriers to employment, to promote environmental sustainability, to provide job and life skills training, and a lot more. The reasons an organization might turn to social entrepreneurship are varied but many times are due to an attempt to diversify funding.

In the United States, there are no legal guidelines regarding how SEs are formed and organized, even though the field is institutionalized. This vague structure allows SEs in the United States to focus more on income generation than on forms seen elsewhere (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011). Without having to focus on fitting a certain mold, SEs have the ability to provide social good through their market orientation (Bauer & Umlas, 2017).

If an organization remains a legal corporation, they are subject to its shareholders and to taxes on their pursued activities. If they are a nonprofit, they can legally only use a percentage of their time in for-profit endeavors. SEs can be nonprofit social organizations, separate from commercial enterprises but sometimes allied to them through funding and cause-related marketing (Peattie & Morley, 2008). The way U.S. social entrepreneurs legally establish their organization is a challenge because they can only claim the benefit of whichever form they choose (Battilana et al., 2012).

The current status of social enterprises in the United States includes the Harvard Business School and L3Cs. According to Rangan et al. (2008), "The Harvard Business School (HBS) founded the Social Enterprise Initiative in 1993 to inspire, educate, and support current and emerging leaders across all sectors in applying management skills to create social value" (p. 2). HBS decided to focus on organizations seeking to create social value whether they were for-profit or nonprofit. Emerging in the United States is the L3C, a Low-Profit Limited Liability Company, but it is only legally approved in a few states and carries with it some ambiguity. As of 2020, eight states, one US territory (Puerto Rico), and three nations of indigenous people have voted the L3C structure into law (Americans for Community Development, 2020). L3Cs are an off shoot to laws surrounding Limited Liability Companies (LLC).

In another development, several U.S. organizations have come under the benefit corporation structure. This is different from the B-Corp certification offered by B Lab (2023b). While the benefit corporation is a legal status only available in certain areas, the B-Corp certification is a voluntary certification available to everyone. According to B Lab's 2022 Annual Report, there are over 6,000 B-Corps now in existence worldwide (B Lab, 2023a). Shareholders judge performance based on the company's social, environmental, and financial performance. Lastly, there is the designation of a Flexible Purpose or Social Purpose Corporation, which requires the board to have one or more social purposes while providing additional protection against liability for directors and management (Battilana et al., 2012). While considered a SE, both L3Cs and benefit corporations fall legally within the for-profit corporation structure in the United States.

### ***Re-entry and Social Enterprise***

Specific to offender re-entry programs, it has been suggested that a SE offers more innovative and creative approaches to combating recidivism than traditional re-entry programming (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011; Seibel, 2019). These programs are often in the service industry, are derived from a need felt by the local community or the individuals, and offer wrap-around services in addition to workforce development.

SEs that serve returning citizens offer the opportunity for these individuals to pursue self-employment to avoid the social stigma of their background. The staff, community, and employees are aware of their status, even if they do not know their personal history. Returning citizens are welcomed into a job to pursue training and job experience to bolster their skills and resume. This type of organization has emerged as a pathway to address many of the challenges returning citizens face, as outlined. They offer an opportunity for organizations to take quick

action in hiring practices with returning citizens (Seibel, 2019). Many SEs of this type offer hands-on soft-skill building, hard-skill training, and work experience so that they can advance to employment in the for-profit sector (Cooney, 2016).

SEs that directly target returning citizens offer them opportunities they would not otherwise have due to the negative stigmas they encounter (Moe et al., 2015). Returning citizens are offered the opportunity to take responsibility for their own growth and development by being offered trust, identity, information, knowledge, and quality work history (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011). Self-esteem and self-confidence are also a benefit of offering quality work to returning citizens because they start to see the possibility of a future for themselves (Seddon et al., 2013). SEs also offer legitimate work that pays better than low-wage/labor-intensive positions they may be offered in the for-profit job market. Then, they do not feel the need to also have off-the-books jobs (Augustine, 2019).

Many SEs offer additional wrap-around services that the traditional labor market does not offer as a part of a person's employment. As Aiken and Bode (2009) explained, due to the multiple personal barriers that returning citizens face, the challenge is to provide appropriate jobs together with these services rather than simply pressing them into a position. Assistance includes mental health services, childcare, transportation services, navigation of relationships with parole offices, financial education, and general education. SEs are driven by a mission. In organizations serving returning citizens, that mission focuses on rehabilitation back into society and the workforce. This encourages individuals to take ownership and responsibility while giving back to the communities where they work (Durham University, 2011). Here are a few examples of SEs in the United States:



- Homeboy Industries (2022) is a gang intervention, rehab, and re-entry program in East Los Angeles. This SE includes an 18-month employment and re-entry program that also includes other services such as tattoo removal, substance abuse support, solar panel installation training, mental health support, and education. Homeboy Industries' business model is to provide training and technical assistance added to job placement and entrepreneurial education through their growing list of SEs (Choi & Kiesner, 2007). This list of SEs includes screen printing, a bakery, a café, a catering company, electronics recycling, a diner, a farmer's market, and a grocery store. Volunteers, board members, and "homies," or the clients of the organization, come up with ideas for the businesses the organization starts (Choi & Kiesner, 2007). Their mission is to provide hope, training, and support to formerly gang-involved and previously incarcerated men and women, allowing them to redirect their lives and become contributing members of the community.
- Greyston Bakery (2023) practices what they call "open hiring," with no questions asked, no resumes, no interviews, and no background checks. There are several portions of the organization: the foundation that carries out social services, the bakery that funds the foundation, and The Center for Open Hiring, which sells its business concept (Van Wert, 2018). Each of these functions serves the organization as a whole. The foundation funds workforce development programs, affordable housing programs, community gardens and environmental education, and housing for individuals living with HIV/AIDS (Van Wert, 2018). The Center for Open Hiring markets its own concept to the wider community. Their mission is to create thriving communities by perpetuating their methods. Greystone

is a Benefit Corporation under New York state law. It also holds a B Corp certification under B Lab (Leipziger, 2013).

- EDWINS Leadership & Restaurant Institute (n.d.) is a fine dining establishment with a training program for returning citizens. Participants receive six months of training in the hospitality industry and access to employment, legal aid, medical care, clothing, job training, literacy programs, and housing (Wainwright & Millet, 2019). The organization also has a butcher shop, a bakery, a community kitchen, and a life skills center under its umbrella. Their mission is to teach skilled and in-demand trade in the culinary arts, empower willing minds through a passion for hospitality management, and prepare students for a successful transition home.

As evidenced by these organizations and their array of programming, SEs are only one piece of a larger effort to combat social exclusion, which also includes education, policing, housing, transportation, and infrastructure (Blackburn & Ram, 2006). These SEs are ones that work with individuals on a variety of areas in their life to help them onto a more stable path. They act as connectors between pieces of the puzzle, which makes them an important part of the solution.

Concerns and issues remain present for SEs serving returning citizens. In general, there is a significant risk for an organization that wishes to undertake a SE with commercial activity, by competing in the market against for-profit companies that do not have a social mission (Cooney, 2016). In addition, it can be challenging when an organization has conflicting agendas of having a social mission and making a profit. Mission drift is possible when the organization is trying to survive, make a profit, and serve its clients (Seddon et al., 2013). Measuring the impact of SEs is a challenge because it is hard to know what to measure appropriately (Seddon et al., 2013).

However, studies have shown that the impacts of services offered by an SE may only be short-term and may not last beyond the transitional employment period offered by an SE (Geckeler et al., 2019).

Many SEs have strict rules for discipline intended to help a returning citizen back into society which may have the potential for setting up returning citizens to fail (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011). While these rules are intended to increase the success of the program, for some individuals, it may be setting a bar that cannot be achieved directly out of incarceration. SEs may not offer the correct additional wrap-around services that returning citizens would find helpful in rejoining society (Visher et al., 2017). The complex nature of the challenges each individual faces also makes it difficult to offer blanket programs (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011).

Inevitably, SEs are also challenged by the willingness of the market to fire returning citizens after their employment at a SE. While they work for the SE, an individual has the potential to gain both hard and soft skills essential to the workforce. Unfortunately, many employers continue to only look at the barriers an individual has when recruiting employees. Returning citizens will still have a record that may hold them back if attitudes do not change regarding their value as employees. The evidence of their reform may not open as many doors as the staff at a SE might hope.

Due to the mission orientation and vague legal structure of SEs, some sort of planning is necessary for them to be successful. SEs are unique because of both mission and business orientation and need a different way to address their goals. ToC is a process to develop a framework that takes the individual context of each organization and creates a comprehensive guide for change. With a flexible ToC that allows for adaptation, an SE can move with changing financial and social environments. Understanding how this works is key to putting together a

quality ToC. In the final section of this chapter below, I provide an overview of research and applied developments related to ToC.

### **Theory of Change**

A ToC is a purposeful way of looking at how an initiative or intervention contributes to outcomes based on a chain of underlying logic, assumptions, influences, and causal linkages to achieve an intended result (Jackson, 2013; Serrat, 2017; Vogel, 2012). ToCs emerged in the United States in the 1990s to assess and plan how change occurred in community initiatives and brought citizens and practitioners together (Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018; Stein & Valters, 2012). ToC can be used in a variety of ways. Within this approach, many methodologies can be used for measurement, collection, and analysis (Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Jackson, 2013). It is versatile in the way that it can be used across organizational types and performance measurement systems (Harries et al., 2014).

Stein and Valters (2012) have suggested that there are four broad categories of purpose for producing a ToC: strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, description, and learning. These categories run on a continuum from technical processes to integrated thinking to political literacy, depending on where an organization is in its developmental stage. Technical process refers to using ToC as a planning tool; integrated thinking is informal knowledge about how the ToC development should work, and political literacy is a complex understanding of how change happens.

ToC has no common definition, although it is understood to be an articulation of how a given intervention leads to a specific change (Collins & Clark, 2013; Hanna, 2010; Harries et al., 2014; Stein & Valters, 2012). ToCs are important because they are an implicit depiction of outcomes that are often very complicated (Connolly & Seymour, 2015). The process of working

through a ToC is a way to create and/or apply interventions for societal issues that are difficult to address. For example, it is difficult to measure phenomena such as confidence, wellness, and employability. Hanna (2010) maintained,

As you widen your scope to deal with a major social problem, the harder it becomes to measure your impact because it is tougher to isolate cause and effect. It is no longer a simple linear relationship, but a complex set of relationships. (p. 2)

The ToC allows an organization to take a broad set of complicated problems and break it down to better understand how to measure the impact of its interventions.

The ToC framework addresses complexity by mapping out the assumptions and context of a situation. This approach can help to unpack what links the intervention to the outcome and understand how these processes are managed (Bolton et al., 2018). Of course, articulating what an organization does and why is only as useful as the practical application of these theories (Harries et al., 2014).

The development of a ToC is a process that can be used when an organization has a mission or goal and needs a pathway to plan and guide its implementation. It is a flexible approach to thinking through the best way to get to the outcomes an organization desires (Connolly & Seymour, 2015; Vogel, 2012). James (2012) asserted that ToC is an ongoing process of reflection to explore change, how it happens, and what it means for organizations in their context. More specifically:

- It locates a program or project within a wider analysis of how change comes about.
- It draws on external learning about development.
- It articulates organizations' understanding of change and challenges them to explore it further.

- It acknowledges the complexity of change: the wider systems and actors that influence it.
- It is often presented in diagrammatic form with an accompanying narrative summary.  
(James, 2012, p. 1)

An important aspect of ToC is the involvement of stakeholders and the community in its development. To work out a theory, groups are brought together and led by a facilitator to map out a framework of change and determine how goals will be reached (Harries et al., 2014; Phi et al., 2018; Taplin et al., 2013). Program stakeholders have insights into what outcomes they would like to achieve and the activities needed to fulfill those outcomes (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007; Connell & Kubisch, 1998; Haskell et al., 2009). It can also influence the growth of partnerships by convening stakeholders for open discussions about programming and implementation (James, 2012; Phi et al., 2018). These discussions can help stakeholders to understand the change clearly and purposefully they are attempting to create and adjust along the way (Jackson, 2013). To create social value, ToC involves bringing the right people with the right values and the right vision to the table in their context with the right support to bring outcomes to a reality (Haskell et al., 2009).

To achieve purposeful outcomes at various ToC stages, its development must first define outcomes and map the ways to arrive at those outcomes. The preconditions and assumptions that enable the intervention to work must be taken into consideration (Johnson, 2012; Taplin et al., 2013). It is important to differentiate impact at different stages when an intervention is being created. Clifford et al. (2013) observed that social investors were interested in making this clear as they funded various stages of intervention. ToC allows intervention steps to take place

because an organization can identify the various places within a framework where change is occurring and what intervention will impact each place.

In addition to mapping backward and discussing outcomes at each stage of its development, ToC can be used as a process within a process. It can be used to evaluate a single project and to identify potential links between project, program, and policy (Bolton et al., 2018). Used during planning, it can be very helpful to achieve stages of outcomes as an organization works towards a larger goal (Connell & Kubisch, 1998).

A ToC can be used by a variety of organizations and program types. The context of the program being evaluated is important because it helps the organization better understand its influences, its stakeholders, and the assumptions it is making about its work. As Vogel (2012) expressed,

The mapping of the logical sequence is strengthened by critical thinking about the contextual conditions that influence the programme, the motivations and contributions of stakeholders and other actors, and the different interpretations (assumptions) about how and why that sequence of change might come about. (p. 3)

A ToC for one program cannot be used for another. Likewise, the ToC created by an organization will not be understood by someone from outside the organization unless they know the context in which it was created (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007). Much like ToC development, no two SEs are alike. Given their context, ToC development is an important activity to undertake for a SE, because it can adapt to any setting.

### ***Elements and Process of ToC***

The key components of a ToC are the introduction, an analysis of the context and situation, the narrative, references, and plans for measurement and evaluation (Harries et al., 2014). A ToC is usually depicted by a diagram or a chart that shows the steps and elements of

the thinking of the stakeholders. The introduction outlines the purpose for creating the ToC, and the narrative describes the diagram with references to evidence that backs up the reasoning behind the structure of the ToC. Plans are then outlined for measurement and evaluation based on the details from the ToC. According to Vogel (2012), ToC has several basic elements:

- **Context** for the initiative, including social, political and environmental conditions, the current state of the problem the project is seeking to influence and other actors able to influence change
- **Long-term change** that the initiative seeks to support and for whose ultimate benefit
- **Process/sequence of change** anticipated to lead to the desired long-term outcome
- **Assumptions** about how these changes might happen, as a check on whether the activities and outputs are appropriate for influencing change in the desired direction in this context.
- **Diagram and narrative summary** that captures the outcomes of the discussion. (p. 4)

The group developing the ToC needs to understand its context both inside and outside the organization. They also must determine their long-term goals. Whatever method the facilitator uses to set goals with stakeholders needs to be clear and concise (ActKnowledge and the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, 2003). When addressing social impact, the stakeholders will often have a variety of viewpoints about what outcomes the program should have.

Mapping this sequence of change begins with these outcomes and lays out what preconditions/enablers or assumptions the stakeholders have about them (Harries et al., 2014; Johnson, 2012). They are the factors that must be present for a change to take place. While these factors are considered essential for ToC development, the literature does not offer a clear



consensus about their definitions and meaning. For this dissertation, assumptions are factors that are assumed about the results of an activity. They are the norms and values underlying what is considered “right” (Valters, 2014). Preconditions/enablers are factors that must be in place so that an outcome can be achieved (Taplin et al., 2013; Vogel, 2012). They are referred to as “preconditions” throughout this dissertation.

In addressing the assumptions of the stakeholders, the ToC can vet ideas that are not based in reality, in evidence, or rely on limited perspectives (Connolly & Seymour, 2015). A group developing the ToC needs to take time to think through what they believe about a program and its success, what they believe about the people taking part in the program, and what they believe about the value of the program to the community. Assumptions are the factors that are already in place or things a person might take for granted (Taplin & Clark, 2012). They may not always be explicit, and it is valuable to have a variety of stakeholders present and an environment conducive to discussion. Careful planning will usually improve the likelihood that the program will achieve its objective (Connolly & Seymour, 2015).

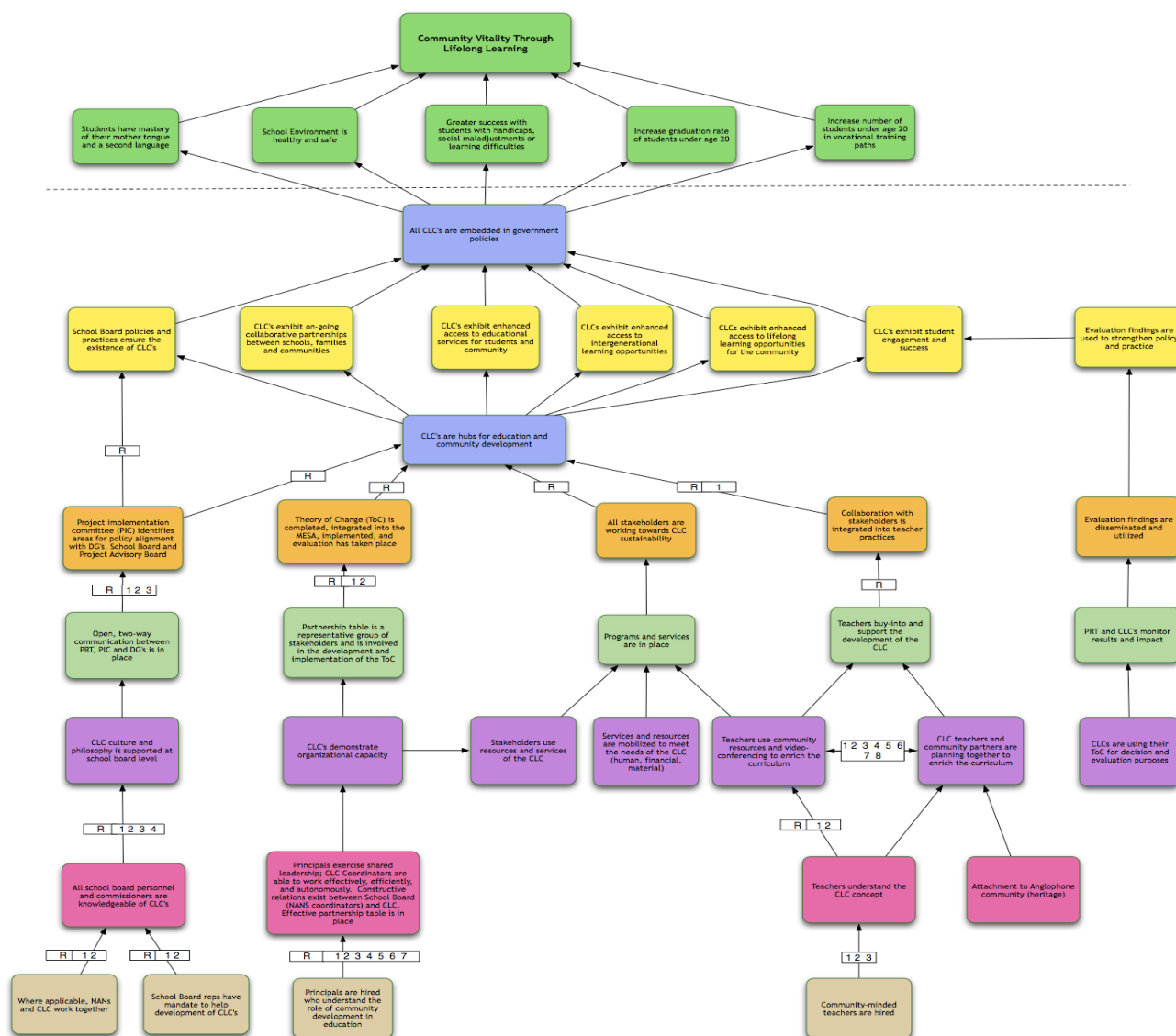
Preconditions are the context and must exist for the program to work. If these preconditions are not acknowledged, it can cause the program to break down (Johnson, 2012). If the outcome is employment for individuals who have been previously incarcerated, the assumption is that they need job skills to find a job, and the precondition is that there are jobs available to gain employment. Sometimes, preconditions are short, simple, and intermediate changes that need to take place (James, 2012).

There are a variety of ways to depict a ToC and work through the steps. These include the CES Planning Triangle©, a logic model, an outcomes chain, a pathways map, and a written narrative (Harries et al., 2014; Taplin & Clark, 2012). It is important to help a group of

stakeholders visualize the path their interventions will take toward the outcome they want to achieve. Figure 2.1 shows a pathways map developed by ActKnowledge regarding lifelong learning.

**Figure 2.1**

*An Outcomes Framework*



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This graphic depiction of the ToC shows the ultimate goal at the very top in green. Working backward from there, the next line shows the conditions that would need to be present to reach that ultimate goal, also in green. There is a dotted line under these conditions, which represents an accountability ceiling. Everything below that line is the responsibility of the organization and how they are working toward their mission. Next, purple, is the long-term goal of the organization. This goal is achieved by the intermediate outcomes below. The subsequent levels are the mid-term and short-term outcomes and the interventions that will be taken to get to the long-term outcome. The boxes with “R” followed by a number represent the responsible parties for each action to be taken. Every step from the bottom to the top must be completed to achieve the long-term goal. The assumption being made is that once the long-term goal is achieved, the items above the accountability line will be impacted. Due to the complexity of systems change, there are many factors to consider when creating a ToC. A good ToC will consider every angle available to the organization to make an impact. It will carefully consider each aspect of the people involved, the resources available, and the context of its programming and environment.

In general, ToC asks the questions:

- Is the theory valid, appropriate, relevant, and accurate?
- Does change occur in the ways the intervention proponents have expected?
- Are there other change dynamics or pathways at work?
- Are there unforeseen actors and factors who promote or constrain change?
- Are there obstacles that stymie or render ineffective the theory of change?
- How can those obstacles be minimized or eliminated altogether? (Jackson, 2013, p. 100)

These and other questions are important to contemplate when thinking of assumptions and preconditions. They are also important as the development moves forward into looking at short-term outcomes and considering further assumptions and preconditions that might happen within a middle stage. It will include interventions along the way to accomplish goals they need to meet to achieve that long-term impact. As can be seen in Figure 1, the diagram goes back to simply hiring teachers who are focused on community and getting groups to work together. The basic structure must be in place to reach the long-term goal.

Now that the pathway map has been created, the group can create a narrative that will explain why they chose to put various assumptions, outcomes, and interventions in place. The narrative is the summary of the theory the group creates that explains the pathways of change, highlights major assumptions, lists rationales, and interventions, and presents a compelling case as to how and why this initiative will make a difference (Taplin & Clark, 2012). The last step is to create an executive summary that will explain the ToC briefly and concisely.

### ***The Importance of a ToC***

A ToC is important for several reasons. It is useful in analyzing the complex societal problems that many organizations are attempting to address, including homelessness, hunger, health and wellness, recidivism, and community engagement. Oftentimes, there are a myriad of factors that influence an organization's choices in interventions. Their measures of success are also subjective and often tied to the dominant culture's definition of what it means to accomplish their goals. How a ToC connects mechanism, context, and outcome evaluation is important to creating a holistic plan for intervention for an organization (Phi et al., 2018).

The ToC framework also addresses the rise in pressure from the public and funders to provide evidence of impact and show linkages between outcomes and specific interventions

(Johnson, 2012). The activity provides a way to nail down complex interventions and outcomes and give evidence of their worth to a community or individual. While many grant applications in the United States require evidence of outcomes, they do not ask for a full ToC. This could potentially be a way for funders to ask organizations to produce a plan that will back up their theories (Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018). While an organization may have to invest resources in the creation of a ToC, it is intended to be fluid and changeable, within reason. In other words, an existing ToC may be used over a period of time with modifications to accommodate the changing needs and circumstances.

The commitment to community engagement, capacity building, and ownership are several of the most important aspects of the ToC framework (Blamey & Mackenzie, 2007). ToC both engages and puts theory into a framework that can be used as a guideline for implementation. It convenes people with varying viewpoints and highlights various partner agendas and values (Bolton et al., 2018). Community engagement benefits funders and organizations alike whether they have been in the practice of using ToC or not. Funders benefit because the organizations have a plan in place. Organizations benefit because they help identify what the community really needs within their context. Employing a ToC results in more frequent communication between stakeholders, leading to more realistic outcomes and measures (Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018).

SEs are unique, and they need a unique way of measuring impact. They exist within the context of the community where they are created. Due to the double bottom line of SEs, they must measure both financial and social goals. ToCs are meant to align with the context of the organization or program where they are developed. In that sense, they are robustly positioned to help SEs demonstrate and measure progress towards their social goals.

## Action Research

AR serves to collect data to make change through the generation of knowledge (MacDonald, 2012). It is a generative process that allows a community to come together around learning to co-create solutions. These solutions are localized, and the context of their generation is important (Shani & Coghlan, 2021). Not every solution will work for every organization if the solutions are taken out of context. This research happens through partnerships between researchers, stakeholders, community members, or others with insider knowledge or lived experience (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020).

AR researchers facilitate conversations and debates around areas of knowledge, social events, processes, and more (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). AR seeks to access the knowledge of the participants to make changes to the human systems in which they are involved. These systems can only be understood and changed if the members of the system are involved in the process themselves (Schein, 2021).

The AR method emphasizes a democratic process of participation with stakeholders rather than research done on people or communities (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Additionally, AR seeks to define a problem, pool knowledge, and create a resolution as a method of change (MacDonald, 2012). It seeks to form collaborations on the research and to empower communities to continue the work after the research is complete (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). Rather than act as a snapshot or point-in-time review of what is going on in an organization, the idea is to create practical solutions that will be carried forward. AR was developed to address concerns related to social, economic, and cultural practices where individuals with differing power, status, and influence could co-create solutions (MacDonald, 2012). The AR method in an organization opens the development of solutions to the staff, clients, and other stakeholders that are involved.

It speaks to power and powerlessness, which is important in organizations, especially those that serve vulnerable populations. Involving the clients in the conversations produces better learning and more valid data about how the system really works (Coghlan, 2019). AR creates a way to balance power within research by valuing the voices of everyone in the room. Including a variety of stakeholders in the process helps the researcher and participants understand the context in which they are attempting to create change.

AR in an organization allows for the generation of knowledge internally to show how it seeks to accomplish its mission. The only way to understand a system happens when an individual tries to change that system, which is hard to accomplish with other methods (Coghlan, 2019). Engaging in a reflexive practice, including a variety of stakeholders, and engaging in conversations about the mission and work of an organization can lead to change.

### **Summary**

SEs fit into the space between nonprofit, for-profit, and government programs. They work directly with people in specific contexts. Therefore, they need a specific and context-based plan of action. A ToC helps to create such plans of action and offers flexibility when opportunities and challenges demand adjustments.

The use of a ToC with an organization serving returning citizens is important in several ways. Returning citizens face many challenges, as described above. They include difficulty in applying for jobs with a criminal record, being barred from applying for certifications needed to own businesses, or being barred from hiring because insurance companies will not allow it. SEs assisting returning citizens need to demonstrate programming that concretely and meaningfully addresses these challenges. ToC offers an important framework and set of processes that may help SEs planning, implementation, and measurement in this regard.

Action research, with its engagement and action orientation, offers an appropriate methodology to study change processes like the ToC co-creation process undertaken for this dissertation. Therefore, as noted above, AR was the research methodology used in this dissertation. The next chapter includes the detailed research methodology.



### Chapter III: Research Methodology

This dissertation aimed to understand what occurs in the co-creation of a ToC in a SE serving people facing barriers to employment. The specific objectives/questions included:

- **Objective 1:** To develop an understanding of barriers and facilitators experienced by those implementing the ToC
- **Objective 2:** To gather the perspectives of program end-users involved in the development of the ToC
- **Objective 3:** To explore with participants how the ToC can be used to demonstrate /and measure impact.

To address the above questions, I used the AR methodology and engaged with the SE, *RecycleForce*. Workforce Inc. DBA, *RecycleForce* is a 501(c)3 that is committed to reducing crime through employment and job training while improving the environment through electronics recycling. Since 2006, *RecycleForce* has safely recycled more than 65 million pounds of electronic waste while providing job training and wrap-around services to thousands of returning citizens (RecycleForce, Inc., 2022). In this case, the end users are the returning citizens that *RecycleForce* serves. The chapter is organized into the following sections:

- **Action research:** definitions and process
- **Suitability of AR for this study:** an explanation of why AR fits in this context.
- **Context:** a vital part of AR and ToC, which gave weight to the creation of the theory
- **Overall design:** how the research was carried out within the context of its environment
- **Participant recruitment:** who was involved
- **Data collection and analysis:** what information was gathered and how

## Action Research

People are the experts on their own experiences, and it is important to value and appreciate them for their knowledge (Horton & Freire, 1990). AR attempts to honor the experiences of others by including them in the process of developing theories, programs, and other ways to organize themselves. AR aims to contribute to the practical concerns of people in a situation they are presently facing and to the goals of social science by joining collaboration within a mutually acceptable ethical framework (Susman & Evered, 1978). What follows is a brief overview of key AR perspectives from several books, articles, and dissertations about its tenets and utilization. While it is important to understand the basis of the field, this review is not meant to be all-inclusive.

AR is strongly value-oriented and seeks to address issues of significance for people and their communities (MacDonald, 2012). Working with an organization that serves returning citizens, it was important to choose a methodology that addressed the issues of power and justice. Using AR did not address every issue, but it did offer a way for researchers to be thoughtful about how they are working with a variety of stakeholders. It allowed participants to be active in the decision-making process and build collective inquiry (MacDonald, 2012).

AR is also an important method for studying human behavior because it allows space for reflection and shared language (van der Riet, 2008). This methodology creates an environment for interaction that fosters conversation. The result of utilizing AR and the developing a ToC creates the opportunity to continue the research. It is intended that the work continues to live within its context and evolve as the organization or group does. In this way, AR allows for a continuum of dialogue between academic research, shared decision-making, and implementation

by community partners (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). The researcher then trains the community and/or organization on how to move the work forward on their own.

There are a variety of definitions for AR and ways in which theorists have determined it is best to pursue this method. Broadly, AR refers to a process whereby the researcher works with a group over an issue of concern, and there is intent to act (Eden & Huxham, 1996). AR fits into whatever context the researcher is using it for, and that means there are a variety of ways it can be defined. Therefore, instead of an actual definition, AR has a set of parameters under which researchers operate (Altrichter et al., 2002). These parameters are outlined in brief below. In leaving the definition open for ongoing consideration, it allows the field of AR the ability to change and adapt more readily (Altrichter et al., 2002).

AR is a practical form of inquiry that allows the researcher to question how they are doing their work, how they can improve, and how they can influence others (McNiff, 2017). It combines theory, practice, action, and reflection to address problems within an ethical framework (Avison et al., 1999). The approach is somewhat fluid and can change based on the desire of the group with which the researcher is working. Stringer and Aragón (2020) have stated that it is an approach to investigating that provides a flexible set of procedures that are systematic, cyclical, solutions-oriented, and participatory. In working with people, the researcher pulls together thoughts from the group to create sustainability in practice.

The context of the organization or group the researcher is working with is an important part of the definition of AR. While not the definition of the phrase itself, it does contribute to the definition of the work that was done. Each AR project undertaken has a different context and cannot be replicated between organizations. The choice of techniques and methods used in the AR are going to depend on the context as well (Hult & Lennung, 1980).

I specifically chose AR because of its ability to dig deep into a specific context and its collaborative nature. I also chose it because *RecycleForce* works with a vulnerable population, and balancing power was important to the development of the ToC. The work of *RecycleForce* changes regularly within the umbrella of its mission. They needed a methodology that would be adaptable long after this dissertation was complete.

### *Types*

There are a variety of types of AR. Coghlan (2019) outlined several, which he called “modalities,” including organization development through AR, participatory AR, action learning, appreciative inquiry, clinical inquiry research, cooperative inquiry, learning history, and collaborative management research. Each of these lines of inquiry involves participants in knowledge generation. Each also has its own slightly different manner of getting to the knowledge generation. This dissertation focused on AR, which focuses on generative insight into how power and powerlessness exclude groups from decision-making (Coghlan, 2019). The process of AR in this dissertation sought to empower people to use their own knowledge to construct a ToC.

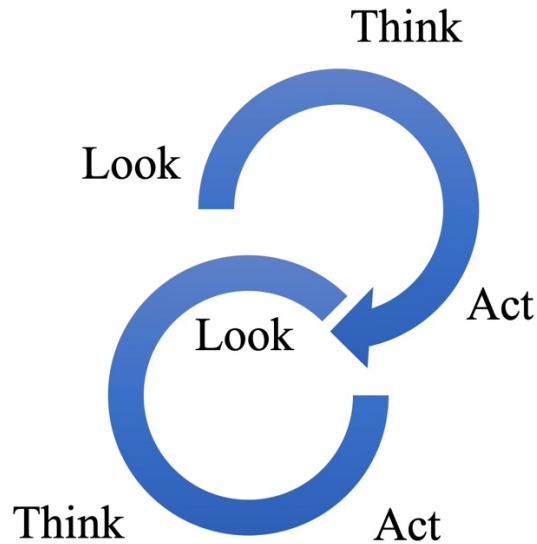
Furthermore, AR is strongly value-oriented and seeks to address issues of significance for people and their communities (MacDonald, 2012). Working with an organization that serves returning citizens, it was important to choose a methodology that addressed the issues of power and justice. Using AR does not address every issue, but it does offer a way for researchers to be thoughtful about how they are working with a variety of stakeholders. It allows participants to be active in the decision-making process and builds collective inquiry (MacDonald, 2012).

AR is also an important method for studying human behavior because it allows space for reflection and shared language (van der Riet, 2008). This methodology creates an environment

for interaction that fosters conversation. The result of AR and the development of a ToC creates the opportunity to continue the research. It is intended that the work continues to live within its context and evolve as the organization or group does. In this way, AR allows for a continuum of dialogue between academic research, shared decision-making, and implementation by community partners (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). It then trains the community and/or organization on how to move the work forward on their own.

**Parameters.** In every AR process, the following parameters should be included: acknowledgment of AR cycles, a focus on social justice, attention to validity, and involvement of participants from the organization or group within which the researcher is working. These four main parameters are discussed below.

**AR Cycles.** Sharing and collective learning in AR is done by following a cyclical line of inquiry involving looking, thinking, planning, and acting, which then leads to another iteration of the same cycle (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). Figure 3.1, which is a variation of cycles I created from several resources, illustrates a simple AR process (Altrichter et al., 2002; Coghlan, 2019; Stringer & Aragón, 2020). While this diagram only represents two iterations of the cycle, AR can be composed of many cycles until the group's predetermined or agreed-upon end.

**Figure 3.1***Action Research Cycle Process One*

Carrying out multiple iterations of an AR cycle allows for time to preplan and then reflect on the research as it is happening. This is important to the process as theory is being developed through iterating these action cycles (Eden & Huxham, 1996).

**Social Justice.** The foundations of broader AR lie in part in the development of new ways of envisioning education in Appalachia and Latin and South America by Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, experiments of Kurt Lewin on social democracy and organizational change, in research from the Society for Participatory Research in Asia, and through the experimental funding ideas of the World Bank (Reason & Bradbury, 2005). Countries, companies, and other groups were coming into these communities and deciding what was best for them or exploiting them without concern for their wellbeing. The work of AR rose out of the desire to include people in the work that was being done in their communities by lifting up their voices and empowering them to advocate for themselves.

Some of the parameters that help to define AR include its focus on social justice and issues of equity. AR is often driven by the desire for the emancipation and empowerment of groups and individuals (Eden & Huxham, 1996; McCutcheon & Jung, 1990; Yin, 2015). It was intended to bring people into conversation about the work being done around them to make their lives better. Co-creation is important to understanding how to combat the social problems that researchers are seeing in the world. They involve people from the communities in which the research is taking place to hear their voices and include their opinions in making decisions. AR maintains the rights of all people to do research and add to the dialectic of the community of knowledge (McNiff, 2017).

The people involved in AR processes have the right, through their participation, to use their own lived experience to develop another kind of language from the one they have previously understood (Horton & Freire, 1990). AR fosters empowerment with the people who are involved in this type of research. This is done through collective learning and allowing them to share their own experiences. As Reason and Bradbury (2005) affirmed, our world does not consist of separate things but of relationships that we co-author. The creation of a participatory worldview is one of the defining components of AR.

Apgar et al. (2017) used AR with people in inland Africa, Asian mega-deltas, and marine and coastal systems of the Coral Triangle. They intended to empower the people in these areas around aquatic agricultural systems. Their AR process allowed them to investigate deeper learning with the stakeholders in these regions. The researchers used participatory AR to engage with stakeholders to plan and implement their research to help people learn about agriculture while developing their program. They worked with institutional stakeholders, as well as the people doing the farming to make sure they were driving the process development.

Concurrently, they also used the ToC framework to document the theory of how the initiative would work. They focused specifically on communities experiencing poverty and addressed underlying assumptions to reflect on how change was happening. As Apgar et al. (2017) explained,

The emancipatory theoretical foundation of PAR and its emphasis on participation and co-inquiry was intended to build rigor and legitimacy in how TOCs were developed and used, and attention to assumptions, use of critical reflection on the causal linkages between actions and outcomes, emphasized through the use of TOC was expected would deepen the process of change further. (p. 18)

A framework for change helps with the creation of a common agenda and allows for a credible and testable knowledge base (Connell & Klem, 2000). In theory, this would work toward taking a social justice movement from idea to sustainable change. AR is not only a way to generate knowledge but also a way to transform individual attitudes and values along with personality and culture (Borda, 2006). As stated in Chapter II, AR functions as a way to meet with stakeholders at the ground level to gather important data about how programs and organizations should function. Addressing social justice through AR means that it allows for all voices to be included in the process. Systems normally created by those in positions of power will only be able to adapt to changing external factors if a variety of thoughts, opinions, and worldviews are included in the change process (Pasmore, 2006).

Likewise, people are only able to participate in the development of systems if they are given the chance and the capacity to do so (Senge & Scharmer, 2005). Everyone's life experience is valid because it is how they experience the world around them. Meeting people where they are and honoring that life experience is vital to social justice. How AR brings together historical research and lived experience allows for more robust views of a context. Working with people in this way will help participants and researchers alike to make sense of



their world and co-create their programs, services, and organizations to better serve in that space (Heron & Reason, 2005).

### *Attention to AR Validity*

Validity in AR, much like AR itself, is an evolving field and so needs to have a variety of ways in which it can be established. Herr and Anderson (2014) have attached the following goals of AR to validity criteria.

1. The generation of new knowledge—Dialogic and process validity
2. The achievement of action-oriented outcomes—Outcome validity
3. The education of both researcher and participants—Catalytic validity
4. Results that are relevant to the local setting—Democratic validity
5. A sound and appropriate research methodology—Process validity (pp. 68–69)

In assessing whether a study has achieved dialogic validity, the conversation happens between the researcher and stakeholders, the research and other action researchers, and/or the researcher and CF, who are familiar with the setting of the research. Likewise, assessing process validity requires the researcher to show ongoing learning through reflective cycles. These cycles dig into the underlying assumptions of the researcher and the community to get real, honest outcomes. The goal in both areas is that the methods and results that come from the research resonate with the community of practice (Herr & Anderson, 2014).

The action component of the AR cycle puts theory into practical application. Researchers can test their theories to validate them and then reflect on them (Burns, 2009). This leads to the ongoing process of learning, action, and reflection which characterizes AR (Burns, 2019). Validity can also be characterized through the learning that occurs for both the researcher and participants in the study. This catalytic validity shows how growth occurs, how change occurs,

how assumptions are challenged, and more (Herr & Anderson, 2014). A researcher keeps a research journal in which they recount their learning through the process (Burns, 2019). The researcher also keeps track of the learning of the participants through their reflections throughout the AR process.

In addition to personal learning, the methods used for education through the process are important. The way knowledge is shared between the stakeholders involved can have an impact on how they relate to other stakeholders and the research process (Burns, 2009). Sharing sensitive information and asking for feedback can have the opposite effect intended and can cause friction or damage the trust in the research process. Having stakeholders in the room with different backgrounds and levels of power creates an imbalance. The researcher may also create imbalance by holding information as power. These dynamics can be addressed by sharing information, setting ground rules, and making space for everyone's voices through verbal and written communication.

Many of these methods of validity overlap. In the case of providing a sound and appropriate research methodology, process validity also applies. Process validity also means that the researcher must use triangulation so that more than one kind of evidence shows the results of the research (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Triangulation in AR refers to the practice of using as many methods as possible to check the validity of the research, employing redundancy in data collection (Eden & Huxham, 1996; Herr & Anderson, 2014). The stories from interviews can be corroborated with observations to make sure the researcher is maintaining honesty in their work. Triangulation can happen by checking with other researchers, checking with participants, finding comparable situations, and moving through the cyclical process of AR (Burns, 2009). The reflective cycles are a way of going back and continuously reexamining the beliefs and

underlying assumptions of the researcher and participants. This type of validity involves careful planning and an openness to change which allows for more honest reflection and, hopefully, accurate results.

The AR process must be differentiated itself from consulting practice (Herr & Anderson, 2014) This can be done through its basis in a systematic study with theoretical considerations (McKay & Marshall, 2001; O'Brien, 2001). The research completed before the AR work allows for it to be steeped in knowledge, led by participants in context, and verified through tested research methods.

Validity in AR looks different than in more traditional research because of the way it is organized. In positivist research, a hypothesis is proposed and tested. The problem is answerable through collecting data by objective means (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990). Validity in AR follows a slightly different iterative path. It is “characterized as systematic inquiry that is collective, collaborative, self-reflective, critical and undertaken by the participants of the inquiry” (McCutcheon & Jung, 1990, p. 148).

Another way to triangulate is to use a CF group to consult on why the research is being done or validation groups to scrutinize the data and results (McNiff, 2017). The nature of AR research means that these groups are open to providing critical feedback to the researcher in an open dialogue. The context of the situation where the AR is taking place cannot be divorced from the systematic investigation of the problem (McKay & Marshall, 2001).

There is a democracy to AR that is uncommon in other types of research. The researcher brings an intellectual framework and knowledge to the process and the participants bring knowledge of the context of their situation (McKay & Marshall, 2001). Participants then work together with the researcher to discover the solutions to problems.

Validity is important to AR because it is an advancing and evolving field. It does not follow the scientific method and is not always strictly qualitative, either. Advancing this type of research is important because it involves scholar-practitioners, individuals who are working in their field and attempting to affect change. One piece of this is recoverability, or the ability for other researchers to replicate the research that is being done. This is an important criterion because if it is met, it helps to justify the generalization and transferability of the results of the research (Checkland & Holwell, 1998). Recoverability means that when AR research is completed, it can be used as a model in other organizations. Included in this concept are the theory, methods, and process, but not necessarily the results of the research.

### ***Involvement of Participants***

The results of a study should be relevant to the local setting. Democratic validity is the involvement of all participants in a project involved in the research process. From the start of the study, the AR process openly engages the researcher and participants in collaborative work (Yin, 2015). The participatory nature of AR is one piece that is integral to the process. It is also what makes the process special because the people who are involved are responsible for the action (Blichfeldt & Andersen, 2006; Stake, 2010).

Participation ensures that the researcher is not in control of the problem-solving. The role of the researcher is not to solve problems but to ask the participants questions, which helps them to come to their conclusions. One of the best ways to educate people is to ask questions (Horton & Freire, 1990). The groups learn together through cooperative inquiry along with the researcher. This is an important point because the change created through the AR process would not be sustainable if the ideas did not come about through the learning of the participants (Halai, 2006; Horton & Freire, 1990).

When choosing who participates in an AR project, it is important to include the users of a program. These participants know their experiences and are the best ones to offer their context to the situation. Stakeholders involved in the project might be staff, clients, funders, or anyone related to the problem at hand. In many cases, this is where the social justice and participant pieces overlap. Involving the end users of a program in working with the AR process allows their voices to be heard. In the case of AR research, with people facing institutional, cultural, or societal barriers, this allows them to have a seat at the table when they normally are left out. An AR project should be done with the community that it is impacting. This particular project took a sample of participants from staff and returning citizens to make sure that the ToC is well rounded.

### **Suitability of AR for This Study**

AR was a fitting method for this study due to its participatory nature and focus on justice. This is important to the research because the research questions centered around inclusiveness and involving stakeholders in the process. AR worked in tandem with the ToC development in this way to make sure that these parties were involved. The iterative nature of this method also aligned well with this study. The literature review, methodology, data collection, CF, and personal reflection allowed for a variety of ways to gather information.

Finally, AR was a fitting method because it is based in the community. The context of the work that *RecycleForce* does is explained in the following section. This work is based on a desire to bring the community together to assist people who have barriers to employment. A method for research to develop a ToC for such an organization needs to fit the context. This method seemed to be aligned with the needs and approach of *RecycleForce* at the time this research was planned.

## Context of *RecycleForce*

*RecycleForce* is a SE that focuses on working with returning citizens. They offer programming to assist returning citizens with workforce development as soon as they get out of jail or prison. *RecycleForce* employs them for a transition period of roughly six months, along with comprehensive services. These individuals can either be hired at the *RecycleForce* recycling facility or at one of the organization's community partners. Classified as a 50113 according to US tax law, they function as a nonprofit organization that self-identifies as an SE that works in electronics recycling.

A few studies have been done on the programming effectiveness of *RecycleForce* through their participation in the Enhanced Transitional Job Demonstration program of the U.S. Department of Labor. A cost-benefit analysis (Foley et al., 2018) shows that *RecycleForce* reduced recidivism in the community by 6.2 percentage points, participants earned \$5,804 in earnings and other benefits, and participants paid \$490 more in regular child support payments than the control group. Overall, *RecycleForce* provided benefits of \$13,297 per person to the Indianapolis, Indiana community.

Cummings and Bloom (2020) reported that *RecycleForce* had positive effects on recidivism, reductions in arrests, convictions, admissions to prison for new crimes, and total days of incarceration. The positive effects tapered off after the six-month period of an individual being involved in the program but still showed improvement over the course of their 30-month study.

A review of their peer mentoring model by Harrod (2019) found that this model used in their programming is key to the success that *RecycleForce* has had thus far. *RecycleForce*'s program group experienced twice the average quarterly employment, total earnings, and months

of formal child support paid (Harrod, 2019). The characteristics of *RecycleForce* that led to the program's success include their "circle of trust" meetings. These required meetings communicate the culture of *RecycleForce* to returning citizens and information about what is happening around the organization (Harrod, 2019). In addition to these meetings, *RecycleForce* also employs full-time case managers as Employee Assistance Representatives and partners with Trusted Mentors to train their peer mentoring staff (Harrod, 2019).

Finally, a report from the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (2020) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services noted that *RecycleForce* fostered relationships that were reciprocal, with both parties benefiting from the relationship. This is an important piece of how the organization works in collaboration with organizations and City of Indianapolis officials to serve both the community and their clients.

## **Overall Design**

### ***Objectives***

Keeping the overall aim in mind, my study examined how a ToC framework functions in an SE focused on people facing barriers to employment. Secondary to this is how engaging the clients or end users of an organization in the process of the creation of a ToC influenced its development. Due to the collaborative nature of the organization and the ToC framework, these objectives guided the design and methodology used in the context of working with *RecycleForce*.

### ***Design***

The study started with engaging stakeholders in a Change Agent group to create a ToC for *RecycleForce*. The group consisted of staff and returning citizens participating in programming at the organization. These sessions were split into a ToC session and an AR

session for data gathering. This group engaged in reflection and brainstorming activities to create the ToC, and then they critically reflected on the ToC portion of these engagements. This is where data was gathered for this dissertation. The group met a total of three times. The first ToC session consisted of exploratory questions to gather information on the barriers and facilitators that returning citizens face and staff attempt to address. It also gathered information on the goals of *RecycleForce* as they existed and/or what they should be. This formed the basis of the ToC and the assumptions people had about their work. The answers to the questions were built into a document that has become an output provided to *RecycleForce*. A short description of ToC and the purpose of the Change Agent group was shared with the group. Then, the group engaged in discussion around several questions, which included the following:

- What are some of the challenges you face in finding employment?
- What are some of the challenges you face in keeping employment?
- What are some of the challenges you face in hiring employees?
- What are some of the challenges you face in hiring employees with a criminal background?
- How do you think these things might affect someone's ability to do their job?
- What is the ultimate goal of the organization?
- What happens within the organization that leads to that ultimate goal?
  - Do these things happen on a short-, mid-, or long-term basis?
  - In what order do they need to be placed to meet the ultimate goal?
- What assumptions is the organization making about the community of Indianapolis?
- What assumptions is the organization making about its clients?
- What assumptions is the organization making about the organizations they partner with?



- What assumptions are the organizations working with *RecycleForce* making about their clients?

At the end of this session, a separate AR session took place with participants. Participants were asked to write a reflection based on the group discussion. They were only read by the researcher and used anonymously in the final dissertation chapters.

A voluntary opportunity to share with the group was offered. Guided discussion also occurred to discover how the session went, what the participants were processing, and suggestions were made for the next session. During the data collection, participants were asked to reflect on these questions:

- Did we achieve the goals we had set out for ourselves during this session?
  - If not, what prevented or discouraged you?
  - What have you learned about yourself, your skills, and your attitudes?
- What should we discuss in our next session that will help you better understand this process?
- How can we make this process more inclusive?
- What would make you want to add more to the conversation?
- What assumptions did you have today that influenced your answers?
- What recommendations do you have for our next session?

The second session focused on *RecycleForce*'s goals and programming. The session opened with a recap of the previous session and closed with the same opportunity for reflection from the group. It followed with the ToC portion of the session and worked on programming and assumptions. Questions regarding assumptions were included in each ToC session to make sure they were being addressed. Questions for this session included:

- What programs and services does *RecycleForce* offer to this community?
- Where do these programs fit in the continuum of goals previously discussed?
- How are these programs helping the organization to meet the ultimate goal?
- What assumptions is the organization making about the community of Indianapolis?
- What assumptions is the organization making about its clients?
- What assumptions is the organization making about the organizations they partner with?
- What assumptions are the organizations working with *RecycleForce* making about their clients?

After the ToC portion of this meeting, the AR portion began with personal reflection and group reflection, following the same pattern as the first meeting. The same questions were used and reflections were collected after this portion of the meeting.

The last Change Agent group session completed the creation of the ToC by covering gaps and potential areas where new interventions needed to be created in the areas of programming, involvement of stakeholders, or goals that need to be developed. Again, the session opened with the ToC portion and a recap of what has been discussed up to this point. It closed with final reflections and an opportunity to add anything at the end. This is where the background information, goals, assumptions, and interventions (programming) come together. The ToC was co-created using information from previous sessions. Given that staff were not involved as much or at all in the first two sessions, a third set of questions was developed in coordination with the CF group and the responses from the first two sessions. These included:

- Is it clear what the organization wants to achieve?
- Will the process activities deliver the specified outcomes?
- Are there other organizations doing what you do or something similar?

- What are your activities, strategies, resources, programs, etc?
- What outcomes are you trying to achieve?
- Do you consider relationship building as a key element of success/indicator of change?
- What does success look like?
- After looking at what we've discussed so far, what gaps do you see in programs or services offered by *RecycleForce*?

This meeting concluded with a final AR data collection portion that asked the same questions. I also asked the following questions regarding the entire ToC framework:

- Overall, what was your impression of the usefulness of this process?
- What do you think the next steps are?
- Did you feel included in your ability to voice your opinions?
- What did you learn about yourself and others through this process?

In addition to the Change Agent group, I also engaged a CF group consisting of peer-reviewers who were not a part of the Change Agent group, to cross-check assumptions and be an additional check for validity (Blake & Gibson, 2021; Burns, 2009; Herr & Anderson, 2014; Wergin, 2018). These CF participants were community members, experts in research, staff from community organizations, and colleagues. Separate from the Change Agent group sessions, three CF sessions happened. A CF session happened after each Change Agent group to aid in reviewing group and personal reflections and the coding and themes that emerged from the data.

I gave a reflection on how the session went to the group verbally. Then, I provided a summary of the session questions via email to the group before the meetings. I asked the group members for their feedback on my reflections and notes. The themes that rose from the data were reviewed with CF and checked for validity.

Separate from the group reflection that happened, AR also calls for the researcher to spend time in reflection. This happened after each Change Agent group session and CF session according to both AR and ToC methodologies. This was an opportunity to review the events that happened during each meeting. The reflection followed Schein's (2021) ORJI guidelines of:

- Observation—look at what has happened logically
- Reaction—emotional reaction to what has been observed
- Judgment—process and make judgments based on observations and feelings
- Intervention—make changes to the research process or own assumptions based on observations, reactions, and analysis. (p. 97)

These notes were used in writing the final chapters of this dissertation. Lastly, the staff were engaged in two sessions to review, verify, and finalize the ToC that had been created. Then, they answered questions about its impact and implementation in their organization.

### **Participatory Action Research Cycle**

The AR cycle used in this dissertation is featured in Figure 3.2. AR cycles can also vary and be expanded into many sections.

**Figure 3.2**

*Action Research Cycle Process Two*



During this research I created the AR cycle illustrated in Figure 3.2 to:

- “Identify the problem” alongside the stakeholders to come to consensus on the end goal of *RecycleForce*, review what the organization is doing already,
- “Develop a Plan of Action” by incorporating research and information from AR reflection sessions,
- “Collect Data” by gathering information during AR reflection sessions on our ToC framework, and
- “Report the Results” to my CF and in my final reporting.

The Change Agent group was engaged in developing a ToC framework. The creation and agreement of ground rules by the group, along with personal reflection time, was included to reduce the inequity that may be found between group members. The development of the ToC framework and AR processes were conducted separately. Data was gathered from both sessions. I iterated my AR cycle three times, with slight changes to the cycle each time, as outlined below.

### *Cycle 1*

1. Identify the Problem: The objective is the co-creation of a ToC
2. Develop a Plan of Action: Engage with *RecycleForce* to identify participants for the Change Agent Group
3. Collect Data
  - a. Session I
    - i. Part 1: Theory of Change
      1. Introduction
      2. Ground Rules Discussion
      3. Explanation of Theory of Change

4. Discussion of *RecycleForce* Goals and Assumptions
- ii. Part 2: Participatory Action Research Data Collection
  1. Personal Reflection
  2. Group Reflection
  3. Lessons Learned
4. Report the Results: CF Session I

## ***Cycle 2***

1. Identify the Problem: Researcher Reviews Lessons Learned from Session I
  - a. Researcher reflection based on Session I Part 2 and CF Session I
2. Develop a Plan of Action: Plan for Session II
  - a. Plan for Reflection Session II part 2
3. Collect Data
  - a. Session II
    - i. Part 1: Theory of Change
      1. Introduction
      2. Revisit Ground Rules
      3. Review Session I Part 1 Discussion of Goals & Assumptions
      4. Discussion of *RecycleForce* Interventions/Programs
    - ii. Part 2: Participatory Action Research Data Collection
      1. Personal Reflection
      2. Group Reflection
      3. Lessons Learned
4. Report the Results: CF Session II

### *Cycle 3*

1. Identify the Problem: Lessons Learned from Session II
  - a. Researcher reflection based on Session II Part 2 and CF Session II
2. Develop a Plan of Action: Plan for Session III
  - a. Plan for Reflection Session III Part 2
3. Collect Data
  - a. Session III
    - i. Part 1: Theory of Change
      1. Introduction
      2. Revisit Ground Rules
      3. Review Session I & 2 Discussion of Goals and Interventions/Programs
      4. Discussion of *RecycleForce* Gaps and Plans for new Intervention
      5. Theory of Change Process Ends
    - ii. Part 2: Participatory Action Research Data Collection
      1. Personal Reflection
      2. Group Reflection
      3. Lessons Learned
4. Report the Results: CF Session III
5. Reflection: Lessons Learned from Session III Part 2 and CF Session III
6. Participatory Action Research Cycle Ends

## Final ToC Sessions

A ToC requires not only a thorough engagement in its development but must also be owned and embraced by the organization. Two final sessions were held with *RecycleForce* staff to verify the ToC and address some questions in line with the study objectives. Session IV was spent with staff reviewing and making edits to the ToC. During this session, participants asked questions about placement, why certain items were included, and if they were able to add additional information. I answered questions and we made additions to the document for clarity.

The original ToC had been created primarily by a diverse group of constituents, but due to unforeseen availability issues, staff participation was limited in the first three sessions. Therefore, ToC document refinement and finalization included the staff who had originally taken part, additional staff from the program and data collection departments, and outside partners of the organization who operated programming at the facility.

In Session V, participants were asked a series of questions about the process and the ToC. Participants were able to reflect on their time in ToC development and review based on these questions in Table 3.1.



**Table 3.1***Reflective Questions*


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Q1	Does the approach outlined in the Theory of change we created accurately reflect the work and processes you are using at <i>RecycleForce</i> ?
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Q2	As you go through each section, is there anything missing? (elements, linkages, assumptions, etc.) What did you learn during our time together about co-creating this ToC?
----	---

Q3	How may this ToC help in program planning?
----	--

Q4	How may this ToC help in program planning?
----	--

Q5	How may this ToC help in program planning?
----	--

Q6	How may this ToC help in program implementation?
----	--

Q7	How may this ToC help in impact measurement?
----	--

Q8	Has this ToC and the process of its creation strengthened your learning about your work?
----	--

Q9	What other purposes may this ToC serve as you move forward in your work?
----	--

Q10	How is having your work mapped out in this way useful?
-----	--

Q11	What do you see as barriers to using this ToC?
-----	--

Q12	What would make it easier to use this ToC?
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Q13	How do you think you could use the ToC to measure impact in alignment with the goals (in yellow)?
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### ***Session I Process: Change Agent Group***

The first three sessions with the Change Agent group took place over a week. In Session I, research was conducted with 12 participants. I originally intended for there to be a mixture of staff and returning citizens. Session I consisted of 11 returning citizens and one staff person. I asked the participants to reflect in writing on the ToC session we had just completed. I assured them that their verbal and written comments would be kept anonymous outside of the room we were using for the session. Once they had turned in their writing, I asked them a series of questions to reflect on the ToC discussion. After concluding this session, I met with a CF group of eight people. The purpose of the study and the responses to my questions were shared with the group. They made recommendations for following up in the second session and adjustments were made to the questions.

### ***Session II Process: Change Agent Group***

In Session II, research was conducted with six participants in the Change Agent group. All participants were returning citizens. This time, no staff were present. I followed the same process from Session I and had the participants take a moment to make reflection notes. Then, I asked the participants a series of questions. After conducting this session, I met with a CF group of five people. I shared the key findings from that day, along with the makeup of the group. Based on the group's recommendations, some changes were made to both the questions and the makeup of the group for the third session. Adaptations were made for the following session.

### ***Session III Process: Change Agent Group***

Session III consisted of research with 11 participants in the Change Agent group. There were five staff members and six returning citizens. One of the staff members was also a returning citizen. Similar to the previous sessions, the group took time to write any reflections before we

began the verbal questions. Once they were finished, I asked them a series of questions to reflect on the development of the ToC framework. After this was completed, I met with a CF group of 6 people. I reported on the process and the reflections I had. They made comments on areas of future research and things to note in the responses that I had obtained. This concluded the sessions of the research for this study.

### ***Sessions IV and V: ToC Verification and Finalization***

Sessions IV and V consisted of 10 participants. All of the participants in these sessions were staff members. Some of the staff were also returning citizens. Three participants were program staff; one worked in data management and one in operations. One of the participants was an outside partner from the State of Indiana who ran programming at the facility. All participants in these sessions were persons of color. We worked through the ToC to make sure it was accurate according to their knowledge. Then, we worked through the questions regarding their experience.

### ***Participants***

Participants were recruited from the *RecycleForce* staff to participate in the Change Agent group which developed the ToC. Returning citizens who take part in *RecycleForce* programming were also engaged.

Returning citizens are considered “vulnerable” under HHS guidelines and were not asked for any information about their involvement in the justice system, their incarceration, or crimes for which they were incarcerated. Unless freely given, it was not required or reported. It was also clearly stated in all conversations that participation in the research had no effect on parole for the returning citizen. It is important to note that many of the staff are also returning citizens. Finally, informed consent was sought from all participants before engaging in research activities.

There was a total of 15 unique staff and 12 unique returning citizens that took part in the sessions over the course of 5 months. At least two staff persons were also returning citizens who had come through the *RecycleForce* program years before and now work with new returning citizens. Some staff worked in the office, some on the manufacturing floor, and some in management. Some returning citizens held positions through the program they had enrolled in with the office and manufacturing floor. Some of the returning citizens held leadership positions within their program. These were the “blue vest” supervisors on the manufacturing floor. After the research, all returning citizens who were not staff at *RecycleForce* had completed the program and moved on from the organization.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The research included qualitative individual reflection, group reflection and work, and discussion with the CF. The Change Agent group was semi-structured to provide the opportunity for additional questions that came up given the participants’ answers. Each session was recorded with prior consent.

Once all data from the AR data collection portions of each meeting were collected, they were reviewed, and initial codes were assigned to the documents. These codes were reviewed and revised to combine them into categories and then themes. These themes are presented and compared to the objectives of the dissertation in Chapter IV along with data from the written and verbal data collection.

### **AR and ToC Working Together**

The study was designed to follow the cycle: identify the problem, develop a plan of action, collect data, and report the results. Each Change Agent group engaged in these activities in addition to the researcher doing the same. The researcher facilitated the development of the

ToC framework and then the AR process as laid out in the data collection. It concluded by verifying the ToC and discussing implementation with staff.

I used an AR process with the development of a ToC framework in an organization serving people who are returning citizens. These processes fit well together due to their focus on the participation of all groups – specifically, people facing barriers to employment. It also allowed the voice of people facing barriers to employment to be on the same level as staff and/or those who run the organization. *RecycleForce* has found great success in working with this group and is looking at why that has occurred. It was important to ensure that the voices of the people involved in this research were heard. This gives them the ability to be instrumental in the change happening around them. ToC and AR are both participatory activities. ToC, however, provides more of a framework for implementing change that organizations can work from while making sure to honor the voices of their participants.

### **Summary**

SEs are unique and they fit within their context in the community where they are created. Likewise, ToCs also fit within the context of the organization or program where they are developed. They are flexible and allow for the measurement of this unique structure. This is why the AR methodology fits so well in this unique context. Its particular focus on social justice is helpful when considering returning citizens and their involvement in creating processes.

A ToC would help an organization to determine if their interventions are meeting the needs of the community and their clients in the intended ways. If an organization is interested in involving all its stakeholders in the creation of its programming, it can be challenging to undertake.

In some cases, these organizations are tied to the political climate in which they exist. The extent to which political or institutional concerns influence the decisions that an organization makes when deciding outcomes is not discussed widely in the literature (Stein & Valters, 2012). A lot of the research makes ToC look like the answer to collaboration in situations where there are a variety of stakeholders. Each part of a SE needs to understand the mission but also fulfill the needs of the business they are running. However, it can reinforce the hierarchy of organizations that are taking part in the development of the ToC framework and the voice of the smaller or less powerful stakeholder is lost (Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018). The mission of the SE might be valuable, but it can be out of touch with what people want or need. Again, this is where AR is helpful so that stakeholders have a voice in the conversation.

ToCs are designed to bring consensus between stakeholder's views, but they do not guarantee equality of influence (Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018; Phi et al., 2018). Human actors are still human, and the dominant culture may still have influence over the measures adopted by the group. Depending on the group, interrupting the dominant narrative and power structure in a situation may be an important piece of the plan to start a ToC framework. It can be hard to gain honest accounts of change when stakeholders are in politically difficult contexts (Valters, 2014), especially when the dominant narrative has yet to be acknowledged by the group. In SEs working with people facing barriers to employment, it is important to honor their voice in the development of the programs and services offered. The staff, funders, or other stakeholders of a SE may not even realize they are perpetuating a narrative that is harmful to the community.

Working with a variety of stakeholders is important, but so too are the voices of the people who are going to be taking part in the intervention. Without their voice, staff, funders, and program managers will not understand how their interventions affect a person's situation.

Especially in organizations working with people facing barriers to employment, staff need to understand what those barriers are rather than assume they know. They may even need to change their mindset from looking at the barriers of the individual to looking at the barriers an organization has placed on an individual. Organizations engaged in the development of a ToC framework need to practice learning and reflection based on the voices of the people they are trying to help. The AR process is a good fit due to its reflective nature.

## Chapter IV: Findings

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the previous chapters and the study's objectives. Next, I will review the context of the study and an overview of the participants. Lastly, I will give an account of my experience in utilizing the AR method.

Chapter I provided the background, significance, and approach of this research. Chapter II laid out a detailed literature review of the relevant theory, research, and practice around people facing barriers to employment, re-entry, social enterprises, and ToC. Chapter III explained the framework, methodology, and design of this study. The primary objectives of the study were as follows:

- **Objective 1:** To develop an understanding of barriers and facilitators experienced by those implementing the ToC
- **Objective 2:** To gather the perspectives of program end-users involved in the development of the ToC
- **Objective 3:** To explore with participants how the ToC can be used to demonstrate and measure impact.

### Context and Overview of the Process

This research was a qualitative study using an action research methodology in the creation of a ToC with an organization serving people facing barriers to employment. The ToC was conducted with participants from *RecycleForce*, a social enterprise located in Indianapolis, Indiana.

This action research study entailed a series of engagements with *RecycleForce* that took place over a five-month period. The engagements included five multi-stakeholder events focused on the ToC co-creation. Session I AR cycle highlights the reflections of the participants,

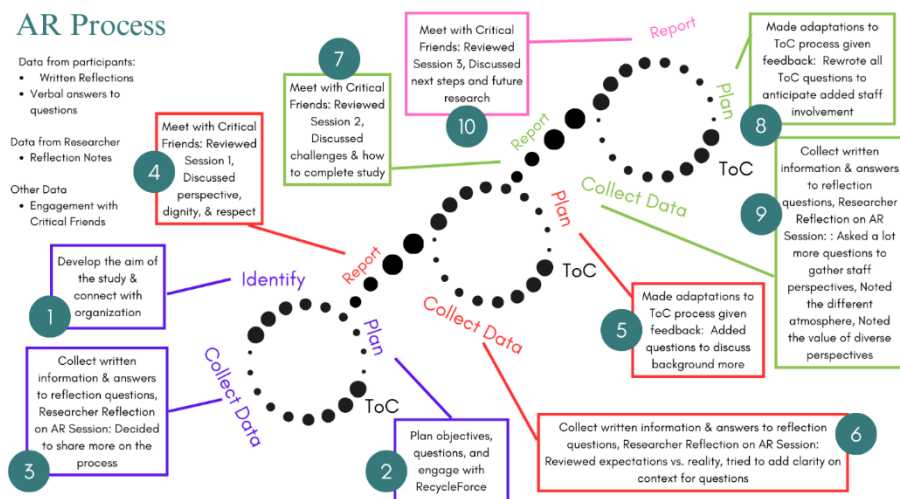


the engagement with the CF group, the ORJI reflection, and the adaptations made for the following session. Session II AR cycle highlights the reflections of the participants, the engagement with the CF group, the ORJI reflection, and the adaptations made for the following session. Session III AR cycle highlights the reflections of the participants, the engagement with the CF group, and the ORJI reflection. The final ToC session highlights the verification and finalization of the ToC and the reflections of the staff who will be implementing it with the organization.

Each session consisted of a series of questions asked of participants and the ToC was verified by staff. The individuals in this study were both staff and returning citizens employed by *RecycleForce*, Inc. The returning citizens were not asked for their background, the reasons they had been incarcerated, or any personal information. Some of them shared limited details about themselves through the process of their own volition. The staff were also not asked about their positions, history with the organization, or their status as returning citizens. If information was shared, it was also of their own volition.

Figure 4.1 below provides an overview of the AR process I created based on the process that I used in this study.

Figure 4.1

*Action Research Process*

*Note.* Starting at box number one, the study was developed in the proposal process. The diagram progresses through the numbers to box 10, my last meeting with my CF group to report and validate the coding of their responses. The final ToC is a concurrent but separate activity, which is why it was not included in this diagram. The final two sessions were an addition to the original process and are outlined in subsequent sections.

**Session I Data Collection*****RecycleForce Session***

During the first session with *RecycleForce*, there were 12 participants. 11 of the participants were returning citizens and one was a staff member. Everyone had a chance to make notes and reflect on paper about their experiences during the ToC session. Once this time was concluded, several questions were asked of the participants to verbally review the ToC session. These questions included the following:

- Did we achieve our goal?
- What should we discuss next time?

- What would make you want to add more to the conversation?
- What assumptions did you have today that influenced your answers?

The goal for the ToC session was to review the background of the organization, why they were there, and why people came to *RecycleForce*. Participants indicated during the AR session that they felt that we had achieved this goal.

When asked about assumptions, they did not have any because they were not prepped for the conversation before entering the room. They wanted to have more information and they wanted to write more. They stated that having people come in to do research or learn about them was good so that it could advance the organization. They also stated that they hoped the research reached the people who needed its information. Their recommendation for next time was to sit and talk more.

### ***Critical Friends***

During the first CF session, I reviewed the objectives for the research with eight people who joined virtually for the conversation. I explained the context of working with *RecycleForce*, the format for the sessions, and where my data collection would be taking place.

The group recommended that I document the programs that *RecycleForce* currently runs with returning citizens. They also recommended looking at the assumptions that the returning citizens might have in getting documentation. It was also suggested that I look into the returning citizens' perspective on the areas of their lives that might have an impact on documentation.

When I explained that there was only one staff person involved in the first session, there was debate as to whether I needed to ask for more staff involvement or just place focus on returning citizens. One person suggested that I should change my focus to be entirely on the

returning citizens. Another person stated that they still felt the staff perspective was valuable given that they may know more about the programming at the organization.

The question was posed that it would be interesting to find out what change meant to returning citizens versus staff at *RecycleForce*. Other areas for further consideration suggested were partner perspectives from outside the organization and the emphasis that *RecycleForce* places on people and their value. CFs were interested in getting to the core of why *RecycleForce* does what they do and the importance they place on dignity and respect.

### ***ORJI***

After each of the sessions, I utilized Schein's (2021) guidelines of reflection, observe, react, judgment, and intervene (ORJI) to make notes on my own observations. After the ToC session, I observed that some participants were more willing to talk than others. The participants wanted to know more about the questions I was asking. They were also cautious and wanted to know why I was at *RecycleForce* and the point of my project. My reaction was that I really wanted them to know I was not just trying to get information out of them. A few of them wanted to know if I was there because I cared about them and the people at *RecycleForce*. I analyzed my own reaction to try to find out why I wanted them to think I was more understanding of their situations. I concluded that I wanted my research to be valuable to the organization and the participants of their programming. I did not want them to think I was only there to get my research completed and to finish my degree. They also asked me to share more about my background, so I intervened by planning to share that information in the next session.

I also noted that I needed to make sure there was a clear transition to the second set of questions, where I was gathering data on their reflections, and that I needed to show them what we were building during the ToC session.

In my reflections, I recognized that it would be easy to get pulled in another direction regarding the focus of my research. The participants of the CF group included community members that had more background on *RecycleForce* and wanted to know more about their work. They had many ideas about how *RecycleForce* should function. In addition, several group members were my colleagues from Antioch University. They brought their own worldviews and research perspectives to the table during our discussion. I reacted by acknowledging that I felt overwhelmed by all the questions and interests of the CF group. It was important to maintain focus on my own research and not get pulled in another direction. I analyzed by asking myself if I needed to be better prepared. It would be important to structure the conversation and give it more focus, while still acknowledging the perspectives of group participants. Lastly, I intervened by looking at the questions for the next session and making adaptations.

### ***Adaptations***

Given both the answers from the *RecycleForce* AR session and the comments from the CF group, adaptations were made to the questions for the second ToC and the AR sessions. More questions were added about programs and services. A question was also added about what success means for staff and returning citizens.

### **Session II Data Collection**

#### ***RecycleForce Session***

During the second session, six participants were present. All six were returning citizens, and no staff were present. Everyone had a break and a chance to reflect on the ToC session on paper. The goal for the session was to dig deeper into programs and services. It was also to outline the assumptions that the participants had about the community and their perceptions of the assumptions made about the organization and its clients.

In the AR session, participants were asked the same questions as in the first session. When asked if the goal for the session was achieved, participants responded positively. They then focused back on programs and services. Participants wanted to write more because they mentioned that they talk all day and do not get the opportunity to write as much.

### ***Critical Friends***

I met with the CF group virtually the day after the second session. There were five people present. I recapped the purpose of my research and its objectives. I reviewed the make-up of the participants from *RecycleForce* and voiced my concern that none of the staff were present for this session.

The group asked me questions about how I engaged participants for the session. I shared that I relied on staff to find participants due to their schedule and current workload. We also discussed possible options. The first was to engage my chair to see what my options were for the next steps.

The CF group also discussed the nature of nonprofit organizations and that they make a big difference but cannot slow down. That working in chaos is a reality but they questioned how sustainable it was for people. They also discussed the issues of dignity and respect once again.

### ***ORJI***

After we had completed the ToC session, I observed that the group of participants I was working on my research with was a successful group dedicated to their education. My reaction was that I thought I got a lot more information from them at the time. It also shifted my own beliefs about how this process would go. I was nervous and unsure of the implications of the changes and how I would report them. My analysis was that I had expectations for how I wanted this to go and I was leaning into the changes. My intervention was to consider how I was going

to make changes to how the research had gone so far. I decided to engage the CF group to ask for confirmation. I also decided to reach out to my chair to find out what I should do next.

After talking with the CF group, I observed that it was good to have these reflective conversations with people outside of the ToC and AR sessions. My reaction was that I felt very uncertain about the issues I was having in not having staff participation. My analysis was that I needed to discuss things with my chair to see if what was happening was okay. I intervened by communicating with my chair both electronically and verbally about the direction of the research.

### ***Adaptations***

Several adaptations were made to the research questions and process after the discussions with the CF group and my chair. First, I reached out to *RecycleForce* to let them know that I needed more staff participation, either by holding a fourth ToC and AR session or by having more staff participation in the third session. After an email exchange, it was decided the next morning that more staff were going to participate in the third session. Two more sessions were added for ToC validation and discussion.

I also made sure that I had questions that would focus on programming, assumptions, and the areas that were covered in the first two sessions. I added an additional set of questions to the list to gather information from the participants that I had not gotten due to staff not being able to participate previously.

### **Session III Data Collection**

#### ***RecycleForce Session***

In the third session, a total of 11 participants were present. Six of the participants were returning citizens and five of them were staff from *RecycleForce*. All participants were offered

the opportunity to write down their thoughts at the beginning of the AR session. Staff were from a mixture of office, program, and management positions. The goal of the session was to review what had already been discussed and then get an overall picture of what *RecycleForce* does.

Participants were asked the same questions in the AR session that they were asked previously. Since it was the last session, they were also asked a few additional questions to wrap up the process overall. The AR session started like the others with my asking if we achieved the goals for the ToC session.

Next, participants were asked if they had learned anything about themselves. This was followed by a discussion of how the process could have been more inclusive. It was noted that there were more staff in the room this time and that it brought a different perspective. Participants commented that this allowed them to take a step back and see a different viewpoint. The impression of the process was that it was eye-opening and informative. It gave participants a chance to voice the positives and then look at how they could improve.

The next steps, according to the group were to continue to talk about what success looks like. That if changes needed to be made, they hoped it would happen. Everyone agreed that they were able to voice their opinions freely during the session. They learned a little about each other's perspectives during the session as well.

### ***Critical Friends***

During the CF group, the evening after the final session, I reviewed the process and objectives. There were six participants in the group who signed on virtually for the meeting. I explained what had happened regarding adding staff to the discussion and that it had worked out to not have to do an additional session. We also reviewed the codes that I had begun to develop based on the data from these sessions.



We discussed as a group the next steps for future research which included further interviews with staff, returning citizens, and partners. We also discussed the nature of AR and the need to be adaptable to situations as they arise. There were a lot of questions about the process and how it was navigated.

### ***ORJI***

I observed in the final session that having more of the staff involved in the session lent a very different atmosphere to the room. Everyone felt welcome to speak and, while different, it was positive. My reaction was that I was very happy with the level of participation I had gotten for the last session. My analysis was that having a variety of perspectives in the room is vitally important to the process. My intervention at the end was to make a list of future research and notes on my experience in using AR.

My observations from the CF group were that talking through the work as it's happening is very helpful to the process. My reaction was that I appreciated the time and thought everyone had put in on my behalf and that without their feedback, I would not have had some important questions asked. My analysis was that this group is an important part of AR and without them, it would not have been as well balanced. My intervention for Session III was to make a note of their ideas for future research both with *RecycleForce* and broader with ToC as a tool.

One observation was that there had not been enough discussion about the implementation of the completed ToC with the staff. There were also challenges in scheduling, which resulted in the first three sessions happening within one week. To remedy this situation, the intervention was to add two sessions to review and finalize the ToC. In these sessions, the staff who would implement the ToC walked through the diagram and made edits. Then, during the final session, they were asked about its effectiveness and implementation.

### **Session IV Data Collection**

Session IV started with a presentation of the draft ToC for staff to review. Since some of the staff had not been involved in its development, I walked them through the ToC document. Starting at the bottom with the short-term goal, each section was outlined by reviewing the goal, the assumptions, the programs/activities, and the outcomes. I started on the left and made my way right through the document. Each section has the same short-term goal and underlying preconditions. Staff added comments on gaps and programs that were not present in the current document. They also clarified the language that was used in the document.

### **Session V Data Collection**

In Session V, two weeks later, I gave a brief overview to the participants and then asked several questions. These questions were intended to gather information about the ToC framework as well as the process itself. They were focused on impact and how the ToC would be used moving forward.

Staff received training on how to make changes and adapt the document as their programs and services change. A final presentation after the completion of this dissertation will be given to a larger group of staff at *RecycleForce* to train them on how it functions and how they can use it as their organization develops.

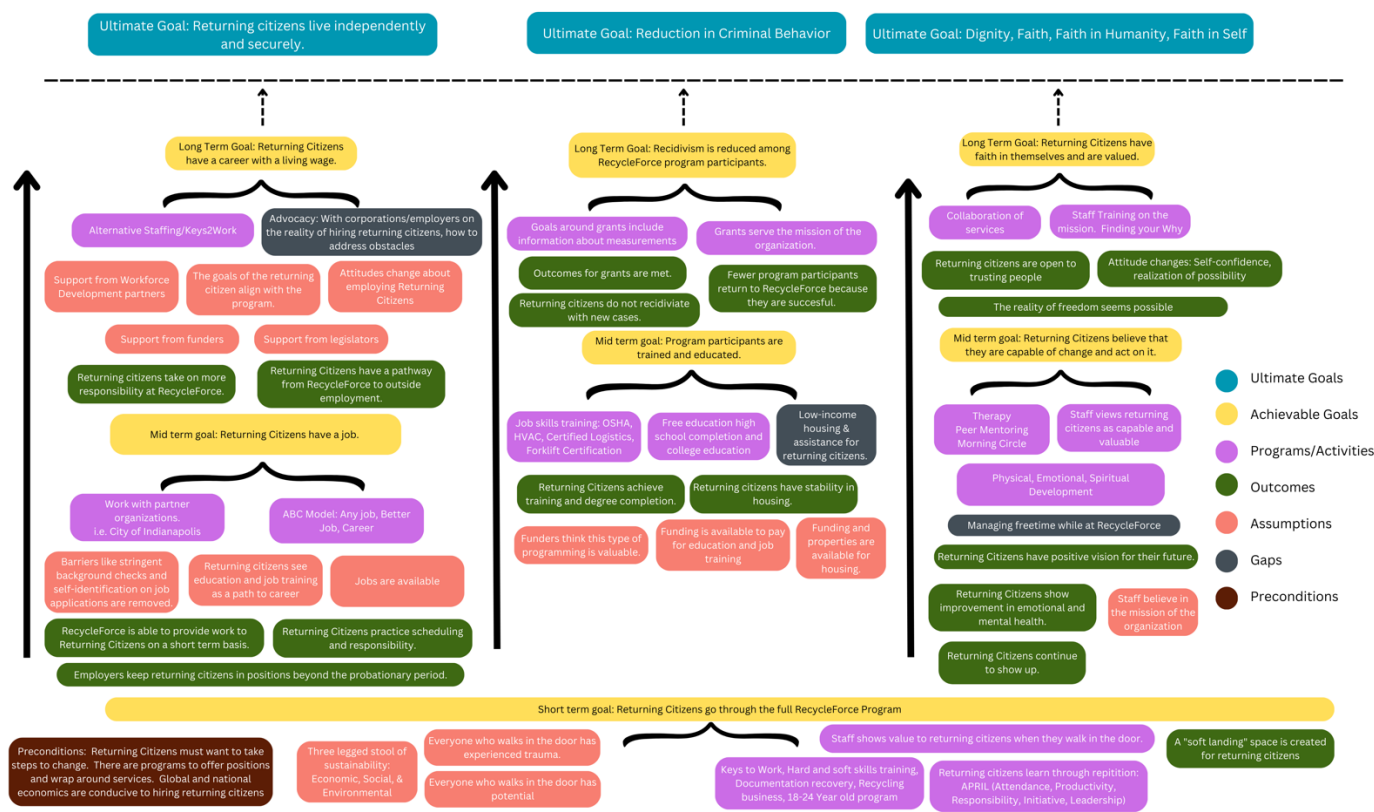
### **Results and Findings**

The aim of this dissertation is to understand what occurs in the co-creation of a ToC in an SE serving individuals facing barriers to employment. As mentioned in Chapter III, there were a total of six unique staff and 12 unique returning citizens that took part in the ToC and AR sessions. Each session had a different make-up of participants from the two groups.

Before sharing the findings related to the specific study objectives, I present the ToC that was co-created during this research engagement in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.2**

*RecycleForce Theory of Change*



The *RecycleForce* ToC functions as a description of the programs and services the organization offers to meet the needs of the returning citizens who become program participants. The diagram is intended to be fluid and flexible as new programs and services arise and as the needs of the program participants differ based on outside influences. It also offers the opportunity to jumpstart further conversations about where programs are happening, what the focus of the organization should be, and how grants and funding opportunities fit into the larger picture of *RecycleForce*'s mission. It should never be considered a static document that cannot be changed.

The ultimate goals of the organization, outlined in blue in Figure 4.2 include:

1. Returning citizens live independently and securely.
2. Reduction in criminal behavior
3. Dignity, faith, faith in humanity, faith in self

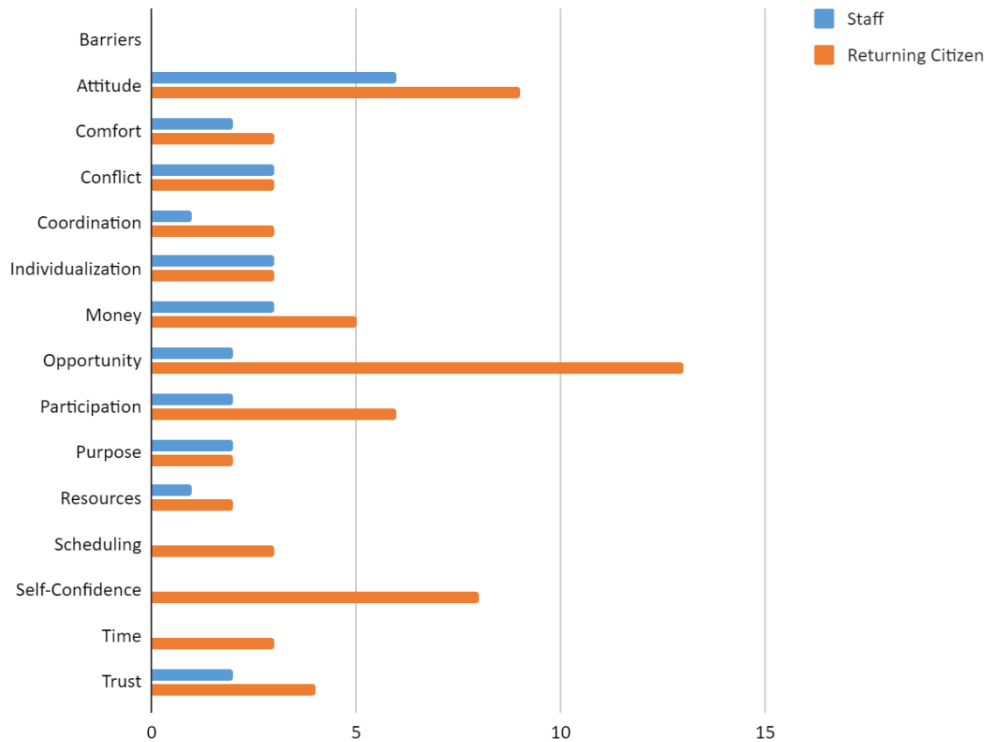
Within these three ultimate goals, there are mid- and long-term goals in yellow that each start with the same short-term goal. Starting at the bottom left of the diagram in dark red, some preconditions exist for the programs and services that *RecycleForce* offers. Programs and activities are in pink, outcomes are in green, assumptions are in peach, and gaps are in grey. This list is not meant to be all-inclusive but rather, a summary of how *RecycleForce* creates and advances change.

To determine if the objectives were met, themes were explored based on the three objectives. This code determined:

1. A list of barriers and facilitators that were discussed (Objective 1)
2. The perspectives of program end users are included (Objective 2)
3. How the ToC could be a way to measure impact (Objective 3)

Descriptor fields were used to define a person as either a citizen or a returning citizen. If a person who responded to questions was a staff member or returning citizen, they were labeled as such in the descriptor field. One of the staff members was a former returning citizen who now worked on staff at *RecycleForce*. All of the participants technically worked for the organization, but some were working as a part of the re-entry programming and others were permanent members of the staff. The descriptor fields were juxtaposed with the themes to see which barriers and facilitators stood out the most during the AR sessions. Figure 4.3 depicts the descriptor fields for staff and returning citizens and the corresponding themes for barriers and facilitators to employment. This

graph was created utilizing the program Dedoose to give evidence to the perspectives of returning citizens according to Objective 2 illustrating the number of responses to each theme based on the individual speaking.

**Figure 4.3***Descriptor Fields x Themes Grid Chart*

Each area may encompass a barrier or facilitator depending on how the statement was phrased and the person commenting. Their frequency is denoted by the numbers at the bottom of Figure 4.3. A codebook was created based on the comments that were made during the AR sessions. The themes and codes are summarized in Table 4.1 below.

**Table 4.1***Themes and Codes Chart*

Themes	Category	Category	Category	Code
Attitude	How it changes	How it's reinforced	Needing a new one	Using the word, Talking about a shift in how they thought
Comfort	Doing what you know	Doing what's easy		Using the word, talking about doing what was easy, not leaving the nest
Conflict	With others at RF	Personal	Individual	Using the word, talking about issues with others or themselves
Coordination	Of needs	Of services	Working with other agencies	Using the word, Talking about working with others or getting services aligned
Individualization	How the program is tailored to each individual			Using the word, talking about each individual's needs, goals, and solutions
Money	Having it	Not having it	Its impacts	Using the word, talking about its effects
Opportunity	Being given an opportunity for a returning citizen	Not being presented with it	Having the chance to participate	Using the word, using the word chance, given, making it happen
Participation	In the ToC development	At work at RF		Talking about involvement of themselves or others

Themes	Category	Category	Category	Code
Purpose	Having a personal mission	Felt when doing work	Changing an outlook	Using the word, talking about the reasons why they are involved
Resources	Organizational level access to them	Having access to them individually when you didn't before		Talking about needs and programs, access to them, or gaps
Scheduling	Staying on a schedule consistently			Talking about getting up, getting to work, independence in scheduling
Self-confidence	Belief in self			Talking about needing to continue doing the work, believing that they are capable
Time	Not enough of it to get things accomplished			Using the word, Talking about how long it takes
Trust	Building relationships			Ability to be open about opinions and observations, talking about support, RF belief in them

In the following section, the themes are grouped by frequency as they are examined. They are combined into groups based on the number of references made. Some of the responses were verbal and some were written to give participants the opportunity to engage in different ways.



### *Opportunity and Attitude*

Opportunity and attitude rose to the top as a theme for almost all the participants and were woven into almost everything they had to say. Opportunity referred to taking advantage of it, not being presented with it, or having the chance to participate and it got the largest number of mentions. Many of the participants found it difficult to switch to discussing the ToC framework versus discussing their views on *RecycleForce*. Evidence of this comes out in their responses listed below.

- “so many certifications and helping hands”
- “*RecycleForce* assumes that we deserve a second chance”
- “Before coming no one would hire me due to my background”
- “Anybody that wants to come can come”
- “Opportunity to change”
- “Like I said, I been here a month and a week. I’ve taken advantage of almost everything they have to offer”
- “I feel like *RecycleForce* is here to motivate you into the right direction, there’s so many certifications and helping hands. From Day 1, I’ve learned money management and I’ve learned how to make a routine for myself. *RecycleForce* isn’t the best paying job but it has many benefits for my type of situation.” (Written)

All these observations, while about the opportunities they have been offered at the organization, did not necessarily speak to the development of the ToC framework itself. I attempted to frame the questions to make sure that they knew how to answer in reference to the ToC framework development.

During the writing portion, one returning citizen commented that they wanted to talk more about the roles individuals have at *RecycleForce*. They stated, “Give more good paying jobs to felons, give felons another chance, Stop thinking only men can do hard work labor, females can.” While this person did not return for further sessions beyond the first one, their response was included in the following ToC session as a point of discussion. The fluctuation

between participants was due to workforce scheduling and who was available for the days I was holding the sessions at *RecycleForce*.

Another participant wrote,

Reasons we have trouble getting or keeping jobs: background, particular case, housing, transportation. Attitude, work ethic, entitlement. Anger, trauma, race and gender. Addictions. *RecycleForce* see each individual as an opportunity to save them, shape them, and help them to have a future. And stay out of prison.

These barriers and others were shared by many participants during the ToC development and came out in the reflection portions of the AR session as well.

One staff member commented on how the session could be more relational the next time. After responding by joking that I should have brought donuts to build our relationship more, they mentioned that this is a key aspect of how *RecycleForce* functions.

I worked at [investment firm], I was a broker for 5 years so I made like way more than I make here but I mean, they used to do stuff like you come in the morning and they have people at the door saying “Hey, thanks for coming, we couldn’t do it without you” and they used to wash our cars and stuff like that so I mean, they used to do little stuff like that and it with a long way, a long way, so like you said, saying that good morning, it goes a long way. People just want to be acknowledged and heard.

Alongside opportunity was the reference to a person’s attitude. The participants placed emphasis on the individual’s attitude being an important key to their success. Attitude encompassed a person’s viewpoint toward work-related tasks and duties, toward wanting to re-enter society, or toward wanting to change. This included needing a change in attitude, reinforcing it, or needing a new one.

One of the main points that was made by several participants was that individuals who came through the door as program participants had to want to be there. They had to have a desire to change. This was stated repeatedly, and I noted it in my reflections as I worked through the process. The returning citizens in the room answering my questions wanted to be there. As we

talked, a staff member responded “*RecycleForce* has the blueprint for people having the opportunity to change but mostly, it’s up to the person to want to change.”

In a similar vein, a returning citizen discussed motivation and stated,

Push yourself cause somebody going push you to go harder and stay focus on track. Nobody pushing you and you not pushing yourself I advise you to push somebody else cause once you see them provide and flourish it may spark something in you to do the same.

These observations are crucial when attempting to understand who needs to be in the room for an activity of this nature. Organizations have to want to be involved, returning citizens have to want to be at the table, and staff have to want to make strides to better their work.

In one session, participants asked me why I was doing this research and about my background. When I shared my background with them, they commented that having the opportunity to talk about these things was valuable. Having people come into the organization and do research with them offered the opportunity to visualize a different future. According to one participant, “We all need that visual of success in order to be successful. We don’t know what success is until we see it.” It was the same for being together and talking with other returning citizens, “You meet a lot of people in the same situation as you doing better so you believe you could do it as well.”

When asked what they had learned about themselves through the ToC development, one staff person commented, “I think I realized that the more I can be approachable, the more I can learn about human connectivity.” This attitude came through from several others as they discussed their learning and reflected on the ToC session.

I learned all I had to do was just be quiet and ask and receive whatever they want, people wanted to share in the manner that they were sharing, right, and I realized that’s all it takes is just us listening and asking, right, and so, I think that’s the start and so I feel like now I don’t have to ask how do I connect, I just have to continue doing it.

This was an important observation because it brought both the work of *RecycleForce* and the ToC together. The lessons learned here applied to both. Another participant stated:

Well, I kinda learned uh, listening to others point of view, what we trying to do here, that was insightful and I think towards myself just it's, there's always room to grow and learn more and to try to understand uh, what we needed to do so, hopefully I can continue to grow and change and try to understand uh, what we trying to do and what they're coming from.

The joint engagement in conversations between staff and returning citizens led to valuable insights. In one instance, a participant commented that they had remembered through these sessions what it was like when they had gone through the *RecycleForce* program.

Sometimes I think that we forget, we forget how young we were so we look at some behaviors now and we kinda, sometimes is bothers me trying to deal with it but, myself when I was young I was real rebellious, and didn't listen, and opportunities was there in front of me and a lot of times I would take advantage of them and so, and I, sometimes when I see these young people around us, I see myself and so I have to be, I have to always remind myself that, because there came a period when I did start listening and I don't know when some of them may, the light might click on and see and realize that they have to start making a change so I think that's what we all have to do as, in the work that we do, we have to kind of reflect back to when we were young and how, sometimes my parents was upset and sometimes my neighbors and the things that we did and so when we thought they was young and thinking everybody's old and they don't have a clue what's going on but uh, I think when we just continue to tell them the right things and how they supposed to because if you go back to your parents instilling things in you and as you get older you go through things, you begin to tell yourself, well they was right, and so and then you can maybe during after sometime though that process you can start really making a positive change. I think that's what we always have to be, we have to be doing that.

Here, the staff member talked about their change in attitude and the way that they utilized it to work with incoming returning citizens. Taking time to reflect during the AR process allowed them the space to be able to voice these thoughts and bend their attitude toward positive change.

### ***Money, Participation, and Self-Confidence***

Money, participation, and self-confidence were all next in the top categories of barriers for a returning citizen. These came out when participants were asked to reflect on the ToC

framework development and what it meant for them. Participants' viewpoints varied but some were similar. Money was in reference to needing more of it, being paid well in comparison to other "honest" work, the consequences of not getting it in time to pay bills, or the choice to make less money than they were making out on the street.

In reflecting on what they learned about themselves during the session, one participant commented,

Feel like RecycleForce is here to motivate you into the right direction, there's so many certifications and helping hands. From Day 1 to my current day, I've learned money management and I've learned how to make a routine for myself. RecycleForce isn't the best paying job but it has many benefits for my type of situation.

As returning citizens discussed the resources and training provided and then reflected on them during the AR sessions, it was evident that they had not been provided with these things in the past. It seemed this was a gap that the organization was filling.

A few returning citizens commented on the effort to change and what it means to them to have stable employment. Their comments in this area all talked about money as tangential to the way it had affected their lives.

- "Getting up early in the morning, to come here, is change, to me. It takes a lot energy to get up. Definitely when you make a \$1000 off pills and then you put that to the side and you actually come in here and you know you're not making as much money as dealing, that's change."
- "If you miss one day, miss one payment it's all over. As long as my son is taken care of that's all that matters. Fees, bills, car, son—take advantage of this opportunity."
- "Straight money and other money is way different."

The consensus was that having and/or making money could make or break a person, often leading to recidivism. The choice was also being made to engage in legal work rather than illegal and that was a significant choice. The analogy of a three-legged stool was used by one participant to describe what happens when one leg goes missing. They stated,

Somebody forgot to clock in, so he missed 8 hours on his check, that's that three-legged stool, that's a big deal, so we had to run and get a check so he could get his money by the end of the day. That's success for us, make sure he got his money so he can pay the bills cause all of them, living check to check.

Participation included the ToC development, or the work being done at *RecycleForce*.

Several of the participants felt that more people should be included and that the research should be ongoing,

I feel like the staff, uh, the board members they should be here. Anything that'll help further move us along. I think everybody's supposed to be involved. Cause it helps on a better scale, where like I say, everybody knows, don't nobody have to ask questions cause you know.

Likewise, another participant enjoyed discussing the work *RecycleForce* was doing and said, "More people. The more the better. Getting a broader understanding of what's going on than a small one." This was an important point and one that indicated further research and work in this area would be welcome. When asked how the session could be more inclusive, one participant commented, "I liked the opportunity to include everyone in that conversation. I think everyone has an opinion." Another said, "More people to talk about what's successful."

Participation also included the recognition that there were different viewpoints in the room. One staff member commented that he learned a lot from listening to one of the returning citizens talk about their experience. That returning citizen also commented that they enjoyed having staff in the room, "You know because you have the people in the mud, and then you have the people that are just—above it. You know, it's two different viewpoints."

Lastly, a majority of participants commented on how they thought it was good to discuss gaps during the ToC development and how staff should be engaging with program participants. One participant stated, "In general, we should always ask our young adults and more mature workforce what the gaps are and how the program is doing." One participant mentioned that taking the time to have the discussion was eye-opening for them. When asked about their own

participation and if this session was useful to them, one staff member commented, “I’d say, eye-opening, informative. You know you always want to accentuate the positives but then think about how we can improve.”

Self-confidence in the research indicated a self belief. Participants commented that they had to find confidence in themselves in coming to *RecycleForce*, One participant stated,

I just had to bring it out of myself. I knew I had it, I just had to bring it out of myself. You know man, I took the wrong road, you know what I’m sayin, to get here. You see me taking the short road. Both roads is easy, but one is bumpier than the other.

Likewise, the participants learned or solidified their belief in themselves through this activity.

Some even spoke of achieving greater goals due to the interactions they had in the ToC and AR sessions. One returning citizen commented about the sessions,

What we’ve done today is just reassuring me that I gotta stay on point, do what I gotta do, make sure my foundation is strong, so that just reassured me. Every time we talk, that reassures us on what we need to do. Whether it’s you or any individual. They come and talk to us and that’s just reassuring us that we gotta keep pushing, keep pulling, keep doing whatever it is that you’re doing that got you where you is, keep doing that and you’re gonna get a little bit further, keep doing that.

It was also the case that this was an opportunity for participants to reflect on their experiences with the organization and how it had influenced them. One returning citizen commented on the way in which *RecycleForce* builds up its program participants.

I wanna say something too, I know I’ve been saying negative things but I do want to highlight the fact that I’ve never been in a place so conducive to growth and hope and change. You know, I mean, just even something as simple as, every time I see him almost, he’s like “how are you doing? Now, how are you really doing?” you know it’s not just a base level of you know, we want you to do a job so we’re going to pay you know, there’s so much compassion and love here, you know. I really do want to say, I really appreciate everything that goes on here.

The chance to take part in the sessions was positive for all the participants. It was, in particular, positive for the returning citizens that the organization promoted these kinds of opportunities in addition to the general sense of being uplifted by their time in the program.

### ***Conflict and Coordination***

Conflict influenced how people engaged with the organization, how they interacted within the organization, and/or what they experienced in everyday life. One staff person commented on several themes, specifically people's perception of having to clock in for work and how that impacted their work.

people aren't used to knowing that that clock is connected to my money...that clock is looked at like an authority, like screw the clock I'm gonna just fall back and just verbally check in but then sometimes people use that as ghosting opportunities to say they worked when they didn't or you know, chop it up in the car and smoke a couple of blunts and "I'm on site" right? And that's better than, it's crazy what's better than being in the streets.

As previously mentioned in relation to opportunity, one returning citizen wrote about anger, trauma, entitlement, race, and gender as barriers to getting or keeping jobs when they reflected on the ToC session. Likewise, the same participant talked about the conflict they face at home and how that makes it difficult to come to work. They stated, "At this job you need cool, focus on work, you need cool but when you go home, you're going through some stuff your mind be everywhere." Outside influences and struggles have an impact on the ability of a person to actively get back on their feet after incarceration.

The struggle of conflict was also felt by the staff when they talked about having to go to great lengths to make sure program participants had what they needed in order to make ends meet. The previous comment about money and the three-legged stool gives evidence to the conflict that the staff faces when a program participant makes a mistake or chooses not to follow protocol. These challenges lead to the necessity for coordination of services and connecting them to trying to a program participant. One returning citizen suggested an app, "Some kind of app that had all the things you need, Like housing, that could connect you with everything. Like



Angie's list for assistance." The staff felt similar struggles when they discussed their reflections on the ToC. One talked about his experience in starting up a new young adult program:

where we drop the ball is that we thought, "oh we been doing this for a long time", grant funded programming and like I said, we had older –olks and oh, 18 - 24 are the same demographic, no it wasn't, we had no plan, no clue what we were dealing with and [Mark] was like, Oh we can do this, we been doing it, and like, no we haven't man it's a whole different ball game. And we didn't have any preplan or anything like that we always say 'we're building it on the fly and that's what we did we had to make some changes, he wanted to keep it the same and it can't be the same. We still making adjustments.

Others commented on their own ability to make changes. One returning citizen had been with the program for some time and worked in production. They commented on the growth and coordination of the program, "There's a lot that we wanna do that we can't do, we trying to make it happen. Little slow little bumpy when he first got there but it blew up. We ready." Lastly, one participant wanted to discuss more on how to overcome these and other hurdles.

### ***Trust and Comfort***

When it came to trust, there were only a few comments. In general, the participants who took part in the research all experienced a level of trust for each other and were open about *RecycleForce*. One returning citizen who had gone through the program, gone back to prison, and then came back to *RecycleForce* commented,

I feel like it's the support that they give you, from experience when I recently got out of incarcerated, when I was incarcerated, I thought they was gonna forget about me, but they didn't, I came back, I felt welcome, you know what I'm saying, and as I was incarcerated, I felt like I don't know, I don't know how to put it, but when court came I seen that you guys didn't forget about me, know what I'm sayin, they didn't. That's definitely a success.

Showing up for returning citizens is a practice of the organization and builds trust between staff and program participants as they navigate re-entry.

When asked about assumptions they had before coming to the ToC and AR sessions, one participant commented:

I think that the community assumes that RecycleForce is wasting its time on us and that we are not redeemable. RecycleForce assumes that we deserve a second chance and that we are worth the time and effort. For me personally, I am grateful for everything RecycleForce has done for me. The opportunity that has been offered to me has changed my life. I have not ever held a job this long before. I have worked here for a year now, and I have been hired on as a permanent employee. RecycleForce is like a toolbox for those of us who have been in trouble with the law. The sad part is that so many don't take advantage of this change or don't want to change, but for those that RecycleForce does help makes it worth it.

While this speaks to a number of areas including opportunity and attitude, the larger theme is how the organization places value on the returning citizen and creates a sense of belonging among them. As a facilitator, this speaks about the way that *RecycleForce* builds the trust that the community has for returning citizens and for how it builds trust with program participants. The assumption stated above is the perspective of one of the returning citizens but there were many head nods as this person spoke. Community perceptions of the organization were not addressed in this study, but it would be an avenue for follow-up in future research.

Comfort, in this instance, refers to doing what a person knows or is used to, rather than acting in a different way. In reflecting on the ToC session, one staff person stated, "There are times when it's too much for some people that for whatever reason, they choose not to deal with going forward, they, it's almost like a nest that people don't want to leave." Other comments overlapped with this theme. They include those about doing what is easy versus doing the right thing, making honest money, ghosting the clock, and other program participants who did not want to make changes.

### *Purpose, Resources, Scheduling, and Time*

The last group of themes had only a few comments that tended to overlap with others in the chart. When asked what they learned about themselves during the session, one returning citizen commented, “It’s a job with a purpose, so I love my job here.” A staff member had the same type of comment when he stated that helping a person make ends meet was a success for him. “My success looks like, if I can get somebody in a better situation, which looks like a job, a real job not just a temporary job, a real job on their way to a better career, that’s success for me.”

Regarding resources, one staff participant commented on the gaps that they see in the programming at the organization, “We have finite resources and we have to develop a referral partnership like what [Damon] and [Taylor] was talking about to fill in the gaps.” Another commented that the issue they had with the program was the time they were allowed to come for training, “I feel like what we could work on would be the amount of time. 120 [days] isn’t long enough in my opinion.” Lastly, a returning citizen commented on the lack of resources they had as a barrier, specifically naming housing and transportation.

Scheduling and time were the last two themes. One participant talked about having to get up and get to work on time. Several returning citizens shared this issue because they had to set their schedules which they were unaccustomed to in prison. Individuals in a prison have all scheduling dictated by the facility and staff. Once a person is on the outside, they have to do it all for themselves and it can be a very difficult thing for some to make this kind of modification.

As stated by a couple of participants:

- “Getting up early in the morning, to come here, is change, to me. It takes a lot energy to get up.”
- “From Day 1 to my current day, I’ve learned money management and I’ve learned how to make a routine for myself.”

Lastly, one participant talked about taking the time to sit down during the AR session and reflect on the work they were doing. They stated,

I think it gave us an opportunity to hear from different viewpoints, you know kinda reflect on what we doing. Maybe then, talking about it we can see... and maybe that reinforced that the thing that we're doing. Being able to reflect on it and talk about it. I think this was a good thing.

As stated previously, the opportunity for reflection was viewed as important for all participants. All of these barriers and facilitators were discussed by both staff and returning citizens in some manner throughout the sessions. Overall, they felt that the activity was valuable and needed to continue. One person stated that it was, "useful because you don't know what you don't know."

### **Barriers and Facilitators to Implementing the ToC**

During sessions IV and V, staff were asked separately about the implementation of the ToC and the barriers and facilitators they might face. When staff discussed the barriers, they talked about how their work is very complicated. About the ToC itself, one staff person noted, "I love flowcharts, but this is still complicated." They saw the ToC as a template to use and wanted to make sure that the document could be manipulated. Staff members said, we "might find ourselves trying to keep ourselves in this box and [we need to] keep understanding that this is fluid."

They also discussed that many of the staff have come from incarceration or have worked in this environment for a long time. One staff member noted, "Maybe one of the gaps is in the trauma that gets triggered for staff, maybe more support is needed." They had a lot to say about staff development. The ToC was a steppingstone for where they might also see needs that they had not seen before or at least bring them to light.

When discussing facilitators, the staff indicated that the diagram would make it easier to implement the ToC with the organization. One staff person commented, “Our daily jobs are busy. There’s days we can’t be 100% for everyone at all times. It’s a refocus.” Since the organization does not have a document of this kind to guide or reflect on their work, they said it was beneficial. Simply having the ToC in front of them would help to make sure they were implementing it and their programming successfully.

### ***Impact***

The consensus from participants was that more discussion about their work was valuable and needed. It was agreed that the work they do is very individualized, and that success looks different for each person. One staff person stated, “There is no complete picture because we change with the person, one person might not need much at all, one person might need a birth certificate from Cuba, you know.”

Measuring impact is difficult when outcomes are individualized in this way. Another staff person observed,

Sometimes we get focused on the program success but really, it’s what each and every person, what their definition of success is and I think that’s probably as important or more important but we still need the programs, right, but it’s really tying that to what they, you know, what success means to them. That was eye-opening.

A key part of the measure of the impact of the ToC for participants was the recognition that more people needed to be involved. As previously mentioned, one participant commented that board members and staff needed to be present for the discussion. Another stated that we needed, “More people to talk about what’s successful.” During the third session though, it was stated by one individual, “I liked the opportunity to include everyone in that conversation. I think everyone has an opinion.” Another participant mentioned when staff participate in efforts like the ToC to help make the organization grow, “Like when they go sit with the governor or state

representative, like what you're doing right now, trying to give us a better result in whatever way they can, whatever they give us."

Many in the room agreed when one staff member commented, "In general we should always ask our young adults and more mature workforce what the gaps are and how the program is doing." Staff appreciated the experience of taking the time to sit and reflect on their work. They appreciated hearing the perspectives of the returning citizens in the room. One staff member stated,

I think it gave us an opportunity to hear from different viewpoints, you know kinda reflect on what we doing. Maybe then, talking about it we can see... [inaudible] and maybe that reinforced that the thing that we're doing. Being able to reflect on it and talk about it. I think this was a good thing.

During Sessions IV and V, the participants were very excited about the ToC draft document. The ToC was helpful because it was a good visual of how their programming works. One staff person said, "We can't keep this straight in our heads. We're all in different places on the diagram working on different things. It's bringing the whole team together." Another participant commented that the ToC gives, "a better understanding of how the work is interrelated. We all play such important roles, and we may not think we do." It helped them to visualize how they all need each other and are important to the whole picture of their work at *RecycleForce*.

They all agreed that the ToC accurately reflected the work and processes being used at *RecycleForce*. They indicated that it was a good way to show what they were currently working on and areas that they needed to improve. One participant said that their work is a balance, and the ToC shows how and where they could put emphasis to maintain that balance. The three-legged stool analogy that was used before came up. It becomes unbalanced when economic, environmental, or social factors change, staff must adapt to meet the needs when one of the legs

is missing. The same participant noted that how they meet those needs is how they measure impact. The ToC allows them to see how they are meeting their needs and maintaining the balance. It also provided evidence for participants that they were focused more on workforce development, and they needed to give more time to social development activities.

In responding to how the ToC would help them in program implementation, staff said that the hardest part is identifying what people need. This would be a good place to ground their work, and also know that it is adaptable as the needs of the people who come through the door change. In the past, the organization had struggled with a new program because of the depth and complexity of the conflict they were experiencing. Having the ToC would, in the future, provide a framework for how all the moving parts fit together. While it would not solve the conflict, it would provide them with a path to follow to connect with partners toward that effort and others. It provides a visual reference for checking program elements that have either been completed or that will need attention from staff who help in service delivery.

Furthermore, participants were asked how the ToC could help with impact measurement. A program staff person mentioned that they could look at the blocks in the ToC and localize what went right or wrong. They could look at areas they need to bolster and “begin to structure the building blocks.” A staff member commented, “Once you’ve identified what needs to be put in place, that’s the starting point for delivering services. Hardest part is identifying what’s needed.” They are successful when they have made enough connections to each of their ultimate goals. In doing these things, they are measuring impact for returning citizens. They are also able to measure impact by using the ToC in how they tell their story to funders and returning citizens who come in the door for programming. They would bolster it by providing data to show how they are implementing each section of the ToC through their programming.

One of the participants noted that people who come to *RecycleForce* to partake in programming need to be ready to participate. Everyone who walks in the door has experienced trauma of some kind. The complexity of that experience comes out while they are in their training at the organization. Sometimes it comes out as a lack of ability to stick to a schedule, sometimes it comes out as physical conflict. Having something like the ToC would help them to know the steps to take when conflict arises. Staff said, “We may need to adapt. We need to spend the amount of time we need to get people set up to succeed.” The length of time staff has program participants with them at *RecycleForce* is a hindrance in some ways. They only touch a program participant’s life for roughly three to four months during their training. Another staff person said, “If they were here indefinitely, we could work with them a whole lot. We concentrate heavily on work but not necessarily therapy as therapy.” Staff indicated that it is the opportunity cost of having people in the building. If they are at *RecycleForce*, they are not out on the street. *RecycleForce* knows that they make an impact, but they have limited time to do so. Having a guide to the pathways they have available to them as an organization would help grow their impact.

Participants expressed that they learned a great deal during these sessions. One stated that they learned how to empathize more with staff and returning citizens. They said it is “easy to look at things one-sided, but when you open up and let others’ opinions in, you get a different perspective.” Staff also learned about connectivity, and they all belong to something greater than themselves. A second staff member commented that “a lot of us stay on the surface level.” This was their indication that connecting, being transparent with each other, and learning together led to greater understanding. This person said that it was a good reminder of how unique their



program is and how closely staff are aligned to their motivations to do the work. “We all belong to something greater than providing for ourselves.”

In Sessions IV and V, staff indicated that the activity helped them “to identify gaps, needs, and strategies” to cover all of the areas of their work. The ToC document did give them tangible proof that there was, as one participant stated, a “method to the madness.” They also reflected on the ToC that it would be a good tool to use with partners. A staff member reflected, “Maybe partners will have a better understanding of what we do here.” One of their partners, who was in the room, confirmed this idea and said it would help them explain it to others. They indicated that it was valuable. It had been created by both staff and returning citizens because everyone would know they were “surrounded by people who have walked this path before.”

Moving forward, the staff saw the ToC as being useful for focusing on continuing improvement. A staff member commented that the ToC was a “well-organized foundation that would help them look for new programs, grants, and partners.” It will help them to go after grants that have outcomes already defined and work in reverse. They have their goals defined and the grants will help them achieve their goals. A separate staff person said, “I can start utilizing this as a part of telling our story without participants. Put in new learnings that we didn’t know at the beginning.” They can use it as corrective action for themselves to stay focused on the mission. Staff also mentioned how it would help them orient new staff to their work and possibly look for areas where new staff are needed. It will also help them to make sure they are focused on measurement. They can pre-plan the measurements they will need to take utilizing the ToC.

Staff indicated that it will be important to keep understanding and/or reiterating that the ToC is fluid. They said they, “love it because you can add to it.” It is important to be able to

manipulate the document as new programs are added or others are completed. It acts as a template, which is helpful because their daily jobs are so busy that they do not have time to focus on creating documents like this. It can seem overwhelming visually, but it might also be helpful so that they always keep in mind the overall goal and philosophy of their work.

Table 4.2 presents a summary of objectives and findings as laid out in previous sections.

**Table 4.2***Summary Findings of ToC Co-creation Experience*

Objectives	Summary findings
<p>Objective 1: To develop an understanding of barriers and facilitators experienced by those implementing the ToC</p>	<p>Barriers and facilitators were coded and sorted into themes which included Attitude, Comfort, Conflict, Coordination, Individualization, Money, Opportunity, Participation, Purpose, Resources, Scheduling, Self-Confidence, Time, and Trust. Each of these were grouped together based on frequency.</p>
<p>Objective 2: To gather the perspectives of program end-users involved in the development of the ToC</p>	<p>Opportunity and attitude rose to the top of the facilitators and barriers for program end users. In general, the chance to participate in the ToC, as well as <i>RecycleForce</i> programming was mentioned the most in relation to this theme.</p> <p>Attitude referred to a person’s viewpoint toward work-related tasks and duties, toward wanting to re-enter society, and toward wanting to change. One of the major points made was that program participants had to want to be at the organization to effectively make change. Study participants learned from listening to one another’s perspectives and shared how it impacted their own attitude toward the process.</p> <p>Money was referenced as a challenge that could impact the lives of returning citizens drastically.</p> <p>Participants thought that participation was important for the development of the ToC.</p> <p>Having self-confidence was important to achieving the goals participants had set out for themselves.</p> <p>Conflict had an impact on success.</p> <p>Coordination was challenging due to the individual nature of the work being done at <i>RecycleForce</i> and important to the ToC.</p> <p>Having a sense of purpose was important to the end users.</p> <p>Having access to resources was also important so that staff could effectively do their jobs and returning citizens could focus on their education and employment.</p> <p>Scheduling had an impact on the returning citizens’ ability to focus on being involved in the ToC framework and coming to work.</p> <p>Time referred to taking the time to reflect on the work and the benefit of walking through the ToC framework.</p>
<p>Objective 3: To explore with participants how the ToC can be used to demonstrate and measure impact.</p>	<p>The work that the organization does is very individualized, and everyone agreed that this activity was effective. There was recognition that more people needed to be involved. Participants learned from each other during the ToC sessions and agreed that it was a valuable activity. Staff agreed that they would use the ToC moving forward in grant writing and maintaining program and mission alignment.</p>

## Researcher Experience

When I initially contacted *RecycleForce* to discuss working with them on my dissertation, the Executive Director was enthusiastic about the possibility. Working with a social enterprise focused on re-entry and recycling was a good fit for the focus area and objectives I had in mind. In addition, the fact that it was in the neighborhood where I live and close to my workplace was helpful during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the time between this initial interaction and my approval to move forward with my research, other projects had started at *RecycleForce*. I reached out to the Executive Director a second time and his response time was delayed due to construction projects, onboarding new staff, and other business concerns. After checking in with him, we agreed to meet to discuss a timeline for the research to be completed. I indicated that staff and returning citizens needed to be involved in the research. He put me in contact with another staff member who wanted me to build a relationship with the returning citizens they engaged. I agreed that this was the best way to handle the research and offered to come over anytime in the following weeks. Scheduling prevented us from connecting for several weeks. I reconnected with this staff member who coordinated with another staff member to facilitate my research with the organization.

The project was completed from the initial proposal in September 2022 to the final hand off of information to *RecycleForce* in September 2023. This included initial discussions with *RecycleForce*, development of objectives, scheduling and planning, engagement with stakeholders, finalization of the ToC, and a final hand off completed information to the organization. Engagement with stakeholders in the AR sessions occurred between April and August 2023. The first three sessions of ToC and AR took place during a week on a Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning. I sent over questions and my informed consent form to the

staff at *RecycleForce* to help with seeking participants. In my email, I indicated that I needed staff and returning citizens to participate. Sessions four and five followed four months later after reviewing the preliminary data and concluding the ToC framework development. These two sessions occurred over the course of a month.

Each session required adaptation after the initial session. Adaptations included the questions being asked, the room where we met at *RecycleForce*, the people involved, and/or the focus I had on the objectives. Working with *RecycleForce* required working around their busy schedule for both programming and production on the work floor. Working with the CF group required keeping my objectives ever present so as not to get distracted by the ideas that came up in conversation.

I discovered that when the project started, that part had not been emphasized by the person scheduling the sessions for me at *RecycleForce*. Only one staff person joined the first session, and no staff were able to participate in the second session. I reached out to my chair after speaking with my CF group to ask how to handle the situation. After speaking with him, I reached back out to my contact at *RecycleForce* to ask for staff participation for the third session or a fourth session. I received a lot of pushback from the organization, with good reason. The organization was onboarding 25 new returning citizens that week, rescheduling production to accommodate my research, and had a major event happening that following weekend. The next week was even busier, so it was difficult to accommodate my work. At the same time, the staff were happy to have me there and made adjustments to help me get my work done.

During one CF session, as previously mentioned, one participant recommended I throw out the direction I was heading and go in a completely different one. I took that advice in with

other opinions and conferred with my chair to maintain focus. AR, in this instance, required the ability to focus and think on my feet quickly given the time frame in which I was working.

One other area that stands out is the ability of the participants to switch from one area of focus to another. The design of the study was that we would complete a ToC section, take a short break, complete some reflective writing, and then reflect verbally as a group on what we had just discussed. Each section was prompted with a description of what we were going to do.

The ToC section started with a definition of what it was and why we were engaging in the conversation. The writing prompt was to reflect on the ToC questions and their responses. They were also to make note of anything that they did not have a chance to discuss verbally during that time. The intention was to provide some reflection time for anyone who did not feel comfortable talking out loud. Lastly, the AR session questions were preempted by stating that we were going to answer the questions based on how they felt about the ToC discussion.

Transitioning was difficult and often, both staff and returning citizens lapsed back into conversations about the ToC questions. While the information was fresh in their minds, it led them back to those responses. The same happened when asked about impact. They reflected on the current session rather than switching gears to think forward to how the ToC might describe the impact of the organization.

In the final ToC sessions with staff, participants confirmed that the way it had been put together made sense to them. With a few additions and edits to how the diagram was organized, it was complete. As staff reflected on the ways they would utilize the document for measuring impact, I was able to see how the entire project came together.

In the next chapter, I further explore meaning-making in terms of this experience and make connections back to the literature. Given this experience and the responses of the

participants at *RecycleForce*, what follows is a discussion of the results. I review findings in connection to the literature to cover the themes, the impact on the field of leadership and my learning, and whether the objectives of the research were achieved.

## Chapter V: Discussion

This dissertation aimed to understand what occurs in the co-creation of a ToC in an SE serving individuals facing barriers to employment. In this chapter, I will begin with an overview of my research. Next, I discuss the interpretations of the findings from Chapter IV and the relationships between the findings and the objectives. A reflection on the AR process will follow based on my experience as a researcher. I will discuss the implications for the field of AR in relation to social enterprise and re-entry. Next will come a discussion on the implications for leadership and change not only for those who run organizations like *RecycleForce* but also for those who participate in its programming. Finally, I will cover a reflection on my own learning and recommendations for future research.

In Chapter I, I presented an overview of the issues people facing barriers to employment come up against when they attempt to find a job. Specific to the context of this research, returning citizens face issues around unemployment, underemployment, being barred from certain professions, legal challenges, negative social networks, poor educational attainment, and more (Augustine, 2019; Baskaran, 2019; Moe et al., 2015). SEs have a unique position where some are specifically seeking individuals who face barriers to employment and cannot find employment elsewhere. Organizations like *RecycleForce*, fit between nonprofit and for-profit entities to meet the needs of returning citizens by offering opportunities. This study also focused on involving the end users of the programs in the process of looking at the goals, programs, and assumptions of the organization. It was designed to be completed in three sessions, each having several parts, that would seek to better understand how their involvement influenced the co-creation of a ToC. The AR sessions and ToC development was split into five sessions, with the addition of the verification of the ToC and a discussion of its implementation. Session I focused



on the goals and the background of the organization. Session II focused on digging deeper into the goals and programs while checking assumptions. Session III was intended to understand objectives, benchmarks, success, and gaps in programming and/or services. Each session included a ToC discussion and an AR session. The AR session was comprised of reflective writing and reflective verbal discussion. Following each session, I met with a CF group to discuss what had happened and check my own assumptions about the process. In the first three sessions, I included reflective writing utilizing the following ORJI guidelines from Schein (2021):

- **Observation:** look at what has happened logically
- **Reaction:** emotional reaction to what has been observed
- **Judgment:** process and make judgments based on observations and feelings
- **Intervention:** make changes to the research process or own assumptions based on observations, reactions, and analysis.

Session IV involved a deep dive into the ToC by staff to verify what had been co-created to that point. The ToC was presented using a diagram. Models are often utilized in research to develop, manage, and evaluate interventions when working with complex systems (Mayne, 2015; Phi et al., 2018). The complexity of the systems being addressed makes it important to visualize how the pieces correspond to each other. In the ToC process, having a visual representation of the system allows the group to think critically together as they attempt to understand this complexity (Vogel, 2012).

The diagram was reviewed as a group, and pauses were made to make sure that each section was clear before continuing. Staff offered commentary on how the programs and long-, mid-, and short-term goals aligned with the ultimate goals.

In Session V, staff and one program partner discussed how and if the ToC would be implemented at the organization. *RecycleForce* is very mission-focused. They also do not have any of their approach documented or diagrammed to this point so that they can stay nimble when changes happen. The staff felt that the ToC documentation and presentation through a diagram were helpful as a starting point to explain their work to others. They also discussed the impact of having a diagram like this to work with as they built and adapted their programming.

The overall findings confirm that having the end users of the program involved in the creation of the ToC made it more robust. The study also revealed learning on the part of both the participants and the researcher in the areas of process, knowledge generation, and new pathways of research. In this discussion, I explore how presumed and actual ideas from the research came about through the discussion during each session.

### **Discussion of Objective 1: Understanding of Barriers and Facilitators**

The first objective of the study was to develop an understanding of barriers and facilitators experienced by those implementing the ToC. Through the five AR and ToC sessions, I identified barriers and facilitators that were discussed by the returning citizens and staff. This list was checked for validity with my CF group to make sure that I had accurately depicted them from the transcripts of the sessions.

The top two areas that were mentioned most often as barriers and facilitators were opportunity and attitude. In Chapter I, I discussed how SEs offer individuals with barriers to employment the ability to achieve it and thus gain valuable experience. The mixture of job training and social programming was something that the returning citizens mentioned as being invaluable (Moe et al., 2015; Visher et al., 2017; Wright, 2017). The staff go to great lengths to make sure that program participants are offered every chance to participate.

The other aspect of opportunity was the free education that is offered to returning citizens. Training that would cost someone hundreds of dollars was offered for free to returning citizens as a part of their re-entry programming. Returning citizens participating commented on how they were provided with education materials and passed them on to others when they were finished. As previously mentioned, this kind of training along with services and other support is invaluable to reducing recidivism (Aiken & Bode, 2009). Returning citizens would pass along materials and resources to others for training. There seemed to be a general sense that program participants were helping each other if help was accepted.

The perspective of the returning citizens was that they were thankful for the chance to be able to get back on their feet and not be forgotten. *RecycleForce* is hitting its target community and its mission as outlined by Moe et al. (2015) as an SE by serving hundreds of returning citizens each year. The variety of opportunities offered by *RecycleForce* includes mental health services, with a therapist on staff to talk with participants. They also offer housing assistance, a livable wage for Indiana at \$15 per hour to start, substance abuse group sessions, and more. All of these things directly impact recidivism (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011; Geckeler et al., 2019; Moe et al., 2015; Seibel, 2019). The hands on soft-skill building, hard-skill training, and work experience that *RecycleForce* offers help many of the returning citizens to find employment in the for-profit sector (Cooney, 2016).

When it came to attitude, there was the general understanding that all the returning citizens who were in the room were taking advantage of the opportunities being offered to them at *RecycleForce*. They were taking personal responsibility and choosing their path (Cosgrove & O'Neill, 2011; Viets et al., 2002). I noted in my reflections after Session II that the individuals who were participating in my research were successful and dedicated to their education. Some

emphasized that there were people who did not take advantage of the opportunities. One staff member, after a returning citizen talked about people ghosting the clock, told a story about people who would clock in but go and sit back in their cars to smoke instead of working. This seemed to be a common practice for some program participants.

Additionally, attitude is a tough problem for some individuals. Motivation to change plays an important role in the effectiveness of work-related programs for recidivism (Bloom, 2006; Bushway, 2003; Bushway & Reuter, 2004). It is sometimes perceived as easier to go and make a lot of money doing things that are under the table or illegal than it is to come to work every day. One returning citizen mentioned that there were individuals who did not take advantage of opportunities or got themselves in trouble again because of their actions. A staff member commented on the way that returning citizens sometimes do not want to leave the behaviors with which they are familiar. Asking someone to change what they have always known or how they have been conditioned to believe they should live their life is difficult. Motivation to change cannot be given; it must be elicited (Viets et al., 2002).

Many barriers are connected to each other and related to how returning citizens are treated when they re-enter society. RecycleForce works hard to address the challenges of opportunity and attitude through its programming. They also work with employers, like the City of Indianapolis, to build trust and provide jobs outside of the organization once the training program has been completed. They are fulfilling their role as a SE by facilitating social inclusion, offering multiple ways to engage with the workforce, and being highly connected to the community (Aiken, 2007). They also partner with other organizations to do their work, but they are the only ones in Indianapolis who fill this role as a SE focused on recycling and returning citizens. Inside the organization, participants of *RecycleForce* programming have an

environment conducive to change. They can see a future for themselves because their self-confidence and self-esteem are built up in addition to hard skills (Seddon et al., 2013). Outside the organization presents an environment where social exclusion, as Blackburn and Ram (2006) described, is still felt by the returning citizens. A couple of participants of this study mentioned the conflicts and challenges they face in their personal lives that impact their ability to come to work and be present during work.

When it comes to both opportunity and attitude, there were some things that were not included in the discussion because we were reflecting on the ToC framework development. Barriers and facilitators arose from conversations during the AR sessions as participants reflected on the ToC session. Opportunities and their absence were discussed fully as participants reflected on our ToC building.

The same occurred in our discussion of attitudes. We discussed the participants' perceptions of the attitudes of people outside the organization, the staff working at the organization, and of the returning citizens during the ToC session. That discussion bled into the AR session but was not fully discussed because that was not the focus of the AR session. Since data collection did not happen in the ToC session, those discussions are not reported here.

Furthermore, staff felt that the ToC would help them describe their program to outside partners. They wanted to continue developing it more and saw it as an opportunity. A few of them commented that they would like to build a ToC out just based on partnerships to help them better understand how the pieces of their organization fit together. Having a visual representation of their work was beneficial, and I was sure to make clear that they would have access to the document to continue its development.

The ToC overall was complicated due to the nature of the organization. It meant looking at outcomes and measurements broadly to encompass the wide array of individual concerns the organization addresses. This was something that the staff commented on as we were wrapping up discussions. We talked about how the ToC should be fluid, and they were welcome to adopt it as their programs changed. This kind of emergent change allows for ongoing accommodations, adaptations, and alterations in everyday work (Burnes, 2005). As I walked them through the diagram, they noted that it was challenging to describe the work they do with outside stakeholders. Getting the flow of their work down on paper with the ability to make changes was valuable for them. As stated previously, visual representation provides a focal point for evaluating their work, given its complex nature (Mayne, 2015; Phi et al., 2018). It would continually draw participants into dialogue about how and why their goals are being achieved (van Tulder & Keen, 2018).

### **Discussion of Objective 2: Gathering the Perspectives of End Users**

The second objective of the study was to gather the perspectives of program end-users involved in the development of the ToC. There were 12 unique returning citizens involved in the research process throughout three different organizational engagements during this AR process. These individuals worked on both the production floor and at the front desk. One worked for the organization permanently after having gone through the program himself.

The involvement of the returning citizens added a lot of depth to the project. Their context differed from that of myself and the staff who worked at the organization. Conversations with them became the site for the generation of new knowledge for all of us by gaining different perspectives (McNiff, 2017). In developing the ToC, all of the returning citizens had confidence

and were forthcoming with their opinions. It was the same in the AR session, where they reflected on the process.

The intriguing part and possibly the key to the success of *RecycleForce* is how they instill belonging, value, and respect in the people who walk in their front door. They are offered trust, the opportunity to take responsibility for their growth and development, and identity, which Cosgrove and O'Neill (2011) identified as important characteristics of SEs. They treat everyone as if they are valuable and have a purpose, which helps them to see a future for themselves (Seddon et al., 2013). The same person who stated that they loved their job because it had a purpose is also the one who commented that they had never been in a place so conducive to growth, hope, and change. He went on to note that he could tell that when someone asked how he was doing, they meant it. None of these were prompted statements. The first was said with no staff member in the room, and the second was said when there were several staff in the room. He made other comments like these as well when no staff members were around.

This idea of motivation, discussed briefly in Objective 1, is important for the work at *RecycleForce* and for SEs in general. Nakamura and Bucklen (2014) stated that promising interventions for returning citizens were those that targeted cognition and motivation to help reduce recidivism. Many factors impact a returning citizen's ability to return to work after incarceration. Attitude, or what has been referred to as motivation by some, impacts behavior, action, and participation (Viets et al., 2002). An SE, like *RecycleForce*, elicits motivation through the way they value people coupled with workforce development and social services to reduce the likelihood of reoffending and encourage a person toward legal, gainful employment.

The value that *RecycleForce* places on the returning citizens who participate in their programming provides a safe place for them to get the training they need for employment. As

stated in Chapter II, SEs that serve returning citizens directly target this population to offer these kinds of opportunities (Moe et al., 2015). This legitimate labor, referred to by participants in this study as “slow money,” provides them with a place to work along with wrap-around services. The perspective of the returning citizens in this instance was that the opportunity for legitimate work and services was invaluable. They were going to take full advantage of everything offered, especially since it was offered to them for free. In offering these programs and services, *RecycleForce* provides returning citizens a way to take ownership and responsibility (Durham University, 2011). One returning citizen commented on how the staff did not forget him when he went back to jail after having gone through the program once. Staff showed up for his court hearing when he got out again and welcomed him back to the program. As demonstrated, how *RecycleForce* engages on behalf of its participants is individualized for each returning citizen.

In Chapter II, I commented on the challenges that SEs face in handling the complex nature of the context of each returning citizen. It seems to be exactly what makes *RecycleForce* successful. Most of the participants commented on how success is measured by what it means for each person who works for the organization or engages in the programming available. Caring about each person individually both builds self-confidence and shows the unique needs and situations in which they find themselves.

### **Discussion of Objective 3: Exploring How the ToC Demonstrates and Measures Impact**

The third objective was to explore with participants how the ToC can be used to demonstrate and measure impact. A ToC approach helps an organization define how and why its programming is accomplishing its mission (van Tulder & Keen, 2018). It is more than a logic model because it includes subjective information. It illustrates inputs and outputs, looks at the underlying assumptions and links, and factors in context (van Tulder & Keen, 2018). These



factors allow an organization to look at the causal pathways their interventions have which lead to success (Mayne, 2015).

In attempting to evaluate and measure impact, a ToC also provides a way to include a variety of stakeholders in the process. Achieving a mission for an organization is a complex process involving a variety of people in a wide range of contexts. Systemic problems require more complex approaches and multi-stakeholder involvement (Coghlan, 2019; MacDonald, 2012; van Tulder & Keen, 2018).

*RecycleForce* uses the goals it sets forth in the grants they have been awarded to provide measurements of its work. They are focused on their mission and the model, *ABC: Any Job - Better Job - Career*. Anything outside of this, they do not pursue. However, they do not have anything written down that shows how their work connects and makes an impact. The ToC provided that space and the staff liked the fact that it could develop with the organization's evolution.

When asked about the usefulness of the ToC co-creation exercise, participants stated that it was “eye-opening” and “informative.” They commented on how it helped them to see different viewpoints, which was very valuable. The activity allowed them to learn empathy and that connectivity is important. The staff already have these qualities but witnessing it through discussions with returning citizens was valuable.

As indicated previously, the engagement with *RecycleForce* included a breadth of activities which lasted from September 2022 to September 2023. During this time the AR sessions took place in April and August of 2023. Some of the staff remained the same but the returning citizens that participated finished their training at *RecycleForce* and moved on. In

general, a variety of staff and returning citizens participated, which added to the depth of the responses.

It was not possible to have access to all the people who should have been included in the study and have access to participants for an unlimited amount of time for interviewing (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). While the research process took place over five months, having more staff and outside partners involved would have benefitted the continued development of ToC. It is also difficult to achieve all the goals a researcher has for themselves and their work in the limited time available during a dissertation process. The tension between completing the study, creating a safe space, supporting a collective process, and making sure all voices in the room are heard is a common problem for AR studies (Apgar et al., 2017). In addition, human inquiry is both complex and incomplete, which needs to be acknowledged (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). Engaging with people during a process of this sort is challenging when outside influences like time, scheduling, and priorities vary for each individual.

### **Navigating the Researcher and Participant Roles**

In AR, the roles of participant and researcher are important but sometimes difficult to define. The action in AR is decidedly interventionist, with researchers acting as critical participants and researchers of the action (Burns, 2009). Other research processes are outside looking into the area of inquiry. This level of involvement means the researcher has to investigate more carefully, more systematically, and more rigorously to distinguish the research from consultancy (Burns, 2009).

In my role as a researcher, I was an outsider, who was working in collaboration with and studying insiders (Herr & Anderson, 2014). In studying the programming of *RecycleForce*, I was working with the returning citizens and staff to develop the ToC. AR is done with people and not

for them or to them which is why they are referred to as participants instead of subjects (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). While I knew the organization, it was from an outside perspective and not of its inner workings. My positionality as the daughter of a prison chaplain, the sister of a prison accountant, a volunteer at re-entry facilities, a resident of the neighborhood where *RecycleForce* is located, and formerly employed with two organizations that worked with *RecycleForce* gave me further context. This was, however, all outside perspective.

As researchers, we occupy multiple positionalities that intersect with and may bring us into conflicting allegiances or alliances with our research sites (Herr & Anderson, 2014). While I may have only had an outside knowledge of *RecycleForce*, one of the reasons I wanted to engage with them in research was because of that knowledge. My interest in this organization and the way it functions helped me to have context and then further my understanding by adding new knowledge (McNiff, 2017). When asking questions during the AR sessions with the participants, I asked if we had achieved our goals and if I could do anything to make the session more inclusive. When asked by participants about my background and motivations, my responses added to the context and trust I had built and added to my development as a researcher through the process.

In AR, positions are flexible and fluid, depending on the nature of the relationships and the interactions of participants (McNiff, 2017). My role as a researcher started formally the first day I went into *RecycleForce* and I ended my time with relationships built between myself and the participants. My ability to reflect and adapt based on the circumstances I faced was important to the research. Knowing how my own positionality influenced the research also allowed an amount of adaptability to take place. Reflexivity requires examining positionality and bringing thoughtful self-awareness into the research process (Finlay, 2002). In looking reflectively at my

positionality, I know that I am a middle-class, white, female that lives in Indianapolis, Indiana. My neighborhood is one of the more diverse in the city but is still over half white. On a daily basis I work with a team of 16 people that is roughly 70% white, predominantly female, most of which have master's degrees and have no criminal background.

On the other hand, the participants in this study were predominantly persons of color, almost all male, and roughly two-thirds had a criminal background. There was separation created by these differences in perspective and worldview. Some of the participants treated me as an outsider and initially responded to me as a person who wanted something from them, which was to be expected. The time needed to build relationships with both staff and returning citizens was limited.

I discussed my positionality with my CF group to make sure I was acknowledging the differences and their implications. As a member of a majority group, I wanted to recognize that I did not know what it was like to be a part of several of the identities that my participants held. I admitted that I could freely go where I wanted, when I wanted, because of my whiteness and my lack of a criminal background. I have access to resources that my participants do not and because of that, it requires me to actively consider their point of view and context. In considering all facets of context for myself and my participants, I was automatically set apart from them. This array of contexts, however, adds to the action research process. As Herr and Anderson (2014) put it:

Each of these dimensions enters into the construction of the reality we capture in our research. We suggest that our obligation as researchers is to interrogate our multiple positionalities in the relationship to the question under study. Our sense is that, in making explicit the tensions we experience as researchers in our varying roles and statuses, we have the possibility of crafting uniquely complex understandings of the research question. (p. 55)

Considering this context, I made an effort to position staff and returning citizens as experts. I started each session by acknowledging that I was an outsider who was interested in their thoughts and experiences because they were valuable. As McNiff (2017) stated, “A basic condition of being human is that we accept life as meaningful, so we seek to understand and understand better; we generate descriptions and explanations for these processes as theories of everyday living (p. 2).” My interest in both ToC and AR lies in their ability to uplift the voices of the people they seek to serve. As stated in Chapter III, AR is often driven by the desire for the emancipation and empowerment of groups and individuals (Eden & Huxham, 1996; McCutcheon & Jung, 1990; Yin, 2015). A ToC creates social value when the right people are at the table for its creation (Haskell et al., 2009). Since it was important to engage in extensive discussions with both staff and returning citizens about the everyday experiences of the people involved in *RecycleForce*'s programming, co-creating a ToC through AR seemed appropriate and important.

As the events unfolded in my week with *RecycleForce*, the first two sessions were predominantly returning citizens, with one staff member involved in the activity. This was not my initial intention and caused great concern. However, when more staff joined in the third session, the unintended result was that the returning citizens felt that they could talk on an equal footing with staff. It added a different perspective that I noted in my reflection after that session and that one of the returning citizens noted as well,

Actually you did something different this time that I want to take note of. I think it's pretty obvious what you did. You know but it gave a whole different perspective too. You know because you have the people in the mud, and then you have the people that are just – above it. You know, it's two different viewpoints.

In the final two sessions, although a few members of the staff were also returning citizens, there were no *RecycleForce* program participants involved. The productive engagement of the previous sessions created a valuable opportunity for the staff to put the ToC into practice.

The last thing that helped with my positionality as a researcher was to bring together individuals in the CF group for reporting and reflection. As mentioned in Chapter I, Herr and Anderson (2014) have stated there are criteria for AR validity. These include dialogic and process validity, which is why it is important to distinguish between researcher and participants. Dialogic validity in this case equates to the conversation that happened between me and the participants, me and the CF group, and the conversation in Sessions IV and V with staff. Likewise, with process validity, the process of reflection gave the research soundness as I cycled through and checked in with both participants and the CF group.

There is significant value in having a group of people act as a soundboard for a person's experiences as a solo researcher. There is also value in their ability to offer a check and balance to a person's work. This dialogic validity offered me the opportunity to describe what was happening amid my research, make appropriate changes, and keep certain aspects of my positionality in mind. It also allowed me to process validity, the act of showing my ongoing learning through the cycles of research. This aided me in being able to separate myself from the participants because I was able to reflect with a group outside of the activity.

### **Reflections on Action Research**

The significance of this research to the field of AR comes in the form of blending different tools and areas of praxis. This occurs when AR is blended with other fields like art and music (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014) and grounded theory (Williams et al., 2022). While combining tools and methods in research is not a new concept, I found little information on

blending the ToC framework with AR when I started. AR and ToC lend themselves well to engaging with the end users of programs to develop theory and map out change. The context of completing research in a SE focused on people facing barriers to employment was another layer added to the equation. Organizations of this type must understand the needs of their program participants to serve them well. These procedures intentionally seek to understand participants' perspectives in a way that serves SEs well.

*RecycleForce* is constantly looking for what its program participants' needs are and is very in tune with them, which was highly beneficial to developing the ToC. As the research process progressed, the returning citizens ended up building the ToC, and it was verified by the *RecycleForce* staff. The dialogue that happened occurred in three major parts: first, it was with the returning citizens, second with returning citizens and staff, and finally with just the staff.

While not a new concept, reinforcing the use of dialogue within the field of AR is important. As McNiff (2017) stated, "Dialogue is different from simple conversation in that it involves actively listening to the other and trying to achieve mutual understanding" (p. 26). My own understanding of the organization, the field of AR, and people facing barriers to employment was deepened through the dialogue. During the conversation with staff and returning citizens, statements started to come out about the value of hearing each other's perspectives. Continuing the practice of engaging in dialogue with one another to better understand each other will always be important.

In effort to normalize power imbalances, co-learning was implemented in the research (Gittins, 2019). During the AR process, the value placed on the involvement and opinions of participants broke down the barriers between the researcher and participants. Re-entry work inherently has the power placed on the staff, employers, and those who work for the system.

Involving returning citizens in the development of the research helped, in this instance, to place power in their hands as they helped to guide the process. Power imbalance is why it is important to the field of AR, specifically the learning and practice of the methodology in doctoral studies.

Likewise, the generation of knowledge by the returning citizens during the first two sessions added to the third where they were joined by staff. They had confidence that their ideas were valued and that they were able to share just as freely during the third session as they were without the staff present. The empowerment that happened during the first two sessions allowed them to carry into the third with a degree of clarity and confidence. The staff learned from them about the activity and their viewpoints. Utilizing the ToC with the theoretical foundation of AR and its emphasis on participation and co-inquiry gave them legitimacy as mentioned in Chapter III (Apgar et al., 2017).

Doing an AR project for my dissertation was challenging. Not only does the AR method used need to fit the standards for completing a PhD project, but it is also limited to the time frame needed to complete the degree. True action research is in-depth and can be time-intensive, often spanning years (Cameron, 2007; Maguire, 1993; Moss, 2009). Relationship building alone is challenging in a short timeframe. I was fortunate that I already had some familiarity with both *RecycleForce* and its executive director. He was very willing to have me come in and work with his staff and returning citizens, which saved me from having to convince him to allow his organization to participate.

However, there is great value in utilizing AR as a methodology for a dissertation. There is extensive research on how to navigate the process of using it for PhD students (Ferguson, 2009; Graves & Varma, 1997; Lee & Williams, 1999; Rudestam & Newton, 2001). The hard and soft skills needed to complete this kind of research require a lot of training and fit well with a



program specializing in students being scholar-practitioners. Learning to ask good questions, listen actively, and create an environment conducive to relational inquiry and co-learning are all things that happen in doing an AR dissertation (Gittins, 2019). The hard skills include theory, philosophy, values, and methods, which are also needed to do an AR dissertation and are often the ones focused on more (Gittins, 2019). There are also numerous articles discussing how difficult doing this type of research can be, which can cause added stress for the PhD student (Burgess, 2006; Coates et al., 1998; Maguire, 2005; McCormack, 2004; Moore, 2004; Zuber-Skerritt & Perry, 2002).

In addition, learning to undergo an adaptive and iterative process in a dialogic environment teaches valuable lessons that the students will carry forward with them after they complete their degree (Gittins, 2019; Vaughan et al., 2019). When I set out to do my dissertation, I was focused on social justice and choosing a topic that would allow me to investigate how I can use my skills to affect change. I learned a great deal about the complexity of creating a ToC framework and using AR as a methodology. In my conversations with returning citizens and staff at *RecycleForce*, I also learned how difficult it is to create systemic change. Writing down and visualizing the process of how and why change was occurring helped me to understand it better. It was also important to me to bear witness to the value people felt when they were asked for their thoughts and opinions. I learned that these processes can be carefully used to promote change and inclusion.

### **Implications for SEs Serving Returning Citizens**

As stated in Chapter III, AR maintains the rights of all people to do research and add to the dialectic of the community of knowledge (McNiff, 2017). A SE serving returning citizens needs to involve them in program development. The lived experience of the participants is vitally

important to the generation of knowledge and the validity of that knowledge (Horton & Freire, 1990). Addressing justice in this way, through the AR process, allows for the voices of the returning citizens to rise in the room and in the research. In this study, they were given the chance and capacity to participate in the development of the systems by reflecting on how the ToC framework functioned (Senge & Scharmer, 2005).

*RecycleForce* gives value to the returning citizens who come to them as program participants which encourages them to make change in their lives. AR attempts to do the same by valuing all of the voices that take part in the research. It may not seem out of place for someone who experiences value being placed in their opinions every day. Giving that experience to people who have been incarcerated makes a difference. Take, for instance, the returning citizen who was so thankful to have not been forgotten. The simple act of a staff member showing up to his court hearing and then welcoming him back to *RecycleForce* made a difference. The leadership of caring for others on the part of the staff at the organization gives this organization its strength and success.

Permission and value placed on an individual who may not have ever had that experience can uplift the individual. Change processes that are impacted by the views and opinions of the people being served help the organizations do their work better. Several of the staff members commented on how the activity had been eye-opening for them. Leading change from within an organization allows it to examine and improve practice (Cardno, 2006).

Utilizing the ToC framework development is a tightening of the change process to make sure that the way change is happening fits the mission. Involving stakeholders in the activity is important so that the change is accurate and able to be accomplished. In addition to this, AR has an impact on the learning and development of the people who are involved (Smeets & Ponte,

2009). In the end, change happens for the individual and the organization. Change happens because value is being placed on the people in the process. Their thoughts, opinions, and questions will create more robust interventions and make the work of the SE more efficient.

It is often the case that universities, hospitals, foundations, or other research institutions have positioned themselves as experts in their fields (McNiff, 2017). Many will utilize the knowledge they have gained to make recommendations for communities or organizations on best practices, programming, and/or solutions to the challenges they face. AR practitioners look to make meaning out of everyday life, which creates personal and dynamic theories as they explore their research (McNiff, 2017). In Chapter III, I stated that AR attempts to honor the experiences of others by including them in the process. In a SE that addresses barriers to employment, like *RecycleForce*, it is important to include the voices of the returning citizens. Those who experience barriers are the experts of their own understanding of how their lives are impacted by them (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). Likewise, as the staff understands more about how individuals are impacted by barriers, they can help to facilitate solutions. Bringing these two groups together helps to bring mutual understanding and generates knowledge about how to address barriers. A SE serving returning citizens will feasibly have a higher success rate in their interventions if they are targeting the right solutions.

One of the goals of AR is to bring about a greater understanding of a situation that enables an organization to resolve an issue or problem they are experiencing (Stringer & Aragón, 2020). It is dialogic and moves people in the direction of change. It would benefit an SE like *RecycleForce* to periodically check in with stakeholders to keep abreast of the barriers its returning citizens face. During this research, it was expressed several times that programming and solutions to barriers were individualized to each person who participated in *RecycleForce*'s

programming. Gathering that information and grouping it together would be beneficial for an organization like this so that they can see if patterns emerge or new issues rise to the surface.

Taking the time to reflect in conversation with one another would also remind staff and returning citizens of their purpose. As one of the returning citizens put it, the job he had through *RecycleForce* programming gave him a purpose and that was something he appreciated. The same could be said for the staff, in particular, the one who was a former investment broker, who felt he had more of a purpose in his work at *RecycleForce*. AR provides a way for people to be involved, discuss the problems they face, and come up with collaborative solutions. AR fosters empowerment and reminds people of the reasons they are involved in the work. A SE serving returning citizens benefits from the passion and dedication of their staff. This passion is passed along to the program participants who then feel like the staff truly cares about their future. Giving people a voice in their own development is essential to the mix when building out programming, which is where I will now turn in my own reflections on learning.

### **Reflection on My Own Learning**

I have long been interested in processes that allow people to utilize their voices in influencing the work that happens in their community. Putting these into practice takes a lot of effort and planning while still remaining open to change. Expectations should be held loosely as the process unfolds. With AR being an iterative process, it can also feel like the research is never complete because there is always more information to gather.

The way the study revealed my role as a practitioner stood out. I had to define the questions before meeting with participants, and I guided the discussion through these questions. While there are many forms of AR, as stated in Chapter III, how the research progressed ended up turning the study more toward participatory AR. I recognized that my work in preparation for

the study, along with the voices of my committee, influenced the involvement of participants in the process (Lundie et al., 2022). While the questions were not co-created, the movement from one session to the next was directed by the participants. The development of the ToC was guided and directed by the staff and returning citizens; however, I was the only one asking questions. I guided the framework development and provided a diagram to the organization to reflect on and utilize moving forward.

A challenge in AR is the variety of definitions and ways it can be implemented. Participatory and practitioner action research definitions vary slightly in the role of the researcher. Practitioner action research seeks to engage in collective problem-solving within a participatory and emancipatory culture from inside an organization (Henthorn et al., 2024). Often used in educational settings, it has reported benefits of encouraging self-critique and reflection (Judkins et al., 2014). My work bordered on practitioner AR because of how I led the inquiry, and there was an element of self-reflection. However, I was not an employee of *RecycleForce*, and I was not critiquing from within, which is often what defines the label of “practitioner.” Blending the AR and ToC made the definitions of AR confusing because the co-creation elements came from the ToC development.

One of the areas of learning for me that stood out the most was how my research interrupted the organization. There has to be a better way to do this kind of research with organizations like this without interruption or with minimal interruption. Engaging with returning citizens has its own issues like not being able to invite them to an evening meeting because of curfew and/or parole restrictions. Building a better relationship with the organization and spending more time with them prior to the research would have helped. Reason and Bradbury (2005) commented that our world consists of relationships where we engage with each

other. Creating a participatory worldview alongside *RecycleForce* would benefit from more time and further sessions.

The beauty of this kind of research is that even though there were complications and challenges, it still had a significant impact. For the staff, it was eye-opening, for the returning citizens it was encouraging, and for me, it was amazing to see how the framework development brought people together. In Chapter III, I stated that meeting people where they are and honoring their life experiences is vital to social justice. This was confirmed for me by this study as people came together to make sense of the way that the organization functions (Heron & Reason, 2005).

Part of doing AR involves the education of the practitioners themselves as they generate theory through the process (McNiff, 2017). During my research, I gained valuable knowledge on how to put together both a ToC and work with an organization doing AR. From the outset, this study was challenging in the way that ToC and AR were blended to complete this research. In the end, though, the benefits of maintaining a focus on participant involvement made the ToC richer.

Having a CF group was vital to the success of this research for me. I learned the value of reflecting and processing with a group of people to better understand how I was thinking and how others would perceive my work. As McNiff (2017) stated, “Knowledge cannot exist without knowers, and knowledge emerges in a whole range of ways, primarily through dialogue (p. 26).” This interchange between community members, scholars, and coworkers gave me insights into how I was advancing my own learning and how I was completing my research.

Switching from a focus on the formation of the ToC to reflection on the exercise itself during the AR sessions was difficult. During the first session, the participants often wanted to go back and answer the questions again that we had discussed during the ToC session. I learned that

I needed to be more explicit when guiding and directing people between sessions to refocus everyone. It was not an attempt to guide their answers to the questions but to make it clear that we were no longer doing the work on the ToC.

As noted above, working with an SE serving people who have barriers to employment has challenges. While I was there, the organization was onboarding 25 new returning citizens who would begin programming and work on their production floor. They had just run a major recycling event the previous weekend and were running another large event the weekend after my research was complete. The staff seemed to be racing from one thing to the next. I ended up holding up their production time each day that I was completing my research. Going into an organization that serves people where they need it most and interrupting their work is not pleasant. This taught me to ask better questions about how I would be impacting an organization's time while I was completing my research.

After speaking with staff and returning citizens at *RecycleForce*, it became clear that more conversations needed to be had around the topic of success. This was a large learning point for me during the research and something that came across from several individuals. During one session, I asked the question, "What does success look like?" The array of answers all had the common thread that it is individualized for each person. On some level, I knew this, but it was confirmed as the participants discussed what it meant for them to make achievements in their own lives.

I believe the same can be said for everyone involved in this kind of organization. Success is subjective in some ways because of the individuality that comes through programming, the community, and the persons involved. There are deliverables for organizations like *RecycleForce* that work through grant dollars, contracts, partnerships, and more. Who defines that success? If

we take into account cultural context, including race, class, gender, or other factors, it has an impact on how success is viewed. The returning citizens said it themselves during one session; they needed a visual of success to show them that they could do other things than what they had previously known. Cultural context plays a huge role in how people define success for themselves. Often it also holds people back from making different choices because they are adhering to the ideas of success that others hold.

Likewise, who defines the goals of the organization? There are standards set by those who will fund programming and those who will hire program participants after their training. Whether conscious or unconscious, they are showing organizations like *RecycleForce* and their program participants what they value. What is their context and expertise? How have they created those standards? In summary, there are many external issues, pressures, and demands that impact the work of SEs engaging with returning citizens. These outside forces may influence the SE's ToC ingredients and its ultimate success. There are many questions, and these thoughts lead me to recommendations for future research.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In dialogue with my CF group and participants, several areas came up for future research possibilities. The first that I would recommend for further research is the length of engagements in the ToC framework development. ToCs can have various levels of depth, and the one developed for this research felt like a high-level overview. While the overview did identify potential program areas and gaps, more time should be dedicated to an in-depth look at partnerships and outside stakeholders for a SE who wants to undertake this exercise. Engaging with more stakeholders would also be important. Another avenue would be to include board members and more outside organizations and employers who currently and potentially could



employ returning citizens. Future research about these related aspects would lend valuable insight into the processes the organization takes to chart pathways for returning citizens to come back to employment.

A line of inquiry that I would be interested in following is the value of reflexivity to change processes, research, programming, and development of thought. Reflection is important to AR, and I found it valuable to talk with my CF group as a check and balance to my research. It was also valuable to pause periodically to make notes in reflection in the midst of research. While this is not a new practice, it was interesting in the way that it enhanced the work I was doing. I would recommend research around reflection and its value to complex systems change research processes.

Another area that arose during this research was how research might interrupt the daily work of an organization. As mentioned earlier, relationship building is key to understanding the daily flow of work in an organization. It builds rapport with staff so that when engagements occur, they do have to interrupt the work of the organization, making it more palatable. These interruptions to do research are not easy and can potentially impact the bottom line for a SE. I would be interested in learning more about this and how it impacts a variety of types of organizations. Research that focuses on work interruption and its associated challenges and costs, especially for small SEs, seems like an important area of inquiry.

Next, and specific to *RecycleForce*, to look more closely at where the values of the organization come from seems like an important area for further inquiry. The organization is run by a charismatic leader and some of his family, in addition to several other staff members. The values that were espoused seem to be the heart of why *RecycleForce* is successful. More research into the core of what those values are and why they are in place would be important. Some

questions that should be asked include: Should the leader of the organization leave, would they continue? Would the programs have as much effectiveness? Does the leader attract like-minded people who would carry on the vision and mission of the organization?

Further research with more staff and returning citizens, including in-depth interviews, to see if the themes around barriers and facilitators hold true. More research can be done to look into them and how to overcome them. The context of *RecycleForce* is unique to the geography, political climate, long-time existence in the community, and more. Following the thread of information from the codes gathered here to see if they ring true with other organizations in other contexts would prove interesting.

## **Conclusions**

The perspectives of returning citizens over the course of this research added to the process by inviting them into the development of the ToC. In the end, the biggest takeaway I had was the emphasis that *RecycleForce* places on the value of the people they engage in programming. The voices of the returning citizens directed the research and led to important insights for me and the staff at the organization. These insights emerged from the conversations between me, the staff, and the returning citizens.

SEs working with people facing barriers to employment have a variety of challenges due to the individualized nature of the people they serve. Engaging in conversations to discover the barriers and facilitators for these individuals gives meaningful insight into the ways an organization can develop its programming. This allows for themes to emerge and new practices to be developed that may facilitate the generation of new knowledge and growth in programming.

This study provided me with insights into the process of completing an AR project with an SE serving people facing barriers to employment. The study also allowed me to engage with participants and learn about the ways they were prevented from finding employment and the avenues that the organization took to address them. Returning citizens also played an important role in the AR process by leading the way with their perspectives throughout the conversations. Through dialogic processes, AR allows for more robust views of the context of an organization and the challenges it faces.

I would like to continue similar lines of inquiry in the future. Notably, different organizations may utilize the overall approach for ToC co-creation with necessary modifications and improvements based on their contexts. There is a lot of work to be done to assist people who face barriers to employment. Policies and attitudes play an active role in suppressing the right to work for many. Co-creative processes like ToC offer potential pathways for how significant, participant-led changes may occur in these contexts.

AR requires adaptation, which occurred throughout this undertaking. I believe I was successful in adapting and exploring this combined process with participants. AR taught me to be clearer with my intentions, to ask better questions, and to listen actively to the people in the room. Whether it continues with *RecycleForce* or another organization, I hope to continue to explore the idea that everyone has a voice and to cultivate spaces for co-learning.

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**APPENDIX**

**APPENDIX A: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION**

Megan Bolton  
February 8, 2021

I'm using the attached diagram for a paper and wanted to ask for permission to do so. Here's the reference: An Outcomes Framework © 2012-2013. ActKnowledge, Inc.

Thank you!

Helene Clark  
February 8, 2021

It's fine to use.

Helene

Heléne Clark, Director  
ActKnowledge

## APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

### DISSERTATION CONSENT FORM

This informed consent form is for \_\_\_\_\_ who we are inviting to participate in a project titled “*RecycleForce* Theory of Change” research.

**Name of Principle Investigator: Megan Bolton**

**Name of Organization:** Antioch University, PhD in Leadership and Change Program

**Name of Project:** *RecycleForce* Theory of Change

*You will be given a copy of the Consent Form*

#### Introduction

I am **Megan Bolton**, a PhD candidate enrolled in the Leadership and Change program at Antioch University. As part of this degree, I am completing a **Dissertation** project to **develop a Theory of Change and reflect on the process with *RecycleForce*, Inc.** I am going to give you information about the project and invite you to participate. You may talk to anyone you feel comfortable talking with about the project, and take time to reflect on whether you want to participate or not. You may ask questions at any time.

#### Purpose of the Dissertation

The purpose of this project is to **create a Theory of Change process with *RecycleForce* and its clients.** A Theory of Change is an approach used to state and clarify organizational and program goals, key activities, and expected outcomes. This information may help me to **understand the experiences of the participants in this research.**

#### Project Activities

This project will involve your participation in **three two hour in-person sessions.** Sessions will only be audio recorded for use in my dissertation.

#### Participant Selection

You are being invited to take part in this project because **you have knowledge, can provide feedback, and will answer honestly the questions I've put before you.** You should not consider participation in this project if **you are uncomfortable with being recorded.**

#### Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. You may withdraw from this project at any time. You will not be penalized for your decision not to participate or for anything of your contributions during the project.

#### Risks

I do not anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed as a result of participating in this project. You may stop being in the project at any time if you become uncomfortable.

#### Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation may help me to learn more about your involvement and to write my dissertation.

### **Reimbursements**

You will not be provided any monetary incentive to take part in this project.

### **Confidentiality**

You can still participate if you are willing to but wish your information to be de-identified, so that it cannot be connected back to you, I will replace your real name with a pseudonym in the write-up of this project. I will be the only person with access to the list connecting your name to the pseudonym. This list, along with any audio recordings will be kept in a secure, locked location.

If you are willing to be recorded for our sessions, I will do so through an audio recording device. I will use the recording for my dissertation.

Generally speaking, I can assure you that I will keep everything you tell me or do for the project private if you choose that option. Yet there are times where I cannot keep things private (confidential). I cannot keep things private (confidential) if I find out that

- a child or vulnerable adult has been abused
- a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide,
- a person plans to hurt someone else,

There are laws that require many professionals to take action if they think a person is at risk for self-harm or are self-harming, harming another or if a child or adult is being abused. In most states, there is a government agency that must be told if someone is being abused or plans to self-harm or harm another person. Please ask any questions you may have about this issue before agreeing to be in the study. It is important that you do not feel betrayed if it turns out that I cannot keep some things private.

### **Future Publication**

This project will be used in my dissertation.

### **Right to Refuse or Withdraw**

You do not have to take part in this project if you do not wish to do so, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without your job being affected.

### **Who to Contact**

If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact Megan Bolton at [REDACTED]

If you have any ethical concerns about this study, contact Lisa Kreeger, PhD, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Antioch University Ph.D. in Leadership and Change, Email: [REDACTED]

**THE REMAINDER OF THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK  
DO YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?**

I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have been asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to participate in this project.

Print Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Day/month/year

**DO YOU WISH TO BE AUDIO RECORDED AS PART OF THIS PROJECT?**

I voluntarily agree to be audiotaped for this project. I agree to allow the use of my recordings as described in this form.

Print Name of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Day/month/year

*To be filled out by the person taking consent:*

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the project and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of person taking the consent \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of person taking the consent \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Day/month/year