

Beyond Circles of Support: “Fearless”—An Open Peer- to-Peer Mutual Support Group for Sex Offense Registrants and Their Family Members

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Abstract

The term *sex offender* carries expectations that include a continuous level of sexual criminal risk and untreatable mental health conditions that govern sex offending behaviors. These role expectations by the public can socially isolate individuals who have been convicted of a crime and the people who love them. This is likely to contribute to negative self-images that can result in loneliness, isolation, and depression, and, subsequently, contribute to discontinuing support for sex offender’s loved ones and reoffending. This article highlights the creation and maintenance of a peer-to-peer social support group for registered sex offenders and their family members that helps combat the effects of “sex offender” labels. This group differs from formal organized circles of support model and traditional self-help groups such as Alcohol (AA) or Narcotic (NA) Anonymous. We review this group’s creation, processes and procedures, and outcomes, including changes in cognition, mood, and affect over time for members in the group.

Keywords

sexual offending, circles of support, support groups, treatment, cognitive and affective states

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Introduction

We live in a world where we maintain multiple roles in society, such as a spouse, parent, sibling, worker, and friend. These roles all come with sets of internally and externally perceived expectations for behavior (James, 1890). For example, the term “sex offender” carries a set of presumptions that include a continuous level of sexual criminal risk, recidivism, and untreatable mental health conditions that govern sex offending behaviors (Gavin, 2005; Katz-Schiavone, Levenson, & Ackerman, 2008; Sample, 2001, 2006). Although empirical evidence suggests that risk levels and reoffending rates for sex offenders are lower than those of other criminal groups (Hanson, Harris, Letourneau, Helmus, & Thornton, 2017; Sample & Bray, 2003), and risk of reoffending decreases over time (Blumstein & Nakamura, 2009; Bushway, Nieuwebeerta, & Blokland, 2011; Kurlychek, Bushway, & Brame, 2012), the public continues to support laws based on these presumptions (Sample, in press). Moreover, previous research has concluded that sex offender treatment programs, inpatient and outpatient, teach coping skills and other techniques that are proven to lower offenders’ rates of reoffending (for reviews see Grady, Edwards, & Pettus-Davis, 2017; Kim, Benekos, & Merlo, 2016). Nevertheless, role expectations of registered sex offenders by the public can serve to socially isolate individuals with sex crime convictions, adding a negative self-image that can result in loneliness, isolation, and depression, all of which have empirically been correlated with reoffending (R. J. Wilson, McWhinnie, Picheca, Prinzo, & Cortoni, 2007).

To combat negative self-images, registered citizens need others in society who will help them establish and maintain prosocial self- and social identities (Burke & Stets, 2009). This could stimulate informal social control (Sampson & Laub, 1993) and provide registrants with prosocial life purposes that do not involve harming others (B. N. Cooley & Sample, under review). Peer-to-peer support groups could fill this need that is often unnoticed and nonexistent in services provided to convicted sex offenders in the community.

In the broader society, we offer fellowship or support groups for almost any life condition, such as support groups for bereavement, cancer, veterans, alcohol and drug abuse, and divorce (Mo & Coulson, 2014; Repper, 2017; Ussher et al., 2005). Theoretically, these groups are supported by the notion that humans are social creatures (James, 1890) who create personal identities through interactions with others (C. H. Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934). Through the roles within social structures, behavior is associated with the identities people develop for themselves (Stryker, 1980). Thus, social interaction is not only important for how people see themselves but it can also play an important role in how people behave in society. As Durkheim (1897/1951) suggested, it is the integration one has into social groups that provides social control over deviant behaviors. Thus, it is logical to conclude that membership in a support group could influence self-esteem, empowerment, loneliness, and stress, and perhaps provide indirect social control over sexual offending. If this is accurate for individuals who are grieving, unhealthy, or experience drug or alcohol abuse, the same logic could be applied to those who have previously committed sex crimes and have been labeled “sex offenders.”

Through our work on understanding the life histories of convicted sex offenders, we were able to observe the creation and maintenance of an open system,¹ social support group for registered sex offenders and their family members. This support group differs from formally organized circles of support models because it was formed organically, lacks involvement of criminal justice actors, and lacks trained treatment or therapy specialists. It is an open system meant specifically to include not only registrants but also those who socially and emotionally support sex offenders, their family members (Schopler & Galinsky, 1993).

It also differs from traditional self-help groups, such as Alcohol (AA) or Narcotic (NA) Anonymous, because it is not based on notions of sexual addiction or 12-step programming. The goal of this group is not to change or maintain the behavior of registrant members or family support networks, instead it is premised on the notion that registrants' family members need social and emotional support just as much as registrants themselves (Bailey, 2017; Condry, 2007; ten Bensel & Sample, 2016).

As Bailey (2017) noted, a "diffusion of shame" occurs to family members and loved ones of sex offenders in which they experience much of the same social isolation, judgment, and loneliness as offenders themselves (also see Levenson, D'Amora, & Hern, 2007; Mercado, Alvarez, & Levenson, 2008; Robbers, 2009; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009; Zevitz & Farkas, 2000). For family members who support registered offenders or live with them, sex offender registration and notification laws influence their travel plans and family vacations in terms of where families can go and how long they can be there. Traditional ways of celebrating holidays, particularly Halloween, change once sex offender addresses are publicly available. Childhood activities, such as "sleep-overs," can no longer occur with a convicted sex offender in a residence. Registered sex offender parents cannot go to children's activities at school, watch their children swim at the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), or be involved in children's scouting events. Bailey and Sample (2017) found that spouses/partners of convicted sex offenders often lose their jobs once their spouses' sex offender status is revealed on public registries. Wives/partners have reported being asked to leave their churches because of their partners' statuses, and they often become detached from non-sex offending family members because people cannot understand why anyone would stay and emotionally support a convicted sex offender.

Both spouses and children were often home when law enforcement personnel come to arrest their loved ones and are also at post-conviction as police come to their homes for registration compliance checks. Family members and children of registered citizens live and experience the consequences, frustrations, and challenges of living under sex offense laws. For this reason, both registrants and family members are more similar than different and learn from coping strategies from each other. Thus, the goal for this article is to highlight the need for social support groups for registrants and their family members in community's postsanction and how groups' creation, processes and procedures, and outcomes can be examined. By understanding the notion of fellowship groups for registered offenders and their families, perhaps we can better comprehend the mechanisms by which they are able to withstand the "sex offender" label, become part of a community, and find unreserved acceptance.

Background

The notions of self-help support groups are theoretically supported by ideas of social inclusion (Durkheim, 1897/1951). The more integrated people are into groups, the less likely they are to exhibit deviant behavior. The unbridled acceptance of people in support groups, irrespective of their crimes, helps improve self-confidence and self-esteem of group members (Burke & Stets, 2009), which helps people learn self-regulation, positive emotional coping skills, and positive behavioral coping strategies (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; McCubbin, McCubbin, Thompson, Sae-Young, & Allen, 1997). Although behavior change can be a goal of self-help support groups, it is more likely that support groups are used to help maintain changes in personal and role identities (Gannon & Ward, 2017). The transformation from deviant or criminal identities to prosocial ones is inherently social and gained through the acceptance of new prosocial identities. People who are similarly situated are less likely to judge or dismiss new identities. When measuring the effectiveness of self-help programs, it is not enough to only seek behavioral change but rather measure changes in self-regulation, emotional and behavioral coping skills, and shifts in self-confidence and esteem to understand the value of self-help support groups.

Self-help support groups are typically categorized by face-to-face interactions between peers or similarly situated individuals, with the goal of changing participants' attitudes, values, self-concepts, and behaviors (Peyrot, 1985). These groups can help individuals overcome the suppression of negative emotions associated with their behaviors. In fact, researchers have found when individuals express their emotions such as anger, it improved their quality of life indicators and reduced signs of depression (Lieberman & Goldstein, 2005; Stanton et al., 2000). Although group interactions can be emotionally challenging, support groups have been found to provide a unique sense of community, unconditional acceptance, information, empowerment, increased self-confidence, and a sense of self-determination for participants (Krentzman et al., 2011; Peyrot, 1985; Ussher et al., 2005). As Repper (2017) explained, "Offering and receiving help, based on shared understanding, respect and mutual empowerment between people in similar situations" is what differentiates familial relationships and the role of social support peer groups, unless, of course, if your familial relationships are having the same lived experiences as those in need of support.

In terms of support groups for individuals with criminal or deviant tendencies, AA and NA have been thought to help rehabilitate and reduce substance use since 1947 (Krentzman et al., 2011). These support groups are guided by principles of the 12-step program, which posits that people who have neurological addictive behaviors (Galanter, Kleber, & Brady, 2014) are likely to benefit from group interactions that accept deviant identities, encourage identity transformation, and provide accountability within a faith-based framework. Scholars have found the positive effects of 12-step participation can reduce previous behaviors, create new identities, and have a positive impact on quality of life indicators, such as stable employment (Krentzman et al., 2011; Tonigan, Toscova, & Miller, 1996).

Traditionally, face-to-face interactions were essential in achieving program benefits, but more recently, it has been suggested that virtual or online support groups can

satisfy many of the same needs as in-person groups (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004; Mo & Coulson, 2014; ten Bensel & Sample, 2016). Eysenbach et al. (2004) defined online support groups as electronic, peer-to-peer communities in which people with common interests gather virtually to share experiences, ask questions, provide emotional support, and find self-help. Online support groups, for various concerns, have existed for more than 15 years and create an online “disinhibition effect” that can accelerate interpersonal dynamics (Galanter et al., 2014). The very act of collecting information from similarly situated peers and expressing emotions in writing can improve knowledge, decision-making skills, and subsequent behavior. The only disadvantage of online support groups is that hearing peer stories may burden members into depression. In the absence of in-person support groups, however, virtual communities appear to offer support to individuals who need assistance and connection to others in similar situations.

Sex Offender–Specific Support and Therapy Groups

Group-based therapy has long been used as a preferred intervention method for sex offending treatment (Hanson et al., 2002; Jennings & Sawyer, 2003; Levenson, Macgowan, Morin, & Cotter, 2009). Levenson and Macgowan (2004) found a strong correlation between engagement in group therapy, as assessed by the Group Engagement Measure, and sex offender treatment progress as determined by the Sex Offender Treatment Rating Scale. Those in group therapy suggested that they found accountability; learned victim empathy and prevention strategies to avoid relapse; and generally had high levels of satisfaction with group intervention (Levenson et al., 2009). Alternatively, Looman, Abracen, and Di Fazio (2014) found no significant differences in sexual or general reoffending rates between people receiving individual therapy and those who receive both individual and group therapy. This leads to questions of therapy dosage rather than effects themselves.² Regardless, we found no research suggesting that group therapy harmed clients or increased their reoffending rates. Within this context, group therapy as a part of broader sex offense treatment program appears to be common and helpful in decreasing a sense of loneliness and hopelessness (Jennings & Deming, 2013). Group-based cognitive behavioral therapy, however, is not the only type of intervention for those convicted of sex crimes.

Based on findings that suggest an overlap between compulsive sexual behavior and substance abuse disorders (Kraus, Voon, & Potenza, 2016), Sex Addicts Anonymous (SAA) groups have become popular as a community-based intervention strategy (Karila et al., 2014). Groups, such as SAA, have the potential to help “sex addicts” by learning from others, belonging to a supportive network, and gaining freedom from secrecy and shame (Hayden, 2017). Evaluative studies of these groups have been minimal, but if they are similar to assessments of other 12-step faith-based organizations, these groups are likely to provide fellowship and social support (Henderson & Salmon, 1995; Moos & Timko, 2008). To the degree fellowship and social support are correlated with reductions in reoffending, SAA groups could help at improving public safety.

More recently, countries such as Canada and Great Britain have embraced Circles of Support and Accountability (CoSA) groups as a form of social support for convicted sex offenders. CoSA offers support to high-risk sex offenders who have ended their sentences and are under no correctional supervision (R. J. Wilson, Cortoni, & McWhinnie, 2009). Community members volunteer and receive training on how to foster support, monitoring, and accountability for those at the highest risks of sexual reoffending. These types of social support groups include not only community volunteers but also an advisory committee of law enforcement, corrections, clinicians, and business leaders who meet with offenders once a month rather than daily or weekly like community volunteers. To date, CoSA groups have been found to reduce general and sexual offending (Chouinard & Riddick, 2014; C. Wilson, Bates, & Völlm, 2010; R. J. Wilson et al., 2009); however, it is too early to determine whether the effects of CoSA are long term, specific to certain legal or political structures, and maintainable beyond 3 years.

Previous research has found that group-based support and self-help groups can influence feelings of isolation, guilt, and shame for ex-offenders who return to the community; however, scholars have argued these feelings are exacerbated for those convicted of sex crimes due to sex offense-specific laws of registration, notification, residency restrictions, and exclusionary zones of residency (Dum, 2016; Mancini, 2013; Socia, Levenson, Ackerman, & Harris, 2015; Tewksbury & Levenson, 2009). Those registered for sex offenses, however, are not the only ones who experience social isolation and shame. Relatives or individuals who support registered offenders often experience secondary stigmatization from friends, employers, and society from the application of sex offender laws (Bailey, 2017; Condry, 2007; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; Goffman, 1963).

Secondary stigma for loved ones of convicted sex offenders is more than just stigma by association or close proximity (Condry, 2007). It is based on contamination and causal inference. Relatives of registered offenders can experience five types of shaming: association and genetics leading to family contamination, omission, commission, and continuation. These types of shaming mechanisms are based on direct causality for which relatives are blamed by others (Nussbaum, 2004). Mothers of registrants are often socially and professionally blamed for the crimes of their children; siblings are socially isolated in case they too have inherited the “crime gene”; grandparents are blamed for failing to do something to help parents prevent crimes; and wives are shamed for not knowing that crimes were occurring and for supporting their offender husbands (Condry, 2007). In many ways, those who support registered citizens after conviction are just as shamed, blamed, and shunned as registrants themselves. Thus, they are in need of support groups to increase their sense of empowerment and self-esteem and help them negotiate new self- and social identities with the help of similarly situated individuals. Who is better situated to understand the trials and tribulations of living under requirements of sex offense laws than offenders themselves?

In light of sex offense-specific laws that publicly announce the names and addresses of convicted sex offenders, support or self-help groups for sex offenders and their family members seem pertinent. As part of a larger project on desistance, we were able to observe the creation and maintenance of a peer-to-peer social support group for registered sex offenders and their family members called “Fearless.” This article explains the creation, processes and procedures, outcomes, and challenges of this group, so we can

better comprehend the social support structures that enable registrants and their family members to withstand the “sex offender” label, decrease negative emotions and increase self-worth, and be productive members of their communities.

Data and Method

Over the past decade, we have worked closely with the Fearless group in Nebraska. One of the researchers of this study started working with the founders of “Fearless” before its creation. The primary researcher was able to observe the creation, processes and procedures, outcomes, victories, and challenges of this group. The majority of our data and subsequent discussions are a result of observational data collected at group meetings and one-on-one interviews with members of the “Fearless” group. We interviewed 20 members of “Fearless” and observed meetings over the last 2 years to determine individual outcomes and group-level cognitions and affective states.

Observational data were collected by several members of the research team throughout the creation and implementation phase of “Fearless” (more discussion on the phases below). Notes were taken throughout group meetings and subsequently written up by research members once meetings were over. No identifiable information was recorded during group meetings to protect the identities of group members and to ensure confidentiality of individual and group discussions. Members of the research team would have debriefing sessions after each “Fearless” meeting to discuss its progress, concerns, difficulties, and victories, so we were informed before attending the next meeting and could adjust our observations accordingly.

Interviews with “Fearless” group members were semistructured in nature and focused on understanding the need, importance, benefits, obstacles, and outcomes of creating, implementing, and participating in this peer support group. We interviewed 20 members of Fearless (10 White, one Black, and one Hispanic registrants; two mothers, one father, and five wives), took notes, and transcribed interview notes thereafter. Interviews typically lasted from 1 to 3 hr and were conducted face-to-face and via email. All participants were given pseudonyms regardless of interview format. Our observation data provided us with information on group-level processes, outcomes, concerns, and motivations, whereas through our interviews, we gained knowledge on individual outcomes of members of the “Fearless” group.

Note that throughout this article, we refer to meeting attendees as registrants or loved ones. The term “sex offender” denotes many negative images not only among the general public (Harris & Socia, 2016) but also among those convicted of sex crimes (ten Bensel & Sample, 2016). Relating to issues of identity, the members of “Fearless” prefer to be called “registered citizens” and we try to respect this distinction during observations and data analyses, and in presentation of our results.

Analytic Strategies

Our analytic process was conducted in several phases. First, we read the observation and interview data holistically and then began coding by focusing on the process in which this group was created and subsequently implemented in Nebraska. We also

paid attention to how the group evolved in its mission, goals, and possible outcomes based on the context of their environment (current sex offender laws, societal isolation, and identities) and needs of members. In addition, we examined individual-level outcomes of “Fearless” members to understand their feelings of isolation, experiences of societal rejection, levels of support, and whether and how participating in “Fearless” affected their lives.

Our analytic procedure was managed by using the MAXQDA software, which stored both our observational and interview data and allowed us to keep all our documents organized. We read the transcripts line-by-line and uncovered themes and meanings within the data. This software helped us reaffirm the discovery of codes within and across cases, manage initial notes while coding, and identify a linear process in which the support group began and evolved, as well as identify outcomes.

The Creation of “Fearless”

The creation of the “Fearless” group can be attributed to four distinct individual- and structural-level factors. First, the retroactive nature of sex offense law reform in 2009 in Nebraska to comply with the Adam Walsh Act of 2006 angered many registrants and their family members. Individuals, whose registration term was complete, were made to reregister or stay on the registry for much longer than they had initially been told during trial or plea. Registrants and their partners/spouses questioned the fairness of retroactive legal reform, and when legal challenges failed, many individuals experienced depression, hopelessness, and fear of more sex offense law reforms in the future. The political and legal structure in Nebraska created similarly situated groups of people with analogous concerns and affective states. The availability of the Internet allowed these individuals to find each other virtually and begin to voice their frustrations and concerns with others like themselves (ten Bensel & Sample, 2016) through a group called Nebraskans Unafraid (NU), which is the larger group that sponsored “Fearless” meetings.

Within this context, the wife of a registered citizen (Marie), a member of NU, explained to the organization how difficult it was for wives of registrants to find social and emotional support in a world that refuses to believe sex offending is treatable. She envisioned a group in which registrants and their family members could exchange experiences and views on criminal justice processing, criminal sanctions, and what life is like living under registration and notification laws. In addition, she wanted a group that could talk about how people cope with sadness, loneliness, and/or anger associated with being on public registries. She had a blog for wives of registrants online but believed it was time for face-to-face interactions and some social engagement outside of the home. This could provide a way to address the social isolation they experienced from the “diffusion of shame” (Bailey, 2017) or the stigma that transferred from their husbands to themselves.

This information was coupled with an increasing awareness that registrants and their families in Nebraska were more alike than different. They were having similar difficulties with the legal system, housing, employment, and socialization. Many

registrants and their wives were shunned by their families upon sex crime convictions and were struggling to cope with depression, loneliness, feelings of persecution, and a sense of injustice alone. There were few opportunities for registered citizens in Nebraska to receive therapy or counseling once they were released from correctional control, and there were no services outside of marriage or family therapy for the partners of registrants. As they seemed to have much in common, it was logical to conclude that peer-to-peer sharing of experiences could provide some social and emotional support for wives and registrants.

Moreover, NU leadership offered to facilitate a group meeting in which all could share experiences, including registrants, wives, mothers, fathers, and siblings of registrants. They developed the “Fearless” group’s mission, which is to provide a safe space for registrants and their family members to seek social support, express concerns, gain knowledge, and vent frustration. As one registrant member noted, “I attend AA meetings and that’s fine, but here is the only place I can talk about my status [as a registrant] and have other people get it.” The existence of an advocacy group for sex offense legal reforms, empirical data, and the lived experiences of registrants and their loved ones generated notions of what “Fearless” could be and how it could make a difference in the lives of people marginalized by law.

Group Organization

“Fearless” operates as an open system (Schopler & Galinsky, 2014), in which members come into or leave the group at their will, with no limit on the capacity of the group. This varies from closed systems, such as CoSA groups, in which groups stay relatively stable in size and composition. McCallion and Toseland (1995) suggested there are four categories of group intervention within communities, including mutual support groups; psychoeducational support groups; social, recreational, and education groups; and service advocacy groups. “Fearless” defies these categorical boundaries because it is a mutual support group that provides social and recreational opportunities, involves a peer-to-peer educational component, and discusses advocacy activities. “Fearless” could be likened to AA or NA groups, but it does not include a 12-step program. It is not a faith-based organization, but its membership includes the faithful.

“Fearless” also can be distinguished from SAA groups or other sex offense therapy groups in that membership does not require a self- or official diagnosis of a mental disorder or an addiction. It differs from therapy groups in its inclusion of registrants’ family members, social activities, lack of psychological influences, and lack of a 12-step program, and is an open system. The main function of “Fearless” is not to change the behavior of registrants or their family members, but rather to help formulate and support individual and group cognition, provide an environment conducive to individual identity and affective change, learn cognitive tools to manage stress and shame, and unconditionally accept those who continue to support their sex offense loved ones. Differences between CoSA, SAA, and Fearless can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Differences Between Group Interventions for Registered Offenders in the Community and Their Family Members.

| Program Components | CoSA | Sex Addicts Anonymous | Fearless |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| Intention | Increase offender accountability and behavior change | Provide peer support for offenders, accountability, and behavior change | Offer safe space to share frustrations, fear, and overcome loneliness for offenders and members of their social support networks and accountability |
| Target population | Offenders | Offenders | Family members and friends of registered citizens as well as offenders themselves |
| Type of system | Closed service advocacy and psychoeducational support with volunteer trainees | Open peer-to-peer mutual support | Open peer-to-peer mutual support with social and recreational activities and service advocacy |
| Risk level | High | Any level | Any level |
| Mental health diagnosis | Yes | Yes | No |
| Faith-based/12-step | No | Yes | No |
| Nature of group | Partially egalitarian | Undemocratic | Egalitarian |
| Support for family | No | No | Yes |

Note. CoSA = Circles of Support and Accountability.

Logistically, the wife of a registered citizen (Marie) became somewhat the leader of the “Fearless” group by finding space for the group to meet (in the basement of a church), and facilitating “Fearless” meetings by ensuring that human courtesies are observed. Marie ensures that every member at the meetings, on the third Monday of every month, gets the chance to introduce himself or herself, and briefly discuss any life changes or struggles members may be having in their lives. This occurs in the first hour of the meeting and then a topic of discussion is introduced for the second hour of the meeting. Topics have ranged from coping with anger and depression to housing, employment, dating, and how to tell others about registrants’ statuses. Meetings began in August 2014 with as few as seven members and have no fewer than 30 members as of October 2017. Walk-in members are always welcome, provided they are registrants or care about one. The NU leadership took the lead in membership recruitment by creating pamphlets about “Fearless” and left these in law enforcement agencies where people register, in probation offices, parole offices, and federal supervision offices. They also advertise “Fearless” meetings on NU’s website each month reminding members of the date and time of the next meeting. For these reasons, Fearless membership

encompasses people enduring pretrial, trial, and posttrial experiences. Over time, Fearless has retained 80% of the people who regularly attend meetings. Some miss meetings periodically due to employment commitments, lack of child care, or illness, but the only members who have begun attending meetings and stopped were those who attended during pretrial and received prison sentences prohibiting their attendance.

Theoretically, "Fearless" was founded on many of the same notions as other group therapy or self-help groups. Groups help reduce feelings of isolation, fear, and hopelessness among members by offering encouragement, guidance, and a sense that someone cares about the members as people ("Helpguide"). "Fearless" fills a gap in society that exists between the treatment registrants receive while in prison, on probation, or on parole and the lack of access to treatment, health insurance, and support groups in communities once they are "off paper" or free of criminal sanction. As once stated on the NU website, "FEARLESS takes responsibility where our politicians will not." As such, "Fearless" meetings have been welcomed by criminal justice agencies and therapists working with registered sex offender populations in the community.

"Fearless" members have reported no difficulties and little conflict related to meeting attendance. Only a select few of church members have a problem with "Fearless" meeting in the basement of their church at night when the congregation is absent. Members have received no threats or harassment during, before, or after meetings from community members, and because clinicians are not members, there is little fear among participants that mandatory reporting to authorities will result from talking about their emotional difficulties. As in all groups, there are some whose personalities align better with some than others, but no animosity has been observed between members. Covert avoidance before and after meetings is observed among a select few.

Although "Fearless" is an open group system, there are some rules that govern membership that make this group an open system with parameters. Not everyone is welcomed at "Fearless" meetings, including criminal justice agents, therapists, clergy, or random community activists. "Fearless" is a group derived by registered citizens and people who support them, and it is meant specifically for registered citizens and people who love them by providing a safe space for members to experience peer-to-peer sharing, not clinical diagnoses. Members have often worked with therapists, have sought assistance from clergy, and have become community activists for sex offense legal reforms, but "Fearless" is not a place where registered citizens and their loved ones want to be preached to, diagnosed, intimidated, or analyzed. It is simply a safe place to talk and share their experiences. For instance, one member stated, "My job moved to 100% commission and the bottom dropped out in January, so I've had lots of financial problems, and I guess it got too much for my girlfriend of four years because she moved out this month." Members offered words of sympathy, encouragement, advice, and positive affirmation of life goals already accomplished by this man. Although no words could help him with his impending bankruptcy or the loss of partner, he left that meeting feeling less alone than when he walked in. We observed visible physical differences in his appearance and demeanor from the beginning of the meeting to the end as his affective state was subjected to positive encouragement.

As in most self-help or support groups, there is an obvious sample bias in the composition of the group. The people participating in “Fearless” are actively looking for support, encouragement, social engagement, and friendship with people like themselves, which naturally affects the outcomes of this group. Regardless, “Fearless” has been in operation for more than 2 years and does have some observable outcomes for individuals, and for the group, collectively.

Individual and Group Outcomes

Just like individuals, groups take on personalities, through which they accomplish their goals, operate within cognitive concepts and develop their own social capital and affective states over time (Halfhill, Sundstrom, Lahner, Calderone, & Nielsen, 2005; Oh, Chung, & Labianca, 2004). Individuals within the group and the group itself are simultaneously learning the meaning of things and are acting upon collectively developed cognition (Thompson, 1998). It is then important to examine group-level outcomes, as well as individual ones. “Fearless” effectiveness at the individual level is most easily ascertained through interviews with members, whereas group effectiveness measures are more difficult to obtain.

Individual-Level Outcomes

Based on arrest and self-reports, none of the “Fearless” members had committed a new crime or had registration violations before or after joining Fearless. The 20 members of “Fearless” interviewed for this study all offered comments inferring reductions in loneliness and depressive states. Marvin (registrant) explained, “I could have not gotten through my conviction and sentence without this group. So much encouragement here.” In another interview, Sally (a mother of a registrant) notes,

I could not get through all this without the help of Fearless. These people have given me an idea of what to expect when my son is released in a couple months. [A registrant member] has offered to let my son live in his basement when he comes home since I live near a school, I enjoy my lunches with [Marie] and the wives, and I just can't imagine my life without this group.

Mac (registrant) explained how he relied heavily on the support and comradery he received from group members when his wife filed for divorce. Another member, Jerry (registrant), feels as if he is part of a family now, while he lives with another registrant and group member.

Beyond reductions in loneliness, group members reported increased levels of self-esteem, confidence, empowerment, and changes in the way they see themselves since becoming members of “Fearless.” Huck explained how he would not have the confidence to testify at legislative hearings without the encouragement of “Fearless” members. Another mother of a registrant, Molly, was shunned by her family and had isolated herself at home after her son was convicted, but “Fearless” has “given me

hope that people care, that I am still a person with contributions to make, and that I matter.” These comments suggest that Fearless meetings are helping people adopt positive prosocial identities.

Additional benefits members receive from “Fearless” are the reduction in anger and increases in friendships that transcend beyond group meetings. Many Fearless members were angry about sex offense legal reforms in Nebraska and their retroactive nature, but as Rick (registrant) explained,

These people are all in the same boat and they seem to have found ways to cope, so I can too. I’m tired of being angry and that is what I like about the group, it reminds me not to be.

In addition, Joseph (registrant) often meets people for meals or “just to talk” with other members. The wives of registrants who are members of “Fearless” meet for luncheons, weekend retreats, and call, text, or tweet each other regularly. “Fearless” sponsors an annual picnic at the end of the summer where all members are encouraged to bring their families, children, and non-sex offender friends, so the group can expand its social capital and work to mutually support families. Members of “Fearless” realize that most of them would not have had a successful reentry without the love and support from their family members. “I couldn’t make it without the love and support of my wife” (Peter, registrant member), so it has become important to registrant members to find support for their loved ones.

Fearless meetings, because of the involvement of loved ones, increase registrants’ awareness that they are not the only ones living under registration and notification laws and experience challenges—their partners do as well. This recognition has fostered a sense of empathy among registrants for those who care about, support, or love them. Registrant members understand spouses/partners also experience shame, harassment, isolation from family and friends, joblessness, and other consequences for supporting someone on the sex offense registry. Family members often need as much, if not more, support than registrants themselves as they are living with the consequences for crimes they did not commit; therefore, they experience full group participation in meetings and have time to meet among themselves without registrants if they choose. The notion that those who support registrants are in need of social and emotional support themselves (Bailey, 2017) makes “Fearless” meetings not only a place to share but also a place to learn empathy and provide emotional support.

Through interviewing members of “Fearless” and attending meetings since its inception, we have observed decreases in stress levels among members, as evidenced by the lack of crying when speaking that occurs for most members over time. Members explain they are more “hopeful” about their futures since joining the group, have increasing “confidence” levels allowing members to interact with each other and non-sex offending people, and experience reductions in anger at the legal system. In our interviews, we asked participants what they would change about the group and members reported that they would “like to see more social activities throughout the month, like creating a bowling league, movie nights, or anything that breaks up the boredom

of working, living alone, and registering” (Marvin—registrant). In all, individuals conveyed positive changes in cognitive and affective states since being members of “Fearless” that could influence identities. In addition, given the role affective or emotional states can play in decision making (Van Gelder, 2013), any positive change people have in their emotional state should foster prosocial decision-making processes.

Group Outcomes

“Fearless” has taken on a personality of its own, which can be measured by task and relationship functions of the group (Halfhill et al., 2005). Given its value for individual members, “Fearless” meetings occur with or without Marie’s (wife of registrant) facilitation or involvement. There is no shortage of volunteers to facilitate meetings, advertise them, or email members. In terms of relationships, there are naturally members who “like” some members more than others, but this does not cause conflict in the group nor does it disrupt the positive, encouraging, and supportive atmosphere. The group has formed a “collective identity” (ten Bensele & Sample, 2016), as they all see themselves as equally marginalized by the law and working to fight social isolation. Despite Marie’s facilitation of group meetings, no single member has risen to be a “leader” of the group. All group members have influence in what topics are discussed and are given opportunities to contribute to discussion. The egalitarian nature of “Fearless” is likely responsible for the increased feelings of empowerment reported by members and maintained by a collective group.

One of the most important outcomes of “Fearless” as a group is that it has provided an environment conducive to “collective narratives,” or a way of understanding registrants’ and their loved ones’ predicaments that is used to construct accounts about behaviors and self-identities. “Fearless” can be likened to a long-term coping group (Borkman, 1990) that helps people accept their circumstances, as well as manage stigma and repair damaged self-identities (Codd, 2002). Unlike the collective narrative of *Aftermath*, a support group for relatives of serious offenders (Condry, 2007), “Fearless” does not identify its members as “victims” of sex offense laws. Rather, the group-level narrative is akin to “hate the sin, love the sinner,” which allows registrants and relatives to see themselves as “good” people who committed a “bad” act or know someone who has; thus, all members are equally deserving of acceptance and support.

Also, “Fearless” as a group offers a setting beyond family therapy to gather multiple perspectives of the same events. Wives and mothers share information with registrants in the group that they do not feel comfortable sharing with their own sex offense loved ones at home. Relatives hear registrants’ motives, justifications, shame, and regret about their sex crimes. In contrast, registrants hear how their actions have harmed family members, have subjected them to punishments, and learn of emotional and economic difficulties that they did not hear from their relatives while incarcerated, on probation, or on parole. This exchange of different perspectives about sex crimes and their consequences broadens not only the cognitive map of the group but also the reconstruction of personal and social identities (Condry, 2007).

Social Accountability

A testament to the positive individual and group outcomes can be seen in the acceptance of “Fearless” membership by therapists and criminal justice agents. To date, those registrants being supervised in the 8th Federal District or in the state of Nebraska have been encouraged to attend “Fearless” meetings, despite standard rules prohibiting associations between convicts while being supervised in the community. The social inclusion fostered by the group provides social accountability for probationers, and peer-to-peer support has become an accepted “divergence” from state standard probation rules to not associated with convicts. We have spoken with several criminal justice and clinical agents about “Fearless” participation³ and found that private, state, and federal agencies allow offenders to attend meetings simply because there are limited opportunities for social inclusion and group therapy for registrants in the community.

To date, no one has been mandated to attend “Fearless” meetings, which would likely change the dynamics of the group, but judges have come to recognize “Fearless” attendance as contrition and a form of social accountability. For instance, Marvin joined “Fearless” after being arrested on child pornography charges. “Fearless” members attended every appearance by Marvin before the District Court, demonstrating the social support Marvin had in the community. His attendance of “Fearless” meetings was mentioned in his presentence investigation (PSI), and the state’s attorney agreed to keep Marvin in the state system for child pornography charges rather than turning him over for federal processing. In the end, Marvin received a 3-year probation sentence that included individual therapy, but his involvement in “Fearless” is encouraged by his probation officer, despite standard probation orders not to socialize with other criminal offenders. The popularity “Fearless” is gaining in Nebraska may not solely be a function of perceived quality of the group but rather a way in which registered citizens receive social support. Nevertheless, “Fearless” participation is becoming a part of the Nebraska landscape of community social service opportunities.

Challenges and the Future of “Fearless”

Although still new, “Fearless” continues to grow its membership, which is a testament to the group as a whole, rather than one individual’s efforts. To date, there have been no road blocks from members, community agents, churches, clinicians, or other entities that interfere with the ongoing development and operations of the “Fearless” group. It is possible, however, that if “Fearless” gains media attention, members of the public may react negatively.

A challenge that arose for “Fearless” as a group was that its meetings were not geographically centered in the middle of the state, so some found it difficult to attend meetings. To address this challenge, chapters of “Fearless” have begun across cities in Nebraska. Members of “Fearless” living 50 to 80 miles from Omaha can now attend meetings in Lincoln. Those meetings have fewer family participants, but it is still growing its membership. The expansion of this group to other cities provides a testament to the need and involvement in “Fearless” as a peer-to-peer social group.

In addition, two long-term members of “Fearless” have stopped attending meetings regularly. When asked why, one explained, “I am done being a ‘sex offender.’ I’m tired of talking about it, I just want to think about my future.” The other member stated, “I have a new girlfriend and I babysit my grandson now, so I just don’t have the time to attend [meetings].” In both cases, it is inferred that these members may no longer require the support and fellowship of peers as they transition to new non-sex offending identities and become active in prosocial activities with nonoffending citizens. This could be viewed as a measure of success for the group as members become empowered and confident to reach out to nonoffending citizens for emotional and social support, but it obviously has implications for membership.

Discussion and Conclusion

“Fearless” grew organically because registrants and their family members recognized peer similarity in social stigma, isolation, fear, anger, and loneliness. It was intended to provide a safe space for registrants and family members to share emotions, seek peer advice, find friendships among similarly situated individuals, and increase social engagement. Interviews with members and observations at meetings suggest “Fearless” has accomplished these goals through increases in several qualities of life indicators (friendships, employment, self-confidence) and decreases in stress and isolation. Members collectively identify with other registrants and their family members and developed perceptions of in-group status (ten Benschel & Sample, 2016). Members take pride in being members of “Fearless,” and as a group, “Fearless” has evolved into a positive and encouraging personality that facilitates dialogue on sensitive topics. As people continue to be placed on public registries post sex crime conviction, it is likely the fellowship “Fearless” provides will be needed by similarly situated individuals.

Policy implications are clear from the creation and maintenance of “Fearless.” There is a need for an informal open group social support system for registered citizens and their family members in the community founded on mutual respect, peer-to-peer advising, and empowerment through sharing. This review demonstrates the creation of a “Fearless” group is not necessarily difficult. It just requires a few motivated individuals, a space to meet, and people willing to act as peer mentors for 2 hr a month. Most states have developed sex offense advocacy groups to reform sex offense laws, similar to NU, and these groups could help facilitate “Fearless” groups like NU did in Nebraska. With the help of the World Wide Web, it is now easier than ever to advertise a group, inform members of meeting times and places, and encourage those new to the registry to join the group. The creation of “Fearless” groups across the state reaffirms the notion that scholarly research can have practical consequences, that registered citizens and their family members need social support just as alcoholics or drug abusers do, and that participation in these groups can affect relapse through encouraging identity changes and actively supporting the needs and concerns of similarly situated people.

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Notes

1. An open system is a group in which members may come into or leave the group at their will, with no cap on the capacity of the group.
2. Those with both group and individual therapy had more contact hours than those who had individual therapy alone, without group.
3. Discussions with criminal justice and therapeutic professionals were facilitated through Dr. Sample's board membership on Nebraska's Justice Behavioral Health Committee sponsored by the crime commission.

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