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The Situation or The Rehabilitation?

Debates on Reintegrative Shaming and General Deterrence on the *Jersey Shore*

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Abstract

In 2014, Michael “The Situation” Sorrentino from MTV’s *Jersey Shore* was indicted for tax evasion and, ultimately, received in a custodial sentence of eight-months for his crimes. Sorrentino’s case, sentencing, and incarceration were featured on a revival of *Jersey Shore* which began airing on MTV in early 2018. *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* provided a vehicle for Sorrentino’s rehabilitative journey which, over the course of the program, adhered strongly to the principles of reintegrative shaming outlined by Braithwaite (1989). Sorrentino’s sentencing was explicitly underpinned by a policy of general deterrence which, in the aftermath of the decision being handed down, also became a focus of the program. Drawing on ethnographic observation of how Sorrentino’s case was covered on *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* over the course of 56 episodes, this paper outlines how major theoretical debates in criminology are portrayed via reality television and, more importantly, how the medium can provide a platform for critical analysis of how the criminal justice system functions. It concludes that, whereas the criminal justice system sought to punish Sorrentino severely in a form of general deterrence, *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* countered this effort with its own narrative of reintegrative shaming, not shying away from its star’s crimes and yet focusing on his rehabilitative journey rather than the punitive measures preferred by the federal court.

Keywords: Reintegrative shaming; restorative justice; general deterrence; *Jersey Shore*; reality television.

Introduction

When MTV's flagship reality television program *Jersey Shore* premiered in December 2009 the eight core cast members were almost instantly elevated to a level of international fame. The show followed young Italian American "guidos" over the course of a summer vacation in the beachside town of Seaside Heights, New Jersey, and became notorious for the cast's idiosyncratic personalities and hard-partying antics (Douglas, 2013). Central to *Jersey Shore*'s narrative was cast member Michael Sorrentino, better known by his self-anointed nickname "The Situation." Even among the other big characters featured on *Jersey Shore*, Sorrentino stood apart due to his comically overt arrogance and preoccupation with his own aesthetic appearance. Over the course of the show's original six-season run, Sorrentino remained a central cast member, with viewers following his journey from *Jersey Shore*'s resident pantomime villain to a drug and alcohol addict in recovery. By the time the show came to an end in 2012, Sorrentino was a household name who capitalised on his *Jersey Shore* fame in other reality programs and through paid public appearances (Gibson et al., 2018). In 2010, at the peak of the show's success, Sorrentino was estimated to have earned more than \$5 million, second only to Kim Kardashian in the world of reality television stars (Sherry and Martin, 2014: p. 1273). Sorrentino's success began to run out after *Jersey Shore* ended, with his brother Marc arrested in September 2014 on fraud and tax evasion charges related to failing to report income up to almost \$9 million during the *Jersey Shore* era (Wood, 2014). Ultimately, in 2018 Michael Sorrentino pled guilty to one count of tax evasion and was sentenced to eight months in federal prison, along with an additional two years of supervised probation and 500 hours of community service to begin after his release (Kelly, 2018).

The return of the original *Jersey Shore* cast members for the 2018 series *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* covered, among other things, the period before Sorrentino's sentencing. The new, more mature version of the *Jersey Shore* franchise provides the opportunity to engage with the criminal justice system through the experience of Sorrentino, a character who viewers had come to know fairly intimately over a career of almost ten years on reality television. *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* explores the concept of redemption, and the ability of the individual to re-join society after acknowledging their deviance and making amends for it in some way. Sorrentino's story, as constructed by the *Jersey Shore* producers, is a case study in reintegrative shaming, a theory which suggests that community shaming is central to the redemptive process and that, while an offender's behaviour must face sanction, they must also be presented with a path to return to mainstream society if the punishment is to be truly effective (Braithwaite, 1989). However, Sorrentino's narrative also brings up elements of the criminal justice system that work to complicate the reintegrative process, including the effect that general deterrence has on judicial outcomes for high-profile individuals like Sorrentino. Despite its reputation as the harbinger of contemporary reality television culture, *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* serves as a media product that can provide complicated lessons to viewers about the criminal justice system. In showcasing the narrative of a character like Michael "The Situation" Sorrentino, who has been a staple actor in this arena for more than a decade, the reality of the individual's experience with crime and punishment in modern America can be portrayed in an instructive way, particularly for the many viewers who do not have firsthand experience in this area in their own lives.

Literature review

Braithwaite's theory of reintegrative shaming (1989) is central to the idea of restorative justice, an overarching concept that provides a counterpoint to traditional, punitive justice. In Braithwaite's view, informal social sanction is just as important to the justice process as the formal controls imposed by the state. He focuses on the application of shaming as a major element of these informal controls: shame, as defined by Braithwaite, consists of "all social processes of expressing disapproval which have the intention or effect of invoking

remorse” (1989: p. 100). The ability of a society to successfully invoke feelings of remorse in an offender is, in some ways, dependent on the existing strength of communal values. In her study of how shaming impacts sexual offenders, McAlinden argues that shaming is most effective “when it reinforces an offender’s membership in civil society” (2005: p. 376). This type of shaming is what Braithwaite describes as reintegrative shaming, where an offender faces public sanction for their actions, yet is nevertheless offered an opportunity to reform and re-enter the community if an appropriate level of remorse is shown and efforts aiming toward rehabilitation or reparation are made (Braithwaite, 1989: p. 55; Edelman, 2017). He contrasts this with disintegrative shaming which, though similar in terms of applying social sanction, is more geared toward stigmatising offenders and further marginalising them in the community, precluding them from returning to the same community-status as before (Braithwaite, 1989: p. 101; Edelman, 2017; Karp, 2000). As Becker (1963) notably theorised, stigmatising offenders in such a way risks pushing them to adopt a “deviant master status” that only perpetuates cycles of deviant behaviour and, in turn, criminal offending. To avoid this, Braithwaite’s reintegrative shaming model proposes an approach that focuses on maintaining respectful relationships, sanctioning actions rather than people, and ends with full and unconditional re-assimilation into society (Braithwaite, 1989: pp. 100-1).

Like reintegrative shaming, the theory of general deterrence focuses less on the individual than their deviant behaviour, albeit with considerably different implications. Deterrence is a central function of the criminal justice system and, for many, the purpose of punishment is intrinsically connected to the role it plays in preventing the perpetrator from reoffending. This is a concept called specific deterrence, a direct method of pressuring offenders to reform by issuing a punishment that the individual would not wish to repeat (Stafford & Warr, 1993). Specific deterrence is, however, only one half of deterrence theory as it is practiced in the criminal justice system. The other is general deterrence, a concept that involves the “imposition of sanctions on one person [in order to] demonstrate to the rest of the public the expected costs of a criminal act, and thereby discourage criminal behaviour” (Nagin, 1978: p. 96). General deterrence is aligned with Bandura’s theories on social learning, in which he asserts that “people can profit from the successes and mistakes of others as well as from their own experiences” (1977, p. 117). Though routinely applied in sentencing proceedings, the efficacy of general deterrence theory as a tool for reforming deviant behaviour has been widely critiqued. Stafford and Warr (1993) argue that an offender’s response to potential punishment is a product of both direct and indirect interaction with the criminal justice system that are more complex than simply an instinctive desire to avoid receiving the same punishment as others. Apel and Nagin (2011) support this contention to an extent in asserting that, though there is evidence that general deterrence can be effective, its impact is inconsistent across all offenders and crime types and, thus, is not a one size fits all approach for criminal justice sentencing. Despite these reservations, general deterrence continues to underpin the philosophy of many contemporary jurists including the judge responsible for sentencing Michael Sorrentino in 2018.

Though the genre has existed in some form or another since the 1940s, reality television truly became a staple of entertainment media from the late 1990s. The representation of crime and deviance on reality television varies significantly depending on the subgenre of program: whereas engagement with issues of criminality is limited on structured or competition reality programs such as *Survivor* or *Big Brother*, it is a primary focus of more observational reality programs like *Cops* or the more recent *Live: PD*. Much has been written about the impact that crime-related reality television has on perceptions of the criminal justice system (e.g., Fishman and Doyle, 1998; Hallett & Powell, 1995; Page & Oullette, 2020), but less attention has been directed at the topic in other programs that are not directly focused on the subject of law enforcement. By maintaining these strict parameters of study when it comes to reality television, the literature tends to ignore the intersectional and (more to the point) evolved state that many long-running reality programs have assumed as the genre has developed. Holmes and Jermyn (2004: p. 3) assert that reality television has moved on “from crime and emergency-service based texts” and, while examples of this programming are still in production and

remain popular around the world, this is far from the only avenue through which representations of crime are presented on reality television in the current landscape. Gillan observes that deviance (albeit non-criminal) has been a central facet of MTV's approach to reality television since the premiere of *The Osbournes* in ..., a program in which audiences were invited to negotiate star Ozzie Osbourne's "colourful" reputation for deviance with the softer, almost banal representation of his everyday family life (2004: p. 56). More so than traditional "crime and emergency-services" reality television, the documentary-style programs offered by MTV from *The Osbournes* to *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* encourage a more complex understanding of deviant behaviour that goes beyond the conventional police-criminal paradigm and, instead, invites audiences to empathise the (sometimes criminal) actions of its cast.

Due to its significant influence within the cultural zeitgeist, *Jersey Shore* itself has attracted considerable attention in the literature. Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus note that reality television in general tends to receive a more sympathetic treatment in academia than in non-academic analysis: whereas "non-academic commentary has often focused on the seeming ills of RTV [reality television], which have been said to include a debasing of cultural and even moral standards ... [yet] RTV is also recognised as a phenomenon well worthy of academic enquiry" (2013: pp. 9-10). Existing work on *Jersey Shore* is exclusively focused on the original series which ran from 2009 to 2012, and does not offer comment on the more recent *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*. There is little doubt that the latter series offers a more mature, sober follow-up to the lives of the *Jersey Shore* cast members as they enter into middle-aged, as opposed to the youthful misadventures featured in the original series. Because of the clear distinction in the tone of the two series, the inordinate focus on the original *Jersey Shore* results in a bias to the literature towards exploring the "debasing" aspects of the franchise, as Blitvich and Lorenzo-Dus put it.

A large cross-section of the literature focuses critically on issues around ethnic and gender identity as presented on *Jersey Shore*. Sastre argues that the show's "troubling interpretation of Italian American identity" constituted a form of "minstrelsy ... an artificial, performed concept" (2014: p. 356). Similarly, Troyani also describes *Jersey Shore* as contributing to the "destabilisation" of Italian American identity and singles out Sorrentino's obsession with the "guido" aesthetic as a parody (2013: p. 7). Most of the extant literature focused on the series is critical, following the same tone set by Sherry and Martin when they described *Jersey Shore* as being "framed within a discourse of stylised and commodified ethnicity, hypersexuality, constant violence and gender stereotypes that are traditionally sexist" (2014: p. 1271). The focus of this article, while inevitably drawing on constructions from the original *Jersey Shore* series as background, differs in that it deals primarily with the series as it is today — a docusoap about adults coping with mature issues such as raising children, divorce and, in Sorrentino's case, prison.

Methodology

To understand the way that *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* has constructed Sorrentino's experience with the criminal justice system, a media ethnography was undertaken based on the principles of visual anthropology. Visual anthropology examines media products from a holistic cultural context, considering the way in which those products are produced as well as the historical, political and cultural circumstances that impact on their creation (Pink, 2007). Coverage of Sorrentino's legal problems has been a recurrent feature of the program over the course of 84 episodes and four seasons airing from 5 April 2018 to 25 February 2021. While each of these 84 episodes have been watched, only 56 episodes were included in the ethnographic observation — 33 covering the timeframe leading up to (and including) Sorrentino's sentencing, 9 on the period between sentencing and reporting to federal prison, and 14 covering his incarceration up to and including his release. As in traditional, field-based ethnographic research, a reliable media ethnography requires the researcher to consume a product (in this case, episodes of *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*) in the manner in

which audiences would have first experienced it themselves. On this basis, I first viewed each episode on a week-to-week basis at the time of airing, taking comprehensive notes, particularly in the episodes directly pertaining to Sorrentino's legal problems. These notes contained not only details of the events that transpired in these episodes and relevant quotes from cast members, but also my first impressions as a viewer on matters like Sorrentino's road to rehabilitation and the 'fairness' of his sentencing. Finally, the episodes were binge-watched in succession after initial weekly viewing was complete, to check notes for accuracy and clarity. While notes on my immediate reactions to the program were reassessed at this point of the research (with the benefit of hindsight) they were not amended or altered, in order to preserve the integrity of the initial ethnographic viewing.

The majority of the reunion series' first 31 episodes aired prior to Sorrentino's sentencing (n=22), at a time when there was little expectation that Sorrentino would receive the substantial eight-month sentence that he eventually did. After this, *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* took a seven-month break before returned with "The United States of America vs. The Situation (Part 1)" (S02E18), in which Sorrentino's sentencing was a primary focus. As such, there is a clear point of delineation between pre-sentence episodes and post-sentence episodes. This is an important distinction from an ethnographic perspective, as the prior knowledge of Sorrentino's verdict invariably influences the editing of the program and the shape that the narrative takes from 5 October 2018 going forward. It was important to not only rely on the primary subject (in this case, *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*) in order to make observations about the portrayal of the criminal justice system on this occasion. As a high-profile, in some ways iconic, figure in contemporary popular culture, the Sorrentino case was heavily featured in the mainstream and speciality media (for example, *TMZ*). By further examining the case via these platforms the research was better placed to identify areas where *Jersey Shore* producers edited the program in a way that was biased, or unduly favourable to their cast member, Sorrentino.

In assuming the role of media consumer, the researcher was in a position wherein from 2009 to 2012 they were a regular viewer of the original series of *Jersey Shore*, yet, at the same time, they had not reengaged with the series since its revival as *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* in 2018. Because of this, there was a level of prior knowledge that already existed with regards to the characters and general context of the series, as well as the same emotional, perhaps nostalgic, attachment that a viewer of the original series would have in relation to Sorrentino and his legal struggles. Even so, the ethnographic research conducted specifically on the Sorrentino case as portrayed in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* took the form of a blind observation, with the researcher having an existing understanding only of the basic details of the case, such as the charges against Sorrentino and his resulting prison sentence. The researcher was, thus, in a position to evaluate the show's narrative as it would have been experienced on first watch by the program's viewers. There are limits to the generalisability of this experience: not all viewers of *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* were fans of the original series and, as a result, the emotional response of these "next generation" consumers will undoubtedly differ from those who come to the more recent series with preconceived sentiments towards the characters. While a potential limitation, the assumption of the researcher is that the vast majority of viewers of *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, if not fans of the original series, come to the program with some degree of prior knowledge about the cast members and what the show is about. Though the extent of this prior experience will invariably impact on the emotional experience and response to the Sorrentino narrative, the storyline regarding Sorrentino's case itself only began in the latter series, and it is therefore not necessary to watch the previous series in order to grasp the same understanding of the context.

Constructions of crime and deviance in the "Shore" franchise

Although this research primarily examines *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, comparisons with the original series are unavoidable as much of the content, characterisation and plot of the more recent series are

informed by its popular predecessor. It is also important to consider the constructions of deviance and criminal conduct in the original *Jersey Shore* series to fully appreciate the position taken by 495 Productions on Sorrentino's rehabilitation — a journey that is central to this research that cannot be properly appreciated without reference to his characterisation in the earlier series. When *Jersey Shore* premiered in December 2009, the deviant behaviour of its cast members was an immediate focal point for the show's storyline. For the first four episodes of *Jersey Shore*'s first season, this was limited to fairly routine cases of social deviance including excessive drinking, verbal arguments and sexual objectification (or, in several cases, degradation). This changed at the conclusion of episode four, titled "Fade to Black" (*Jersey Shore*, S01E04). The episode ended with a violent altercation at a bar where cast member Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi was punched in the face by a male aggressor after confronting him for stealing the group's drinks. The incident, though serious enough to warrant police charges, was ultimately treated as a positive, defining moment for the *Jersey Shore* cast: the aggressive, protective response of Polizzi's fellow cast members in pursuing her attacker after the incident was seen as a bonding moment that "brought the cast closer together" (Nelson, 2009).

From a subcultural standpoint, this perspective has merit. The construction of "guido" culture presented by *Jersey Shore*, for all its faults, drew an arbitrary line between the sexual objectification and degradation of women, often referred to as "grenades" by Sorrentino and his male co-stars, and the physical assault of women as in the Polizzi case (Sherry and Martin, 2014; Swift, 2012). While (given the circumstances) there is some argument for *Jersey Shore* casting the aggressive response of cast members in a positive light here, later occasions of violence featured in the program were inarguably less justifiable. The first season ended with cast member Ronnie Ortiz-Magro being arrested for assaulting another man on the Seaside Heights boardwalk (*Jersey Shore*, S01E08), while an incident in the Season Four episode "And The Wall Won" (*Jersey Shore*, S04E05) became a running joke over the remainder of the program (and in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*) after Sorrentino was hospitalised for hitting his own head against a concrete wall during a fight with Ortiz-Magro. The gravity with which the Season One assault on Polizzi was treated was, it would seem, an aberration — for the most part, the show portrayed subsequent cases of violence with less seriousness or, worse, as a humorous episode.

Violence was not the only deviant conduct that *Jersey Shore* portrayed in a humorous light during its original run. An iconic episode in Season Three featured Polizzi being arrested for being intoxicated in public after an incident at the Seaside Heights beach (*Jersey Shore*, S03E03). This incident is perhaps the closest that Polizzi comes to being effectively sanctioned for her reckless, often intoxicated behaviour: after being released from jail and being spoken to by her father, Polizzi promises to "tone down" her drinking (*Jersey Shore*, S03E04). In her post-feminist analysis of Polizzi's character, Patrick (2017) observes that this commitment is short-lived: Polizzi is "never, within the show, compelled to change in order to attain either approval from others, or for 'success.'" While Patrick's analysis is focused on Polizzi, the same could be said for each of *Jersey Shore*'s cast members who (at the time) profited from their public profile as individuals who purposefully resisted social normativity. The show's acceptance, if not tolerance, of its cast's aberrant behaviour continued for *Jersey Shore*'s entire original run. Even into the final season in 2012, the storyline of several episodes focused on cast members getting into fights at nightclubs (*Jersey Shore*, S06E04) or becoming dangerously intoxicated (*Jersey Shore*, S06E05). This conduct, by this stage the norm for *Jersey Shore*, was set against a backdrop where long-time cast members had already moved beyond the "deviant master status" (Becker, 1963) they had assumed as characters on the show — Sorrentino had begun his sobriety journey, for example, while Polizzi was pregnant during filming (Goldman, 2015; Sweet, 2014). The cast member's increasing reluctance to play a deviant role because of life pressures outside the franchise essentially forced an end to *Jersey Shore* in its original form, with the program only returning in its more mature *Family Vacation* version several years later.

The shift to less outrageous, more mature content in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* is a matter of pragmatism rather than policy. In the period after *Jersey Shore* ended, several successor programs were created by production company 495 Productions to fill the gap left by the reality television juggernaut. The first true follow-up to *Jersey Shore* from 495 Productions was *Party Down South*, a program aired on CMT from 2014 to 2016 that applied the “share house” docusoap format to a collection of “rednecks” from America’s southern states (Lewis and Weaver, 2015). The six seasons of *Party Down South*, if anything, upped the ante when it came to presented violence, inebriation and sexual objectification in a positive light. The cast of *Party Down South* were involved in considerably more physical altercations than their *Jersey Shore* co-stars though, as most serious fights were between cast members and did not involve the general public, the *Party Down South* cast had more negligible (on-screen) interactions with law enforcement across the show’s run. Both shows were later succeeded in 2017 by a more overt hybrid version of the two, *Floribama Shore*, where the interaction between cast members and police has been far more pronounced (Ribeiro, 2019). Several *Floribama Shore* cast members have been arrested for violent conduct during the show’s short run, including one instance where cast member Aimee Hall was arrested for battery after an incident which took place during filming (*Floribama Shore*, S02E23; Hirsch, 2018). Unlike the sympathetic redemption story constructed around Sorrentino’s legal problems on *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, Hall’s battery conviction was treated as a running joke on *Floribama Shore*, continuing a trend set by 495 Productions in *Jersey Shore* in taking a comedic approach to serious incidences of deviant behaviour. The fact that this continues to be the case on other 495 Productions shows makes the portrayal of Sorrentino’s case in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* even more conspicuous as a departure from the reality television norm that is worthy of closer analysis.

“The Incarceration”: Pre-sentencing narratives in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*

Though the primary narrative regarding Sorrentino’s tax evasion case was restricted to episodes of *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* his redemption narrative actually started in the final season of the original *Jersey Shore* series, during the liminal period where cast members were beginning to move past the deviant identities they had cultivated as part of the program over the previous five seasons. In his sentencing hearing in 2018, Sorrentino said that he was heavily using narcotics at the time the tax evasion offences took place around 2011 (Helsel & Dasrath, 2019). Even before his 2014 arrest, Sorrentino’s recovery from substance abuse was a key part of his narrative on *Jersey Shore*: his behaviour became increasingly erratic throughout Season Five, to the point where he experienced a paranoid episode during a cast camping trip as a result (*Jersey Shore*, S05E10). Between filming Season Five and Season Six in 2012, Sorrentino completed a 34-day treatment at a rehab facility and, when he returned for *Jersey Shore*’s final season, his sobriety was a key focus (Sweet, 2014). In the Season Six premiere, Sorrentino openly refers to his time in rehab as “the most unbearable, unpleasant experience you can possibly go through” — negative rhetoric that is a departure from the later, more positive discussions of reform that occur in the *Family Vacation* revival (*Jersey Shore*, S06E01).

Sorrentino’s storyline in this final season is largely concerned with processes of reintegrative shaming, where his time in rehab has motivated a campaign to make amends with the cast members he had fought with and disrespected in previous seasons. From the very beginning, Sorrentino begins his “apology tour” by making a family dinner which he describes as “the Italian way of saying sorry.” This is a primitive form of the same *mea culpa* narrative that Sorrentino experiences in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, but at this early stage of the transition from party- to adult-focused content, Sorrentino’s addiction struggles are not treated by the cast in a fully serious manner. His rival Ortiz-Magro jokingly offers him a drink at the table, disregarding Sorrentino’s ongoing issues, and Polizzi asserts that she “could forgive Mike [Sorrentino] but could never forget” his previous bad behaviour (*Jersey Shore*, S06E01). While Ortiz-Magro and Polizzi’s behaviour seems to preclude a process of reintegrative shaming, which is predicated on judging acts as deviant rather than the people who

commit them, it could be argued that *Jersey Shore*'s intention was to highlight the complicated nature of the reintegrative process (Braithwaite, 1989; Edelman, 2017). There is little faith shown in Sorrentino's ability to truly stay sober during this season, regardless of his time in rehab. The implication is that Sorrentino's self-improvement does not in itself constitute making amends for past bad behaviour — rehab, in this case, does not in itself show remorse or provide the requisite level of intra-community shame that would allow Sorrentino to fully re-engage with the group (Braithwaite, 1989; Strang, 2000). Sorrentino is only able to earn his way back into the group over the course of Season Six by consistently proving his commitment to changing his behaviour, staying sober and avoiding conflict. In this sense, the original *Jersey Shore* series concludes with a redemption story for Sorrentino that shows both the power of social sanction and that it is possible to re-join a community only when the subjective benchmarks for appropriate remorse and shame set by the group are met.

Prior to Sorrentino's sentencing, where he was sentenced to eight months in federal prison, there were 31 episodes of *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* focused on the myriad of ways that Sorrentino had bettered his life in the six-year period since the original series last aired. For the entire 31-episode run, cast members and audience alike were aware of Sorrentino's impending sentencing, though at this stage it was believed unlikely that he would receive the lengthy custodial sentence that he ultimately did. Even so, the series was evidently treated as a platform for Sorrentino to demonstrate the extent to which he had reformed since the tumultuous period around 2011 when the offences he was charged with took place. Far from the antagonistic character that Sorrentino was portrayed as in the original series, he adopts the paternal identity of "Big Daddy Sitch" in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* — a characterisation that reflects Sorrentino's shift from party-boy to mature, sober mentor, a role model to others struggling with addiction (*Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S03E15; Peckham, 2020). This characterisation is not entirely the construction of the program, as Sorrentino's career since *Jersey Shore* ended involved "real-world" redemptive actions, serving as an advocate against opioid abuse and participating in other similarly community-oriented projects (Bellum, 2013). It is evident from the narrative presented on *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*'s pre-sentencing episodes that the reintegrative journey that Sorrentino began on Season Six of the original run has continued, even absent the cameras. Whereas cast members like Polizzi asserted six years prior that they could "never forget" Sorrentino's bad behaviour towards them, amends were seemingly made by the time *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* begins, with the cast indicating on multiple occasions that in the interim period between series' Sorrentino had remained a close member of the "*Jersey Shore* family" who was, now, had earned the respect and love of the group (*Jersey Shore: Family Reunion*, S01E01).

Being accepted back into a social group with love and respect is a key component to Braithwaite's reintegrative shaming and the experience of Sorrentino shows that, while sometimes a lengthy process, it is possible to successfully overcome the stigma of prior deviance by demonstrating remorse through not just words, but actions as well. Sorrentino's redemption within the group also demonstrates that reintegrative shaming does not require the unanimous approval of the collective. During the first two seasons of the revival, Ortiz-Magro is the only cast member who consistently reminds Sorrentino of his previous bad behaviour, going so far as to bring his (non-cast member) girlfriend Jen Harley into the feud when she refers to him as "The Incarceration," a play on words related to his "Situation" moniker and legal problems (*Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S02E11; Kuperinsky, 2019). Rather than discourage Sorrentino's reform narrative, however, Ortiz-Magro and Harley's actions trigger resistance from within the group. The other members of the *Jersey Shore* cast, who by this point have accepted Sorrentino's remorse and reintegrated him into the group, perceive the attacks on him as a deviant act in itself — both from Harley, who is not seen as part of the group, but mostly from Ortiz-Magro, a cast member that is expected to adhere to the collective judgement of the group to accept the process of reintegrative shaming that Sorrentino went through. As a result, Ortiz-Magro (and, in a different way, Harley) are instead ostracised, marginalised from the in-group for their refusal to show respect to Sorrentino as part of the reintegration process. Though Ortiz-Magro remains outwardly supportive of Sorrentino

in the lead-up to his sentencing, he continues to experience the sanction of the group for his perceived lack of support for Sorrentino during this time (*Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S02E11; Mackay, 2006).

“The comeback is always greater than the setback”: General deterrence vs. reintegrative shaming

Sorrentino’s sentencing was a pivotal moment in *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*’s second season, with the double-length episode “The United States of America vs. The Situation” airing after a seven-month break on 11 July 2019. The episode focused on the immediate lead-up to the sentencing, with the *Jersey Shore* cast members all converging on Newark, New Jersey, to support Sorrentino. Even at this late stage, it was the prevailing belief that Sorrentino would receive a fairly light sentence, due to the scale of his crime and his willingness to offer a guilty plea (*Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S02E18). Despite Sorrentino being confident, based on legal precedent, that he would receive no jail time, the 11 July 2019 episode ends with his fellow cast members learning via the local news that Sorrentino was given a 24-month sentence — this, as the next episode would show, was a mistake by journalists who confused Sorrentino with his brother, Marc, who was also being sentenced in the case (Department of Justice [DOJ], 2018; *Jersey Shore*, S02E20). In actuality, Sorrentino received an eight-month custodial sentence, far more than the show suggested would be the case. Sorrentino’s celebrity status was central to the sentencing arguments put forward by prosecutors: Deputy Assistant Attorney General Richard E. Zuckerman argued that “lying and defrauding the federal government is a very serious crime, regardless of a defendant’s celebrity status” and US Attorney Craig Carpenito added that the Sorrentino brothers “act[ed] as though fame and celebrity status placed them above the law” (DOJ, 2018). Carpenito went on to say that the sentences imposed by the court would make it “abundantly clear” that tax fraud is a serious crime, and that celebrity status does not shield offenders from justice. Despite others found guilty of similarly scaled crimes receiving much lesser sentences, Sorrentino’s fame was central to the eight-months imprisonment that he ultimately received, making the argument for general deterrence being applied here.

Celebrity offenders are often at greater risk of receiving sentences informed by the principles of general deterrence than others. The concept of general deterrence is predicated on the impact that a harsh sentence has on dissuading others in the community from engaging in the same behaviour (Nagin, 1978; Stafford & Warr, 1993). The interactions that prominent individuals have with the criminal justice system are considerably more visible because of the extensive media coverage they receive — take the 2020 trial of Harvey Weinstein, in which his 23-year sentence for sexual offences made breaking news headlines around the world within moments of being handed down (Ransom, 2020). Sorrentino’s case (and celebrity status) is, of course, not of the same scale as Weinstein, yet the same principles apply in the sense that Sorrentino was one of the most successful personalities in reality television history and, even after years off-screen, remained a highly recognisable public figure (Sherry & Martin, 2014). The sentence for imposed on him, thus, gave prosecutors and the court the opportunity to make a firm statement about the federal government’s stance on tax evasion that would be transmitted around the country, and the world. General deterrence, thus, provides a reasonable explanation as to why Sorrentino’s sentence was more severe than others: in essence, his fame was a disadvantage, used as a vehicle by the state to send a message of deterrence that was inherently separate from the Sorrentino case itself (DOJ, 2018; Nagin, 1978). Criticism of general deterrence has focused on the inconsistency of its impact on the wider community, but less attention has been given to the inequitable treatment of individual offenders under the law (Stafford & Warr, 1993). While admittedly guilty, Sorrentino entered into a plea bargain with the government with the understanding that his sentence would be in line with precedent (*Jersey Shore*, S02E18). What was not considered was that, under the principles of general deterrence, Sorrentino would leave himself vulnerable to the state turning his celebrity identity against him, punishing him more severely for who he was, rather than the offence he committed.

In this sense, the concept of general deterrence is in stark contrast to the principles of reintegrative shaming, which call on communities to judge offenders by their acts, rather than who they are as a person (Braithwaite, 1989). Sorrentino's unexpectedly severe sentence complicated the redemptive narrative that *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* had been conveying since before the series returned in 2018 — that Sorrentino had acknowledged the error of his past, and was doing everything in his power to make amends to society. The sentencing was a reminder that reintegrative shaming and, in turn, restorative justice is not a generally agreed goal of the American criminal justice system, which is more geared towards punitive measures than rehabilitation (Barton, 1999; Beale, 2003). The conditions of Sorrentino's verdict, however, gave the program an opportunity to redirect the narrative to include the prison sentence as part of the reintegrative process. While it handed down its decision in early October 2018, the court decided that Sorrentino should be allowed to voluntarily surrender to federal prison several months later in January 2019 (Helsel & Dasrath, 2019; *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S03E01). In the immediate aftermath of the sentence, cast members repeatedly commented on the unfairness of the decision going against precedent. Despite this, Sorrentino was depicted as accepting his fate, though begrudgingly. Subsequent episodes featured Sorrentino preparing for prison, rushing to marry his fiancé Lauren Pesce and seeking advice on how to behave in prison from older members of *Jersey Shore*'s supporting cast (*Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S02E27; *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S03E01). In many ways, Sorrentino's acceptance of responsibility despite the apparent inequity of the general deterrence approach taken in his sentencing was a signal that the process of reintegrative shaming which initially began in 2012 had reached completion. Whereas the original *Jersey Shore* version of Sorrentino likely would have reacted negatively to this turn of events, the newly-reintegrated incarnation featured on *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* is shown to acquiesce to the court's decision in a way that demonstrated considerable personal growth — a key goal in the restorative justice philosophy (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007).

One of the four key components that Braithwaite (1989) states are essential to the reintegrative process is the willingness of the community to accept an offender back with support and respect after the reintegration process is completed. Just over six months and thirteen episodes after Sorrentino was shown arriving at Otisville Federal Correction Institution, the program depicted the moment he was collected from the facility by now-wife Lauren (*Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S03E15). As if to reinforce the reform process that he completed with his prison stint, Sorrentino exited Otisville wearing a t-shirt bearing one of his favoured personal mantras, "The Comeback is Always Greater Than the Setback" (@jerseyshore, 2019; *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*, S03E15). The slogan t-shirt serves as a visible reminder of Sorrentino's redemptive journey for viewers, with the implication that prison was a "setback" for his personal development rather than a transformative or rehabilitative experience. From the program's perspective, Sorrentino's reintegration was largely complete before entering prison, with the court's sentence reflecting the need for some form of performative penance, not a legitimate effort to apply specific deterrence on Sorrentino himself (Stafford and Warr, 1993). The strength of the reintegrative process that Sorrentino engaged in before serving time is firmly established in the first scenes after his release: despite now having attained the stigmatised identity of the formerly incarcerated, Sorrentino is not treated as though this is now his master status (Becker, 1963). Instead, the show's producers take the rare step in reality television of "breaking the fourth wall" and showing interactions between Sorrentino and long-time members of the production crew who had worked on *Jersey Shore* since its original run (Sweeney, 2014). These crew members congratulate Sorrentino for having served his sentence, and react to his release in a visibly emotional way that showcases the very respect and support that Braithwaite theorised was so important to effective shaming practices. By the time Sorrentino has left prison, the deviant characterisation he earned during his time on *Jersey Shore* was a distant memory, replaced by the portrayal of a man who accepted his wrongdoing, expressed remorse, made amends and, in turn, was successfully reintegrated into the community.

Conclusion

There is little argument that Michael “The Situation” Sorrentino’s experience with the criminal justice system should be a matter of public interest. Both the United States federal court and the producers of the *Jersey Shore* franchise are seemingly in agreement that there is a clear benefit to Sorrentino’s story being told in a public forum, but where they differ is in what the moral of this story should be. From the state’s perspective, the Sorrentino case was a vehicle by which it could apply general deterrence and make clear to the American people that tax evasion was a serious crime with harsh consequences (Nagin, 1978; Stafford & Warr, 1993). The portrayal of the case shown on *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation* was substantively different: instead of treating Sorrentino as a deviant pariah, it used the case as a cautionary tale, albeit one where personal growth and redemption was the ultimate outcome rather than formal punishment. Sorrentino’s rehabilitative journey was a focus of *Jersey Shore* since at least 2012, long before his arrest for tax evasion two years later. While the franchise did not air for six years between 2012 and 2018, the program leaves little doubt that Sorrentino’s “comeback” has been a lengthy process in which he has earned reintegration, first into the core *Jersey Shore* group and, in turn, into society at large. *Jersey Shore* producers take a different view on what remorse and redemption looks like than the federal government does. Rather than requiring a custodial sentence to make amends, the program shows that it is more important for Sorrentino to prove his reform to the people he has wronged and, in doing so, he is able to successfully overcome his deviant master status and re-join the group with no additional sanction. This is a prime case of restorative justice at work, where Sorrentino’s experience of having to re-earn the trust and respect of his fellow cast members exemplifying the underlying reintegrative shaming process at work (Braithwaite, 1989; Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007).

Sorrentino’s case reveals to the *Jersey Shore* audience one of the key philosophical debates in the American criminal justice system, that being what the true purpose of punishment is. Because of the show’s commitment to following Sorrentino’s redemption in recent years, the court’s decision to impose a reasonably long custodial sentence came as a shock to most viewers who, from their perspective, could see the tangible changes that Sorrentino had already made towards bettering his life. In this sense, the show’s narrative led viewers to reject the principles of general deterrence, seeing the verdict as unfair rather than accepting the importance of setting an example for others. Context is key when it comes to the efficacy of general deterrence and, often, the court is not able to control the variables that make this approach truly effective (Stafford & Warr, 1993). In this case, the most important variable was out of their control: the existing redemption narrative promoted by *Jersey Shore: Family Vacation*. Had an eight-month custodial sentence been applied to Sorrentino during the zenith of his spiral into addiction and deviance, it is possible that general deterrence might have worked as an example of justice being served. However, this was not the version of Sorrentino that was sent to prison: instead, *Jersey Shore* had worked hard to show his rehabilitation, changing the public’s perception to the point that the version of Sorrentino sent to prison was seen as undeserving of further penalty (Braithwaite, 1989; Edelman, 2017). The outcome of Sorrentino’s sentencing highlights two main things: firstly, the incompatibility of general deterrence policies with the principles of restorative justice and, secondly, the way in which a successful program of reintegrative shaming can impact whether or not the public accepts general deterrence as a valid approach. For Michael “The Situation” Sorrentino, the revival of *Jersey Shore* gave him the opportunity to showcase a reintegrative shaming process that, in its own way, was more effective in stripping of him of his deviant master status than any prison sentence that the court could have ever applied.

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