Effects of Relationships with 'Significant Others' that can contribute to Offender Rehabilitation

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INTRODUCTION

The term 'significant others' is in common use to denominate those persons, largely families and friends, who support ex-offenders[1] in their efforts to keep out of trouble after imprisonment. Fundamental to life in society is interaction with people, as the poet expressed it, 'No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main' (John Donne, 1624/ 2001: 445). One of the main factors that influence the process of reform for ex-offenders, is the establishment of stable relationships with families and friends. This observation has been widely noted, see the literature review by Ditchfield who stated in opening 'American and British research supports the notion that family and community ties are rehabilitative' (Ditchfield, 1994: 3). He further commented that most work to support families of prisoners in helping them to succeed was provided by voluntary agencies, i.e. not by the statutory services. In concluding, he stated that both detailed social research and large scale statistical studies strongly indicated that family ties and responsibilities may help reduce further offending. The influence of visiting by families and friends on subsequent recidivism was studied in detail for seven thousand prison inmates in Florida (Bales and Mears, 2008) who concluded 'Our central overarching hypothesis was that visitation reduces recidivism and, save for a few exceptions, the analyses largely supported this expectation.'

A former UK Home Secretary (Clarke, 2005) having identified the pressing (economic and social) need to reduce re-offending referred to the 'powerful impact of supportive relationships'. This raises the question of the reasons for supporting ex-offenders; is this primarily to help them in mending their ways or to help the community in reducing offending? Both aims are valid. Funding for the rehabilitation process is debated - should the state support directly the efforts of the significant others by the actions of statutory services or should the task be left to devolve upon the voluntary agencies by default? There is evidence that often neither the official services nor the volunteers are there for families at the critical time when ex-offenders are released back into the community (Stockdale et al. 2007: 99).

Three out of eight of the principles that the authors contend should inform practitioners aiming to support those seeking to put offending behind them refer to maintaining or establishing positive relationships: 'the quality of a person's relationships - both personal and professional - are central to the process of desistance' (Weaver and McNeill, 2007: 1). In their account of English prisons just after World War I, two conscientious objectors who had been imprisoned during the war, noted, in recounting the experiences of ordinary first offenders on release, 'In each case it has been shown that the return to an honest and law abiding life has been the result of some personal influence, either of a friend or of a social worker' (Hobhouse and Brockway, 1922: 514 Note 22). Referring to the bonds linking ex-offenders to law-abiding neighbours, families and communities, Petersilia also noted that 'informal social bonds are the strongest predictors of ultimate desistance from crime' (Petersilia, 2003: 19). As Faulkner has expressed it:

> *Any success in working with offenders, whether it is measured by rates of re-offending or by some more sophisticated test of progress, will often depend less on the kind of programme or 'intervention' which offenders are required to undertake than on practical support (training, jobs and somewhere to live) and on how their relationships can be formed and sustained. They need continuing and consistent relationships with supervisors, with their families, and with others who may have an influence on their lives (Faulkner, 2008:76).*

A survey in 2003 of nearly two thousand prisoners (Niven and Stewart, 2005) reinforced the idea that 'resettlement strategies should encourage greater involvement of families and partners in the resettlement process' and the authors added that 'family/partner visits to prisoners are a tangible demonstration of relatively strong ties'. This view of the significance of others was earlier expressed, whether within or without families, finding and supporting living situations that support processes of desistance through positive relationships with "significant others" seems vital' (McNeill, 2002:7). When describing the SWing model of resettlement, Hudson (2007) observed that recent research has provided strong evidence that 'families and friends are crucial' to the process. The caveat has to be made that not all relationships are beneficial. Ex-offenders returning to families and friends with distorted values are not likely to be helped into an honest life. As Raynor (2007: 27) has expressed it 'Reintegration...may not be the best outcome for others who were well integrated into communities or peer groups where offending was normal or accepted'.

The obvious question follows - what beneficial effects do relationships with significant others have? How do they affect the ex-offender? Are they primarily utilitarian/functional or psychological/emotional or, more probably, some of both? Is the ex-offender who is trying to lead a crime-free life merely a receiver of help or a giver of support to others as well?

This article considers first the end in view for ex-offenders, desistance from continuing a criminal life, then who are these 'significant others', both families and professional practitioners. The return from custody and how the ex-offender benefits from the activities of these significant others leads to the conclusion that trusting relationships of mutual reciprocity are all important in the rehabilitation of the offender for their benefit and that of the community.

DESISTANCE

Before coming to the means, the first thing to be considered is the end in view. What do ex-offenders themselves want once outside? McNeill concluded his briefing paper for practitioners, 'we need to learn more <u>from them</u> about what might persuade them to desist and about the support that they need to see their decisions through' (McNeill, 2002:7, emphasis in original). The Howard League initiated a study of young men in prison in the 18-20 age range to ascertain their views on what would help them out of continuing to offend on release. The report of this study tabulated eighteen resettlement needs (Farrant, 2006: 23) identified by the young men as necessary for rehabilitation. Of these, just

over half can be classified as utilitarian: jobs, housing, etc. The need for employment headed the table with 55% of the young men identifying it. The emotional needs, such as control of drug use, setting achievable goals, etc have to be met if the utilitarian needs are ever to be achieved. In particular girlfriends, children and families were sought as support. One of the young men in the Howard League study put it succinctly 'I'd need a job, a place to live and settle down with a girl' (Farrant, 2006:23). Most people returning to society have conventional aspirations for a better life, what could be described as the 'English dream', i.e. 'a not-too-onerous but safe job as an employee of a stable company, enough money, some consumer luxuries, a steady girlfriend and (possibly) kids' (Bottoms et al. 2004:384): to which must be added secure housing. For a minority a criminal career is more desirable for what it can bring materially, among those classified by Burnett (1992) as persisters.

To be able to realise the dream the ex-offender needs a new self-image as a non-offender. As Laub and Sampson expressed it when discussing personal agency in the decision to give up crime, 'a new sense of self and a new identity as a desister from crime or, more aptly, as a family man, hard worker, and good provider' were found in their study (Laub and Sampson, 2003: 146). In passing, this is just where the UK Rehabilitation of Offenders Act hinders ex-offenders effectively (SEU 2002: Chapter 8; Mears, 2008) labelling them 'criminal', which jeopardises their chance of a job, when even the term 'ex-offender' is backward looking. The components of the dream cannot all be acquired immediately on release. Setting goals in order of achievement that the ex-offender will accept is necessary to avoid frustration and abandonment of the struggle. Imprisonment does not only mean loss of liberty, the direct sentence, but also in many cases means loss of employment, housing and possibly partner, the indirect sentence (SEU, 2002). These latter requirements need sustained effort to regain and the motivation of the ex-offender is a key factor in overcoming the obstacles (Farrall, 2002: Chapter 9). After a period under the day-to-day control of those in positions of authority who make all the decisions, the ability to take one's own decisions can be slow to return. This was noted by Vivien Stern 'Those who went to prison without much self-confidence or ability to make decisions for themselves will probably find it even harder to manage without the mind-deadening regimentation of a prison' (Stern, 1987: 70). Custodial isolation feeds self-absorption and this effect has to be reversed for success in life in the 'real world'.

Not only is there a future to be gained but there is a past to leave behind. The reason for offending may be superficial - an adolescent urge for a buzz met by fast driving of stolen cars, an alcohol-fuelled pub fight sparked off by a verbal challenge - 'Oo you lookin at'? It can be basically economic - where money is needed for supporting dependants or feeding a drug habit, or desired for a flamboyant lifestyle to impress peers. Most problematically, it is related to the emergence of deep-seated troubles arising from abuse in early childhood that later surface destructively in violent crimes (Boswell, 1996). Gaining the trust of such offenders is a difficult task even for professionals.

Programmes addressing offending behaviour and anger management, drug detox and cognitive-behavioural treatment can be effective in dealing with past offences given time, but the shortness of many sentences and the continual transfer of prisoners between prisons to make room for the steady stream of new arrivals from the courts mean that time can rarely be given to addressing the needs of offenders and that programmes are not completed. Continuity of support 'through the gate' cannot be relied on either. Though treatment interventions can change outward behaviour, and to a certain extent the motivation underlying it, no programme can change an essentially self-centred innate nature.

The 'Good Lives Model'[2] of therapeutic treatment described by Ward and Maruna (2007) is a strengths-based approach that asks what the ex-offenders can contribute to their families, community and society so that their lives become purposeful. The goal of a strengths-based approach has been described by Burnett and Maruna (2006) as providing opportunities for ex-offenders to develop pro-social self-concepts and identity by engagement in rewarding work that is helpful to others, thus augmenting their social capital. The need to feel valued as a consequence of contributing to the family and the community has to overcome the feelings of

worthlessness and guilt due, for example, to absence from crucial family events and failure to provide a suitable role model for children to follow (Katz, 2002).

These observations on what desisting offenders are seeking relate largely to what has been called 'the majority of the majority' i.e. young men from disadvantaged backgrounds. The future aspirations of women offenders, the 6% of those inside, differ in essential respects, not least in their concern for the children from whom they have been separated. As McIvor, Trotter and Sheehan (2009) point out in their Australian study, 'women's experiences on release from prison have received limited empirical and political attention'. They found that the greatest support the women received was usually from family members. In their summary of working with women offenders, Worrall and Gelsthorpe (2009) emphasize the mutuality of relationships because so many have experienced only those that were oppressive and exploitative. They commend ensuring that women have a supportive mentor to whom they can turn when they have completed any offending-related programmes, since personal support is likely to be as important as any direct input from the programmes.

THE SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

Closeness of relationship would suggest that immediate family members can be most significant in helping ex-offenders into a new law-abiding life. In his review of research on resettlement, Crow (2006) in summarising his main points stated that 'Families and friends can play a vital role in providing supportive relationships, and the connections needed to obtain jobs'. In the account by Devlin and Turney (1999) of 23 people, men and women of all ages who succeeded in 'going straight', a wide range of others appears from mothers and grandmothers to prison governors. What these have in common is a personal concern for them that the ex-offender recognises as genuine - the approach of probation in the days before 'offender management'. In the Howard League survey (Farrant, 2006) of young men after release, 80% identified parents, mainly mothers, grandparents and girlfriends, as the most important providers of support. As one of the young men said of his girlfriend, 'She keeps me out of trouble' (Farrant, 2006: 88). However, relationships at this age were volatile: young women could be overwhelmed by the dependence put upon them and the high expectations of relationships often failed to be realised. It was concluded that the families and girlfriends themselves needed help from services to be able to sustain their supporting roles. The significance of this conclusion could well indicate an approach to desistance worth following up. Should interventions also be directed to support the significant others as well as to the ex-offenders trying to amend their lives?

A longitudinal study by Farrall of probationers and their supervisors found that:

> *The elements which this study has most frequently found to be of most help in assisting probationers overcome obstacles and avoid further offending have not come from officers, etc., but from the probationers themselves (their motivation) and from changes in the nature of the social contexts in which they lived. Good motivation, gaining employment, mending damaged relationships, starting new relationships, moving home and so on were key influences on the success or otherwise of many of the attempts to overcome obstacles (Farrall, 2002:213, emphasis in original).*

This finding led Farrall (2002:220) to suggest that probation practice should be refocused from 'offence-related factors' to 'desistance-related factors' i.e. looking forward to the bright future not back to the dark past. This approach has been commended by McNeill (2002, 2006).

In many studies of desistance, one finding that appears regularly is that 'what works' with ex-offenders on the rough road to an offence-free new life is the quality of relationships with the significant others, whether these are professional workers, prison or probation staff, volunteers, family members, or whoever. The ex-offenders can sense

the difference between real concern for their future happiness and an impersonal case management style in delivering rehabilitative programmes. However excellent the programmes, they can succeed or fail to have the intended effect depending on the relationship between the ex-offender and the presenter, see Rex (1999) and Trotter (1999), for example. The crucial trusting nature of this relationship was found earlier by Bailey who stated:

> *A review of the interview transcripts revealed that while the sanctions inherent in the Probation Order usually appeared to ensure the relationship between a young adult serious offender and his or her supervisor, it was the quality of the relationship which determined the dynamics and interactions - for good or ill - within it (Bailey, 1995: 28).*

Commenting on the importance of quality and consistency in the relationship between an offender and supervisor, Robinson and Crow (2009) referred to a series of studies that sought to elucidate the influence of the programme tutor on the effectiveness of the programme where it was found that 'there were four "tutor variables" which had a positive impact on offenders' test scores: these were empathy, warmth, rewardingness and directiveness'. When the National Offender Management Model (NOMM) was developed by the newly formed National Offender.

Management Service (NOMS) and first promulgated in 2005, it was ostensibly based on principles derived from the available research literature. In particular, reference was made to the 'Core Correctional Practices' itemised by Dowden and Andrews (2004): the fifth being 'working through warm, open and enthusiastic relationships'. It is worthy of note, therefore, that paragraph 8.3.7 of NOMM states 'the bedrock of supervision is the ability to form and maintain a trusting working relationship with the offender and through it to model pro-social behaviour and attitudes' (Grapes, 2006). It is the maintenance of trusting relationships that proves difficult in practice when continuity is broken as the offender is 'managed' by a succession of professionals responsible for different aspects of a probation order. Is it likely that the situation can improve when contestability also brings voluntary organisations into the probation process?

Supportive families and friends behave in a fundamentally different way from those people who managed the offender either while inside or after release. They do not manage or control, they do not impose treatments or interventions but can show care and affection that enhances the self-esteem of the new person. Friends willing to help are of great value. The workmates of one of the young men in the Howard League survey collected money to help him cope during his first week after release. A study by Martinez (2009) of a small number of pairs of former prisoners and their family members (from mainly resource-poor families) revealed the reciprocity of their relationships:

Specific social support exchanges among former prisoners and family members illustrate that family members and former prisoners alike benefit from the social support exchange process. This finding clearly is indicated by former prisoners being encouraged to contribute positively to their relationships. For family members, providing support gives meaning to their lives, in that their purpose is to ensure that the former prisoners do not return to their previous situations (Martinez, 2009:66).

An observation that can be drawn from the individual stories that Martinez includes is that supportive relationships between former prisoners and their families have developed as they have grown up together and got to know one another - a process that takes time. Such time is not so readily available to practitioners who are pressed to get to know their clients through short contacts spread over weeks not years. This point has been made by Burnett (2004: 183) 'the interpersonal skills of the practitioner are crucial here. They include the social and interpersonal skills that most people acquire in the normal process of becoming functioning human beings who care about and depend on others'.

RETURNING FROM CUSTODY

The return from custody is a time of stress. The time inside was free from responsibilities, though not from worries about the well-being of partners and children, but suddenly, on release, life is all about responsibilities, decisions and other people. Help is needed. A review by Martinez of a number of studies of ex-offenders returning to their families found that, though most reunions were beneficial in utilitarian and emotional ways, not all were a success. On the published research he reviewed, Martinez observed:

> *Much of the literature on former prisoner re-entry discusses the perspective of the former prisoner and neglects that of the family. That is, former prisoners have been queried about how well they were supported by their families when they were released (Martinez, 2006:33).*

Many interacting factors influence re-integration, for example: length of time away, frequency of visits while inside, age of the ex-offender relative to other family members, the economic status of the ex-offender previous to custody, the closeness of the relationship (child/partner), the social standing of the family in the community, the structure and cohesion of the family before the ex-offender was removed from it and the abilities of the ex-offender. Adaptation to life outside is not easy for all those involved: a loving welcome cannot be assumed. A young person returning after a short time in custody to a family that has kept in touch can more readily slot back into a previous relationship than one returning to live with a partner burdened by childcare. A former peer group that may be deviant could have more attractions. However, it has been observed that the birth of a child to a young father is an event that presents an opportunity to change direction towards desistance (Bottoms et al. 2004; Farrall, 2002; Farrant, 2006).

Where the ex-offender was the principal wage earner in a single or dual parent family, the other members will have had to make fundamental role changes during the prisoner's custody. It has been found, however, that where children are involved, partners and other family members do not act with economic rationality by taking on paid work to maximise household income. A survey of prisoners' families (Smith et al. 2007) found that caring responsibilities took priority over paid employment. There is the ever-present fear that children of prisoners will be removed into 'care', where treatment may well be less than caring. Reintegration will not be straightforward as the returning member will have to take back a role from another grown accustomed to making the family decisions. If employment is not soon found, stress and conflict will follow when financial dependence becomes unsupportable. Cohesion depends on each member of a family contributing to the well-being of the whole. The ex-offender has to become a contributor, not only materially but also emotionally, giving out affection as well as receiving it.

After a long period of custody, children will have grown up and possibly moved away. The family situation is not static while the ex-offender has been in a highly static and controlled environment. In the worst case there is no family left to return to. Small wonder that an immediate return to crime and to the safety of custody is often seen to be desirable.

The criminally minded people with whom the ex-offender may have formerly associated may also be influential in encouraging continuing unlawfulness. Finding new and law-abiding friends who will believe in the changed person can prove difficult for those lacking the necessary social skills. Becoming a changed person requires recognition by others that one has indeed reformed Any facile dismissal such as, 'Oh, he/she is only a former criminal', with the implication that once a criminal always a criminal, can be a crushing blow to self-esteem. As one of the prisoners working for the Citizens Advice Bureau in Oxford expressed it, 'As far as society is concerned you are never, you are never rehabilitated' (Burnett and Maruna, 2006: 93).

BENEFITS

Gaining employment after release is widely acknowledged to be a key to resettlement. An analysis of a very large number of studies of young people by Lipsey (1995) concluded that the single

most effective utilitarian factor in reducing re-offending rates was employment. A good number of the prisoners surveyed by Niven and Stewart (2005) had jobs arranged before release through families, friends and outside contacts. Many were able to return to previous employers: in some cases these were family or friends. Most of those also starting jobs with new employers arranged them in the same way. The Howard League survey similarly found 'The main source of employment for the young men was via family or friends' (Farrant, 2006: 73). Employment can bring many benefits: an income ending dependence on others and providing financial stability so that the ex-offender can afford to be out and about making new friends; a change from an disorganised life to one in which time matters; a reduction in the time spent hanging around with deviant peer groups drinking boredom away; a new identity as an 'honest worker' that raises self-esteem; daily interaction with non-offenders at the workplace, and stimulating ambition for greater success with goals for the future (Farrall, 2002:146). He also pointed out that employment not only changes an individual's image of him or herself but also changes other's opinion of that individual.

Stable and secure housing is important in relation to gaining employment and is another significant factor in preventing re-offending (London Resettlement Board, 2005). Of the prisoners surveyed in 2003 (Niven and Stewart, 2005), 80% of those with no permanent place to live before custody said they were going to live with family or friends. These authors commented that prisoners facing release turned to family members or partners even when they had not been living with them before custody. In a follow-up post-release interview survey, the Howard League found that just under 80% of the young men contacted, (constituting 30% of the original sample), were living with family or friends. Returning to live with family or friends has the additional benefit of providing psychological support for the 'new person'.

A survey of just over 400 men returning from custody to Baltimore and Chicago found that pre-release expectations of housing, jobs and financial support by families in most cases were exceeded after release, somewhat to the surprise of the investigators. Before release 69% hoped to live with a family member and two to three months afterwards 86% reported success in this respect. Similarly for family involvement in finding jobs 61% became 73%. The 41% expecting financial support became 66% in the first month and was still 55% after two to three months. Not surprisingly the investigators concluded:

> *Released prisoners rely very heavily on their families for support in navigating virtually every aspect of the re-entry experience, from assistance with housing and employment to financial support and overall encouragement (Naser and La Vigne, 2006: 102).*

It was noted, however, that the two to three months could be a 'honeymoon period' that would not be sustained. It should also be pointed out that, as 86% of the men were African Americans, the findings could be influenced by cultural factors. Just over half of the men themselves said before release that families were an important factor in successful rehabilitation and 80% after release said families were important in staying out of custody. The recidivism rate at three years was given as nearly 66% for offenders in this category.

In addition to the utilitarian benefits, the emotional benefits are equally important in stabilising the life of the returning ex-offender. Social re-integration with family first, potentially the most significant other, is a key to success. The lone ex-offender lacks props to prevent falling (Ditchfield, 1994:4). Family support commences with belief and trust in the new person that a permanent change for the better has been achieved and become 'one of us' again. This foundation can then be built on by the inclusion of the new person in all the matters that affect the family, such as decisions on practical problems, sharing financial concerns, sympathising with the cares of family members, for example. Taking up responsibility is an important step in restoring self-esteem.

Individual significant others and partners above all, can convey by their words and actions the love and care that reassure the new person of acceptance. A companion with whom to share feelings restores

the humanity crushed by emotional isolation while inside. Responsibility for children brings a sense of value that the new person is indeed needed, though it is true that this new burden bears heavily on inexperienced young parents who often do not know where to turn for help (Stockdale et al. 2007).

Entering the wider social sphere can be a traumatic experience for the ex-offender. As one put it:

> *When you first go out the gate again on a town visit, or when you come to work, even though you haven't got HMP [Her Majesty's Prison] stamped on the middle of your forehead, you feel very aware of your position, and where you are and you think, 'Do people know?' (Burnett and Maruna, 2006:93).*

It is in these situations that a friend at one's side can support the new identity. Such a friend seen by the 'people out there' to be accepting the ex-offender as 'one of us' helps overcome the fear.

CONCLUSIONS

Significant others, notably families and friends, play a vital role in the rehabilitation of ex-offenders as they can provide utilitarian and emotional support in the difficult transition between custody and freedom. Commenting on the findings of Niven and Stewart (2005), Solomon expressed it strongly 'The message from the evidence is very clear. Family ties are the overriding factor in assisting prisoners to find stable housing and employment or training to ensure they are less likely to re-offend' (Solomon, 2005:1). While lip service is paid by authorities to the value of families, in practice they receive next to no help, or even information, while the prisoner is inside (Katz, 2002). Too little is done while the offender is in custody to prepare for life after release. In many cases the relationships regained are beneficial but the many factors involved render prediction uncertain in an individual case. Where a drug or alcohol addiction has not been overcome, remembering that these addictions can be the symptoms of deep malaise, rehabilitation can be exceedingly difficult.

Not only has the ex-offender to change into the new person but the 'others' need to change as well to enable reintegration. Though surveys have been carried out on ex-offenders, little account has been taken of the views of 'the others' in reacting to the reappearance in their midst of the new person. Does more need to be done to collaborate with 'the others' who may be so significant in the lives of the ex-offenders? They need support and guidance too to sustain their new roles as they are integral to the process of rehabilitation. However, as has been pointed out, 'there is no one statutory agency responsible for co-ordinating responses to the needs of the families of prisoners' (Mills and Codd, 2008:16). Among the implications of his study, Martinez (2009) identified a need that 'criminal justice practitioners must focus on former prisoners and family members in the treatment context' (his emphasis).

NOTES

[1] The term 'ex-offender' for the new person is regrettably backward looking. Were there a recognised forward looking term it would be preferable to use it but none presents itself neither does a thesaurus offer inspiration.

[2] This model is built on the premise of strain theory that crime involves illegal ways of pursuing the attainment of desirable goals when legitimate ways are unavailable. It focuses on assisting people to achieve acceptable goals via non-offending methods.

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