

A place to call home: perspectives on offender community reintegration

Adult offenders evidence a proven reoffending rate of 25.4% in the UK within the year of release from prison (Ministry of Justice, 2013). For those individuals serving a sentence of less than 12 months, 58% reoffend within the year after release (Ministry of Justice, 2013b). Evidence demonstrates that offenders often face a number of health and social problems such as drug and alcohol dependence, mental illness, limited educational attainment, inadequate life skills, poor emotional and cognitive functioning, past and present social isolation, previous criminal history, and marginalisation created by the label of being an ‘offender’ (Mumola, 1999; Pogorzelski et al., 2005; Griffiths et al., 2007). These factors are likely to make it increasingly difficult for offenders to successfully reintegrate back into the community (Griffiths et al., 2007). It is acknowledged that reintegration is complex and occurs over a period of time, and desistance from crime is only one aspect of reintegration (Davis, Bahr and Ward, 2012). The effects of imprisonment are complex (Shinkfield & Graffam, 2009) and offenders may be challenged in terms of the social, economic and personal options available to them upon immediate release from prison which can create obstacles to living a lifestyle absent of crime (Griffiths et al., 2007).

Offenders also face practical challenges upon release such as finding employment and housing and this can have a negative impact on reoffending and successful community reintegration (Meisenhelder, 1977; Lewis et al., 2003; Wormith et al., 2007; Prison Reform Trust, 2013). Permanent stable accommodation suitably located to facilitate reintegration, is important to provide the stability to address offending behaviour and is viewed as the “cornerstone for beginning a life free from

crime” (Shelter, 2010:1). Alongside this, enabling access to a range of services to facilitate the reintegration process; inclusive of employment, drug abuse treatment and allowing the chance for the formation of stable relationships (NOMS, 2006; Mills et al., 2013).

Reintegration, which is defined as abstaining from criminal activity and engaging in a socially productive and responsible life (Ward & Maruna, 2007), is an active process (Mills et al., 2013). It is influenced by the role of human agency (Maruna, 2001) in which offenders must conceive personal change as possible, be willing to change their offending behaviour (Davis, Bahr and Ward, 2012) and possess the motivation to refrain from reoffending (Mills et al., 2013). The role of agency is essential in creating ‘turning points’ (Sampson & Laub, 1993) for offenders which involves the offender as seeing themselves differently compared to their past behaviours (Davis, Bahr and Ward, 2012). Through the offender differentiating themselves from their previous self and past offending behaviour (Davis, Bahr and Ward, 2012) they adopt the identity of the ‘ex-offender’ (King 2013). Actively acknowledging their past offending behaviours (Maruna, 2001) while simultaneously taking control of their present and future, allows offenders to move on from their previous ‘offender’ identities (Hearn, 2010), developing a ‘replacement self’ (Davis, Bahr and Ward, 2012) and cultivating a change in their ‘narrative identity’ (McNeill et al., 2005).

The Good Lives Model (GLM) is a “strengths based approach to offender rehabilitation that augments the risk, need and responsivity principles of correctional intervention” (Willis et al., 2013:3) through its focus on assisting clients to construct and achieve meaningful life plans that are incompatible with future reoffending (Willis et al., 2013). The GLM assumes that all individuals have similar aspirations

and needs, and offending behaviour occurs when individuals lack the internal and external resources to satisfy their values using pro-social means (Ward et al., 2012), therefore adopting maladaptive attempts to meet life values (primary goods) (Ward & Stewart, 2003).

Within the GLM primary goods represent values that are deemed significant to the individuals own life and experiences. The GLM identifies ten primary goods: life, knowledge, excellence in work and play, agency, inner peace, relatedness, community, spirituality, happiness and creativity, however importance may be placed on specific goods/values for each individual (Willis et al., 2013). The GLM argues that secondary goods are the means through which primary goods are attained for example, access to suitable housing, employment and life skills training (Ward et al., 2006; Ward et al., 2012) – the criminogenic needs addressed within community reintegration programmes (Ward & Maruna, 2007). Providing access to secondary goods, via community reintegration programmes, should therefore facilitate the attainment of primary goods. This is predicted to enhance the psychological wellbeing of offenders and creating a life in which criminogenic needs are conceptualised as obstacles that block attainment of values which the individual attaches meaning to in constructing a personally meaningful life (Willis et al., 2013).

The present research explored the experience of community reintegration from the perspectives of a small group of prolific offenders residing in a UK community housing scheme. Hearing the perspectives of those participating within the scheme provides a unique insight into the value of the scheme and facilitates the development of knowledge and understanding within this field.

Method

Design

Data were collected via face to face semi-structured interviews with five participants.

Participants

All participants were part of a UK 'north west housing association scheme' operating within a large housing association in the North West of England. There were three male participants, aged from 25 to 47, and two female participants, aged 43 to 55 years. For all participants this was the first reintegration scheme they had participated in.

The Scheme

The scheme began in 2008 and since then, 66 people have been accepted onto the scheme and 57 have been successfully reintegrated back into the community. Participants in the scheme are deemed to be successfully reintegrated following a period of abstaining from offending behaviour and abiding by the terms and conditions set by the scheme, with progression onto a standard tenancy within the housing association. The scheme is part funded by the local council. Referrals to the scheme are via the probation service. Offenders are supported for a minimum of eight months, up to two years. The scheme focus is reintegration back into the community, and aims to promote a lifestyle change, supporting people to not only secure and sustain a tenancy but to gain confidence and build skills through engagement in training, voluntary work and employment. Access to other services such as substance misuse services and debt counselling are also encouraged if appropriate. The services offered endeavour to provide the foundations to support the offenders in building and sustaining a crime free life.

Materials

Topics for the interview schedule were derived from existing research (Mumola, 1999; Lewis et al., 2003; Griffiths et al., 2007; Wormith et al., 2007; Ward and Maruna, 2007; Ward et al., 2012), and covered; general information about the individual, immediate post release experiences (options available, worries/concerns/barriers), the scheme (view of benefits and how the scheme has helped), prison and offending (past and present views on offending and crime, reasons for offending in past, what has impacted this, personal change, preparation for release, decision to stop offending).

Procedure

Ethical approval was granted by Manchester Metropolitan University and the research adhered to the British Psychological Society guidelines (BPS, 2009). An 'invitation to participate' letter and a brief was presented to eleven potential participants via the scheme co-ordinator, five of whom agreed to participate. Participants were informed that their identity would be anonymous and that the scheme name would not be identified (other than broad geographical location), as agreed with the scheme co-ordinator. Full informed consent was gained from each participant before the interview commenced.

All participants were interviewed individually, in a housing association office, with each interview lasting between 50 minutes to an hour, each interview was audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to highlight and explore how offenders are able to desist from crime and reintegrate into the community upon release from prison. Preliminary ideas, meanings and patterns were identified, and initial codes were then generated relevant to the research questions. All the codes were collated and linked, from which eight preliminary themes emerged. Evidence for each theme was identified across the transcripts. The themes were then developed further through devising a ‘thematic map’ of the analysis which encouraged some themes to merge together and create sub-themes. The four final themes were labelled as ‘a decision to change’, ‘a place to call home’, ‘suitable support system’ and ‘self-fulfilment’.

Results and Discussion

Four key themes were identified when exploring the experience of community reintegration from the perspectives of the offenders’. The themes identified were ‘a place to call home’, ‘the decision to change’, ‘self-fulfilment’, and ‘a suitable support system’.

A Place to Call Home

The opportunity to live in rented accommodation was a significant part of the desistance process and appeared to facilitate community reintegration. All participants felt this was the starting point for their ‘new lives’.

“I don’t think I would have got myself into that frame of mind without a house to lock myself into” (Participant 1).

“being given my own flat was enough to convince me to stay out and not reoffend” (Participant 4).

All participants expressed how it was important to be have a permanent residence and discussed how reoffending was often due to having ‘nowhere to go’ upon release from prison.

“I don’t know where I’d be without this flat” (Participant 5)

“I had nothing then, now I have things, I used to think that the police can’t come and find me cos they don’t know where I live, cos I don’t have nowhere...I had nothing to lose and nothing to look forward too” (Participant 3).

This theme is supportive of existing literature arguing that stable accommodation is a “cornerstone for beginning a life free from crime” (Shelter, 2010:1) providing the participants with ‘choices’:

“it gave me a lot of independence and choices, and I could choose not to let my friends round instead of walking on the front and them being there. I could choose to be far enough away from them not to be banging on my door” (Participant 1).

It also provided fulfilment in the sense that they felt they had ‘something to lose’ if they reverted back to offending behaviour and was a positive base for re-establishing family relationships which further encouraged the desistance from crime (Hirschi, 1969).

“Like if I mess up I’m out of the scheme and like I’ll lose my flat and stuff and I don’t wanna go back prison now I’ve got all this and like you don’t get nowhere if you reoffend, only place is back in prison and it’s not worth it for me anymore” (Participant 4).

Having ‘a place to call home’ provided participants with personal choice and independence allowing them to feel in control of their own lives which evidenced to be an important goal for successful reintegration for all the participants.

Decision to Change

All participants acknowledged that ‘a decision to change’ was an important factor in the reintegration process. This theme incorporated the sub themes of ‘choice’, ‘moving on from offender identity’ and ‘changing for others’. Without the

conscious decision not to reoffend all participants said that the housing scheme would not be beneficial.

“I thought it would be beneficial and I wanted to do it to get me out of the atmosphere I was in.....Four years ago I'd be nowhere near ready, but then two years ago when [name of scheme coordinator] come I had not long been out of jail, I dunno my whole life was upside down and it was all or nothing”

(Participant 1).

Making the decision to attend the scheme, and wanting to change appears to have been important for all the participants.

“like I know it's a choice cos like everyone can give me advice and help me but it's me who makes the decisions because they've got me on a steady path now, the right way...like even when I'm off [scheme name] I gotta carry it on ... I'm not gonna go out and reoffend” (Participant 3).

“You've gotta want to change otherwise it probably wouldn't help ya”

(Participant 1).

For some participants the scheme appeared to instil a sense of agency, one of the primary goods discussed in the GLM (Willis et al., 2013). Participants acknowledged actively making the decision to choose to reintegrate back into the community, highlighting the importance of ‘wanting to change’ in order for the reintegration programme to be successful.

'Moving on' from their offender identity was important in influencing 'the decision to change'.

"I mean who wants to spend the rest of their life in jail....I mean you never forget it, you always gotta keep it there cos like I said you can get complacent so you gotta have summat to stop you going off that line again and make sure you don't fall back into your old ways" (Participant 2).

There was also a sense of a 'new life' for the participants, for example participant 5 stated that she has:

"got a decent home, decent people around me, I'm not with riff raff anymore".

"I just ain't never going back, this is a new life for me" (Participant 2)

Offenders must construct a consistent self, acknowledging their past offending, subsequently allowing them to adopt the identity of ex-offender (Maruna, 2001). This relates to the primary good of knowledge about oneself (Willis et al., 2013), and was significant to some participants in order to assist with changing their offender identity, further supporting the theory of the GLM (Ward et al., 2012). The scheme demonstrated it acted as a secondary good in providing the participants with the tools and appropriate support to move on from their offender identity and consequently develop the required knowledge about oneself in order to do this.

The decision to change was partly influenced by existing relationships with others such as parents or children, that is, *changing for others*. Some of the

participants strongly attributed part of their reason for changing was the need to be there for significant others.

“you know he’s a ten year old lad, he needs me not to be in jail” (Participant 3)

“I think the main thing was that it’d destroy me mum so I do it for her” (Participant 4).

The scheme encouraged the participants to identify relationships important to them in their life and provided them with the support necessary to maintain or rebuild these existing relationships; this is supportive of the primary good relatedness (Willis et al., 2013).

Self-Fulfilment

The theme of ‘self-fulfilment’ was evident, whereby participants acknowledged what they had achieved whilst participating in the reintegration scheme.

“it gives me a sense of purpose I guess...like I own something, it’s like yours” (Participant 2).

“I have done quite a lot since coming out of prison, like I am pretty proud of that actually when I think about it” (Participant 3).

Participants emphasised what they wanted to achieve and ways in which they had done this:

“I wanted to change and I felt proud of meself of what I’ve achieved and the same for coming out here and living in me own place and starting off without going off the tracks, and also going on all these courses to help address me drinking” (Participant 5).

“I’ve been on the scheme for nearly a year now so that’s almost done and after that I go on a normal tenancy and stuff so that’ll be good, like an achievement I guess” (Participant 4).

“it makes me wanna do good, I’ve already passed my starter tenancy thing and then in 12 months I’ll go onto a normal tenancy so that makes me wanna do good and get onto that” (Participant 3).

This relates to the primary goods of agency and excellence in work and play (Willis et al., 2013) which appears to have been significant for some participants, facilitated through the schemes help in providing the means to achieve these goals. The participants discussed how setting goals for the future helped them to remain ‘focused’ in desisting from crime and leading socially responsible lives, therefore aiding their reintegration back into the community.

The scheme also gave participants the means in which to achieve goals that before were unavailable to them allowing them to achieve the primary good ‘inner peace’ (Willis et al., 2013), for example by facilitating the improvement of significant relationships and providing access to housing, volunteer work, employment and self-improvement courses.

“I want a job and like the holiday I want. You need something to look forward too, something to keep your head on track otherwise you start losing it cos like you think I need to keep focused cos like you got things to save up for and plans” (Participant 1).

Through participation in the scheme, activities inclusive of work, self-improvement courses and improved relationships were facilitated, which acted as motivators to desist from future crime. This supports the view that change is a process and involves a focus on what motivates people to change or continue to change as important for preventing future relapse (Prochaska & Levesque, 2002).

A Suitable Support System

The availability of someone to listen, advise and guide was prevalent throughout the interviews.

“that’s why it was good have [name of scheme coordinator] cos he’s been ere like all the time....it was like someone to talk to, tell him how I was feeling what I was thinking....I needed someone to talk too, I needed someone to

support me and I mean, not someone telling me what to do but guide me so I knew what to do” (Participant 1).

“[name of scheme coordinator] helped me a lot, he really has, he kicks me up the backside now and again.....he 'elps me with computers, everything, jobs, job interviews, budgeting and how to budget like ya food, ya gas, ya electric cos I'd never done that before” (Participant 2)

“I don't wanna come off it cos you get all the help you need and it feels good to 'av someone there, and like the help.....yeah, like I just need someone there sometimes so I know everything's alright, even if the problems are stupid” (Participant 3).

“I couldn't have done it on me own, I don't mind admitting it, this time I could not have done it on me own, I'd still have been where I was or on the street now” (Participant 5).

Some participants felt that if they had not had access to a support system they would have relapsed into offending behaviour. It was important for all the participants to have 'someone to talk to' during challenging times. The scheme provided services such as professional support and someone to talk to or provide advice and guidance in regards to general daily issues which appeared to facilitate a sense of community for the participants. Maguire & Nolan (2007) state that a support system is crucial as it allows offenders to discuss their problems and work out solutions. In line with the GLM (Ward et al., 2012; Ward et al., 2012), the findings support the primary good of

community as being a common life goal and was viewed as significant during the reintegration process for some of the participants.

Explanations given by the participants when discussing their experience of community reintegration is comparable to the Good Lives Model (Ward et al., 2012). Access to secondary goods such as housing, employment and support systems appeared to facilitate the attainment of the primary goods inclusive of knowledge acquisition, excellence in work and play, agency, inner peace, relatedness and community (Ward et al., 2012). These primary goods were highlighted as significant to the participant's own personal life and experiences (Willis et al., 2013). The participants' explained how being occupied and having a focus, appeared to positively encourage the desistance from future crime as they felt content with the way their lives were going and also explained a sense of fulfilment and heightened self-esteem from taking part in rewarding and meaningful activities. This positivity was highlighted throughout all of the interviews, with all the participants speaking positively about the housing scheme, with one participant describing the scheme as:

“It's just the best thing this [scheme name] is..... it's the best thing ever”

(Participant 5).

This therefore highlights how the strengths based approaches fostered a sense of agency and a positive focus on future outcomes.

Limitations

The current research focused on a small sample of participants which provided in-depth, first hand experiences of community reintegration upon release from prison. Participants talked positively about the help they received from the scheme, however

the selection process may have been somewhat biased as the scheme coordinator recruited volunteers to take part in the research. This research did not capture the perspectives of those that were 'unsuccessful' in obtaining a place on the scheme. The data collected represented a specific point in time, therefore the relationship with longer term outcomes has not been established.

Future Directions

Future research would benefit from a larger sample of qualitative data, focusing on various reintegration schemes in order to explore whether the reintegration experience and the factors that facilitate the process are consistent. Research could also focus on the specifics of different reintegration schemes to explore how important different components are in facilitating the reintegration process. It would also be beneficial to interview offenders who have been unsuccessful in a reintegration scheme, such as those who have been incarcerated following participation in a reintegration scheme, in order to explore the reasons why it did not work for them. Exploration of the longer term outcomes with regards participation in community reintegration schemes could provide insight into whether the benefits are sustained over time. Exploration of reintegration projects outside of the UK would also be beneficial.

Conclusions

The experience of community reintegration from the perspectives of the offenders upon release from prison was explored. The acknowledgement of social and psychological factors (Andrews & Bonta, 2006) were important and a number of 'desistance factors' (Ward et al., 2012) revealed to be crucial in abstaining from

offending behaviour, allowing participation in socially productive and responsible lives (Ward & Maruna, 2007). The research highlighted the applicability of the Good Lives Model (Ward et al., 2012; Willis et al., 2013). Achieving common goals, referred to as primary goods were significant for reintegration for all participants, encouraged through the provision of secondary goods- the criminogenic needs addressed within community reintegration programmes (Ward & Maruna, 2007). Support is provided for the importance of reintegration programmes in breaking the cycle of offending behaviour and maintaining a crime free, pro-social life.

In summary the offenders interviewed acknowledged 'the desire to change' as important in maintaining a crime free life, however the research evidenced that participation in the reintegration scheme was also needed to positively facilitate the change, by providing access to secondary goods which facilitates the attainment of primary goods. A stable home was the foundation upon which offenders' could 'rebuild their lives'; whilst support was imperative for continued motivation and guidance through experiences upon release from prison into the community.

Implications for Practice

- Stable accommodation, with access to support, facilitates successful community reintegration, in line with the GLM
- Further consideration of the criteria for acceptance onto the scheme would provide insight into the 'readiness' factors for successful community housing scheme placements.
- Longitudinal research would allow more detailed exploration of the challenges faced during community reintegration and how housing schemes can support this.

- Support was a key theme within the data; developing an understanding of the key elements of support would be beneficial to develop effective support models with this field.

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