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Illness, Crisis & Loss 2016

“It’s a Tug of War between the Person I Used to be and the Person I Want to be”: The Terror, Complexity, and Limits of Leaving Crime Behind

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Abstract

This article draws upon an ethnographic study of peer mentoring in the United Kingdom criminal justice system. It examines how people attempting to desist from criminal lifestyles often experience a period of crisis, characterized by unsettling practical and personal losses. Through interviews with peer mentors and mentees, and observations of mentoring practices, this study renders this sense of adversity visible. It also reveals the ways in which peer mentors may alleviate the weight of the crisis, by providing a blueprint of change, while appearing to be nonauthoritarian. These are important components given that mentees often feel untethered from known ways of being and describe their interactions with authority figures as embattled. An interesting secondary effect which emerges here is that peer mentors appear to shift the perceptions of external observers. This is a vital feature, given that sustained desistance from crime requires contexts conducive to such changes.

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Keywords

desistance, criminology, social work, helping professions, qualitative data, research methods, social identity

Background

Peer mentoring now forms a key strand of U.K. criminal justice policy and practice. In 2011, the National Offender Management Service stated an aim that “all offenders . . . be offered the opportunity of an informal mentor” (p. 3). This was followed by political plans to make “good use of the old lags [ex-convicts] in stopping the new ones” (Grayling, Justice Minister, 2012)

In practice, peer mentors now constitute as many as 92% of offender mentors in some parts of England (Willoughby, Parker, & Ali, 2013, p. 7). This growth has occurred in the context of the Transforming Rehabilitation (2013) reform programme, which opens up the rehabilitation market to a diverse range of new providers. State run community rehabilitation has been devolved to 21 new community rehabilitation companies, made up of private and voluntary sector contractors. Despite claims for a mixed market, however, the majority of the lead provider contracts for these new community rehabilitation companies were awarded to large private corporations (Ministry of Justice, 2014), with the voluntary sector positioned largely as subcontractors. It is therefore unclear, as yet, how much influence volunteer peer mentors will have upon rehabilitation provision more broadly.

Peer mentoring itself is a diverse practice. This study, for example, focused upon peer mentoring in criminal justice settings, yet respondents variously defined the peer element as shared experiences of crime, drug addiction, growing up in care, being a woman, or having experienced exploitation or violence, indeed this diversity reflects the breadth of experiences that criminal justice services are engaged with. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime describes the practice as:

The use of same age or same background educators to convey educational messages . . . Peer educators work by endorsing 'healthy' norms, beliefs and behaviours within their own peer group or community and challenging those who are 'unhealthy'. (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2002, cited in Finnegan, Whitehurst, & Denton, 2010)

There are a number of identified benefits of peer mentoring, not least that it can inspire people to change (Boyce, Hunter, & Hough, 2009), can result in reduced reoffending (Frontier Economics, 2009; The Social Innovation Partnership, 2012), and can reduce delinquency, aggression, and drug use (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; Tolan, Henry, Schoeny, & Bass, 2008). The transformations identified to date, therefore, are largely individual, and measures have been instrumental, focusing upon whether mentoring has improved the individual in ways that can be quantified. The findings presented in this article suggest that personal change in these settings is more problematic than is currently understood, experienced not simply as a positive outcome but as a period of crisis in which people must navigate away from known ways of being. Crises are characterized by feeling overwhelmed, by being taken outside of the comfort zone of our experience and competence, and by feeling unsure of ourselves (Thompson, 2009). Peer mentors and mentees frequently speak in such terms, as they point to vivid fears, difficulties, and conflicts surrounding both personal

change and also the very contexts and personnel tasked with assisting. Peer mentoring also has a broader focus than individual transformation, as respondents point to the need for renewed services and attitudes in order for desistance to appear as a realistic goal.

Desistance refers to ceasing a pattern of criminal behavior or going straight (Maruna, Porter, & Carvalho, 2004, p. 221).

Desistance studies examine “not why people get into crime but how they get out of it and what can be done to assist them” (McNeill, 2012, p. 95). Most studies present desistance as a process, whereby people grow out of criminal behavior, make new decisions based on social ties, or experience an identity shift through new stories, narratives, or scripts about their true good self (see McNeill, 2006, p. 46). Interestingly, the study of desistance emerged out of a critique of the professionally driven medical model of corrections. To explore desistance was to “study those persons who change without the assistance of correctional interventions” (Maruna, Immarigeon, & LeBel, 2011, p. 11). Indeed “[a]lmost all of the research suggests that ‘programmes’ have a remarkably minor impact on life outcomes like going to prison” (Maruna & LeBel, 2010, p. 68). In contrast, desisters’ “own resources and social networks are often more significant factors in resolving their difficulties than professional staff ” (Hill, 1999, [AQ3] cited in McNeill & Maruna, 2007, p. 229). This article explores the micro dynamics of these resources and networks as they present in mentoring. As such, it has relevance for any practice which employs befrienders in corrective contexts and for any practice which involves personal change. Its close focus upon lived experiences further understanding of the interpersonal dynamics, which are present as people make efforts to desist from crime. It also illuminates how these dynamics are difficult to separate from broader social attitudes and operational contexts, which each intertwine to shape the futures that people perceive to be possible for themselves. The article begins by exploring how personal change can often be a terrifying and difficult process, before suggesting that peer mentoring can offer a unique antidote to this terror. Finally it will outline how mentors aim to make changes to the systems and settings they work within; in doing so, they often appear to challenge some of the dominant negative discourses, which frame people with criminal convictions.

Methodology

The data presented here are drawn from a qualitative study of peer mentoring in the penal voluntary sector. Methods employed included as follows: semi structured interviews with peer mentors (n=18), mentees (n=20), mentoring coordinators (n=4), and probation staff (n=2). Observations of practice were also undertaken, including: recruitment, training, and supervision of volunteers and peer led group-work. Participants, whose names have been

changed, were drawn from settings in the North of England. These settings, which have also been anonymized, included a probation-based service, a care leavers charity, a women's employment charity, and a young women's project. The sampling strategy was purposive (Denscombe, 2014, p. 41), designed to select services in the voluntary sector, who were delivering peer mentoring in a criminal justice context. The selection of interview respondents was also purposive, as coordinators were asked to recruit equal numbers of mentors and mentees from each project. This allowed access to the experiences on both sides of the relationship. A limit of this approach was that it relied upon intermediaries as gatekeepers (Denscombe, 2014, p. 219). To mitigate their influence, snowball sampling was also employed, by asking mentors and mentees "to locate other members of that population they happen to know" (Rubin & Babbie, 2011, p. 358). Research with offenders requires an understanding that their offending is intertwined with complex needs and vulnerabilities, as a result there was a need for sensitive reflection and planning throughout the process. Participation was voluntary, and the informed consent of all participants was sought, the study also avoided one-to-one mentoring observations, given a researcher presence would have been disruptive to the interaction. Following participation, all participants were issued with details of local helplines and services available. The resulting interview transcripts, and observation notes were analysed manually and thematically (King & Horrocks, 2010), further coding and analysis was then undertaken using NVivo software version 9. Techniques of critical discourse analysis—a "form of textual analysis" which involves finding a regular pattern in a text and then proposing an interpretation of the pattern and an account of its meaning (Cameron, 2001, p. 137) were also employed. One of the overarching themes (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 153) which emerged as a result was the difficulty of change, a feature explored in detail below.

Change as Terrifying and Difficult

Despite the positive potential of peer mentoring (Boyce et al., 2009; Frontier Economics, 2009; Tolan et al., 2008), many mentees (and mentors) described how they struggled to change and how struggles were often strongly rooted in fear. Fear has previously been highlighted as a feature of desistance. Farrall and Calverley (2006, p. 6), for example, report how desisters fear serious physical harm if changes are not made, or fear no longer coping physically and emotionally with prison life. Similarly, Paternoster and Bushway (2009) suggest that offenders often have a feared self—a fear of what they may become if changes are not made. Respondents in this study introduced another facet, however, the fear of what changing entails, rather than the fear of staying the same:

I've been on drugs since I were thirteen . . . I'm scared to death . . . I'm hoping, praying to God that I am ready (Fiona, Mentee).

There was no weed and no alcohol – that's why my head come straight, not because of the jail . . . I know I just need to stop, no doing it in moderation, [I've] got to stop, scary (Georgie, Mentee).

Coming off drugs, stopping grafting, it's not easy, it frightens me. I have nothing. I 'been alcoholic since I was thirteen (Don, Mentee).

These speakers face a frightening void. The self that they strive for, which is free of substances, what Paternoster and Bushway (2009, p. 1,103) refer to as the positive possible self, is also not one which they face without fear. Rather there is a tangible anxiety of leaving the known behind. They fear ending established substance addictions, which they consider necessary to function:

I don't know what normal is, it's so un-normal to have to get up in the morning, and if I didn't take Methadone or drugs I couldn't sit here and talk to you . . . But I've got to go through that detox, go through that pain . . . it is worth it (Fiona, Mentee).

In their efforts to make changes, these mentees must surmount significant fears. What is more, they do not imagine perils, but recognize the difficult realities of recovery and, as will become clear, consequent reintegration. Roy, for example, a mentor who uses a prison-based peer support group, vividly illustrates how testing these perils can be:

My decision [to change] was not overnight, I was in high security at the time. I was involved in a lot of gang violence. I'd had enough, I put my own safety at risk, I had my face cut open [points to visible scar] I didn't retaliate. It's a tug of war between the person I used to be and the person I want to be . . . I've got fears, I don't know society there today [after 10 years in prison] I get out there, nothing . . . (Roy, Prison Peer Group Member).

Roy not only describes serious physical harm, which resulted from his desire to desist, but additionally describes the fear of the unknown after a long period of incarceration. Change, for Roy, is both physically dangerous and emotionally isolating; it situates him in a battleground between the person he was and the person he wants to be. This experience is not dissimilar to that of Steve, a prolific offender, who was supported by a multiagency team comprising of peer mentors and police officers upon release from prison:

The actual word 'change' used to terrify me, I used to be coming out of prison thinking 'what am I going to do?' Because I didn't have any mates . . . I started going running with a police officer, it was like: 'Oh My God' I'd get labelled a Grass . . . When you go to prison a Grass, [you are like] someone who harms old people or women or children, they're all classed as one person, you know? They'd get beat up (Steve, Mentor and previously a Mentee).

While Steve did not experience the physical harm that Roy did, he was aware of the threat of it. He also describes the same sense of being lost and isolated in this new unknown. This fear of an unknown future was also articulated by Eve, a mentee at a women's project, albeit in a very different context. Eve received a community sentence having fraudulently claimed state benefits, something she explained she was pressured into by her abusive partner. Her partner left her after the sentence, leaving her facing a different kind of unknown:

I didn't know who I was and I had to find myself. And I was so scared because . . . I couldn't wear certain things, I couldn't do certain things, I couldn't go to my Mum's or Dad's, because he was like: 'Where are you going? What are you doing? What time will you be back?' I couldn't go to the shop because he'd be texting me. So I got to a point where I didn't even know who I was (Eve, Mentee).

Eve faced the void of finding herself after a life where she had felt wholly controlled, where she had lost her sense of herself. This is wrapped up with the additional terror of living with domestic violence as a norm. While her circumstances are different Steve and Roy's, her sense of an unknown future and shifting self resembles what they describe, as does the accompanying fear.

Change for many of these respondents is characterized by loss, be it of known pleasures, known supports, known lifestyles, or even experiences of coercion. Indeed it is not just change itself which is frightening, but the challenges associated with it. Lin, for example, had a desire to get help for alcoholism, yet as a single parent she worried that revealing the extent of her alcohol use would result in her children being removed from her care:

I'd tried getting help for my drinking a few years ago, but when you first go in they have got to warn you that . . . if you say something that could be endangering the kids they have to tell the appropriate services. And the way my drinking was, if I'd have been totally honest, they'd have had to . . . and I was scared of losing the kids.

So I kept it hidden. Thankfully social services found out, so it was like a complete disaster, but it was like 'Thank God', because now I can go to the service and put all my cards on the table (Lin, Mentor and previously a Mentee).

These descriptions indicate that change is both physically and psychologically difficult, a process fraught with tangible dangers and frightening newness. However, Lin's account also illustrates that some of this fear is connected to the services tasked with assisting change, she introduces a notable fear of authority.

Quelling Fears of Authority

McNeill (2013) illustrates why interactions with authority can be so fraught for offenders: "People whose relationships with others – often especially with authority figures – have often been, at worst, abusive and traumatic and, at best, inconsistent and difficult" (p. 84). Indeed Haney (2010) argues that even when authority figures intend to be therapeutic, their interventions may pose dangers:

Given the realities of their lives, the inmates warned that [staff] ideals may be dangerous . . . they were expected to drop their "masks" and "badass attitudes" as signs of recovery [yet] their masks and attitudes had been key survival strategies for them, allowing them to withstand abusive family members and . . . navigate tough inner-city neighbourhoods. (p. 174)

Respondents in this study were not just fearful of the power held by authority figures, or dubious about their approaches, but they also framed such relationships as combative. Indeed when Roy spoke, above, of a tug of war between the person he was and the person he wants to be, he introduced a recurrent battle motif, which was most concentrated was in descriptions of encounters with authority:

I've been in and out of jail since 15 . . . I saw authority as the enemy (Roy, Prison Peer Group Member).

My old mentor got me a flat . . . they said stop all the shoplifting, drug use – my mentor said don't give them [the housing providers] any ammunition (Don, Mentee).

[Going straight], for me, is something that could be done to have no criminal record, I feel a little bit that it hangs over me like a sword (Gina, Mentee).

The battle metaphor serves to describe how these speakers feel positioned in relation to authority. They are not passive victims as they have enemies and allies, yet they consider their combatant armed and poised. Fear does not just accompany the changes they hope to make and the incumbent difficulties which attend them then but also the very personnel tasked with assisting these changes.

On one level, this expresses the subcultural position of labelled offenders. Howard Becker (1963) contends, for example, that “a major element in every aspect of the drama of deviance is the imposition of definitions – of situations, acts, and people – by those powerful enough or sufficiently legitimated to be able to do so” (p. 207). People with convictions are acutely aware of their position within this defined hierarchy. However, the substance of these fears goes beyond labels. Lin, for example, did not imagine the authority of social services to recommend the removal of her children, Don did not invent the tenuous nature of his social housing tenancy, and Gina is correct in assuming her criminal record will restrict her employment opportunities. When these dangers are seen as occasions for combat and mentees invest in the position of being in conflict with authority, it creates a barrier to interactions with those agencies. It is in this regard that peer mentoring may have something unique to offer. Personal change is difficult, not just in practical terms, but in existential terms, mentees question known ways of being and in doing so encounter a deep sense of insecurity. In addition they encounter agents and systems of authority, which often increase this anxiety. Where peer mentoring offers subtle potential is in soothing such feelings of ontological insecurity.

Ontological security is, at its simplest, a sense of safe familiarity, a feeling of steadiness, of being tethered to the world as we feel that we know it:

The notion of ontological security ties in closely to the . . . ‘bracketings’ presumed by the ‘natural attitude’ in everyday life. On the other side of what might appear to be quite trivial aspects of day-to-day action and discourse, chaos lurks. And this chaos is not just disorganization, but the loss of a sense of the very reality of things and of other persons. (Giddens, 1991, p. 36)

To avoid this sense of chaos, this unanchoring of a known reality: “Individuals will routinely try to maintain a sense of ontological security, or else they would be paralysed by anxiety” (King, 2013, p. 323). Yet making a change from offender to ex-offender can provoke such feelings of losing a known reality: “When you move away, even areas, it’s a real challenge, you’re insecure, trying to find out who you are, without status and influence” (training group

participant). If such change fosters ontological insecurity, however, the example of peer mentors can provide a reassuring comfort:

[If] the possibility of change is perceived as something that can be easily coped with, possibly by accommodating it within the current conception of the self, then the individual is unlikely to feel a sense of ontological insecurity; the sense that one's very being is threatened. (Hunter, 2011, p. 224)

Not only have peer mentors survived the challenge ahead of their mentees, thus rendering the unknown more known and indicating that change can be coped with, but also they are peers. To see a peer, someone you regard as closer to your own "conception of self" making this change offers a sense of security that cannot be gleaned from an external expert, a distant authoritarian:

Seeing the change helps you to not be scared of change, because a lot of people are. I was scared of change . . . you don't feel like you are going it alone, because people have gone there before you . . . It's not like there's somebody in a suit saying 'she's said this and said that'. They have more of an understanding where you are psychologically if you know what I mean? (Lin, Mentor and previously a Mentee). I think they see us differently because obviously I have no authority, I make that clear. I'm just another person who came here, it helped me and I've gone through the same, going through the other side. Yeah so . . . instead of being a paid person from a university or . . . (Ben, Mentor).

These mentors believe that they provide a measure of comfort, which renders change manageable because they have been in a similar position and because they separate themselves from authority and officialdom. This dynamic was not just voiced by mentors but also mentees:

A mentor has been there and done it. So if you speak to them, they know if you're speaking crap or not . . . It's hard to explain . . . like a mate or something [They] still have a badge round [their] neck, but not proper official, [they] talk on a level to you (Will, Mentee).

Not to be too in your face about things, like down to earth, relaxed [My mentor] doesn't chat shit, he won't tell you to do something he wouldn't do himself. That's a good quality to have (Paul, Mentee).

These mentees describe experiences of mutual recognition, of parity with their mentors. Mentors are not perceived as official, but like mates, offering suggestions they have used, this results in feelings of ease. Importantly, however, this parity is also valued because it differs from what has been known before, because it is not a relationship with disciplinary consequences for saying the wrong thing, or which requires people to say the right thing even if it is not the truth of an experience. Relationships based upon such collaborative ideals potentially allow more trusting, open, and peaceable exchanges. These articulations communicate desires not only for leveling the power disparity between helper and helped but also for relationships where personal experiences can be explored with less judgment and adverse consequences.

Challenging the Practices of the Criminal Justice System

Calls for less authoritarian exchanges reflect a broader theme in which mentors challenged the practices of the criminal justice system. The aim of much peer mentoring is not just to influence individual lives, therefore, but also to change the shape of services and systems. Adam, for example, an ex-offender employed as a mentoring coordinator explained:

My experience guided how the system could be different . . . We [ex-offenders] complement what's already going on, we're able to add an additional perspective (Adam, Mentoring Coordinator).

The probation manager who first employed Adam and indeed who was proactive in recruiting four other people with criminal convictions into paid probation posts also explained how probation services could gain from such insight:

All of our ex-offender staff changed because of their own connections, not Probation. That's not to say that Probation doesn't help, but that there are other strategies available outside professional understanding (Probation Manager).

Once in post, many mentors focused upon systemic, rather than individual changes. Paula, a volunteer mentor, for example, highlighted a gap in provision for families of people who are dependent upon drugs or persistently offending:

[M]y husband used a lot of drugs, I didn't get any help. I didn't actually know he was on a lot of drugs until quite late in, well before he died really. So I didn't understand

anything about it and I actually think that people need to understand what it's all about (Paula, Mentor).

As a result she decided to bridge that gap:

We're setting up a 'concerned others' group along at Women's Centre, I think because of people that are coming in to mentoring who have got the other side of it, been a concerned other, it does help, it's all connected (Paula, Mentor).

Paula's lived experience of isolation throughout her personal loss motivates her to take constructive action, she then becomes an agent of change because her suggestion is adopted by the project. Similarly, Lol, a mentoring coordinator, is concerned about a lack of focus on the relationship between local authority care and prison. As an ex-offender and care leaver himself this issue has particular resonance. Lol facilitates consultation groups with offenders in community and prison settings, to explore what improvements they would like to see to the care and justice systems and to examine how mentoring may assist with these aims. Mentoring, therefore, becomes a tool for this subgroup of offenders to examine pertinent patterns in their own lives, patterns which may have been missed using an individual deficit approach to rehabilitation. However, Lol did not describe the same level of success as Paula:

When we speak to offender supervisors we don't seem to be able to develop a relationship . . . because they're so under the cosh, with fifty cases at the side of their desks, having to work their way through all of that, they're not giving their time to a conversation about that particular experience in care and how that all might fit in (Lol, Mentoring Coordinator).

Lol expresses frustration that his knowledge, and that of his peers, is not heard because they are not allowed into the conversation. Their user voice cannot compete with the demands of a heavy caseload, which necessarily positions service users as passive cases to be juggled, rather than active agents to be engaged. Despite different short-term outcomes, however, Paula and Lol's personal experiences of the criminal justice system acted as their motivation for bridging perceived gaps.

Changing Perceptions

One of the interesting forms of change that did happen as mentors attempted to reshape services, however, was that they often unwittingly came to shape people's perceptions.

Keisha, for example, described what happened when she was offered a business advisor to support her developing mentoring business:

My business advisor, she's a lovely woman. Before she met us she'd never been in contact with 'people like myself' . . . She loves us to death and once she got to know us, she goes: 'Do you know what? You have changed my whole view . . . I was so negative'. She used to manage this company where they used to recruit and you know what she used to tell the people? 'Anyone with records: to the side!' (Keisha, Mentor).

Something similar happened at Project Peer, which is managed by two coordinators with long criminal histories, who are now well embedded within a probation office. They share their office with a drugs service and a range of probation staff, who value their presence:

We all socialise, they're just colleagues, on the same level as we are. They came to my wedding . . . The offenders see our friendship and it's really pro-social, says a lot, they're not stuck in that label forever (Probation employee attached to Project 'Peer').

Their manager, however, explained how such perceptions were not always dominant. She described numerous battles in advocating for ex-offenders to become colleagues. Partners in the police, prisons, and probation had reservations about the trustworthiness of ex-offender staff and the ethics of their having access to clients' personal information. This manager persisted in her commitment to the value of these individuals, however, and the service became something of a flagship in successfully embedding peer led practice. Not only are the coordinators of the mentoring scheme ex-offenders but also two paid probation service officers are also graduates of the scheme. As a probation team they regard their work as desistance in action, illustrating the positive potential of people with criminal histories. The manager was also keen to point out added value for the paid staff who are tasked with instilling hope in persisters that they have the power to change. In her words, there has been a "change in the office, you can see hope in the workers eyes."

The presence of ex-offenders in proactive mentoring roles may then have the potential to affect how people with convictions are perceived more broadly, to offer a lived challenge to accepted stereotypes. This is important because the dominant discourse in relation to ex-offenders is so negative: "Criminals are overwhelmingly portrayed unsympathetically . . . in both fiction and news" (Reiner, Livingstone, & Allen, 2000, pp. 117–118). Peer mentors, in

contrast, offer the public a personal connection, a direct challenge to this broader discursive othering. The importance of this lived presence, this visibility has been acknowledged elsewhere. In the field of mental health, for example, Rufus May, a clinical psychologist and former patient, argues “Mental health workers. . . don’t see the ones like me who got away. Therefore they have very little concept of recovery from mental health problems” (cited in Basset & Repper, 2005, pp. 16–17). In the addiction field, it is argued that recovery champions “help people to believe that recovery is not only possible but desirable. I refer to both people who provide and people who receive treatment and support services” (Kidd, 2011, p. 174). Visibility may therefore be crucial to people believing in or understanding a concept of change—be it providers or users of services. This reveals another potential of peer mentoring. While statutory probation caseloads are full with offenders and their risk scores, and public news stories are laden with images of the criminal, rarely do we see, in either context, the ones who have desisted. Peer mentoring forges a space for desisters to become visible. Mentors constitute the possibility of desistance for mentees, professionals, and the public alike. This aspect of change was unexpected and has obvious benefits in terms of fostering contexts conducive to sustained desistance.

The Futility of Working With “Big Boys”

While the shifts in perspective outlined earlier come to undermine some of the entrenched discursive othering experienced by offenders, such categorization is not always contested. Indeed another surprising feature of peer mentoring was mentors who invested in their own categorizations of offenders:

In prison, you . . . get the ones that just get bullied constantly, you get the ones that I classed myself as, just the middle ground . . . And then you get the ones who are dead confident . . . So you have three sets and I think it’s the same in the community (Steve, Mentor and previously a Mentee).

Having established this hierarchy, Steve characterizes those at the “top”:

One of my best mates, he’s doing nine and a half years now because he was the money man. He thrived on selling drugs and the fast cars and the nice women. People like that . . . it’ll just be virtually impossible to sort their lives out . . . Within two weeks of getting out he can have an M5 [sports car], he’ll have a gorgeous woman on his arm, he’ll have loads of money (Steve, Mentor and previously a Mentee).

This narrative has an interesting effect. Steve's money man embodies "hegemonic masculinity . . . a cultural ideal or aspiration that only limited numbers of men can practise" (Connell&Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 849 cited in Hearn, 2012). As a result, Steve conceives that his own status is lacking in the eyes of former associates. He not only establishes the character of the big boys, personalities who personify hypermasculine (Courtenay & Sabo, 2001), capitalist values, but also he outlines what he sees as the futility of trying to intervene with at this level:

People like that shouldn't be [mentored] because when they're big boys . . . they don't benefit from people like us . . . One lad was put on [mentoring] and he was a little bit, not intimidating . . . from my past, I knew him . . . I think I actually felt a little bit uncomfortable, because I didn't think I could offer him . . . I hated it that I kept saying: 'I'm not trying to tell you what to do' I kept apologizing . . . because I knew in his head he was thinking: 'what are you doing in here? I'm too engrossed'

Steve valorizes the big boys status, elevating them not just above other criminals, but also subtly above mentors and probation staff. As a result, he is intimidated, ambivalent in, and discomforted by, his own position. Moreover, he feels he has nothing to offer as a mentor, these beliefs inform his behavior and he apologizes for even trying to intervene. Steve perceives that it is futile to intervene with a man he deems such a socially successful criminal. This affects not only how he feels about himself in his role, but also how he practices:

It's pointless . . . he's involved in all the guns and we shouldn't be working with people like that. I just thought: I'm wasting my breath here. It's nothing we can do, so there is this hierarchy that our service just can't touch them (Steve, Mentor and previously a Mentee).

On a practical level, Steve's views could be seen as evidence of a poor matching of mentor and mentee, but they also challenge the assumption that shared histories will lead to constructive outcomes. Steve's reflections have real significance for how—and with whom—mentoring aims to affect change. Change here is not simply about a shift from criminal to noncriminal, about instilling a desire for such change and rendering it manageable, but rather it has regard for the social standing of the potential changer. When the mentee is of a perceived higher social standing than the mentor, the practice is problematized. Steve does not describe an influential, exemplary social role, which empowers him, but he describes feeling incapacitated, uncomfortable, and apologetic. The features with which Steve

characterizes big boys are also of interest in terms of conceptualizing change. It is cars, gorgeous women, money, guns, connections, and power that indicate to Steve these mentees are untouchable. The accepted value of such ideals has been highlighted in work on masculine criminal cultures. Dailey (2001, p. 259), for example, argues that inmate stories were typically about “fast women, drugs and expensive cars. They always focused on the ‘fast life’.” What we know less about however is the impact of such hyper masculine ideals upon volunteer mentors who have left crime behind. For Steve, while desistance is desirable, it struggles to compete with a wealthy, masculine lifestyle, even if this is criminally supported. This is perhaps no surprise. Steve’s big boy embodies the Western hegemonic ideal of manhood; he is independent, wealthy, and powerful, and he has means of aggression and represents virulent heterosexuality. Steve is right to question whether going straight will compensate for the wealth and status of success; not just in criminal terms but also in terms of the dominant patriarchal, capitalist ideology. This tension was also recognized by Keisha:

I know people that are happy committing crime. They tell me: ‘Oh I couldn’t do what you do [mentoring]. Oh no love’ . . . They’re going to Mexico every week, they’re having brilliant holidays, they own their own house (Keisha, Mentor).

These narratives point to the cost of changing. They suggest that material and social success can maintain criminality as readily as they can promote conformity. Having something to lose adds a further barrier to contemplating change. Mentees with wealth and status need to accept significant material losses in addition to the existential challenges outlined earlier. Moreover, a mentee who has wealth and status can present as a barrier to mentors even trying.

Conclusion

In an increasingly marketized criminal justice system, peer mentoring by people with convictions has been conceptualized as a functional vehicle for supporting personal change. Change itself has largely been constructed as a quantifiable functional goal, be it reduced reoffending, delinquency, or drug use (Boyce et al., 2009; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2007; The Social Innovation Partnership, 2012; Tolan et al., 2008). Such conceptions are increasingly necessary given the move to only pay rehabilitation providers “in full for real reductions in reoffending” (Ministry of Justice, 2013). Nonetheless, a focus on outcomes can divert attention from some of the richer dynamics and tensions within peer mentoring, including the subtle interpersonal processes which make change appear more manageable, and the terror often experienced when moving away from crime. This study illustrates some of the micro

level strengths “residing in peer support networks” (Weaver, 2012, p. 407), not least the reassurance that change can be managed and that alternative futures are possible. It also contends that a fear of what changing entails can accompany desistance as much as readily as the fear of not making a change (Farrall & Calverley, 2006; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009). Change is presented here as a fundamental challenge, a leap into the unknown, where familiar supports are absent. In response, peer mentors often provide a sense of ontological security—a tethering to the known—as mentees describe experiences of mutual recognition and of some level of parity with their mentors. Despite these clear interpersonal reassurances, which mitigate the terror of making life changes, there are also clear warnings that dominant constructions of peer mentoring are problematic. To conceive of mentoring in terms of “old lags stopping the new ones” (Grayling, 2012) conceals the complexity of the practice. First, respondents here present change in terms of personal improvement, but also point to changes external to themselves, to the need for transformations in public perceptions and the practices of rehabilitation services. Second, change for these speakers, whether individual or structural, is constructed as a site of struggle. Mentors and mentees reveal struggles between known habits and unknown futures; struggles between wanting to accept help and seeing authority as dangerous. Struggles can also be traced between mentors using their experiences to reimagine and improve existing services and having these experiences ignored, between changing the perceptions of others and having to live and practice within dominant discursive realities. What features throughout all of these struggles are points of crisis. Mentees describe lives blighted by addiction, violence, and suffering, blights which continue to feature after they have made a decision to change. They also describe helping contexts where they feel embattled, and significant losses that can accompany a decision to leave crime behind, be they losses of pleasure, supports, or known lifestyles. Mentors often have a unique understanding of these experiences and forfeitures, yet they are not always able to compensate for them, nor mitigate them through the offered suggestion to go straight. While peer mentoring has much to offer to people making efforts to desist from crime, therefore, the multifaceted dynamics within these relationships should not be overlooked, nor should the practice be minimized as an uncomplicated, low-cost panacea.

Acknowledgments

The author thanks those who participated in this research and from those who I have learned so much. I am also grateful to my PhD supervisors: Mary Corcoran and Ronnie Lippens who have helped to shape my ideas.

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