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Why Our Beliefs Matter in Offender Management

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I am very pleased when the topic 'Throughcare — Who Cares? Resettlement in the Real World' was announced as the focus of this year's Perrie Lecture. This is a symbolic occasion taking place at a crucial, transitional moment for both NOMS and the Government more widely. So, I think this choice of topic sends an important message about the values of the people behind the Perrie Lecture Series and in NOMS more widely. These values mean a lot to me and are going to be the subject of my talk today. That is, of the 'Throughcare — Who Cares?' title, my remarks will focus more on the issue of 'Who cares?' even though my previous research has focused more on 'throughcare' or reintegration. I am, as most of you will know, a big believer in reintegration, but, more recently I've become a believer in beliefs about reintegration or what I call 'belief in redeemability'.

First, allow me a brief aside on this choice of language: You will find I use the words 'redeem' and 'redemption' throughout my remarks and in my research in general. Some people don't like these terms because they think the words have religious connotations. None are intended. The term 'redemption' is perfectly meaningful in a secular context and that is how I am employing it. My mortgage statement that arrives every month lists at the bottom of it a 'Cost of Redemption'. Now, the figure on there is not the price of my soul (that could be bought a great deal cheaper, I can assure you). The 'cost of redemption' is the amount required to pay off my debt to the bank. Individuals who commit crimes have accrued similar debts to society and my research has focused on how they are able to 'make good' on these. Like the relationship with my bank, this process is a two-way street. The person needs to change his or her behaviours, make efforts to atone for one's wrongdoing, but the rest of us (especially those working in the criminal justice system) also play a crucial role acting in the role of forgiver.

Yes, Christian teachings have a good deal to say about this process, but so do other religions. This does not make the concept 'religious', though. Christian teachings also have a great deal to say about sin, punishment, and retribution (an 'eye for an eye' and all that). So, by this logic, as prison and probation professionals, you are all in the religion business yourselves. Redemption plays a key role in most religions because it is a crucial concept for a functioning society. One of my key arguments (and the reason I am using this word) is that secular society would be mad to abandon the idea. If we are going to have secular sin and secular punishment, we surely also need secular ways of redeeming oneself.

This is why I have become interested in exploring this notion of 'belief in redeemability'. To help understand what I mean by this concept, I'd like to ask you all your views on three statements in particular:

(A) Most offenders can go on to lead productive lives with help and hard work.

(B) Even the worst offenders can grow out of criminal behaviour.

(C) Most offenders really have little hope of changing for the better.

Along with my colleague Anna King, I asked those questions to around 1000 British householders in 2005.[1] Here's what they said: 86 per cent agreed with statement A; 77 per cent agreed with statement B; and 68 per cent disagreed with C. In other words, belief in redeemability appears to be alive and well among members of the British public — or this sample of it at least.[2] That said, these beliefs are hardly rock solid. The modal response for the first two items above in our sample was 'slightly agree' as opposed to 'agree' or 'strongly agree'.

What is important, however, is that our statistical analysis found that how strong a person's 'belief in redeemability' was (i.e. how they scored on the items above and the other items making up our 'belief in redeemability' scale) was a very strong predictor of attitudes about a variety of criminal justice issues,

1. Maruna, S. & King, A. (2009). 'Once a Criminal, Always a Criminal?: 'Redeemability' and the Psychology of Punitive Public Attitudes.' *European Journal of Criminal Policy and Research*, 15, 7-24.
2. Although not a representative sample, our sample was hardly an unusually liberal one. Over half of respondents described themselves as politically conservative, and over half said they supported resurrecting the death penalty in the United Kingdom for serious crimes.

especially support for punitive prison policies. The more respondents believed in redeemability in our research, the less likely they were to want to see sentences lengthened and harsher treatment introduced into the prison system. Redeemability beliefs probably have even more important implications for those of us working in the world of prisons and probation. That is, how the people in this room answer those three questions above, may have a tangible impact on recidivism rates in the UK.

Two Views about Intelligence

I will make this case in a moment, but first let me provide a parallel example from entirely outside criminology, from the field of educational psychology. Education researchers suggest that both children and adults tend to hold one of two implicit theories of intelligence: 'entity' theories or 'incremental' theories of intelligence[3]. Lay **entity** theorists believe that intelligence is basically fixed and unmalleable. Some people are just smarter, and although others can learn new things or study very hard, they will never be as smart as those born/made that way. This is a common belief in Western societies, especially in the United States, where we are all desperate to have our children diagnosed as 'gifted' before they are even able to crawl. On the other hand, lay **incremental** theorists believe intelligence is modifiable and believe that one can get smarter through study and exercising one's brain. This is more common in Eastern cultures, like Japan. But in all cultures, some people lean more toward one side or the other.

Now, which one is right? In fact, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' theory of intelligence. Of course, there is evidence of the stability of IQ, the genetics behind such differences. We know that childhood IQ predicts a great number of outcomes later in life and so forth. Yet, there is also considerable and growing evidence for the other side — the notion that real success has more to do with hard work and elbow grease than so-called 'genius.' Increasingly, intelligence researchers are turning away from cherished concepts of 'genius' and 'giftedness' as research has shown that plain, old fashioned effort (e.g., studying, tutoring) can even increase test scores meant to measure natural 'aptitude'[4].

So, if the empirical case is still undecided, what about a normative one? That is, if you accept both of these as mythological concepts in some ways (the reality is surely a little of both), which one is the 'better' organizing concept to animate our education systems, cultural myths? This is a normative question, but again, the empirical research is useful in reaching a decision. After all, research has found that these implicit theories have highly predictable impacts on social behaviors. For instance, people who ascribe to incremental theories of intelligence are more inclined toward and successful at challenging intellectual tasks. They study harder (because they see a point to it) and they end up doing better at school and in the workplace.

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Imagine you fail a maths test. If you have been taught to accept entity theory, you might see this failure as evidence that you are just no good at maths — you're not a maths person. So why should you study hard in the future? After all, you will never be any good at it? Hey, presto, self-fulfilling prophecy. But, in an incremental culture, a failure means you need to work harder next time. In one experimental test of this theory, a group of college freshmen were told that it was normal that grades would improve from their first to second year in University. They didn't tell this to the control group. A year later, the experimental group did perform better than the controls. They didn't get as discouraged and held on to hope that they could succeed[5]. Likewise, Asian students who tend to attribute success in school and in life to hard work, appear to work much harder than do North American students, who typically attribute success to their natural abilities, intelligence or aptitude[6].

Thus, our beliefs in our own abilities to improve do not seem to be hardwired in any way — they are strongly shaped by the messages we receive from others — teachers, experts, peers. Literally hundreds of different studies have found confirmation for the idea that one person's expectations for the behavior of another can actually impact the other person's behavior.

3. Dweck, C. S., & Leggett, E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95(2), 256-273.
4. Gladwell, M. (2002). The talent myth. *The New Yorker*, 22, 28-33.
5. Linville, P. W. (1982). Improving the academic performance of college freshmen: Attribution therapy revisited. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 42, 367-376.
6. Dweck, C. S., Chiu, C., & Hong, Y. (1995). Implicit theories and their role in judgments and reactions: A word from two perspectives. *Psychological Inquiry*, 6(4), 267-285.

The most famous example of this is described in the book *Pygmalion in the Classroom*[7]. Rosenthal and Jacobson found that teacher expectancies of student performance were strongly predictive of student performance on standardized tests, and that manipulating these educator biases and beliefs could lead to substantial improvements in student outcomes. Similar so-called 'Pygmalion Effects' or expectancy-linked outcomes have been found in courtroom studies, business schools, nursing homes, and numerous different workplaces[8]. Meta-analyses of studies conducted both inside and outside the research laboratory suggest an average effect size or correlation (r) of over .30 in studies of interpersonal expectancy effects[9].

Are there dangers to inculcating children with incremental theory? Sure. It puts a lot more pressure on individuals to work hard. Whereas the kid who fails a test in an entity culture can kick back with some satisfaction and say hey 'It's not my fault I was born this way,' in an incremental culture, there is always pressure on you to do better. And this puts a lot of pressure on kids. Ji writes: 'If a Chinese child scored 98 out of 100 on a test, the Chinese parent would likely respond, 'How come you lost two points? You need to study harder and score higher next time."

There's another big risk here, that might be the more important one: If you believe intelligence is dynamic, then not only can 'stupid' people get smarter, but smart people can presumably get 'more stupider' too. This is a little experiment my gifted friends and I tried out at university, by basically getting stoned and watching bad TV all day, and I can testify to its legitimacy. For some, this dynamic nature of intelligence is an awfully scary thought to comtemplate. Still, I think this is a small price to pay for the advantages that the research literature (again: the empirical research literature) tells us about belief in incremental theory for equality, democracy, fairness. Remember, I am not necessarily arguing that incremental theory is right (or wrong) empirically, but instead that promoting the theory produces empirically better results, normatively speaking.

The fact is, criminologists know a great deal about early childhood risk factors — including genetic and prenatal risk factors — that substantially raise the possibility of someone getting involved in drugs and crime.

Two Views about Criminality

Now, why am I devoting so much attention to education research in a talk about throughcare? Obviously, I think a parallel dichotomy can be found in regard to criminal behaviour. Drawing on the work of David Garland and others, I argue that there are two primary cultural scripts available in regards to wrongdoing:

- ❐ *Moral Essentialism (Entity theory, lay dispositionalism, 'Criminology of the Other'* [10]*)*

The idea here is that criminal behaviour is due to fixed, unalterable dispositions, traits, inner character. Criminal behaviour is a symptom of who a person really is, deep down, and always will be.

- ❐ *Moral Redeemability (Incremental theory, lay situationalism, 'Criminology of the Self')*

Here, criminal behaviour is separated from the permanent nature or character of the person. Criminality is not 'fixed' in a person, the individual can fundamentally change and 'make good' for what they have done in the past.

Again, remember, I'm not making an empirical argument in favour of one of these two, very different models of understanding criminality. Just like with intelligence research, criminology has amassed considerable evidence on both sides of this coin. Indeed, one of the best known theories of crime seeks to account for both patterns in empirical data on crime in the life course[11]. The fact is, criminologists know a great deal about early childhood risk factors — including genetic and prenatal risk factors — that substantially raise the possibility of someone getting involved in drugs and crime. Further, we know there are these largely stable personality characteristics, like low self-control or some of the characteristics associated with 'psychopathy', that appear to be deeply implicated in

7. Rosenthal, R. and Jacobson, L. (1992) *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. New York: Irvington.
8. Rosenthal, R. (2002) 'Covert communication in classrooms, clinics, courtrooms, and cubicles', *American Psychologist*, 57: 839-49.
9. Kierein, N.M. and Gold, M.A. (2000) 'Pygmalion in work organizations: A meta-analysis', *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 21: 913-28.
10. Garland, D. (2001). *The culture of control*. Chicago: University of Chicago.
11. Moffitt, T.E. (1993), 'Adolescence-Limited and Life-Course-Persistent Antisocial Behavior: A Developmental Taxonomy', *Psychological Review*, 100, 674-701.

criminality and are not thought to be easily modified over time. At the same time, we know that there is a large body of research evidence that people can change lives of persistent offending. Indeed, for any of you who have heard of my work, you will know this is the research I have spent much of the past decade doing: studying the process of 'desistance from crime'[12]. In fact, it is estimated that around 85 percent of those people we call 'criminals', even 'career criminals', eventually desist from crime according to longitudinal research[13].

My argument today is different, though. My argument is that (like with intelligence), regardless of the evidence in favour of persistence or desistance in crime, we (as a society, but especially a justice system) should believe or at least try to believe in a moral redeemability theory — not just because it is right, empirically, but because doing so is good for society. Again, this is a normative argument (an argument about what is right or wrong), but I make it based on the empirical, research literature — not the empirical evidence for the two theories, but rather evidence regarding the consequences that *adherence* to one theory or the other might likely have for society (and especially for 'offender management').

Desisting from crime is difficult and requires considerable self-belief. If a person feels like everyone is against them and that they don't have a chance in life, well, they probably don't.

Like with intelligence, there's a huge body of social psychology evidence on the consequences of stability beliefs with moral statuses that can support this argument. Research shows that those who perceive their ascribed status to be permanent (be it a label such as 'alcoholic', 'mentally ill', 'paedophile', etc.) are most likely to slip into hopelessness, passivity, and retreatism. They are the least likely to make efforts to change themselves for the obvious reason that they do not think such change is possible[14]. Moreover, we know that people's beliefs on such issues are strongly influenced by those around them.

Of course, we know all about this story in criminology. We call this labelling theory and the idea is well known — young people who are stigmatized into thinking they are no good, turn out to fulfil this prophecy. Labelling theory fell out of favour politically in the 1980s, but its redemption — begun by prominent criminologists like John Braithwaite[15] and Sampson and Laub[16] — has truly come full circle with a recent, award-winning article in the prestigious journal *Criminology*[17]. Ted Chiricos and colleagues followed the outcomes of 95,919 men and women who were either adjudicated or had an adjudication withheld in the state of Florida, and found that those who were formally labelled were significantly more likely to recidivate within two years than those who were not. Similar findings have repeatedly emerged in longitudinal cohort studies from Farrington's Cambridge Study[18] to Bernburg's recent work with the Rochester cohort[19] to Burnett and LeBel's important longitudinal work on ex-prisoners[20]. Desisting from crime is difficult and requires considerable self-belief. If a person feels like everyone is against them and that they don't have a chance in life, well, they probably don't.

Far less attention has been given to the other side of this equation, but presumably if one can internalise a moral essentialism script through a process of stigma and self-labelling, then presumably one can also be taught to believe in one's own redeemability. My colleagues and I have called this prosocial labelling process a 'Pygmalion effect' in the rehabilitation process[21]. The idea is that if we show individuals that we believe they can change, they may begin to believe this themselves.

12. Maruna, S. (2001). *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association Books.
13. Blumstein, A., & Cohen, J. (1987). Characterizing criminal careers. *Science*, 237, 985-991.
14. LeBel, T.P. (2008). Perceptions of and responses to stigma. *Sociology Compass*, 2: 409-32.
15. Braithwaite, J. (1989). *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
16. Sampson, R. J. and Laub, J. (1997). A life-course theory of cumulative disadvantage and the stability of delinquency. In Thornberry, T. (ed) D*evelopmental Theories of Crime And Delinquency*, Transaction Press, New Brunswick.
17. Chiricos, T., Barrick, K. and Bales, W. (2007) 'The labelling of convicted felons and its consequences for recidivism', *Criminology*, 45(3): 547-81.
18. Farrington, D.P. (1977) 'The effects of public labelling', *British Journal of Criminology*, 17: 112-25.
19. Bernburg, J.G., Krohn, M.D. and Rivera, C.J. (2006) 'Official labelling, criminal embeddedness, and subsequent delinquency: A longitudinal test of labelling theory', *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 43(1): 67-88.
20. LeBel, T.P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S. and Bushway, S. (2008) 'The 'chicken and egg' of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime', *European Journal of Criminology*, 5(2): 130-58.
21. Maruna, S., LeBel, T., Mitchel, N. and Naples, M. (2004). Pygmalion in the Reintegration Process: Desistance from Crime Through the Looking Glass. *Psychology, Crime and Law*, 10 (3), 271-281.

Of course, this is more difficult than it sounds. Many of the behaviours that we in the criminal justice system think of as 'helping' individuals actually end up stigmatizing them or reinforcing their social and psychological deficits by treating them as passive recipients of some expert treatment. There is a difference, therefore, between beliefs in redeemability and support for rehabilitation. One can support a rehabilitative regime without believing in redeemability.

Again, there is a useful parallel in education: both entity theorists and incrementalists believe in the value of education. The difference is that whereas incrementalists support schooling because they believe that low achievers can learn to be high achievers through education, entity theorists mostly support education as a sort of sifting process, separating the wheat from the chaff, determining which students have the natural aptitude for leadership and which students are destined to lesser things. Schools are good, then, at testing individuals' capabilities, rather than actually teaching them things.

A similar essentialist mindset can be found in some strands of offender management where the focus is on risk assessment rather than risk reduction. Offender management becomes a process of sorting individuals into low-risk and high-risk, amenables and non-amenables, those that will succeed and those who won't. The danger is that by assigning groups of the population to the category of irredeemable, we may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy that none of us wants to live out when those individuals are released from custody.

. . . in a society without the possibility of redemption, the 'past dominates the present and the future [and] every failure results in guilt from which there is no exit'.

Conclusions

Like with incremental models of intelligence, a societal belief in moral redeemability is necessary 'because there has to be a way to restore people to good standing so that they'll be motivated to return to cooperation with all of the other [law-abiding members] in the population'[22]. If there is no chance at forgiveness, then there is no reason for those who have offended to ever change their ways. Instead, in a society without the possibility of redemption, the 'past dominates the present and the future [and] every failure results in guilt from which there is no exit'[23]. Hannah Arendt talks about this as the 'burden of irreversibility' in *The Human Condition*:

> *Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victim of its consequences forever, not unlike the sorcerer's apprentice who lacked the magic formula to break the spell*[24].

The belief in redeemability may not be a magic formula, but it can help to break habituated patterns or mindsets that prisoners find themselves in, and in this way it can reduce recidivism by promoting cultures or at least subcultures of desistance even within a prison.

Yet, the power of redeemability goes beyond this. Redemption beliefs are also good for society in less tangible ways. In 'Redemption and Politics,' Robert Smith writes:

> *Unlike punishment, which mobilizes our sense of virtue and sets us apart from the transgressor, forgiveness arouses in us, and depends upon, a sense of shared weakness. We are moved to forgive out of our own need to be forgiven for what we have done in the past and what we may do in the future. Forgiveness, unlike punishment, moreover, depends upon a life of common values and concerns*[25].

Redemption brings us together as a society in a way that punishment and exclusion can't. Durkheim taught us that punishment was not first and foremost for the prisoner, it was for us. Whether the punishment deterred crime or reformed prisoners was secondary to the effects that punishing others had on

22. McCullough, M. E. (2008). *Beyond revenge: The evolution of the forgiveness instinct* New York: Jossey-Bass, p. 106.
23. Smith, R. W. (1971). Redemption and politics. *Political Science Quarterly*, 86(2), 205-231, p. 206.
24. Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition* Chicago: University of Chicago, p. 213.
25. Smith, 1971, p. 219.

wider society. The same is true with redemption, as John Braithwaite has argued in his revision of Durkheim's thesis. Reintegration isn't just for 'them', it is for 'us', too. A society that forgives well — and by that I don't mean easily, but rather carefully, purposefully, setting out reachable targets for what individuals need to do to redeem themselves and holding out hope that every person can —is a 'good' society. It is also a safer society.