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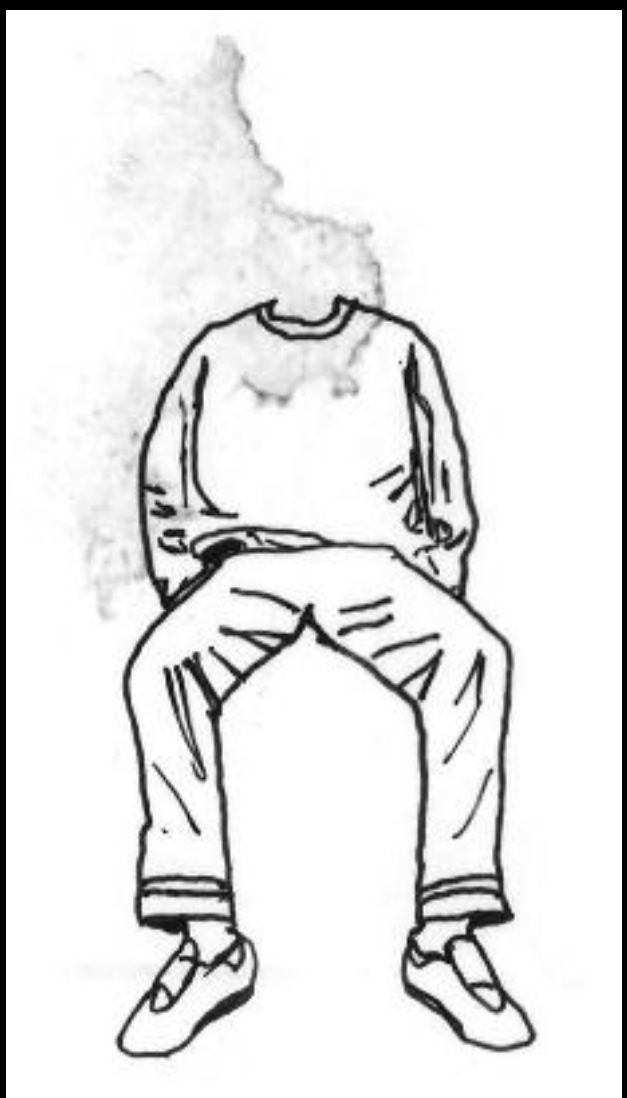

Special Edition

The Prison and the Public

Civic re-engagements amongst former prisoners

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Introduction

Peer mentoring by people with convictions is very much 'in vogue'. There is a tangible appeal to the concept of reformed offenders taking a proactive role in the rehabilitation of others, which fits well with current criminological theories of desistance and indeed with political plans for a 'rehabilitation revolution'. Whilst there is optimism for this approach, however, and indeed some strong practice examples, there are equally some tangible barriers to peer mentoring in the criminal justice system, which reflect a broader tension between punitive and rehabilitative ideals. Mentors and mentees often refer to difficulties in making the transition from prisoner to member of the public, because they feel viewed in terms of their risk defined past, rather than their self-defined present. They also describe barriers to volunteering as peer mentors, and settings where they are allowed to work, but with heavier restrictions than other civic volunteers. Finally however they speak in hopeful terms about the uniqueness of the prisoner experience. Specifically how it may present a privileged form of knowledge, with the potential to encourage autonomy and change in others. Drawing upon data from my PhD project, which is an ethnographic study of 'peer mentoring' by people with convictions this article will explore these three points of dialogue. Data has been collected through interviews with mentors and mentees, direct observations of practice and documentary analysis.

From Prisoner to Member of the Public

The difficulties experienced in making the transition from 'prisoner' to 'member of the public' are well documented, not least because 'having a criminal record represents a substantial barrier to many types of legal employment'.[1] Indeed many of the respondents to this study perceived that a criminal conviction renders you unemployable:

> *I'm not hearing anything, all applications ask if you have convictions, I put: 'will discuss in interview', but I think they see that and just throw it away.* (Jen, Mentee, 2012)

> *It is always hanging over you, there's nothing I can do about it… [The form asks]: 'Have you got a criminal record?'… 'Yes, to be discussed at interview' you don't get any further because they think 'oh well, she's a criminal isn't she'.* (Gina, Mentee, 2012)

> *My sentence was eight years ago now and still no one will employ me.* (Toni, Mentor, 2012)

Whilst advocates of punishment and deterrence may argue that such informal sanctions are deserved consequences of criminal choices, they nonetheless represent a clear barrier to civic reengagement. Furthermore, the difficulties experienced are not restricted to paid employment:

> *On the [college] course I told this woman [about my conviction] and she just looked at me like she'd just stepped in me and it was a horrible feeling.* (Eve, Mentee, 2012)

> *I told the head person [of the charity] I've got a conviction, they were fine, but I'm sick of tip toeing round people so I told [my colleagues] and that's when the shit hit the fan, they asked me to stand down.* (Cat, Mentor, 2012)

> *I work for a hospice as well and I didn't want to tell them [that I'm a peer mentor] I think they have this impression that all the really bad criminals get together and… it's just not like that.* (Janet, Mentor, 2013)

These three women were all engaged heavily in charitable voluntary work, yet here too, all had experienced forms of exclusion or fear of exclusion. There was also evidence of barriers when volunteers were seeking formal training for their work:

1. Visher, C.A., Winterfield, L. and Coggeshall, M.B. (2005) Ex-offender employment programs and recidivism: A meta-analysis. Journal of Experimental Criminology, 1(3), pp. 295-316: p.296.

Four of our women were selected and signed up for the local college's Health and Social Care course, but after being reassured they wouldn't have to do it [the standard criminal history check] as they were all off site, they backtracked and all applications with a criminal record are now on hold (Mentoring Coordinator, 2013)

Despite the barriers experienced and perceived here however, there remains a strong idealist policy discourse that prisoners can be reintegrated into the public fold once they have repaid their debt to society. There is potentially a fracture occurring therefore between our stated rehabilitation ideals and personal realities. Nowhere is this more apparent than if we juxtapose the Justice Minister's description of peer mentoring with that of a reformed offender coordinating one such project:

When someone leaves prison, I want them already to have a mentor in place to help them get their lives back together… Often it will be the former offender gone straight who is best placed to steer the young prisoner back onto the straight and narrow — the former gang member best placed to prevent younger members from rushing straight back to re-join the gang on the streets. There are some really good examples out there of organisations making good use of the old lags in stopping the new ones. (Chris Grayling, Justice Minister)[2]

People generally think if you are in prison you are an offender, if you are in the community on license you are an ex-offender, I think you actually become an ex-offender once you have demonstrated that you have moved away from offending and if you are going to do good work in custody and then come out and do good work in the community you have to be given opportunities. To then deny opportunities like this to people who have got four years of a license to serve is to say you are lost for the next four years in the community, no matter how much preparation you have done, when you come through the gate you are at the wall. (Mentoring Coordinator, 2013)

For Grayling then, interveners are viewed to have power and agency, it's in their hands to 'steer, prevent and stop' the criminal actions of their peers. In practice however, labels are imposed upon people, which result in powerful restrictions. Peer mentors are defined in relation to their past harms and denied (even restorative) opportunities accordingly. The resulting language is of 'denial', 'loss' and being 'at the wall', with power and agency not so apparent.

The following account further illustrates limitations upon full civic engagement, albeit for different reasons. 'Olivia', like many women with criminal convictions, has experienced controlling violence and exploitation within an intimate relationship. As a result she has debilitating emotional health needs and is dependent on sickness benefit, she also volunteers as a peer mentor on a near full time basis. She simultaneously therefore embodies the *civic volunteer* essential to 'big society' ideals, AND the *economic dependant* caricatured as the antithesis to these; a drain on economic ideals. Perhaps unsurprisingly it is her identity as a 'drain' that she feels most keenly:

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I volunteer Monday to Friday, I do it for the love of it, but the Job Centres don't see it like that and the government don't see it like that, they see me as going to work in a shop, even though my past [of violent public attacks by her ex-partner]… they say well 'we'll put you in a shop' now as soon as one person knows where I work everyone will know… the Job Centre are trying to make me, but my doctor gives me a sick note every four weeks because he will not put me in that situation, but the likes of government are like 'you can do it, if you can do voluntary work, you can do this', but I can pick and choose, on my bad days I don't come in… I'll have to have calm tablets to stop me from falling over… because I panic and I think I'm going to see him, and when I see him he'll see that I'm with [my partner] and smiling, and he'll just walk up and knock me out, he's done it plenty of times in the middle of town and I think I can't do that, so

2. Grayling, C (2012) 'Rehabilitation Revolution' speech, 20th November 2012, available in full at: http://www.justice.gov.uk/news/speeches/chris-grayling/speech-to-the-centre-of-social-justice

I won't put myself in that position, but the government don't see it like that, it's just like: 'get over it, it's been nearly 3 years now, you should be well over it.' (Olivia, Mentor, 2012)

Whilst policy ideals for ex-prisoner rehabilitation will require an 'army of volunteers to do it properly'[3] there is perhaps an underestimation of the complex needs some of these volunteers will have, and some of the significant challenges they face. If there were recognition of and provision for these needs however, the rewards are likely to be immeasurable. Olivia is undertaking an NVQ level 3 in Information, Advice and Guidance having successfully completed level 2 with her project's help. She has also accomplished a sign language qualification and puts these skills to use as a peer mentor, a role she is described as extremely skilled at.

The voluntary contributions of many interviewees then, despite meeting civic — or indeed 'big society' — ideals, did not always overcome the stigma of being labelled an 'offender'. Moreover they often did not appear to meet more dominant economic ideals, such as the demand to be in salaried forms of employment.

Barriers to volunteering

The clash between rehabilitative ideals and personal realities in the spaces of peer mentoring can also be traced in transition from prison work. Professionals, ministers and researchers, for example, have all argued that reintegration efforts ideally require input pre and post release from prison:

[W]e recognise 'reintegration' as a process that starts at the point of confinement, preparing the prisoner for success after release, and continuing for some time afterwards.[4]

There are roles for offenders acting as mentors… They can be particularly effective during transition from prison to outside world.[5]

The One to One model ideally involves a period of regular contact between young person and Mentor prior to their release from custody to allow time to get to know one another and prepare for return to the community.[6]

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Yet this 'through the gate' work is proving to be a difficult basic to master, if not through a want of trying, as illustrated by this exchange between a volunteer and her manager:

Mentor: I want to go into the prisons, do an action plan, say I'll be here if you need anything, get back on your feet and get you away from the people who are going to draw you back in.

Manager: I wish we could, but even the staff have struggled to get into the prison. We did their security training but couldn't pin them down to a planning meeting, and that was the external partner's link person. (Project B, 2013)

Security has also proved to be a barrier for 'Lol', a paid mentoring coordinator working for a national charity:

My offences are not 2 weeks old, my offences are many, many, many years old and principally as a young offender by the way and related to coming through the care system… The prison was interested in supporting us… but could not find practitioners to support the 'through the gate' mechanism… we can't keep meeting through

3. Harry Fletcher of the National Association of Probation Officers, quoted in BBC news article 'Prison gates mentor plan for released inmates' 20 November 2012. Retrieved online, May 2013 at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-20399401
4. Association of Chief Probation Officers cited in Deakin, J and Spencer, J (2011) 'Who Cares? Fostering networks and relationships in prison and beyond' in Sheehan, R., McIvor, G., Trotter, C. (Eds.) *Working with women offenders in the community*. Cullompton: Willan.
5. Ministry of Justice (2011) 'Making Prisons Work: Skills for Rehabilitation Review of Offender Learning'. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills: p.23
6. Hunter, G and Kirby, A (2011) 'Evaluation summary: Working one to one with young offenders' London: Birkbeck College: p.5.

the legal visits; we need to have some space in the offender management unit as our own... because I'm an ex offender, when they do 'enhanced' clearance for me it says no, so we've gone back to Ministry of Justice… they have come up with this 'standard plus' which is not quite 'basic' clearance, its nowhere near 'enhanced', it's somewhere between the two but what that does is allows each prison to do its own local risk assessment (Lol, Mentoring Coordinator, 2013)

Whilst the Ministry of Justice and individual prisons are taking steps to address the barrier of restricted access on security terms then, for the moment people volunteering as peer mentors in these settings experience a restricted or scrutinized form of citizenship. For example, even when mentors are granted access to prisons, there is often a staff member or volunteer without a criminal history additionally required:

We have access [in prison X] but a prison volunteer [who is not a peer] is always in the room, that has a massive impact, last week when I went over she turned up late, I had 45 minutes with the guy on my own and we did more in that 45 minutes than we did in any of the meetings prior to that because he just opened up (Lol, Coordinator, 2013)

In working as volunteers therefore 'ex-offenders' may struggle to overcome the 'master status'[7] of having been an offender, despite their current status as volunteers or even criminal justice staff members.

In working as volunteers therefore 'ex-offenders' may struggle to overcome the 'master status'[7] of having been an offender, despite their current status as volunteers or even criminal justice staff members. In other words they feel that they continue to be viewed in terms of a risk defined past, rather than a self-defined and publicly performed present:

I've had it, going to [prison] as a paid member of probation staff… I've gone there to talk to the client… getting ready to be released… so in that I've talked about my past and what I'm doing now, and how that kind of qualifies me to offer that support, just so he knows he can have confidence in me as well and build that relationship… by the time I had got back here [to probation] there had been a phone call from the head of [prison] security: 'next time you send offender up here to do visits we'd like to notified beforehand' and we was saying: 'he's not an offender, he's a paid member of [trust name] staff' and there was just this hoo ha about it. (Adam, Mentoring Coordinator, 2013)

Despite these limitations, there is some hope that reformed offenders may be granted access to complete the work: '[Prison Z] have come back and they've vetted, I went out and met with the governor last week and they're perfectly happy for us to go in three times a month' (Lol, 2013) However it is clear that once in action the work can make professional and personal demands over and above those placed upon non-labelled or 'public' volunteers, as Steve, a peer mentor with a prolific offending history, and more recently a probation employee explains:

I've got the prison officers looking at me, they recognize me, I don't say anything, I just feel uncomfortable, at first there was a lot of loop holes they had to jump through to get me in there, but now I go on my own but I love that side of it, sometimes it's strange, like [Prison A] walking down the main corridor… you're walking past all the prisoners and some are my old associates are like: 'fucking hell, how you doing? Used to be a nightmare him, he was a proper grafter' and I'm like thinking 'ohhhhhh', I get really embarrassed by it, because obviously I am ashamed of my past (Steve, Mentor, 2012)

Similarly, Phil is a peer mentor and former prisoner:

It can get you down a little bit if I'm honest, because you never get to forget that part of your life which you'd probably like to forget, you know, it's the part that as a father now of a young child, I want to kind of bury, I'm un-

7. Becker, H.S. (1966; 1963. *Outsiders; studies in the sociology of deviance*. New York: Free Press.

burying every day in practice, with good intentions, but nevertheless its resurfacing all the time (Phil, Mentor, 2012)

For Steve and Phil then there is an ongoing personal demand even after navigating security concerns. Working in the prisons previously served in, serves as a reminder of a shameful past. It also brings to life an identity remembered by others. Whilst Phil acknowledges that this in itself can be motivational: 'it's an opportunity for me to revisit them dark places, just to remind myself that I never want to go back there' (2012), there is nonetheless an intense, lived emotionality to this work, which is not present for volunteers without such history.

The user perspective as a privileged knowledge

In terms of civic re-engagement however, the peer mentoring picture is not all limitation, exclusion and shame. Indeed this appears to be a context wherein people with convictions can not only become civic contributors but 'civic experts' with a unique and privileged knowledge:

65 per cent of offenders under the age of 25 said that having the support of a mentor would help them to stop re-offending; 71 per cent said they would like a mentor who is a former offender.[8]

User Voice is a charity led and delivered by ex-offenders. This gives us the unique ability to gain the trust of, access to and insight from people within the criminal justice system.[9]

Ex-offenders are 'uniquely placed' to offer support to offenders, alongside other professional services and can connect with them in a way that many other agencies cannot.[10]

In the space of peer mentoring, ex-offenders are perceived as both experts with unique experiential knowledge and un-patronising equals:

It does seem to work better when you've actually been there, that's how I personally feel anyway. Somebody who's just read it from a book isn't the same as actually been there and done it. (Ben, Mentee, 2013)

For a straight mentor crime wouldn't come into their thought, but another mentor thinks 'I'll have to speak to him and try and level him out', someone who's not been down that road, not be patronizing, but they've not got a clue about it really (Will, Mentee, 2012)

With someone else like the man in the suit you'd just think 'you haven't got a clue', and it would make me feel angry and resentful towards them but if I get it off a peer I think well 'they know what they're on about' and I trust their comments and take them on board (Lin, Mentor and Previously a Mentee, 2013)

Mentors who have made positive changes themselves also appear to provide an inimitable form of inspiration.

These reflections provide some support for the arguments that peers 'are more likely to have specific knowledge… and an understanding of realistic strategies to reduce risk'[11] and that 'ex-offenders… have the credibility that statutory agencies don't often have'.[12] Mentors who have made positive changes themselves also appear to provide an inimitable form of inspiration:

I wanted to feel the way they did, they weren't beaming out happiness, but they weren't sad, they was that content in their life they were offering to other people, to help them and I wanted to be able to do that (Georgie, Mentee, 2012)

8. Princes Trust (2008) *Making the Case: One-to-one support for young offenders*, 23 June 2008: Princes Trust, Rainer, St Giles Trust, CLINKS.
9. User Voice (2013) 'Mission statement' available online at: http://www.uservoice.org/about-us/mission
10. Crispin Blunt: Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Prisons and Youth Justice, answering questions in parliament, July 2012. Reported in Puffet, N. 'Ex-offenders enlisted to tackle youth reoffending' in *Children and Young People Now* Magazine. 4 July 2012. Article retrieved online, January 2013 at: http://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/1073814/ex-offenders-enlisted-tackle-youth-reoffending
11. Devilly, G.J., Sorbello, L., Lynne Eccleston, L. & Ward, T. (2005) 'Prison-based peer-education schemes'. *Aggression and Violent Behavior,* 10, 219-240: p.223.
12. Nellis, M and McNeill, F. (2008) Foreward to: Weaver, A. *So You Think You Know Me?* Hampshire: Waterside Press: p. xi

To meet people who were just as twisted as I was… see somebody for yourself go through them changes and be a positive member of the community, you know it's possible… 20 years destroying everything around them then they've flipped it over and those 20 years turned into gold… it saved my life (Lin, Mentor and previously a Mentee, 2013)

I don't think of myself as being a massive inspiration but it is sort of proof that it can be done. (Katy, Mentor, 2012)

Central to these narratives is the *image* of the ex-offender, which at once comes to symbolise new possibilities and knowledge of a shared struggle. Indeed there is theoretical support for the power of such imagery:

It is only through recovery forums and peer-led services that people in recovery can become visible. Once these people become visible recovery champions, they can 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.[13]

Visibility is therefore seen to be vital in terms of hope, not just for people contemplating change, but also for those supporting them. In the field of mental health for example, Rufus May, a clinical psychologist and former patient argued: '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'.[14] If we transfer his reasoning to this setting, peer mentors come to inform and constitute the possibility of desistance for service users and practitioners alike. This is particularly important as:

Some of the most recent work on the process of desistance has focused on the role of hope in the reintegration of offenders (Burnett and Maruna 2004; Farrall and Calverly 2005). These studies contend that 'hope' for the future seems to play a significant role in predicting reintegrative and rehabilitative success. It provides ex-offenders 'with the vision that an alternative 'normal' life is both desirable and, ultimately… possible' (Farrall and Calverly, 2005: 192-93)[15]

Concluding thoughts

The barriers and possibilities described in this study reflect a fundamental contradiction in expectations upon people as they move from 'prisoner' to 'member of the public'. Plans to concurrently scrutinise, monitor and restrict people with convictions, whilst engaging them as the specialist citizens in the 'rehabilitation revolution' reflects a justice system which attempts to serve punitive and rehabilitative ideals simultaneously. If desistance requires people to be responded to 'as citizens with rights and needs, rather than… past lawbreakers and future risks'[16] we perhaps need to reconsider how far punitive responses reach post-conviction. If we are committed to rehabilitation and reintegration, actuarial safeguarding arguably needs to be balanced with efforts to allow people fuller re-entry to public life. This is not a call for a neglectful culture of risk, but for a measured reflection of the categories and restrictions we impose upon people and a consideration of what purpose they serve. In my own field of criminology this may require a reflection upon the degree to which we are complicit in the civic exclusion of 'offenders'. We label people, we take their stories, we 'make sense' (and so label again), we publish stories and gain plaudits in our own name. We are arguably an industry which has cultivated (and sustains) notions of 'offender' and 'ex-offender'. By listening to the lived experiences of civic life after prison, and by recognising forms of knowledge that are relegated below the academic or the professional, we may be encouraged to humanise rather than objectify people involved with criminal justice services. In doing so we may open spaces for *reformed* citizens rather than *scrutinized* citizens and so promote sustainable desistance from crime.

Note: The names of respondents used and cited are pseudonyms to maintain their anonymity.

13. Kidd, M. (2011) 'A Firsthand Account of Service User Groups in the United Kingdom: An Evaluation of Their Purpose, Effectiveness, and Place within the Recovery Movement'. *Journal of Groups in Addiction & Recovery*, 6:1-2, 164-175: p.174.
14. Basset, T. & Repper, J. (2005). *Travelling Hopefully*. Mental Health Today (November), 16-18:pp. 16-17.
15. Farrall, S., Sparks, R & Maruna, S. (2011) *Escape routes: contemporary perspectives on life after punishment*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge: p. 168.
16. Carlen, P (2012) 'Against rehabilitation: for reparative justice' A transcript of the 2012 Eve Saville lecture given by Professor Pat Carlen to the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies on 6 November 2012: p.5 Available online at: http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/resources/against-rehabilitation-reparative-justice