SPECIAL ISSUE
ON DESISTANCE
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DESISTANCE
MOVING ON: DESISTANCE AND REHABILITATION
IT IS ALMOST 50 YEARS since Pauline Morris published her ground-breaking study of the impact of imprisonment on the families left behind (Morris 1965). After decades of neglect, families affected by imprisonment are now becoming increasingly visible to practitioners, researchers and policy makers. While the experiences and voices of prisoners’ families remain absent from much of the current literature, it is nonetheless clear that many suffer from high levels of social disadvantage, which is exacerbated by a family member being sentenced to custody. While some families may feel relief at the imprisonment of the offender, for example where they have experienced domestic abuse, or the offender is particularly chaotic or violent, others may experience considerable distress. The family may also face practical, geographical and financial barriers to maintaining relationships with the prisoner, at a time when their housing, finances and child care arrangements may also be in crisis.

Given these potential difficulties and vulnerabilities, these families should be offered support as individuals in their own right and not simply viewed as a potential resource for reducing reoffending. Nonetheless, just as imprisonment can have serious negative implications for the family, the family outside can play an important role in the resettlement of the prisoner. Indeed, research suggests that positive family support reduces the likelihood of reoffending by between two and six times (Mills and Codd 2008). The desistance literature is particularly useful in helping us to understand why this might be the case, arguing that family relationships might assist in the long and difficult process of ‘going straight’ by building stocks of social capital, helping to change how (ex) offenders see themselves, and recognising the positive contributions that they can make to their families and communities.

Understanding the Benefits of Family Relationships

Social Capital

As has often been observed, the road to desistance can be long and challenging. For some, families can serve as a source of social capital which can prove to be a valuable resource along the way; providing not only emotional support but also practical assistance, such as job opportunities, child care or housing. Possessing high levels of social capital can also reduce reoffending, as this would jeopardise these relationships and the supports that they offer. Therefore positive relationships can act as a ‘turning point’, providing the social capital, emotional bonds and informal social controls that can prevent future offending (Sampson and Laub 1993). These informal social controls will be felt most strongly by those who enjoy happy and committed relationships, as people invest more heavily in meaningful relationships. However, such reciprocal relationships also in turn create more social capital as they foster participation and inclusion in society, for example by providing employment in a family business, which will build further stocks of social capital and promote desistance (McNeill 2004).
Developing a positive self-image

Others suggest that the resources that family relationships might provide are in fact less important in terms of desistance than the opportunities they present for helping the offender to develop a new, more positive self-identity. The decision to change is key to developing this new identity, and desistance is therefore underpinned by individual choice and motivation. However, it is not achieved by the individual alone, as a person’s commitment to this new role deepens through their relationships and interactions with others (Uggen et al 2004). Given the importance of relationships in development of this new self-image, it has been suggested that those who have at least some existing pro-social relationships might find it easiest to desist; while those that have a primarily antisocial network of friends and family might benefit from ending these relationships. For this second group, any remaining positive family relationships may have a particularly important role to play, filling both their time and the emotional gap left by severing previous ties.

Recognising prisoners’ strengths

While individual motivation and the decision to ‘go straight’ is undoubtedly important, it has been argued by those advocating strengths based models of desistance that this alone is not enough, as successfully moving away from offending also requires this ‘changed self’ to be recognised by others. Strengths-based models of desistance suggest that offenders are stigmatised by the wider community, and that this stigma in turn perpetuates further offending. It then follows that prisoners should be given opportunities to make amends to their victims and contribute positively to their communities. This not only allows them to earn redemption, but also provides the opportunity for the community to recognise that individual as a productive member of society and de-label him accordingly (Maruna 2004). For many former prisoners, a relationship with someone who sees them as a good parent, partner, child or friend may be an important first step in this process.

A Family Portrait?

While the desistance literature provides a number of ways to begin to explain why family relationships might reduce reoffending, the image of the family it portrays tends to be narrow, reflecting traditional, heterosexual and middle class views of family life. The dominance of this model of the family appears to persist despite a growing body of evidence that the traditional, nuclear family is in decline. Marriage rates are falling, cohabitation is becoming increasingly common, there has been a dramatic rise in the number of children born outside marriage, and a growing number of people are choosing to live separately from their partner, or not have a partner at all.

Indeed, family relationships are becoming increasingly fluid and diverse and often now encompass same-sex partners, ex-partners (and their new partners and children) or close friends, who are seen as more significant than blood relatives and form part of chosen families. Criminologists must therefore be open to more diverse family structures if we are to identify which relationships are most meaningful, and therefore more likely to promote desistance. This is not least because prisoners are perhaps less likely than other social groups to come from a traditional nuclear family given that many prisoners have experience of parental imprisonment, family conflict and institutional care (Scottish Prison Commission 2008).

Uncritically accepting a traditional view of what it means to be a family also fails to recognise that much of the family support provided to prisoners is given by women, regardless of the gender of the offender (Mills and Codd 2008). The failure to acknowledge the gendered nature of this emotional and practical support inevitably limits our understanding of the impact that this caring burden places on female family and friends. This gender blindness also means that we know very little about the different role relationships might play in desistance for female offenders. For example, as most support is given by women, romantic relationships might be less significant for many female prisoners than they are for men. This then raises the question of whether other relationships such as parents, friends or grandparents become more significant to these women, or do they simply receive less support?

Therefore I would argue that to better understand the role that families might play in the difficult process of ‘going straight’ it is necessary to take a wider view of the family; recognising that care, commitment and love, wherever they come from, may be more important than bonds of blood or marriage. Encouragingly, the desistance literature is well placed to recognise less traditional families as it already emphasises the importance of what relationships do, offering support, encouragement and opportunities for a new start, rather than what they are (a parent, a partner or a spouse). Adopting a broader view of the family will not only potentially better reflect the experiences of many prisoners, but might also expose instances where less traditional families experience unfairness or injustice, for example being unable to access supports or services. Embracing the diversity of modern families therefore not only offers an exciting direction for future research, but also has the potential to benefit all those who are affected when a prison sentence is imposed.

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