
Mentoring, Social Capital and Desistance: A Study of Women Released from Prison

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Mentoring ex-prisoners is an increasingly popular tool in the burgeoning field of offender reintegration and resettlement. Yet surprisingly little is known about what makes mentoring effective and indeed even whether it can be effective within the domain of criminal justice. This article proceeds in two parts. First, drawing upon desistance theory it attempts to develop a theoretical underpinning for mentoring practice with ex-offenders that would identify appropriate targets for mentoring practice, including the development of social capital or connectedness. Part two of the article utilises data from research on a women's mentoring program in Victoria, Australia, to understand how one key dimension of desistance — social capital — is recognised by women as a domain of need and those women's perceptions of the way mentoring may deliver gains in social connectedness and capital. The article concludes with a discussion of the distinctly gendered nature of women's postprison experiences and the way in which these factors shape both the process of desistance and the nature of mentoring interventions.

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The mentoring of offenders has a long but somewhat chequered history. Of all criminal justice 'interventions', mentoring remains among the least well developed both in theoretical terms and in the empirical base underpinning its deployment. The aim of this article is to address both of these issues, suggesting first that mentoring of adult offenders may usefully be understood as an activity grounded in emerging and established principles of desistance, rehabilitation and an enhancement approach to working with offenders. From this literature we can derive an account of the needs mentoring seeks to address, the mechanisms by which it should produce effects and the sorts of impacts than an evaluation of mentoring efficacy should aim to measure. To illustrate some of these ideas we report preliminary data from an Australian mentoring project that paired female community volunteers with women exiting prison. Our analysis focuses on a key deficit experienced by women after release from prison — the absence of social connections as a result of offending, imprisonment and deliberate choice —

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and the role that mentoring has to play in assisting the women to build the social capital necessary to make a successful transition from prison back into the community.

This study has been undertaken against a backdrop of an expanding interest in mentoring within criminal justice (DuBois, Holloway, Valentine, & Cooper, 2002; Sherman et al., 1998). Offender mentoring (which for the moment we will describe simply as the pairing of adult offenders with members of the community with a view to bringing about positive lifestyle change) is a form of social program intervention that is attractive to agencies involved in offender support for a variety of reasons. The most obvious is that it gives fiscally stretched non-government organisations the capacity to leverage the services of community volunteers as a way of providing a greater range of after-care services. Any social program has limited resources and has to allocate these in proportion to the seriousness of the problems it is trying to address. This may mean that only those individuals with the most severe problems receive significant attention. For example, it has been argued that many youth-oriented programs focus on older youths who are already active offenders, and not on younger ones who may in fact be more responsive to development and prevention initiatives. In contrast, mentoring is a means to mobilise social resources that can reach offenders who are less problematic, but possibly also more responsive.

A second feature of mentoring programs is that they involve relatively high levels of contact time between mentors and mentees. In contrast, the contacts between professional support workers and their clients are likely to be brief and episodic (Barry, 2000). Current thinking about the effectiveness of offender treatment programs is that the minimum effective 'dose' may be considerably greater than has been typical of many programs in the past. Mentoring may be effective because it provides for a relatively intense relationship based on substantial periods of contact that may take place over long periods. The nature of the mentoring relationship, including its voluntary nature and the way that the relationship emulates 'normal' familial or friendship relationships, may also give it a legitimacy that professional worker–client relationships do not have (Tyler, 1990). If the relationship is established on the basis of respect and support, the mentee will wish to retain the mentor's approval and attention, and will ultimately see the social and personal values modelled by the mentor as important and worth striving for.

Finally, we should note that mentoring involves a diversity of program models that include career mentoring, and a wide range of adolescent and juvenile mentoring programs. In the United States, particularly, adult mentoring has for some time been associated with faith-based interventions. To the extent that faith-based postrelease interventions have expanded, and continue to do so, in the US (Yoon & Nickel, 2008) there may be significant differences in both the aims and content of mentoring programs around the world. An evaluation of the InnerChange Freedom Initiative, for example, a faith-based program operating in Texas, summarised the program content as 'emphasizing education, work, life skills, values restructuring, and one-on-one mentoring' within a program 'anchored in biblical teaching, life-skills education, and group accountability' ideals (Johnson & Larson, 2003: 4). In this study we focus on mentoring that is adult-focused and aimed at general social and psychological support.

The Effectiveness of Offender Mentoring

Despite its pervasive presence, little is known of the effectiveness of offender mentoring. In the youth sphere, where mentoring programs are perhaps most strongly established, recent studies in both Great Britain and the United States cast doubt on the efficacy of the mentoring model. A report to the US Congress titled *Preventing Crime: What Works, What Doesn't, What's Promising* (Sherman et al., 1998) described youth mentoring as 'an increasingly popular delinquency prevention strategy' on which Congress had spent more than \$19 million, but the authors went on to describe the limited evaluation research of these efforts as 'generally poor' and concluded that 'the effectiveness of school-based mentoring for reducing delinquency and drug use is not known' (p. 5:49). DuBois et al. (2002) echoed this conclusion following a meta-analysis of 55 studies of youth mentoring programs across a variety of settings. They noted that effect sizes (0.14 for fixed effect models and 0.18 for random effect models) were small both in absolute terms and in comparison to average effects found for psychological, educational, behavioural and mental health interventions more generally. 'This aspect of findings' they concluded 'is seemingly inconsistent with the widespread and largely unquestioned support that mentoring initiatives have enjoyed in recent years' (p. 187). Similarly, two large-scale evaluations of youth mentoring in Great Britain, both commissioned by the Youth Justice Board (St James-Roberts, Greenlaw, Simon, & Hurry 2005; Tarling, Davison, & Clarke, 2004) found no or even negative effects upon offending. Another British study, by Newburn and Shiner (2005), looked at the impact of mentoring youth on social exclusion and offending. Here it was found that while mentoring could shift youth toward inclusion, such gains 'did not translate directly into reduced offending' (p. 166). Moreover, the authors noted that while 'substantial reductions in offending were evident among programme participants ... similar, and in some cases more marked, reductions were evident among non-participants' (p. 166).

In respect of adult mentoring, some broadly positive results have emerged from a recent evaluation of seven resettlement Pathfinders in Great Britain by Lewis, Maguire, Raynor, Vanstone and Vennard (2007). Volunteer mentoring of adult ex-prisoners was a key ingredient in the service mix of two of the seven projects, both located in the voluntary services sector. The resettlement Pathfinder project aimed to address the needs of short-term prisoners by providing assistance with the practical problems of transition back to the community (such as accommodation), tackling typical offence-related problems (such as drug use) through referral to specialist agencies and addressing motivational and cognitive problems through a brief cognitive-motivational program (restricted to three of the four probation-led projects). Lewis et al. concluded that 'the projects as a whole appeared to have no significant effect on one-year reconviction rates' of their participants (p. 46), even when controlling for risk. At the same time, however, the authors argued that behind this broad conclusion were several more positive results, a large number of which concerned aspects of the voluntary mentoring model that are worth noting here. Moreover, the impact findings were also buttressed by the self-reported needs of the program participants and the benefits they reported having derived from the programs.

Briefly, while prisoners enrolled in the Pathfinder projects tended to cite practical problems (such as the need for accommodation or help with alcohol or drugs) as

a reason for joining the programs, once on the program, both before and after release they began to cite relational factors as the main benefits they were receiving. At prerelease, for instance, across all programs the three most highly cited benefits were 'confidence and peace of mind' (24%) and 'someone to talk to/mentor' (17%). Anticipating release, prisoners listed 'someone to talk to/mentor' (28%) as the equal most important type of help they wanted, along with assistance with employment and education. This preference by program participants for supports that were more relational than instrumental in nature continued into the community. Lewis et al. report that in follow-up interviews over half reported the most helpful aspect of the program to have been 'emotional support' or 'someone to talk to', roughly four times the number who cited 'help with accommodation', the next most common response. Since only two of the seven projects involved a formal mentoring arrangement, clearly many of these relational benefits were being obtained through participants' relationships with their probation officer. Yet the Lewis et al. study is important because it also identifies discrete effects for the mentoring relationship itself. Those offenders who had postrelease contact with voluntary agencies' mentors 'did significantly better than any other group of prisoners analysed' (p. 47) and while there were trends toward positive effects on reconviction across a variety of program components, it was only among those who had postrelease contact with mentors that differences were statistically significant. This led Lewis et al. to conclude that 'ex-prisoners may benefit particularly from contact with people who have more time to pay attention to individual needs and whose distinctive contribution is often the provision of personal and emotional support' (p. 47).

We are thus left with the picture of mentoring as an increasingly popular form of offender intervention, but with mixed evidence as to its effectiveness. A third element in this picture of mentoring is the relative absence of theory about how offender mentoring is supposed to achieve its goals. It remains unclear whether the effects mentoring is hoped to deliver flow from the benefits of the mentoring process itself, or whether that process is a way of acting upon something else, such as the developmental process in youth. In the next section we briefly explore the theoretical underpinnings of mentoring, suggesting that if mentoring is to be effective, it needs to be connected with an account of the behaviour or process upon which it seeks to act — that is, the avoidance of criminal behaviour — and a theory of intervention, which is to say, how it should work.

Mentoring in Theory

Part of the difficulty with discussing mentoring lies with the term itself. In the wider (noncriminal justice) mentoring literature, mentoring is variously compared with and distinguished from tutoring, supervising and coaching. The status of the mentor and mentee is also subject to various distinctions. Should the person being mentored, for instance, be considered a protégé or a peer? Does the mentoring relationship aim to intervene in some kind of developmental (or maturational) process or are its goals purely instrumental? Who, or what, should be the beneficiaries of mentoring: is it limited just to the mentee, does it extend to the mentor, or even to a third party (an organisation, or the wider community)? Do mentors, mentees, or both, require specific training around the process in which they are

engaged, or is it a more naturalistic process? Is there a common model to be applied where a group or organisation wishes to establish a mentoring scheme? These issues have been worked out through a literature on mentoring that spans business, education, welfare, ageing and more.

General Principles

This wide ranging literature has been synthesised and digested by Megginson and Clutterbuck — two dominant figures in the professionalisation of mentoring — into a set of general principles (Megginson & Clutterbuck, 1995, 2005; Megginson, Clutterbuck, Garvey, Stokes, & Garrett-Harris, 2006). In the second edition of *Mentoring in Action: A Practical Guide* (Megginson et al., 2006) they define mentoring as ‘off-line help by one person to another in making significant transitions in knowledge, work or thinking’ (pp. 4–5). In the context of criminal justice, Nellis (2002) defines mentoring as entailing ‘someone more experienced guiding, coaching or encouraging someone less experienced in the performance of a task (or role). It is (usually)’, he continues, ‘more formal than befriending but less formal than supervision — and more purposeful than mere “volunteering”’ (p. 94–5). This, Nellis suggests, is what mentoring is ‘at its core’, although he allows that aspects of its ‘nature, duration and intensity, and its meaning to both mentor and mentee’ will always be ‘setting-specific’ (p. 94).

There are two things worth noting here. First is the general tendency within this literature, and one made explicit in *Mentoring in Action*, to regard mentoring as reducible to a set of general principles that may be applied in roughly the same manner across a variety of contexts. Megginson and Clutterbuck use case studies that range from mentoring victims of domestic violence, to owners of microbusinesses, to junior Black academics, to very long-term peer mentoring, e-mentoring, and so on. The second is that, aside from an elementary distinction between what they term ‘sponsorship’ mentoring (typical of career mentoring within organisations) and ‘developmental’ mentoring (focusing on personal development), the primary focus in the work of Megginson and Clutterbuck and the wider literature is upon the form and techniques of the *mentoring process*. The impacts of mentoring, in other words, are felt to flow from getting the process right. This process includes factors such as proper recruitment, selection and matching of mentors and mentees, the setting and agreement on mentoring goals, rapport building, understanding the evolution of the mentoring relationship over time, applying appropriate techniques (e.g., dealing with roadblocks, stimulating creative thinking) and effectively concluding the mentoring relationship. But there also appears in *Mentoring in Action* a small recognition of the complexity of the otherwise untheorised ‘developmental’ aspect of mentoring. They describe, for example, an emerging area of study of what they term ‘mentoring moments’, illustrated by their proposition that ‘mentoring can be viewed as a moment in time when our pasts confront our presents’, such that mentoring provides an opportunity for people to ‘think new thoughts and realize a new future’ (p. 29).

Nevertheless, our overall assessment of *Mentoring in Action* and the wider mentoring literature is that it is overburdened by its focus on *mentoring process*. The effect of this is that it elides almost completely the *personal or developmental process*

of those being mentored, save for some broad recognition of the 'normal' processes of human development that underpin work with children and youth. We suggest that the developmental or life-change process of desisting from crime is qualitatively different to other behavioural changes or fields of learning, such as those involved in running a successful microbusiness or succeeding as a junior, ethnic minority academic. The remainder of this section draws upon the literatures on desistance from crime and rehabilitation for guidance on what mentoring ought to be targeting and doing. There seem to be at least two aspects to this literature that require our attention: first, identifying the features or aspects of effective interventions that appear to drive effectiveness; and second, understanding the underlying developmental or change process we are attempting to intervene in.

Features of Effective Intervention

Contemporary correctional theory and practice is distinguishable from its predecessors by three distinct yet overlapping characteristics: a managerialist approach to organisation, the dominance of risk thinking and risk assessment and the development of a suite of mainly cognitive-behavioural interventions aimed at managing or ameliorating offender risk (Barry, 2000; Brown, 2005; Gorman, O'Byrne, & Parton, 2006). One of the most significant areas of debate in this respect has been around the formalisation of intervention models under the 'what works' and 'risk-need' paradigms (Andrews & Bonta, 1998; McGuire, 1995). The points of contention in this wide-ranging exchange need not concern us here, but it is worth noting that for a number of theorists and practitioners alike, there has been a feeling that psychologists have sought to (re)colonise the space of work with offenders, often pushing out longstanding practices grounded in principles of social work with offenders (Burnett & McNeill, 2005). For this reason, at least one strand of the debate has revolved around the problems or virtues of the cognitive-behavioural methods that stand at the centre of contemporary psychological interventions with offenders. While this debate has certainly been productive (by, for instance, highlighting the slim empirical evidence of impact on reoffending), one of its effects has been to draw attention away from the issue of what, in the broader sense, accounts for the benefits/impacts of psychological interventions.

This oversight has recently been addressed and the conclusions drawn are both important and sobering for those engaged in work with offenders. In a comprehensive report produced for the Scottish Executive, McNeill, Batchelor, Burnett and Knox (2005) examine the literatures of rehabilitation and desistance to produce guidelines for effective practice in Scottish probation work. Perhaps more importantly, they also go to the literatures of counselling and psychotherapy to consider the issue of change processes in wider perspective. The somewhat remarkable finding they arrive at, key elements of which are supported through findings by the American Psychological Association (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999), is that only around 15% of the variance in treatment outcomes can be explained by the specific treatment technique itself (e.g., cognitive-behavioural vs. Rogerian approaches). By far the greatest influence upon treatment success are client and extratherapeutic factors (including social support), which account for 40% of success, followed by the quality of the therapeutic relationship (30%) and

expectancy or placebo effects (15%). The failure of specific techniques to have greater impact on success is explained by what are termed 'common factors' or 'core conditions' shared by most forms of intervention, so that the impact of specific techniques is limited, though clearly some techniques work better than others for certain problems or conditions. Elsewhere, McNeill sums up these core conditions for effective intervention as requiring 'empathy and genuineness; the establishment of a working alliance; and using person-centred, collaborative and 'client driven' approaches' (2006, p. 52).

While McNeill suggests the importance of these 'are perhaps familiar to probation staff' (p. 52), their significance should also ring true to those with a knowledge of mentoring. Combined with clients' personal characteristics and features of their social context and location, the psychological literature would suggest we have 70% of the ingredients of successful intervention. In terms of theorising the mentoring process, these conclusions suggest a need for focus on and/or assessment of (i) offenders' individual level of functioning, including psychological factors such as motivation to change, resilience and the like; (ii) the social context within which offenders find themselves, including factors like social connectedness, social support and the like; and (iii) the mentoring relationship, which would include those aspects of the therapeutic relationship mentioned above, such as respect and trust, collaboration and the mentee's goals, plus factors that might be specific to mentoring within a criminal justice setting, such as the formal organisational arrangements within which the process might be embedded.

Understanding How People Stop Offending

Having better understood the features of effective intervention, we may now move to a consideration of the underlying process of development, maturation or change that the mentoring relationship seeks to intervene in. One of the great benefits of the desistance literature, in this respect, is that it 'modernises' the moribund precepts and dogmas captured within the 'what works' and 'risk-need' approaches that have captured so much policy ground in recent years. This might seem a rather strong criticism, but it would be well to note that a key aim of these approaches has been to abstract offenders from their environment and thus to locate the causes of behaviour squarely within the individual. Of course, this makes little sense to those with any sociological training or indeed to many criminal justice practitioners. But as the discussion of social context above would imply, it also makes little sense within modern psychology. 'Virtually all sophisticated contemporary accounts of social behaviour' claim the eminent American psychologists Haney and Zimbardo, 'now acknowledge the empirical and theoretical significance of situation, context and structure'. Speaking directly to the issue of offending, they note that 'in academic circles at least, the problems of crime and violence — formerly viewed in almost exclusively individualistic terms — are now understood through multilevel analyses that grant equal if not primary significance to situational, community and structural variables' (Haney & Zimbardo, 1998, p. 720).

A useful way of conceptualising the distinction between the individual and their social context is proposed by Farrall (2002, 2004) who talks about building both human capital (which might include improving thinking styles or motivation to

change) and social capital (which takes in the 'social interactions between individuals and other groups and individuals', 2004, p. 61). The notion of social capital includes individuals' social connectedness and social ties, their embeddedness in a set of relations of trust, their participation in civil society and so on (see also Sampson & Laub, 1993). For Farrall, the twin domains of family and work are seen as key factors, functioning 'as *both* the precursors and the outcomes' of social capital (2004, p. 61, emphasis in original). On this view, in order for an offender to desist from offending, it is necessary that interventions work upon increasing not only human but also social capital. In part, then, the failure of many 'rehabilitation' programs (which focus mainly upon the human capital), such as those providing employment skills or training new ways of thinking, can be put down to the one-sided nature of the intervention. Gaining employment, for example, requires not simply individual skills, but a network of relationships between the individual and other individuals and their community that link a person into employment and support and sustain them there. It is widely estimated that around 80% of jobs are never advertised. Moreover, even for those that are, networking is commonly a key strategy in making a job seeker competitive: in other words, gaining employment will depend crucially upon an individual's stock of social capital.

At one level, this gives us some guidance on the processes with which mentoring needs to engage: that is, the acquisition or maintenance of human and social capital necessary to lead a nonoffending lifestyle. But by what processes does an individual gain human and social capital and thus move forward into this new and hopefully nonoffending life? Three dimensions of change were identified by Maruna (2001) in one of the first studies squarely conceptualised within a framework of desistance. Following some additional suggestions by Farrall (2002), McNeill summarises the question of how desistance from crime occurs, as follows:

...desistance resides somewhere in the interfaces between developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions, and the individual subjective narrative constructions which offenders build around these key events and changes. It is not just the events and changes that matter; it is what these events and changes *mean* to the people involved. (2006, p. 47, emphasis in original)

The capacity for a mentoring relationship to operate across all three of these dimensions is probably limited. The basis of maturational changes lies mainly in the realm of factors and activities (ageing, cognitive-motivational programs) that lie beyond the scope of mentoring projects. The second dimension, concerning the individual's ties to family, community, employment and the like, seems to lie squarely within the domain of mentoring and concerns the acquisition or maintenance of social capital. The final dimension, regarding the narratives offenders construct around themselves, their circumstances and their future goes to the issue of human capital and would also be a reasonable process target for mentoring relationships.

Our Research

In our research we were concerned with the second element of this series, the role of social capital in offending and to address two questions related to this general model. First, would the general view provided in the largely male-oriented literature

on offending and desistance hold for the case of female offenders; and second, to what extent could a mentoring process grounded in the precepts of intervention identified above address and ameliorate problems of low social capital? The setting for our research was a women's mentoring program in Victoria, Australia, run by the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO), a not-for-profit agency that provides a range of postrelease support services to men and women.

The VACRO Women's Mentoring Program

The Women's Mentoring Program¹ was established in 2004. The program target group was defined as women prisoners with limited social and financial resources, although in practice it was open to all women leaving prison except those with a major mental illness or other complex needs, or who were judged to pose a risk to the safety of mentors.

Recruitment took place inside prison through the combined efforts of visiting VACRO workers and prison staff. Successful applicants to the Women's Mentoring Program were matched with a mentor about three months prior to their release date. Ideally, the mentor visited the prison several times before the mentee's release in order to establish the mentoring relationship. Before release, both parties drew up and signed a Mentoring Agreement that set out the intended frequency and nature of postrelease contact. Mentors and mentees were encouraged to meet weekly or fortnightly in the period immediately after release, but in practice this varied considerably between pairs. Some mentor-mentee pairs established patterns of regular, frequent meetings, some met irregularly. Contact might be by telephone or in person and typically involved informal social activity either in the mentee's home or at commercial (e.g., coffee shops) or cultural (recreational — e.g., cinema) venues. Some restrictions applied to the mentoring relationship to preserve the safety of both mentors and mentees.

While it proved relatively straightforward to recruit women into the program while they were in prison, there was a high rate of attrition in the period immediately after release. Approximately one in four eligible women were recruited and their profile broadly matched that of the overall inmate population (Department of Justice, 2008), with the exception that participants in the mentoring program were more likely to be property offenders, less likely to be drug offenders and served generally shorter sentences than nonparticipant women prisoners. Roughly one in six women recruited dropped out even before meeting their mentor. Of those remaining (and who thus had contact with their mentor while in prison), half did not continue after release. In some cases, women advised VACRO that they had decided to exit the program because of practical problems ('too far to travel') or changes in their expectations about mentoring ('not what I really wanted'). However, most frequently attrition was the result of participants simply failing to make contact after release. On the other hand, women who did establish a mentoring relationship after release often maintained this over an extended period, with some mentor-mentee pairs having relationships that were active for well over a year.

The mentors were women recruited through newspaper advertisements. The newspaper advertisements described suitable applicants as having 'good common

sense and with some life experience'. All mentor applicants went through a training program of ten 2-hour sessions delivered by VACRO staff members. The training had three main components: how to mentor (including practice-based skills), ethical and safe conduct for mentors and background information on the criminal justice system, women's experiences and postprison transitional issues. VACRO had hoped to recruit five mentors, but the response to the advertisements was such that an initial group of thirty applicants was trained, followed by a second group of twenty about 6 months later.

The results reported here are based on interviews we conducted with 25 mentees and 26 mentors between late 2005 and early 2007. The material presented in this article is mainly concerned with the experiences of the mentees. The interviews were carried out at various stages of the mentoring relationship. Some were conducted in the first few weeks after release, while others took place when the relationships had been established for 6 months or more. In four cases we were able to reinterview mentees who had been in a mentoring relationship for more than 12 months. Five of the women were interviewed after they had returned to prison. The interviews typically took around an hour and covered the women's expectations about mentoring, the nature of their relationship with their mentor and the practical and emotional problems they faced after release. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and loaded into NVivo™ for analysis. Our initial NVivo™ coding framework emphasised practical issues and experiences associated with postrelease adjustment (e.g., finding accommodation, reestablishing relationships with children) but we later went back and added coding nodes for the relational aspects of their postrelease experiences. We also had access to VACRO case file data on all 90 women who were recruited into the program up to September 2006, around one quarter of all those who were eligible for recruitment. This dataset included demographic details, the woman's goals and expectations about mentoring, identified social and personal needs relating to release and the number of recorded contacts between mentee and mentor.

High rates of postrelease attrition are a feature of many transitional support programs and it is quite evident that mentoring does not hold the same attraction for all women exiting prison. The Women's Mentoring Program was more successful in engaging and retaining women who were older, had shorter criminal histories and less severe problems with drugs and alcohol. Three quarters of women with identified drug issues who were recruited to the program had no postrelease contact with their mentor, compared with less than a third of those where drug problems were not identified. Similarly, 90% of those with identified alcohol problems had no postrelease contact. Generally, women with more extensive histories of imprisonment were less likely to continue in the Women's Mentoring Program. Over half of those who exited prison after their first custodial term continued their mentoring relationship after release, compared with less than a quarter of those who had served multiple prior terms. The presence of an identified mental disorder appeared to have no bearing on whether participants remained in the program after release, and women with identified gambling problems were more likely to remain in the program after release. Women who remained in postrelease contact were also older (mean age of 38 years) than those who did not (mean age of 32 years). Over 80% of women aged less than 30 years dropped out of the program on release, compared

with half of those aged 30 to 39, and around 40% of those aged 40 or more. On the face of it then, there appeared to be a strong self-selection effect along two maturational dimensions relating to age and to the embeddedness of offending within the woman's lifestyle.

The women we interviewed were generally representative of those who were medium- to long-term participants in the program. We were able to interview a small number of participants who had been returned to prison as a result of further offences or parole breaches but were unable to interview the large number of women who dropped out of the program immediately upon release from prison.

Mentoring in Practice

Although there was a large attrition rate after initial recruitment into the Women's Mentoring Program, once in the program many relationships were remarkably long lasting (more than one year). Indeed it was among women with some of the most extensive prior criminal histories that mentoring relationships were maintained for longest. This raises the question of what factors were associated with preparedness to engage in mentoring — what we have termed here 'readiness' for mentoring — or what we might also describe as a readiness to activate social capital opportunities. Indeed, it might be useful even to distinguish between the factors that propelled women into mentoring and those that held them there.

For the women in our study a key 'value' of mentoring appeared to lie in the relational supports it held out. But though many women might have benefited from such supports, readiness to engage in the mentoring program and to make use of what mentors had to offer also seemed to be related to women's capacity to value life or noninstrumental relationships (i.e., those that do not produce material benefits). This is one of the key psychological dimensions of recruitment and retention in the program. Many of the most commonly cited benefits of mentoring were relational values or processes — a trusted nonjudgmental ear, a person unconnected with criminal worlds or lifestyles, a person who knows one's past, a person who could provide alternative ways of looking at problems, and so on. For women at a life stage where they felt ready to capitalise upon these benefits, mentoring made a lot of sense. At the same time, however, this psychological dimension required an accommodating lifestyle. For women with extensive drug and alcohol problems, or other types of chaotic postrelease lifestyles, the problems of the moment seemed so overwhelming that mentoring seemed both unmanageable and irrelevant. 'Ashleigh', who we interviewed after she had been returned to prison, expressed it thus:

The only problem I had was when I got out I didn't have a straight contact number for her. ... I lost my paperwork or whatever and so I tried to get into contact with her but I just couldn't do it because I was sorta doing the stuff and got caught up and forgot all about it. ('Ashleigh')

Mentoring and Social Capital

The idea of social capital with which we have chosen to work refers to the web of social relations within which we all live, including relationships with family, informal social networks, relationships established through work, and so on. One of the

most striking findings arising from our research was the level of social isolation of participants in the Women's Mentoring Program and thus the tenuousness of their links with other human beings. Even on a very liberal measure of social contact, we found a small group of women wholly isolated from social contact with friends, children or other family, except for those contacts with their mentor and service agencies, plus a much larger group who had only one contact aside from their mentor. Two thirds of women in the study had only one or no regular social contacts.

The reasons for such social disconnection were numerous but a small number of themes frequently arose in our interviews with the women. First among them was that women often chose to limit social contact as a strategy for bringing their lives into order and attempting the transition away from offending lifestyles. In contradistinction to what is known about men's desistance from offending, for example, it was recognised by many of the women in this study that relationship partners were often part of the problem rather than part of the solution. Some women dissolved relationships because partners were not willing to follow them in their attempts to go straight, while for others issues of personal safety necessitated such severances. 'Zoe', for example, told us:

All of my friends are drug-related, you know, have something to do with drugs and crime. So since coming out of prison and changing, I've had to cut off all my friends. I've had to start a whole new fresh, pretty much. ('Zoe')

'Crystal' was attacked by her husband on a prison visit shortly before release and went into hiding when she was released. She said: 'My main focus when I left jail was basically to hide from him, so I took out orders and things like that and basically I'm in hiding at the moment ...' ('Crystal').

On the other hand, another finding from the research was that many women were isolated, not by choice but through the dissolution of key familial and intimate relationships, often related to the women's persistent offending and the chaotic lifestyles, including drug use, that were associated with it. In the absence of friends and family, and with a history of imprisonment that many women wished not to have made public, release from prison left a number of women in a quandary: how does one establish new connections from a position of social isolation?

It was in circumstances such as these that the value of mentors became apparent. Mentors, all of whom could be said to have deep roots in the community, were limited in the direct, material benefits they could provide, but throughout our interviews we found numerous examples of the way they activated their social capital for the benefit of their mentees. This included the provision of character references for employment and housing, attending court with and even speaking on behalf of their mentee there, providing statements and attending court for child custody hearings, accessing information on educational opportunities, providing transport for medical and similar sorts of appointments, acting as an advocate and 'interpreter' as mentees worked through arcane bureaucratic systems to access benefits, and so on. In each case the impact of the mentor's efforts was twofold. On the one hand it was practical, in the sense that in a world where relationships count (through references, referees, etcetera), mentors were able to use their own social capital to bind Women's Mentoring Program participants into the prosocial world at important and difficult junctures: applying for a job or house, going to court. On the other hand,

the women we interviewed reported the 'fact' of being supported in this way to provide evidence of trust and affirmation of their status as a person that was important and meaningful to them.

'Julia' gave some sense of the importance of this in both practical and emotional terms when she said of her mentor:

She came to court and she had me in tears because she got up on the box and I think if it wasn't for her, maybe the lady judge would have sent me in. She stood and she said '[X] has been on her own for a very long time and she doesn't have any family so she's basically by herself'. She said 'I don't know how she gets through most of the problems she has to face because I would certainly have to go to one of my family members for help' ... She had me in tears. I've never really had anyone do that before I think. ('Julia')

This is an example of 'activating' social capital. It occurred where participants in the VACRO Women's Mentoring Program became sufficiently embedded in a relationship with their mentor that the relationship itself could provide capital, both practical and emotional, in their lives. Our interviews with mentors revealed that many had a finely tuned sense of the opportunities and limits provided by their relationship, wherein they recognised opportunities for assisting not simply by practical means, such as in providing a reference, but also in suggestions for different ways to read situations, deal with problems, think about opportunities and the like.

And she's spoken about a couple of issues with her mum ... and we were able to say, oh well, let's forget about your point of view and how about we look at it from a 'mum' point of view? (Mentor 'Janet')

But it was also clear from our research that both mentors and mentees recognised the artificial nature of their relationship. It most often was not one of equals, it was not 'naturally occurring' and while the mentor was generally recognised as a friend, this friendship was not viewed in the conventional sense. 'Crystal' described her relationship as:

... having a friend who I can actually go out and not socialise with but just have that contact with somebody else that's away from the family who can give me some support, you know, if anything goes wrong or I need anything, I've got that friend to turn to. ('Crystal')

In a similar vein, 'Marie' described her relationship:

Well I know she's the mentor, the only way I can describe her is she's a mentoring friend. I can look to her if I need to get something off my chest but at the same time I can look at her as a friend. ('Marie')

Interestingly, none of our interviewees thought of their mentor as a role model, which was one element of the original Women's Mentoring Program model. An important part of the reported 'friendship' relationship was that mentees were able to talk to their mentor about experiences or feelings that they would be reluctant to disclose to family or friends because they were painful or shocking. This was particularly the case for experiences about prison. Many of the mentees had found imprisonment to be deeply traumatic and had been exposed to events that they found troubling and that they had to 'protect' other people from. However, with their

mentors they did not have to hide or suppress this part of their life — the mentor already knew where they had been. ‘Elisabeth’ noted that her relationship with her mentor was different from relationships with her other friends because ‘she knows that I’ve been in prison, so she’s safe’. Our data therefore suggest that a ‘special’ type of friendship may be a useful way of thinking about what mentoring aims to establish, an issue we will pursue further below.

Yet it is impossible to view these mentor–mentee relationships without recognising that they were, almost by definition, conditioned by a differential in power between the two actors. Our data suggest that the significance of this imbalance varied widely from one relationship to the next. For ‘Maxine’ it created an awareness of balance; that despite the recognised benefits of their relationship, which she had described in some detail, there lay behind it an important absence of knowledge about who her mentor really was and thus almost a continuance of the power imbalances that characterised the prison experience.

I understand that you shouldn’t really ... you can’t afford to give out addresses and home phone numbers and even last names because it can be dangerous to them, so I’m not sure how to approach that but I did find it ... I mean, you’re already coming from a situation where you are so damn dehumanised; where you don’t exist, you know? Medicare doesn’t even cover you. So that just adds to it a bit more, that you are insignificant. But on the good side, they came over and picked me up and we all went out for coffee and she was always more than willing to come closer to me and whatever, so there’s the positive stuff ... [But] it makes you feel somewhat insignificant, a lesser person, a lesser being because you’ve already come from that. Of course with my background in addiction, I’ve already got self-esteem problems. (‘Maxine’)

It seems probable that differences in frequency and level of engagement within mentoring relationships reflect the impact of this power differential on ex-prisoners’ willingness to engage with a person who is otherwise external to their lives. For many women the relationship was resoundingly positive and this differential perhaps less important. But for others, such as ‘Tania’ who wondered whether her mentor looked at the relationship ‘not as a job or obligation, but as a completely separate thing in her life away from the rest of her life’, it was distance in some form, be it power or class, that precluded a full and open engagement.

Mentoring and Personal Change

Many of the contributions provided by mentors can be understood as assisting the psychological restructuring that takes place as ex-prisoners seek to develop a nonoffending lifestyle and self-concept. Our data suggest a need to distinguish between role-modelling, which is perhaps a too broad or indistinct concept in the current circumstances, and the more limited idea of modelling the prosocial thinking styles and behaviours that form part of the cultural or social capital held by mentors. A number of participants in the Women’s Mentoring Program described ‘events’ within their mentoring relationship where the mentor had assisted them in thinking through a particular problem in ways that were either new to them or, if not new, certainly not part of their normal repertoire. It was not always the case that this occurred in a didactic sense. On some occasions mentors reported how an idea they had raised at some time in the past had later been brought into conversation,

indicating that the mentee had indeed picked up on an otherwise unremarked suggestion.

I used to encourage her to try and build bridges, to not be so picky about this one or that one and to concentrate on family type of thing and one day further down the track she mentioned something about bridge building and I thought "Good Heavens, she must have listened to what I said". (Mentor 'Beatrice')

On other occasions some aspect of participants' behaviour created a demand that it be addressed head on. This was by no means a one-way street. While there were circumstances where mentors reported the need to 'out' antisocial or manipulative behaviour, equally mentees reported that the nature of the mentoring relationship brought with it new demands for open or honest conduct that, upon reflection, was a positive aspect of the relationship. All of these developments reflect the strong binding and enmeshing elements of mentoring relationships, creating demands on both participants to 'do the right thing'. The product of these forces, including trust and genuineness in the relationship, appeared in our data to provide important reinforcement to both parties, but particularly perhaps to these ex-prisoners who experienced a often rare validation of their worth as human beings. This is reflected in the experience of 'Martina' who said:

Most of my life people just said to me that I'm useless and hopeless; I'm always doing stuff wrong. When you grow up with that, and, that's pretty much what you feel you are — just gutter scum ... I[ve] gone from thinking that I just had to tell her everything was good, to I could tell her anything I wanted to ... I could tell her when things were going really good and she gave me confidence, she made me believe in me. ('Martina')

We are thus left with a view of mentoring as working upon many aspects or dimensions of the desistance process, each of which draws upon the social capital of mentors to provide practical and psychological benefits. Interestingly, these transfers are activated or achieved through the rather roughly hewn device of a relationship that gradually emerges between community women and ex-prisoners brought together by a sponsoring organisation, in this case VACRO.

Discussion and Conclusion

The Women's Mentoring Program was established by VACRO as a way to supplement the scarce postrelease support services available to women exiting prison by using women from the mainstream community to provide companionship, advice and emotional support. The response from the general community was far greater than expected, suggesting that offender mentoring programs may have an important role in breaking down the barriers of ignorance and fear that exist between the community in general and the minority of its members who go to prison. Where postrelease relationships were established, both parties generally viewed them favourably and at least some of the relationships persisted over long periods. However, it is clear that mentoring is not the appropriate or desired form of postrelease support for all women exiting prison. Our research shows that those who continued in a mentoring relationship after release were mainly those who did not

face fundamental problems like drug or alcohol dependency, mental illness or having nowhere to live.

It may be significant that the women in this study so frequently sought to describe their relationship with the mentor as a form of friendship. We can perhaps only conjecture that what these women reported as positive aspects of the mentoring relationship — truth and honesty, openness, and so on, but also such factors as working through difficult or demanding ‘developments’ or ‘stages’ in the relationship’s growth — met some ideal-typical or implicit model of meaningful friendship. The idea of friendship qualities and of ‘the friend’ more generally seems a productive avenue to pursue in future research. Currently, the literature on friendship and desistance from crime is rather thin, focusing mainly upon peer influence upon agency in movements into and out of criminal activity (see Giordano, Cernkovich, & Holland, 2002).

Perhaps more squarely related to our theoretical frame of desistance, research on friendship influences has been tied to key variable affecting desistance identified by Sampson and Laub (1993): marriage. Here, debate has turned over whether marriage itself has a main effect upon criminal conduct or whether marriage serves to change peer friendship relations which, themselves, affect involvement in crime (Warr, 1998). In challenging Sampson and Laub’s assumptions over the drivers of change through marriage, Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolf (2002) argue for an interpretation that focuses upon the normative orientation of the partner rather than control theorists’ emphasis upon bonds. In this respect, Giordano and colleagues reference not only the differential association principle of prosocial orientation, but note also Simmel’s (1950) principle that it is in fact difference, not similarity, that is key to understanding individual change. Although Giordano et al.’s concern has been with intimate relationships where difference produced positive change in their participants’ lives, their conclusions are quite apposite to the friendship relationships developed between prosocial mentors and ex-prisoners. They remark that ‘a high level of initial motivation and effort’ was required to make the relationships work and suggest this is ‘because the actor must overcome the more generally observed tendency for partners to select one another on the basis of similarity’ (p. 1047). There are echoes here of the words of both mentors and the ex-prisoners they mentored, and their stories of adaptation and acculturation to each other’s modes of thinking and being. Seen this light, the effect of accessing and activating social capital through mentoring is in many ways congruent with the impacts of positive normative orientation among reference others that lie at the heart of differential association and social learning theories, and now increasingly also, models of desistance.

All of this points to the importance of the quality of the friendship that developed between ex-prisoners and their mentors. Clearly, the mentoring relationship is more than just a substitute for normal social relationships that are unavailable. The mentor is someone who has committed to supporting the mentee through her postrelease problems, who knows that the mentee has been in prison and has some idea of what kinds of experiences this entails and who will respond to the issues that the mentee raises in predictable ways: honestly, confidentially, safely and nonjudgmentally. The fact that a mentor is not someone with whom the mentee has an emotional or familial attachment means that her advice is able to be used in ways

that are potentially more helpful. All of these features of the women's reported experiences with their mentor are in harmony with the key dimensions of effective therapeutic relationships identified in the first part of this article. Perhaps where they differ from the core conditions for change elaborated by McNeill (2006, p. 52) — 'empathy and genuineness; establishment of a working alliance; and using person-centred, collaborative and 'client driven' approaches' — is indeed in the genuinely collaborative aspect of these mentoring relationships.

But mentees did also note the power imbalance in the relationship. On the one hand this seems to be implicit in the concept of mentoring itself, be it within career development, youth assistance or adult criminal justice. But as 'Maxine' noted in respect of her own experience, women exiting prison bring with them both longstanding psychological sensitivities to such an imbalance (e.g., low self-esteem) and the recent experience of dehumanisation that is part and parcel of imprisonment. The significance or impact of power differentials is difficult to ascertain and would benefit from further, direct, attention, particularly since few studies address the within-gender context, the mentoring situation and the experience of imprisonment as an important feature of the relationship dynamic. Three recent studies do bear mention. In a recent qualitative study of women in custody and in transition to community, Mageehon (2008) emphasised the strategic experience of women in negotiating and brokering power relationships both with 'authority' but also within inmate and ex-prisoner social networks. In the context of within-gender mentoring, in this case, women paired with girls, Schippers (2008) found power difference to flow not from the hierarchical nature of the mentoring relationship itself but rather from girls' efforts to construct a point of difference through race and to establish their own (Blackness) as of higher status. Two things (at least) make Schipper's work interesting. First, she reveals the inadequacy of assumptions about hierarchical and linear lines of power. Second, she moves away from perspectives that present a dichotomous relation of power with resistance. This binary is routine in criminology, and particularly in prison sociology. Bosworth and Carrabine (2001) have attempted show how prisoners, like the middle-school girls studied by Schipper, are subjects of power not in any ordinary hierarchical sense, but rather in a mediated fashion underpinned by interactional strategies. Bosworth and Carrabine argue that prisoners bring to the power context a variety of subjective identities conditioned by gender, class, race, sexuality and the like that, together, go to form the performative modes of being that have too simplistically and homogeneously been labelled 'resistance'.

But we must still ask the question: Does this mentoring work? The aim of our discussion of mentoring theory with which we began this article was to problematise the whole question of effectiveness. The widespread adoption of offender mentoring programs is not founded on a clearly articulated set of processes or mechanisms by which mentoring should render positive outcomes. The thesis of this article is that it may be possible to derive some of these crucial intervention targets from the burgeoning literature on desistance.

Here we have focused principally on the notion of social capital — and its accumulation — as a key factor in desistance from offending and the transition to positive prosocial lifestyles. Farrall (2002, 2004), it will be recalled, identified family and work as key to both the production and exercise of social capital, or what we have also referred to here as social connectedness and integration (see also Mills &

Codd, 2008). The centrality of family and social ties in the reintegration process is one of the distinctive factors about women's offending and their desistance from offending (Chesney-Lind, 1997; Covington, 2002). Our data reinforce previous research findings that one of the most critical consequences of imprisonment is the disruption of these social networks — more than half of the women in our sample had nobody, or only one person, in their lives other than their mentor. Yet there is also an upside to this rather dismal picture. It is clear, for instance, that a number of women actively severed relationships in an attempt to distance themselves from antisocial or criminal associates.

But it would be impossible to examine these reports of women's lives after prison without recognising the distinctly gendered nature of their postrelease experience. Unlike the research on men's desistance, which continually identifies romantic relationships as a lever for men's movement away from crime, for many women in this study their male (ex)partners were a source of risk and stress. Indeed, this is a consistent finding in the small literature on women's desistance. Leverentz (2006: 483) summarises it to the effect that 'men are often central to [women's] offending and tangential to their desistance', indicating that contrary to the conclusions of Farrall's or Sampson and Laub's research on men, gender dynamics may mean that it is necessary for some women to shed themselves of certain types of relationship in order to move out of offending. Moreover, although we must recognise the potential importance of social bonds and forms of social capital such as work, it is equally important to recognise the limited range of such resources 'that are within the reach of highly marginal women' (Giordano et al., 2002, p. 993) who are so often to be found in prison cohorts. Thus, while work training during imprisonment and employment following release may be important to men's desistance, work is and tends to have been a far less central part of women prisoners' lives both prior to and following their exit from custody.

All of this goes to reinforce the importance of understanding what the objectives of mentoring should be. The women in this study principally regarded their mentor as a friend rather than a role model. Unlike other forms of mentoring, such as career advancement, there is little evidence that the relationships in the VACRO Women's Mentoring Program served as the basis for the transmission of a distinct body of knowledge or skills from mentor to mentee. But to what extent can a mentor in such a position work actively toward therapeutic change goals (such as developing change plans or working to reframe ideas of self)? We suggest that at the very least a positive mentoring experience might give the women concerned new experience and practice in relationship building, instantiating Covington's (2002, p. 130) principle that 'in order to create change in their lives, incarcerated women need to experience relationships that do not repeat their histories of loss, neglect and abuse'. But our study has also shown the enormous potential of the pool of residual social capital that lies largely untapped within our community. Our study evidenced definite pathways by which that capital could be activated for purposes that were both practical in nature — providing job or house references, lending reputation in court proceedings — and that intervened in the complex process of psychological change that must accompany letting go an old life and personal identity and finding new ways of being in the world.

Endnote

- 1 Only an outline description of the Women's Mentoring Program is given here. A full description of the program can be found at <http://www.vacro.org.au>

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