

Inmates in the Role of the "Wounded Healer": The Virtuous of Peer-to-Peer Programs in Prison

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Abstract: Researchers in the field of crime desistance have recently focused on the strength-based role of the "wounded healer" or "professional-ex", as exemplified by former addicts and prisoners who desist from crime and recover through the professional practice of peer mentoring. Studies point to the many benefits inherent in the role of the "wounded healer" for incarcerated people employed in peer-based rehabilitation roles. These benefits can include opportunities to experience accomplishments and an increasing sense of ability and self-worth. Additional benefits include acquiring a new meaning and purpose in life, the development of a new self-identity, increasing feelings of belonging and satisfaction from life, and a stronger commitment to avoid crime. These findings suggest that formerly incarcerated individuals can form positive, pro-social relationships with their peers and serve as positive role models for them. The purpose of the present article is to review the current literature on peer-to-peer programs currently implemented in Western prisons, to establish and expand them, as a means of improving the rehabilitation efforts of present and past prisoners. It is recommended to examine the preservation of their benefits and effectiveness in the long run, both for aid providers and recipients.

Keywords: Wounded healer, peer-mentoring, positive criminology, crime desistance, rehabilitation.

INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades, peer-based programs have been implemented in prisons and the community, aiming to improve ex-convicts' chances to avoid crime and integrate into the community. Peer-based programs are based on the role of the "wounded healer", according to which former addicts and prisoners assist peers to recover and rehabilitate, based on their knowledge and experiential experience. Studies in the field of crime desistance conducted in this direction suggest that generative activities, such as volunteering, peer-mentoring, and rehabilitation work, contribute to the personal rehabilitation efforts of the resisters (Arrigo & Takahashi, 2006; LeBel, 2007; Maruna, 2001; White, 2000).

A major challenge facing ex-prisoners who wish to reform and rehabilitate is the need to prove that they deserve forgiveness (Maruna & LeBel, 2009). One way to reconcile with the past injuries, to be forgiven and re-integrate into the community, is by aiding others ("making good"), especially those who have gone through a similar path in life, i.e., addicts and former prisoners (Maruna, 2001). Involvement in productive activities for the benefit of others enables convicts to practice a new pro-social identity, overcome negative stigmas, rebuild their relationship with society and gain redemption (Heidemann *et al.*, 2016; LeBel *et al.*, 2015; Maruna *et al.*, 2004).

The purpose of the present article is to review peer-to-peer programs, which are currently implemented in prisons in various Western countries, from the perspective of the "wounded healer" role, to establish their benefits and expand them, as a means of advancing the rehabilitation efforts of present and past prisoners.

The Role of the "Wounded Healer" in the Field of Offender Rehabilitation

The archetype of the "wounded healer" refers to the healing of other wounded individuals by those who have themselves been injured (Conti-O'Hare, 1998). Wounded healers with a history of drug addiction or delinquency often have a sharp understanding of the "lived experience" regarding their addiction and recovery process (Heidemann *et al.*, 2016; LeBel *et al.*, 2015; Maruna, 2001; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020). The "wounded healer" principle is based on *experiential knowledge*, which can lead to *experiential expertise*, referring to the ability to treat or solve a problem through the usage of personal experience with the phenomenon (Borkman, 1976).

The principle of the "wounded healer" is reflected mainly in self-help groups for addicts such as AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and NA (Narcotics Anonymous), in which an addict-in-recovery can become a role model as well as a source of hope and can serve as a guide and leader for the new recoveries (Borkman, 1976; 1990). Through their knowledge and experience, recovering addicts offer to the new recovering relevant insights and support that help them

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cope with the ongoing challenges on the recovery path (White, 2000).

Studies confirm these assumptions, noting that involvement in the role of sponsors in support groups for addicts was found to be associated with psychosocial adjustment and better treatment outcomes (Marsh, 2011; Silverman, 2013), as well as with a higher sense of self-worth (Aresti *et al.*, 2010).

Prisoners and ex-prisoners are currently integrated into formal rehabilitation roles within the prison and community, in reentry programs (Burnett & Maruna, 2006), and mutual aid groups for addicts (Bellamy *et al.*, 2012). For example, the "United Re-Entry" (Clute *et al.*, 2019), which is implemented in a joint effort of two former prisoners—Paul Taylor and Weldon ("Prince") Bunn—who as part of their rehabilitation process assisted their peers in prison and continue to do so in the community. The program trains ex-prisoners, named "returning citizens", who have managed to change their way of life during imprisonment, to be leaders of change in their communities after their release. The program rests on the idea that personal experience in prison gives ex-convicts unique skills to deal with problems they once contributed to when by helping peers, they preserve their process of change (Clute *et al.*, 2019).

Studies conducted on ex-prisoners employed in peer-based rehabilitation programs point to the following benefits inherent in the role of the "wounded healer": granting opportunities to experience achievement; increasing sense of ability and self-worth; developing a sense of accomplishment, meaning and purpose in life, developing pro-social self-identity; increasing sense of social belonging as well as their commitment to desist of crime (Aresti *et al.*, 2010; Heidemann *et al.*, 2014; Heidemann *et al.*, 2016; LeBel *et al.*, 2014; Maruna, 2001; Woods, 2020).

These findings suggest that ex-prisoners can form pro-social relationships with their peers and serve as positive role models for them. As Riessman (1965) noted in his "helper therapy principle", those who help others, donate themselves. Similarly, researchers in the field of crime desistance point out that aiding peers allows ex-prisoners to gain reinforcement and legitimacy for their new way of life (Maruna, 2002). This can be seen as an expression of the development of positive emotions such as gratitude and altruism used by those who wish to reform (Bathje *et al.*, 2020), as emphasized in self-help groups for addicts (Ronel,

1998) and positive criminology perspective (Ronel & Elisha, 2011; 2020).

However, alongside the many benefits attributed to the "wounded healer" role, primarily for the aid providers as noted above, care should be taken not to romanticize the past injuries, assuming addiction has to value only in the context of recovery and healing. Furthermore, studies pointed to professional conflicts of former addicts used in professional healing roles, resulting from different views on the nature of addiction and recovery, as well as problems of countertransference, role confusion, and even relapse (White, 2000).

Inmates in the Role of Wounded Healer: Peer-to-Peer Programs in Prison

Despite the increase in the number of formal programs that offer inmates practical opportunities to assist other inmates in prison, the number of such programs is limited. This is due to the reluctance of the prison authorities to give prisoners power and authority over other prisoners, for fear of abuse (Woodall *et al.*, 2015).

However, in recent years, peer-mentoring programs are operated in prisons in various Western countries such as England, Canada, the United States, Australia (Devilly *et al.*, 2005), and Israel (Einat, 2017), aim at transferring pro-social attitudes and behaviors (Dhaliwal & Harrower, 2009). Studies have concluded that these programs are valued by mentor prisoners, mentees, and prison officers, reduce self-harm among mentees and increase the self-image of mentors (Adair, 2005; Devilly *et al.*, 2005). It also found that the role of mentorship allows mentor prisoners to develop positive personal and interpersonal skills (e.g., taking personal responsibility and empathy), and perceive their role as a practical opportunity to compensate society for their past negative actions and rehabilitate (Edgar *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, a study from Israel on inmates serving as a peer mentors, points to the development of feelings of responsibility and concern for others and finding positive meaning in life (Einat, 2017).

In addition to peer-mentoring programs as noted above, prison-based academic seminars are operated in prisons, aiming to train graduates for assistance positions. A notable example is the Inmate Missionary Program for Graduates at Angola Prison in Louisiana. The program allows inmates to acquire a bachelor's

degree for free, while in return, the graduate inmates serve as "peer ministers", i.e., supporting peers through a variety of roles such as counseling, mentoring, guidance, and vocational training. This program was expanded and is currently operated in at least 14 other U.S. states (Jang *et al.*, 2020).

A study designed to understand the motivations and meanings that inmates of the Angolan seminary attribute to their role as "peer ministers", reveals four themes of positive criminology (Ronel & Elisha, 2011): (a) the importance of respectful treatment of inmates by correctional administrations; (b) the value of building trust in pro-social modeling and improving inmates' self-perception; (c) repairing past injuries and harms and (d) spiritual practice as a basis for constructing a positive self-identity and social integration. Contrary to the description of their long imprisonment experience as a "social death", supportive prisoners reported that their occupation as peer supporters allows them to develop positive emotions such as love and human compassion and find new meaning in their lives (Hallett *et al.*, 2017).

Similarly, a recent study examined the effectiveness of a prison-based seminar operating in maximum security prisons in Texas, among aid providers and recipients, found positive correlations between participating in the program and increased feelings of meaning and purpose in life; high levels of religiosity and spirituality; and cultivating virtues such as humility, forgiveness, and gratitude (Jang *et al.*, 2020).

Unlike most other roles in prison, the peer-mentoring role offers inmates autonomy, authority, and daily involvement in a variety of meaningful and legitimate activities. These may support the notion that a prison can function as a real correctional facility, as suggested by Cullen and colleagues (Cullen *et al.*, 2014) in their proposed innovative model of prison - "the virtuous prison", which strives to promote pro-social norms and behaviors, by encouraging positive encounters between prisoners based on positive modeling. However, despite the positive trend and the encouraging findings, there are few peer-to-peer programs in prison, while after the release from prison the ex-prisoners encounter many barriers in their reentry efforts into the community.

CONCLUSIONS

Studies in the field of criminology support the idea that the role of the "wounded healer" contributes to the

transformation of former addicts and prisoners while indicating a culture of "giving back to others", according to which those who have begun to rehabilitate feel a moral obligation to help especially those in a similar life path (Maruna, 2001; Heidemann *et al.*, 2016). Accordingly, research finding point to many benefits inherent in the role of the "wounded healer" for inmates employed in peer-based rehabilitation roles: providing opportunities to experience accomplishments; Increasing the sense of ability and self-worth; Developing a sense of accomplishment, meaning, and purpose in life; Developing a new self-identity; Increasing feelings of belonging and satisfaction from life; And a stronger commitment to avoid crime (e.g., Aresti *et al.*, 2010; Heidemann *et al.*, 2016; LeBel *et al.*, 2014; O'Sullivan *et al.*, 2020; Marsh, 2011; Maruna, 2002; White, 2000; Woods, 2020).

This evolving field holds the promise of a paradigm-changing in the correction systems and utilizing the generative effects of peer-based programs on change and rehabilitation processes (Heidemann *et al.*, 2016; Jang *et al.*, 2020). Considering the many benefits attributed to peer-to-peer programs, as demonstrated above, it is recommended to develop appropriate policies and to expand such programs that train former addicts and prisoners for rehabilitation and mentoring roles, in prison and the community. However, it is also advisable to research to examine the preservation and effectiveness of the benefits inherent in the role of the wounded healer in the long run, both for aid providers and for recipients. It is also recommended to examine the barriers and limitations that narrow the possibilities of former addicts and prisoners to participate in peer-to-peer programs, such as the lack of incentives and low wages (Bathje *et al.*, 2020).

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Received on 02-02-2022

Accepted on 04-03-2022

Published on 09-03-2022

<https://doi.org/10.6000/1929-4409.2022.11.02>

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