The relational context of desistance

Beth Weaver
July 2013
Overview

• The dynamics of the relational context of desistance
  – Recurrent elements of change process
  – Intimate relationships and families of formation

• The implications for practice and service delivery with individuals and families
The Story of the Del

- Life stories of a naturally forming group of men
- Aim:
  - to explore the relational contexts in which desistance occurred (or not)
  - to understand how particular social relations (friends, partners, families etc.) influence offending and desistance
  - how individual, relational, cultural and social contexts influence onset, persistence and desistance
Desistance, intimate and family relationships

• Relationships are central to human motivation and action – need to mutually and reciprocally relate to other people.
• Interpersonal dynamics and effects are only part of the story.
• It is that bond that exists between people and the outcomes that emerge as a consequence of being in the relation that is key to understanding effects.
• These outcomes are called relational goods i.e. love, trust, loyalty
• The desire to maintain these goods emerging from a given relationship motivate and drive human action.
Meet Harry…

- Intimate relations and desistance - a partner places constraints on their partner’s behaviour or people change themselves because their partner’s views become more significant than their friends’.

- Bit more to it?
  - Harry disassociated from the Del when the feud broke out.
  - He was in a significant intimate relationship with Millie.
  - Despite her exhortations for him to desist, he associated with a new group and continued to offend – although he gave up burglary to limit the shame for Millie.
  - Millie stood by him even though she disapproved.

- Here we see them making reciprocal and collaborative adjustments to maintain relationship.

- Relationship neither causative or conditional on desistance.
• Fatherhood provided impetus to initiate and sustain changes in his behaviour and lifestyle.
• Motivated by potential impact of offending on role and relationship with his son.
• Informed by Harry’s values and beliefs about masculinity and good fathering.
• Here family as both a constraint on offending and enablement for a new way of living.
• Not reducible to effects of individuals on each other – but change emerges as an outcome of the reciprocal orientation of the family to maintain their relationships.
Informal social relationships and desistance

- Desistance enabled / constrained by *interaction* of social relations of friendships, intimate relations, family, faith communities and employment – depending on the *meaning* of these social relations to the individual.

- Their meaning is informed by the individual’s *personal priorities, values, aspirations and relational concerns*.

- Desistance occurs within and through social relations and the *reciprocal informal exchanges* that take place between family and friends and/or through work & (for some) faith communities

- Reciprocity is about mutual helping in context of solidarity / interdependency.

- Connecting people to ‘circuits of social reciprocity’ can assist desistance.
Practice implications

• Crime and imprisonment can damage relationships and sever natural norms of reciprocity.
• Restorative and relation-focussed practices which engage friends and family in the change process.
• Transforming rehabilitation – where are the families?
• Families are both the context and medium of change or source of chaos, stress and trauma underpinning offending.
Practice implications ~ 2

• Working with and through families:
  – Problem-solving family work
  – Mutual aid based support groups
  – Parenting education
  – Relationship counselling
  – Family support and mediation.

• Range of techniques to create / build on circuits of social reciprocity between individuals and families using strengths-based, restorative approaches.

• Preparation for family re-entry and assistance to encourage naturally occurring processes of mutual support.

• Circuits of social reciprocity akin to circles of support model coordinated by practitioners and including, as appropriate, volunteers, key family members and friends.
Relational rehabilitation must start at the beginning of a sentence and continue throughout the process of release.

Focus on supporting or building naturally occurring circuits of social reciprocity.

Early and graduated release schemes are key opportunities overlooked by the transforming rehabilitation agenda i.e. HDCs and RoTLs.

Need to develop a better understanding of how such opportunities might be utilised to create conditions in which change can occur
  - i.e. combined with restorative and family focussed interventions
Summing up

• Informal social relationships are both context and medium through which change occurs.

• Still need to understand better:
  – The relational dynamics critical to the change process
  – How we might use these insights to more effectively support individuals and families
  – Through what mechanisms they might be most effectively delivered.

• Needs to be a much greater commitment at all levels to ensure relationally informed practices are systematically and widely available to individuals and their families.