Rehabilitation – writing a new story

Adrian Needs looks at the importance of process and context in turning prisoners' lives around

In 2014 many readers will have seen discussion of restrictions on prisoners receiving books. Driven by the then Justice Secretary Chris Grayling, these proposals were part of a revision of the Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEPS) that had come into force the year before. Their rationale was that the availability to prisoners of certain commodities should be structured around effort, attainment and compliance; it was further claimed that the restrictions would promote consistency and improve security. Protesters saw the hand of populist politics and expressed alarm at the moral implications of the measures, and their likely impact on constructive aspirations such as education. In December 2014 the High Court declared the restriction on books to be unlawful and its rationale to be 'misleading'. Not all psychologists were silent on the matter, but perhaps more could have been offered to inform the debate from a psychological perspective.

Fewer readers will be aware of an important critique of psychology in prisons that appeared around the same time as the controversy surfaced. This paper (Gannon & Ward, 2014) argued that there is a crisis in the identity, practice and knowledge base of the field. This was attributed largely to the dominance and manner of implementation of the 'Risk-Needs-Responsivity' (RNR) approach to reducing risk of further offending. Here, I will develop several concerns in relation to psychology in prisons, focusing in particular on a widespread failure to get to grips with processes in personal change and related contextual influences. I also offer some suggestions concerning the future of psychology in prisons.

Neglecting the process of change

Central to the RNR framework is the targeting of personal, attitudinal and lifestyle factors that extensive research has identified to be linked to involvement in crime (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). These factors (or 'criminogenic needs') typically are addressed using group-based, cognitive-behavioural methods.

There is an incremental relationship between effect sizes and adherence to these principles (Andrews, 2011) and this approach, heavily supported by manuals, has provided a platform for the delivery of rehabilitation efforts on an unprecedented scale. Nonetheless, questions have been raised concerning a variety of aspects of the approach, including its quality of implementation and effectiveness in practice. Whilst critics have sometimes been accused of 'knowledge destruction' or failing to provide evidence in support of even complementary developments, there has been an acknowledgement even from proponents that some aspects have remained underdeveloped (Andrews, 2011).

The RNR framework is based upon factors that predict continued involvement in crime; these are not the same as factors that predict desistance from crime. McNeill (2012) has argued that failure to analyse and apply understanding of how desistance comes about – in effect, neglect of the process of change – is a major limitation of the framework. A second point relates to delivery. Concerns have been expressed over the inflexibility of some therapy staff with regard to individual group members, over an emphasis on goals couched in terms of avoidance and reasons behind behaviour couched in terms of deficits. Such aspects can be experienced as punitive and impersonal, to the detriment of motivation and engagement (Ross et al., 2008). Combined with a perception of undue influence on their prospects, it seems that some prisoners have come to distrust psychologists (Maruna, 2011). Although the last few years have seen a reaffirmation of the importance to rehabilitation of the therapeutic alliance (Marshall & Serran, 2004), the above factors may work against its attainment.

Context

So, too, may the prison environment. The society of prisoners can be an arena of threatened and sometimes actual violence and exploitation, where individuals must locate themselves and their actions in relation to hierarchies, subgroups and possible roles. In encounters with prison officers prisoners may see themselves as spoken to like children or as being on the receiving end of more insidious 'mind games'. Clearly there is scope for vicious circles here, though many prison officers do extraordinarily well in managing difficult interactions with professionalism and humanity (Hay & Sparks, 1991).

Always in the background, though, is 'the system', and even before restrictions on books the IEPS tended to be seen by prisoners as serving control rather than rehabilitation (de Viggiani, 2007). To be a prisoner can be to move in a kind of parallel world that for many is permeated by a sense of powerlessness, lack of autonomy, wasted time, uncertainty, boredom, failure and shame. Mistrust is

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elevated, along with a need to preserve some degree of safety and self-worth (e.g. Butler, 2008; Perrin & Blagden, 2014). All this is not necessarily easy to shed upon entry into a rehabilitation programme, and it is to such a world that individuals must return when the session or programme is over.

Of course prisons are not all alike. They differ from each other in a range of respects, from architecture to staff morale. Prisons also differ according to their 'social climate'. This refers to aspects such as perceived safety, opportunities for personal development and the quality of relationships between prisoners and between prisoners and staff – in effect the 'personality' of an institution (Timko & Moos, 2004). Van der Helm and colleagues (2011) summarised relevant literature in terms of dimensions of support, growth, atmosphere and repression. Such dimensions accord with Alison Liebling's extensive work on the 'moral performance' of prisons (Liebling, 2004). This concept extends earlier notions of 'legitimacy' centred on the respectful, fair and ethical use of authority. Liebling's seminal research has been a major force behind what has been known as the 'decency agenda' and surveys of the quality of prison life. This is a body of research that is often omitted from discussions of rehabilitation.

There is little doubt that we need to know more about relevant processes if rehabilitation is to be supported more effectively (Woessner & Schwedler, 2014). When programmes are rolled out more widely, their effectiveness can be attenuated to the point of evaporation: it is at least in part context-specific (Hough, 2010). Support for this view comes from early evaluation of cognitive skills programmes within HM Prison Service (Falshaw et al., 2003).

This limited incorporation of context and a focus on 'procedures over process' (Marshall & Serran, 2004, p.310) has a number of origins. For example, the expansion in employment of psychologists in prisons was accompanied by a concentration on assessing and working to reduce risk of reoffending centred on the emerging RNR approach. The attractions of 'evidence-based practice' and standardisation on a large scale had an added appeal for managers and policy makers attuned to a cultural context of target-setting, audit and accountability in use of resources (Bryans, 2000). Expansion on this basis resulted in a growing proportion of psychology staff having limited experience of areas of working in prisons that used to be the norm, such as organisational consultancy and helping prisoners with adjustment difficulties. In explicitly narrowing the range of work and hence experience available to forensic psychologists, the strategy outlined in the NOMS publication 'Driving Delivery' in 2003 also reduced opportunities for trainees to meet the requirements of training and qualification based on a more comprehensive model of professional practice (Needs, 2010b).

An overriding concern with identifying and correcting apparent deficits within individuals may also be seen as a manifestation of the classic fundamental attribution error, whereby dispositional factors are emphasised over situational ones. The context-specific nature of risk is under-estimated (Boer, 2013) and life events that have been shown to be important in other areas receive cursory attention. This might be a consequence of the criminogenic needs at the heart of the RNR approach being abstractions, 'proxy' measures of often complex processes that occur within the varied contexts of individuals' lives (Polaschek, 2012).

Most fundamentally, this relative lack of emphasis on situational contexts might be seen as stemming from a prevailing 'essentialist' epistemology that locates 'mind' within the individual rather than as part of a system of pathways and interactions that encompasses and constitutes both individual and environment (Barrett et al., 2010). Following Clarke and Crossland (1985), perhaps we should concern ourselves less with taking human functioning apart and more with what it may be part of. This opens up possibilities for embracing the complexity of interacting, non-linear (outcomes are not necessarily in proportion to inputs) dynamical systems (Pycroft & Bartollas, 2014).

Process
Prisoners can indeed be seen as inhabiting a variety of 'systems'. These

Meet the author

'I felt I couldn't let the prison "book ban" go unchallenged. Though subsequently reversed, it seemed as punitive and badly thought out as, for example, earlier proposals to make new prisoners wear a distinctive uniform. There was, however, another troubling aspect. Whilst writers, actors and reform groups had been vociferous in their protests, I wasn't aware of much of a contribution to the surrounding debate from psychologists, including those involved in rehabilitation. Had things really changed so much since I had left HM Prison Service? Had the emphasis on standardisation and audit left so little scope for thinking outside of boxes that must be ticked? Of course this is a pretty offensive over-generalisation but it set me thinking; these thoughts bumped into those occasioned by Gannon and Ward's (2014) critique of "correctional psychology".'

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include relationships with specific individuals, generalised others, former and future selves, and structures such as bureaucracies and regulations. These interact with each other and with the systems of other people. For example, allegiance to subculture, related contingencies and perceptions of legitimacy may influence a personal narrative that is brought to bear in a risk-assessment interview with a psychologist. The psychologist, too, is part of multiple systems. In the ensuing encounter each individual responds to the other. Doctoral research by Jo Shingler suggests that some practitioners can be aware of and even navigate such processes, though they can be a source of tension. Such systems are rarely reflected in manuals or existing research into risk assessment, despite their potential impact on outcomes.

Switching to rehabilitation, as yet unpublished supervised work by former postgraduate students of mine at least raises the possibility that prison environments can come to reflect (and therefore perpetuate) the sorts of personality characteristics often attributed to their residents. Where other provision is limited, the more disturbed, coercive or ruthless elements amongst the prisoners may co-create a social climate in their own image; this in turn affects individuals who might have gone in a different direction. 'Dog eat dog' views of the world find ready opportunities in prison for manipulation, intimidation and exploitation. These can contribute to a context where a preoccupation with themes of survival, advantage and guardedness can be adaptive and self-fulfilling. Similarly, individuals who lack coherence and consistency in their experiences of self and relationships can be finely attuned to the implied or explicit views and intentions of others toward them. Here the environment may be one of fragile relationships and emotional volatility.

It would be surprising if exposure to the patterns resulting from such an environment did not come to affect the outlooks and behaviour of members of prison staff, who for their part might already be feeling the consequences of the prevailing economic, political and managerial rhetoric. Such climates are hardly conducive to rehabilitation. In fact, in one establishment studied the salient configuration of social climate indicated by prisoners (low perceived support, autonomy and order) was almost the exact opposite of that reported by Timko and Moos (2004) as necessary for therapeutic change. This was mirrored in the staff group by high levels of stress.

Such findings on social climate must be treated with caution, but it might be useful to raise the possibility of a resonance with another 'system'. Parallels might be drawn between Timko and Moos' conclusions regarding the climate necessary to promote personal change and the conditions for providing a 'secure base' for exploration and development recognised in attachment theory. The implications of an attachment-based approach to understanding and practice have been promulgated in forensic mental health settings (Adshead, 2002). Far from providing a secure base for renewed development, the setting mentioned above seems to have constituted, for some at least, a crucible for concerns and strategies associated with insecurity and self-preservation.

Such an orientation may be kept alive by an environment where themes of perceived distrust, rejection, shame and unresponsiveness are rarely far beneath the surface. It is tempting to suggest that the consequences of impaired 'reflective functioning' associated with insecure and chaotic forms of attachment (Fonagy & Target, 1997) bear more than a passing resemblance to the targets of RNR-based cognitive-skills programmes. We must give more thought to how we might realistically create an approximation of a secure base in a prison environment. Despite improvements in recent years, perhaps programme makers might ponder a little more on ways of enabling individuals to experience the reciprocal connectedness necessary for greater awareness of self and the perspectives of others (or 'reflexivity': Weaver, 2012).

These are powerful processes. Belonging is a fundamental human motive, and how we fare in this affects a range of mechanisms that have their origins in the fact that we are social beings. Again with a trace of irony, the effects of social exclusion can include impairments in self-regulation, a decrease in prosocial behaviour and an increase in aggression (e.g. Baumeister et al., 2005). The ways in which we define ourselves and give meaning and direction to our lives are inherently relational. Many offenders constitute their identities through narratives characterised by themes of shame, stigma and condemnation. Though some commentators might see this as entirely appropriate, the attendant fatalism and loss of hope tend to be counter-productive. Supportive relationships, on the other hand, can sometimes steer the individual towards agency and a more coherent, prosocial identity. These aspects have been suggested as crucial to the process of desistance from offending (Vaughan, 2007; Ward & Maruna, 2007).

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There is a growing view in criminological research that desistance from offending involves several more or less sequential processes characterised by the interaction of subjective and environmental factors (McNeill, 2012). There must be openness to and momentum for change, new experiences and engagement, the building of new narratives and aspirations regarding the sort of person the individual can become (Giordano et al., 2002). As in psychological perspectives concerning readiness to change (Burrowes & Needs, 2009), there is great scope for psychology to explore and evaluate these processes.

Such work can already draw upon several promising areas that emphasise supporting and engaging the individual as an active agent in the change process. These include the Good Lives Model (Ward & Maruna, 2007), engaging prisoners as 'Listeners' or peer mentors, the growth in 'enabling environments' and PIPEs (Psychologically Informed Planned Environments) for personality-disordered offenders, and the use of Prisoner Self-Service kiosks to facilitate planning and contact with families. Major lessons can also be learned from experience with therapeutic communities. There is certainly a place for RNR-based practice, but as part of a comprehensive strategy that incorporates context and process and puts ethics at the forefront (Polaschek, 2012).

Back to books

Although its impact is now historical, what implications can be drawn concerning the possible psychological consequences of restricting prisoners' access to books? It might be suggested that openness to new ideas, possibilities, patterns and perspectives is enhanced through reading. Something similar might be said about connectedness to other minds. Books can be resources for conversation and the development of new interests and potential roles. For the many prisoners with literacy problems

but time on their hands, the availability of books can support their efforts at catching up on their education. Where others send in reading matter this is a validation of one's individuality and worth. Reading is also an activity that 'normalises' in that the essential process is the same wherever it is done or who does it. This might converge with reconstruing offending as incompatible with new roles and a developing identity. Rather appropriately, Perrin and Blagden (2014, p.912) write of the latter as prisoners 're-storying their lives'.

The loss or reversal of these benefits is likely to have had several regrettable consequences compounding, for example, a lack of openness to new experience and possibilities that perpetuates a reliance on schematic processing and group norms (Perry & Sibley, 2013). Especially cautionary, however, are indications that perceived legitimacy is eroded by apparent instances of unfairness, unethical behaviour, impersonal treatment and arbitrary control – especially when prosocial aspirations (such as improving education) and moves to cultivate a positive future self are undermined (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). Prisoners tend to be acutely aware that they are in prison *as* punishment, not *for* punishment, even when others appear to forget it.

It is worth remembering too that prisoners are drawn disproportionately from the most socially excluded people in society. Many come from backgrounds of institutional care and in a custodial environment there are likely to be 'frank and overt reminders of previous attachment disruptions and insecurities' (Adshead, 2002, p.37). We need to be careful about inadvertently maintaining the stances and strategies that we should be helping prisoners to leave behind. When environmental pathways are impoverished mind is too, and other meanings will fill the void.

The restriction on books was announced as part of a 'common sense' (and avowedly right wing) attempt at

contingency management. However any programme based on the latter needs careful implementation, management and adherence to principles that acknowledge, for example, the importance of 'a climate of good relationships between inmates and staff' and encouraging intrinsic motivation (Gendreau et al., 2014, p.1089). The gap between these aspirations and the crude reality of IEPS is suggested by (albeit anecdotal) accounts of prisoners committing disciplinary offences to be dropped a band in order to avoid being out of step with their peers. This would not be the first time that an element of the criminal justice system has stumbled into unintended consequences; rather ironically, like poor decisions everywhere, such instances not uncommonly involve a failure to take into account contextual factors whilst being shaped by the contextual factors operating on the decision-maker (Needs, 2010a).

Ultimately, the issue of supporting rehabilitation and the reintegration of offenders into society may be less one of whether we can achieve this than whether as a society we really want to (Maguire & Raynor, 2006). As reports by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons show, reductions in staffing due to severe budgetary restrictions have had numerous adverse consequences and do not give grounds for optimism. This is arguably false economy in an area of government policy often fraught with contradictions, such as ostensibly preparing prisoners for employment then doing little to help them get a job (Weaver, 2012).

The challenge for psychology in prisons, meanwhile, is to reinvent itself through realignment of what it offers and reassertion of its values (Gannon & Ward, 2014). Promising developments have appeared in relation to practice and knowledge. These should be nurtured and extended by reaffirming the contribution of psychology beyond (and arguably to bring to fruition) the RNR framework. With integration (and consideration of the 'whole system') arguably essential to fostering engagement and change, this should be supported by a renewed emphasis on forensic psychologists in prisons gaining experience of working at the organisational level of regimes, consultancy, 'trouble-shooting', training, supervision and well-being of staff. These were once established roles and there can be a synergy between relevant skills (Needs, 2010b). Such a strategy may also be a safeguard against any poorly conceived and coercive populist strategies in the future.

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