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‘Giving back and getting on with my life’: peer mentoring, desistance and recovery of ex-offenders

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Abstract:

Peer work and peer mentoring are dynamic social processes that have reciprocal benefits for both mentor and mentee in tackling issues around reoffending and substance misuse. Narratives of peer work and desistance were collected from Probation, Criminal Justice Drugs Team mentors and Health Trainers, to explore identity transformation and how the criminal justice system supports ex-offenders in desistance. Criminal justice practitioners were also interviewed, to explore the importance of relational support networks. Themes that emerged from the research include the transformative potential of peer work and how peer workers can become role models for other offenders. Peer workers are ‘experts by experience’, using personal narratives of desistance to inspire hope in others. Influential criminal justice personnel are key to this process. Peer work can be the start of building a desisting identity, acting as a ‘hook for change’ (Giordano et al 2002). Peer workers are given spaces within criminal justice organisations to work, which fosters a sense of purpose, belonging, trust and responsibility Seeing ex-offenders from a strengths based perspective is integral to supporting ex-offender transition. However, peer workers are inconsistently validated by criminal justice personnel, which can impede their desistance, placing them in a liminal position.

Key words:

Peer mentoring, probation peer mentoring, desistance, Health Trainers, peer support

Introduction:

This paper draws upon findings from a wider PhD study around peer work and desistance (see Nixon 2018), demonstrating that peer work can have a positive impact upon identity transformation and can contribute to the desistance process for peer mentors. Ex-offenders use peer work as a ‘hook for change’ (Giordano et al 2002) and the role can be instrumental in helping to construct a replacement self that is incompatible with further offending. Central to this process is support from criminal justice personnel, in recognising potential and providing a sense of hope and optimism that a future pro-social self can emerge. However, ex-offenders in peer work roles are placed in liminal positions because they receive inconsistent validation from ‘non-offending *colleagues*’ for their newly

emerging desisting identity, which can impair the desistance process. It is important to note that peer work and peer mentoring are used interchangeably in this paper. It is defined as ex-offenders "working with people who are not in authority over us" and "people that are the same as us" (UN Office on Drugs and Crime 2003:8). This research focusses upon formal peer work interactions rather than informal gestures of help and support.

Peer work schemes in criminal justice recruit ex-offenders *because of* their ex-offender status. Those released from prison tend to experience longstanding employment problems (Visher 2008), exhibit weaker attachment to legitimate work (Apel and Sweeten 2010), face inequality in the job search process, are unskilled and poorly educated, making them unattractive to potential employers (Bushway and Apel 2012). Peer mentoring is often the first step towards a successful career in the criminal justice system.

Whilst peer mentoring is not new to criminal justice, the justice secretary Chris Grayling highlighted its importance, making it a key part of the 2013 Transforming Rehabilitation agenda. Peer mentoring is useful "to help them get their lives back together" and to make "good use of old lags in stopping the new ones" (Grayling 2012 in Buck 2017:1). This research was conducted around the same time the Transforming Rehabilitation agenda was introduced and probationers subsequently demonstrated involvement in delivering RAR (Rehabilitation Activity Requirements).

Grayling identifies the utility of using ex-offenders to deter others from future offending. In trying to make sense of Grayling's statement, it is ambiguous as to 'whose life' it actually impacts upon, because peer mentoring has reciprocal benefits for both mentee *and mentor*, something that has largely been overlooked in criminal justice research until recently (see Jaffe 2012; Kavanagh and Borril 2013; Perrin and Blagden 2014; Buck 2014, 2016, 2017). It is important to capture the 'softer' outcomes of being a peer mentor, in terms of identity transformation, rather than a narrow focus upon recidivism rates. Therefore qualitative research, focussing upon the impact upon mentors rather than mentees is a welcome addition to existing knowledge around peer mentoring and peer work. The various peer mentoring schemes used in this research are outlined below:

CJDT (Criminal Justice Drugs Team) train existing service users to become peer mentors and they work with other substance misuse clients (service users) through facilitating group tasks. Former peer mentors lead delivery of the twelve-week CJDT peer mentor training. Former peer mentors have progressed to paid roles within criminal justice, for example substance misuse engagement coordinator or treatment worker, which shows there is a distinct career trajectory for peer mentors.

Probation peer mentors complete their training at the CRC (Community Rehabilitation Company) and at the time of their training they are still on licence, so they occupy a liminal territory, bridging the gap between service users and probation staff. Probation peer mentors in this study have worked with probation staff to deliver a service user satisfaction survey, and have been instrumental in setting up the first RAR (Rehabilitation Activity Requirement) 'Transition and Hope', which is a mandatory requirement for service users.

The Health Trainers are a team of ex-offenders who are employed to deliver initiatives to improve the health of service users.

Using ex-offenders as (peer) mentors in times of austerity will ultimately provide the criminal justice system with a source of free labour, which can potentially exploit ex-offenders. Hucklesby and Wincup (2014:1) argue that, "transferring mentoring into the coercive and punitive environment of the criminal justice system results in a departure from the very principles and values which are the basis of its usefulness elsewhere". Liminality experienced by peer mentors and the frustration around being *employed because of ex-offender status* is of significance in this paper, which is not reflected in the simplicity of Grayling's vision of peer mentoring.

This paper will demonstrate application of Giordano et al's (2002) theory to peer work and desistance, and findings from the study will illustrate both the enabling and constraining elements of peer work in supporting the desistance process.

Literature review:

The transformative potential of peer work

Kavanagh and Borril (2013) researched peer mentors who work for the St. Giles' trust, which is a London based organisation that provides peer support to those suffering from exclusion and marginalisation. The researchers found that peer mentoring yielded many positive benefits for both *mentor* and *mentee*. Mentors found the experience to be empowering, whereas previously they had felt powerless, and the experience of providing help for others was a personally rewarding venture. Mentors reported that the opportunity to give something back to the community was a strong benefit of engaging in the programme, which is supported by Webster (2013). Through mentoring relationships, trust was built and the mentors acted as role models for mentees. Peer mentoring developed a sense of hope for their future, opportunities for civic reintegration and the development of a new, pro-social identity (Kavanagh and Borril 2013). Participants expressed frustration when their mentees reoffended, which illuminates the extent of their own desistance, commitment to pro-social values and pathways to successful reintegration into society. In support of

this, Buck (2017) documents how peer mentors internalise failure when their mentees do not achieve their goals.

Peer mentors felt listened to by staff and felt supported by a range of criminal justice personnel (Webster 2013). They were treated as an asset to the scheme, using their experiences to support others. Previous experiences as an offender and/or substance misuser were cited as key to having authenticity in the role (Webster 2013), which has relevance for desistance, in terms of 'amputation or reconstruction' of a past criminal identity (Maruna and Roy 2007).

Peer mentors reported that they woke up with a purpose and experienced a redefinition of the self (Webster 2013). Peer mentoring forges strong social bonds between peer mentors, and a sense of reliance on each other for mutual support helps to build social capital. Peer mentors experience an enhanced level of trust placed in them, which allows them to see themselves as more than an 'offender' or a 'drug user'. Maruna (2001) identifies that ex-offenders are often drawn to roles like mentoring, which provides a special attachment to a group, and offers a connection to something larger than the self, which is vital for the desistance process.

Inspiring others, instilling hope and giving back:

Peer mentoring allows mentors to help others to do well in recovery and desistance, and this is beneficial to their own rehabilitation, helping to manage a spoiled identity (Goffman 1963) through generative acts. Generativity is defined as "the concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation, manifested through parenting, teaching and mentoring" (McAdams and De St Aubin 1998:20). Peer mentors instil hope in others who are embedded in the criminal justice system. RAPt (Rehabilitation for Addicted Prisoners trust[1]) and User Voice recognise the power of peer mentoring and only recruit ex-offenders for peer support services, which offers a creative approach to desistance; "mentoring and support roles offer personal development, a position of trust and responsibility and a way to develop leadership and inner-personal skills" (RAPt 2013:3). Buck (2016) identifies the relational dynamics that allow for peer mentors to be successful. They offer a template of a future life that is achievable, regardless of problematic criminal histories. Mentors are tactile human beings with emotions, aspirations and imperfections, rather than subjects to be governed (Buck 2016). Offenders with convictions become 'civic experts', with a unique and privileged experiential knowledge, and they have a level of credibility that others without an offending past

[1] Leading addiction charity The Rehabilitation of Addicted Prisoners Trust (RAPt) and social enterprise Blue Sky have completed their merger under the new name 'The Forward Trust'.

lack. Peer work reminds ex-offenders of a path that they never want to take again, reinforcing the changes that they have made (Kavanagh and Borril 2013).

Giordano et al (2002: 310) identify the construction of new networks as offering a way of enhancing one's own identity as a respectable person, or through provision of 'help, advice and moral support' (Giordano et al 2002:312). New pro-social networks provide an alternative to previous criminal social contacts (Giordano et al 2007: 16) which can support the desistance process.

Influential criminal justice personnel: Inspiring hope and recognising potential:

Rex (1999) found that many probationers attributed change to the work undertaken by their supervising officer, with their probation officer being 'non-judgemental, friendly and a good listener, making them more positive about their future and more confident in their ability to desist from crime (King 2014:7). In addition, McCulloch (2005) states that feeling connected to and seeing the probation officer as dedicated, loyal and concerned for the individual's well-being, were crucial aspects necessary to support change. Thus, key social relations, "have the capacity to influence, enable or constrain processes of change" (Weaver 2013: 84). Graham (2012:7) suggests that by creating social ties and participating in socially and personally valued roles, responsibility is increased for the individual and supportive micro environments are established. Positive relationships and social networks can increase social capital and reciprocity. Desistance is facilitated by having someone believe that the person can change for the better, which Maruna (2004) has linked to the Pygmalion concept (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968). The inclusion of hope for probationers rather than the language of offenders as hopeless, risky or dangerous, are key to successful desistance focussed practices (McNeill 2012). Social contexts that enable a move away from crime and reintegrate into mainstream society (King 2012) are key concepts in the desistance paradigm and recognising potential is fundamental in supporting ex-offender transition. Taylor (1997) identified the concept of 'enabling niches', which are positive environments that can foster positive changes. Commitment to a particular venue associated with peer work and desistance can signal desistance intentions to others. Buttimer (1976) states that individuals are not passive actors within spaces; rather there is a level of agency to organise their space in accordance with their goals. However, individuals must be granted mobility and the opportunity to move upwards by increasing their social standing, de-labelling, moving beyond the past and changing from being a stigmatised outsider to a citizen and stakeholder in society (Graham 2016). This is something that many ex-offenders cannot achieve without supportive relational networks in the criminal justice system.

Liminality of the peer work role:

However, working alongside non-offending colleagues within probation/criminal justice agencies can pose problems for a newly emerging desisting identity. Liminality is defined as the transition between identity states, as individuals are in a space of 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1967), encountering a period of ambiguity and disorientation. The end goal should be to receive a new status and re-assimilation into society (Turner 1967), but the liminal, intermediary space in this process is where the uncertainty lies. The community setting for peer work yields some tough emotional spaces for ex-offenders to work within. In contrast to 'enabling niches', 'entrapping niches' (Taylor 1997) are places where people are defined negatively by their social category, and their immediate environment is detrimental to emotional and social growth. In the probation environment, peer workers are trying to portray a new conforming and legitimate self; however, there are *'colleagues'* who do not validate this identity. Trying to recreate an alternative 'master status' (Becker 1965), the ex-offender is differentially accepted and endorsed by others in the community. Envisioning an appealing and conventional replacement self (Giordano et al 2002) becomes difficult and lack of continuity necessitates a constant renegotiation of identity with every interaction encountered. Peer mentors are defined in relation to their offences and are denied opportunities because of restrictive labels that are applied to them (Buck 2014), which limits civic engagement.

Buck (2014) argues for greater attention to be paid to the process of humanising rather than objectifying offenders, advocating that spaces should be opened for them as 'reformed citizens' rather than 'scrutinised citizens', in order to promote sustainable desistance from crime. Her research found that there was not a universal acceptance for the peer mentor identity *from mentees*, because of previous criminal connections. Shared former criminal histories vividly brings to life a remembered identity and subsequently, at least partially, dismisses the new identity of the peer mentor as inauthentic (Buck 2016).

Desisting self-identity:

Ex- offenders need to make sense of their lives, and they are able to do this through the development of a coherent and pro-social identity (Maruna 2001). It is important to consider the extent to which ex-offenders integrate their past into a current working self, or 'knife off' their past completely, which Maruna and Roy (2007) refer to as' amputation or reconstruction of the self'. Maruna (2001) claims that some ex-offenders connect past negative experiences to the present in such a way that the present good seems to be an almost inevitable outcome from the past, and involves reworking a delinquent history into a source of wisdom when acting in generative roles

(2001). This contrasts with Giordano et al (2002), who suggests that the ex-offender develops a replacement self incompatible with further offending, with the past discarded in favour of a more positive current self. Farrall and Calverley however, (2006) state that the past is a continuous presence because ex-offenders are reminded of where they came from, which generates a desire not to go back there.

In order to sustain desistance, there needs to be a fundamental and intentional shift in a person's sense of self, intentionality and agency (Maruna 2001) but this needs to be supported through interactions within the criminal justice system. Redemption rituals and validation are "social and interactional processes of empowerment and reintegration" (Maruna 2001:13). Halsey et al (2016) identify the fragility of a desisting self-identity, where a sense of fatalism and 'frustrated desistance' emerges because opportunities and upward trajectories are blocked for ex-offenders. The stigma of a criminal record can serve as a barrier for ex-offenders who wish to make the transition to spheres of employment that do not recruit ex-offenders purely *because* of their ex-offender status.

Methodology:

This paper originates form a wider PhD study around peer work and desistance, involving prisoners, probationers, former probationers and criminal justice practitioners (see Nixon 2018). One of the motivations behind this (wider) study was to provide a voice for peer workers in academic research, to raise concerns, advance an agenda for change and improve their lives (Cresswell 2011). Peer work research has predominantly focussed on the impact on the *mentee*, in terms of recidivism. This study focuses upon the *mentors*, looking at how peer work can as a 'hook for change' (Giordano et al (2002) and can be an integral step in the desistance process, which offers an original contribution to existing knowledge.

The author is a former prison officer who served 6 years at a category 'B' local adult male prison. Motivation for conducting this research was drawn out of frustration with prison officers who are reluctant to embrace offender rehabilitation and pro-social behaviour.

The wider PhD research recruited 38 prisoners/probationers/former probationers to be interviewed, to explore how peer work has helped, or is helping to shape desistance and transform their identity. Further to this, 8 staff were interviewed to examine the importance of relationships between peer workers and criminal justice personnel.

Of relevance for this paper, a subset of the overall research sample is utilised, comprising of 19 community participants working for CJDT, probation or Health trainers, at various stages of the

desistance process. The head of resettlement and accredited services, a senior probation officer and the peer mentoring training facilitator (probation officer) were also interviewed. Staff were selected to reflect a diversity of positions within the probation service. [2]A convenience sample was used in this research, drawn out of associations that the researcher held, or through connections made within probation, CJDT and Health Trainers. Gate keepers were keen to promote the ethos and success of peer mentoring programmes and therefore only a positive sample was recruited; no negative cases (where people quit or were invited to leave the role) were utilised in this study.

Attempts were made to contact ex-peer mentors who had left or been released from the programme, but those contacted either had their licence revoked and had been returned to prison, or refused to participate in the study. This sampling strategy links to the researcher's belief that peer work is transformative for the individual; however, there are limitations with this approach and the researcher is aware that the narratives provided are unrepresentative of all peer mentors. Whilst the findings demonstrate the many positive and transformational benefits experienced by this select sample, data collection also identified negative elements attributed to the role, which somewhat offsets the bias in sampling strategy.

All participants were informed of the status of the researcher as an ex-prison officer. Some participants were known to the researcher from the prison environment; others were not, thus placing the researcher in a 'partial insider', but mostly 'outsider' position, with little knowledge or direct experience of probation settings. All interviews were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed. Participant details were anonymised.

Interview transcripts were analysed thematically using Braun and Clark's (2006) 6 stage model and key themes were identified. Giordano et al's (2002) cognitive transformational model of desistance was used as a theoretical framework in this study, and transcripts were coded to align with the stages of the model. Giordano et al's (2002) theory offers a symbolic interactionist approach to understanding desistance, combining structure with agency. The model has 4 stages. Firstly there must be a general cognitive openness to change; "a shift in the actor's basic openness to change" (Giordano *et al*, 2002: 1000). The second stage of the model is latching on to a 'hook for change'; in this research, peer work was the 'hook for change'. Peer work is something that ex-offenders have actively sought out as a potential pathway to desistance. A replacement self starts to emerge and this influences future decision making, as a cognitive blue print for future actions (Giordano et al 2002). "An appealing and conventional 'replacement self' emerges that can supplant the marginal

[2] This research was conducted prior to the emergence of CRCs (Community Rehabilitation Companies)

one that must be left behind…so that it becomes inappropriate for "someone like me" to do "something like that'" (Giordano et al 2002: 1001). Significant others enable the desistance process through validation of the replacement self. Finally the ex-offender develops a self that is no longer compatible with further offending. This research supports application of Giordano et al's (2002) theory in understanding the role that peer mentoring can have on the desistance process.

Findings and discussion:

This section will present findings to support peer work as a 'hook for change' (Giordano et al 2002) and demonstrate how influential criminal justice personnel can offer both inspiration and hindrance to the desistance process. Findings suggest peer workers are placed in a liminal position and inconsistent validation for a 'replacement self' (Giordano et al 2002) can impair momentum towards achieving and sustaining desistance.

Peer work gives ex-offenders a renewed sense of self and an opportunity to generate hope into others, as LG illustrates:

> *"I get a lot form it (peer work) for myself; it gives me a purpose. I enjoy seeing people recover and make progress in life. It is instilling hope and aspirations back into them…helping people to lead healthy, productive lives as much as possible…when I see people still using, I feel for them, it's painful…when I see people in town that I have worked with and they come up to me and shake my hand and they are doing really well, I just feel blown away that I have been part of that. It empowers me to want to carry on (LG former peer mentor)*

LG demonstrates that peer mentoring has a reciprocal quality, which draws upon the 'wounded healer' concept (Jung 1951). Peer work offers the opportunity to use the self to guide others, and understanding the 'woundedness' of others allows empathy to be shared. Peer work also serves to reinforce the belief that they do not want to return to the painful place of addiction and criminality. LG's narrative offers an insight into his own desistance and the replacement self that he has created through peer work. Peer work can lead to a decision to progress into counselling or youth work as part of their own self-development and desire to change (White 2000; Maruna 2001). LG is currently employed as a treatment worker, thus professionalising his helper orientation towards others.

Peer mentoring can help ex-offenders to envisage a self that is useful to support others and helps to develop social capital and social networks, which are important for desistance (Farrall 2004). The notion of 'giving back' and making amends to society for offending is a reoccurring theme in the narratives of peer mentors:

"Peer mentoring has enabled me to fulfil my ambition to put something back into society, which is what I feel I should be doing, in light of where I have been and what I have done. I want to hold the hand of someone and say ""come on pal, I can give you a hand with that""; whatever it takes to stop someone from going back inside or to help them to see their life as worthy. Some people are called to preach…I am being led down a road; this is my calling…to help other people" (NH peer mentor)

NH is demonstrating a level of generativity towards others. Peer mentors orientate themselves in activities that benefit others, that transcend self-related interests and allows for giving back to society. Generativity is an important part of the desistance process and therefore it is key that work with ex-offenders should allow for development and facilitation of generativity (Maruna and McNeill 2007).

Peer mentors can have an influential and inspiring impact on others to become peer mentors, which is illustrative of a 'hierarchy of influence'. This supports Buck's (2017) concept of mimesis, where peer mentoring generates a sense of "wanting to be just like them" through positive role modelling. LM identifies the impact that other peer mentors had upon him:

"I just wanted to be a peer mentor. I wanted to do what I had seen BG and LG do in the past and I knew that I couldn't do drugs and the peer mentoring; I chose the peer mentoring" (LM former peer mentor, now substance misuse engagement coordinator)

The influence of seeing former criminal peers excelling in their role as peer mentors gave LM a level of self-efficacy, where he contemplated his future self against continued criminality. Peer mentors who motivate others to become peer mentors, encourage the subtle processes that underpin and maintain desistance (Buck 2016).

The power of using ex-offenders to deliver peer mentoring training sessions creates a sense of authenticity amongst trainee peer mentors, because they are 'experts by experience' and use their narratives to educate others:

"NH is the oldest peer mentor and he delivers parts of the training. The power of the experience of other mentors, the points they make and their insights they give during delivery of the material is more powerful than the material itself; it's ok getting the material to become peer mentors in isolation, but getting views on how you might interpret that, makes it even more real and dynamic" (CA peer mentor)

There is very little research that looks simultaneously at the narratives of both offender and staff to identify patterns of interaction that support desistance; which this research addresses. Criminal justice personnel are key to supporting the desistance process and can generate a sense of hope and optimism, through recognising potential to perform the role of peer mentor. The impact of providing hope to offenders is a key advancement in criminological research (see Van Ginnekan 2015; Liebling et al 2019). Negative labelling from the criminal justice system can impair self-efficacy to progress into positions of trust and responsibility, whereas positive affirmation from significant others can generate a looking glass self (Cooley 1902) and can increase self-efficacy:

> *"I was on an order at the time and my drug worker and probation officer were encouraging me to be a peer mentor, because I was testing negative (drug tests) all the time. I threw myself into groups and I became a well-known face in any recovery group. They saw something in me and said that I would be great at this. It gave me a boost when I had weak moments and thought that my life was going to be on drugs. There was always something in the back of my head telling me that, but now it's telling me that my place in life is getting others off drugs" (LM former peer mentor now substance misuse engagement coordinator)*

Alongside supporting the desistance of others, LM is starting to envisage a replacement self (Giordano et al 2002) through peer work, and through supportive desistance focussed relationships, he can see a positive possible future self (Paternoster and Bushway 2009). His 'working identity' (Paternoster and Bushway 2009) as a 'drug addict' and 'criminal' is starts to be replaced by a 'peer mentor' identity where he can see himself as a symbol of hope and recovery to other service users.

Staff in the criminal justice system can inspire change through a top down level of support for peer mentors, and recognising strengths and potential in ex-offenders is a key principle in criminal justice practice (McNeill et al 2012). JP (senior probation officer) supports Maruna and Le Bel's (2003) strength based practice assertion with regards to the Health Trainers, whom she is responsible for supervising:

> *"The decision was made to recruit those with first-hand experience of the criminal justice system; ex-offenders who have successfully turned their lives round and could be role models. I believe that instead of their former experiences being a handicap, our trained team of Health Trainers would be uniquely placed to use their past life knowledge in supporting and motivating service users to improve their health and well-being and empower them to want to lead healthier lives" (JP senior probation officer)*

Working with, rather than against criminal justice staff is an example of how ex-offenders can signal desistance (see Bushway and Apel 2012; Maruna 2012) and this research found a mutual level of respect and appreciation between peer mentors and senior criminal justice personnel. CP (head of resettlement and non-accredited interventions at probation/CRC) demonstrates respect for the contribution and commitment made by probation peer mentors, and also a high level of support for the desistance potential of peer work:

> *"…there is that hope and it's also about giving back, reparation, in desistance terms and whilst they may not have that terminology, they say that peer mentoring has ""changed my life and it's saved my life""; they talk in very strong terms about it and it is fantastic for us because they are really, really committed…these guys go the extra mile and they stay around …it (peer mentoring) is one of the most uplifting things that I do…I always try to stay connected, so whenever I meet peer mentors it always reminds me of what we are doing it for and the great impact they are having and equally what the peer mentor role is having for them. It is very rewarding for me. I assume that the level of trust and involvement will give people a level of self-confidence and self-worth, that they have been trusted and responsible for something, and hopefully they see themselves in terms of their strengths…that they have moved on with their life and to feel that they have got a bright future ahead of them" (CP head of resettlement)*

Senior criminal justice personnel are instrumental in helping to create a new identity for peer mentors. Allocation of a specific space in probation premises for peer mentors can help to forge a sense of belonging and role commitment, which can facilitate the start of a change in self-identity. Taylor (1997) draws upon the concept of 'enabling niches', which are positive environments that can promote positive changes. Commitment to particular venues associated with desistance generates a sense of security and place attachment, allowing for the creation of a replacement self (Giordano et al 2002):

> *"Yes it feels good to have our own place where we can meet up and not take up other rooms. CP (head of resettlement) is very big on peer mentoring and earmarked that room for us straight away…today is the first day that I am on my own…today, this is my room, this is part of my 'new world' and this is part of the attempts at trusting me and giving me a second chance…it's acceptance" (CA probation peer mentor)*

Peer mentors demonstrate role commitment by utilising physical resources given to them. LM's affinity to the peer mentor hub demonstrates a sense of purpose and attachment to the role of peer

mentor and the place in which this role is performed. This designated space also allows LM to focus upon supporting the desistance of service users:

> *"It was like a second home for me (the peer mentor hub)…I was there when they unlocked and they would have to boot me out at 5…I spent all day there...only 3 or 4 hours a week were actually spent doing the peer mentor placement. They had a little office with computers and other service users could go in if there was a peer mentor…I felt like I was doing something positive for others. When people are in here they aren't out robbing and scoring" (LM former peer mentor)*

Being given trust and responsibility are key to supporting the desistance process and peer mentors live up to this trust, not wanting to let down those who have shown faith in them:

> *"…I became a senior peer mentor then a probation volunteer. It's a responsibility. I have the keys. That is trust and I feel part of it…it was expected of us, from probation. From day one, there was a picture painted of us, a responsible person…be of some help to engage with people early in treatment, give them that support. From where I have come from…an order…on licence…it's quite a long journey" (BG probation volunteer)*

Probation peer mentors were recruited to design and deliver the 'Transition and Hope' RAR (Rehabilitation Activity Requirement) sessions to other service users. Involving ex-offender mentors in interventions that are delivered to service users generates a sense of inclusion and value for the mentors, and can enhance the credibility, meaning or legitimacy of the interventions (Weaver and McCulloch 2012):

> *"We put together the transition and hope RAR, which after finalisation will be put to every single offender. Basically, that is us telling our story. It hits home to people that have been through it; people can relate to others who have gone through it and come out of the other side. When they listen to our stories, they are more likely to take something in, and that is why peer mentors are getting a bit more promotion these days" (IM probation peer mentor)*

However, peer mentoring is not an exclusively positive experience. Peer mentors received 'mixed messages' from non –offending *'colleagues'* about their inclusion in a probation environment. LG was met with a negative reaction about his presence as an ex-offender:

> *"I still get the feeling today that some people (in probation) are still hostile towards you cos the think ""hold on, you have lived this life of crime, you have used drugs and now you are*

employed working here at the same level as me…we shouldn't be having people working in this environment, with confidential information, what if they relapse?"" Again, I wouldn't feel good enough…just my sensitivity…if I picked up on something and I could see that this person didn't enjoy working with me, I took a back step…made me feel shit about myself…that is life though I guess" (LG former Health Trainer)

LG is reminded of *who he is* by *who he is not* and this continual fluctuation in acceptance is a potential barrier for sustaining the desistance process. He experiences a sense of disenfranchisement in this environment (Uggen 2006) and his attempts at civic reintegration (Uggen 2006) are influenced by criminal justice personnel working alongside him.

Liminality is compounded further for LM, because after transitioning to a paid position within CJDT, there was a lack of acceptance towards him because his brother is a current service user. LM's position as substance misuse engagement coordinator placed him in a difficult position with colleagues who did not know how to handle his brother, and family loyalty placed him in a state of 'betwixt and between' (Turner 1967)

"…my brother is deeply entrenched in drugs. It's a strange one…my brother is a service user where I work. He can be quite difficult. A few times in the office I have heard his name mentioned. Members of staff bitch about him…I put my headphones on. I don't want to hear people calling my brother a cunt…he is my brother…it's difficult to hear people call him a 'waste of space'…I get appreciation on one side, but" "you shouldn't do that" "on the other. Whatever I do I am going to piss someone off" (LM substance misuse engagement coordinator).

LM, like other participants in this study, have transitioned from volunteer peer mentoring to paid positions within criminal justice. They are employed *because* of their ex-offender status, which over time can become problematic. Some ex-offender criminal justice workers are more transparent about their criminal pasts than others and keep it a salient part of their identity, yet others want to distance themselves from their criminal pasts. RE (probation peer mentor) is "grateful for being an addict" because it allows him to identify with the people that he is mentoring. He integrates his past into self, and a narrative is woven together to create a generative script (Maruna 2001) to help others:

"yesterday I accompanied a young woman (27) to a medical, broken, wanted to kill herself….she is struggling with drugs and im sat there not using…just to be beside her and

encourage her …being there for another person who is fucked and wants to die… is the reason I get up in a morning…it is why I do what I do" (RE peer mentor)

TR and DM started out as peer mentors and progressed to paid positions within criminal justice but both are keen to move away from roles that employ them *because of ex-offender status*. Frustration at blocked opportunities to progress into 'mainstream' occupations were evident in both narratives. TA expresses his frustration at being dismissed by non-offending colleagues and also stagnation in his role as Health Trainer:

"*I have been here 5 years as a Health Trainer….a lot of offender managers….they don't even look at you or talk to you…the reason why we are good is because we are ex-offenders and that gets us by with clients, but the way it doesn't work is that we are* ***always ex-offenders*** *and at some point you need to* ***not be*** *an ex-offender" (TA Health Trainer)*

Giordano et al (2002) states that the final stage of the desistance process is when there is a transformation in the way the ex-offender sees further offending; future criminality is fundamentally incompatible with the newly emerged replacement self. RE is a former armed robber who served 10 years in prison for this offence. When interviewed, was an active member in NA recovery and probation peer mentoring. His current self has surpassed his former criminal self as an armed robber, and he wants no part in future criminality:

"I couldn't even nick a penny sweet now, it just wouldn't feel right"

Comparison between armed robbery and a low cost item is of substantial significance for RE's desistance trajectory (through peer work). His comment suggests a level of desistance, where the actor looks back with increasing disdain on their former spendthrift ways (Giordano et al 2002). RE sees criminality as morally incompatible with the person he is now, demonstrating a level of moral agency (King 2013).

Limitations of this study include the sample used, which has been identified as a convenience sample. Peer mentoring has largely been presented as a positive experience; however, there are also challenges, which have been largely overlooked in this research due to no accessibility of negative cases. Researching ex-offenders who have had negative experiences of peer mentoring or have reoffended during their role could shed light on how to improve peer mentoring schemes within criminal justice. Longitudinal work could prove useful in furthering understanding of how peer work shapes the desistance process and can potentially lead to future opportunities within the criminal justice system.

Conclusion:

It is evident from the primary data presented in this paper that ex-offenders are a highly motivated and experienced resource to be utilised in criminal justice. There are several things that we can learn from this research. Firstly, this research supports application of Giordano et al's (2002) cognitive transformational model to peer work and desistance, identifying different cognitive shifts in the desistance process. Using this model, peer work can act as a 'hook for change' and can be a catalyst for desistance and/or recovery. Primary data presented in this paper suggests that peer work allows for a replacement self to emerge, that renders further offending incompatible with the new conception of self and the responsibility of peer work roles. This research demonstrates the importance that key criminal justice personnel have in supporting the desistance process, through recognising potential and inspiring hope. In addition, peer mentors offer a template of hope and desistance/recovery for other ex-offenders.

However, this research also found that peer work can produce negative experiences that inhibit the desistance process. Peer mentors expressed inconsistent validation from non –offending 'colleagues', which places them in a liminal state, causing fear and uncertainty. Buck (2017) states that peer mentors are required to give emotional toil for little financial reward. The emotional labour (Hoschild 1988) required for dealing simultaneously with their own desistance/recovery, the desistance/recovery of mentees and meeting organisational expectations can take its toll on the peer mentors. They are situated as intermediaries between staff and service users, and in an increasingly results-driven criminal justice system they can be overstretched and risk burning out. This has been documented in prison Listeners (see Jaffe 2012, South et al 2012), who are expected to perform increasingly more complex tasks as the prison officer workforce diminishes. It is important that peer mentors are supported and not exploited as free labour during austerity within the criminal justice system.

The research presented in this paper therefore suggests that peer workers should be treated with professionalism, to create an inclusive criminal justice culture, and to promote desistance focussed environments. Peer workers work exceptionally hard and have a high level of commitment to their roles. The integrity and professionalism they demonstrate is commendable, and a credit to the criminal justice system for recognising the utility of ex-offender mentors as assets. Through enabling ex-offenders to draw upon criminal pasts as sources of knowledge and wisdom to help others, rather than mechanisms to stigmatise them further, a transformative identity can emerge.

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