

The Myth of Rehabilitation

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Introduction

What is "Rehabilitation"? John Conrad (U.S. Department of Justice: 1973:22) suggests that rehabilitation is the process which makes it possible for an institutionalised and ostracised individual to function as a responsible citizen by enabling him to exercise his rights to meet his obligations.

This does not address the dilemma of rehabilitation should the individual not have rights or the resources necessary to meet his obligations.

This paper will examine the likelihood of successful rehabilitation for two contrasting examples:

- a) of an individual whose primary material needs cannot be met;**
- b) of an individual whose material needs can be realised and whose primary requirements would be social and personal rehabilitation.**

Rehabilitation cannot be considered independently of the consequences of imprisonment. A review of these issues will lead to the question of whether rehabilitation can be realised for the majority of those passing through the prison system. The dilemma for the social worker, questioning the likelihood of rehabilitation, is how to address the needs of the individual who although damaged by the system must continue to function within it.

As only 4% of the prison population are women I will take the liberty of referring to ex-prisoners and offenders in the masculine.

A Case History – A Case for Community Rehabilitation

John, one of 9 siblings, grew up in an overcrowded impoverished black community – dependent on the meagre wages his mother earned as a "domestic". His mother was only able to visit on her "weekend off" and indeed, he regarded his grandmother as a mother figure. The occasional male presence at home was generally characterised by drunken abuse. John never completed Std. 1. There wasn't often money for books or school uniforms, and besides, John frequently needed to look after younger brothers and sisters.

It became easier to avoid school and to rather socialise with the local street corner society. At 23, with 3 previous convictions, John was convicted of robbery and given a "life" sentence which he served at Barberton Prison, hundreds of miles from his home. He soon lost contact with his family. They could not afford the transport costs to visit, and being illiterate, were unable to maintain contact through correspondence.

At the age of 42, John was released with a train ticket to his home town, R8.00 in his pocket and the prison suit he was wearing. He went home but the sprawling metropolis he found bore little resemblance to the distant town of his youth. He was unable to locate his grandmother's house and no one seemed to have any recollection of his family.

John wandered aimlessly with no idea of where to go or what to do with himself. He was disorientated by the crowds and traffic, and confused by the price of commodities (fish and chips used to cost 50 cents – now one would scarcely get change from R8.00).

Thanks to an old time hobo with whom he had spent the night on Park Station, John arrived at Nicro weary, hungry and utterly bewildered. Perhaps if he could get to Empangeni where he believed he had family ...

Although this is a relatively extreme example – it is not uncommon, and it is in this context that we must address the issues of rehabilitation. According the S.A. Prison Service Report for the year ending 30 June 1989 there was a daily average of 111,557 persons in prisons. Of these, 32.4% were serving sentences of 2-5 years, and 33.2% longer than 5 years.

The average person from prison is:

- poorly educated
- lacks job/employable skills
- severed from family relationships
- unemployed
- has no resources

Arthur et al (1979:9), suggest that a society "makes its own criminals". That this is not only in the unequal distribution of resources but also in the values propagated by that society – "that the pursuit of material wealth is seen as an honourable vocation".

Arthur et al go on to point out that historically "... criminal laws were inevitably developed by the rich and powerful primarily for the protection of their own interests and property and not to regulate society for the equal benefit of all its citizens".

Marxist and radical theorists support this perception of crime and would argue that it holds true today. Rules are propagated by those in power to protect their income and their power base (Walker 1981:111) (My explanation is simplified). Capitalists protect their labour pool and the employer/employee relationship by ensuring that certain sectors of society are not in a sufficiently powerful position to change structures for their benefit. While there may well be weaknesses in this argument, apartheid certainly protected the privileges of the white minority – it was illegal for blacks to assume certain roles or positions of authority. It was illegal for blacks to move from one area to another without permission and without I.D. (passes). It was illegal for them to live where they chose or where they could best afford accommodation – they were placed in townships thus preventing their poverty from becoming an eyesore to the wealthy and this further ensured that a large proportion of their wages were spent on transport; families were split and unable to properly supervise their children. Transgression of any of the above mentioned laws resulted in imprisonment for hundreds of thousands of citizens. Furthermore, the courts were staffed almost exclusively by whites, the trial conducted in English or Afrikaans and the legal system and court procedures unfamiliar to most of those passing through the courts. Although these laws are slowly changing, the structures and consequences of these structures will remain for generations to come.

There is evidence that suggests the crime rate is not related directly to poverty but to situations where the disparity between rich and poor is obviously enormous. In 1970, the richest 20% of the population of South Africa owned 75% of the wealth. The Gini Co-efficient (which measures economic inequality) for South Africa in 1978 was the highest of the 57 countries in the world for which data was available (Wilson, 1989:18). The question thus arises – is it not the community rather than the individual that stands in need of rehabilitation?

Before considering responding to the individual needs – let us consider another case history to outline the consequence of imprisonment.

Case History 2: A Case for Individual Rehabilitation

Bill, a 42 year old, remarried, businessman, held an extremely well paid executive position for a large corporation. He was sentenced to 6 years for blackmail after threatening to disclose sensitive information when his employer did not honour a personal financial agreement.

His wife Jean was compelled to move from their luxurious Sandton home to a small flat in Windsor and to seek work. While he was trying to come to terms with the rigidly disciplined life in prison, she was trying to survive in a harsh and extremely critical environment. Few people were sympathetic. Battling with overwhelming practical

difficulties and extreme emotional stress resulted in deeply ambivalent feelings about marriage and its future.

The relationship had to be maintained by means of controlled and censored letters. Visits were permitted, but these were not contact visits and took place through glass and intercoms with warders listening and watching for any break in prison regulations. These 30-40 minute visits, are shared in a large room with a number of other couples. Visits cost wives a great deal both in terms of money for transport and in terms of emotional energy. Jean's daughter of 16 from her first marriage dropped out of school and began to run away from home. This dramatically increased her anxiety and guilt that in marrying this man she had contributed to her daughter's problems.

On being released, Bill returned to his family and was able to start working for a friend. Six months later he was divorced and had changed jobs twice. He was bitter about Jean's apparent lack of support. He was angry that the girls (his and her daughters) had been allowed to "run wild" in his absence and that a relationship with them now seemed impossible. Bill also hated feeling obliged to his friend for a position that was "created" for him but had no real responsibility in the company.

The extremely complex circumstances to which an individual returns on release from prison contribute to the improbability of rehabilitation.

But what does prison do to an individual?

Imprisonment

The prisoner has been physically rejected by society and subjected to a totally abnormal environment with its own subculture, values and norms. Brigadier J.P. Roux (1975) listed the following problems facing a person in prison:

- i) The prisoner is sent to prison unwillingly.
- ii) Most prisoners, in their need to belong, will identify with the prison subculture which usually acknowledges a negative and anti-social code of behaviour.
- iii) The prisoner is deprived of all responsibility.
- iv) The prisoner is isolated from healthy family ties.
- v) He is deprived of all normal social and interpersonal relationships.
- vi) He becomes institutionalised. Erickson et al (1973:57) note that prisons are "total institutions" in that they have total control over the activities of the individuals within them.
- vii) The person in prison has to contend with hours, days, weeks and months of boredom and frequently meaningless labour. Although the opportunities to further oneself exist, they are limited and often dependent on the prisoner having access to private funding for studying.

viii) Except for the privileged few who have cells to themselves there is a total lack of privacy. Prisoners eat, sleep, work, shower and use the toilet in the presence of others.

ix) This results in the gradual disintegration of the individual's sense of self-worth and personal identity.

Although credit must be given to the Prison Department for the recently wrought changes – such as controlled access to telephones and an unlimited number of letters per prisoner permitted, the system itself appears to serve only two functions:

i) Retribution and punishment

ii) The temporary removal of a threat out of society

In 1970 Irwin and Shaw indicated that United States prisons failed miserably to rehabilitate their inmates. (Erickson et al, 1973:58). South African – and indeed worldwide recidivist rates of between 60 and 86% further prove that prison does little to rehabilitate.

It would thus seem in the words of Brig. J.P. Roux "that prison is, in spite of all the treatment facilities and professional personnel, the least suitable place where personality development and therefore behaviour changes could be engendered ..."
"Many offenders crimes arise from the inability or unwillingness to accept responsibility for their doings with the result that the prison set up suits them and therefore strengthens the pattern of I-need-not-accept-responsibility-for-my-behaviour" (1975). Rehabilitation of the general so-called "prison population" does not appear to be possible in so negative an environment. Arthur et al (1979:23) castigate prison as being "... the most expensive and futile of all ways at present in use of trying to combat crime ...". At the cost of R 1,745,869 per day to keep our current prison population incarcerated, one must agree with them.

The Effects of Imprisonment

If not rehabilitative, what are the effects of imprisonment on an individual which may need to be addressed in subsequent therapy?

Arthur et al (1979:23) perceive the chief products of a futile system as being rancour, resentment, degradation and a widening gulf that separates "them" and "us" and it is the gulf that most people from prison feel most acutely. The *stigma* seems to cloy: from the paranoid sense after release that everyone is watching and can see that they have been in prison, to the experience of being shunned – held up as an object of fear to children and denied work in a society that has neither forgotten nor forgiven thus laying waste the individual's perception that he has "paid his debt" to society. The change in environment causes *disorientation*. The individual no longer has a place in society or a meaningful role to play. His children have grown up and his wife has coped without him. He is unemployed. Erickson et al (1973:65) point out that unemployment not only deprives a person of the necessary material and physical resources, but also of primary group support, identity and self-worth, as well as a linkage to society. It denies him a sense of belonging and, reinforces that he has no

meaningful role to play in society. Life has moved on and he has been left behind. Many individuals find themselves *isolated* as interpersonal relationships have disintegrated. Due to the socialisation process within a prison most individuals find that their general and *social skills have deteriorated*. Prison language and vocabulary is not accepted in society and constructive, appropriate means of dealing with conflict have usually been denied the prisoner.

The person from prison is also almost immediately confronted with the pitiful *lack of resources*. He finds himself virtually *unemployable* and no means of obtaining money – the commodity without which almost all is impossible. There are no half-way houses or places offering temporary accommodation – bar the street and night shelters.

Thus release, although desired, is usually extremely stressful. The prisoner has dreamt of and idealised the moment of his release and return to society and expectations are often unrealistic. This is balanced by some anxiety and fear of not knowing what to expect or how he is going to manage.

It is common that any radical change causes stress. The individual has adapted to life in prison, lived there "successfully" for a few years and must now be uprooted, and change, and adapt again.

On being released from prison, people appear to go through a number of phases:

Phase 1: Initial honeymoon phase, reflecting the joy of release and the relief to be out of prison. This can last anything from a few hours to a week or two, depending on the resources available to the individual.

Phase 2: Depression sets in. Being overwhelmed by the changes and unexpected reality, the person experiences a strong sense of alienation and finds himself missing prison, the familiar routine and the old friends.

Phase 3: The depression begins to lift as the individual becomes more familiar with society and finds himself coping with initial stressors. With increased confidence he believes that problems will be resolved.

Phase 4: Faced with the long term implications of imprisonment, the nagging lack of resources, the unwillingness of society to forget when every second form to be filled in asks about a criminal record, the lack of confidence exacerbated by continuous rebuff, depression again manifests itself. I suspect that it is at this point an individual is most likely to return to a criminal lifestyle.

Phase 5: If the person has been able to persevere and to find work he will find himself slowly able to "put the pieces together again" and to re-establish his life.

However, the intra-personal scars of imprisonment run deep and at times of crisis the person may revert back to destructive behaviour patterns that included criminal activity.

Intervention Strategies

So what is our role as a social worker, psychologist, "helping professional" or "therapist"? Against almost impossible odds, it's hard to know where to begin or what might really be of benefit to the client.

As social workers, our intervention tends to focus on the individual's interaction with the society in which he finds himself, his coping skills and the accessibility of available resources. We thus make extensive use of Task Centred and Problem Solving approaches.

However, to establish a relationship and to be perceived as providing a safe place for an individual to unburden themselves is difficult as we are usually met with extreme lack of trust and resistance.

This is due, partly to the inherent mistrust of society experienced by most ex-prisoners; partly to the harsh lesson taught in prison that one can afford to trust no one; and partly to the projection of negative experiences of previous social workers, professionals and the authority system in general.

This obviously impacts negatively on the success of any intervention strategy.

Furthermore, one often does not have the time to establish a sound relationship. The individual from prison is in a situational crisis and presenting clearly defined needs:

The most overwhelming need is for work. There are an estimated 4 million people unemployed in S.A. at the moment. The opportunity to secure employment is restricted by a poor work record (Slabbert 1980:35), the stigma or imprisonment and poor social skills.

Erickson et al's study on the needs of parolees in San Diego indicated that employment did not decrease the longer a person was out of prison but in fact increased (1973:65). The most prominent physical needs expressed in the study were work, money, transport, clothes, housing and medical care. Expressed social needs included general acceptance, friends, a "wife/mate" and a family; while personal needs expressed were self attributive and harm avoidance (Erickson et al 1973: 67).

My experience in South Africa supports these findings except that physical needs, especially work and accommodation predominate. The need to obtain identity and other relevant documents is pertinent. It is possible that many of Nicro's clients, being poorly educated and inarticulate are unable to express their social and personal needs. The need for identity documents, apart from practical considerations, possibly gives unarticulated expression to the need to be re-instated and accepted as a person and as an individual.

These expressed needs bear a strong relation to Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Most offenders are consumed by the need to meet basic physiological and safety/security needs – essentials to ensure survival.

Erickson et al (1973:73) point out that most of the needs expressed by ex-prisoners are not unreasonable but that the ex-prisoner, being unemployed, low on money,

poorly educated and unaccepted by society, cannot find ways of meeting these needs.

Linking with Resources

"In line with Maslow's reasoning, programmes for the rehabilitation of the ex-prisoner must give the satisfaction of physical needs top priority" (Erickson et al, 1973:70).

Nicro's first intervention strategy is to link the offender with available resources. We refer clients to night shelters and hostels – where finances can be negotiated, to the YMCA and Salvation Army. Where possible, funding for I.D. photos and a referral to the relevant government building to obtain identity documents is provided. The need for clothing is enormous. Most men own only the clothes in which they were released. Collected second hand clothing is made available to them and a kind ex-client permits Nicro to send one or two clients a month to his family's clothing store. To appear clean and presentably when one owns only one set of garments and has no where to wash is virtually impossible.

Transport and fares are another great need and a near impossibility with no financial resources. Food is another need – with clients reporting to Nicro who have not eaten for days. We try at least to provide the client with something to eat immediately, if not a small parcel of food to take away with him.

Work – where does one begin? Referrals to the Department of Manpower will be met with little success. However, in Johannesburg, the Prison Department's Re-integration Officer has proved enormously helpful, but even he cannot combat a nearly hopeless situation.

The person trying to assist the offender is caught by a feeling of hopelessness – being overwhelmed by the need and lack of resources. This proves to be a drain on one's emotional energy and motivation, and burnout becomes a threat. Furthermore, social workers are caught in the dilemma of not wanting to foster dependence but recognising that basic human needs need to be met.

Task Centred Work

This approach is closely aligned to the previous strategy. The focus is on the accomplishment of tasks to enable the person to cope with the immediate crises of release. After linking with the necessary resources the second step toward training in social skills is embarked upon. Considering the overwhelming physical and material needs of the ex-prisoner and their lack of trust. This is also usually practically orientated and aims at training an individual to expose and use their own internal as well as external resources to better cope with the demands of society.

Task usually focussed on are practical and simple:

i) Where to look for work, how to fill in forms, how to conduct a job interview, and whether to admit having a criminal record or not.

ii) Relationships – exploring causes and looking for strategies to resolve interpersonal conflict both at work and at home.

Throughout one aims at making the person aware of the options and of the consequences of his choices that he may choose the option best suited to his circumstances. Clients are often unwilling to expose more than a need for the most practical assistance and resist dealing intra or inter personal issues.

It is within these constraints that one attempts to develop a professional relationship that will provide some of the support, acceptance and understanding necessary for the individual to begin to piece together his shattered sense of self worth.

I believe it is often the simple and the obvious things that assist in the slow process of restructuring some self of self worth and the development of trust. The accessibility of the offices and of a social worker are important. The office environment should be pleasant and as respectful of the clients as possible. Should the client be made to wait in long queues, in a cold passage on a hard wooden bench, the client's unlikely to regard the social worker/therapist as any different from prison personnel.

Furthermore, presenting problems on release are probably severely compounded by a cycle of institutionalisation and deprivation that has existed since childhood (Slabbert, 1980). It is thus questionable whether in the space of 4 or 8 – or even 50 – one hour interviews any individual can be "rehabilitated", and can change the behaviour patterns established over a lifetime. Nor is one treatment programme or approach going to be of benefit to all the individuals who approach one for assistance.

Given the physical, financial and social constraints within which we work, I believe it is a valid objective to aim at better equipping the individual to cope with most pressing problems besetting them.

Problem Solving Approach

This approach aims to take treatment a few steps further than the Task Centred approach, when working with offenders who would like to change their own behaviour and who have access to basic resources. It is an attempt to firstly do something about the offence behaviour directly and secondly to help individuals bring about changes in their own offence related behaviours and attitudes.

To achieve this exercises, graphs, diaries and scales can be used. These tools are extremely useful in assisting inarticulate, literal persons and those constrained by their physical circumstances to explore their own behaviour and seek options.

Five areas are highlighted for discussion and intervention using guidelines suggested by McGuire and Priestly (1985):

i) The offence behaviour: the what, when, where, why and with whom is explored; the person is assisted to "count the cost" in terms of fines, institutionalisation and the consequences of internment.

ii) Beliefs and Values: helping individuals to clarify their attitudes and beliefs; to explore whether these are so different from "straight" society; and determine how values influence behaviour.

iii) Status and Self-esteem: explore the individual's self image and possible "Criminal identity", using scales, graphs and exercises to enhance self-esteem, confidence, and self respect. Achievement of goals remains the most forceful enhancer of self esteem and confidence.

iv) Training in Social Skills: for example, how to be assertive, how to be flexible, dealing with conflict and responding to peer pressure are skills that can be learnt.

v) Decision-making: here the focus is on assisting the person to accurately weigh up the risks or consequences of behaviour and to creatively explore other options available.

The above programme concurs with Erickson et al's recommendation that a rehabilitative programme should assist a person up the hierarchy of needs as described by Maslow (1973:72). Erickson et al suggest that "the most successful programme for the offender would be one which allowed the offender to feel like a man and to be self sufficient. He needs to have his ego rebuilt after his release; the prison system has torn it down through coercion, control and humiliation. He needs to regain his confidence legitimately, not a false or imagined self confidence typified by unrealistic expectations about his ability and his future" (1973: 98).

But what are the prisoners' chances in our present system? As Erickson et al ask – what ordinary citizens can set out with less than a high school education, no job, no close ties or other resources, R8.00 in his pocket and "make it"? (1973: 75).

If basic needs cannot be met, crime becomes a survival strategy and imprisonment a repetitive cycle.

Ex-offenders recommendations for rehabilitation include:

- unemployment benefits for 6 months;
- on the job training – commensurate with ability and choice;
- educational and vocational opportunities;
- self-governed residential centres;
- self-help groups (Erickson et al 1973: 102-103).

In itself these are not unrealistic but in South Africa where pressing needs are being experienced by all strata of society in an unstable and depressed economy with a changing government, in the face of escalating violence – it is highly unlikely that any of these needs will be met in the foreseeable future.

"Community rehabilitation" – a change of those very structures that currently define and determine criminal behaviour is going to be essential to combat crime and prevent recidivism. At the risk of sounding trite what is needed is adequate education, employment, and a society that enables parents to be available for their children. The disparity between rich and poor must be decreased. People need to earn a living

wage, be able to provide for families to which they belong, regain innate self-respect that was denied by discriminatory legislation and again have a meaningful and viable role to play in our society.

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