

Successful Community Reentry After Incarceration: Exploring Intangible Aspects of Social Support During the Reintegration Process

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The United States prison population and rate of incarceration have climbed to the highest worldwide, and mass incarceration has become a concerning social issue. Research demonstrates that incarceration adversely affects social networks, increases risk factors for children of incarcerated parents, and economically and politically disenfranchises communities and neighborhoods. Through critical examination of the existing rubric of incarceration, reentry emerges as an integral point of intervention for social workers to disrupt the chronic cycle of recidivism and downward spiral caused by incarceration. While past research has provided a cursory knowledge of the risk and protective factors that predict reentry success, much remains obscure. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the intricate, recon-dite, and intimate ways that family members function to assist the formerly incarcerated individual during reentry. By analyzing data through a transactional social support paradigm, this paper expands upon and enhances existing literature on the implicit functions of familial social support during prisoner reentry. Implications for social work practice with formally incarcerated individuals are explored based on key findings from the study.

In 2008, the Pew Charitable Trusts reported that the United States rate of incarceration reached an astonishing 1 in 100 people behind bars (The Pew Charitable Trusts Center on the States, 2008). Among Hispanic men aged 18 and older, this rate is 1 in 36, and for African American men between the ages of 18 and 34, the number jumps to 1 in 9. This surge in the population imprisoned by the U.S. penal system represents the highest rate of imprisonment of any country in the world. Alongside a precipitous growth in the national incarceration rate are record numbers of individuals completing prison sentences and reentering society

(Pinard, 2007). Upon reentry, several barriers are laid bare by high recidivism¹ and prevent former prisoners released from correctional custody to truly reintegrate into the community. Furthermore, the collateral consequences of incarceration can be prohibitive and debilitating to healthy reintegration into social, familial, community, and work life upon release. Due to the stigma of imprisonment on occupational, social, and familial settings, the prospects of long-term success for people with criminal records can be dismal. Through critical examination of the existing rubric of incarceration, reentry emerges as an integral point of intervention for social workers to disrupt the chronic cycle of recidivism and downward spiral of incarceration.

While there is cursory knowledge of the risk and protective factors that predict reentry success and recidivism, much remains to be examined. Some empirical studies have demonstrated the positive impact of family support systems on reintegration, yet the intricate, invisible, and intimate ways that family members function to assist the released individual are largely undocumented. The purpose of this research study is to develop a deeper understanding of the implicit functions of less tangible but equally valuable aspects of familial social support. A transactional social support paradigm is used to expand upon and enhance existing literature on the implicit functions of familial social support during prisoner reentry. Implications for social work practice with formally incarcerated individuals are explored based on key findings from the study.

Mass Incarceration, Reentry, and Recidivism

Mass incarceration in the United States is a social issue that demands both clinical research and attention at the policy level. According to the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 2009 the total federal, state, and local adult prisoner population consisted of nearly 2.3 million individuals (Glaze, 2009). Furthermore, the United States incarcerates at a rate of approximately 750 per 100,000 residents, representing the highest rate worldwide (Bouffard, 2007; Clear, 2008; Day, 2005; Hartney, 2006; Martinez, 2007; The Pew Charitable Trusts Center on the States,

2008). This is significantly higher than that of European inmate populations, including the Russian Federation (628 per 100,000 residents), Belarus (426 per 100,000 residents), and Georgia (401 per 100,000 residents). Additionally, racial disparity in incarceration rates is a conspicuous and problematic reality (The Pew Charitable Trusts Center on the States, 2008; Cooke, 2005; Hartney, 2006; Pettit & Western, 2004; Western & Pettit, 2002). African-Americans are between 6 and 8 times more likely, and Latinos twice as likely, to be incarcerated than Caucasians; African-American men make up 45% of the prison population. Research demonstrates that mass incarceration adversely affects social networks, increases risk factors for children of incarcerated parents, economically and politically disenfranchises communities and neighborhoods, and ultimately contributes to a pernicious cycle of social exclusion and disadvantage for individuals, families and communities affected by incarceration (Kjelsberg & Friestad, 2008; Petersilia, 2001; Pettit & Western, 2004).

Disturbingly high recidivism rates underscore many of the social, economic, and psychological consequences of incarceration and the challenges of community reintegration. At a minimum, 95% of prisoners complete their prison or jail sentences and reenter the community (Hughes & Wilson, 2002). Recent estimates indicate that at least 700,000 individuals are released yearly (Austin, 2001; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010; Draine & Herman, 2007; Johnson-Listwan, Cullen, & Latessa, 2006; Simonson, 2006; Travis & Petersilia, 2001). Of this cohort, it is estimated that two-thirds will return to correctional custody (either as a result of parole violations or a new offense) within the 3-year period following their release (Mears, Wang, Hay, & Bales, 2008; Mellow & Christian, 2008; Petersilia, 2001; National Reentry Resource Center, 2010). Increasing successful reentry experiences has the promise of reducing fiscal strain, societal costs, and personal collateral consequences associated with incarceration that weigh on the individual, family, community, and government.

Methods

This research was conducted as a qualitative study consisting of face-to-face interviews with three formerly incarcerated men. As a second-year social work intern in a New York City reentry program, I met the three gentlemen over the course of 5 months. The interviewees were invited to participate in the research, and it was communicated both in writing and verbally that involvement was voluntary. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted through seven open-ended questions. The interview outline consisted of questions that explored the individual's primary relationships during reintegration from prison and what in these relationships he found most meaningful. The questions were as follows:

1. Could you tell me a bit about the main relationships in your life during your reintegration?
2. Please tell me about your most valued relationship/s among these?
3. Can you describe your relationships with these person/s?
What do you find helpful in those relationship/s?
Intangible things
Aside from material things like housing or food, are there things that you gain?
Do you feel supported emotionally?
Do you feel a purpose?
Do you feel needed or important to that person/s?
Do you feel appreciated or valued?
Do you feel cared for?
How do they (s/he) show they (s/he) care/s?
5. What do you value most in those relationship/s?
6. What do you find most useful in those relationship/s?
7. Do you feel you have a clear role in your family or circle of friends?
8. How do you feel this would have been different if you had been staying in a shelter or transitional residence?

All three men are fathers and, at the time of interview, were under

parole supervision and living with family or an intimate partner. Names of interview participants were replaced with the pseudonyms Dale, Stanley, and Mark to maintain anonymity. Dale is an African-American male in his mid-50s who lives with his long-time partner (who I refer to as Tina). In his most recent prison sentence, Dale served 2 1/2 years. Stanley, a West Indian male in his mid-50s, served 3 years for his most recent offense. He lives with a woman who, for the past decade, has sporadically been both friend and girlfriend. Finally, Mark is an African-American male in his late 30s who completed a 12-year sentence. He lives with his mother, father, and younger sister. All three men reside in New York City.

The role of family during the reintegration process was examined through qualitative analysis of participants' perceptions and interpretations of family dynamics and relationships. Strong consideration was given to the impact of domicile on each family's ability to perform the less-tangible, though strongly meaningful, aspects of support. Interview data were grouped into one of two categories: features of primary relationships or transactional social support.

Results

Features of Primary Relationships

All interviewees indicated that their most valued relationships were with immediate family members, including children, parents, and romantic partners. When asked what they found most useful in these relationships, all suggested informal, less-tangible articulations of support, such as love, caring, guidance, and realization of social role. Much of the anecdotal evidence they imparted, the moments or situations that produce this support, would be lost had they not been residing with family. Living with family members afforded all three men opportunities for the exchange of support.

Dale stated that along with his daughter, his partner Tina was the central figure in his reentry. In the final 3 months of his sentence, Dale and Tina worked deliberately on building their

communication skills and strengthening their relationship. When he was released to Tina's residence, he immediately began relying heavily on instrumental and emotional sources of support from her. These included housing, financial assistance, emotional support, and help with navigating the responsibilities, requirements, and psychosocial stressors that accompany reentry. Dale also commented repeatedly on the pleasure and meaning gained from playing an active, parental role in his adult daughter's life.

Stanley and Mark both identified their teenage children as providing the most valuable relationship during their reentry. Stanley's son is 15 years old and lives with his mother. Mark's 17-year-old daughter has an infant and lives with the child's father and family. Stanley and Mark see their respective children on a weekly basis and engage with them in a variety of positive, productive, and interactive activities. Stanley plays ball with his son, helps him with homework, and takes him to museums, parks, his home, the movies, and arcades. He converses extensively with his son and offers advice and guidance liberally.

Mark socializes with his daughter and serves as relief caretaker for his granddaughter. Their shared time is rich with laughter, conversation, and counsel. He accompanies his daughter to school at times, when he perceives a need to advocate on her behalf, and provides input on how to be a "good parent." Mark reported that in addition to his daughter, his relationship with his mother was most valuable during reentry. He assists her with errands, cooking, and household tasks. When she was hospitalized shortly after his release, Mark assumed many of these domestic tasks in her absence. He expressed satisfaction in being able to provide for his father and sister in these ways and to reciprocate the caring gestures he felt from them. While playing an active role in contributing to the well-being of his family members, Mark described receiving meaningful support from them as well. This was conveyed through "advice... a lot of 'I love yous;' and [the] help that they provide." Some of the most salient examples of the informal support imparted to Mark by his family members were elucidated when he discussed his readjustment to society after 12 years of prison life and isolation from society.

I think about the first day I got released from prison. The world [had] changed. It's a very, very devastating effect, when you walk out of prison... The first thing I noticed was that people were all walking around with cell phones, or some type of gadget... it's like 'Wow, what is there to talk about?' ... All day long, everybody's walking and talking.

Mark's words provide a window into the subtle psychological and emotional adjustments that occur at times in the reintegration process. Mark explained how his family members assisted him in adjusting to many simple yet profoundly overwhelming developments that he was negotiating in his environment. They eased his process of acclimation.

[Your family knows] you're in a state of shock. And...they are able to walk you through the transition and explain 'This is what's going on, this is what's new, lemme teach you how to operate a cell phone, lemme teach you how to use DVDs.' Your family is there to coach you through everything. They gonna crawl you until you walk again.

These excerpts illuminate some of the many ways that healthy family dynamics can operate as stabilizing forces during the potentially chaotic and challenging reentry process. They speak to the unique role that those who are intimately involved in this process have in easing the strain and discomfort that accompany reintegration into civilian life. Explicit efforts on the part of family members to assist their reentry process are easily considered social support. Yet what we begin to see is that there are more subtle forms of support, found within the context of family and home, which urge us to conceptualize and dissect social support in a more expansive fashion. These intricacies became particularly apparent when respondents articulated the benefit provided by transactional social support.

Transactional Social Support

Transactional social support is understood as the interrelated systems of caring, assistance, and support that increase the capacity of respondents to provide meaningful contributions to others. The multidirectional exchange of support within the family system not only provides necessary social support (instrumental and emotional) to the vulnerable individual, but also allows him or her to find a sense of purpose by contributing to others in important and consequential ways (Martinez & Christian, 2009; Naser & LaVigne, 2006). The positive gain from this process is exponential as all parties are strengthened and empowered. The application of a life-course perspective illuminates how transactional support fortifies social bonds and allows for the fulfillment of important social roles within the family such as provider, caretaker, and productive family member (Elder, 1994; Hutchinson, 2005; MacMillan & Copher, 2005). It conditions a core of resilience and sense of mastery, which, along with meaningful role fulfillment, is eroded by the social, political, and psychological architecture of the incarceration process.

Transactional support was emphasized and evidenced in all three interviews. Respondents ascribed more value to relationships in which they were able to contribute and assume a supportive role for their loved one. This was apparent in comments such as Mark's response to the question of what was most helpful for him within his primary relationships: "To find out the importance that the male role model plays in the family. We play a major impact in the family. People always come to me for advice...it's very important."

It is noteworthy that when asked what was "most helpful" in his relationships, Mark identified not something given to him, but rather something he provided to those for whom he cares deeply. Without the support of his family, Mark's ability to assume meaningful familial roles and provide love, assistance, and care to his mother, daughter and granddaughter would be greatly compromised. Residing with family rather than in a shelter enabled Mark to care for his granddaughter for extended periods of time. When asked to clarify why seeing the importance of the

male role in the family was most helpful, he responded, "Because your life has more meaning when you're playing your role in society and in life in general... It's definitely something that motivates you."

Stanley's response to the first interview query ("Could you tell me a bit about the primary relationships in your life right now?") also illustrated transactional support. After stating that the most important relationship in his life is his 15-year-old son, he went on to explain, "he needs a person to guide him, a role model. Even though in the past I had problems with the law, that don't stop me from teaching him the right from the wrong." The significance of his presence in and contributions to his son's life were central in Stanley's evaluation of meaningful social relationships. This deviates from traditional, unidirectional views of social support. However, I purport that the ability of these men to contribute in meaningful ways to their loved ones, and the welcoming of these gestures by loved ones, function poignantly as sources of support.

Discussion

Research has indicated some pragmatic, circumstantial, and behavioral factors that predict successful reentry, including a strong family support system. However, the intricate, recondite, and intimate ways that family functions to assist the formerly incarcerated are less understood (Martinez & Christian, 2009; Naser & LaVigne, 2006; Naser & Visser, 2006; Yahner & Visser, 2008). Research findings in the present study corroborate with scholars in the field by enhancing the existing literature on familial social support during prisoner reentry. This appeared prominently throughout the interviews. Participants noted family members with whom they exchanged caring gestures, support, and affection as key in their reintegration. Parenthood was central in the men's stories (offering support), for instance, as was feeling cared for (receiving support). Both receiving and providing support and care compelled the men to be more conscientious and intentional in their decision-making and behavior. What they described in these relationships overall were pro-social attitudes and

behaviors stemming from strengthened sense of purpose and sense of self.

Juxtaposing the findings of this study with existing literature on the role of family support during reintegration raises many questions and begs for further research. This study paves the way for future qualitative analysis that is critical in our quest to understand predictors of successful reentry into the community after incarceration. Rigorous research into the nuanced role of family, the impact of domicile, and the very definition of social support has the potential to bridge the gap and ease the contradiction between empirical evidence and policy implementation in regard to family support and prisoner release.

Despite limitations in study design and sample selection, considerable insight was obtained into the ways in which formerly incarcerated individuals gain social support from family and intimate partners. The qualitative nature of the study design, in conjunction with a small sample size, limits the generalizability of the study results. Additionally, future analyses must examine reentry success in broader terms through longitudinal mixed methods approaches. Quantitative empirical studies with robust sample sizes would provide a population-level assessment of the benefit of transactional support to formally incarcerated individuals. However despite the aforementioned limitations, there is considerable insight that can be gained from these findings for practicing social workers and for anyone who works in the field of prisoner reentry in the United States.

Given that social workers practice as clinicians, researchers, and policy makers at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels, the profession is uniquely poised to take on the issue of reentry with a holistic perspective and to engage in addressing it from multiple angles. Prisoner reentry is an issue of social justice and civil rights that affects a large portion of our population. It is our responsibility as agents of social change to make a sincere commitment to restoring basic human rights and full participation in society for all citizens.

Note

¹ For the purposes of this analysis, recidivism refers to rearrest, reconviction, and/or reincarceration occurring at any point during the 3 years following release from prison.

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