



The core conditions of peer mentoring

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Abstract

Peer mentoring is an increasing feature of UK criminal justice, yet very little is known about the micro dynamics of this practice. Drawing upon an ethnographic study, this article identifies a number of ‘core conditions’ underpinning the practice, including caring, listening and encouraging small steps. Mentors and mentees highlight these conditions as antidotes to what they often perceive as disconnected, unhearing and technocratic criminal justice practices. Peer mentoring is claimed to release suffering, to unburden the self of grief and to explore new directions, given that mentors ‘genuinely care’ and are tolerant of slip-ups. Respondents offer valuable insight into the experience of being intervened upon and advocate for manageable shifts, which could meaningfully improve services for a range of vulnerable and stigmatized populations. However, the article also introduces tensions, including the expectation of emotional toil for little financial reward and the context of an increasingly results-driven criminal justice system.

Keywords

Care, desistance, emotional toil, goal-setting, listening, peer mentoring

Introduction

In 2012 the UK government unveiled plans to *transform rehabilitation* by opening up the ‘market to a diverse range of new rehabilitation providers’ (MoJ, 2013: 6). Peer mentoring formed a central element of this vision, as the then justice minister outlined plans for every prisoner to be met upon release by a mentor ‘to help them get their lives back together’, more specifically, to make ‘good use of the old lags in stopping the new ones’ (Grayling, 2012). Peer mentoring schemes are now an increasing feature of the penal landscape. Indeed, it is estimated that peer mentors constitute as many as 92 per cent of offender

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mentors in parts of England (Willoughby et al., 2013: 7). Despite this growth, little research has been done in the field; that which has been done is largely functional, aiming to evidence reduced reoffending rates (Frontier Economics, 2009; Social Innovation Partnership, 2012). This approach is often necessary, given that the *Transforming Rehabilitation* agenda introduces plans to ‘only pay providers in full for real reductions in reoffending’ (MoJ, 2013). As a consequence, however, very little is known about the micro-dynamics of these relationships, or indeed *how* they actually work to effect change. This article begins to address this empirical gap, offering insight into peer mentoring relationships as described by those engaged in the work. This contribution is significant, not only because mentoring theory is underdeveloped (Bozeman and Feeney, 2007: 735), but also because it affords those involved some authority over their own experiences, something which is often denied to people with convictions (Ballinger, 2011).

The article contends that the three ‘core conditions’ of peer mentoring are *caring*, *listening* and *setting manageable goals*. These principles were not always integral to mentoring training, yet were recurrently claimed, in diverse field settings, to have specific benefits for people attempting to desist from crime. The article highlights why these conditions are important, with a particular focus on the need to heal suffering, it concludes by discussing the claimed therapeutic benefits of this practice and the tensions they create within punitive and consciously neoliberal justice contexts.

Fieldwork and Methods

The study employed a rigorous qualitative design, guided by an interpretivist philosophy (Bachman and Schutt, 2014), in order to consider the ways in which mentoring is meaningful to participants. The research comprised semi-structured interviews with peer mentors ($N = 18$), mentees ($N = 20$), mentoring coordinators ($N = 4$) and probation staff ($N = 2$). Observations of mentoring practices were also undertaken. Participants, whose names have been changed, were drawn from mentoring settings in the north of England. These included a probation-based project; a care leavers’ service; a women’s employment project; and a young women’s service. A ‘purposive sampling method’ (Denscombe, 2014: 41) was adopted in that projects were only contacted if delivering peer mentoring in a criminal justice context. The selection of interview respondents was also ‘purposive’ given coordinators were asked to approach five mentors and five mentees from each project. This allowed access to experiences of both sides of the relationship, however, it also relied on intermediaries as ‘gatekeepers’ (Denscombe, 2014: 219). The sampling method was therefore enhanced using ‘snowball sampling’ (Rubin and Babbie, 2010: 149), which locates members of the target population that respondents happen to know.

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (King and Horrocks, 2010: 153), which involves ‘descriptive’ coding of transcripts, interpretation and the construction of ‘overarching’ themes. Analysis was enhanced using Gilligan’s ‘voice method’ (Kiegelmann, 2009), which involves the researcher tracking their own responses to what is being said, so that objectivity ‘becomes a matter not of avoiding relationship but paying attention to relationship’ (Kiegelmann, 2009: 12). It was through this structured process of noticing that the theme of suffering (discussed below) came to light.

This structured, interpretive method is congruent with a constructionist standpoint, which holds that meaning ‘comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world [...] Meaning is not discovered, but constructed’ (Crotty, 1998: 9). The presentation of data was also influenced by Gilligan (in Kiegelmann, 2009) and Furman et al. (2006), who each make compelling arguments for presenting data in poetic forms. While data are often too impersonal to be easily consumed, leaving readers overwhelmed or unmoved (Furman et al., 2006: 24), representing emotive narratives through artistic forms can enhance engagement. The goal of creating poetry from data is to ‘inspire an empathic, emotional reaction, so the [reader] can develop a deep, personal understanding of the “subject” of the data’ (Furman et al., 2006: 25). The aim of the poem presented in the findings below is to acknowledge and dignify the individual but connected experiences of suffering that surfaced repeatedly in interviews. The approach is ‘less concerned with statistical generalizability [and more] interested in “metaphoric generalizability,” the degree to which qualitative data penetrate the essence of human experience’ (Furman et al., 2006: 25). While a limitation of this method is that context is stripped (Furman et al., 2006: 27), all methods of data gathering and representation involve some form of selection. This form pays close attention to this process, making selection decisions explicit.

Findings: The Core Conditions of Peer Mentoring

Being an ex-offender alone doesn’t qualify you – we want to be *good* mentors. (Mentoring Coordinator)

Carl Rogers (2004 [1961]: 37–38) introduced the concept of *core conditions*, arguing that genuineness, warm acceptance and empathy were essential conditions for person-centred counsellors. In their individual descriptions of ‘good’ mentors, respondents similarly suggested that the core conditions of peer mentoring are: ‘caring’; ‘listening’; and ‘encouraging small steps’. While different perceptions and broader themes did emerge across and within user groups, this article will focus upon these three interesting points of connection from *across* the settings. These connections were not grounded in shared histories, but in interpersonal therapeutic conditions. The resemblance to Rogerian conditions could, of course, reflect the pervasiveness of psychological discourse more broadly. The ‘core conditions’ of effective criminal justice intervention, for example are argued to be: ‘empathy and genuineness; the establishment of a working alliance [...] using person-centred, collaborative and “client driven” approaches’ (McNeill, 2006: 52), conditions which Brown and Ross (2010: 37) suggest ‘should also ring true to those with a knowledge of mentoring’. The use of ‘should’ as an imperative here gives a clue as to how this discourse has entered ‘lay’ mentoring as a truism. The dominance of person-centred values in mentoring reflects a prevailing, if only partially adopted, professional discourse. However, the repeated articulation of key values in this study also appears to communicate something specific to these settings. What follows will therefore suggest that it is not just the presence of *any peer* engaging on positive, or person-centred terms which is important to this work, but a peer who is able to employ a number of conditions.

Core condition 1: Caring

During the early months of this study I attended a conference at an eminent government venue. Speakers included academics, politicians and voluntary sector representatives. Amid the conference etiquette, a prisoner (granted day release to speak at the conference) stood up to explain the positive effect of a prison intervention on his life. What was remarkable, and indeed what elicited a murmuring of uncomfortable chuckles from attendees, was this man's description of his prison officer; a man whose approach he described as *loving* towards him. Much like the nervously tittering audience, I have a discomfort when acknowledging *love* or *care* in the context of a criminological study, particularly as 'criminology's approach to emotions has been cautious and circumspect' (Karstedt, 2011: 1) and approaches that stress 'the value of focusing upon emotions [...] stand[s] in opposition to modernist agendas, being viewed as somehow less valid and objective, and more partisan in nature, and therefore "suspect"' (Spalek, 2008: 4). This 'distrust of emotions', Pettersen (2008: 53) argues, is deeply rooted in: 'Western moral thinking, and can be explained on the basis [that] emotions are associated with the body, sexuality, nature and women, which in Western hierarchical thinking are considered inferior to reason, self-control, culture and masculinity'. These gendered complexities will be revisited. For now, however, let us consider how care has been conceived of in criminal justice terms. Knight (2014) argues that the modern criminal justice system is

constituted to respond to, control and punish criminal behaviour in an objective, rational and just manner. As far as possible the system aims to exclude emotion on the basis that emotions are likely to interfere with and distort the process of justice. (Knight, 2014: 2)

In contrast, Karstedt (2011) argues that we have seen an end to the project of 'rationalization'. The 're-emotionalisation of law', she contends, is evident in the 'return of shame into criminal justice procedures, a stronger focus on victims and emotional needs [...] and finally highly emotionalised public discourses on crime and justice in Western democracies' (Karstedt, 2011: 3). This process is viewed as part of an 'emotional turn' in postmodern societies, two facets of which are the 'informalization' and 'emancipation of emotions' (Karstedt, 2011: 4). While Karstedt points to a re-emergence of emotion within justice, however, rarely is the focus on 'offender' emotions, unless, that is, they are framed as 'dynamic risk factors' (Day, 2009: 119). Rarer still are calls for the nurturance or *care* of 'offenders'. Rather, where emotions are more clearly present is in 'emotional and mostly punitive public and political discourse' (Karstedt, 2011: 3). Despite a context unfavourable to caring for those within the criminal justice system, *care* is a feature that has been highlighted as important in supporting change. Desisters and probation officers, for example, considered the following as crucial characteristics to support desistance: 'having someone that they could get on with and respect; who treated them as individuals; was *genuinely caring*; was clear about what was expected of them and trusted them when the occasion called for it (Leibrich, 1994 [1993], cited in McNeill and Weaver, 2010: 59, emphasis added). The notion of care also persisted in this study:

The ones that are volunteering, you know that it's not just a job for them; they do actually genuinely care. (Lin, Mentor and previously a Mentee)

It needs to be somebody who understands *and* cares. (Roy, Prison Peer Group Member)

They make you feel like you are their only priority and they're just here to help you and that makes you feel good [...] There is somebody out there who genuinely cares. (Janet, Mentee)

Genuine care here is seen as an expression of altruism, based upon understanding. These speakers consider that peer mentors are motivated by an emotional awareness of what mentees are going through, rather than by personal gain. Not only is genuine care valued, but emotional connections are framed as legitimate mentoring tools:

I'd be crying my eyes out. She'd give me a few cuddles, I don't know if they should do that or not, but it was what I needed at the time and I was dead happy. I'd feel a whole new lease of life. (Georgie, Mentee)

Georgie feels 'valued' by this physical affection and gains 'an increased sense of mastery', a new lease of life. *Genuine* care is also deemed to be more spontaneous than 'professional' care:

Are they sessions? I just go boxing, I've got it this afternoon, have a hug; 'what've you been up to?' I don't know, I wouldn't call it a session (laugh). (Will, Mentee)

Be yourself, vibrate at their level, not being an expert, allowing them, they're OK to be in that place at that moment. (Liz, Mentor)

Such descriptions of physical and felt human connections are the antithesis of structured risk assessments and of evidence-based bureaucracies, which 'thrive on impersonality and detachment' (Lippens, 2009: 84). Indeed both Will and Liz reject associations with formal intervention: 'I wouldn't call it a session/not being an expert'; their understandings are informed as much by what mentoring *is not* as by what it is. Similarly Georgie appears to be aware that her mentor's approach may violate professional norms: 'I don't know if they should do that or not'. Yet she asserts her preference for a tactile, embodied approach. Peer mentoring positions these speakers as tactile fellow humans with emotions, imperfections and wishes, rather than subjects to be governed. They are personified, not objectified. Care is conceived of as the opposite of judgement, expectation and obligatory intervention. It is described as fostering personal connection and building esteem. Rogers (1995 [1980]) theorized why such genuineness or 'congruence' may be significant. Reflecting upon his own experiences, he contended that acceptance is 'growth promoting' because it allows people to *be* rather than expecting them to become another's ideal: 'one of [...] the most growth promoting experiences [...] comes from my appreciating this individual in the same way that I appreciate a sunset. People are just as wonderful as sunsets if I can let them *be*' (Rogers, 1995 [1980]: 21–22, emphasis in original). This sense of not being judged, but being openly accepted also featured strongly in the perceptions of mentees; and indeed mentors:

With counselling it can sometimes feel like you are being judged [...] Whereas with someone from a similar background who has been on that level [...] they don't patronize. (Katy, Mentor)

I've been amazed that nobody has judged me [...] Here's a person I've never met before, knows what I've done, but understands why I did what I did and is telling me: 'you're not a bad person, that actually you're quite nice'. (Gina, Mentee)

I've got mental health problems and a lot of people don't understand and they judge you, but [mentoring] was such a nice relaxed atmosphere. (Lin, Mentor and previously a Mentee)

A non-judgemental approach helps these mentees to re-frame their view of themselves. They are not a diagnosis, or a bad person, but 'nice' and *normal* or on the same 'level'. However their expressions are a reminder that most criminal rehabilitation work takes place within a system of judgement. Respondents imagine professional caring as distinct from volunteer caring, partly because the latter is deemed to be free of this system of judgement. Probation work and associated health improvement work are perceived through an 'us and them' divide: '*they* judge you', and through feelings of belittlement, anxiety and pressure. Peers, however, are perceived to provide a degree of separation from this; to be free of such judgements because they too have experienced them. There is a powerful belief among these speakers that judgement and understanding are incompatible. This aligns with Buber's notion of dialogue 'in which I open myself to the otherness of the person I meet' as opposed to 'monologue':

[I]n which, even when I converse with her at length, I allow her to exist only as a content of my experience. Wherever one lets the other exist only as part of oneself, 'dialogue becomes a fiction, the mysterious intercourse between two human worlds only a game, and in the rejection of the real life confronting him the essence of all reality begins to disintegrate'. (Buber, 1985: 24, cited in Friedman, 2005: 30)

For Buber, true dialogue requires openness to the fullness of the other's experience. This openness may be stifled by a system characterized by pre-judgement, such as a criminal justice context which has established scientific answers to individual experiences. In this context *the offender* is less a speaker to be open to and more a *collection of risks* to be managed. 'Katy' illustrates this difference neatly. Following a conviction for selling cannabis, Katy was mentored and later trained as a mentor herself. While training she was offered an opportunity to sell drugs again by some of her old acquaintances. As she was on a housing waiting list, she was also offered – by coincidence – the very property she had previously been selling drugs from as a tenancy. She refused both offers and told her mentoring supervisor about them. She did not feel, however, that she could discuss the offers as easily with her probation officer for fear of risk-averse consequences:

I told my supervisor [...] but with probation they tend to overreact on it, and my supervision probably would have got extended, and they probably would have called me in on a more frequent basis, and panicked about it, whereas [my supervisor] trusted where I was at. (Katy, Mentor)

Katy assumes that her words will be interpreted by her probation officer in terms of risk and that her experience will only 'exist' in these terms. The perceived responsibility of offender management services to respond to people as risks, therefore, restricts open

dialogue. In contrast, peer mentoring is perceived to allow a more open dialogue. Peers separate themselves from this system of expertise, identifying instead with lived understandings *and* attending to the experience of the speaker before them. They have the freedom to listen, to engage in dialogue, and to open themselves and their practices to the ‘otherness’ of the person they meet. This makes space for a new reality, wherein the mentee’s voice is central; their experience and judgements afforded equal ground. The ‘offender’ becomes co-author; agent, rather than a problem to be changed. In Freire’s (1996 [1970]: 105) terms, such dialogue enables people ‘to feel like masters of their thinking and views of the world explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades’. Overall, mentoring emerges here as a caring version of dialogue where issues of inter-personal power imbalance are not so evident. Caring and a non-judgemental disposition are seen as important qualities for a mentor to have. They foster positive human connections and enable new personal perceptions, perhaps even ‘growth’. However, Colley (2001: 188) warns against uncritical idealism, suggesting that expectations of care may be more limiting than they initially appear: ‘where commitment to the client is made central [...] the worker sells her personality as an integral part of her own labour power. It takes the form of emotional labour, and this emotion work brings its own costs.’ A potential limit of such selfless care is that helpers become ‘trapped inside a concept of nurturance which [holds] them responsible for the freeing of each [...] individual, and therefore for the management of an idealist dream, an impossible fiction’ (Colley, 2001: 188–189). To expect mentors *to care* is not simply to expect a harmless giving of one to another, but to expect emotional toil. Furthermore, this toil may feel like a failure if care does not work its desired magic. There is also an economic factor to consider, given that the ‘care’ of peer mentors is framed as the antithesis of the work of *paid* employees. James, for example, described his prison peer group as distinct from professional ‘caring’ relationships he had previously experienced:

I spoke, tears, in [peer] group. I was confident, comfortable [...] Social worker, foster carer, they’re all seeing pounds. I’m not sure I’ll ever see from their point of view. All about money, not care and love, the child’s needs. (James, Prison Peer Group Member)

An interesting underlying thread here is that respondents often see being paid as antithetical to caring: ‘it’s not just a job for them; they do actually genuinely care’ (Lin)/‘they’re all seeing pounds [...] not care and love’ (James). This narrative reveals a problematic binary between care and economic value. One interpretation of this separation is that respondents have accepted the pervasive anti-feminist discourse, which devalues emotional labour. Gilligan (2011: 19, *emphases in original*), for example, argued:

Care is a *feminine ethic*, not a universal one. Caring is what good women do, and the people who care are doing women’s work. They are devoted to others, responsive to their needs, attentive to their voices. They are *selfless*.

The same expectation appears to be upon peer mentors. To be ‘genuine’ implies you must also be *selfless* in professional or monetary terms. The speakers who make the discursive

separation between care and monetary reward appear to have no conscious intention to depreciate mentors, nor to expect them to do emotional work without reward. Rather, they appear to recognize the enormity of giving emotional labour for free. It is not just admirable, but it dignifies mentees; these are 'genuine' relationships because they take place in the absence of financial reward. Nonetheless, there is an intrinsic danger that care remains separated from economic value in this construction, that selfless care is no longer just what 'good women do', but what good mentors do. Colley (2002: 269) argues that this scenario is ultimately disempowering as that the outcome of such demands might be: 'the intensified productivity, worsened working conditions and post-Fordist super-exploitation of [...] workers, internalised and self-imposed through dedication to an idealised image of client care'. In this light, volunteer mentoring does not just provide a re-focus on the importance of offender emotions and loving connections, but it is part of a context, which subtly undermines the monetary value of care and limits mentors to roles where they are expected to labour (emotionally) intensively for little or no financial reward. There were, however, some seeds of resistance to this potentially exploitative situation, as illustrated by this exchange within a volunteer training session:

Trainee: Could you get paid for this work?

Trainer: We could – it is our aspiration.

The coordinator of another project explained: '[o]ur women [mentors] are paid on a sessional basis and paid well. Young people should be valued for the contribution they make.' There is some recognition, therefore, that emotional labour *should* be valued and not doing so represents a restriction of power. However, the implication that young people 'should' be valued, along with the fact that remuneration is an 'aspiration' rather than an achievement, indicate that this goal has not yet been reached.

Core condition 2: Listening

The most frequently voiced condition of peer mentoring was *listening*. The importance of listening is not in itself a new finding. Female lawbreakers, for example, have defined "helpfulness" as material help and *non-intrusive listening* and advice-giving' (Worrall, 1990: 157, emphasis added). In probation settings, participants 'identified "being listened to" as one of the most useful methods' in addressing problems (McCulloch, 2005: 18) and 'suggested that the best approach was [...] to listen to clients about the problems, fears and consequences of offending' (Barry, 2007: 416). Listening is deemed useful, not least because 'offenders themselves tend to have a good understanding of what they want from practitioners and politicians to help them reintegrate' (Barry, 2007: 409). Moreover, it may be vital for the development of knowledge:

If we are to have an informed, effective strategy and approach to deal with the problems of crime – politicians, policy makers and criminologists must relate, listen to and understand those who are being processed by the ever widening and more punitive criminal justice system. (Burke, 2007: 317)

This argument echoed in mentoring settings. Lol, for example, works for a charity which supports local authority care leavers, he is also a care leaver himself. His motivation to become involved with mentoring was to get a ‘user perspective’ heard:

[Probation officers] don’t take into account a care experience, but [...] 25 per cent plus in the prison system can say ‘yes I was in care’ [...] It’s fundamental to a person’s progress to engage with some of those issues [...] So this seminar [organized by Lol for criminal justice partners] is about trying to say these things to them. (Lol, Mentoring Coordinator)

Steve, a mentor with a prolific offending history, was similarly motivated to get a voice of experience heard:

[Probation staff are] listening a lot more [...] to people like myself and we’re saying: ‘Listen, what good is it doing him coming in here for half an hour chat with you and then he goes? Where’s the support? You’re talking about motivational techniques and they’re not interested, they’re just going through the rhythms!’ (Steve, Mentor)

Both Lol and Steve imply that by *doing* to people rather than *listening* to people, professionals miss relevant parts of a person’s experience and create inauthentic transactions. ‘Receivers’ do not engage fully, but go through the expected ‘rhythms’, play the game, which is shaped by the interveners’ world view. Listening is also deemed as important *within* the mentoring relationship:

I have met mentors that do a lot of the talking, and forget they’re actually there to listen, so I think listening is equally as important as being able to offer, actually listening is offering. (Phil, Mentor)

Listening is a massive part [...] a client was in for an hour and a half, I hardly spoke, he just spoke [...] Just listening, for him it’s somebody that will listen to his problems. (Brad, Mentor)

For Lol and Steve, there is value in practitioners learning from the experiences of those who have been through the system. For Phil and Brad, however, experience only takes you so far. Once the face-to-face work of mentoring is underway, it is listening – allowing space for the mentee to make their own sense of things – which is deemed to be more important. Listening is *doing* something; it is a means and an end. This may seem an obvious finding, yet *listening* is not constant in criminal justice practice and is often omitted completely: ‘listening does not feature as a promising factor in any of the “What Works” literature, nor is it offered as a guiding principle in the National Standards’ (Barry, 2007: 419). While it is an approach with obvious importance, therefore, its value may currently be unrecognized: ‘[t]he provision of advice and guidance is now well recognized as a useful method in helping probationers [...] though the value of talking and, more significantly, listening to probationers is less well documented’ (McCulloch, 2005: 15). What peer mentoring does in practical terms, is assert the importance of listening to people who are ‘subject to state sanctions’, something ‘insufficient attention’ has been paid to (Burke, 2007: 316). Respondents also illustrate *why* listening is important:

I'd say the main [skill] was being able to listen, because people who come to probation have a lot of problems that they need to get off their chest. I do feel comfortable telling [mentors] most family problems, or problems that I have with myself, cos they don't criticize you, they listen. (Paul, Mentee)

Georgie, who was mentored following her release from prison, made a similar claim:

She was very good at listening [...] I just needed emotional help and I didn't know where to get it [...] When you can't deal with your emotions, or things that are going on, you don't realize that talking to someone can help. (Georgie, Mentee)

And finally, Gina, who was mentored when she lost her career through offending, prioritized the importance of listening. Indeed she regarded this feature to be more important than a shared history: '[i]t was quite nice to be with people who knew what you'd been through [...] but not necessarily important, as long as they're a good listener and understand the system and understand you' (Gina, Mentee).

Listening then is an intervention in itself. It enables people to unburden themselves of problems, to begin to see themselves as capable of self-direction when conditions feel overwhelming and to feel heard. The unburdening of problems is a sub-theme that warrants further exploration, before the third core condition of this work is outlined.

Listening as unburdening problems. Personal suffering ran throughout these narratives and subsequently requires foregrounding here. Each line in the following data poem was selected as it had a visceral impact upon the researcher, as identified and recorded using Gilligan's 'voice method' (Kiegelmann, 2009). Each line is taken from a different respondent interview and each statement marks an unburdening of grief:

'Care home, YOI [Young Offender Institution], I constantly felt discarded.
Nobody cared at all now. I was discarded'

'I was in pain, I had to find some help. All the time I'm feeling down'

'It hurts like a bastard, rips my heart out that I can't see my children'

'In care, abusive alcoholic family [...] I brought younger brothers up, got adopted and not allowed to see them [...] I lost five of my family in five years'

'I used to self-harm, no-one was arsed about blood trails in my bedroom [...] I've been hit, abused, family problems, relationship problems'

'I felt that really I wasn't worthy of anything, emotionally at rock bottom'

'I was at my lowest point, living in a hostel, I had absolutely nothing'

'I got attacked, so I just never went back'

‘There’s a lot of damp, no heating for three days [...] I feel like hiding’

‘I lost my Granddad, then my Nan [...] my Mum had had a nervous breakdown and she’d tried to top herself [...] my ex [partner] raped my Mum’

‘Living in a concrete coffin, the graveyard where my friends are buried’

‘I put my own safety at risk; I had my face cut open’

‘I feel so lonely, I feel so useless when I say that. Your life is that bad, you just want to forget [...] You need your drugs, you’re ratting, white, feel awful, sneezing, terrible, it’s awful’

‘Domestic violence, self-harming, mental health issues, so much stuff that all goes together’

These collated extracts, together with a repeated message that it was useful to talk through problems, reframe the experience of these ‘offenders’. They serve as a reminder that *being an offender* is often accompanied by *suffering*. While criminologists have often highlighted how crime can be “‘symptomatic” of a broad spectrum of vulnerability’ (McAra and McVie, 2010: 189), what is new here is that respondents locate their suffering in a context of ‘recovery’:

Peer mentoring is helping people through recovery, helping them to be enabled to take on everyday life [...] It’s actually helped me through my recovery as a concerned other, which has then helped me to help my children. (Paula, Mentor)

I have got problems, but I really have overcome a lot since I’ve had a mentor [...] when you’ve lived the sort of life I have, you need somebody to drill things into you or you’re not going to be doing it, you need that shove to an extent, a bit of hand holding. (Fiona, Mentee)

Show vulnerability, show emotion. Not: ‘I’m a man, don’t cry’ – I cry [...] it’s therapeutic. (Mark, Prison Peer Group Member)

These speakers have very different histories, including experiences of addiction, abuse and violent offending. Yet despite diverse experiences, their descriptions of *recovery* illustrate a shared sense that personal improvement is required. Recovery here is associated with feeling better and feeling cared for, but also with a sense of inadequacy; people consider that they need re-drilling and healing. These are the very corrective processes that people resist from professionals, yet they are experienced positively from peers. While there are times when peer mentors engage more critically with the broader social contexts, which impact upon individual lives, a therapeutic approach necessarily focuses on the person, a limitation of doing so is that the oppressive and stigmatizing contexts, which often frame experiences are demoted. The notion of ‘recovery’ is potentially problematic for another reason. Not only does it potentially minimize social contexts, but it may also at times be deficient. Georgie, for example, found her mentoring experience valuable in helping her to settle into life away from her established peer group upon

release from prison. As the relationship progressed, however, she found it lacking in terms of helping her to recover from addiction:

- Georgie (Mentee): I feel it's deeper, my stuff now [...]
 Interviewer: So the mentor was able to take you so far, introduce to process of talking and healing [...]?
 Georgie: Yes, but I think I need some counselling or something [...] If AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] would have been introduced to me two years ago I'd be straight now.

Georgie does not discount the contribution of peer mentoring, but recognizes it will not provide the 'answer' for everyone. Taken together, what the above narratives very clearly do, however, is reposition 'offenders' and desisters. Rather than flawed individuals who must make sweeping life changes, they become people experiencing significant difficulty who can benefit from gentle support. Indeed the changes expected in these settings are often deliberately small, rather than comprehensive, as indicated by the third and final core condition of peer mentoring: encouraging small steps.

Core condition 3: Encouraging small steps

In addition to 'Caring' and 'Listening', a third important condition repeatedly highlighted was the encouragement of 'Small Steps' towards change. This was initially denoted by Gina (Mentee) when she described her own mentoring as 'just gentle [...] it plants the seed and it grows'. Small steps were also important to mentors:

I think that setting little goals is what gets people going. (John, Mentor)

They've got their short term goals, we do things like star [planning] chart, different goals where you can monitor [...] see how far they are in two weeks, a month's time. (Paula, Mentor)

The significance of liminal goals is that they seem achievable and motivation is sustained because people see the progress they are making. While often overlooked within bigger bureaucratic agendas, which demand tangible 'results' such as 'reductions in reoffending' (MoJ, 2013), mentors stress the importance of smaller changes:

To get them out of their little ways [...] I've been incarcerated most of my life [...] It's like the first time I've been in the real world and it is difficult. But because of everything I've been through and found out, and the things that have blocked me, I've found ways round [...] it just gives them a bit of hope for the future because I was the same. (Cat, Mentor)

Cat highlights how change, particularly from entrenched criminality or incarceration can take time, yet time is a resource which big systems no longer have. Rather 'the contacts between professional support workers and their clients are likely to be brief and episodic' (Brown and Ross, 2010: 32). However *time* also needs to be marked with indications of success for motivation to be maintained:

I'm starting to get into the routine now of setting my mini goals to get the eventual thing that I want. Nine times out of 10 I was just trying to get the end thing and I was just fucking myself up [...] There's the odd time where you have a little fall, but it doesn't hit you as hard as if you're about to achieve the main goal that you wanted and then you mess up. (Paul, Mentee)

[My mentor] used to say: 'Right, one thing at a time' [...] It'd only be one step closer, but just made me feel better cos I'd got somewhere with at least something [...] If you're feeling vulnerable, it takes a little something to knock you over the edge, commit crime, take drugs or treat somebody how you shouldn't be treating them, and I think mentoring just takes that edge off. (Georgie, Mentee)

For Paul and Georgie, taking small steps provides opportunities to *demonstrate* success, however small. When success can be witnessed, it can be *felt*, it becomes a reality. In very practical terms, mentees are conditioned to have hope. This is a vital feature: 'hope and hopefulness are important factors [...] The worker needs to work with him or her towards its formulation and realisation and to persist and maintain hope through lapses and relapses' (McNeill and Weaver, 2010: 8).

Not only do the speakers here describe incremental motivation, but they begin to acknowledge that this road will not always be smooth; that lapses and relapses are a likely and acceptable feature. Indeed both mentees and mentors explicitly described the importance of not over-reacting to slip-ups. Paul and Don, for example, use a peer mentoring service attached to probation:

Rome wasn't built in a day. It's going to take time, there is bound to be them slip-ups. But most of the time they [mentors] just seem to be understanding about it. (Paul, Mentee)

If I have scored [taken drugs] they say 'don't worry, what set it off?' (Don, Mentee)

This approach is important given that resorting to further offending is rarely down to individual 'will' alone (Halsey et al., 2016: 16), rather it 'almost always involves the quality and timeliness of social interventions and support capable of dissipating the fatalistic mood in desistance journeying'. Peer mentors often become such 'supportive people [...] meaningfully attuned [who] positively impact the volatile space between desperation and infraction' (Halsey et al., 2016: 16). Indeed mentors often strive for such support and tolerance in their work. Julie (Mentor), for example, explains:

I failed loads of times in my life, but then I've got up [...] People won't go straight just like that, they'll have their up and downs, but I think having a mentor will support them and show them that you're not giving up on them, even if they do go off the rails a bit [...] they'll turn that around and think: 'well I won't do that because she's still there for me'.

Steve also rationalizes the need to persist with hope when others are tiring of lapses. Here he describes a discussion with Probation and Housing staff, wherein he advocates for a mentee who has had numerous relapses during his efforts to lead a crime free life:

In my mind I'm saying: *I had them same chances and I kept messing up over and over* [...] [They say]: 'We've put everything in place for him over and over', and I've carried on: 'I've

just got that niggling feeling that just a little move, to a more supportive accommodation, that could be the making of him.' (Steve, Mentor)

For the mentees speaking here, lapses are normalized, rather than pathologized. This works with, not against a 'zig-zag' desistance process, whereby 'individuals tend to desist gradually rather than suddenly' (Farrall, 2013: 21). It also creates a sense that efforts are not futile, that attempts to change are still on track. For mentors, tolerance of mistakes is an intentional strategy, based upon the conviction that people will have 'ups and downs' but with consistent belief and support, 'not giving up', there is always the hope of success. Uniquely, the driver for Julie and Steve is not their knowledge of desistance research, but their own experiences of change. They both describe 'failing' or 'messing up', yet managed to desist in the end. They have an existential confidence in the possibility of change, despite repeated lapses. Moreover, both see persistent support as the thing which will eventually conquer these 'slip-ups'. This is theoretically very different to actuarial criminal justice, which regards further offending, or lapses, as risk factors to be recorded and addressed. This element of peer mentoring also creates one of the many tensions between the managerial aims of criminal justice and alternative forms of knowledge.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

As the dust settles on *Transforming Rehabilitation* and peer mentoring becomes more deeply embedded in criminal justice, we must go further than to count people as statistics, we must also understand the core features of these intersubjective relations. While each mentoring relationship is unique, this article reveals three 'core conditions' that underpin peer mentoring in the settings observed: *caring*; *listening*; and *encouraging small steps*. These conditions do not sit comfortably within a punishment framework, yet they offer antidotes to what can often be experienced as disconnected, unhearing and technocratic criminal justice practices. Peer mentoring, in contrast, is claimed to release suffering, to unburden the self of grief and to enable new self-direction. It is seen as a safe space to do this given that mentors 'genuinely care' and are tolerant of slip-ups. The liminal goals encouraged by mentors also seem achievable and motivate people. This study therefore illuminates the interpersonal elements of mentoring, which are claimed to promote personal growth and change. Despite these ideals, however, the article also introduces a number of core tensions. First, while 'genuine' care can build a sense of self-worth and potentially promote desistance, this discourse burdens peer mentors with an expectation of emotional toil for little or no financial reward. There is also a risk that emotional approaches – associated with the body, nature and women – are considered inferior to those based upon reason or self-control, which can be quantitatively measured. Similarly, while respondents highlight the importance of listening and encouraging small steps, it is unclear how such unquantifiable approaches will fare within an increasingly 'results' driven justice system. These tensions have specific implications for criminal justice policy, practice and research. First, the rich interpersonal transactions outlined here, which take place within contexts of significant adversity and suffering, imply that peer mentoring is far from an unskilled addition or alternative to established rehabilitation approaches.

Rather this work requires skilled practitioners employing core humanistic values within challenging contexts. Not every person leaving crime behind will want to do such work, and not all those that do will hold the required skills and values. Even those who excel at this work may find their skills unrecognized by a criminal justice ‘marketplace’ which is increasingly ‘results’ driven. Second, there are implications for professional workers. Not only are relationships based upon trust and care important, but slip-ups are presented as an integral part of the path towards desistance. Both of these features, however, collide with an ‘outcomes’ focused policy model, which may well take precedence over the voices of those within the system. Finally, while criminology has contributed rich statistical analyses of populations and been instrumental in developing a ‘professional’ approach to rehabilitation practices, this has often relegated work that seeks ‘to engage offenders by asking what intervention programmes are most meaningful to them’ (Gelsthorpe, 2006, cited in Spalek, 2008: 4). A focus on the lived experience of interventions, however, reveals that managerial approaches often constitute ‘offenders’ one-dimensionally as flawed individuals, missing highly relevant parts of a person’s experience. There is an ethical and empirical need, therefore, for research approaches which engage ‘offenders’ themselves and afford them a voice.

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