The role of self-help efforts in the reintegration of 'politically motivated' former prisoners: implications from the Northern Irish experience

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The Role of Self-Help Efforts in the Reintegration of 'Politically Motivated' Former Prisoners: Implications from the Northern Irish Experience

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Abstract Self-help (or mutual aid) processes play a substantial role in the reintegration of stigmatized individuals, in particular, a substantial self-help movement has developed around addiction recovery. Prisoners and ex-prisoners have also established self-help groups around the world. This paper focuses in particular on the role of self-help principles and practices among "politically motivated" former prisoners from all sides of the Northern Irish conflict. The concept of self-help and its application to former prisoners are analysed theoretically, then applied to the Northern Irish case study through a series of interviews with ex-prisoners whose incarceration has been related to the conflict in Northern Ireland. We draw on the implications of this case study for wider issues of reintegration for politically motivated and ordinary prisoners.

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The concept of "self-help" has assumed a central place in the academic and public understanding of how individuals move away from addictive behaviours [47]. Self-help movements have even been established around the world by former prisoners to provide a supportive network to assist with the reintegration process [24]. Over fifty years ago, the psychologist Albert Eglash (known mostly for coining the term "restorative justice" in 1977) was calling for groups such as "youth anonymous" and "adults anonymous" as support networks for people trying to desist from offending [14, 15].

An organisation of "political extremists anonymous" where "recovering" individuals sit in a circle introducing themselves as "My name is Osama, and I have been terror-free for over three years now" may sound to some a step too far. Indeed, rehabilitation programmes for individuals convicted under the terrorism legislation in Saudi Arabia have widely been derided as "Betty Ford Clinics for Jihad-olics" in the popular media and sceptical blogs [16]. Nonetheless, such self-help initiatives, consisting of ex-combatants and individuals convicted of various "terror"-related offences have started to grow in numerous jurisdictions (see [5, 26]).

In this article, we focus in particular on the experiences in Northern Ireland, emerging in the past two decades from a protracted, thirty-year conflict informally known as "The Troubles" involving the deaths of over 3000 individuals. The concept of "self-help" has been paramount to groups formed to facilitate the reintegration of former combatants/former prisoners in Northern Ireland (hereafter FC/FP) on all sides of the conflict[3]. Numerous Irish Republican and British Loyalist FC/FP organisations emerged during and after the conflict to support ex-prisoners' and their prisoners' families achieve full civic, social and economic participation, despite the considerable stigma of their criminal records and imprisonment experiences. Emerging from a history of political conflict, self-help values were developed and practised by politically motivated prisoners in jail which then continued outside the prison. This informed the work of many of the FC/FP organisations seeking to achieve a broader social impact (e.g., promoting peace in Northern Ireland) while still maintaining their *collective* post-imprisonment identity.

The data for this article was derived primarily from a series of 35 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former prisoners and others involved in FC/FP reintegration work, conducted by the first author as part of her mixed-method Ph.D. dissertation project [13]. This sample had a higher representation of members from the Republican community (68%) than Loyalist community (32%). (During the conflict, Irish Republicans fought for a unified Irish state, whereas Loyalists fought to preserve Northern Ireland's place in the United Kingdom). This imbalance was the result of several factors, but most importantly due to the simple fact that there are a higher number of Republican ex-prisoner organisations in Northern Ireland. Interviews were tape-recorded and lasted from one to three hours. Transcripts were then analysed inductively following the coding processes outlined in Dwyer [13] for full description of methods and ethical considerations.

We present, here, a critical analysis of the concept of "self-help" and its application to the experience of the reintegration of the "FC/FP". It shall be argued that FC/FP organisations have been founded on the notion of "self-help" mutual aid for numerous reasons, but not least because of the fear of residual criminalisation, the desire to control their own destiny, and because they feel it is through their experiences that they are best placed to empathise and understand the effect imprisonment has had on their "comrades". We argue, like McEvoy and Shirlow [63], that these groups played a central role in the movement away from politically motivated violence in Northern Ireland. Some readers might be inclined to accept such an argument but, legitimately, argue that it stems purely from Northern Ireland's unique circumstances as a society transitioning out of conflict. We, therefore, situate this case study within a wider discussion of ex-prisoner self-help groups, and conclude with a discussion of the wider implications of these findings for the reintegration of prisoners more widely. We argue

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[3] The term *'former combatant/ former prisoner'* shall be used when referring to former prisoners whose incarceration was linked to the conflict in Northern Ireland. The term refers specifically to **former prisoners** and excludes reference to those who participated in the conflict and were never apprehended and incarcerated (i.e. combatants or former combatants). Although those considered 'politically motivated' former prisoners are not strictly recognised as 'combatants' under international law, there now exists an increasing amount of literature which refers to those whose incarceration is conflict related, as 'former combatants' [63], (and see Mitchell, C. (2008) 'The Limits of Legitimacy: Former Loyalist Combatants and Peace-Building in Northern Ireland', Irish Political Studies, 23, (1): 1-19, and Gormally, B. (2001) Conversion from War to Peace: Reintegration of Ex-Prisoners in Northern Ireland, Bonn: Bonn International Centre for Conversion).

that the Northern Irish experience contains important lessons for those seeking to promote desistance from crime and violence, politically motivated and otherwise.

Self-Help: Theory and Practice

Ironically, the term "self-help" implies that individuals get involved in the efforts in order to benefit themselves; however contrary to this, one of the key features of self-help work is that people come together to help one another (see [28, 29]). A traditional understanding of help is that it involves an action that has a consequence of providing some benefit to or improving the well-being of another person. The "self-help" concept stems from the belief that people facing a similar challenge can help each other by coming together in this way. Moreover, it has been argued that assuming this "helper" role is itself personally empowering, rewarding and therapeutic for the help-giver him or herself [43]. Helping others validates the helper as an important member of his or her community. Indeed Riessman [70] proposed in his "helper therapy principle" that those who help others, also help themselves, by increasing their commitment to recovery, perception of importance to others, social status and sense of independence (see [91]).

Riessman [70] traces the "helper therapy principle" ("the use of people with a problem to help other people who have the same problem") to the writings of Kropotkin [46] who contended that the notion of mutual aid "…is so remote an origin and is so deeply interwoven with all the past evolution of the human race that it has been maintained by mankind up to the present time notwithstanding all vicissitudes of history…" (p. 223). Kropotkin's idea of the innate nature of mutual aid has been confirmed in the numerous studies (see [2, 39, 53]), that indicate that common interest groups, which transcend kinship ties, appear very early and were more widespread among ancient societies. Katz states, "self-help through natural or created "lay" groups and networks is both the oldest and the most pervasive system of care for human ills" ([39], p. 153). An important element that produces the healing effect of self-help is that the helper has experienced a common problem and it is this shared experience that makes help therapy possible. The person's "woundedness" therefore is thought to have a significant sensitising effect for some healers, and that a significant experience of suffering is merely highly conducive to becoming an effective healer (see [31]):

> For a healer it could be said that it is crucial to come to live with what he or she is. The value of exploring and coming to terms with what one is, is particularly significant, and an aspect of this is becoming acquainted with one's liabilities, as well as one's assets - with one's past and present wounds and sufferings, as well as one's strengths. Then the healer may turn those sufferings to account as sources of knowledge, as basis for understanding, appreciating, and empathising with the wounds and sufferings of others ([31, p. 36).

This notion of "wounded healer" has been referred to as both a metaphor and an archetype and this theme can be found in mythology, religion, traditional stories and western psychology (see [48, 65, 78]). The "wounded healer" metaphor for example, can be traced back to Greek mythology and has been associated with the both Chiron and Asklepios who were both regarded as healing gods. Asklepio's mother was accused of adultery by her husband Apollo, then sentenced by him to death and finally murdered. Snatched from his mother's womb after her death, Asklepios was raised by a centaur named Chiron who suffered from a terrible and painful wound from a poisoned arrow which would not heal [31]. Through the intensity and acknowledgment of his own pain and suffering, Chiron eventually transcended his own wounding, going on to become a great practitioner of the healing arts. Although his wound never healed, he emerged as a wounded healer because of a conscious desire to change his circumstances through sacrifice. In one sense his story can be viewed as a paradox, since Chiron's suffering remained at the core, yet he transformed his wounding into a positive experience.

This metaphor of the "wounded healer" is at the basis of a model based on psychodynamic concepts of projection, polarities and countertransference [23, 44], and heavily influenced the work of 20th century psychotherapists such as Carl Jung. In Jung's [37] work entitled "Fundamental Questions of Psychotherapy", Jung discusses the idea of the "wounded physician" wherein psychotherapists should undergo training analysis which would prepare therapists to take into account their own personal psychological problems:

> "without too much exaggeration…a good half of every treatment that probes at all, deeply consists in the doctor examining himself, for only what he can put right in himself can he hope to put right in the patient…it is his own hurt that gives the measure of his power to heal. This, and nothing else, is the meaning of the Greek myth of the 'wounded physician'" (cited in [31, p. 21]).

Interestingly, Jung's work had significant bearing on the development of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), one of the oldest and most widely known self-help organisations. It has, at its core, the principle of members sharing their experience, strengths and hopes so that the members together may solve their common problem. Not surprisingly, the theme of the "wounded healer" is also found within the ethos of Alcoholics Anonymous [47]. AA's very essence is the notion of ill or "wounded" people playing a crucial role in the healing of other ill or a "wounded" people. Designed and carried out for the purpose of helping alcoholics achieve and maintain sobriety, AA was built on a mutual-aid therapeutic movement consisting of a "recovery program in which the sufferers are all alcoholics and the healers are all alcoholics" ([31], p.28).

So rather than relying on traditional welfare organisations, individuals can utilise self-help groups as additional support or as a complete alternative. Dissatisfaction with the traditional help organisations has also led to an increase in the use and number of self-help organisations. Research suggests these groups provide "an antidote to stigmatisation" ([41], p. 12):

> "A new member who frequently has felt stigmatised and criticised (or at the very least isolated and not understood) frequently finds immediate acceptance as a member of the group. That sometimes stunning experience seems to be a vital step towards making the cognitive, emotional and behavioural change necessary for a more effective functioning and improved quality of life" ([32], p. 538).

It has been contended that self-help organisations can operate as normative communities insofar as they give group members the space to express and share a common problem. It is by identifying with others who share a "problem" that enables the therapeutic aspect of the self-help group. This process has been referred to as the "homogeneity of concern" (see [32]) and as Humphreys [28] notes:

> "The experience of learning that we need not suffer life's burdens alone, that we have a place in the human community, and that we have something both to offer and to receive from other beings is too profound to be captured by such terms as ... 'better coping'" (p. 15).

As such, the development of self-help/mutual aid groups has not been confined to sharing coping strategies. The work of Katz [39] has categorised groups under two main umbrellas, namely those that are "natural and informal social networks of family, workmates, schoolmates, neighbours, friends and peers" and secondly those which are "largely self-organised and self directing, educational, healing, economic and socially supporting groups" (p. 131). Katz [39] has highlighted the array of groups which include anything from self-care in physical, mental and emotional help, including "physical disabilities, bereavement, eating disorders, child abuse, ex-service men/women, to groups which have been set up to, "help so-called "deviants" (e.g. ex-convicts, ex-prostitutes and former mental patients) reclaim or redefine their position among humanity..." (p. 131).

To define the nature of these groups proves difficult due to the variety of types, structures, ideologies and purposes. Reflecting on work by Killilea [42], Katz [39] has summarised Killilea's categories of interpretation of self-help/mutual aid groups into four major areas including, 1: self-help as self treatment, 2: as ideology 3: as organisational form or social institution and 4: as empowerment strategy. According to Katz and Bender [40], some of the key elements which make up a self-help/mutual aid organisation include:

> "that they are formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need; The initiations and members of such groups perceive that their needs are not or cannot be met by or through existing social institutions; overcoming a common life disrupting problem and bringing about desired social and or a personal change; voluntary, small groups structures; promulgate an ideology of values through which members may attain and enhance a sense of personal identity; and they are frequently 'cause' orientated" ([39], pp. 135-136; [40]).

Self-help groups are clearly characterised by a bottom-up form of participation as noted by Riessman [71] and it is due to this grassroots nature of the self-help phenomenon that reliance is primarily on the collective, "experiential knowledge" possessed by the membership. This "experiential knowledge" has been defined as information and wisdom gained from one's own life experiences or from the experiences of others (see [6, 76]). Many agree that it is the exchange and communication of "experiential knowledge" which is one of the fundamental aspects of all self-help groups [25, 27, 69, 77]. Schubert and Borkman, [77] claim that "…participants in self-help groups need to believe that the knowledge they gain from experience is worthwhile

and that it should be shared with others. Sharing experiential knowledge enables group members to define the problem that they have encountered and to develop guidelines for dealing with it" (cited in [76], p. 282).

There are clearly profound differences in the basic make-up between different types of self-help groups. Some self-help groups focus on a condition members have which is permanent. Some focus on behaviour which can be changed, and others are focused on trying to effect changes in the larger political arena and the participation varies greatly from group to group. But participants gain a sense of confidence and of being a worthwhile member of sharing with others who also identify with the problem. It is noted that members of the self-help group give positive esteem to the individual in a normative respect and provide a sense of meaningful integrity to the individual's transcendental needs [51].

Riessman [70] therefore emphasises the benefits the "helper receives from being in the helper role" (p. 32) insofar as it may be beneficial to give help than to receive it and "those who help are helped most" ([17], p. 19). Riessman [73] has noted that the underlying commonality across all these self-help organisations is that, "… they all promote latent inner strengths. Self-help emphasises self-reliance, self production and self empowerment" (p. 11). Quantitative studies of mutual-help groups have largely supported these claims, suggesting that engaging in helping activities is related to better psychosocial adjustment and treatment outcomes [11, 74, 91], and higher self-esteem and feelings of self-worth (e.g., [30, 60, 76]).

Self Help and Prisoner Groups

Prisoners and former prisoners have created a number of self-help projects aimed at promoting rehabilitation and reintegration [24], and these have generated occasional criminological attention. In his discussion of what he calls "retroflexive reformation", Donald Cressey [12] argues in favor of a social learning interpretation of this process: "In attempting to reform others, the [prisoner/probationer] almost automatically accepts the relevant common purpose of the group, identifies himself closely with other persons engaging in reformation, and assigns status on the basis of anticriminal behavior" (p. 119). Moreover, Lofland [52] argues that the "wounded healer" role, "serves to make acceptable, explicable and even meritorious the guilt-laden, 'wasted' portions of an actor's life" (p. 287). By sharing one's experiences and acting as either a role model or mentor, former prisoners can "reach back" and help other similarly stigmatised people "make it" after incarceration (see [56, 87]).

The theoretical arguments found in Cressey's "reflective reformation" and Riessman's "helper principle" were subsequently implemented in a number of "new careers development" programs throughout the 1960s and 1970s (see [21, 22, 68]). Grant [21] noted the impact of utilising ex-prisoners as a "manpower resource in correctional rehabilitation and re-entry programs, building the benefits for training prisoners for 'change agent roles'" (pp.226-34). LeBel [50] observed the increased role of self-help and the "helper principle" played in programs developed in the 1970s, reflecting on the work of McAnany and colleagues' [61], study on former prisoners which found that, "a self-help orientation comes very close to being the identifying mark of [the] groups, and appears to be based on a realisation that their identity as prisonised persons requires self-help" (p. 26).

Recent criminological research (see [56, 57, 50]) has rejuvenated discussions of the helper principle under the umbrella of the "strengths-based paradigm" in corrections, contending that "the helper principle should be recognised for its potential to facilitate recovery and reintegration of former incarcerated persons" ([50], p. 24). LeBel [50] argues:

"Today, prisoner reintegration programs appear to be making great use of formerly incarcerated persons as staff. ... Although it appears (at least anecdotally) that many released prisoners are turning to mutual-help settings for assistance..., *we know very little about the appeal and the effects of these groups*" (pp. 22-3, emphasis in original).

A model of this sort of self-help or strengths-based reintegration is the Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco [57]. Founded in 1971 by Mimi Silbert and former prisoner John Maher, Delancey Street has grown from an organization consisting of ten recovering addicts (and one criminal psychologist) living in an apartment to a thriving organization with 1,500 full-time residents in five self-run facilities, more than 20 businesses that double as training schools, and an annual operating budget of close to $24 million [7, 64]. The program is self-supporting and has no professional staff. Instead, taking an "each one teach one" approach, residents teach and train newer arrivals then utilize these new skills to sustain the organization once the more

senior residents "graduate" into private housing and independent careers. According to Silbert [82], "This process is much like mountain-climbing in a chain in which the person closest to the top is pulling everyone else along" (p. 46). In doing so, Silbert says, residents "learn a fundamental lesson…that they have something to offer. These are people who have always been passive…. But strength and power come from being on the giving end" ([7], p. 11).

The Northern Irish Experience

Imprisonment was widely used as a way of combating political violence during the three decades of conflict known as the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Although no exact figures are available, Jamieson and Grounds [33] estimate that somewhere between 13,400 and 38,192 individuals served time in prison or jail as a result of "politically motivated" criminal activities during the Troubles. Reintegration support for such individuals was available from state and voluntary-sector groups such as the Probation Board of Northern Ireland and the Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (to the extent that such services are available to all former prisoners). However, involvement with these agencies was largely considered unacceptable to the FC/FP because of their work with "ordinary" prisoners and the associated stigma of criminalisation. Typically, FC/FPs draw a strong distinction between prisoners convicted of ordinary crimes ("ordinaries") and those serving sentences for political motivated activities. For the most part, prisoners who had been sentenced for "politically motivated" activities said that they did not avail of the services provided by government agencies and other government-sponsored organisations, as these are viewed as catering for the *rehabilitation* of "ordinary" former prisoners:

> "I am no social misfit needing rehabilitation. I've never committed a criminal act in my life and I won't be treated like a crim. If I were to go to the likes of Probation looking for help, I'd be practically admitting that I wasn't a political prisoner. It would go against everything I believe in. I do need help but I am not going to criminalise myself to get it" (Republican former prisoner, An Loiste Uir Prisoner/Ex-Prisoner Project).

Moreover, there is little trust amongst former prisoners of those who have not been directly involved in the conflict, as there is a general belief that those who have not been directly involved cannot, and often do not, want to understand what it is like,

> "…even my own wife doesn't really understand what I've been through. I spent years on the blanket [prison protest]. I was beaten, humiliated and degraded in ways I want to forget about, but the effects never leave you. The only ones who can really understand are the lads who were there as well. If I was looking for help or advice I would want it to come from someone who I trust and who knows the score" (Republican former prisoner, An Loiste Uir Prisoner/Ex-Prisoner Project).

FC/FP self-help groups have therefore developed, which are composed of and run by, those who have shared experiences similar to former prisoners wishing to avail of their services. Those working with self-help groups generally struggle with the same issues and can connect and build trust with those who use their services. Not only have the self-help groups been viewed as an important and crucial facility to integrate former prisoners into the community as "useful citizens", they continue to address key re-integrative issues which in the past have been ignored.

Former prisoner's involved in the self-help groups are clearly motivated by the idea of contributing to the community and "giving something back":

> "We're also A-plus technicians who are able to build and maintain computers. We actually did a project where we built 10 computers for community organisations in the area, showed them how to build them and then they kept the computers ... *and all of this is our way of putting something back into the community"* (Project Coordinator of a Republican Former Prisoner Group).

> "A lot of them find themselves in community work…and there would be a number of them who would be working with other people. *It's about giving back to the community and using their experiences in a positive way in the community ...* there are a lot of things that ex-prisoners have to offer" (Loyalist FC/FP).

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LeBel [50] notes that the helper/wounded healer orientation can transform individuals from being part of the "problem" into part of the "solution" as they give their time in the service of helping others who are less far along in the recovery and reintegration process (see [58]; [72], p. 225). Moreover, Maruna and colleagues [59] have noted the importance the role individual actions have in the removal of stigma and subsequent place of persons in society. Although the FC/FP community would dismiss the idea that they are stigmatised by their local communities, stigma is certainly something they have faced in the *wider* community, as one project coordinator remarked:

> "When word got out that there was an ex-prisoner group being set up here, there were all kinds of rumours and scare-mongering going on. We had a lot of PR work to do, to try and get the story corrected and that was just at the community level then. And when you go into the institutions ... there was a lot of battling done. Like with the likes of the Department of Employment, you were seen as a criminal, as an ex-offender" (Project Coordinator of a Republican Former Prisoner Group).

Therefore, one way of removing both internal and external stigma may be by modifying the self concept by taking on the helper role and associated activities, thus allowing the former prisoner to take on a new role that enables them to be seen as valuable contributors to society. Burnett and Maruna [8] have argued that, "in the context of a professional role and self-concept, the mirror provided by colleagues becomes critical to appraisal of one's authenticity, efficiency and acceptability in that role" (p. 95). One project coordinator captured this notion well:

> "I think the [Republican ex-prisoner] network ... has worked very hard to gain that respect, we're a very hard working organisation, we're a very professional organisation as well. And that's probably one of the things that people say the most is that – "Gosh, you really know what you are doing, you know" (Project Coordinator of a Republican Former Prisoner Group).

> "It's commitment to the project that holds us together, we're all committed to making this a big success, not only for us as ex-prisoners but so that the community can look to us and say, 'Look what they've done'" (Republican Former Combatant/Former Prisoner).

Burnett and Maruna [8] have summarised the potential for this strength-based approach insofar as it, "(a) perceives prisoners as a positive resource to fill gaps within the voluntary sector or the employment market (which we could term the 'needed services' principle); and (b) provide opportunities for ex-offenders to develop pro-social self-concepts and identity, generally in the form of rewarding work that is helpful to others (the 'helper principle')" (pp. 101-102). Bazemore and Erbe [4] have also noted the importance of such identity transformation in that it can demonstrate to the returning community that the former prisoner is "worthy of further support and investment" as well as allowing the former prisoner to feel that they have something to "offer that is of value to others" (p. 45). The desistance literature (see [19, 56, 80]) provides compelling evidence that long-term desistance does involve identifiable and measurable changes at the level of personal identity or the "me" of the individual.

Hans Toch argued this transformation in self is encouraged by participation in what he calls "altruistic activity" or "activity designed not for profit or gain but to assist some underprivileged people who stand in manifest need of assistance" ([84], p. 270). Participating in these types of activities can provide "a sense of purpose and meaning, allowing them to redeem themselves from their past mistakes, and legitimising the person's claim to having changed" ([58], p. 133). The growth that can result can lead the offender to reject his "past offender identity" and adopt "a new identity and a new self and a new set of goals" ([84], p. 276). To achieve and reach self potential was also important to those who participated in this study. One Republican former prisoner stated:

> "To inhibit and to somehow curtail the potential of a human being and allow that person to believe this is where he goes and this is where he can't go, I think this is a massive sin in itself and there is something really terrible wrong here, in that you are saying 'you are there and this is where you are going to stay'" (Republican Former Combatant/Former Prisoner).

Of course, there are some important differences between these contributions and those of "ordinary" former prisoners. "Politically motivated" FC/FPs are not seeking forgiveness or redemption, nor do they need to desist from crime in a traditional sense. At the same time, there are parallels to desistance to be found in their efforts toward conflict transformation, community development and transitional justice.

"The objective is…how can groups facilitate ex-prisoners like myself getting back into society and above all developing some form of conflict transformation programme which would help prevent young people getting involved in the paramilitaries?" (Loyalist Former Combatant/Former Prisoner).

FC/FP interviewees also repeatedly echoed the theme of wanting to "give something back" and make a contribution to their communities and the wider society:

"...the objective is not so much what can society do for ex-prisoners but what ex-prisoners can do for society and how can groups facilitate ex-prisoners like myself getting back into society" (Loyalist Former Combatant/Former Prisoner).

"I would love to work with the council, in … tourism, I studied tourism and culture and I got a first last year. I would like to make a contribution to … the people … especially the community in which I have lived in who I feel desire a lot better in this post cease-fire situation and peace situation" (Republican Former Combatant/Former Prisoner).

It is through this self identity as a "leader" or "transformer" that FC/FPs can feel a sense of purpose and meaning. Yet, politically motivated former prisoners often see such work as a continuance of their struggle, albeit by peaceful means. Maruna, LeBel, and Lanier [58] found in their research that former prisoners often adopted a role as a wounded healer, having experienced "the transformation of identity from victim to survivor to helper" (p. 142). This has resonance with many of the former prisoners in this study with one stating:

"I didn't want to go into prison and if I will be harnessed with this here all my life as a burden it doesn't go well for my future. I try to do anything I can to get away from it and I found the only thing I can do is to try and transcend it by going back to university and saying 'look here I have done my best, here accept my merit, accept me for what I have done here'" (Republican Former Combatant/Former Prisoner).

It is with the help of self-help organisations that former prisoners seek to reach their potential and to transcend the label "ex-prisoner" to develop a transformed identity. The emphasis on self-help should therefore help create an environment where former prisoner can express who they really are and what they really feel, without any possible betrayal on their label as "a former combatant/former prisoner".

"Families and relatives of ex-POWs should be able to leave past baggage at the door and the POWs should be identified as themselves, not just as who they were when they went to jail, and they should not be defined merely as ex-POWs" (Republican Former Prisoner, Coordinator's Report Tar Anall, 1997)

Moving Beyond "Self-Help"

Since the signing of the "Good Friday" peace agreement in Northern Ireland in 1998, the FC/FP self-help movement has continued to grow and develop into organisations whose functions have moved beyond their initial aims as practical assistance providers. Through strength of identity, shared common purpose, and motivated by the continued exclusion and discrimination of their group members into full civic society, these organisations have evolved into a significant social movement. Driven by and lobbying on behalf of a new politics of identity – that of the FC/FP -- the work of these organisations has evolved to ensure not only the equality and participation of former prisoners but also a focus on wider community development:

"It has become a community-based group and is no longer an ex-prisoner centre. We'll never hide our background from anybody but it is seen as being community based. What we want to do now is develop it so that it can be a major force in community work. The idea of broadening out into a regional approach, that's very much on the agenda" (Project Coordinator of a Republican Former Prisoner Group).

"…we tried to ensure that we were not only focusing on the target group of ex-prisoners and their families, that then moved into people 'on the run' and displaced people, but we've also left it open for the general public because many of us would have been involved in local community initiatives…" (Project Coordinator of a Republican Former Prisoner Group).

In addition to the significant contribution these self-help organisations make to community development, conflict transformation and peace-building (see [63]), these groups remain most heavily committed in challenging the numerous practical and structural barriers which continue to block the full reintegration of the FC/FP community. However, rather than addressing these issues on an interpersonal-level, the groups have moved into the political arena, addressing the politics of re-entry.

Indeed, the movement of FC/FP in Northern Ireland has largely transcended the typical mutual aid and support functions associated with self-help. Although groups are still involved in providing counselling and personal assistance to members, many groups that begain as mutual-aid support groups have metamorphosised into agents for both political and social change. One project coordinator commented:

> "[Our] aims and objectives broadened from welfare support in the sense that people began to identify … that prisoners were attempted to be criminalized ... their term in jail was identified as a criminal record ... such a tag on any prisoner, particularly a political ex-prisoner has all sorts of consequences ... we are … struggling against the whole concept..." (Project Coordinator of a Republican Former Prisoner Group).

These organisations can be viewed as a "social movement"; beyond dealing with the practical and every day issues of their members, these groups have also given their users a larger platform for their voice to be heard within the wider political arena:

> "...what we are saying is ... rather than concentrate greatly on accessing information on your entitlements, although we are still looking after that, but we are saying that we are now in a position where we should be looking to impact policy, State policy..." (Project Coordinator of a Republican Former Prisoner Group).

> "I think that as long as and until discriminatory legislation is done away with against ex-prisoners, there is a struggle and a battle there, and I think that we are the in the best place, in a coordinated fashion to head that struggle and battle. There is a major role for ex-prisoners in the political field" (Republican Former Combatant/Former Prisoner).

In fact, FC/FPs from all sides of the conflict have filled major political positions all the way to the highest political office in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions: Lessons from the Northern Irish Peace Process

With individuals once branded (and convicted) as "terrorists" routinely elected as members of the devolved parliament in Northern Ireland, the place is truly exceptional in many ways. However, this sort of transformation from self-help work to political advocacy is hardly unknown outside of the context of the Troubles. For instance, the organizers of the ex-prisoner group "All of Us or None" [1] argue that: "It's OUR responsibility to stop the discrimination, and to change the public policies that discriminate against us, our families, and our communities". Likewise, in their Chicago research, McAnany and colleagues [61] found that the ex-prisoner groups were "formed to confront the stigma, which these prisonized persons were running away from" (p. 27). These groups argue that there is a "common bond" between all persons who are formerly incarcerated and that "helping 'the brothers' was essential for continued group identity" ([61], p. 28). By providing a supportive community and a network of individuals with shared experiences, these groups can be interpreted as transforming an ostensibly individual process into a social movement of sorts [24].

Indeed, there are parallels in numerous other domains outside of criminal justice as well. William White [87]-- one of the primary chroniclers of the long history of self-help activities among those recovering from addictions to alcohol and other substances -- has identified the beginnings of what he refers to as the "New Recovery Movement." In this new development, recovering persons have moved "beyond their personal service work" as wounded healers and become "recovery activists," advocating on behalf of recovering persons as a group. According to White [88], individuals in the New Recovery Movement have joined together "not in supplication but in service; not asking for something, but offering something; not advocating for themselves, but for others; not acting as individuals, but in communion; and not seeking solutions through formal institutions but through the community itself" (p. 6). These wounded healers "turn their personal stories into social action" and "move beyond their personal service work and become recovery activists" ([88], p. 16).

Martin ([55], p. 373) emphasises how social movements have been instrumental in bringing about changes in welfare provision through self-help groups which challenge the old welfare order. Williams [90] has argued that these "new social welfare movements" have thus contributed to "the emergence of the active welfare subject as opposed to the passive recipient of benefit" (p. 683). Williams [89] describes the movement as comprising of "a panoply of groups expressing specific needs collectively but which are united by a concern with the nitty-gritty of empowerment, representation, and ensuring the quality and accountability of user centred provision" (p. 216).

Collective action by groups of stigmatized persons to change laws and other social policies have been documented for persons with physical disabilities, gays/lesbians, persons with mental illness, persons with HIV/AIDS, and other disadvantaged groups [3, 45]. The mental health "consumer movement," for instance, emphasizes the importance of activism in helping those with mental illnesses overcome stigma [85]. These sorts of empowerment-oriented, proactive, and collective attempts to change public perceptions and create a more positive identity are increasingly being thought to be stigmatized persons' "most effective and enduring route to reducing prejudice" ([54], p. 217).

Rogers and Buffalo [75] refer to this type of stigma coping orientation as the "fighting back" phenomena (p. 105; see also [18, 35, 88]). Whereas, helping behaviors primarily ease an individual's own experience of stigma, the activist orientation seeks to confront the stigma against ex-prisoners more broadly by "breaking through social prejudice" ([81], p. 6). There may be discernible personal benefits for engaging in this sort of advocacy work. In research among members of other stigmatized groups, Wahl [86] for instance found that "involvement in advocacy and speaking out are self-enhancing, and the courage and effectiveness shown by such participation help to restore self-esteem damaged by stigma" (p. 476; see also [79]). Becoming involved in advocacy-related activities can also imbue individual lives with meaning, purpose, and significance to a formerly incarcerated person's life ([9], [58]).

LeBel's [50] research on a sample of over 200 ex-prisoners provides the most systematic evidence to date of these benefits of involvement in advocacy as a coping orientation for ex-prisoners. His survey research found that an activist or advocacy orientation is positively correlated with one's psychological well-being, and in particular their satisfaction with life as a whole. Moreover, he found a strong negative correlation between one's advocacy/activism orientation and criminal attitudes and behavior. This indicates that advocating on behalf of others in the criminal justice system may help to maintain a person's prosocial identity and facilitate ongoing desistance from crime.

Of course, only a small minority of stigmatised individuals take on activist roles. Others, seek strategies for concealing their stigma or countering it in other ways [36, 38, 81]. Those ex-prisoners who become activists/advocates on behalf of all ex-prisoners, therefore, can face even greater resistance. Indeed, in some cases, in fact, such activism might lead to a further backlash against ex-prisoners and so may increase rather than combat stigma (see [10]). Goffman [20] writes:

> The problems associated with militancy are well known. When the ultimate political objective is to remove stigma from the differentness, the individual may find that his very efforts can politicize his own life, rendering it even more different from the normal life initially denied him—even though the next generation of his fellows may greatly profit from his efforts by being more accepted. Further, in drawing attention to the situation of his kind he is in some respects consolidating a public image of his differentness as a real thing and of his fellow-stigmatized as constituting a real group (p. 114).

In the widespread discussion of how to combat terrorism, few are discussing the issue of ex-combatant and ex-prisoner reintegration (for exceptions see [5, 26, 49, 62]). When the subject is raised, as in the concept of DDR (Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration), the focus is typically on reducing the risks posed by FC/FPs in society. Likewise, the wider conversation about the reentry of large numbers of "ordinary" prisoners back into society tends to focus on the risks this process entails and the plethora of needs that people in that situation have to minimally satisfy to ensure safe and successful reintegration. It is less common to think of reentry in terms of the contributions that people returning from prison can make to their communities and to the wider society. However, reintegration is "a two-way street" [34, 56, 66] involving changes on the part of the returning prisoner as well as in society. The strengths-based approach of the self-help/activist model recognizes this and therefore has considerable appeal for stigmatized and marginalized groups.

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