

The Religious Community: A Space that Facilitates Successful Resettlement for Muslim Offenders



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Abstract The religious community can play an important role in providing tangible and intangible support for offenders to help them reintegrate into society after serving a prison sentence. Using data drawn from life story interviews with 17 Muslim male offenders in England and Wales, this chapter outlines the different ways in which the religious community plays a crucial role in the reintegration journey after release from prison. Tangible support provided by a religious community can include help with housing and employment, two key concerns for offenders upon release from prison. Furthermore, the religious community provides important intangible support, which is crucial for reintegration after the degradation and stigma associated with imprisonment. This intangible support includes strong social bonds within the community which are based on reciprocal relationships. Acceptance by spiritual and community leaders can act as a redemption ritual which allows offenders to break from their negative past and develop a new positive identity. The community can also support the move away from crime by providing a moral environment which engenders a respect for the law. Along with this, civic engagement and contributing positively within a community fulfils important generative impulses which are part of identity development. Tangible, as well as intangible, support plays an important role in helping offenders manage the delicate transition back into society, which is usually fraught with challenges, as well as possibilities.

Keywords Resettlement · Muslim offenders · Religious community · Rehabilitation · Post-release

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Introduction

Religious charities have historically played an important role in supporting offender reintegration upon release from prison (Vanstone, 2004, 1–18). The earliest support programmes for offenders leaving prison were voluntary and run by religious and other charities. In England this role was formalised through the 1907 probation legislation and the missionaries providing voluntary support were given formal status as officers of the court; this later developed into the role of the probation officer. Thus, the impetus of supporting the re-entry into society of offenders upon release from prison is influenced by humane religious ideas of providing support during periods of hardship and offering offenders a point of contact within a community based on empathy and commitment (Vanstone, 2004, 2).

However, in contemporary times, the role of religious communities in providing support to members dealing with the challenges associated with resettlement after release from prison is often overlooked within the policy domain. In popular discourse, minority religious communities are seen as insular and at odds with broader society (Runnymede, 2017). This is particularly relevant with regard to perceptions about Muslim religious communities in Europe. In this chapter, I discuss some of the ways in which Muslim religious communities can play an important role in supporting ex-prisoners in their journey towards desistance from crime. Though often not professional social work, this can be understood as informal social work. I use the life story accounts of 17 Muslim offenders convicted of different criminal offences to show the ways in which their ties within a religious community were key elements in their resettlement after their release from prison and shift away from crime.

The article starts by discussing literature on the re-entry of offenders after they have served their prison sentence. In particular, the process of desisting from crime and the factors that can help in successfully maintaining a life free from crime after release from prison are considered. The article then moves on to outline the methodological approach adopted for this research. Finally, the data findings and conclusions are presented.

State of the Research

Resettlement and Reintegration

Re-integration and resettlement are two central concerns with regard to offenders' after-prison experiences; however, these terms are misleading, as they are based on assumptions that prisoners have a level of integration and are settled before entering prison. The pre-prison life experiences of offenders suggest a different picture: offenders' lives are largely tumultuous and chaotic with severe social as well as economic deficits (Farrington, 2000a, 2003). After conviction, these deficits only

increase through the added layer of stigma, shame, negative social learning from the prison environment, and social exclusion due to the new status as a convicted criminal (Maruna, 2014). The low levels of social and economic capital that offenders have before prison shrink further once they have been convicted. It is therefore not surprising that almost 28.8% of all offenders will return to prison within 2 years (Russel Webster, 2020); this figure is higher (39.2%) for young offenders as well (62.2%) for those serving short sentences (less than 12 months). However, the age-crime curve also shows that a majority of offenders will eventually desist from crime completely (Maruna, 2001, 6). This makes the period after release from prison particularly important from a crime control perspective, as there is potential both for desistance and continued or increased offending. This also makes the post-release period one fraught with challenges as well as possibilities. A key concern from a public protection perspective is whether individuals who have previously been involved in crime can successfully transition away from this involvement. Thus, a crucial aspect of successful reintegration and resettlement is long-term desistance from involvement in crime.

Moving on from purely punitive concerns, criminological research as well as criminal justice policy interventions have sought to understand the factors that lead to involvement in crime and equally importantly the factors that can lead to a move away from crime. In most Western democracies, evidence-based approaches to crime reduction that focus on risk factors and need assessment of offenders have become the predominant paradigm in offender management (Bonta, 2002; Farrington, 2000a, 2000b; Latessa & Lovins, 2010). Risk factor and need analysis look at psycho-social factors and deficits which are common in the background of individuals who become involved in crime. These approaches have no doubt brought a degree of rigour in understanding the reform process. However, the predominantly quantitative nature of these studies that focus on large scale evaluations and meta-analysis tend to obscure the importance of the local context in which the individual exists and takes decisions.

The use of autobiographical narrative helps offset this imbalance by focusing on the individual, and research approaches that focus on the life stories of offenders are well established in criminological research (Becker, 1973; Laub & Sampson, 2005; Shaw, 1966). The narrative approach has been used within criminological research to explain trajectories of desistance and criminality amongst groups of juvenile delinquents (Laub & Sampson, 2005). Life stories told by the offender help to unpick the social factors that lead to criminality, along with looking at the impact that involvement with criminal justice has on future criminality and social connection (Shaw, 1966). These stories also outline the influence and importance of human agency in making sense of the social and in orientating behaviour and making choices (Laub & Sampson, 2005).

Individual experience and biographies are seen as a key through which to unlock the historical and structural milieu in which the biographies unfold. Such approaches therefore allow us to better understand the whole, by focusing in detail on key parts of the whole (Becker, 1973; Rustin, 2000). They implicitly assume the micro-macro linkages that exist between the experiences of individuals and the broader social

environment. A life story approach which is centred on the micro level is well-suited to uncover and outline the meso-level causal mechanisms that make explicit the mutual impact of the micro and macro-level (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). Furthermore, as Shadd Maruna (2001) shows in his seminal book on how offenders reform, this context and an individual's self-understanding play a critical part in the journey towards desistance from crime.

Desistance from Crime and the Redemption Script

Maruna (2001) describes desistance as a process of keeping away from criminal activities despite facing obstacles and challenges in everyday life. Desistance is a process which requires understanding how individuals who have committed crimes in the past change, and continue to maintain crime-free behaviour (Maruna, 2001, 26). He suggests that ex-offenders frame their criminal past and their commitment to a future free of crime through the use of a 'redemption script'. The redemption script has three main elements: it emphasises a 'core' positive identity; reinforces a strong sense of personal control over future actions; and focuses on 'generativity' – the desire to contribute positively to future generations (Maruna, 2001, 148).

Redemption, from the Latin term *redimere* meaning 'buy back', derives from a religious understanding of making atonement for wrongdoing or sins. The redemption script helps offenders to make sense of their past in a way which allows them to move forward positively. Given the religious nature of redemption, one crucial question would be whether religious communities could function as bridges which would help the offenders to move away from crime and to develop a positive identity in their post-release lives.

The Role of Post-Release Relationships

Weaver and McNeill (2014) have highlighted the important role played by family, religious community, work and friendship groups in facilitating changes in identity and a desistance from crime. They suggest that relationships based on reciprocity are important in fostering change that leads to desistance from crime. The role of a 'wounded healer' was particularly important in this regard (Eglash, 1958; LeBel, 2007, 2009; LeBel et al., 2015). Wounded healer is a term drawn from the work by Carl Jung (1951) and refers to the importance of the therapist introspecting and healing their internal wounds while helping a client through psychotherapy (Eglash, 1958, 237). This term is also used by Alcoholics Anonymous whereby recovering alcoholics can mentor and support others who are on a similar journey. Such reciprocal relationships help breakdown the stigma of a troubled past and to move towards a positive life based on dedication to self and others. For ex-offenders who

have moved away from crime, helping others avoid similar pitfalls can be an important reinforcement of their commitment to desistance.

Methodology

Autobiographic Narrative Interviews

This research used religious biographies as the means through which to understand the processual creation of social identity amongst Muslim offenders in England and Wales. It followed an oral life story approach, which aimed to collect retrospective, as well as current, information about the significance and role of religion in the lives of the research participants. As discussed earlier, the use of autobiographical narrative is well established in criminological research (Becker, 1973; Laub & Sampson, 2005; Shaw, 1966).

There are however certain limitations to adopting this methodology. The small sample used for this research limits the generalisability of the research findings to a wider context. Life story narratives are also seen as dependent on context. The methodology acknowledges that the life story elicited through such an approach is influenced by the relationship of the researcher and the participant (Harrison, 2009; Kakuru & Paradza, 2007). Nevertheless, through purposeful sampling, the research has attempted to provide in-depth and detailed information about the practice and meaning of faith to Muslim ex-prisoners from different ethnicities, age groups and neighbourhoods.

Sampling

Choosing cases for detailed case studies, as required in life story research, involves a cross-case comparison. I needed to carefully consider the demographic and other characteristics that I wanted to include in the study. I therefore paid particular attention to collecting in-depth information from a purposeful sample that had the characteristics which would allow for a diverse cross case comparison while still maintaining the depth of detail and richness of engagement allowed for by a case study method.

Research with marginalised and hard to access groups prioritises convenience in sampling and data collection. In this project, access has been one of the most challenging aspects of the research process. As the research model relied on conducting more than one interview, maintaining contact for follow up interviews further added to the difficulties of the sampling process. I started with a larger sample of 21, however meaningful data was drawn from 17 participants. This is a large sample for life story research and allowed for diversity in the study.

A range of organisations were approached to get the full sample. These included NGOs working on the resettlement and mentoring of ex-offenders, the London Probation Trust and mosques. The purposeful sampling prioritised getting a good mix based on the following characteristics: Muslim offenders from different ethnic backgrounds and age groups, as well as a good mix of born Muslims and converts. A significant part of my sample (7) was drawn from a mosque in a small city in the North of England which followed the Sufi Naqshbandi tradition in Islam. This site was chosen as I knew of other researchers who had accessed research participants there. A key contact found members of the community that had a criminal conviction and were willing to participate in the research. The participants were recruited for me; it was not clear if any refused or might have been excluded for any reason by my contact person. The community in which the mosque was based was predominantly composed of first and second-generation British Pakistani migrants who had migrated to England in the early 1960s and 1970s. The sample drawn was therefore mainly of Pakistani origin and community relationships were based on strong kinship ties and a common ethnic background, as well as religion. There were however two white converts in the sample drawn from this mosque. Although this site was chosen purely for convenience, its location in the North of England and its particular adherence to Naqshbandi Islam provided a contrast to the rest of the participants who were from London. Participants were also recruited through two NGOs in London working to support the reintegration of Muslim offenders. Seven participants were receiving formal help in the form of mentoring as well as help with accessing housing and employment from these religious organisations. The final three participants were recruited through the London Probation Trust. Differences on the basis of geographical location, ethnicity and religious affiliation had an influence on the type of community help participants received and the sort of community ties they relied on. The participants drawn from London tended to go to mosques that were more ethnically diverse.

Data Collection

As part of the process of explaining the research and getting written consent, participants were made aware that participation in the research would involve more than one interview. Eleven of the participants participated in more than one interview. With the rest (6), I relied on material from one in-depth unstructured interview. Following a Biographical Interpretive Method (BIM) (Harrison, 2009), the first interview with each of the participants was unstructured and was used to build rapport with the research participants. Participants were asked to talk about their lives, thinking about it in chapters. The interview was kept unstructured so that no assumptions or preconceptions were imposed on the interviewees.

In particular, I was conscious not to overemphasise religion or identity as the primary categories of interest for the research. By doing so, I tried to do justice to an important maxim in qualitative research that is pointedly formulated by Desmond

(2014) as follows: “By assigning utmost importance to the categories that define a group, ethnographers may unintentionally bias their informants to filter the representation of everyday life through the prism of that category.” (Desmond, 2014, 552).

The first interview rarely followed any kind of chronological order. Instead, participants chose different events from their lives that they considered as significant. They went back and forth as they discussed significant phases and events in their lives. The first interview was followed up with further interviews which were more structured, building upon themes and ideas that emerged in the first interview. The second interview included some questions that were considered relevant to the research questions. From the third interview onward, I also used timelines with participants (as recommended by Laub & Sampson, 2005). These were useful as participants could chronologically order the information they had given in the first interview. The timelines provided a structure to the stories of the participants. The timeline also allowed me to go back and revisit the significant themes that required further explanation or detail at different stages in their life. Going over the significant events in each participant’s life in a chronological order also allowed for any inconsistencies or ambiguities to be resolved. In this chapter, I draw on the interview material which focused on post-release experiences.

Data Analysis and Coding

The first part of data organisation involved formatting and editing interview transcripts. Transcriptions were strict verbatim and included pauses identified by the use of ... in any quotations as well as *erm*, *ums*, *ers*, repetition etc. The data was anonymised, and pseudonyms were used to insure confidentiality. Initial precoding of the data was done manually, in which key passages and quotes were organised in a word document. This document maintained the chronological order of the life story stages but divided these stages into major themes that seemed significant upon the first reading of the data. This was followed by a write up on each of the participants, in which themes relevant to the research questions, such as significant events, neighbourhood, motifs, emotions and relationships were noted in individual biographies. This helped bring each of the stories together so that major events and themes in each story were available in a summarised format for easy access. The interview transcripts, biographical information, field notes and relevant literature were then transferred to NVivo for formal analysis.

Drawing on Charmaz (2001) Saldana (2016, 4) regards coding as “the “critical link” between data collection and their explanation of meaning.” Coding entails capturing the ‘essence’ or main attribute of language-based qualitative data. As stated in the previous section, the study adopted unstructured interviewing. Starting from early childhood, participants were allowed to recollect events and chapters in their lives that they considered relevant and important. Coding analysis has been broken down to reflect the different chapters in the lives of participants, as presented by them during the interviews. Most participants divided their lives according to

age. The first significant chapter is up to the age of 10 or 11, followed by teenage years, life after secondary school, early adulthood, and their current situation. The flow of these seamless narratives was broken at various points due to traumatic events, losses suffered, imprisonment, and other sudden changes in the lives of the participants. The coding aimed to retain the narrative element of the interviews while also highlighting these sudden changes and significant events.

NVivo coding was the first step through which the data were clustered or organised. Recurring meanings and patterns were developed into categories. These categories formed the basis of major research themes which were used to develop theories from the data. The research adopted social organisation categories by Lofland et al. (2006; see also Saldana 2016), which include the following:

1. Cultural practices (daily routines, occupational tasks, micro cultural activity etc.)
2. Episodes (unanticipated events or irregular activities e. g. divorce)
3. Encounters (interactions between two or more individuals)
4. Roles (student, father, etc.)
5. Social and personal relationships
6. Groups and cliques (gangs, congregations, families)
7. Organisations (schools, prisons, probation)
8. Settlements and habitats
9. Subcultures and lifestyles

These categories were used to code the data in order to examine the different experiences within these different social settings. As already outlined, in this chapter I use the parts of the interviews which focused on post-release experiences of the research participants. Coding of post-release material highlighted several significant themes; these are discussed in the next section.

Findings

Role of the Religious Community in Helping with Desistance

The religious community can play an important role in providing both tangible and intangible support for offenders to help them reintegrate into society after serving a prison sentence. Tangible support provided by a religious community can include help with housing and employment, two key concerns for offenders upon release from prison. As for the intangible support, it usually includes strong social bonds within the community based on reciprocal relationships, an issue of major significance for the reintegration of the offenders, particularly regarding the degradation and stigma associated with their imprisonment. Acceptance by spiritual and community leaders can act as a redemption ritual which allows offenders to break from their negative past and develop a new, positive identity. The community can also support the move away from crime by providing a moral community which

engenders respect for the law. Moreover, civic engagement and contributing constructively within a community can strengthen a positive new identity. This tangible, as well as intangible, support plays an important role in helping offenders manage the delicate transition back into society, which is usually fraught with challenges as well as possibilities. It is important to emphasise, however, that such support only led participants to successful desistance if the individual had made a personal commitment to move away from crime. For individuals who refused to make such a commitment, community help did not lead to desistance from crime. By continuing to remain involved in crime, they risked experiencing ruptures in their relationships with positive peers within the religious community and jeopardising their access to help and support.

Redemption Narratives, New Social Relations and a Moral Community

It is therefore not surprising that the role of the religious community as a bridge towards acceptance and a positive new identity was crucial in the lives of the participants who had moved away from crime. For Muslim ex-offenders in this study, their belonging to and participation in a religious community helped them maintain a positive identity by supporting all three elements of their redemption scripts. Within religious communities, participants sought guidance and forgiveness from spiritual leaders. These interactions with spiritual leaders acted as redemption rituals and strengthened a positive identity. Religious communities helped these participants overcome self-doubts about their decision to desist, thereby helping them to maintain a sense of control over their actions. Religious communities were also a source of social capital and participants could access help with housing and employment through their social contacts within the community. Contributing positively to their community helped these participants strengthen their new identity away from crime.

Participants emphasised the importance of their religious communities in inhibiting their involvement in crime by providing strong social bonds and support. Relationships with members in the religious community were an alternative to previously harmful peer relationships. Positive roles within a community offered an alternative way to make social bonds and gain the respect and status that individuals got through their involvement with their peer groups (Maruna, 2007). Religious communities were seen to promote moral messages that condemned acts of deviance and crime and helped offenders maintain a sense of connection to moral norms and values. Congregational religious practise also provided structure and gave a sense of routine to everyday life (Calverley, 2013).

For Abdullah (British Pakistani), changing his circle of friends and involving himself back in the mosque was crucial to his commitment to desist.

When I came out (of prison) I had offers every other week. “Hey how you doing? Heard you’re back, sorry to hear about your father, you know when you’re ready give us a shout”.

I just changed my number then. I just said “boom”, crossed everybody out start fresh again start fresh again, started coming *dhikr* here. On Thursday we’d come here and read *dhikr*, read *jum’a* (Friday prayer), changed my attitude, changed my ways, changed everythin’ cause now I’ve seen it there’s no point doin’ it again, is there? You know what I mean. You know so I’m just thinking let’s start all over again get another chance and get on with it to be honest with you. But it’s just obviously you know you make mistakes we’re human innit but if you make the same mistakes again, I don’t know what to call that – stupid innit?

Along with peer relationships, to have a person of high spiritual standing within the religious community engage with them, despite their own stigmatised identity (due to their crimes), helped participants to manage the shame and stigma of their crime. By getting acceptance from a figure of religious authority, participants felt they could move away from the stigma of their past. This acceptance can be regarded as a redemption ritual. As Abdullah explained:

Our Sheikh’s different, it’s no *sakhti* [strictness], there is no *sakhti*... I am, I am, I am scum, I am scum. People know now my true colours and what I am. You know who I am. People know who I am, you know more than that, but you still choose to sit here and talk to me. That’s what my Sheikh’s like. My Sheikh will say to me “Son yeah, it happens innit. Have you learnt anything off it?” “Yeah I have.” “Right, *puttar* [son] go and do your thing. Go and do your thing. Now don’t make the mistake again.” If you make it again the Sheikh will sit there and say, “You done it again?” “I have done it again.” “What you doing?” It’s just, you know what it is, it’s just that focus...

For born-Muslim participants, relationships within the religious community were based on kinship bonds and a common ethnic culture. Most of these participants had moved away from their kinship community during the phase in which they were involved in crime. They returned to these kinship relationships after release from prison.

Converts tended to establish links with a religious community through their experience of conversion; for some of the participants, this was during their prison sentence. For them, the bonds they formed with other Muslim prisoners during their prison sentence remained important after release from prison. Ali (white convert) had relied on his Muslim friends from prison when he was going through a “mid-life crisis”:

Last year I had a major slip. You know I’m just saying this for the sake of being truthful. I had a major slip, me and my wife broke, I went back to London. I thought I was missing something... and I had enough, and I said I wanna go out... So, I went out to bars and started wanting to live that non-Muslim lifestyle again... You see everybody is out there having fun and I allowed myself to become weak and... but you know it was difficult. So, I went back to London and being away from the situation and back around people who knew me... umm and who challenged me, you know what I mean. I needed to be around people who would just be bluntly honest with me and say listen... yeah, they were all from prison. I reached out to them. I texted about three or four of them one day and said, “Look man, I’m in a bad way, you know I’m really in a bad way, I’m close to doing things that I’m not, you know”... and mashallah they really... they said come back to London, at my house every day you know, they were good brothers, I mean. Yeah, they were really there for me. You know they kinda got me back...

Ali’s relationship with other ex-prisoners who had committed to desisting from crime provided a reciprocal relationship which helped him maintain his

commitment to desistance despite his personal doubts. Having such a group to rely on in times of difficulty was significant in helping him maintain desistance from crime.

Giving Back to Society – Moving Away from Materialism

Civic engagement and giving back to the community offered participants another avenue through which they could occupy roles that could lead to identity change and help them move away from crime (Uggen et al., 2004). Many of the participants spoke of wanting to contribute to broader society in a more positive way. For some, this was related to their role in their kinship community (Dawood, Abdullah, Rahim), while for others it was a broader concern. In particular, participants saw their life stories as instructional; they felt their experiences were useful in helping others avoid the mistakes they had made. Two of the participants were working as mentors in the criminal justice system. Others also spoke about their desire to be more civically involved.

Amongst ex-offenders, the role of a ‘wounded healer’, a person who helps other prisoners navigate their integration back into society, is seen to lead to a range of positive outcomes (Eglish, 1958; LeBel, 2007, 2009; LeBel et al., 2015). Involvement in mentoring roles is linked to a lower sense of stigma about previous criminal history, more pro-social values, better self-esteem and better coping strategies, along with higher levels of wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Steve (Mixed Race, convert) wanted to work as a youth mentor. He felt such work would be particularly rewarding for him due to his own difficult past:

What I really want to do is get into that mentoring like youths that are in gangs and trying to deter them from, because obviously I’ve been there, I’ve done that. Been involved in gangs in that area and stuff like that. So that’s what I want to do, and in terms of, that would be fulfilling for me. Just before I come out, I was thinking about even like charity work abroad. Not for long. Just for me, helping someone, I get, there’s nothing, there’s not a better feeling, you know what I’m saying? There’s not a better feeling. Obviously, I have to make money, but I started to realise it before, I was always “money, money, money” But there’s more to life than money, you know? Money can’t bring you happiness. So, I’d rather help someone along the way, and be satisfied and content, you know?

Ex-offenders regarded their informal role within their community as playing a significant role in their desistance journey. The chance to contribute positively to their community, to be involved in activities within their religious community, and to be seen as established members of their communities were a way of “giving back” to society, which was important for respondents.

Imran (British Pakistani) had set up a call centre with some friends. He felt that his business offered him a chance to give back to the community as he was able to give employment to young boys in his city:

Plus, we’re okay, so I mean that one thing [his business] like changed completely from what we are, well from what we were. Do you know what I mean? Obviously in a positive way,

so we're bringing something to the community. Or we're doing something and now, for example the place in (name of city) we took like 30, 40 lads from the area who had nothing basically, who were drug dealers who were everything and we took 30, 40 of them and put them straight and now they're all paying taxes, they're all getting their own wages, mothers are happy, fathers are happy that's, do you know what I mean? So, we're lucky to be where we are and we can do that. So, alhamdulillah I mean everything's worked out for us so we're alright.

Imran saw the business he had set up in which he was contributing to the community by providing jobs and paying taxes but also through the spiritual practise of organising *dhikr* services after work as an indicator that things had worked out for him despite his conviction. This sense of personal achievement as well as his emphasis on giving back to society suggested that he had successfully established a positive identity for himself.

Tangible Help with Employment and Housing

Community membership could offer participants the chance to build non-criminal relationships, as well as get help with employment and housing. Most of the participants told me that they relied on contacts made through their religious communities in finding help with employment and housing. Trust formed through social relationships within religious communities allowed participants to move beyond the stigma of a criminal record. Several participants received help in setting up business ventures through social contacts at their mosque. This kind of help was significant for ex-offenders as their criminal record limited their options for finding regular work; setting up their own business gave them the opportunity to earn money without having to deal with the stress and stigma of sharing their criminal record with potential employers.

In the case of Abdullah, for instance, kinship networks linked to his mosque played an important role in helping him become self-employed:

I always knew people anyway, because my uncle, my *caca* (paternal uncle), few members of my family, they were in the ladies' wear. So, I always had the connections since we were kids that I know who to go to. So, if I went to him, he don't need a credit or someone to say he's a good lad, him. They'll give me the credit anyway 'cause of family links. They knew my father, there's always be that link, they'll never run off with our money, so he's one of them.

Imran, who served two prison sentences for violence, also found support to set up a business through friends in his kinship network. After leaving prison he set up a call centre with the help of a few friends from his community:

I mean obviously for me because like, obviously I was always into fighting and all that I think that's what I think me now, I've like calmed down all that I think basically just stick to the law, simple as that, obviously we're blessed enough to get to a position where we have done now you know what I mean? Obviously, I'm not an (unclear), we were as teenagers, we were lost, proper lost. We done everything and so for us to like leave that and

alhamdulillah, we're alright because now we've obviously got legit businesses there where it's happening for us if you know what I mean?

Along with the tangible help Imran received through friends in his community, he also attributed the success of his call centre to his Sheikh who he felt had blessed his business. Near his call centre some of the workers had set up a Thursday *dhikr* group, which they attended after work.

It's like we built up from like seven, eight people from eight people, then from there we built up within two years we got it to like 150 – 60 people so obviously, once we implement the idea of it and we got the computers it just sprung up itself, it just – constantly just – like it's just the building I mean I can't explain it. I mean obviously we got blessings I think of Sheikh Itisham but it's just since these last six, seven months it's just been building.

Similarly, Naveed (British Pakistani) also got his first job through the help of Muslim friends outside prison. Close to the end of his sixteen-year sentence for murder, when Naveed was in an open prison, he was introduced to a property developer through one of his friends. This developer offered him a job on one of his projects. Having a job made the transition to life outside prison much easier for him. This friend became a key contact for Naveed outside prison; he started to mentor him and helped him progress through different types of jobs. Eventually he managed to get him involved in a mentoring project for young Muslim offenders.

Although religious communities could offer help with housing and employment, this help could also be jeopardised due to continued involvement in crime. Informal tangible help from community members or through formal channels such as Islamic charities required a degree of responsibility and reciprocity from individuals receiving this help. This was particularly the case with formal sources of support as NGOs faced the pressures of reporting the rates of reconviction and recidivism for the people they were helping, in order to maintain their funding. They were also under immense pressure to show that offenders under their care were moving, in quite short periods of time, onto secure employment and more long-term secure housing. These pressures faced by the organisation made it difficult for them to adopt a more long-term relationship with the offenders they were supporting. In the case of informal help, these pressures were also present, as participant's relationships could become strained if they continued to carry on their involvement in crime despite receiving help and support. However, generally, in the case of informal sources of support, there was more flexibility, more chances of forgiveness and help available for offenders to bring about change. Informal help therefore was better able to support the 'zigzag' nature of desistance.

Vin and Zulfikar, two casual Muslims who had found accommodation through community contacts, became homeless due to their continued involvement in crime. After release from prison, Zulfikar's (British Pakistani) cousin had offered him a place to stay in London. This arrangement, however, did not last long, as his cousin disliked him using drugs and alcohol.

After his release from prison, Vin (mixed race, convert) had secured accommodation through an Islamic charity. He really valued his apartment as his first secure,

independent accommodation; having access to his own place was an important step towards taking more responsibility and becoming an adult:

Where I've got my own little flat, it's like it's the first time I've been in a situation in life, so I'm managing it. It's like I'm becoming an adult. Or I am an adult, but I know what I'm being, I'm being more responsible in terms of getting to understand how the working world works. I've never had a job before. But same way I've never gone out and doing my own shoppin', my own washin', my own laundry, my own cookin'. All of these things, I'm doing them. So I have grown. I'm adding these skills and experiences. Just trying to re-start my life, basically, away from the crime. 'cause the circle was vicious circle, and one thing leads to the next, and you know, you only get older.

Despite the hope and aspiration in Vin's interview, his situation changed quite rapidly. When I tried to contact him for a follow-up interview, he was not available. I found out through the organisation that he had been evicted from his flat. A key worker at the organisation explained that he was always behind on his rent; there were concerns that he had a gambling addiction and was using his housing benefit to maintain his addiction. Although Vin was open about his dependence on cannabis in the interview, he did not mention anything about gambling. However, since he could not consistently keep to the rules set by the organisation, he had lost his access to his apartment.

Role of Religion for Persistent Offenders

It is important to emphasise that the importance of a religious community in deterring from crime was effective for participants who had developed strong redemption narratives, in which they separated their current identity from their past criminal actions and saw themselves as inhabiting their real, authentic 'good' self (Maruna, 2001, 148). Desistance involved both an active decision and commitment from the individual in moving away from crime despite difficulties and challenges, along with an environment which promoted and supported this change in the individual (Maruna, 2014). Desistance from crime was a process which required constant work from participants, and many found it hard to completely move away from crime. Dependence on drugs was a mitigating factor, however, which could draw participants back towards crime, as were financial pressures and the pull of negative peer relationships.

The main difference between persistent offenders and ex-offenders was a sense of control over personal actions. Persistent offenders who were part of religious communities felt that their actions were driven by forces outside their control (Topalli et al., 2013). They described their rule breaking as driven by worldly temptations or strains. This focus on external forces helped them justify their involvement in crime. These participants retained the idea of returning to an identity in which they were able to overcome the strains of worldly desires and obstacles to commit fully to the religious teachings they were ignoring due to their involvement in crime.

Dawood (mixed race, convert), was a regular attendee at his mosque and had recently been arrested for involvement in the supply of drugs and possession of an imitation firearm. For Dawood, his arrest was a one-off slip; he had succumbed to the financial pressures, and he had also wanted to help his friend who was looking for a place to store some of his drugs. Describing his crime as influenced by external pressures and explaining his actions as an attempt to help a friend were ways in which he could see his crime as externally driven and not in contradiction to his religious beliefs:

Like his mum kicks him out. She's found some *ganja* [name of a drug] or something in the house some *puriya* [packet of drugs] em and she kicked him out the house. So he says, "Can I stay at the flat?" and I'm like might as well and 'cause I was staying somewhere else at the time I was like, "Yeah no problem, no problem." Like I say, he was giving me money as well, which I was a bit skint at the time because I was like going back down d'you know the wrong ways and that, so my money weren't save, it was windowed away. Like I say I had the stress of Christmas coming up and the kids saying "I want this, I want that, I want this, I want that" so like I said I don't know why but I kinda justified it to myself in my own head "Oh well I'm not doing it myself like I'm just letting him do it in the flat and letting him stay there" and like I said I can't tell lies and say I didn't know he was doing drugs 'cause I did know he was doing drugs and selling drugs like I said I kinda justified it to myself.

Identity change is seen as a process which starts with contemplation of the possibility of change (Ebaugh, 1988). Persistent offenders showed some degree of reflection and contemplation along with phases of action. However, a complete shift in social relationships and changes to identity were not observable.

Conclusion

I started the chapter by discussing the role of religious communities in supporting desistance from crime. For ex-offenders, participation within a religious community led to changes in social relationships, along with tangible and intangible help to settle back into life outside. Religious communities provided social capital to maintain a crime-free identity. Along with socio-economic integration, civic engagement provided another avenue through which participants could occupy social roles that were linked to positive identity changes and a move away from crime. In this, the role of 'wounded healer' was particularly valuable in helping participants manage stigma and develop a new positive self-identity. Spiritual sense-making and community ties may be aspects of re-entry that are specific to participants who have an affiliation to a religion, however the support provided by the religious community was not different to the established social factors that support desistance from crime, such as: positive social bonds and relationships of reciprocity; support in finding long-term employment and housing; and opportunities for civic engagement.

The importance of self-narratives in influencing long term desistance from crime is reinforced through the life stories presented in this chapter, as participants who did not have strong redemption narratives could be part of religious communities

but continue to remain involved in crime. For persistent offenders, aspirations of moving back to a pure crime-free identity was part of their self-understanding. However, the participants saw themselves as lacking the power or motivation to deal with challenges and setbacks. They regarded external pressures, such as the need for material things, the influence of their peers and their dependence on drugs, as too powerful and saw their actions as being driven by these influences. Religious ideas of fate and weakness in the face of worldly temptations, as well as ideas of endless opportunities to gain forgiveness were commonly used techniques of justifying involvement in crime.

The chapter extends knowledge in the field of narrative identity and desistance by showing the ways in which positive religious self-understanding, as well as a supportive religious community, contribute to the process of desistance for offenders. The focus on the important role of a minority community – Muslims in England – as a space for resettlement and a protagonist of informal social work challenges usual narratives which present both such communities and the individuals who belong to them as helpless victims of racism, and socio-economic deprivation. A religious identity, which is usually seen as supportive of involvement in serious crimes, such as Islamist-inspired terrorism and hate crimes is in fact shown to play a role in helping individuals desist from involvement in crime. This points to the importance of further developing an understanding of the role of religion in desistance and involvement in crime. Not enough attention has been paid to this area in recent times.

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