

The Living Edge:

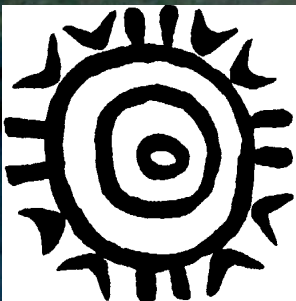
*Aboriginal people and social structures
post-prison release*

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Introduction: sociological imagination

- Today little consideration given to individual agency in desistance from crime – using a sociological imagination (Mills, 1959)
- Social structures such as the economic and political systems in Australia shape individual and group experiences (Germov, 2002)
- No matter who has the strongest self or spirit (*individual*), it can only get knocked so many times by eg poverty (*structural*)
- Looking at how social structures keep people inside or outside the Australian welfare safety net (social inclusion/exclusion)
- Difficult to keep strong in one area on the margins of a society rarely taking account of ones culture
- Linked to citizenship rights and social inclusion - structural factors that keep people in cycles.

Why *not* the individual?

- Several difficulties with looking at *experiences* of individual Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders:
 - Attempts to look at the situation of individuals is rarely from an Indigenous perspective
 - Euro-centrism applies to most assessment tools for individuals
 - Notion of assessment is arguably not “traditional” to some or many Australian Aboriginal cultures.
 - Pan-aboriginality
 - Indigenous knowledge means understanding issues very differently - patterns, cycles, relationships, country, movement.
 - Aboriginal experiences characterised by dispossession.

“Need to look at root causes”

- Existing data, practice-wisdom and Indigenous knowledge (eg experiences of Elders) show structural determinants are likely to have some synergy with causes of crime, as they are with health
- Prisoners are often from socially excluded groups and hence the issues they face in prison “stem from a wider social environment of inequality and disadvantage” (di Viggiani, 2007)
- Australia has had social model of health in policy since 1992
- We need:
 1. More research to understand more precisely what is going on for individuals
 2. Examine *why* these things are going on
 3. Advocate for change through intergovernmental collaboration with CCHOs.
- BUT “*what can be done?*”
 - Easier for practitioners to design individual or sub/population level interventions.

Data, questions & analysis

- Narrative style/interviewing with 12 Aboriginal people, convenience sample across parts of Qld
- UQ ethics approval, NHMRC guidelines on research with Aboriginal people
- Approximately 1 hour, sound-recorded, transcribed
- Not thematic analysis; data examined to answer research questions:
 - What is the interaction between the individual and the social structures?
 - How do Aboriginal people negotiate their way through the structures enough to “avoid falling through the net”?
 - “Staying in the net” (rather than “staying out of prison”) – what are the pro-inclusion factors that assist?

Qualitative research on structural issues?

...by humbly inquiring about what inequalities matter to people, and how those inequalities are made evident, researchers can gain a better understanding of social inequalities as they actually appear in members' lived experiences.

(Harris, 2006, p. 228)

Structural domains examined

Two levels:

- Interviewee experiences of social structures
- 1. Responses of social structures
 - Current pro-inclusion strategies
 - Areas for future investment.

Domains:

- Income support
- Employment
- Education
- Social programs
- Community.

Interviewee experiences: Income support

- *Difficult to live on Centrelink payments – to meet basic requirements or save for TAFE course or to relocate to regional or urban area where there may be more jobs.*
- *I got money coming out of my bank left, right and centre, just from home goods and the kids and stuff like that. See, this is second house I've had in my life.*
- Gaps in re-establishing family payments
- Housing loan debt pre-prison precluded access post-release
- Inadequacy of the first payment - somewhat a gap even though the payment works out on paper
- Additional expenses at this time – to live the normal expectations:
 - Bond for rental
 - Furniture and electrical goods
 - Transport to job interviews
 - Food stocks (not just meals) and toiletries
 - Medication and health care
 - School uniforms for children if relocating; clothing
 - Enrolment fees.

Structural responses: Income support

- What are the pro-inclusion aspects?
 - Some pre-release linkage with banking, bank accounts
 - High level of awareness of Centrelink and income support provisions
 - Centrelink visits to prisons
 - Tailored information packages backed up by verbal support.
 - Is the provision of information by Centrelink procedure-in-policy or is it procedural by the individual staff employed at the moment?
- What else could be done?
 - An increase in and redistribution of income support across government structures, particularly where activities or products meet reintegration needs
 - Pre-payments using Centrelink funds
 - Vouchers for transport, accommodation, education
 - to combat argument of “if we give them all the money upfront it will go on drugs”.

Interviewee experiences: Employment 1

- *Back then you can get a job any day, hey? But now it's a bit hard, now you can't get a job. Probably wait about two years before you get a job.*
- *I reckon that main issue is being without a job, that's all. I was strong apart from being without a job, you know, instead of being in jail, you know, without a job.*

Interviewee experiences: Employment 2

- Discrimination related to being an ex-prisoner
 - Exclusion from profession due to incarceration
- Meaningfulness of employment not only in the lives of these interviewees, but as evidenced by decades of literature on the topic
 - Underemployment, engagement in monotonous work
- Range of economic challenges of being unemployed
 - Capacity to pay for and engage in training to get into work
- Being overwhelmed about finding work
 - Finding a great job but being overwhelmed by the workload as well as family issues
- Working poor due to high rent prices, transport to and from work and medication.

Structural responses: Employment

Strategies:

- Employment in peer programs
- Training for “helping professions” to assist others to *feel good about themselves, give back* after periods of crime and incarceration, to *step up as a leader*, to prevent the *next generation* suffering the same fate.

Policy:

- Subsidised training post-release
- Pathways to workforce from prison eg pre-apprenticeship and other vocational training.

Interviewee experiences: Education

K: When I went to jail I couldn't read or write at all. But I taught myself. I felt I had to. I couldn't really even understand my own name. I thought if I educate myself it would be better for me. I knew that education was the key. So I tell my children the same thing. Educate yourself. I really learn every day of my life. We are still learning aren't we? Well, I am.

- *E: Doing the junior certificate is my main priority to get into study, because I only went to half grade 9. I didn't want to do it.*

Structural responses: Education

- These hint at the role of the individual – in getting themselves educated
- Much self-blame – patterning among the interviewees to explain lack of engagement
- Plethora of material about the continual inappropriateness of education systems in Australia
 - not embedded Aboriginal culture through languages, customs, expressions, structures.
- Expectation to participate and assimilate into the Australian system, despite concerns about low retention rates
 - Gaps for prisoners, and children of prisoners, ex-prisoners
- Multiple strategies already recommended elsewhere - structural and policy change, improved coordination.

Interviewee experiences: Social programs

- Even though Jonathan was often off his face at Parole appointments and told her “bare faced lies” like he was willing to go to rehab, the Officer persisted over months, offering referrals. After time, Jude took a particular referral, and spent a drug rehab. Jude and others vouch he is a changed man taking his place in his family, culture, work, with education and relationships. He now works in family support.
- *M: I ring up a support service when I usually want help. I go to the Aboriginal medical centre. They've got everything there. You've got the dentist, social workers, everyone there. Sometimes I'll talk to a couple of them but I've got to know which one, so I know they're not the type that will go around talking.*

Structural responses: Social programs

P: I haven't been back to our bush home for 26 years. Good memories, yeah, grandparents and that. But we were put in a home. Things happened there, bad... flashbacks.... In jail I was in anger management. They asked me to do anger management and I done anger management, then I ended up having a fight in anger management so I had to keep repeating, repeating about six times, seven times. I've still got the anger in me.

- Depression, anger, addiction... we can provide an individualised response through diagnoses, treatment and care plans but...
- Some social structures such as incarceration, child removal, education and health at the root cause of trauma
- These are the same systems that attempt to reduce trauma and improve outcomes for individuals
- Federal government apology occurred but action to end structural violence required
- Greater investment in Community Controlled Health Organisations recommended
- Improved linkage across structural domains.

Interviewee experiences: Community

- “Taking my place”

J: Two of my daughters and my son were already born before I went to jail. My brother and sister-in-law schooled my kids, they clothed them, fed them and plus they had their own children too. And now I have got two more kids. I don't want my kids growing up without their parent. Now I keep them very close. Very good kids, you know.

- The generations

K: That sense of self came from my grandmother I think. She passed away while I was still in jail. I tried to kill myself a couple of times but yeah... I came round a bit differently. It was only because I was trying to get my own head together and try to raise these kids properly.

- The social

A: I play football, that's the best one. We play in black competitions. It just brings the best out of you but before you play you have a good week, drink a lot of water, clean yourself right out and that's how you play because it's bloom'n hot. I love it because we are with other people.

Structural responses: Community

- Vast number of people touched in one family by imprisonment and system-related trauma
- Communities and groups indirectly buffeted by imprisonment are important to consider because they represent some of the “most fragile families and neighborhoods” in society (Western, 2007, p.11).
- Children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families begin their life with a “poorer platform of health and a reduced capacity to benefit from the economic and social advances experienced by the rest of society” (Najman et al, 2004, p. 1147)
- No where near able to build the social capital required for improvement in health and social status of our next generation
- Other issues (and areas for investment) are:
 - Conflict resolution, cultural healing and strengthening
 - Court orders, processes and costs
 - Emotional, instrumental and practical forms of support
 - Men’s and Women’s groups, links to culture.

Structural responses: Community control

I: If we get this men's group up and running, if they could push forward... If we can get into crime prevention courses, domestic violence courses, anger management courses, AA courses, reoffending courses, ending offending courses, relapse programs, we can do all that...

...We've been out and we stand away from that place forever now. And that's our word we want to get across to our children and younger generation. Teach them about land and that, culture. Teach them about our history. Teach them about our life, the way we live, the way we are supposed to live, that is the way we got to go. We are strong people. We are black Aboriginal people. We are Indigenous. This is our land too.

Conclusion

- Even if we can name the structural impediments to community integration post-prison release, can we really do anything about them?
- Need strategies to improve determinants including housing, employment, education and relationships.
- Why do this?
 - For increasingly more socially inclusive services, which means the money being spent does the job it is intended for, does not leave too many populations or individuals falling through the safety nets
- Theoretically if we tackle social inclusion we are also tackling crime prevention and threats to citizenship.
- But political conservatives are making social inclusion all things to all people!
- Be aware of efforts to focus on the individual but lead by Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations, with intergovernmental coordination.

Future research questions

- How effective are prison or post-release programs in changing a person's social circumstances, beyond individual behaviours?
 - If it is not their role – who takes responsibility for this? Policy?
- How does tackling structural determinants relate to recidivism, or to wellbeing - both these things in turn being possible indicators of community integration?
- When citizenship rights are returned with release from prison, why do many ex-prisoners again seem to experience deprivation, often related to social exclusion?
- Indicators for community reintegration
- Across government plans for reintegration.

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