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Mentoring: Crossing Boundaries with Care?

Helena Gosling and Gill Buck consider the emotional and practical boundary lines of mentoring within a criminal justice context, in light of a paired conversation between a mentor and mentees.

There is growing enthusiasm for mentoring as a criminal justice intervention. Indeed there is a stated policy aim to offer a mentor to every person leaving prison (Grayling, 2012). The idea is reminiscent of the abolitionist inspired radical community interventions of the 1970s (Dronfield, 1980). It is also appealing to policy makers concerned with austerity measures and opening up the justice 'market to a diverse range of rehabilitation providers', given that most mentors are volunteers (MOJ, 2014). Despite the enthusiasm, however, there is little empirical evidence documenting how these relationships develop in practice. This conversation piece, whilst not representative of mentoring more broadly, given its small sample size, is intended to illustrate some of the nuanced challenges that can exist within an evolving mentoring relationship. It is our hope that this will begin a discussion about the nature and evolution of mentoring relationships in this field.

The article draws upon an informal 'focus group' discussion between a volunteer mentor and two of her past mentees that took place in the autumn of 2014. The discussion included Gemma* (a volunteer mentor), and Elliot and Andrew, whom Gemma began mentoring on a 'therapeutic wing' in prison. Elliot and Andrew have long criminal histories, but have not reoffended since being released from prison two years ago. The discussion originally focused upon how relationships evolved and came to an end, but uncovered a dominant theme of 'Care'. This humanitarian principle will be the focus of the article as it highlights a number of tensions and dilemmas.

The value of care

The notion of 'genuine care' has been highlighted as important within relationships which aim to support desistance from crime (Knight, 2014; Leibrich, 1994). Tolan et

al (2008) have also argued that positive effects related to delinquency, aggression, drug use, and achievement tended to be 'stronger when *emotional support* was a key process in mentoring interventions' (2008: 3, italics added). The mentees in this discussion also considered care to be important:

Mentoring played a big part in my resettlement... the relationship was built over four years...my mentor was at the end of the phone, maintained contact by mail, birthday cards; things I've still got at home. Just someone out there who actually cared (Andrew)

The fact that someone was willing to just accept me for who I was that day, when they met me... which is just what any normal human could have done for me, but no-one ever did... It was a breath of fresh air, someone saying "I'll give you that chance" (Elliot)

Care is considered a legitimate, if not essential, mentoring tool by Andrew and Elliot. It affirms that they are people worth caring about. Gemma's care was also deemed to be genuine because it crossed those boundaries often present in professional relationships:

Andrew: My mentor worked with me so long she knew everyone in my circle, the people who were supporting me out here and inside the prison estate. She was there the day I got released, along with my best friend to pick me up...

Gemma: Now we're colleagues, friends, associates, these guys know my family

Andrew: She's met our family... I met her brother and sister, they got me Christmas presents, her family did!

Elliot: You didn't get slippers did you?!

Gemma: A coat I think! (Laughter)

Andrew: But they're there if needed, its similar to the friends you have now.

The care offered by Gemma and her family not only strengthened the therapeutic bond, but enabled both mentees to share their vulnerabilities with regard to the practical challenges that faced them post-release:

[It's] simple things: how do I sign on [the] dole, get on a bus. [Things] you can't talk to people about, but the mentor is there, to ease you back in slowly. If left to the authorities, there's nothing there, there's no trust been built over the years (Elliot)

You feel like an idiot, I didn't know how to work a mobile phone or a sensor tap... You feel like you've got prison emblazoned on you and she was there, consistently, it

was someone I could call and speak to, someone who listened and understood and wasn't going to ridicule (Andrew)

Elliott and Andrew felt able to use the relationship as a learning tool; to test insecurities, develop skills, and more importantly test boundaries:

Andrew: You [to Gemma] said, and I've never forgotten: "If there's ever anything you can't tell me: question yourself". So, there are times when I would phone you [for example, about] the unlicensed fighting, working on the door, cos money was low and it was the easy option. But cos you said, "I wouldn't want to know you" it then mattered; it changed my thinking, because we had that relationship ...I knew right from wrong, but I was still cutting corners. It was someone to run my distorted thinking by...

Elliot: Probation, it's about control and restraint, I'd never have that conversation with them, so who do you have that conversation with? [Gemma] was the person who I had them conversations with, because that trust had been built up, and I know whatever she told me would be non-judgemental and for my benefit. She had my best interests at heart. That was the tipping point that got me over the final barriers.

Mentoring became the route through which Andrew and Elliot could test the ground between known, entrenched, criminal habits and their emerging non-criminal identities. This, however, left Gemma in a vulnerable situation. She describes feeling a tension between the level of recording and disclosure required professionally, and what she felt she could safely hold in order to build trust and assist without sanction. We suggest that if people leaving prison feel they have no route to test out these grey areas, these thoughts about 'cutting corners', then they face a barrier to desistance on a practical level. However, we also recognise that the balance between care and unsafe practice is one which needs to be explored further.

Devilley et al (2005: 233), for example, have called for 'clarification of the many ethical issues' including: confidentiality guidelines, dealing with personal bias and values, and referral to professionals in light of complex issues (2005: 233).

Whilst the notion of 'care' may appear as a benign feature of mentoring then, it is a loaded concept which poses something of a challenge to delivery in criminal justice settings. Not only does it make personal demands of mentors and prompt them to test the boundaries of risk recording systems, but it is a difficult emotion to express in oppressive spaces. The criminal justice system, Knight (2014: 2) argues, is constituted to:

Respond to, control and punish criminal behaviour in an objective, rational and just manner. As far as possible the system aims to exclude emotion on the basis that emotions are likely to interfere with and distort the process of justice.

To care in environments where control and punishment dominate, therefore poses unique problems:

I went into [Andrew's] sentence plan meeting and at the end, because he was so pleased with some of the things we'd put in place, he give me a hug. Within the space of you [to Andrew] letting go, there were two security officers talking to him and frog marching me off. I was hauled in front of an SO [security officer and asked] "what's he passed you?"... In the community [this] would be lovely and be acceptable. It was alright in the end, but it just shows how hard it is to just be real (Gemma)

Mentoring is an intervention which aims to personify, rather than objectify. Although for Gemma this constitutes a 'more just approach', it is met with ideological resistance. This is born when the benefactor has been subject to a criminal justice sanction; 'othered' on an interpersonal, political and social level. For the security officers in the above scenario, Andrew is a 'prisoner' and therefore exists as a 'risk'. For Gemma, he is a fellow human; he exists as a 'person, not a file'. This fundamental juxtaposition in philosophy illustrates a unique tension for mentoring in criminal justice settings.

Conclusion

There is a gap in our knowledge of how the popular ideal of 'through the gate' mentoring will evolve at a relational level. This short conversation piece has raised a number of challenges facing such dyads. Firstly, it suggests that mentoring requires genuine care on the part of mentors, a quality which is personally demanding, if not also rewarding. Secondly, mentors face a conflict of philosophies in secure environments, which can constrain the evolution of healthy working relationships. If these challenges can be managed, however, mentoring may offer a safe space for mentees to practically 'try on' desistance for size, alongside a supportive other. It also questions the day to day workings of a system, which routinely 'manages' and 'dehumanises' people. It is our hope that this article begins a broader conversation to promote the healthy evolution of mentoring in this field.

***Note** the names of services and respondents used and cited are pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. [1546 words]

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