GETTING PAST SURVIVAL MODE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE
EMPATHIC SKILLSET AND IDENTITY IN CONTEXT OF STRONG AND WEAK TIES OF
FORMER PRISONERS INVOLVED IN RE-ENTRY TRANSITIONAL PROGRAMS.

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ABSTRACT

The current prison system in the United States is overwhelmed with people entering and exiting

the system. Upon exiting the prison system, people are faced with integrating into a community

without the appropriate emotional and social intelligence to change and subsist in society. While

many transition centers focus on jobs, legal and financial support, housing and substance abuse

treatment, many former prisoners need to unravel who they are and how to manage relationships

outside of the prison and criminal context. Using data obtained from four interviews with

females who have been released from prison within the last five years, this study examines how

former prisoners frame their relationships upon release, specifically looking at (1) empathic

patterns in speech and (2) functions of identity when describing strong and weak tied

relationships. The increased depth of understanding of the role strong and weak ties play in

prosocial rehabilitation may assist re-entry programs in selecting the appropriate therapeutic

programs for their clients.

Keywords: prison, empathy, identity, strong ties, weak ties, interpersonal communication

Getting Past Survival Mode: An Ethnographic Analysis of the Empathic Skillset and Identity within the Context of Strong and Weak Ties of Former Prisoners Involved in Re-Entry Transitional Programs

INTRODUCTION

The United States supervises approximately 6,937,600 people in the adult correctional system (Glaze & Herberman, 2013). This figure works out to be about 2.9% of the adult population and is recorded as being the highest number of prisoners in the world (International Centre of Prison Studies, n.d.). Add the 61,423 children in juvenile detention (Child Trends Data Bank, 2013) and the percentage point creeps upwards. The question remains, why are there so many people in prison in the United States? The punishment paradigm assumes if the punishment is severe enough, people will avoid prison. However, the ritual of imprisonment is considered a "rite of passage" in some subcultures (Pinnock & Douglas-Hamilton, 1997) and given the growing incarceration rates, the loss of freedom appears to be an insufficient deterrent. On the other side of the coin, rehabilitation efforts often only focus on education, job skills and/or standard physical appearance, falling under what is known as a deficit model. If both punishment and perceived deficit elimination were effective the prison system, regardless of the total number of people in prison, would be considered a success if the majority of people who entered, never returned. But the prison system is not a success. It is a failure.

Two-thirds (67.8%) of people previously incarcerated were arrested for a new crime within 3 years, and three-quarters (76.6%) were arrested within 5 years (Cooper, Durose, & Snyder, 2014). With the cost per prisoner averaging $28,323 per year (Kyckelhahn, 2012), the United States cannot afford the growing incarcerated population. If prison is both expensive and unproductive, it naturally follows that changes must be made to the prison system. Privatization of the prison system has already begun, with a handful of beds falling under the control of two corporations: the Corrections Corporation of America (CCA) and the GEO Group. However,

privatization is fraught with challenges including reduced pay for correctional officers, fewer

training opportunities and private-sector benefits (Friedmann, 2012). The other possible avenue

is to investigate alternative rehabilitation practices both inside and outside of prison gates. Part of

this change would include discovering the originating reasons why people end up in prison (e.g.,

outdated laws, racism) and providing a holistic approach to self-development opportunities

within the correctional system. The increased depth of understanding of the role strong and

weak ties play in empathic rehabilitation may assist re-entry programs in selecting the

appropriate therapeutic programs for their clients. This study seeks to understand how former

prisoner's frame their relationships upon release, specifically looking at (1) empathic patterns in

speech and (2) functions of identity when describing strong and weak tied relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study seeks to understand how former prisoner's frame relationships upon release,

specifically studying (1) empathic patterns in speech and (2) functions of identity when

describing strong and weak tied relationships. While required rehabilitative markers, like

employment and housing, signify acculturation to the dominant culture on paper, only providing

support in these areas does not address the substantial psychological issues that contribute to

ongoing criminal behavior and continued incarceration. The literature review looks at the context

of the prison environment and is based on the theory that empathic skills have a positive

correlation with the reduction in recidivism.

Identity: The environment of a prison is more akin to a public 'warehouse', in which

prisoners are perpetually monitored twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week; and not

necessarily by guards, but also by video and peers. Constant surveillance limits an individual's

right to privacy, which in turn limits an individual's autonomy. With the advent of technology

that allows people to be digitally monitored, Foucault's writing on surveillance is making a

comeback. The concept relies on the prisoner's lack of knowledge about when they are being

observed and thus, power detaches from the law and the prisoner becomes their own observer

and manager of their identity (Foucault, 1995). One of the ways in which prisoners manage their

day-to-day relationships is through impression management (or self-presentation), which refers

to the way in which a person attempts to control how other perceive them. Prison is an

environment in which these performances divide a person into two parts: who they are on the

inside and what is expected of them on the outside. This results in a new construction of self and

elicits behavior that may or may not adhere to their original perception of self (Leary &

Kowalski, 1990), creating a dualism based on both the pre-prison identity and the newly

constructed false prison identity (Schmid & Jones, 1991). This false identity serves as a shield

from a subculture void of freedom and littered with institutional rules and procedures designed to

help people cope with captivity (Johnson & Dobrzanska, 2005) as well as the peer-based rules

for basic survival. These new and often conflicting sets of rules limits one's personality range as

one must present only a strong and powerful persona at all times to survive. The strong persona

does two things: (1) creates a protective bubble within the identity and (2) rewards prisoners with

status and power gained from the acquisition of social, cultural and/or economic capital

(Bourdieu, 1990). While this appears on the surface to function as a temporary patch, over time

the newly constructed prison identity permanently merges with the pre-prison identity creating

an entirely new persona that may not fit back into society once released. The impact of prison

culture is so severe a new disorder has been recommended for entry into the DSM V, Post-

Incarceration Syndrome (PICS). PICS pinpoints the following behaviors derived from Post-

Traumatic Stress Disorder: (1) difficulty trusting others, (2) difficulty engaging in intimate

relationships, (3) difficulty making decisions, (4) spatial disorientation, (5) difficulty in

interacting socially, (6) feeling not to belong in a social setting, and (7) thoughts that positive

events and situations can be taken away (Liem & Kunst, 2013)

Providing therapeutic opportunities within prison walls is often problematic. The

environment is often hostile and there is risk for both therapists and prisoners alike, as therapists

have an obligation to breach confidence when another inmate or officer is perceived to be at risk

(Scott, 1985), making honesty a challenge as part of the process. If prison is unable to provide

the rehabilitative environment necessary for individuals to regain agency, then post-prison

programs must serve as the transition point from prison to community. Seranfini, Maitland and

Adams (2006) developed a theoretical framework to describe the primary functions of identity,

which can be used for building blocks towards rebuilding or recreating identity. They are

processed into five categories: (1) a **structure** to understand self-relevant information; (2)

establish **goals** that correspond with the existing identity; (3) **personal control** through the

process of setting and achieving goals, (4) **harmony** between chosen values, beliefs and

commitments; (5) recognize **future** possibilities and a sense of a possible future self (Serafini,

Maitland, & Adams, 2006). This framework could be used as a model to create programs geared

towards the development or recreation of identity after prison.

Strong and Weak Ties: Re-entry transitional programs provide people with a broader

social network in which the person can take advantage of both strong ties (e.g., family, friends)

and weak ties (e.g., clergy, parole officers, support groups). Granovetter (1973) defines ties as

follows: "the strength of a tie is a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the

emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which

characterize the tie." Strong ties are often seen in family and bonded friendships. The strength of

these relationships often facilitate support in substance abuse treatment (O'Brien, 2001) and the

continued presence of family while in prison reduces the likelihood of the person to reoffend

upon release (Cunningham, 2001). However, some caution is advised in emphasizing strong ties

associated with family and peer groups for social support, as strong ties are often indicative of

the similarities found between two people (Berscheid & Walster, 1969). If former groups set the

environmental and emotional conditions for criminal behavior, continued participation in these

groups may stimulate further crime and increase the chance for recidivism (Hagan & McCarthy,

1997). Weak ties, on the other hand, help in the transmission of novel information and are

connections or potential links to other ties (Granovetter, 1973). Weak ties, in the case of

institutions, have the capacity to provide access to emotional support (e.g. group therapy) in

addition to expanding a person's social network and creating additional opportunities for stability

through employment and education.

Furthering the concept of strong and weak ties, Knapp's model of relational development

helps unpack the relational process that guide individuals in strengthening their network and

rehabilitative opportunities. Knapp's model follows two paths: (A) "coming together" path and

(B) "coming apart" path. In the "coming together" path the process is as follows: (1) initiating,

(2) experimentation, (3) intensifying, (4) integration, (5) bonding. Initiating stage consists of the

first impressions, in which people assess individuals primarily based on their physical

appearance. The experimentation stage adds another layer to relationships by using self-

disclosure to establish common interests and superficialities. The latter stages involve a

deepening of the relationship and a fusion of identity until final bonding (Knapp, 1984). It is

assumed that strong ties rest in Stage 3, 4 and 5 of Knapp's model and weak ties in Stage 1 and

Stage 2. If the relationship disintegrates, it follows a "coming apart" path of: (1) differentiating,

(2) circumscribing, (3) stagnation, (4) avoidance and (5) termination (Knapp, 1984). In disintegration, the individualized attitude surfaces, which is normal in all relationships. The real issues occur during circumscribing, where individual routines are established and if interrupted, are considered a violation. Stagnation is simply a rut, in which behaviors are irritating or expected. Avoidance is when two people separate from one another at all levels: emotionally, physically and mentally. It is this separation that causes the relationship to reach its final stage of termination (Knapp, 1984). In strong ties, it is assumed this coming apart process is slow and may be emotionally challenging, creating additional conflict for the person after release from prison with the potential to create an unstable environment for the person in transition or recovery. Dissolution of relationships in the category of weak ties, on the other hand, may be quick and relatively painless and thus reduces the overall emotional investment. Additional research into the reduction of emotional investment and motivations for transition or recovery would be beneficial, but are considered outside the scope of this paper.

The key stages that relate to those recently released from prison are likely to be initiating and experimentation stages in weak ties as well as both the avoidance and intensifying of strong ties. Strong ties may have already undergone both the coming together and coming apart processes and are being renewed once someone is released from prison. Strong ties may also be continued throughout the incarceration period, causing concern only if those strong ties maintain the network of people who continue to participate in the criminal lifestyle. The same concern exists regarding weak ties with peers, if the peers are still in their criminal element. However, access to multiple weak ties in group therapy opens the potential to establish new relationships through the initiating and experimentation stage within the in-group and can help quickly establish new positive relationships simply based on shared experiences. However, due to the

rates of recidivism, another factor must be introduced to help foster positive relational practices. Teaching former prisoners how to establish common ground outside of the context of prison or addiction cycles are essential to the reintegration process. Part of establishing common ground and working through the initiating and experimentation stage, requires an empathic skill set that can foster better relationships and expand the reach of networks outside the prison or criminal context.

Empathy: Empathy plays a critical role in social indoctrination and is viewed as precursor for the development of social skills (Hoffman, 2000). While there may be multiple definitions of empathy, this study looks at cognitive empathy and defines it as a deliberate process in which a person proactively sees a situation from another person's point of view. The facet that addresses this cognitive process is referred to as perspective taking in which the individual is largely able to anticipate the behavior and reaction to others (Davis M. H., 1983). This conscious process makes cognitive empathy substantially different from affective empathy, which is simply a reaction to a set of emotions from the group; the empathy we naturally feel for others.

The ability to engage in perspective taking allows individuals to find an alternative explanation for another's behavior (Davis M. , 1996), which can reduce or inhibit antisocial behavior, limit aggression (both physical and relational), reduce problem behavior and encourage positive relationships (Smits, Doumen, Luyckx, Duriez, & Goossens, 2011). This skill has a long-term impact on the development and maintenance of relationships, as it fundamentally shifts the individual's role in the relationship; people skilled in perspective taking will largely focus their energy on calming the internal distress of the other person (Eisenberg & A.Miller, 1987), providing the individual with a sense of control. Low levels of perspective taking are

linked to fear and social anxiety and arrogance (Davis M. H., 1983), which may prevent

relationships from forming or progressing. High levels are indicative of a selfless concern for

others and general social competence. This skill comes in handy not only for personal

relationships, but it can also address the feeling of an unequal balance of power (Kilgore, 2001)

within the post-release prison system. Cognitive empathy skills enable former prisoners to self

manage high-risk conflict situations and more effectively deal with the authoritarian systems that

demand both mandatory attendance and energy (e.g., Alcoholics Anonymous meetings). An

additional benefit to cognitive empathy is it's correlation with feeling more positively toward

people in general (Staub, 1987) allowing former prisoners to focus on their own intrinsic value as

they adapt to societal expectations and manage the ongoing hardships of finding employment,

applying for housing and day-to-day social interactions.

Perspective taking is unique from other forms of empathy because it is a conscious

process that can be taught. Recent research claims cognitive empathy is more positively

correlated with high IQ and high social economic status (Bock & Hosser, 2013), making

perspective taking a potentially controversial training module since the majority of prisoners

have an average IQ of 85 (1 standard deviation below the population mean) (Miller, 2009).

However, Bock and Hosser may be overlooking the idea that empathy is rooted in culture.

Scientists discovered that through culturally shaped prejudices, people feel less empathy for

people of other races on a neural level (Mathur, Harada, Lipke, & Chiao, 2010). This means our

brain adapts to learned attitudes and behaviors elicited by the immediate group. If people can

shape the neural circuits based on culture, racism and prejudice, there is hope that people can

reshape their neural circuitry through cognitive empathy training.

However, determining the approach to cognitive empathy is a challenge. Bock & Hosser (2013) discovered a negative correlation between cognitive empathy skills and general recidivism in young adults, demonstrating there could already be different levels of existing skillset in prisoners. Kilgore (2001) believes that cognitive empathy is a commonly found skill among the female prison population. And finally, an all-Caucasian male study showed a deficiency in both cognitive and affective empathy between offenders and the presumed normal population (Domes, Hollerbach, Vohs, Mokros, & Habermeyer, 2014). This suggests there is no single answer when it comes to reducing recidivism and multiple avenues must be explored when dealing with a full rehabilitation program. However, what these studies do agree upon is the benefit of cognitive empathy training and the immediate need for pro-social skill development throughout the rehabilitation process.

Social Programs: Currently, the war on drugs has shifted funds away from critical social programs, thus reducing transition programs to simple policing efforts by the prison system (Seiter & Kadela, 2003). Re-entry transitional centers are investing in rehabilitative programs that strive to address more than the basic needs by partnering with other organizations and providing services that help former prisoners find jobs, housing and access to substance abuse treatment programs. However, more is needed to help individual's transition back into society. Former prisoners need emotional strategies for creating or renewing strong ties with friends and family, dissolving interest in re-involvement with crime, and navigating the continued supervisory nature of institutions (e.g., parole officer). All of these factors are crucial in creating a safe environment for both the former prisoner as well as the community in which the parolee intends to live.

<div align="center">METHODS</div>

This research was performed using an ethnographic methodology of both observational and interview data. Four participants were recruited by a non-profit organization in November of 2014 using the following criteria: over eighteen years of age, female, English speaking, released from prison within the last five years and is an active participant in one or more social programs. The type of social program ranged from relationships class (n=1), financial and legal support (n=2) as well as substance abuse recovery programs (n=4). Each participant was instructed the interview would last for approximately thirty minutes, but with permission, the interviews extended to ninety minutes on at least one occasion. The sample consisted of female individuals (n=4) who self identified as Caucasian, African American, African American and Caucasian, and Caucasian and Native American. The average age is 38 and only one of four individuals was in a committed relationship at the time of the study. Of the participants, one had recently been jailed for 30 days or more, but had not yet served the full sentence, thus falling slightly outside the scope of the study. The type of crime was not requested, however it was revealed during the course of the interview and all four women discussed issues with substance abuse. Only one was arrested for a non-drug related crime. The interviews were conducted onsite at a re-entry transition center in Portland, Oregon.

Data was subjected to content analysis after the transcription process of each interview. The written transcriptions were reviewed multiple times during the coding process and organized via a spreadsheet that unpacked empathy and identity. This type of analysis helped organize the data based on the (1) frequency or (2) intensity of the content, which invited the creation of a new section, labeled support. The coding of the data specifically looked for contextual indicators describing empathic skills and strength of ties within the transcription. Specifically, perspective taking can be seen in conversation if the participant reflects upon a situation by taking another

person's point of view. This is uncovered in conversations about relationships by cues that the participant (a) listened to the other's argument, (b) reflected upon any criticisms about another person as though the participant was in their shoes, and/or (c) attempted to look at multiple sides of a question. Identity was coded based on the functions of identity based on references to: (a) who the person is, (b) meaning and direction through commitments, values and/or goals, (c) consistency and harmony between values, beliefs and commitments and (d) recognition of potential in the form of future possibilities and alternative choices. In the results section, I kept the integrity of the phrasing, but removed the non-lexical vocables (e.g., ums) and stuttering (e.g., repetitions of words and/or phrases) to simplify the reading process.

IMPRESSIONIST TALE

Field research is no longer viewed as full of "neutral, objective, observable facts," increasing the importance of describing the circumstances and framework of the researcher (Van Maanen, 2011). As such, here are the factors that influence my view of the world in reference to this specific project. I am a graduate student at the University of Portland, studying human communication and technology. This particular project is an ethnographic pilot study designed to inform a broader future study of an investigation into the empathic skills and identity functions in prisoners with the goal of documenting ways to focus or enhance the rehabilitation system. A re-entry transitional center became a natural choice, due to their convenient location in downtown Portland and their close ties to the University. Interview decisions were based on the kindness of the office staff in recruiting the participants and granting free access to their offices and programs. I was given explicit instructions that any interview with their clients had to be done on site in their offices for the safety of their clients. I have no real lived experience with

prison outside a single incident in 2001. A friend was terrified to see her father, who was incarcerated in a Washington state prison, so I agreed to support her and drive her to the penitentiary. Being a passionate photographer I started taking photos of the grounds to pass the time while I waited for her. I was subsequently held for questioning in the parking lot and kicked off the grounds for taking photos. Outside of this situation, I am personally ignorant of the lived prison experience. I consider this to be both a benefit and a fault, as I had to ask participants to elaborate on their experience, but also elicited no real connection to the experience. I often found myself creating empathic connections based on my personal experiences in Corporate America and imagining myself living in a cubicle for several years. Since I had previously experienced sleeping at the office and have been known to spend more than 12 hours a day cooped up with my coworkers, I found a way to relate to their experiences. This could have caused some amount of perception bias in my interpretation. This meant coding was especially rigorous and the reason why the spreadsheet remove as much bias as possible in their responses.

RESULTS

In prison, there are no weak or strong ties. There's simply no one. During incarceration, study participants commented on the absence of relationships or distancing behavior to separate oneself from the group. Jane specifically mentioned, "When you go to jail, everybody forgets about you. You don't have any friends." This was manifested in a variety of ways from isolation techniques to becoming a "mother figure" or leader, in which the prisoner becomes a source of support without divulging any personal information of their own. This may speak to the types of relationships one acquires as part of the addiction environment, but it also speaks to the difficulties and process of visiting someone in prison. Not all family members had a driver's

license or a car and occasionally people were sent to an out-of-state prison adding another barrier

of cost and time around visitation. However, when speaking about the experiences of being in

prison, only one participant used cognitive empathy to understand why she was alone.

> Jane: [In prison], sometimes [support or assistance] wouldn't get done because people are
>
> very busy and when you deal with people that are involved in crime and addiction they
>
> really are just trying to survive out there…. They're not capable of [support].

Strong Ties & Cognitive Empathy: Strong ties are challenging when it comes to perspective

taking and bonded relationships. With long-term dysfunctional behavioral patterns, it takes

significant effort on the part of the person learning new empathic skills to reframe or change

patterns of behavior. In the following transcribed quote, the ums and pause are left in to

demonstrate the participant's struggle to create a positive view of the strong tie. In this scenario,

the participant was the primary caregiver to a gentleman, which she had to give up due to her

prison sentence. Her mother took over the role of caregiver in her absence.

> Jane: When my mom came she doesn't drive. So he had to stay at the house more and she
>
> was, she's not as.. um, she's a good caregiver, there's some things about his character that
>
> is really hard for a person that doesn't want to... uh, I don't know even know how to say
>
> it. Some people are just... good at talking people out of things that aren't good for 'em.

Her pauses and shifts in language demonstrate a conscious effort to reframe her feelings. Jane

has had a challenging relationship with her mother and old behavioral patterns are often difficult

to change. However, identification of the behaviors and looking at the situation from another

person's point of view in addition to taking responsibility for the situation empowers a person to

understand both themselves as well as someone else, creating opportunities to change old

patterns.

Jane: And a lot of things are met with opposition. And [my kids are] trying to talk me into things. They're very skilled at their manipulation and they get that directly from watching all this stuff go on around them…. it really makes young people pull into themselves and start not trusting and start questioning every situation and not wanting to put in effort because…. they haven't seen the fruit of that.

Amy: Since I've been in recovery and since I've gotten out of jail, I've learned why some of the things that [my Mom] did when I was younger…. I just judged [my Mom] …. I've learned to think different… why [my Mom] made those decisions.

For Kate and Terry perspective taking for strong ties was challenging. In both interviews when asked to describe a situation, followed by a prompt to reflect on how that situation affects their strong tie, neither of them responded using perspective taking. In this instance Kate is describing an extremely negative situation that occurred between her, her sister and her former domestic partner. She dismisses her sister's emotions or potential response and maintains the focus on her own feelings.

Kate: I feel like I've forgiven myself, but I haven't forgiven [my sister]. And I don't think I can forgive her without telling her to her face that I forgive her. Or even if she forgives me. She probably doesn't think about it anymore.

Strong Ties & Support: Three participants reported receiving support from strong ties, but mentioned these ties never participated in drugs or criminal behavior. One participant noted the strong tie as playing a continued support role, and discussed weak ties as irrelevant or transitory. Two other participants mentioned strong ties as an avenue for support, but the statements were often contradictory and often circled back to weak ties as the source for change in behavior. The

contradiction of support lies in Kate's explanation of strong ties as an enabler to her criminal lifestyle.

>Kate: Having been out [of prison] for two years and getting into a nasty relationship and the last time he assaulted me, I was just like, "I need you, I need you Mom." I needed her more then. I asked her if she would come stay with me. So my mom got first hand what my addiction was like. So I could run [drink and use] more. Grandma's here, now the kids is good so now I can run. And I was running nowhere real fast. Basically she watched me struggle and my sponsor came in my life and I detoxed and I stayed clean.

Weak Ties & Cognitive Empathy: All participants presented a case of avoiding peer-based weak ties, but the ability to perform perspective taking varied between participants. Peer-based weak ties are often personal acquaintances that are perceived as a threat to stability. When discussing weak ties in relationship to treatment programs, the discussion of setting boundaries becomes a significant topic. Amy noted, "We see each other in traffic and I may be with my baby and I could easily put her in the car but I'm not wanting to because I know where that will lead me." But when speaking about dealing with other people in prison, the institutional weak tie of clergymen is what prompted the entire self-discovery process for one participant. During this process, she discovered her inarguable belief in God could be her shield and a means to navigate prison life.

>Jane: When I first see [other prisoners] doing [a weak] behavior, [I tell them] you want to be very careful not to do that. Some people would get very mad at me… and I might say something about my faith and they just get frustrated with me or cuss at me. You know, I say, "I love you!" or something about my faith again to them. And they're like "Shut the f* up!" It's just kinda just how I dealt with it.

Perspective taking was evident in the discussion of weak ties for only one participant. One

participant mentioned the Department of Corrections issues as being understaffed and

accommodating too many prisoners are the primary reason they were not able to help her.

> Jane: I would never even say this is a bad counselor because they are overworked and
>
> have so much going on with all these different inmates. It's extremely hard for them to
>
> address issues in cases like they would need to be addressed.

The perspective taking is not blindly followed; critical thought regarding the implications of a

lack of support in the prison system was discussed from the framework of another prisoner.

> Jane: Precious Anderson hung herself and that was how she dealt with her situation….
>
> They're supposed to have an officer walking past very frequently. She should not have
>
> been in that dorm; she should have been in a mental health unit that was more supervised.

No other participant mentioned the perspective of office staff at the transition center, nor the staff

at the prison.

Weak Ties & Support: Relationships are important in the successful transition from prison to

community. Weak ties in a non-judgmental environment create a safe place for people struggling

with addiction and transition.

> Kate: But when I finally got to a point where I realized I need some help, [the transition
>
> center] is where I came. I came in here with a black eye, it was hard, but I knew I was
>
> safe. I came in here willing to start over. I'm ready, I need some help.

All participants reported using support groups and networks of peers who are experiencing

similar issues and transitions in the form of addiction sponsors as well as professionals and

institutions that "promote" people in reentry programs and validate their recovery progress. One

participant reported using public institution's help to educate and support their path to family

stability, emotional understanding and education.

> Jane: I was very fortunate and blessed to have an officer come out and be able to reason
>
> with my son…. he was so awesome…. he reasoned with my son for half an hour! [The
>
> second time] the officer came out; he must have stayed for forty-five minutes. Same
>
> officer. Unbelievable…. I just feel so blessed in that circumstance because there's a lot of
>
> officers who don't have tolerance and they don't have time for this little, simple [bullshit].

Parenting education was a topic for all interviewees and drew support from family, bonded

networks and when all else fails, YouTube.

> Amy: [My daughter] wouldn't drink water…. And I got on YouTube and showed her
>
> some pictures of some kids that are starving. Literally starving. Have no water. Have
>
> nothing. Immediately, she drank water. So like, I try to be.. use.. like the outside world to
>
> explain.

Amy also reported using the disciplinary tools she learned from parenting classes, like a chore

wheel and setting boundaries for herself to give her time to study. But for the participant in

transition between jail and prison, she finds it difficult to know which institutions provide

support. For Terry the process is overwhelming when thinking about the magnitude of changes

taking place: family dynamic, loss of a relationship, loss of a home and community, substance

recovery, legal understanding, emotional issues, and the complex process preparing for prison.

> Terry: I don't know anything about any of this. I'm utilizing my support as it comes, so
>
> that's about all I can do. And referrals and anything that anyone can give me as far as
>
> help. I'm trying to take it all.

Identity: Weak ties and institutions play a large role in help rebuild or create a new identity, separate from the prison or criminal identity. These weak ties serve as new additions to the network, none of which were participating in or encouraging criminal behavior. The discussions centered on particular people within the organization that have gone the extra mile to help support their new identity. The functions of identity are broken into four categories that describe (1) who the person is, (2) the meaning and support that is given through commitments, values and goals, (3) the consistency, coherence and harmony between values, beliefs and commitments, and (4) the recognition of potential in the form of future possibilities and alternative choices.

The stability of identity varied between participants and the frequency of mentions of identity only came from the three participants who were raised in a multiracial home and/or with multiracial children.

Kate: Growing up, my Mom's white my Dad's native and my Mom married a Hispanic and I have black children. There's always been this mixture of cultures and not seeing that as a child – I was very color blind and now that I'm older, where do I belong?

This identity negotiation appears to occur for people in process of recreating their post-prison identity. A realization that Jane says, "really starts with your belief system. It starts with believing that I am a new person. I am a different person. I'm not the same person I was when I went into prison. I'm different. I'm healed."

Weak ties support reconciling past issues with identity through a variety of programs, linked to the recognition of potential in the future. Weak ties appear to prompt discussion about the future. Amy noted, "my probation officer says there's gonna come a time when you're gonna want to [date]," when asking about how she felt about dating. And Jane, who is further down the

road in developing family stability, discussed how the support from weak ties is supporting her

future identity.

> Jane: [The re-entry transitional center] helped me. They've mentored me. They've helped
>
> me financially. I've taken classes here and they just have really been a solid part of my
>
> support network and have promoted a positive and productive [self] identity.

But not all participants were progressing with their post-prison identity. Kate struggles the most

with her identity as she is often presented with obstacles that remind her of her past. She

mentioned, "So there's some things showing up…. I couldn't do the police ride along [for my

criminal law class]…. there's some things I just couldn't do that my classmates were doing

because of my past." For Terry, the issue of identity was around intimate relationships. She

desired having a loving relationship in which her desired identity was that of a homemaker.

However, her current identity is that of a provider and emotional pillar.

DISCUSSION

This study seeks to understand how former prisoner's frame their relationships upon release,

specifically looking at (1) empathic patterns in speech and (2) functions of identity when

describing strong and weak tied relationships. The increased depth of understanding of the role

strong and weak ties play in empathic rehabilitation may assist re-entry programs in selecting the

appropriate therapeutic programs for their clients.

Cognitive Empathy: Weak ties had the fewest emotional obstacles when participants

perceived it was time to change their behavior. Institutions and non-personal relationships can

begin the perspective taking process as they are typically in a nonjudgmental environment, are

one-dimensional and the effort to understand their point of view is free from deep-rooted patterns

of behavior. In short, it's easier to learn perspective taking beginning with weak ties. Institutional

weak ties can also serve the function of eliciting a verbal commitment from people in transition,

thereby addressing specific people who have low levels of accountability. Clifford (1973) found

task performance increased with a type of "good luck" experience, wherein a person enjoys the

process of trying one's luck versus trying to save face. In addition to task performance, the

likability of the weak tie will predict the ability for the person to learn (Gurung & Vespia, 2007).

Weak ties also maintain a level of ambiguity, which has been correlated with sustained liking

(Norton, Frost, & Ariely, 2007). The factors of likability and learning increase the importance of

positive experiences with institutional weak ties and their response to re-entry and transitional

needs. Likeable weak ties can actively support the needs of people in transition and help them

achieve long-term goals.

The research acknowledges the impact family ties have in reducing recidivism rates

(Visher & Travis, 2003), however in many cases these strong ties do not exist or support old

behavioral patterns, creating additional conflict. Strong ties, particularly children, are the

grounding factor that motivate continued recovery or signal errors in behavior, however romantic

or sexual relationships are areas of stress and could cause the participants to regress if returning

to the relationship after prison. The strength of ties between adults, particularly in cases where

the partner participated in the criminal activity (e.g., drugs, theft, fraud, etc.) the relationship may

have too many challenges (e.g., abuse, criminality, temptations, behavioral patterns) for people

in transition and the resistance to recidivate is a constant and primary focus. If the strong tie was

not an integral part of the person's former criminal lifestyle, but maintained a social or familial

connection, perspective taking was more challenging as the accumulated personal experiences

and resentments act as obstacles or barriers. Thus, the strength and knowledge gained from

access to weak ties and institutional support plays a large role in the person's ability to reconnect in new ways with existing strong ties.

Identity: It was more common for participants to lean on weak ties in the development of their future identity and saw professionals and institutional staff as part of the necessary support network required to achieve the vision of their future self. Participants perceive institutional employees as friends and advocates who can support their transition based on perceived commitment from the staff and the expansive network the re-entry transition center has accumulated since its inception. Avoidance strategies and moderate isolation techniques are used to create a safety barrier and add a sense of control around their newborn identity. In all cases, face-to-face connections with former or peer (e.g., recovery programs) weak ties were avoided. If communication occurred, it happened over the telephone, creating space between the old identity and the new one. It can be especially challenging to reframe relationships and establish boundaries and people in transition tend to adhere to strict rules that eventually become the guidelines to avoid recurrence of criminal behavior. In short, weak ties are the foundation upon which new identities are crafted and new visions for future possibilities and alternative choices begin.

Strong ties, on the other hand, often did not confirm the new identity. Three out of the four participants responded with the struggle previous strong ties had adapting to the new vision for themselves. Participants with younger children had an easier experience in the transition, incongruently; participants with older children reported a much more difficult time transitioning to their new identity. In the case where Jane called the police to help support her adjustments to the desired family dynamic, it highlighted the struggle people face when crafting their post-prison identity with strong ties.

CONCLUSION

This study seeks to understand how former prisoner's frame their relationships upon release, specifically looking at empathic patterns in speech and functions of identity when describing strong and weak tied relationships. The increased depth of understanding of the role strong and weak ties plays in empathic and identity rehabilitation may assist re-entry programs in selecting the appropriate therapeutic programs for their clients. A re-entry transitional center located in Portland, Oregon years, selected four female participants who had been released from prison within the last five years and were highly engaged with a social program. Selecting individuals who are engaged in the recovery process provides a foundational knowledge of what it looks like to be on the other side of the transition.

Cognitive Empathy: Both strong ties and weak ties supported the learning process for cognitive empathy. Weak ties, like corrections officers, were cited as being overworked and former criminal acquaintances were excused from friendship duties, like showing up for visitation at prison. Once patterns of empathy are introduced with weak ties and positively rewarded, approaching strong ties with the same cognitive empathy approach can help create stronger relationships and supportive networks with the goal of preventing the person from recidivating. Previous research suggests people with strong ties are less likely to engage in criminal behavior. In this study, all participants had children, but spouse or outside familial support varied. Children were often the driving force behind the push for a change to their lifestyle. The participants used outside institutions like police officers and educators/programs to help reestablish the family unit and set new boundaries. In three of the four cases, the institutional role either coached or performed the role of perspective taking on behalf of the participant to deal with issues related to strong ties.

Identity: Weak ties in institutions are the keystone for overcoming identity crises. Participants claimed attachment to sponsors, teachers, staff and other institutional members as friends and mentors. In some cases the assigned mentor is insufficient and people in transition should have a choice in their support network. While viewed as a person in authority, participants relied upon weak ties to add stability to the identity transition process. Finally, weak ties performed the function of a broad social network, which allowed participants to separate themselves from their past and gain more control over their daily choices, supporting their new post-prison identity.

FUTURE RESEARCH

The participants claimed it's their cycle of addiction or lack of pro-social skills as the reasons for their previous failure to adapt to societal demands. However, the real issue lies within the repeated trauma and abuses that go unnoticed, unlabeled or untreated. From this case study, it would be worthwhile to investigate the transitional steps towards successful rehabilitation (1) self-identification of emotions and behavioral patterns, (2) practice cognitive empathy techniques within weak ties; particularly using institutional programs or members and (3) introduce cognitive empathy training for strong ties to strengthen familial ties upon release. When society elects to place people in a socially and physically dysfunctional environment (prison), society becomes culpable in the co-creation of the post-prison identity and return to crime. Society must be willing to change the prison system and introduce therapeutic techniques to help incarcerated people recover from the trauma prison culture inflicts upon them. Since this cannot be wholly accomplished in prison, the burden lies on reentry and transitional programs to create pathways towards successful rehabilitation.

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