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Session 8A
1.30pm

Risks of Reintegration: Young Offenders Perceptions of Making the Transition Back to their Communities

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Associate Professor Glenn Dawes currently teaches Sociology and Criminology at the Townsville and Singapore campuses of James Cook University. He teaches in the areas of youth studies and juvenile justice. His research interests are closely linked to his work in North Queensland communities in areas such as school disengagement among young people, and crime on the Townsville Strand, Youth and hooning in North Queensland, and Young people and car theft in Queensland. He is presently undertaking a consultation with the Department of Communities about young people and their reintegration into society after serving supervised court orders. He is the author of one book entitled "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Subcultures and Education" as well as a number of papers in academic journals.

Abstract:

This paper presents the outcomes of a two year longitudinal study of young people with re-offending histories who attempt to reintegrate back to their communities following their release from detention. The research focuses on the risks young people identified which impede them from making successful post-release destinations. Such factors include dysfunctional homes, poverty, peer group influences, substance abuse and a lack of accessibility to education and employment. Interview data shows that in many cases the structured life of institutions such as detention is often preferable to the unstructured unpredictable life that exists in outside world for many young people. The paper concludes with some strategies which could be assist young offenders to make successful reintegrations and to desist from crime.

The nature of risk and risk taking on the individual in late modern society has been an ongoing sociological debate. The work of Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991) argued that the world can no longer depend on the rationality of science to provide answers to new problems



associated with the effects of industrialisation. As a new and dangerous world emerges, individuals are more concerned with preventing or removing risk from their lives. Risks therefore become more individualized and society regards “social problems” as individual shortcomings rather than as a result of social processes. As the individual loses the traditional markers of security such as belonging to a particular social class or family he/she has becomes ‘disembedded” from the old order and reintegrated into a new and changing new social order. The liberation for the individual from the traditional societal markers allows them to develop reflexive biographies where they can freely choose their identities through access to various forms of consumption such as fashion, leisure or occupations.

However while the individual may have the freedom to consume and construct alternative identities they are at the same time constrained and increasingly dependent on “secondary agencies” that shape their biographies through the kinds of interactions they have with institutions such as education, health and training programmes leading the individual to become “institutionally dependent on individual situations” (p.130). The conditions of doubt that penetrate all social life means that the construction of ones identity therefore becomes a lonely business which is “full of risks which need to be confronted and fought alone” (Bauman 2001, p.xvii).

However not all sectors of society are confronted with the same risks. For example wealthy people can buffer themselves from potential risk compared to less well off or vulnerable social groups. The development of individualised risk society therefore has implications for the sectors of society who may not possess social economic or political power. “Inequalities in class and risk society can therefore overlap and condition one another, the latter can produce the former (Beck, 1992:45). Risk and poverty and class are therefore more likely to coincide producing unequal life outcomes for some groups of individuals.

Research on young people portray them as risk takers who are often more vulnerable while they are developing their biographies and making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Furlong and Cartmel (1997) suggest that individualization and the feelings of greater vulnerability have increased young people’s insecurity and heightened their awareness of risk. Certainly young people today face a very different world from their parents as they encounter less certainty due to the changing labour market, an increased demand for an educated workforce and in many cases an extended period of dependency on their families.

However Furlong and Cartmel’s analysis is limited because it fails to recognise that some young people are more vulnerable to the risks of society compared to other youth who are economically and socially advantaged. This paper attempts to address this limitation by focusing on the social and



cultural contexts of how young male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth who have histories of reoffending behaviour construct their biographies in limiting the risks associated with reintegrating back to their communities after their release from detention.

The Study: Young Indigenous Re-offenders and Reintegration

It is well documented that young male Indigenous youth are one of the highest risk groups when considering their over-representation in all sectors of the Juvenile Justice System. Nationally in 2006 fifty-four percent of all young people incarcerated were Indigenous. This is extremely disproportionate considering Indigenous people only make up 2.4 % of the countries population (Australian Bureau Statistics, 2004). On the basis of youth as an overall population, Indigenous youth are 26 times more likely to be in detention than non-Indigenous youth (Veld and Taylor, 2005:24-27).

The issue of whether periods in detention actually serve to rehabilitate young offenders has been the focus of a number of research projects. For example Kraus and Smith (1978) concluded that young people were more prone to reoffend when remanded in custody while a Queensland longitudinal study found that by 2002 eighty-nine percent of male Indigenous juveniles on supervised orders in 1994-95 had progressed to the adult corrections system, with seventy-one percent having served at least one prison term (Lynch, Buckman, Krenske, 2003).

Professionals in the Juvenile justice system and government policy makers are therefore seriously concerned about how to stem the flow of young Indigenous people who return to detention after committing further offences. There are a number of debates as to what needs to be done to assist these young people to successfully reintegrate back to the community. A focus of The Department of Communities in Queensland is to reduce youth crime and to provide support in reintegrating young people back to their communities highlighted in the departments Strategic Plan (2004-2008) which states:

the priority is to focus on holding young offenders accountable for their actions and improving rehabilitation and reintegration programmes to address the educational, vocational developmental, cultural and recreational needs of these young people (p.9).

However existing research fails to provide data about the kinds of desirable or undesirable destinations of young people when they make the transition into their communities. Accordingly there is little research that highlights the challenges faced by young people and the kinds of support they require if they are to avoid re-entering the juvenile justice system. This two year longitudinal study research study followed forty young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males aged between 13-17



years. The young people were interviewed once while in detention and again twelve months later to identify the major risk factors which prevented them from desisting from crime and making successful transitions back to their communities.

Reflecting on Risk

A major focus of the first interview with each young person while they were in detention was to ask them to identify the major risk factors which could prevent them from making successful transitions back to their communities. The concept “risk” is an ambiguous and often relative term which can be interpreted in many ways. However sixty-three percent of the sample perceived risk in terms of the high probability of reoffending upon release from detention. While seventy-five percent of the cohort expressed a desire to break free from a life of crime, they expressed anxiety about the high risks of re-establishing links with their peers, resorting to substance abuse and having nothing to do. Fifty-two percent of the interviewees stated that they preferred to stay in detention because they felt physically safer in that environment compared to life back in their communities. Of this sample, twenty-two percent of the cohort identified their home environment as posing the greatest risk in terms of experiencing and/or witnessing physical violence as well as being the victims of sexual abuse.

In addition to perceiving that detention was a relatively safe environment the majority of youth cited that they enjoyed the structured environment of detention through their regular participation in the individualised and rehabilitative programmes and extra-curricular activities such as sport and music. The young people also spoke positively about the opportunities of re-engaging with education and learning vocational skills in areas such as hospitality, horticulture and art. In the final weeks of their sentence each young person participated in developing a transitional plan with their caseworker and the school based transitional officer. When asked about the assistance they received from staff at the detention centre eighty percent of the cohort were positive about the help they received in developing skills and strategies to overcome some of the potential hurdles they could encounter upon release:

I really enjoy talking with M when she talks me through things that make me angry. I did the anger management thing and M would talk through little like situations about how I would handle myself if someone pissed me off at the shop or something. Like before I would just have punched the other guy and got in more trouble. M... always goes on and we talk about these kinds of things. If I can walk away from that I'm gonna keep out of trouble and not go back to Cleveland like before.



Risk Reputations

The second phase of the research consisted of re-interviewing each young person twelve months following their release from detention to ascertain how successfully they had reintegrated back to their communities. Of the forty young people in the first phase of the research, thirty were re-interviewed. Of this number, twenty-four youth had reoffended since the first interview, with eighteen returning to detention. The average time between being released from detention to reoffending was three months. By comparison, six of the original cohort had not been in contact with the juvenile justice system since their release the previous year.

A number of risk factors can be identified for the high percentage of youth who failed to make an unsuccessful reintegration. A common factor for lapsing back into crime was around the “risk reputations” of the young people. The negative effects of being labeled as a criminal was reinforced by the young person’s continued interactions with peers and in some cases with other family members which contributed to their reoffending. In thirty-percent of the cases the risk of committing further crimes was accepted and normalised in families. The normalisation of crime in some families with siblings and other family members involved in the system only served to ingrain the idea that going to prison was a rite-of-passage in becoming a man. By doing time in prison a young man gained ‘respect’ due to their risk reputations by significant others who were often also involved in criminal behaviour. For some youth the possibility of being sent to the adult system did not faze them as observed by one fifteen year old because a number of his other family members were already incarcerated; “I have a cousin and an uncle there. They’ll look after me and other people will look up to me and see me as a real man.”

However the risk reputations of the youth made it difficult for them to negotiate successful transitions into their communities when they came into contact with institutions such as the legal and education systems. There were a high number of accounts where young people were stopped by the police on the street questioned about their alleged involvement in crimes, searched for stolen goods or drugs and in some cases taken to the police station for questioning about their alleged involvement in crimes. The actions of the police were interpreted by the young people as harassment due to not only to their criminal histories but also their racial backgrounds. Fifty-two percent of all participants cited examples where police made racist remarks while conducting interviews with them as in the following excerpt:



The cops are arseholes to us and racist as well. If we try to be nice to them, they just talk I don't know, I don't like them they're always smart arses to us...They say anything like you're a black low life and stuff, you're nothing and you're scum. They say anything to us.

The risk reputations of young people also militated against their attempts to re-engage back into mainstream schools. A high percentage of youth encountered negative reactions from school principals and teachers based on their past interactions which were characterised by high levels of absenteeism, resistant behaviours and in many cases suspension from school altogether. The difficulty in navigating their way back into mainstream education either meant that these youth either failed to return to education or were forced to seek entry into other forms of education or training.

Twenty-percent of the reoffenders found employment in unskilled jobs such as labouring or hospitality work. However in all cases the young people were unable to sustain their employment over time due to issues around a lack of transport, the lack of accommodation or their inability to live in an unstable family environment. A further ten percent enrolled in training courses through TAFE or the Choice Programme. However all experienced a range of problems which forced them to abandon the programmes. For example, one young male who was enrolled in a TAFE course stated that he dropped out of the course after six months due to the deterioration of the relationship with his mother and his inability to study because of the large numbers of visitors who frequented the home each night. He stated; " Home was like one big party every nightt all these smashed people singing and shouting... I just couldn't study there so I left".

Conclusions

This research demonstrates that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with criminal reoffending histories face a number of personal social and institutional barriers when attempting to desist from crime and successfully reintegrate back to their communities. It is clear that these youth fit into Beck's notion of "disembedded" individuals who have had to construct alternative reflexive biographies which are outside of the traditional ties such as the family or school for support. As an alternative, a high number of youth in this research have been forced to become dependant on secondary institutions such as detention due to its perceived relative safety and structured environment.

The challenge is to therefore reduce the institutional dependency of young people by providing additional support to aid in their successful reintegration back to their communities. It is incongruous that large sums of money are allocated to rehabilitating young people while they are in detention but there is far less support in the community for young people post-release. There needs to be an



overlap consisting of ongoing support for the young person specifically during the first three months when young people are most likely to relapse into criminal behaviour. This could be achieved by ensuring young people had the opportunity to continue and complete the educational or vocational programmes they started in detention within alternative settings to increase the likelihood of increasing their life chances. Additionally the role of the detention based transition officer could be extended to assisting youth within their communities with finding suitable accommodation and ensuring they have ongoing access to drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Finally a post-release mentoring programme could be established whereas young people are matched with community volunteers who take the role as a “familiar friend” and provides the youth with assistance and guidance.

References

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