Building social capital to encourage desistance: Lessons from a veteran-specific project

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Little qualitative work has focussed on military veteran-offenders. The work that has been done has focussed on understanding causes of involvement in crime rather than veterans' experiences of desistance from it. Desistance from crime is in part dependant on levels of social capital, which are constituted of the relational resources available through formal and informal social networks. This chapter provides an overview of approaches to social capital. In addition, it presents a social capital process model utilised by a post-Transforming Rehabilitation initiative working with UK military veterans in the community. This chapter identifies six key social capital building strategies, which supported the progressive inclusion of veterans into wider civilian society. These dynamics are used here to illustrate the significance of practitioners including opportunities for the development of relationships which enable the potential for trust, reciprocity, generativity and notions of citizenship to emerge which support desistance.

Introduction

The concept of social capital has expanded in intellectual currency as a way understanding the importance and value of family, community and civic relationships. Social capital remains a complex term to define and is vigorously contested in some quarters (Schuller et al. 2000; Navarro 2002; Daly and Silver 2008; Fine 2010). Within the discipline of criminology and criminal justice, social capital has been theoretically linked to aiding desistance (Laub and Sampson 1993; Laub et al. 1995). The significance of the role of wider relational factors in supporting the desistance process is increasingly being called for in the practitioner literature (Farrall 2004; McNeill 2006). The first half of this chapter introduces the origins and development of the concept of social capital, providing an overview of the two main approaches, before moving into a critical engagement with the usefulness of the term with regard to the desistance process. The remainder of this chapter presents six key social capital building components identified in the delivery of a veteran-specific community-based addictions recovery project. This chapter concludes that while the concept of social capital is useful as a framework through which practitioners can work to co-construct strategies to increase offenders social interaction, social capital building strategies to aid desistance are best served when made deferential to the broader and more holistic understandings of the tertiary desistance process.

Origins, levels and dimensions of social capital

The essential idea regarding the significance of social capital is that if one has a diverse range of relationships with family members, friends, work colleagues and wider social acquaintances, these relationships can constitute significant assets when an individual, group or community face changes, difficulties or transitions. Originating from mainstream economics, social capital is defined as "networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups" (OECD 2017, p 41). However, the concept is understood theoretically, empirically and explanatorily in different ways across and indeed between disciplines.

There are two main approaches to social capital, the network perspective - focussing on describing the levels and dimensions of social capital, and the social structural perspective - prioritising the features and characteristics of social capital. While both approaches are overviewed separately here for clarity, they are commonly used interchangeably. From a network approach, key distinctions are made between three different levels of social capital. First, bonding social capital refers to more intimate horizontal ties between similar individuals within the same family, social group or local community, as being the source of a sense of belonging and solidarity (Putnam 2000). Second, bridging social capital refers to the ties between different social groupings within a community, which enable access into more vertical social network resources and provide opportunities for cross group reciprocity (Szreter and Woolcock 2004). Finally, linking social capital describes connections made through the sharing of social norms such as respect and trust which interact across more formal, civic and institutionalised authority in wider society (Gitell and Vidal 1998). It is posited that the more homogeneous the community, the more bonding social capital is exhibited and less bridging and linking social capital (Lin 2001; Costa and Kahn 2003). A key point here is that if social capital building is based on exclusive ties (e.g. gender, race or in this case ex- forces) as a way of empowering disadvantaged groups, this may unintentionally reinforce group boundaries, thereby making it more difficult for groups to develop other forms of social capital (see Pahl and Spencer 2004).

Likewise, from a more social structural approach to social capital, three similar dimensions are highlighted, describing the range of the manifestations of social capital. First, fulfilment of structural social capital involves attainment of established social roles, which enhance access to the social networks and the rights and responsibilities that are associated with them (Hitt et al. 2002). Second, achieving cognitive social capital – involves being exposed to social settings where shared norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs which predispose people towards mutually beneficial collective action

are promoted (Krishna and Uphoff 2002; Uphoff 1999). Finally, realising relational social capital – is said to be based on investment in intimate social relationships - commonly described as a source of trustworthiness and hope - which are considered key to facilitating unfamiliar or more creative, innovative tasks (Moran 2005). Therein prioritising the quality or strength of social ties, this approach draws on the distinction made between 'strong' and 'weak' social ties (Granovetter 1973; Hawkins and Maurer 2009; Chapman and Murray 2015). Generally, the strength and/or quality of these bonds are considered to reduce the further away from those similar to oneself these social ties reach. This conclusion however is not dissimilar from the network perspective position regarding the issues of dissimilar levels of the different types of social capital in homogeneous communities outlined in the section above.

Social capital and desistance

Within the desistance literature, the term social capital has been largely, if not uncritically, used to define resources that reside in social networks and social relationships (Weaver and McNeil 2010). Approaches to building social capital to aid desistance have mirrored the advances in the wider social capital literature as described above. These studies range from exploring opportunities to mobilise the social capital of families within criminal justice practitioner work (Wright et al. 2001; Mills and Codd 2008), to tapping into the social capital securing employment can provide (Farrall 2004), and assessing the community level social capital inherent in faith and volunteer groups (O'Connor and Bougue 2010; Fox 2016). Further work is on-going around the potential of mobilising community capacity via the civic engagement route (Bazemore and Erbe 2003; Uggen et al. 2006) and opportunities afforded by mentoring roles (Brown and Ross 2010). Social capital building initiatives designed to support community self-regulation around crime and subsequent challenges around community capacity building are also a growing area of interest (e.g. Braithwaite 1989; Van Ness and Strong, 2014; Kruttschnitt et al. 2000). While broader strategies designed to address the negative impact of enduring structural inequalities on access to realistic opportunities to build social capital have also been considered (Bracken et al. 2009; Cattell 2001).

The social capital building potential of innovative co-operative community projects are just beginning to be demonstrated (e.g. Ruiu 2016: Weaver 2016). Likewise, national initiatives such as the the National Criminal Justice Mentoring scheme (Ministry of Justice 2013; Aiken 2016), the Prison Reform Trust's Active Citizen's pilot (Prison Reform Trust 2017) and civic governance-related innovations such as User Voice initiatives (Schmidt 2013), Debating for a Change (Fleming-Williams and Gordon 2011) and A Fair Response (Edgar et al. 2011) can all be described as responding to the broad range of different social capital level related issues within the criminal justice setting.

While approaches to building social capital to support desistance may differ in terms of focussing on the main relational source of this capital, to paraphrase Rose and Clear (1998, p 471), they all prioritise retaining offenders in the community, as treating offenders as having a valuable contribution to make and insist that utilising local resources can assist transformational journeys for offenders. However, the authors of this chapter assert that it is essential for future work conducted on the development of theoretical approaches to fostering this broad range of social relationships is both securely embedded and more closely aligned to our understandings of the desistance process, specifically tertiary desistance stages.

Recognised as a three stage process, desistance trajectories involve movement from a state of primary desistance or a cessation in offending, to a more permanent underlying change in self-identity no longer associated with offending behaviour, or secondary desistance (Maruna et al. 2004). The importance of wider relational factors in the cementing of these desistance processes are encapsulated within the third stage of the desistance processes, that of tertiary desistance (McNeill 2014). This is a broad concept based on the importance of recognition and validation of fledgling desistor identities by others. Significantly, this third stage of the desistance process is distinct from the first two through its near complete disassociation with offending behaviour per-say. Importantly, the tertiary desistance narrative priorities opportunities to gain a sense of social inclusion, acceptance, belonging and participation, ideally both within one's own community and wider society, embodying concepts of citizenship, social justice, integration and solidarity (Maruna 2012; McNeil 2014; Fox 2015).

The social capital building continuum

This section presents findings from the evaluation of an explicitly social capital building project designed for ex-forces personnel accessing a community-based addictions recovery service in the North of England[1]. For full details of the study see Albertson et al. 2017a and for practice implications of this approach for practitioners working with the Armed Forces Community in prison, see Albertson et al. 2017b. Testing the potential of a social capital building approach as both an individual and community-level concept prefaced the evaluation of this post-Transforming Rehabilitation initiative (Albertson et al. 2015). Themes of social capital building, agency, identity and transition are identified as feeding into the development of a positive outward facing community participation-based identity, captured in the concept of 'military veteran citizenship' role played out for this cohort (Albertson et al. 2017a, p 68).

Three key elements pre-empted the group membership criteria: Attendance is voluntary; members all have similar life experience; the project activities are tailored by the group members. The evaluation identified six key social capital building components or strategies incorporated by this project, which ensured opportunities to develop positive relationships throughout the continuum of bonding through to bridging and linking social capital:

1. **Regular association with peers:** Occurred with weekly group meetings with other veterans, based on the mutual aid group model[2] providing structured opportunities for reflection on past, present and future goals and behaviours are provided. Mutual commitment motivates continued attendance (O'Connor and Bogue 2010) creating a sense of belonging, assisting 'personal healing through the reacquisition of cultural traditions' as 'one way to overcome structural constraints while at the same time supporting an individual decision to desist from crime' (Bracken et al. 2009, p 61). Members both receive and reciprocate reinforcement of motivation and hope, providing a forum where members begin to construct a story to redeem themselves of their past behaviours and assert a meaningful future, as encapsulated by the term redemption scripts (Maruna 2001).

2. **Involvement in group-based discussion settings**: External agency attendance to raising awareness of citizenship-based rights, i.e., the duties and responsibilities which 'include respecting the rights and legitimate expectations of others' (Faulkner 2003, p 289), whilst establishing pathways into advice services (e.g. Benefits; housing). Q and A or discussion format utilised to raise awareness of, reinforce and legitimise the rights and responsibilities of the group 'as matters of social and civic responsibility' (Faulkner 2003, p 295). These activities enabled the group to have a sense of informed knowledge about the services available and their appropriateness for the veteran cohort, thus raising members' sense of self-determination and confidence in decision-making, alongside enhancing their sense of authority with regard to recommending services as veteran-friendly.

3. **Participation in social events, group tasks and activities**: Selected by group members to foster positive networks (e.g. walking groups; allotment garden). Group residential opportunities prove particularly effective. Links into wider regional and national organisations events and social activities. This kind of active civic engagement facilitates the transmission of community morals, expressing 'the values of inclusion, citizenship, fundamental human rights, and forgiveness' (Fox 2015, p 86). Devolution of responsibilities

for negotiating external social connections occurs; involving increasingly civic engagement provides group members with a sense of authority, based on their effective community representation to external bodies.

4. **Engaging in acts of reciprocity and generative activities**: Training for Veteran Recovery Champion roles, delivered at by other local support agencies as providing pathways into voluntary work that is enjoyable, rewarding and in some way supportive of one's own community (Bazemore and Stinchcombe, 2004) is identified as indicative of desistance signaling (Maruna 2012). Over time members took up volunteering roles in other non-veteran and non-recovery specific agencies. A key distinction here is that engagement with generative activities needs to be based on reciprocity, not self-interest (Forrest and Kearns 2001, p 2141).

5. **Participation in wider non-veteran community events**: Encouraged to contribute knowledge and experience to represent their group, thereby supporting positive and affirming social interaction in the wider community (e.g. local fetes/ fairs; charity fund raisers). Increases sense of ability and confidence of individuals' to make a valuable contribution on behalf of their group in the wider community. The veterans' cohort narrative around which is infused with a sense of pride and an embedded forward-facing 'military veteran citizenship' role (Albertson et al. 2017a, p 68), which is 'accompanied by an alteration to the individual's sense of moral agency' (King 2013, p. 161).

6. **Formal civic, governance/ decision-influencing settings**: Members attend formal meetings (e.g. conferences; seminars; Westminster-briefings). Veterans described these opportunities within a narrative sense of restoration as a citizen, with both rights and obligations, thus increasing the potential for co-operative action and political change. The groups' collective response to the stigma around veterans in addiction services and prison motivated them to contribute to national debates on the subject (see Le Bell 2013). Illustrating this delivery models' success in providing the community as the context in which the rights and responsibilities of citizenship are given practical expression (Faulkner 2003).

Utilising notions of social capital to aid desistance

The practical building social capital model outlined above is in essence predicated on developing effective strategies to draw individuals 'beyond a narrow preoccupation with themselves and their own problems' (Burnett and Maruna 2006, p 94) and into an increasing concern for others. This 'other centring', afforded by social capital opportunities facilitate strong generative concerns that 'come to the forefront, concerns intended to satisfy both personal aspirations for new meaning and the desire to gain pro-social legitimacy' (Porporino 2010, p 73). More broadly, this building social capital model facilitates a process of the 'recommunalization of the disenfranchised' (Arrigo and Takahashi 2006, p 313). Illustrating the potential of social capital building activities to assist the move from the "I", of stigmatized socially excluded individual status to the "we", required by 'full democratic participation' as a stakeholder (Uggen et al. 2006, p 283).

In the context of supporting desistance, this chapter asserts that the process of building social capital is most usefully viewed as enhancing opportunities to assist individuals to move through the social capital continuum informed by the framework of tertiary desistance. The role communities can play in creating and reinforcing the non-criminal identity is increasingly being highlighted as anchoring desistance moments (Arrigo and Takahashi 2006; Day and Ward 2010; Fox 2016). The required shift from prioritising criminal justice services to prioritising communities that support desistance 'means engaging much more directly and meaningfully with communities than has hitherto been the case' (McNeill 2009, p. 52). When thinking about the potential for social capital building opportunities to aid desistance this chapter illustrates there are key common areas we can focus on. These areas can be effectively mapped out along with those we work with, by getting to know them and their social world. Becoming aware of the world views, areas of interest, relationships and passions of these individuals and their social networks means we can begin to co-identify opportunities for social capital building to support desistance trajectories.

Notes

1. Addaction are one of the UK's largest specialist community drug and alcohol treatment charities, for more details see the web page: https://www.addaction.org.uk/. For more details about the Right Turn project, see the web page: https://www.addaction.org.uk/help-and-support/adult-drug-and-alcohol-services/right-turn. The evaluation was Funded by The Forces in Mind Trust: See web page: http://www.fim-trust.org/.

2. Mutual aid groups models operate on an ethos of egalitarianism and self-help.

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