



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

“Social workers by day and terrorists by night?” Wounded healers, restorative justice, and ex-prisoner reentry

Albert, A. (2023). “Social workers by day and terrorists by night?” Wounded healers, restorative justice, and ex-prisoner reentry. *Punishment and Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14624745231208183>

Published in:
Punishment and Society

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

Publisher rights

Copyright 2023 the authors.

This is an open access article published under a Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the author and source are cited.

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Queen's University Belfast Research Portal is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The Research Portal is Queen's institutional repository that provides access to Queen's research output. Every effort has been made to ensure that content in the Research Portal does not infringe any person's rights, or applicable UK laws. If you discover content in the Research Portal that you believe breaches copyright or violates any law, please contact openaccess@qub.ac.uk.

Open Access

This research has been made openly available by Queen's academics and its Open Research team. We would love to hear how access to this research benefits you. – Share your feedback with us: <http://go.qub.ac.uk/oa-feedback>

“Social workers by day and terrorists by night?” Wounded healers, restorative justice, and ex-prisoner reentry

Punishment & Society

1–22

© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/14624745231208183

journals.sagepub.com/home/pun**Allely Albert** Technological University Dublin, Ireland and Queen's University
Belfast, Northern Ireland**Abstract**

Common to many post-conflict societies, former political prisoners and combatants in Northern Ireland are often portrayed as security threats rather than as potential contributors to societal peacebuilding processes. This distrust limits their ability to contribute to the transitional landscape and additionally hinders desistance processes during their reentry from prison. Drawing from the work of Maruna, LeBel, and others on “wounded healers,” this article critically examines the restorative justice work of ex-prisoners who have become involved in leadership roles within community based restorative justice. It is argued that such practitioner work can help former combatants overcome many of the challenges typically associated with reentry, contributing to a “strength-based” approach to desistance, impacting factors such as employment, social bonds, internal narratives, and agency. This work also enables individuals to showcase their desistance to others, highlighting their “earned redemption” and encouraging society to acknowledge that reentry is a two-way street.

Keywords

ex-prisoner, restorative justice, wounded healer, reentry, desistance, Northern Ireland

Corresponding author:Allely Albert, TU Dublin School of Social Sciences, Law, and Education, East Quad, Grangegorman Lower,
Dublin, Ireland D07H6K8.Email: allely.albert@tudublin.ie

Introduction

Many societies have become increasingly focused on successfully reintegrating former prisoners into the community after their release from prison. This release, or reentry, is conceptualized as the “process by which a former prisoner rejoins his or her community as a free citizen” (Clear et al., 2005: 182), and encompasses the experience of returning to society after being incarcerated (Travis, 2005). One of the traditional goals of the reentry process (and the criminal justice system more generally) is to ensure an individual’s successful desistance from crime. Desistance often requires longitudinal study to measure, as it is characterized by “the long-term abstinence from crime among individuals who had previously engaged in persistent patterns of criminal offending” (Maruna, 2001: 26).¹

This desistance process is hindered within retributive systems in part by the lingering discrimination that continues to brand individuals as “offenders” even after their release, negatively labelling the person instead of their actions, and reducing them to “the worst thing they’ve ever done” (Stevenson, 2012: 3). Through such processes, guilt becomes interpreted as an “individual failing,” which can then form a basis for further stigmatization (Zehr, 1990). In this way, society “others” those who commit societal infractions, despite evidence that shows that most criminal behavior is short-lived and sporadic and that most people have committed some sort of infraction during their lives (Maruna, 2001). This residual criminalization—which can include social stigma, limited career opportunities, social exclusion, loss of material goods, and an inability to access social benefits, as well as a range of other hurdles related to release—reminds ex-prisoners that they have not, in reality, paid their debt to the society, and ensures that they remain unequal, both in the eyes of the public and the law, making it exceedingly hard for ex-prisoners to succeed (Listwan et al., 2011; Maruna, 2001; Miller, 2021).

While the reentry process is typically slightly different for political prisoners, as most do not face the same degree of stigmatization within their own community and are differentiated from “ordinary offenders,” it does not mean they are immune to reentry challenges. Indeed, common to many post-conflict societies, former political prisoners and combatants in Northern Ireland are often portrayed as illegitimate terrorists and “security threats” who need to be managed (Dwyer, 2012: 286), rather than as agentic subjects with the potential to aid in peacebuilding (Mitchell, 2008; Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). Moreover, they too are subjected to discriminatory policies that limit their ability to find employment, receive support, and assist in society’s transition (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009). Studies in Northern Ireland have shown that these individuals experience high rates of financial problems, mental health issues, alcohol misuse, and social and economic exclusion (Jamieson et al., 2010). Despite these hurdles, many former prisoners and ex-combatants in Northern Ireland have attempted to find ways to contribute to society’s changing landscape following the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, which brought an official end to the conflict.² One such contribution was the development and management of community based restorative justice systems as an alternative to paramilitary punishment violence (McEvoy and Mika, 2002). These systems attempted to transition paramilitary organizations away from violence and provided broader mediation

and support services to local communities, and were known for the prominent leadership of ex-prisoners (Eriksson, 2009).

More broadly, restorative approaches have gained popularity in many places around the world since their wider adaption from indigenous and religious origins in the 1990s. They focus on repairing harm, view crime as a violation to relationships, and emphasize stakeholder involvement in developing solutions (Zehr, 1990). While imprisonment has been recognized to have a null or negative impact on offending (Cullen et al., 2011), restorative justice offers promising results in terms of reducing recidivism and reoffending, particularly with serious crime (Sherman and Strang, 2007; Sherman et al., 2015). Due to the support, accountability, mutual understanding, and empowerment that such systems promote, many argue that they provide a better platform for achieving long-term rehabilitation (Liebmann, 2007; Maruna and LeBel, 2010; Nowotny and Carrara, 2018). In fact, it has been shown that restorative practices increase informal social control and support mechanisms, applying reintegrative shaming techniques, which de-label the offender and result in higher expectations and better performances (Braithwaite, 1989; Maruna and LeBel, 2010; Maruna et al., 2004).

Until now, most of this desistance research has focused on the incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals who come through restorative systems as *participants*. Virtually, no research has focused on incarcerated or previously incarcerated people who have served as restorative justice *practitioners*. Even in Northern Ireland, where restorative justice schemes have received significant attention, scant research has examined the impact of the practitioner role on ex-prisoner facilitators. This is a considerable oversight, as many of the qualities that have been identified in increasing the chances of desistance are also present in relation to ex-prisoners in the practitioner role. Criminological scholarship on wounded healers, credible messengers, and other self-help practitioners often recognizes the way that such “helper” positions can have beneficial effects for those occupying the roles (LeBel et al., 2015; Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2018; Riessman, 1965). Researchers have therefore promoted the idea of using formerly incarcerated individuals as practitioners in rehabilitation work for other “offenders” since the 1950s and 1960s—contending that such a model has the ability to reflexively encourage rehabilitation and desistance (Cressey, 1955; Maruna, 2001; Riessman, 1965).³

In this article, I will argue that the same dynamics that promote desistance and positive reentry are present within restorative justice settings, and that former political prisoners who lead such programs benefit from their positions as restorative practitioners. Under these conditions, desistance refers to an ex-prisoner’s abstinence from violence, and particularly from the use of “punishment violence” as a means of conflict resolution. The research will examine one particular organization in Northern Ireland—Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI)—well known for its involvement of former combatants and ex-prisoners as restorative practitioners. Through this case study, I will contend that ex-prisoners⁴ can assume positions of agency within their desistance process, and that their adoption of leadership positions as restorative justice practitioners can improve their reentry experience. First, I will provide background related to the Northern Ireland context, outlining the development of CRJI and ex-prisoner involvement in leadership positions. I will then analyze the ways in which the CRJI practitioner

role impacted specific qualities linked to desistance, including employment, social bonds, internal narratives, and agency. The discussion will then turn to the influence the practitioner role has on perceptions of ex-prisoners, and its potential ability to reduce stigma. I will conclude by considering the implications of this case study for wider society.

The research

This article is based on data collected as part of doctoral research conducted in Belfast from 2018 to 2021. The overall project sought to examine how the inclusion of ex-prisoners as practitioners impacted the micro-dynamics of restorative justice processes, using CRJI as a case study. Three strands of sub-inquiry were identified: (i) outlining the skillsets of ex-prisoner practitioners and examining the impact of their previous history on the development of their skillsets, (ii) exploring the way ex-prisoner identities and skillsets affect relationships with clients and other actors within the restorative process, and (iii) investigating the impact of the practitioner role on mechanisms related to ex-prisoner reentry and desistance. The analysis related to this last point serves as the basis of this article.

Utilizing a qualitative approach, fieldwork involved two key elements. First, as an insider researcher, I engaged in over 1,950 hours of ethnographic observation at CRJI, with unparalleled access to staff interaction, meetings, mediations, and organizational records. I considered myself to have insider status because I began volunteering with CRJI in 2017 (having previously served as a restorative facilitator in the United States), and, during the period of study, underwent CRJI's standard process of training to become an accredited restorative justice practitioner and administrative worker. These circumstances enabled me to associate directly with the study's target population, including both ex-prisoner and nonprisoner practitioners, as well as the clients and outside professionals with which they regularly interacted. Through these exchanges, I was able to familiarize myself with practitioner performance, their professional beliefs on restorative practices, their client interaction styles, and their interpersonal relationships with colleagues and statutory workers. These observations were recorded through regular fieldnotes and helped create a general understanding of practitioner traits and behaviors. While insider participation is often recognized for bringing a degree of tacit knowledge, credibility, and in-depth comprehension to research, it can also impact subjectivity and bias (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007). This can be mitigated by reflexivity however, and I regularly debriefed my understandings with my participants and supervisors, and also maintained a degree of separation due to my "outsider" status as a researcher and US citizen.

Second, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 33 individuals associated with CRJI, involving both ex-prisoner practitioners (8) and nonprisoner practitioners (17), as well as academics, experts, and board members associated with the early development of the organization (7), and one nonpolitically motivated ex-prisoner client (1).⁵ These numbers reflect nearly all practitioners and staff at CRJI at the time of research—only one administrative staff member declined to participate in the research.⁶ I additionally conducted three pilot interviews with formerly incarcerated practitioners in the United States (3) to see if this research would have any potential relevancy outside of Northern Ireland with nonpolitically motivated individuals. In terms of gender distribution,

of the CRJI ex-prisoner practitioners interviewed, seven were men and one was a woman, while of the nonprisoner practitioners interviewed, four were men and thirteen were women. Interviews covered a range of themes, addressing ex-prisoner practitioners' roles at CRJI, public perceptions, and reentry experiences. All interviews were audio recorded, except for two (per the request of nonprisoner participants where notes were taken instead) and were manually transcribed. Although the ex-prisoner sample size was perhaps on the smaller side, Guest et al. (2006, 2020) have noted that the majority of themes tend to be captured after six interviews, especially within homogenous groups, and thematic saturation was achieved during this study's analysis. Furthermore, these themes were not limited to the ex-prisoner practitioners, and other participants were also able to comment and provide insight on reentry experiences and public attitudes. Finally, I additionally distributed a short survey to practitioners, but its questions were directed at the first two research questions and therefore it is not discussed in detail here.

All interview transcripts, fieldnotes, survey results, and notes on relevant literature were included in my dataset. Data were coded using NVivo and then thematically analyzed to identify factors related to reentry and desistance. I conducted an initial descriptive coding of my data, and then conducted a secondary coding in which I began to interpret and generate themes from the data, sorting and organizing the data. I completed a third level of coding in which I refined and restructured the codes, interpreted patterns, and connected themes to theory. Throughout these cycles, I revised the codes being used, developed different structure options, and discussed themes with my supervisors and participants, using a recursive and reflexive process. I then synthesized the data into my findings, developing thematic narratives and analyzing their relationship to the research questions, yielding the basis for the critical examination outlined within this article. Although observation fieldwork provided me with an important general comprehension of practitioner dynamics (particularly for the research subthemes related to skillsets and client relations), quotes from interviews are used within this article because of their ability to highlight practitioners' views regarding the personal impact of the facilitator role.

Restorative justice and the context in Northern Ireland

In the wake of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement (1998) which formally ended 30 years of ethno-national conflict, Northern Ireland took a relatively progressive approach to the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of former combatants and prisoners. According to the terms of the Agreement, a commission⁷ was established to oversee the release of "qualifying" political prisoners—those individuals convicted of a "scheduled" (or politically motivated) offence whose organizations had agreed to a ceasefire. Although now widely recognized as a crucial component in creating sustainable peacebuilding, at the time, the early release of political prisoners convicted of the most serious offences was a highly controversial aspect of the peace process (Dwyer, 2012; Mitchell, 2008).

While political ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland did not experience the same level of stigmatization within their own communities as "ordinary prisoners" since they were

often afforded a higher status as individuals who had fought and been imprisoned on behalf of the community (McKeown, 2001), on a structural level, they experienced very similar obstacles including difficulties accessing housing, job opportunities, education, travel, insurance and welfare benefits (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). Beyond their own working-class communities, many were viewed with a generalized mistrust that essentially portended that prisoners would not “change their paramilitary spots” (Gormally, 2001: 16). They also still had to transition to life outside of prison and were forced to deal with the long-lasting impacts of incarceration on family relationships, their physical and mental health, and institutional challenges related to systemic denials of opportunity (Holland and Rabrenovic, 2018; Jamieson and Grounds, 2005).⁸ This was compounded by the historic lack of services and opportunities within working-class communities—and particularly nationalist communities—which were economically and socially excluded by the state and experienced substantial poverty and violence (Leonard, 2004; Hargie et al., 2011). Nevertheless, former combatants did contribute to the societal transformation occurring, taking part in a range of work that focused on building local capacity, helping youth, campaigning for human rights, resolving interface issues, and addressing a variety of other peacebuilding factors (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008).

Some former combatants and ex-prisoners became involved in restorative justice schemes, both in republican communities and loyalist communities (McEvoy and Mika, 2002). These individuals served as restorative practitioners, managing the projects and restorative encounters in a unique model of restorative justice that enabled ex-prisoners to assume leadership roles.⁹ Through these positions, ex-prisoners (together with their nonprisoner counterparts) have been able to promote peace from the bottom up, familiarizing people with nonviolent means of pursuing justice, challenging intra-group attitudes, and promoting dialogue between local communities and government agencies (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009).

The formation of CRJI

During the conflict, the common exposure to sustained violence led to a “culture of violence” (Steenkamp, 2005), wherein violence was normalized, routinized, and trivialized in daily life. Further provoked by a “void” in ordinary policing duties within local communities, caused both by the hostility displayed by local citizens towards police and the unwillingness or inability of police to provide such services (see McEvoy and Mika, 2002; Mulcahy, 2006), many areas became dependent on paramilitary organizations to handle day-to-day crime and misbehavior in their neighborhoods. The IRA, in particular, established a complex tariffed system of “punishment violence” in republican communities where, in effect, they became the primary policing entity in countering local crime and delinquency—deploying warnings, curfews, beatings, shootings, and “kneecappings” to enforce order.

This system of punishment violence received increasingly negative attention during the 1990s, with community members, politicians, international actors, and combatants alike calling for change. These calls eventually led to republican combatants seeking help from human rights experts and voluntary workers in Belfast in order to “disengage

responsibly” from punishment violence and develop a nonviolent community-based alternative. This process culminated in the creation of CRJI in 1998 (Auld et al., 1997). Based on restorative principles and the peaceful transformation of conflict within local communities, the organization offered a variety of services, including restorative mediation, mentoring programs, advice, and support, all of which continue today. Aided by the efforts of local women and nonprisoner community workers (Ashe, 2015), the programs were supported and eventually embedded within the local neighborhoods.

Notably, former combatants and ex-prisoners helped establish the organization and continue to serve in key leadership roles, and alongside their nonprisoner practitioner counterparts,¹⁰ lead casework and facilitate client mediations. Their involvement has been shown to be crucial to the success of the organization, with ex-prisoners bringing a distinct type of credibility, moral agency, and political and social capital to their roles (Eriksson, 2009; McEvoy and Albert, 2020; McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009), with additional research indicating that their leadership might also benefit the micro-dynamics of restorative practice (Albert, under review).

However, the involvement of ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI inevitably created suspicions in certain spheres and was often utilized as a method of critique. Detractors could be found within the government, who wished to uphold the state’s control over the justice arena (Ingram, 1997; Northern Ireland Office, 1998); from other restorative justice agencies, who believed the ex-prisoner-led model would tarnish the restorative justice “brand” (Criminal Justice Review, 2000); and from some community members, who disliked the ex-prisoners’ affiliation with the Republican Movement (McEvoy and Eriksson, 2008; Maginness, 2006). These opponents accused CRJI of acting as a “front organization” for the IRA, of circumventing principles of due process, of promoting vigilantism, and of imposing “terrorist” control over communities (Criminal Justice Review, 2000; McGrattan, 2010). An individual within CRJI expressed this persistent characterization, stating:

It was said, “They’re social workers by day and terrorists by night.” I mean that’s exactly what we were seen as with CRJI—wee masked brigades going to your house at night to put you under threat and tell you, “You better go to CRJI,” and then... [the practitioner] the next day is the [same] person who was at your door under a mask. It was bollocks....They weren’t putting people under threat during the night and advocating on their behalf during the day. But we had a hard job getting over those hurdles, because... many people were very critical of who was involved in CRJI and how serious we were about moving away from punishment beatings and shootings.¹¹

In line with numerous external assessments and evaluations by the Northern Ireland Criminal Justice Inspectorate, my research confirms that such suspicions were ill-founded.¹² The former combatants and ex-prisoners I interviewed were evidently committed to nonviolence and the principles of restorative justice theory. Although practitioners were not required to renounce any republican beliefs they may have held, many of the republican practitioners viewed their new role at CRJI

as an opportunity to use peaceful and political means to promote such values (including protecting and developing the community).¹³ Moreover, it is my contention that this desistance from violence was, in fact, *strengthened* by these individuals' adoption of practitioner roles at CRJI. The next section will focus on this desistance and the ways in which restorative leadership positions helped former combatants and ex-prisoners commit to peace, especially in terms of conflict transformation, and generally supported their long-term reentry process.

Ex-prisoner practitioners and desistance

Maruna (2001) identifies three primary theoretical frameworks within desistance literature: maturational reform, social bonds theory, and narrative theory (see also McNeill, 2006). Maturational reform, or “ontogenic” theories, are the most historically established and are driven by the link between the reduction of certain criminal behaviors and age (Farrington, 1986; Glueck and Glueck, 1940; Hirschi and Gottfredson, 1983). Social bonds, or “sociogenic” theories, contend that ties to family, employment, educational programs, and prosocial relationships—often linked to particular stages or events across the life course—are responsible for changes in criminal behavior (Farrington, 1992; Hirschi, 1969; Sampson and Laub, 1993). These connections create a “stake in conformity,” or a reason to desist (Hirschi 1969; Toby, 1957). Finally, narrative theories emphasize the significance of internal changes to a person's sense of identity, which can manifest in shifted perspectives, redefined motivations, greater concern for others, a desire to give back or “make good,” and a greater focus on the future (Maruna, 2001; McNeill, 2006). Academics tend to agree that desistance lies somewhere within this mixture, and generally cite the existence of a redemption narrative, prosocial purpose, agency, solid social bonds, and gainful employment as factors that increase the success of desistance (Maruna and Toch, 2005; Ward and Langlands, 2009; Weaver, 2019). Such factors were all present in the restorative justice work of ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland that I analyzed, as discussed in detail below.

The practitioner role and employment

First, at the most basic level, the practitioner role provides meaningful employment. This type of work has been shown to be an important factor in desistance, supplying a steady income and stable livelihood that can provide an alternative source of financial support (Boersch-Supan, 2009; Uggen et al., 2005). Importantly, findings reveal that employment must include gainful opportunities and a sense of purpose in order to be impactful, as underemployment—working in unstable, poorly paying, or low-level jobs—is unsurprisingly associated with recidivism (Currie, 1985; Listwan et al., 2011). Ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI reported that the job gave them satisfaction and a purpose, and provided them with opportunities that had elsewhere been denied to them because of their status.¹⁴ This satisfaction with their job and the feeling that they were conducting meaningful, purposeful work provided a positive occupation for them. As several ex-prisoners described:

It gave me a direction...see, when the war stopped, a lot of combatants were...they didn't know what to do with their lives. 'Cause they were involved in conflict for years and years, and when they come out of the conflict they were rudderless, they were lost, and they still are, whereas I think that I came through it with my head above water...I had something to do, it was this.¹⁵

When I started trying to find a job, I found it hard to get a job, even to get an education. You know, it took me about 20 years to get a job.... So there was all those barriers.... So that's where CRJ came in. CRJ created opportunities for me, opened doors... I was at that crisis point...and then when I came into CRJ, I seen a purpose for me.¹⁶

These opportunities were especially important given the fact that many former political prisoners experienced financial problems and institutionalized barriers to employment as a result of stigmatization and economic disadvantage in their local neighborhoods (Jamieson et al., 2010). Holland and Rabrenovic (2018), for example, have noted that state sponsored exclusion rendered ex-prisoners dependent upon the voluntary sector for income and status. Having these positions available therefore not only contributed to desistance processes, but more generally mitigated against discriminatory policies and eased reentry.

The practitioner role and social bonds

Furthermore, employment at CRJI offered a network of support for ex-prisoner practitioners, with colleagues serving as mentors and friends (Uggen et al., 2005). The existence of such bonds typically helps promote relationships with law-abiding citizens, instilling prosocial identities and values (Cressey, 1955; LeBel et al., 2015; Maruna, 2001; Reissman, 1965). In the context of CRJI, belonging to a group that embraced nonviolence and promoted restorative forms of conflict transformation within the community may have helped ex-prisoners internalize such values, transitioning further away from cultural normalizations of violence. Cressey (1955: 119) has described this as a process of retroflexive reformation, in which offenders are themselves helped by promoting desistance in others: "the [offender] almost automatically accepts the relevant common purpose of the group, identifies himself closely with other persons engaging in reformation, and assigns status on the basis of anticriminal behavior." Thus, by aligning oneself with prosocial beliefs and behaviors in efforts to help another desist, the practitioner actually promotes such a process internally, encouraging a law-abiding life (LeBel, 2007; Leverentz, 2014). Similarly, ex-prisoner practitioners in this study described that mentorship and association with their colleagues helped them adopt nonviolent approaches and further instilled their belief in restorative practices,¹⁷ commenting that inclusion at CRJI had made them "more thoughtful, more caring, and more tolerant."¹⁸ Although not all ex-prisoner practitioners mentioned such effects, multiple interviewees relayed this dynamic of embracing prosocial values as a result of their employment at CRJI, stating for instance:

Interviewer: If CRJI hadn't formed do you think that you would have continued to support punishment justice?

Participant: Yeah, I wouldn't have questioned it, you know what I mean? I wouldn't have questioned it.¹⁹

I wasn't really sure if the restorative approach was for me or not, especially because we had to work with the PSNI.... because remember I was anti-PSNI before CRJI, you know, I was opposed to the PSNI, and I would've actually been for punishment shootings, so CRJI sort of challenged me...and about my thoughts about things... once I started seeing the development of it, I said, 'Actually this isn't bad...' you know....[CRJI] got me to expand out more.²⁰

Thus, while inclusion in a group which embraced nonviolent practices helped ex-prisoners reexamine their belief systems and other popular practices, these positions at CRJI additionally offered general opportunities for social integration. This was important considering the fact that isolation, alienation, and breakdowns in relationships have been identified as common problems for some ex-prisoners after their release (Jamieson et al., 2010; Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). The social bonds offered by this employment, as Hargie et al. (2011) have argued, promoted inclusion, cohesion, psychological well-being, and positive citizenship, and more broadly served as a protective factor against social exclusion during reentry.

The practitioner role and internal narratives

Beyond these types of sociogenic factors encouraging desistance from violence, the practitioner role also seemed to help foster narrative developments in participants, further entrenching peaceful and lawful attitudes. Indeed, part of the reason that the role is influential is because of the nature of restorative work, which allows ex-prisoner practitioners to construct a coherent self-narrative centered on prosocial intentions without disavowing their past republican beliefs. Maruna (2001) argues that these "redemption narratives" enable previously incarcerated individuals to reframe their past actions so that desistance behaviors maintain (rather than reconstruct) a prosocial identity. These "redemption narratives" are therefore created to generate a coherent positive identity as a strategy "of resistance and empowerment that allow inmates to form entirely new, 'unspoiled' identities independent of their past or present circumstances" (Jamieson and Grounds, 2005: 375). By reframing past behaviors and experiences in a way that makes them meaningful for a current self-conception, individuals can embrace prosocial behaviors and commit to desistance in the future (Maruna, 2001). This gives reason and purpose to their life history and prevents them from having to reject their old identity—instead reincorporating it and transforming it into a larger narrative of a "true" self. Such processes would clearly be important for sustaining peace processes at the individual level, enabling former combatants to create narratives that help them to commit to nonviolence and develop peaceful methods of contributing to their communities in the future.

One of the key ways that former prisoners create these redemption narratives is by “making good” (Maruna, 2001)—similar to Bazemore’s (1998) concept of “earned redemption”—which helps individuals feel that their reintegration is deserved and displays to others that their prosocial identity is legitimate. Through such means, individuals assist others, using their pasts to enhance their current role. Maruna (2001) identifies positions in which individuals have a productive role and are able to contribute to society as particularly important to this process (i.e., as mentors, counselors, etc.). This type of “generativity,” or giving back to future generations, is seen as an expression of one’s “true” identity, and is crucial in the larger development desistance, increasing feelings of self-worth (see Heidemann et al., 2016; LeBel, 2007; LeBel et al., 2015). In this way, restorative work offers an ideal narrative for reforming past experiences, as formerly incarcerated individuals can assist their communities and frame their previous experience in prison or in the Republican Movement as beneficial to their current role as practitioners, giving purpose to their histories and crafting narratives with consistent values. Ex-prisoners associated with this study regularly expressed such outlooks. In fact, all ex-prisoner practitioners interviewed portrayed a narrative in which helping their community was seen as their ultimate purpose,²¹ forming a consistent identity in which their actions had always worked towards this end. While their efforts to protect or advance the political aim of their community had once been characterized by violence, it was now achieved through restorative justice work. Participants stated for instance:

I’ve always been involved in the community, always. At one point or another, I’ve always been helping the community.²²

I suppose in my heart, or my passion, lay in sort of wanting to try to make a better community for us all to live in, but also to give those that hadn’t got a voice, a voice....It gave me great satisfaction... when I achieved that [at CRJI], you know.²³

Now I can use that passion for my community in a restorative way...you use your knowledge and your past as an advantage rather than a disadvantage...I seen my purpose. And my purpose was—see my past? Actually use it as a positive.²⁴

The practitioner role and agency

Part of the ability to craft such redemption scripts depends on the perception of the self as an empowered agent. Prior to developing redemption scripts, offending parties typically view their life as a “condemnation script,” in which they have little agency (Maruna, 2001). The ability to formulate a sense of agency or control over one’s own destiny, emphasizing the “self as a causal agent” (Maruna et al., 2004: 279), enables individuals to focus on an intrinsic motivation for their change, and thus helps foster desistance. In fact, agency has been found to be a key difference between those who desist and those who do not, increasing self-confidence and feelings of control (Leverentz, 2014; Liem and Richardson, 2014; O’Mahony and Doak, 2017). Recent efforts to help prisoners reenter society therefore tend to emphasize the strengths and skills that such individuals

bring to their own reintegration, highlighting their agentic ability and active participation in shaping the world around them.²⁵ The process of serving as a practitioner within a restorative justice organization fits such a description, increasing the agency of formerly incarcerated individuals in society by giving them opportunities that otherwise would have remained closed to them. Involvement at CRJI offered ex-prisoners an important avenue from which they could grow their efficacy and power in everyday life. Ex-prisoner practitioners were enabled to claim agency, move beyond their labels, and take up a purposeful prosocial calling. As described by an ex-prisoner practitioner,

CRJ created opportunities for me... built up that connection that actually saw beyond my record and who I am. And I can show you my work, what I'm capable of, and now I'm in a different process.²⁶

In sum, many of the factors linked to successful desistance—including employment, social bonds, internal narratives, and agency—are associated with the restorative practitioner role, and it is contended that these dynamics helped ex-prisoner practitioners maintain their desistance and served as protective factors during their reentry. In fact, several ex-prisoner practitioners actually directly credited CRJI with this ability to remain out of armed groups in the post-conflict setting. They stated that being a practitioner at CRJI helped prevent them from joining anti-peace process paramilitary groups after their release from prison,²⁷ revealing the reflexive power of their prosocial role. Although not all ex-prisoner practitioner believed this, such statements illustrate the potential of restorative positions to promote the factors discussed so far and contribute to successful desistance processes:

When I was coming into CRJI, I was sort of at a stage where I was lost...and all these armed groups were coming up, and I think I would've been at risk of going down that route, that I would've ended up in prison again. Now going through CRJI's been challenging—I question some things in CRJI, I do—but that's ok, that's ok to question, because the thing is, it's keeping me on a pathway, a nonviolent way.²⁸

CRJI's helped keep me in this nonviolent direction. [Without CRJI] I probably would've still been in jail.... 'Cause I wouldn't have done this, if CRJI hadn't been here, I would've come back and started off what I was supposed to finish, and went back to the old way, which was wrong. This way is different, and sitting next to all the rest of them [CRJI practitioners]... every day is a learning day for me. You could come in and hear something different, and that sinks into your head... it helps. It helps in many ways.²⁹

Ex-prisoner practitioners and perceptions of legitimacy

Beyond the internal impact to the ex-prisoners involved, the assumption of the practitioner role can help legitimize ex-prisoners' desistance to the rest of society. Bazemore (1998) suggests that a prosocial role can indicate to the larger community that an individual is worthy of support and forgiveness, helping to shed the negative labels and stigma

previously imposed on that person. A practitioner role at a restorative justice organization in this sense serves as a symbolic “stamp of approval,” proving to the community that the individual has reformed and can hold a position of trust. Moreover, many studies have shown that this acceptance and recognition is essential not only for reducing the stigma and discrimination against formerly incarcerated populations, but also for entrenching the desistance of ex-prisoners as it helps reinforce their own prosocial self-concept (Maruna, 2001). Because self-identities are impacted by the perceptions of others (real and imagined), having people perceive ex-prisoners as productive members of society can help individuals internalize their desistance identity (Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2004). In this sense, prosocial labelling instigates Pygmalion effects, in which positive expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies (Maruna, 2011; Maruna and LeBel, 2010; Maruna and Toch, 2005).

As described earlier, many practitioners at CRJI witnessed these dynamics, explaining that ex-prisoners still faced significant stereotyping and discrimination from statutory bodies and people who opposed their role in the conflict. Through their inclusion as practitioners, however, participants noted that ex-prisoners were able to lessen this stigmatization. As one ex-prisoner commented, “I think I’ve had more respect from when I’ve come into CRJ, to be honest.”³⁰ In this way, ex-prisoner involvement in the restorative justice organization served to legitimize their standing in society, proving to the outside world that they had moved on from their pasts, transforming others’ perceptions and attitudes towards them. Both nonprisoner practitioners and ex-prisoner practitioners alike described:

I’ve changed my views about them... They’ve changed that much, you know. It must be hard for them to change from what they were to what they are now, like as community workers and respecting them in the community. They always were respected, but a different way then. I definitely have more respect for them, which I didn’t have in the past.³¹

They’ll look at you differently now, if you’re trying restorative practices....It’s different, it’s completely different. It’s like a totally new world. A whole new life, just starting off like. They come to you and trust you and talk to you now, where they didn’t before. You know...years ago it would’ve been a different issue, me coming to someone’s house... Now I’m going to someone’s house where they’re coming out with their hand out... we were dealing with a case a couple days ago, and this boy’s father actually stopped me walking up the road, asked me to get out of the car—I thought he was going to start a fight—and he gave me a hug for helping his son. See the feeling? His son was supposed to be getting shot, and I prevented that there from happening, so the feeling of that there was unreal. That’s completely different now, a lot of people’s respect... it’s turned everything around.³²

Conclusion: An improved reentry process

Despite the popularity of the restorative justice field, there has been a significant lack of interest concerning the impact of such work on practitioners within the academic literature. In fact, there has been a tendency to overlook the practitioner role more generally (Crocker, 2016). This article has helped address this gap, placing practitioners at the

center of the study and examining the way that their involvement in restorative leadership affects their own lives. Thus, although research in Northern Ireland has broadly looked at restorative justice's contribution to peacebuilding (see, for example, Eriksson, 2009; McEvoy and Mika, 2002; Topping and Byrne, 2016), few studies have examined the micro-dynamics related specifically to the reflexive impact of the facilitator role on ex-prisoner practitioners.³³

CRJI's example indicates that involving ex-prisoners in positions of authority at restorative justice agencies can impact desistance processes in a positive manner and enhance protective factors during reentry. My research supports the idea established by "wounded healer" and "helper" theories that participating as a practitioner can improve an individual's reentry and desistance. Such literature similarly suggests that ex-prisoners' positions in practitioner roles can provide them with increased agency, give them meaningful employment, help facilitate the construction of redemption narratives, improve social capital, reduce stigma, and ultimately transform their beliefs and attitudes towards conflict (Maruna, 2001; LeBel, 2007; Leverentz, 2014). Although these desistance factors are not the goal of the restorative justice initiatives in this study, as their focus remains on addressing conflict in communities and curbing violence, such variables were nonetheless apparent. Indeed, the experience of ex-prisoners at CRJI indicates that the practitioner role coincides with an adoption of restorative values and a sense of agency, along with a focus on prosocial work centered on helping the community, which can assist ex-prisoner practitioners in continuing nonviolent pathways in the post-conflict environment and can help discourage a return to paramilitary activity. While former political prisoners generally have low recidivism rates in Northern Ireland,³⁴ and it is not argued that these individuals would have necessarily continued supporting violence in the absence of CRJI, it is contended that the practitioner role can help ameliorate the impact of residual criminalization and provide protective factors that improve long-term reentry experiences. Furthermore, enabling ex-prisoners to be practitioners of restorative justice can foster acceptance from the public, removing stigma and opening additional avenues for the formerly incarcerated.

Thus, this research underscores that, contrary to popular criminalizing opinions, the ex-prisoners practitioners involved in restorative justice were *not* "social workers by day and terrorists by night." Instead, these individuals firmly embraced nonviolent principles and desisted from violence, with their role as restorative practitioners comprising a key element within their desistance and reentry journey. This example therefore offers a potential model for other post-conflict areas, indicating that restorative leadership might be a beneficial strength-based approach to ex-prisoner reentry. Ex-prisoner involvement in such work would enable the practitioners to claim an agentic role within their own desistance process, reducing the likelihood of a return to violence and promoting greater equity. Since much of the theory within this article applies to formerly incarcerated individuals more broadly, there is also some reason to believe that these effects would be replicable for "ordinary prisoners" in non-post-conflict societies.

For instance, a growing number of organizations are using "lived experience" models that recognize the importance of shared backgrounds and peer guidance. Although largely unexplored by academics until recently (Buck, 2017; Sandhu, 2017), researchers

are beginning to highlight the benefits of including individuals with lived experience in a variety of settings, such as street outreach (Corburn et al., 2021), gang violence intervention (Whitney-Snel et al., 2020), youth work (Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2018), and prison contexts (Buck, 2021). However, much of this research is focused on the impact to *participants*—prioritizing the experience of the clients on the receiving end of services—rather than *practitioners*, and only limited research has looked specifically at restorative justice programs (Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2018, 2020). Of the studies that do acknowledge the impact of the leadership role, researchers have found that individuals can increase their self-worth, gain positive peer networks, acquire practical employment, reduce feelings of isolation, and promote co-desistance processes, in line with this study (Buck, 2020; Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2020; Nixon, 2020).

At a fundamental level, then, this research challenges dominant restorative structures and encourages a deeper exploration of ex-prisoners as agents rather than as objects of restorative justice. It is contended that the incorporation of formerly incarcerated individuals as practitioners would not only serve to improve the lives of the formerly incarcerated, but could also help progress praxis, yielding a more democratic, equitable, and transformative model of restorative justice. This would meet the call posited by other academics (Miller, 2021) inspiring us not to focus solely on the individual when attempting to achieve positive reentry and desistance outcomes, but to scrutinize and reform larger structures and societal responses as well. Indeed, we must ensure that our restorative systems do not uphold the structural oppression and marginalization that they seek to dismantle. As the saying goes, change must start from within. This model would help promote ex-prisoner leadership in a practical way, supporting a modest but meaningful change, creating space for ex-prisoner agency within the restorative field and encouraging the adoption of a “two-way street” approach to reentry.

Acknowledgements

This article would not have been possible without the insight and participation of practitioners at CRJI, and the author is grateful for their input. The author would also like to thank Kieran McEvoy and Amanda Kramer for their feedback on an earlier draft, as well as Shadd Maruna and John Braithwaite for their comments on the PhD thesis.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by funding from Queen’s University Belfast in the form of a postgraduate research studentship.

ORCID iD

Allely Albert  <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-4562-0695>

Notes

1. Maruna et al. (2004: 274) suggest that desistance might be distinguishable in two phases, building from Lemert's two-pronged theory on developing a criminal identity: a primary desistance, based on "any lull or crime-free gap in the course of a criminal career" and a secondary desistance that includes "the movement from the behavior of non-offending to the assumption of the role or identity of a 'changed person.'"
2. The conflict, informally referred to as "The Troubles," entailed a period of violence beginning in the late 1960s and lasting until the mid-1990s in which more than 3,600 lives were lost and roughly 25,000–30,000 people were imprisoned (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). The society was divided along ethnonationalist lines, involving on the one side, the nationalist/republican community, who desired a united Ireland free from British rule, and on the other side, the unionist/loyalist community, who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom. The British government also played an active role—managing military operations and inflicting casualties to enforce state control (Hearty, 2017). Paramilitary organizations became active to defend their respective communities and push their position forward, often carrying out acts of violence and in order to do so.
3. The idea that by helping current offenders, ex-prisoners would be positively impacted themselves dates back to Cressey (1955), who argued that by positioning oneself in a prosocial role to help another, an individual adopts prosocial attitudes and instigates self-reform. Building from this idea, Reissman (1965) suggested a "helper therapy principle" which posits that a provider ultimately is helped more than the subject of the help. The theory also argues that helper roles promote "latent inner strengths" like self-reliance, self-production, and self-empowerment. Quantitative studies support such claims, proving helper positions are related to better psychosocial outcomes and higher feelings of self-worth and self-esteem (see Crape et al., 2002; Schiff and Bargal 2000).
4. The term "ex-prisoner" reflects the language used by participants in the study. While such labels may be considered reductive or stigmatizing, it was the preferred terminology of the formerly incarcerated individuals themselves. In part, this is likely because of the context in Northern Ireland, where admission of participation in a paramilitary group is a prosecutable offence and carries a sentence of up to 14 years (Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021). Using the euphemistic term "ex-prisoner" therefore denotes the time served for a politically motivated offense without admitting membership to a proscribed organization. Moreover, the term is often seen as a badge of honor, depicting the "sacrifice" made on behalf of their communities and cause (McKeown, 2001).
5. I had originally planned to speak to more CRJI clients, but the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted my data collection and it was decided with my supervisor that I should focus on the interviews I had already collected and forgo plans to interview additional clients. Also of note, one of the interviewees, listed as a member associated with CRJI's early development, was once also an ex-prisoner practitioner, but is not counted in the above total of ex-prisoner practitioners.
6. This person cited the local historical and cultural attitude of silence ("say nothing") as a reason for not participating, as well as a past negative experience participating in an interview unrelated to this study.
7. Established by the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 per the terms of the Good Friday Agreement, the Sentence Review Commission oversaw the vetting of prisoners sentenced before 10 April 1998 to be released on license. The scheme stopped short of full amnesty or pardon, and allowed for licenses to be revoked if an individual violated any terms of release

- or became involved in paramilitary activities. By 2012, 506 prisoners had been released under the scheme (Democratic Progress Institute, 2013: 19).
8. The particular challenges of female ex-combatants have been noted by academics like MacDonald (1991) and Rolston (2007), who comment that women face additional ostracism and stigmatization because of their perceived violation of gender norms. In the post-conflict landscape, they also have the additional struggle of being more likely than their male counterparts to be ill equipped for the job market, as many have previously had little formal education or professional training prior to their mobilization as combatants (Gear, 2002; Rolston, 2007).
 9. While it is generally common for ex-prisoners to serve as participants within restorative processes (i.e. as “offenders” who meet their victims and take responsibility to repair harms), it is still relatively rare (outside of Northern Ireland) for ex-prisoners to take on leadership roles as practitioners and facilitators of restorative processes. Similarly, there is a significant gap in the literature on the dynamics associated with ex-prisoner practitioners and the way their leadership impacts restorative processes, even within Northern Ireland, which this article seeks to address.
 10. Some authors have argued that these non-prisoner practitioners, and specifically women practitioners, have been overlooked in favor of ex-prisoner practitioners within the literature (see, for example, Ashe, 2009, 2015). It is therefore important for me to acknowledge that women have been, and are currently, a huge part of CRJI’s success and are an integral part of the organization and this research. Contrary to previous critiques about women being sidelined, the ex-prisoner practitioners in CRJI and this study comprise both men and women, and the present focus on ex-prisoner practitioners does not assume the exclusion of women. Moreover, the women and men who serve as non-prisoner practitioners were also interviewed and made substantial contributions to this research. Many of the women interviewed served in leadership roles: two women served as office coordinators in the Belfast area, five women served as project coordinators, and one woman served on the three-person management team (since the study, this number has increased to two). Although further research on the gender dynamics within restorative justice schemes is clearly needed, this particular study is focused on ex-prisoner practitioners (of all genders), as a group that is regularly discredited and delegitimized, in order to challenge those critiques and explore the ways in which the practitioner role may mitigate some of the residual criminalization such individuals face, and as such, a full gender analysis is beyond this article’s scope.
 11. Interview with former CRJI board member, Belfast, 4 February 2020.
 12. The CJI, an independent body that inspects agencies within the criminal justice system, has directly contradicted these ideas, finding no evidence of intimidation and denouncing the contention that practitioners had any sinister influence, instead reporting a firmly embedded non-violent ethos (Criminal Justice Inspectorate, 2007). This was also confirmed by the Independent Reporting Commission (2021: 14), who wrote that restorative justice “made an important contribution to tackling paramilitarism within local communities” and noted that staff received substantial accredited training, including in human rights and restorative practice.
 13. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 22 July 2019.
 14. Interviews with republican ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI, Belfast, 25 June 2018 and 23 July 2019.
 15. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 23 July 2019.
 16. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 25 June 2018.
 17. Interview with ex-prisoner practitioner, 25 June 2018.

18. Interview with ex-prisoner practitioner, 8 January 2020.
19. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 28 October 2019.
20. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 25 June 2018.
21. Ex-prisoner practitioners often described their restorative work as being motivated by a desire to help their community, which had also existed in their combatant role. This dovetails with research from Dwyer (2010) that finds ex-combatants tend to see community work as a continuation of their struggle. Thus, ex-prisoner practitioners do not dissociate with their previously held republican beliefs, but instead adopt a nonviolent approach, in line with mainstream republican directives following the signing of the 1998 Agreement.
22. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 22 July 2019.
23. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 26 June 2018.
24. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 25 June 2018.
25. Known as “strength based” or “good lives” models, these approaches look at the possible contributions a formerly incarcerated individual can make “to his or her family, community and society,” and capitalize on those strengths to “allow for the reconstruction of a new generative identity, instead of unwittingly reinforcing the passivity and fatalism of the old identity” (Ward and Maruna, 2007: 23–24). Restorative justice can be considered a strength-based approach (Ward and Langlands, 2009).
26. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 25 June 2018.
27. While mainstream republicanism accepted nonviolence as a condition of the 1998 Agreement and announced a formal end to its armed campaign in 2005, the so-called republican “dissident” groups who opposed the peace process continued to operate and use violence (Hearty, 2017).
28. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 23 October 2019.
29. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 25 February 2020.
30. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 27 June 2018.
31. Interview with non-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 23 July 2019.
32. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 25 February 2020.
33. While some studies have looked broadly at ex-prisoners serving as community workers (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008), none of these studies have specifically looked at ex-prisoners as RJ facilitators and the impact that the role has had on their reentry experience.
34. A total of 483 individuals have been released from prison since 1998, and only 27 have returned to jail (O’Neill, 2023).

References

- Albert A (accepted) Walking the walk: Ex-prisoners, lived experience, and the delivery of restorative justice. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*.
- Ashe F (2009) From paramilitaries to peacemakers: The gender dynamics of community-based restorative justice in Northern Ireland. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 11(2): 298–314.
- Ashe F (2015) Gendering demilitarisation and justice in Northern Ireland. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 17(4): 665–680.
- Auld J, Gormally B, McEvoy K, et al. (1997) *The Blue Book’ Designing a System of Restorative Community Justice in Northern Ireland: A Discussion Document*. Belfast: The Authors.
- Bazemore G (1998) Restorative justice and earned redemption: Communities, victims, and offender reintegration. *American Behavioral Scientist* 41(6): 768–813.

- Boersch-Supan J (2009) *What the Communities Say*. Oxford: CRISE.
- Braithwaite J (1989) *Crime, Shame and Reintegration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Brannick T and Coghlan D (2007) In defense of being ‘native’: The case for insider academic research. *Organizational Research Methods* 10(1): 59–74.
- Buck G (2017) ‘I wanted to feel the way they did’: Mimesis as a situational dynamic of peer mentoring by ex-offenders. *Deviant Behavior* 38(9): 1027–1041.
- Buck G (2020) *Peer Mentoring in Criminal Justice*. London: Routledge.
- Buck G (2021) *Mentoring and Peer Mentoring*. Manchester: HM Inspectorate of Probation.
- Clear T, Waring E and Scully K (2005) Communities and reentry: Concentrated reentry cycling. In: Travis J and Visher C (eds) *Prisoner Reentry and Public Safety*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 179–208.
- Corburn J, Boggan D, Muttaqi K, et al. (2021) A healing-centered approach to preventing urban gun violence: The Advance Peace Model. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8(1): –7.
- Counter-Terrorism and Sentencing Act 2021. Available at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/11/contents/enacted> (accessed 10 October 2023).
- Crape B, Latkin C, Laris A, et al. (2002) The effects of sponsorship in 12-step treatment of injection drug users. *Drug, Alcohol and Dependency* 65(3): 291–301.
- Cressey D (1955) Changing criminals: The application of the theory of differential association. *American Journal of Sociology* 61(2): 116–120.
- Criminal Justice Inspectorate (2007) *Community Restorative Justice Ireland: Report of a Pre-Inspection of Schemes*. Belfast: CJINI.
- Criminal Justice Review Group (2000) *Review of the Criminal Justice System in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: HMSO.
- Crocker D (2016) Balancing justice goals: Restorative justice practitioners’ views. *Contemporary Justice Review* 19(4): 462–478.
- Cullen F, Jonson C and Nagin D (2011) Prisons do not reduce recidivism: The high cost of ignoring science. *The Prison Journal* 91(3): 48S–65S.
- Currie E (1985) *Confronting Crime: An American Challenge*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Democratic Progress Institute (2013) *The Good Friday Agreement – Prisoner Release Processes*. London: Democratic Progress Institute.
- Dwyer C (2010) “*Sometimes I wish I was an ‘ex’ ex-prisoner*” release and reintegration: The experience of ‘politically motivated’ former prisoners in Northern Ireland. PhD Thesis, Queen’s University Belfast, UK.
- Dwyer C (2012) Expanding DDR: The transformative role of former prisoners in community-based reintegration in Northern Ireland. *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 6(2): 274–295.
- Eriksson A (2009) *Justice in Transition Community Restorative Justice in Northern Ireland*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- Farrington DP (1986) Age and crime. In: Tonry M and Morris N (eds) *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research, Vol. 7*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 189–250.
- Farrington DP (1992) Criminal career research in the United Kingdom. *British Journal of Criminology* 32(4): 521–536.
- Gear S (2002) Wishing us away: Challenges facing ex-combatants in the ‘new’ South Africa. *Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation, Violence and Transition Series* 8.
- Glueck S and Glueck E (1940) *Juvenile Delinquents Grown Up*. New York: Commonwealth Fund.

- Gormally B (2001) Conversion from war to peace: Reintegration of ex-prisoners in Northern Ireland. *Bonn International Centre for Conversion* 18: 1–45.
- Guest G, Bunce A and Johnson L (2006) How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods* 18(1): 59–82.
- Guest G, Namey E and Chen M (2020) A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLoS One* 15(5): 1–17.
- Hargie O, O'Donnell A and McMullan C (2011) Constructions of social exclusion among young people from interface areas of Northern Ireland. *Youth & Society* 43(3): 873–899.
- Hearly K (2017) *Critical Engagement: Irish Republicanism, Memory Politics and Policing*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Heidemann G, Cederbaum J, Martinez S, et al. (2016) Wounded healers: How formerly incarcerated women help themselves by helping others. *Punishment and Society* 18(1): 3–26.
- Hirschi T (1969) *Causes of Delinquency*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Hirschi T and Gottfredson MR (1983) Age and the explanation of crime. *American Journal of Sociology* 89(3): 552–584.
- Holland C and Rabrenovic G (2018) Masculinities in transition? Exclusion, ethnosocial power, and contradictions in excombatant community-based peacebuilding in Northern Ireland. *Men and Masculinities* 21(5): 729–755.
- Independent Reporting Commission (2021) *Fourth Report December 2021*. Belfast: Independent Reporting Commission.
- Ingram A (1997) Find a better way. *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 December.
- Jamieson R and Grounds A (2005) Release and adjustment: Perspectives from studies of wrongly convicted and politically motivated prisoners. In: Liebling A and Maruna S (eds) *The Effects of Imprisonment*. Abingdon: Routledge, 33–65.
- Jamieson R, Shirlow P and Grounds A (2010) Ageing and social exclusion among former politically motivated prisoners in Northern Ireland. *Changing Aging Partnership*.
- LeBel T (2007) An examination of the impact of formerly incarcerated persons helping others. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation* 46(1/2): 1–24.
- LeBel T, Richie M and Maruna S (2015) Helping others as a response to reconcile a criminal past: The role of the wounded healer in prisoner reentry programs. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 42(1): 108–120.
- Leonard M (2004) Bonding and bridging social capital: Reflection from Belfast. *Sociology* 38(5): 927–944.
- Leverentz A (2014) *The Ex-Prisoner's Dilemma How Women Negotiate Competing Narratives of Reentry and Desistance*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Liebmann M (2007) *Restorative Justice: How It Works*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Liem N and Richardson N (2014) The role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 41(6): 692–712.
- Listwan S, Sullivan C, Agnew R, et al. (2011) The pains of imprisonment revisited: The impact of strain on inmate recidivism. *Justice Quarterly* 30(1): 144–168.
- Lopez-Humphreys M and Teater B (2018) Peer mentoring justice-involved youth: A training model to promote secondary desistance and restorative justice among mentors. *The International Journal of Restorative Justice* 1(2): 187–209.
- Lopez-Humphreys M and Teater B (2020) It's on the inside that counts': A pilot study of the subjective changes among returned citizens participating in a peer-mentor support initiative. *Journal of Social Science Research* 46(6): 741–755.
- MacDonald E (1991) *Shoot the Women First*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Maginness A (2006) *The Issue Explained in a Nutshell*. Belfast: SDLP.

- Maruna S (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Maruna S (2011) Reentry as a rite of passage. *Punishment and Society* 13(1): 3–28.
- Maruna S and LeBel T (2010) The desistance paradigm in correctional practice: From programmes to lives. In: McNeill F, Raynor P and Trotter C (eds) *Offender Supervision: New Directions in Theory, Research and Practice*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 65–89.
- Maruna S, LeBel T, Mitchell N, et al. (2004) Pygmalion in the reintegration process: Desistance from crime through the looking glass. *Psychology, Crime and Law* 10(3): 271–281.
- Maruna S and Toch H (2005) The impact of imprisonment on the desistance process. In: Travis J and Visser C (eds) *Prisoner Reentry and Crime in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 139–178.
- McEvoy K and Albert A (2020) John Braithwaite: Standards, ‘bottom-up’ praxis, and ex-combatants in restorative justice. *International Journal of Restorative Justice* 3(1): 94–105.
- McEvoy K and Eriksson A (2008) Who owns justice?: Community, states and the Northern Ireland transition. In: Shapland E (eds) *Justice, Community and Civil Society*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing, 157–189.
- McEvoy K and Mika H (2002) Restorative justice and the critique of informalism in Northern Ireland. *British Journal of Criminology* 42(3): 534–562.
- McEvoy K and Shirlow P (2009) Re-imagining DDR: Ex-combatants, leaderships and moral agency in conflict transformation. *Theoretical Criminology* 13(1): 31–59.
- McGrattan C (2010) Community-based restorative justice in Northern Ireland: A neo-traditionalist paradigm? *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 12(3): 425–441.
- McKeown L (2001) *Out of Time*. Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications.
- McNeill F (2006) A desistance paradigm for offender management. *Criminology and Criminal Justice* 6(1): 39–62.
- Miller R (2021) *Halfway Home: Race, Punishment, and the Afterlife of Mass Incarceration*. New York: Little, Brown and Co.
- Mitchell C (2008) The limits of legitimacy: Former loyalist combatants and peace-building in Northern Ireland. *Irish Political Studies* 23(1): 1–19.
- Mulcahy A (2006) *Policing Northern Ireland Conflict, Legitimacy and Reform*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.
- NIO (1998) *Review of Criminal Justice in Northern Ireland: A Consultation Paper*. Belfast: Northern Ireland Office.
- Nixon S (2020) ‘Giving back and getting on with my life’: Peering mentoring, desistance and recover of ex-offenders. *Probation Journal* 67(1): 47–64.
- Nowotny J and Carrara M (2018) The use of restorative practices to reduce prison gang violence: Lessons on transforming cultures of violence. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 36(2): 131–144.
- O’Mahony D and Doak J (2017) *Reimagining Restorative Justice*. Oxford: Hart Publishing.
- O’Neill J (2023) Good Friday Agreement: Prisoner release a bitter pill for victims. *BBC News*, 10 April. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-65164519> (accessed 31 August 2023).
- Riessman F (1965) The ‘helper’ therapy principle. *Social Work* 10(2): 27–32.
- Rolston B (2007) Demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants: The Irish case in international perspective. *Social Legal Studies* 16(2): 259–280.

- Sampson R and Laub J (1993) Turning points in the life course: Why change matters to the study of crime. *Criminology; An Interdisciplinary Journal* 31(3): 301–325.
- Sandhu B (2017) *The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change*. The Lived Experience. Available at: <http://thelivedexperience.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Lived-Experience-Baljeet-Sandhu-VLE-full-report.pdf> (accessed 1 October 2023).
- Schiff M and Bargal D (2000) Helping characteristics of self-help and support groups. Their contribution to participants' subjective well-being. *Small Group Research* 31(3): 275–304.
- Sherman L and Strang H (2007) *Restorative Justice: The Evidence*. London: Smith Institute.
- Sherman L, Strang H, Mayo-Wilson E, et al. (2015) Are restorative justice conferences effective in reducing repeat offending? Findings from a Campbell Systematic Review. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 31(1): 1–24.
- Shirlow P and McEvoy K (2008) *Beyond the Wire: Former Prisoners and Conflict Transformation in Northern Ireland*. London: Pluto Press.
- Steenkamp C (2005) The legacy of war: Conceptualising a 'culture of violence' to explain violence after peace accords. *The Round Table* 94(379): 253–267.
- Stevenson B (2012) Celebrating a broken community, full of grace and love. *Hospitality* (July): 3–4.
- The Belfast Agreement: An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland 1998. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/619500728fa8f5037d67b678/The_Belfast_Agreement_An_Agreement_Reached_at_the_Multi-Party_Talks_on_Northern_Ireland.pdf (accessed 10 October 2023).
- Toby J (1957) Social disorganization and stake in conformity: Complementary factors in the predatory behavior of hoodlums. *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Police Science* 48(1): 12–17.
- Topping J and Byrne J (2016) Shadow policing: The boundaries of community-based 'policing' in Northern Ireland. *Policing & Society* 26(5): 522–543.
- Travis J (2005) *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press.
- Uggen C, Wakefield S and Western B (2005) Work and family perspectives on reentry. In: Travis J and Visher C (eds) *Prisoner Reentry and Crime in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 209–243.
- Ward T and Langlands R (2009) Repairing the rupture: Restorative justice and the rehabilitation of offenders. *Aggression and Violent Behavior* 14(3): 205–214.
- Ward T and Maruna S (2007) *Rehabilitation*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Weaver B (2019) Understanding desistance: A critical review of theories of desistance. *Psychology, Crime and Law* 25(6): 641–658.
- Whitney-Snel K, Valdez C and Totaan J (2020) 'We break the cycle...': Motivations for pro-social advocacy among former gang members to end gang involvement. *Journal of Community Psychology* 48(6): 1929–1941.
- Zehr H (1990) *Changing Lenses*. Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press.

Allely Albert is a Postdoctoral Researcher at TU Dublin, School of Social Sciences, Law, and Education and a Visiting Scholar at Queen's University Belfast, School of Law. She holds multiple certifications related to restorative justice, including in mediation, victim-offender dialogue, and restorative practice.