"It takes a village…": the social fabric of recovery and desistance

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The story so far...

In 2019, having spent the previous fourteen years in the grips of the chaos of drug and alcohol addiction that led to me serving multiple prison sentences, being chronically unemployed – at least in any legitimate sense - and being, in many ways, hopeless; I was in early recovery and living in temporary accommodation having just left rehab. It turns out, however, that I was at the start of two journeys: one into recovery and desistance; and another into education, having been excluded from school at aged 15. I had enrolled onto two Level 2 Adult Learning courses in 'Understanding Mental Health' and 'Understanding Children and Young People's Mental Health'. During this time, a support worker from another service had floated the idea of me starting an 'Access to Higher Education' course. I remember laughing at the absurdity of the concept of me going to university. However, with some encouragement and a point in the right direction, without any expectations of things to come, I enrolled on the course to study social sciences at college. Fast forward to the summer of 2023 and I have just graduated with a first-class BA(hons) degree in Criminology and Sociology from Lancaster University. Furthermore, I was given an award for finishing top of the year for my degree programme – a sentence that doesn't feel real even as I write it! I have a family, I have started to build a career - working within the criminal justice and recovery sector - and I can absolutely envisage a bright future for myself and my family.

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Often, the story that is told of recovery - or recovery and desistance as an interlinked and semi-dependant combination, in the way it features in *my* experience – is one of resilience and tenacity, one of an individual overcoming significant adversity, and, against all the odds, achieving what may once have been deemed impossible. This celebration – the celebration of the individual – *should be* told and sung loudly. The features and narratives mentioned above *absolutely do* feature in the stories of recovering addicts and desisting offenders. However, what is often missing in the story told about individual recovery, and what I hope to convey in this piece, is the social one. Recovery and desistance are social processes.

Two sides of the same coin

Recovery - or *addiction* recovery - is a term used to describe the recovery from substance dependence (White and Kurtz, 2006). However, it is also understood that the separation from substance dependence alone does not necessarily equate to recovery. The Betty Ford Consensus Group (2007: 222) defines recovery from substance dependence as "the voluntarily maintained lifestyle characteristics of sobriety, personal health, and citizenship". Recovery in the community often involves a person actively doing work on themselves whilst simultaneously attempting to forge and foster new pro-social bonds and connections.

Desistance is a term that can be used to describe the process of the cessation of offending (see Maruna, 2001; McNeil, 2006). An estimated one in three people in the adult prison population are suffering from serious addiction issues (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). Often, for those with chronic substance use problems, crime and addiction are inseparable. Much like addiction recovery, desistance can describe a journey and pathway to an intended goal as much as it illustrates a definite arrival point. Although both recovery and desistance are, theoretically, separate concepts that describe separate phenomena, in the context of those who experience problematic substance use and problematic drinking – which often is linked to and contextualises offending behaviour and patterns - I have found both in my *own* lived experience and in the experience of those who I work with, that often, the process of recovery and desistance are two sides of the same coin – they both intersect *and* support each other.

A Social Matrix

Research shows that often, those who have experienced chronic problematic drug use, alongside a prolonged and repeated offending history, have experienced – or are experiencing – a history of multiple and compounding disadvantages (see Bramley, Fitzpatrick, and Sosenko, 2020). Such disadvantages include school exclusion, childhood trauma, poverty, homelessness, criminal justice involvement, domestic abuse and neurodivergence - amongst others. The intersection of such experiences with drug addiction and criminal justice system contact often means this user cohort is significantly marginalised and socially excluded. The notion of creating or building on social capital during the recovery and/or desistance process to sustain recovery and mitigate the chronic experience of social exclusion is not new. Similar to Bourdieu's (1986) notion of social capital, the idea of 'recovery capital' (Granfield and Cloud, 1996) has been developed and is widely accepted as a practical framework across the addiction recovery treatment sector. It is understood that access to networks of pro-social peers and community engagement significantly aids the recovery process (Best, Irving and Albertson, 2017).

Like many others, when I arrived at the point of early recovery and embarked upon the process of desistance, whilst spending years within anti-social and pro-criminal networks and connections, I found myself with a distinct lack of social capital and the pro-social connections needed to promote, stimulate, and sustain my recovery and desistance. However, when I reflect on my time over the last five years, and particularly those early, most crucial, and most formidable years, I observe a social matrix: a tapestry of individuals – friendships, professionals and mentors – and structures, that cut across statutory services, third sector organisations, CIC's, professionals, educators, mutual aid, and, arguably most importantly, organic social networks and communities.

From the early recovery services and professionals who aided my initial steps into rehab, to the volunteer coordinator who went the extra mile to get me my first volunteer role – despite the endless risk assessments - and the relationship that we built, to the college tutors on those early courses that understood the context of my past and stimulated my appetite and belief for learning; from the company that gave me my first paid position and the co-worker who explained how to fill out application forms and practised interview preparation with me, to the number of people who have taken on roles as mentors and friends - an exhaustive list would be too long to write for this piece. The point I aim to convey is that this wealth of interactions, exchange, and relationships - however fleeting they may, or may not be as singular events - are the very fabric and consistency of my recovery and desistance. They have become inseparable from my ability to maintain, and to thrive, into the life and position I now find myself in.

It takes a village.

While both recovery and desistance are seen broadly as positive and welcomed, these processes can often seem - to those outside of the dedicated support structures - as something that happens 'over there'; somewhat distant. Often, the local drug or probation service, mutual aid fellowships, and the somewhat abstract idea of 'rehabilitation centres' monopolise the imaginary of the recovery and desistance landscape. In the last decade, there has been a positive and welcomed move to include third-sector recovery organisations into this fold. However, I assert that this is not far enough. I am proposing to (re)imagine what a society conducive to recovery and desistance looks like - a *'Recovery Ready'* community (see also, Ashford et al. 2020). Much like the televisions that were on sale in the early 2000s that were 'HD Ready' – that is, equipped and ready to receive high-definition broadcasts, should they arrive – the entire spectrum of the social fabric and institutions that make up our communities should aim to be 'recovery ready'. Housing providers,

healthcare, sports organisations, mental health services, education providers, the voluntary sector, faith groups, women's services, work coaches, gyms (the list goes on and on) should all be ready to receive, welcome, integrate, and absorb those who are on the recovery and desistance process, should they arrive.

As mentioned previously, often those who populate the duality of both addiction and criminality are amongst the most marginalised and socially excluded members of our society. A proactive approach that promotes the inclusion and wholesale integration of recovering addicts and desisting offenders into the wider community is needed to combat the chronic social exclusion and marginalisation that many have faced over the years. Biernacki (1986: 141) states that, for previously dependent substance users to recover, "addicts must fashion new identities, perspectives and social world involvement wherein the addicted identity is excluded or dramatically depreciated". Similarly, the notion of tertiary desistance (McNeill, 2014) describes the necessity of belonging to a community. It is argued that for a transition to be whole, this requires the "...corroboration of that new identity within a community" – a person's new identity has to be witnessed, authenticated and legitimised by a social group (Best, 2019: 8). It is in this process of building and accumulating social and recovery capital, new sustainable identities can be constructed.

This (re)imagining of the recovery and desistance landscape into one that breaches the confounds of the traditional dedicated support elements, and becomes one that spans the entirety of the social fabric that underpins our communities, will require collaboration, and communication between services, professionals, and social institutions in order to create a genuinely inclusive and reintegrative environment; one in which recovering addicts and desisters have access to social and recovery capital and social networks in order to facilitate and sustain their position (see also, "Recovery cities" Best and Coleman, 2019).

It is also essential that individuals and professionals – members of the community, from beyond what would usually be considered as the 'recovery and desistance' landscape - absolutely recognise their own agency and take an active role in facilitating this process. Whilst the wealth of my positive engagements may have happened within the context of structured organisations, it is the individuals themselves who have made the deepest impressions and given time and attention at a time in which I felt I most needed it. If we truly want to live in a society in which people have an opportunity to enact change and achieve their potential - whatever that may look like - it requires a top to bottom, community-wide approach. After all, it takes a village...

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