Getting out, Fitting in, Getting on...

Preliminary findings of ex-prisoners’ experience of release.

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This paper draws on in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with men recently released from prison, conducted as part of a PhD research project entitled Getting out, Fitting in, Getting on – The Culture of Prison Release: Post-release theory, practice and lived experience in Victoria. The study is focused on men, for two reasons: the overwhelming majority of prisoners are male, and despite the rise in the rate and proportion of female imprisonment, men still comprise over 90% of the Australian prison population. Secondly, there are features of the post-release experience with peculiarly male dimensions, with which this study seeks to engage: the fracturing of family relationships and its impact on fathering, for instance; and the extent to which the hyper-masculine prison environment and its culture seeps into and inflects the post-release experience.

Preliminary findings from the ex-prisoner interviews attest to a state of liminality by which the post-release experience may be characterised, as this paper will illustrate.

This research is seeking to understand the experience of being released from prison and the difficulties associated with ex-prisoners trying to fit into a society from which they have been physically removed, emotionally and psychologically estranged. That is not to say that imprisonment necessarily causes their estrangement: many prisoners have no previous experience of effective integration into a law-abiding community; for some, prison is part of their broader experience of marginalisation, of living on the edges; and for a significant number, imprisonment is part of a cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to escape the longer they are enmeshed in it.

In Victoria, in 2009, there was an average daily number of 4,081 men in prison. 51% of these have served a previous adult sentence; 36% will return to custody within two years of their release (DoJ, 2009; ABS, 2009a). Prison census data, however, don’t capture the comings and goings of prisoners on short sentences and remand (Carach & Grant, 1999: 2; Baldry, 2007: 3; ABS, 2010: 1). Reception and discharge figures tell us more about their flow: in 2006-07, for instance, Corrections Victoria registered 5,364 receptions of 4,891 individuals – 473 instances of reimprisonment (Corrections Vic, 2008); 3914 sentenced prisoner receptions in 2007 indicating one in five prisoners on remand (ABS, 2009b).

While around a third of prisoners are released on parole – with a daily average of around 1500 people on parole – over three thousand men are released from prison, on straight release, every year in Victoria (Corrections Victoria, 2008; ABS, 2009). What’s more, remand prisoners are frequently released straight from court cells, without any preparation for their release at all. The implications for the provision of post-release support for these men are clear: there are far more prisoners released than there are targeted services available to meet their needs.

This is not to diminish the work of programs such as Link Out, which is run by a consortium of four agencies across Melbourne, and offers three-months pre-release and twelve-months post-release intensive support for prisoners deemed at high risk of reoffending; or Konnect, a similar program for Aboriginal men and women; or the various faith-based post-release services offered by largely Christian organisations, such as Prison Fellowship and Prison Network Ministries; or a newer initiative based at a church in the inner-western suburb of Footscray, called Five8 (rhyming prison slang for ‘my mate’), which offers an intensive friendship model of support in the form of a ‘micro-community’ of volunteers. These have demonstrated successes such as those mentioned below. But still many prisoners fall through the cracks...

My study imagines a culture of prison release, characterised – my findings suggest – by a state of liminality. ‘Culture’ here refers to ‘semiotic practices’ (Wedeen, 2002), looking at the language and symbols people use to make sense of their world and their experience, and how these signifying systems relate to and produce effects in what they do, their actions and behaviours. The notion of liminality draws on the work of anthropologists...
Arnold Van Gennep (1908/9), Victor Turner (1967, 1974, 1982) and Mary Douglas (1966). Though in the context of the transition from prison to community, it is Yvonne Jewkes (2005), Eileen Baldry and her colleagues (Baldry et al, 2006; Baldry et al, 2008; Baldry, 2009), and most recently Deirdre Healy (2010), who have described the post-release state as a liminal one; it is this work on which the study seeks to build.

So first to define the concept, Van Gennep (1909) conceived rites of passage as comprising three phases: the pre-liminal phase (separation); the liminal phase (transition or margin); and the post-liminal (re-aggregation, reincorporation or, in the post-release discourse, reintegration). Expanding on this idea, Turner described people in a liminal state as being “betwixt and between” – neither belonging to the society they were separated from, nor yet absorbed or accepted into the society they’re entering. Liminality is this halfway house; this state of being in limbo; an ambiguous period of uncertainty, instability, vulnerability, chaos. Douglas (1966) suggests that liminal spaces represent risk, invested with the larger social group’s fears and anxieties (Jewkes, 2005: 376). Yet liminality – in its ‘in between-ness’ – also holds the potential for transformation and, recalling Foucault’s (1961/2006) ‘limit experiences’ can provide opportunities for some people to find ‘ways of being free’.

The title of my thesis – Getting out, Fitting in, Getting on – suggests a progression, a sequence of events or stages, a neat series of steps leading to reintegration. This belies, however, the nature of the post-release experience for many prisoners: more a chaotic swirl than an even track. ‘Getting out’ can mean finding yourself with $231 in your pocket from Centrelink, a motel room voucher, and after that nowhere to live, and nowhere to go; as ‘Scott’ puts it:

“When you get out on a straight release you got no support, like if you got nowhere to go, it doesn’t matter mate, it’s out the door, bad luck, you got nowhere to live – “oh, here y’re, I can give you three days in a hotel...” (ex-prisoner interview)

‘Getting on’ entails, on one level, attempts to establish social connections, repair or rebuild relationships, taking steps towards living a crime-free life, getting a job and so on. In drug-users’ lingo, however, and for many released prisoners, ‘getting on’ is a way of celebrating freedom: ‘getting on the gear’, scoring, having a hit of their drug of choice. Inevitably, for many, this leads straight back to jail, as ‘Scott’ explains:

“Drugs have been such a big part of my life... when I get out, I usually do the family thing first, like I’ll go see my family the first day I get out, and then I’ll usually say, the second day, “oh listen I’m just goin’ to see a few friends” and then I’ll go for a couple days and just have a good binge you know a good party and get wrecked ... just to celebrate cos I’m back out, you know, it’s just like a merry-go-round sort of to me, that’s how I sort of picture it now, like a ride, like I’m out now for six months, I might be back in, at six months I might be back out, you know, it’s like I’m on the merry-go-round...”

‘Scott’ has been imprisoned fifteen times over the last seventeen years; he describes his typical ‘merry-go-round’:

“I was out two days, then I was out five days, you know, cos I had nowhere to go, so I just got out, got stoned off my head, done a burg, got pinched, went back to jail for another year and a half or two, got out, nowhere to live again, got pilled off my head, done another burg, got pinched, done another year or two...”

He talks about how he imagined his freedom might be:

“When you get out, you think, like, the sun’s gonna shine everyday and you’re gonna, like, have a thousand dollars in your pocket every day, and everything’s gonna be good and, you know, you’re gonna be able to go and buy whatever you want...”

and how the initial euphoria and excitement of release soon fades:

“...but you gotta pay bills and methadone and medication and you find out like you got no money to live on and you know, you’re doin’ things like this to get a $20 food voucher, just so I’m not going out committing crime...”
It emerges too that release is experienced as a process rather than a single moment or event, as ‘Jim’ tells (describing waking up before dawn, watching the dawn break, the birds, cats, people walking past):

“It took me months just for it to sink in that I was actually free and on my way to a normal life”

‘Fitting in’ is a longer term proposition, but it often begins in a boarding house surrounded by drug-users and parolees where, as well as struggling to connect with a ‘pro-social’ community, it can be difficult to escape the ex-prisoner culture, as ‘Rocky’ relates:

“Nobody wants to be hanging out with them sort of people ... but ... you see their face in jail, you see them outside jail, they recognise you straight away ... so you’ve gotta say g’day and it’s not, like, I don’t want to hang with them but everywhere I go they are, and methadone ... most people coming out of jail are on methadone as well, so just lining up to get my methadone, there could be ten people in the line that I know from jail, no matter how hard I try, you can’t get away from them...”

Describing what it’s like relating to other people, ‘Scott’ says:

“It’s hard talking to people who haven’t been to prison ... I’ll try and talk to people and a lot of people are scared of me ... a lot of the people we knew from when we were younger won’t see me... and me mate said ‘you don’t understand, they’re scared of you... look what you’ve done, man...’”

‘Jim’ provides insight into the lack of a common language and shared experience with people on the outside:

“I get really nervous in some situations, anything to do with normal life and normal situations I have real difficulty in communicating and having a conversation about that, I sort of shut down, but I mean anything to do with jail and stuff like that, well I’m off, I can talk for days, about change and fighting drug addiction and stuff like that, but I’ve gained all that knowledge from being jail...”

The experience of being stuck in between is evident when ‘Scott’ describes being “tired of robbing people”, and wanting to leave his criminal life behind:

“when you’re like that, no-one wants you to live with them so you’re homeless, except the drug addicts [and] they only want you to live with them so they can rob you...”

But he struggles to find a way of being free:

“You have to like turn into a different person out here, to fit in, if I wanna fit in with normal people ... I have to change everything ... it’s like trying to become a different person and it’s sort of not who I am, it feels like it’s not who I am, I’m not being me.”

‘Scott’ has been out for nine months this time, the longest time ever. For him, having somewhere to go when he got out this time enabled him to complete his three months of intensive parole, and subsequently get his own place, a ‘studio apartment’ in a boarding house. As he explains:

“...every time I got out I’ve been homeless, you know, this was the first time I had somewhere to stay”

[on his sister’s couch].

Having his family has made the difference too, describing his niece and nephew as:

“probably the main two reasons I’m out, them and my mum and my sister, if it wasn’t for them ... I’d just go and use as much heroin and whatever I could find... They’re a reason to stay out”

With the support of family and his Link Out worker, he’s been able to avoid the usual pitfalls of “using, money” and “certain people”, as he describes:
"I avoided two people the other day… ‘cos I know if I hadda went with ‘em I would’ve been doin’ something that night… and that was two good friends who I hadn’t seen since I got out."

Scott’s ‘in between-ness’—the difficulties associated with trying not to fit in with his old jail mates and not being able to fit in with people on the outside—mean that ‘getting on’ is still a hard habit to break:

“It’s kinda hard to make straight friends… if I’ve got a spare hundred bucks or something I always just boom, you know, instead of going to a pub and meeting people or going to a bar and talking, meeting people, you know, it’s like, a hundred bucks, oh sweet, I’ll go get a hundred, I’ll buy some speed or heroin or coke or whatever.”

Highlighting the importance of belonging to a group, of feeling connected to other human beings, ‘Dale’, talks about his experience of being in between worlds:

“…what’s helped me in the last few months… is I’ve slotted in and I hang round in the city and I’ve been drinking and know a lot of people that sort of hang around in the park and drink and that—not old deros, younger people… it’s like being in prison, ‘cos that’s one of the biggest things about getting out is the loneliness, even though you’ve got your circle of friends… they’ve got their own lives… and you know you visit them once every now and then but… in prison it’s like this [at a city café], you wake up every morning, it’s this every day, you know, things are going on—there’s a confounding sort of loneliness in that that’s not there anymore, so that that becomes really difficult, you’ve lost your network of friends in that sense… the company and the activity…”

‘Jim’ reiterates the loneliness that ‘Dale’ talks about, and how having a group of volunteer ‘friends’—“having that whole social circle taken care of”—has helped him survive and thrive so far…

“I’ve had other times I’ve been released and I had all good intentions and I felt serious in myself, felt good about it, you know, very resolute and stuff like that, and I’d come out and I’d just have no-one, nothing to do, and I’d go nuts, I’d go stir crazy, I’d be able to maintain it for months or whatever but sure enough after months or a year or whatever it just got too lonely and too boring and… I’d go back to that life to find friendship and someone to talk to and something to do, and sure enough… before I know it I’m in jail again, so with the Five8 group, that loneliness and that isolation hasn’t been an issue, feeling different has been an issue but I can always talk to them about it…”

From these initial findings, the liminality of the post-release state may be conceived as an assemblage, a layering of the symbols and stigma associated with imprisonment; the connections, the meanings and the interactions arising from and inflected by that experience; and the emergence of these aspects as relational and mutual, yet also intensely personal, idiosyncratic and heterogeneous in the ways they are experienced. For prisoners the experience of getting out, fitting in, and getting on is indeed one of being ‘betwixt and between’, neither belonging here nor wanting to belong there. Creating a path through this state of liminality—finding a way to be free—appears to require a combination of personal resolve, material resources and social support. Yet recalling Van Gennep’s rites of passage, perhaps the liminality of the post-prison world is only truly escapable when there is a community of people to whom to return; for many prisoners, there isn’t.
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