Assisting and Supporting Women Released from Prison: Is Mentoring the Answer?

Mark Brown and Stuart Ross*

Abstract

Mentoring is widely regarded as a positive form of post-prison support for women. Yet our data from a Victorian study of mentoring reveal that many women drop out early in the mentoring experience: many prior even to meeting their mentor in prison and as many as half directly upon release. This article therefore considers the question of the suitability of mentoring. It asks why mentoring seems 'right' for some women and not others and reports the characteristics and opinions of women for whom mentoring was a good option. Finally, it considers the contemporary environment of post-release support and programming, observing the increasing fragmentation of support services for women amid continuing efforts by state agencies to control the form and approach of post-prison service delivery. It concludes with suggestions for how a supportive post-prison environment, so important to mentoring, might be integrated into release planning.

Introduction

Despite decades of empirical and theoretical work demonstrating the highly gendered character of offending and recidivism it still remains possible in criminology to post a question mark over the significance and status of gender. As recently as 2005, two seminal figures in modern correctional programming wrote an article in the practitioner magazine *Corrections Today,* provocatively titled 'Is There an Evidence Base Supportive of Women-Centered Programming in Corrections?' (Porporino and Fabiano 2005). This article in fact

---

* Mark Brown teaches criminology in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. He has written on a number of aspects of punishment, penal history and theory. He is currently engaged in research projects on the process of desistance from offending, on the modern history of the prison in Australia, on the jurisprudence of offender risk and is writing a book on penal power and colonial rule in India. Stuart Ross is a Senior Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences. His research interests include sentencing decision making, criminal justice population modelling, and the evaluation of criminal justice programs. His recent work includes evaluations of release transition programs, court programs and the development of an instrument for assessing risk and need in Victorian prisoners and offenders.

The authors would like acknowledge the assistance and input of VACRO staff, volunteer mentors and the mentees who agreed to participate in the research. Thanks go to Nicola Henry and Jenny Malone for research assistance on the project and to Jenny Malone and the Journal's special issue editors and reviewers for comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This project was supported by an Australian Research Council Linkage grant LP0560398.

drew attention to the gulf separating academic study of women's offending, where gender figures prominently, from the day to day post-release work undertaken by correctional and community agencies. Adding to this picture, Hubbard and Matthews (2007) conclude that one of the main strengths of the dominant gender-neutral model of risk-needs has been its capacity to bridge this gap, making prescriptive and thus organisationally appealing claims about 'what works' and therefore what correctional agencies should do and with whom. Efforts to develop women-centric services in custodial and community corrections thus face the twin challenges of continuing gender deniers on the one hand (Rettinger and Andrews 2010) and poor prescriptive guidance in relation to service provision on the other (van Voohris et al 2010).

Among the intervention principles that have breached this gap, the relational model looms large (Covington 2002). Developed as an alternative to male focused theories of maturational development that emphasise self-sufficiency and autonomy, the relational model posits that women derive strength and find self actualisation in connections with others: in other words, in relatedness and connectedness. Our aim in this article is to consider one example of relational intervention that holds considerable intuitive appeal, in this case a mentoring program for women released from prison. The program we studied linked women in the last stages of a prison sentence with a community volunteer who was chosen on the strength of her established non-offending lifestyle and positive social ties. It was therefore not a peer mentoring model, linking ex-prisoners with individuals shortly to be released. Rather, we have characterised the program as grounded in a social capital view of ex-prisoners' needs and the potential benefits that mentoring might offer. We have already described the findings of our study in relation to how mentoring affected the psychological and social processes of transition from prison to community (Brown and Ross 2010). There we observed the powerful value of the mentors' social capital in terms that were both instrumental (in the form of practical assistance) and psychological (relational). Moreover, we identified special qualities in the mentoring relationship that do not equate to what might be termed 'normal' friendship or familial relationships on the one hand, or professional relationships, such as with a parole officer, on the other. Finally, our research indicated that mentoring did provide the sorts of relational benefits noted by Covington (2002), with a number of ex-prisoners remarking upon the importance of connections and affirmations established and experienced during the mentoring experience.

Yet our sample in this research was attenuated and self selected in important ways. A significant number of women who signed up for mentoring—nearly one in six—failed to attend any of the in-prison meetings set up to introduce them to a mentor and thus never properly entered the program. Of those who did meet a mentor in prison, fully half dropped out immediately upon release, having no post-prison contact with their mentor. We are thus left to ponder the question around which the remainder of this article is focused: what potential does mentoring hold for women released from prison and what role might it play in post-release planning? At first blush this might seem a rather simple question with an equally simple reply: nothing suits everyone. But the question's significance for women-centric intervention is rather deeper because it goes to the heart of exactly that which has given the gender-neutral technology of risk-need assessment its power, and that is its answer to the question of the best allocation and distribution of intervention activities. If gender responsive post-release planning is to gain greater hold in correctional practice, it needs to be able to say what should be done, for whom, and when. The scope of this task is manifold and it is not the aim of this article to offer a full answer. Rather, our aim here is to consider what we've learned from one mentoring program for women in light of these questions

about suitability, selection and the like, and how this knowledge fits into the growing picture of women-centred correctional work.

The remainder of the article is divided into three sections. Part I will briefly describe the nature of the mentoring program we studied and some key findings relevant to the present discussion, including our conclusions on the way mentoring can be understood in relation to social capital and relational principles. Part II will turn mentoring around, focusing not on what it might give or do but instead upon what it demands of participants. Here we place mentoring into a matrix that includes both individual level factors, such as motivation or readiness to change, and more structural or environmental factors like housing stability, drug use stability and the like. These issues are drawn together in Part III which considers the policy model within which contemporary Australian post-release correctional programming takes place. Here we identify and discuss factors that impact upon the provision of services for women, in particular the progressive absorption of community agency work into the overall state service delivery model. We also draw here upon a small, emerging literature from the field of (male) offender assessment that illustrates the limits of risk-need approaches and demonstrates the critical role of lifestyle stability, both of which appear to be important developments for any model that would deliver gender responsive services for women.

I. A Mentoring Program for Women Released from Prison

Since 2004, the Victorian Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (VACRO) has facilitated mentoring support for women released from Victorian prisons. The VACRO program was initially aimed at women with limited social and financial resources, but over time it has been made available to a wide range of women, excepting those with serious personal or mental health problems or women who might pose a safety risk to potential mentors. Between 2005 and 2007 we partnered with VACRO under the auspices of an Australian Research Council Linkage Program grant to investigate the impact of such mentoring on processes of psychological and social transition associated with release from prison. Before describing some of our findings we will briefly outline how the VACRO Women's Mentoring Program worked.

Victoria has two prisons for women, the Dame Phyllis Frost Correctional Centre, which is a 260 bed mainly maximum security prison on the outskirts of Melbourne, and Tarrengower Prison, a 54 bed minimum security institution on an old farm site in rural Victoria. VACRO staff regularly visit both institutions and recruitment of women to the mentoring program occurred through the combined efforts of these workers and prison programs staff. Our data show that women were also co-referred, in the sense of being referred by other prisoners who had used the program or who were aware of its purposes. When a woman indicated interest in the program efforts would then begin to find a suitable mentor from within the pool of mentors recruited and trained by VACRO and thence to set up one or more pre-release meetings between the prisoner and her mentor. Before the program began in 2004 VACRO was unsure whether they might be able to attract enough mentors, but early recruitment efforts via newspaper advertisements revealed considerable interest within the community. Women were selected as mentors based upon the suitability of their personal qualities (e.g. patient, non-judgemental), commitment and agreement with the program standards and ethical prescriptions. Once selected, mentors were then inducted through a training course of ten two-hour sessions. The content of the training reflected a

combination of the cumulative experience at VACRO supplemented by feedback on an evaluation of the training by a psychological consultancy firm. The training covered both practical matters (how to mentor, ethical and safe conduct for mentors) and what might be termed 'framing matters', which concerned the context of women in the criminal justice system, typical experiences of women leaving prison and some material on transitional release issues.

Over the period of the research between 2005 and 2007 we conducted interviews with 25 pairs of mentees and mentors as well as five interviews with women who returned to prison, as well as with various VACRO and institutional staff. In Part II of this article we will consider the factors that seemed to make mentoring work for some women and not others, something we have not previously explored in any depth. Before doing that, however, we will here recount briefly our main findings as they relate to the women who stayed in the program and who were able to describe to us their experiences of transition from prison to community and the role mentoring played in that process (Brown and Ross 2010). Three things in particular stood out to us: the importance of mentor's social capital; the special character of mentor-mentee relationships; and actualising power of positive relational experiences for mentees.

Mentor's Social Capital

The importance of social capital is now widely recognised in studies of desistance. Here we use Farrall's definition of social capital as taking in all the 'social interactions between individuals and other groups and individuals' (2004:61). More precisely, social capital reflects the depth and extent of social bonds, connections and ties as well as the embeddedness of individuals in relationships of trust and their integration into the participatory structures of civil society. As with other forms of capital it is possible for social capital both to be accumulated and lost, for it to be made to work in the sense of its being activated to achieve particular ends, and for it to be shared, distributed and transferred. In the case of prison releasees, a key issue is obviously that the process of imprisonment involves the erosion of whatever social capital that person possessed prior to being incarcerated. Imprisonment breaks down social bonds, compromises trust and prevents participation in social processes.

One of the key findings of our research with women released from prison and their mentors was that mentors performed two very important roles with respect to the social capital they held. First, and in the most elementary way, mentors formed a relationship with the women they mentored. Many of these ex-prisoners were extremely social isolated; two thirds had either no or only one regular social contact. Mentors—and the mentoring program more broadly—thus provided an important form of relief from the social isolation experienced by women leaving prison and an important link between an ex-prisoner and the wider community.

Yet mentors also represented a source of social capital in a deeper and more complex way than simply their presence as another human being. Many of the women in our study were isolated not only by factors beyond their control but also by their own efforts to separate themselves from offending-related friends, associates and often intimate partners. Thus, the value of mentors lay not simply in their status as another individual, for most of the women could if need be have accessed any-other individual. Rather, it was the social status of the mentor as a pro-social person with deep roots in the pro-social community and civil society that provided benefit. Across a number of interviews, women reported to us

that their mentor had assisted in providing references for housing, working through complex social security or educational paperwork, attending court and custody hearings, and more. What this represented was an activation of the mentor's social capital, reflecting as it does a store of social power and authority, for the benefit of the woman being mentored. Thus, while the terms of the Women's Mentoring Program precluded mentors offering material assistance, it became clear that their real value indeed often lay elsewhere, in what they could offer as a function of their social position in the community.

A Special Friendship

The relationship built between mentor and mentee was a special one. It was not, for instance, like the relationship between an ex-prisoner and her parole officer, as a number of women pointed out, while still acknowledging that their parole officer did quite a good job. But neither was the relationship a 'normal' one, in the sense of it arising naturally from family or friendship groups. The relationship was also imbalanced in a number of ways. To begin, women in prison were presented with a mentor who represented VACRO's considered view of who would be a good match. Thus, neither party really chose each other and the relationships that developed reflected the success or otherwise of the two women's efforts to find a common ground and to manufacture the dynamics of a normal relationship in clearly abnormal circumstances. Imbalances also existed between what a mentor could know of her mentee and vice versa. For reasons of mentor safety and more general boundary maintenance, there was always an artificial wall between the two parties to the relationship. But at the same time, both parties mostly accepted these artificial boundaries as an inevitable feature of what was never going to be a 'normal' relationship.

Most of the ex-prisoners in our study were satisfied with their relationship with their mentor and the term 'special friendship' occurred repeatedly in interviews with them. Even though the mentor was not a 'natural' friend, she did have the advantage of knowing where the woman she mentored had been, meaning that there could be an openness to the relationship that was difficult for some ex-prisoners to achieve in their other social interactions. Yet not all ex-prisoners were satisfied with the match made by VACRO. Sometimes this was simply related to preferences for different age or cultural groups. But there was also the sense among a few prisoners that no one who hadn't been to prison could understand either the troubles or the worldview of an ex-prisoner. For these women the mentoring program felt much less relevant than it might otherwise have been.

The Power of Positive Experiences

The capacity of mentors to activate their own social capital in the interest of the women they mentored was noted earlier as an important instrumental value of mentoring. Yet the women interviewed in our research also observed the important emotional and relational benefits of these and other experiences. The American writer Stephanie Covington has observed that '[i]n order to create change in their lives, incarcerated women need to experience relationships that do not repeat their histories of loss, neglect and abuse' (2002:130). Many mentoring relationships provided just those sorts of experiences. Sometimes they occurred easily, such as when a mentor provided affirmation of a woman's value by providing her a reference, visiting her in hospital, or in some other way that was not obliged but given freely. Other times, it was only through sometimes delicately balanced debates over issues like truth or trust that both parties—mentors and mentees alike—came to recognise the depth and importance of the new relationship that was developing between them. For the sake of brevity we have refrained thus far from elaborating our summary with interview data

(see Brown and Ross 2010). However, we will conclude this section with an extract from an interview with an ex-prisoner whom we have called 'Martina'[1], drawing on her comments about the significance of her mentor's non-judgemental openness and affirmation of her own value as a woman and a person:

> Most of my life people just said to me that I'm useless and hopeless; I'm always doing stuff wrong. When you grow up with that, and, that's pretty much what you feel you are – just gutter scum … I'[ve] gone from thinking that I just had to tell her everything was good, to I could tell her anything I wanted to … I could tell her when things were going really good and she gave me confidence, she made me believe in me. ('Martina')

Mentoring thus offered a unique opportunity for women to find in the experience some quite complex positive and affirmational experiences. Most women did not regard their mentor as anything like a role model. But by the same token, the experience of mentoring itself did open up for them opportunities to see relationships 'being done' in new and positive ways and to have experience of the way women, quite different to them, sought to negotiate and manage relational territory, including issues of truth, trust, self-confidence, expectation, disappointment, and the like. Moreover, as indicated above, this was a learning rather than a teaching experience, with mentors as well as mentees reporting challenges and benefits from their shared engagement.

Notwithstanding these positive outcomes, however, it is important to remember that these experiences of mentoring were not shared by all who signed up for the program. Many women dropped out even before they could first meet a mentor, and many who did meet a mentor in prison never followed up contact on the outside. It is to this question of suitability of women for mentoring, and the suitability of mentoring for some women, that we now turn.

II. Readiness for Mentoring

A larger than expected number of mentors recruited by VACRO meant that places in the Women's Mentoring Program (WMP) could be offered to a commensurately larger number of mentees. Between the commencement of mentee recruitment in January 2005 to its cessation in September 2006 (due to a temporary lack of program funding), a total of 90 women prisoners were offered places on the program. Since there are around 250 women discharged from prisons in Victoria each year who would have been eligible to join the WMP, around one-quarter of all those who were eligible were recruited.

Initial in-prison recruitment was quite effective, with a large number of women indicating a wish to become involved in the mentoring program. There was an almost immediate attrition rate of 1-in-6, with these women failing to keep appointments for an initial in-prison meeting with a mentor. In the group that remained there was a post-prison step-down where a further 1-in-2 women exited the program by failing to make any contact with their mentor upon release. A few of the latter group advised VACRO that they no longer wished to be involved, sometimes citing practical matters like time or travel problems, but on the whole post-prison attrition occurred through mentees simply vanishing from contact. This was perhaps one of the defining features of the Women's Mentoring

---

[1] The names of the ex-prisoners have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Program; high levels of initial interest, but difficulty in translating that interest into participation. But for those women who did meet a mentor in prison and then continue contact following release, the ensuing relationships were often quite long-standing. The period that they were engaged as a program participant ranged from 7 days to over 1,200 days (i.e. over three years), with a mean of just over a year (378 days). One-third of the women remained engaged for less than 100 days, but another third had relationships that lasted for more than a year. Additionally, since many of these remaining relationships were still continuing when the research concluded, the actual mean period of engagement will ultimately have exceeded a year. In this section of the article, we examine factors that might be related to all of this and, specifically, we examine and discuss the appropriateness of mentoring as a strategy for different sorts of women, or for women at different stages in their lives. We begin with a brief examination of women's demographic characteristics based upon program data, collected and made available to us by VACRO, before moving to consider the explanations given by women for what drew them to the program, what made it 'work' for them and why they might have dropped out.

Correlates of Engagement and Retention

Engagement and retention were strongly associated with the women's age (older), length of criminal history (shorter) and the presence or severity of drug and alcohol problems in their lives (none or less severe). In prima facie terms, it seems reasonable to conclude that what made mentoring appropriate for some women and not others was at one level a simple function of maturation. Women whose lives were more stable and who were, in a sense, aging out of crime and its attendant features of chaotic lifestyle were much more likely to enter and stay with the program. 90 per cent of women with recorded alcohol problems, and three quarters of those with drug problems, failed to make any post-release contact with their mentors. Similarly, less than a quarter of women with multiple prior imprisonments continued with the program post-release. Women under 30 were very unlikely to follow through with commitments to meet their mentor on release; more than 80 per cent failed to do so, compared with just 40 per cent of women aged over 40. Interestingly, however, mental disorder—which had initially been established as an exclusion factor—turned out to be unrelated to program participation. The limited demographic data presents one picture of who engaged in mentoring and who didn't, but it is also probable that factors like youth and a chaotic substance abusing lifestyle precluded participation in any kind of program, not just mentoring (Baldry 2010). We are thus left with the women who did stick with mentoring and the question of what, specifically, they found positive, attractive or relevant in the mentoring on offer.

The Value of Mentoring to Women Leaving Prison

Understanding why some women prisoners find value in mentoring, while others do not, is problematic because we know almost nothing about the large number of women who didn't enter the program at all, and relatively little about those who commenced a mentoring relationship but failed to maintain it after release. In the interviews, we asked the women what they expected from mentoring. The most common response from women who stayed in the program was that they anticipated they would be isolated and materially and emotionally vulnerable after release, and saw a mentor as a way to deal with these problems. 'Debra' was in her late twenties and had served five months in prison for a driving offence. She told us that she had entered the program because:

> …. I knew I would need help when I got out. I wasn't coping in there and I thought well if I'm not coping in here, how am I going to cope when I get back out? ('Debra')

'Debra' was seeking a mentor she could talk to 'openly and honestly as I wanted without being judged', in part because she had been unable to confide in anyone while she was in prison. Anticipating post release problems was not necessarily related to having experienced them before. 'Debra' was serving her first term of imprisonment, but other women who had been to prison repeatedly didn't see a mentor as potentially useful in assisting with their post release transition. 'Ashleigh' met with her mentor twice while in prison, but didn't make contact after release. She had been to prison before and had not had anyone to support her when she was released, so thought she might give the VACRO Women's Mentoring Program a try. Other than this, she didn't seem to have any clear expectations about mentoring.

These and other features of our data suggest at least four conditions need to be met if women prisoners are to be 'ready for mentoring'. The first relates to whether a woman has some sense of what mentoring means in a literal and practical way. Another feature relates to whether the woman is at a stage of life where establishing and maintaining a mentoring relationship is perceived as something that is likely to be worth the investment of time and energy. The third requirement is that the woman's life circumstances are able to accommodate a relationship with a mentor. Finally, a perceived lack of sufficient supports to make the transition to the community appears to prime readiness for mentoring. In particular, it was recognized by many of the women in this study that previous relationships (including in many cases intimate relationships) often were a source of physical danger or likely to contribute to post-release failure. Obviously, these four conditions are strongly related to one another and we will outline just the first three here since we have described some of the social support issues in our earlier article (Brown and Ross 2010) and in the discussion of social capital above.

Understanding Mentoring

Debra's lack of expectation around mentoring reflected what many participants said when asked about their expectations; they did not really have a clear idea about what or who a mentor was and what mentoring would entail. Some women believed that a mentor was yet another extension of the surveillance that was intrinsic to the correctional system. Peer encouragement was an important aspect of dispelling this misconception. One participant 'Jill' suggested that the word mentoring was intrinsically problematic because many of the women literally did not understand what it meant let alone its conceptual underpinnings. Although the lack of understanding and, in fact, suspicion around the motives of mentors deterred some participants, others engaged with the program despite only a vague understanding of its aims and what it could offer. However, for the most part, these women were open to the idea of accessing any kind of support that might be useful in the post release phase and were happy to be referred and encouraged by peers or prison staff.

Stages of Life and Non-Instrumental Relationships

It is known that processes of human development are strongly related to desistence from offending (Farrington 1999). In its simplest form, this can take the form of growing older and less able, or prepared to live with the physical and emotional stresses associated with an offending lifestyle. This classical 'aging out of crime' scenario may be one point at which mentoring, and the demands it brings, could begin to make sense for a woman contemplating release from prison:

> I'm getting too old mate, I'm 37 you know. I'll be 40 in three years. It's time to settle down mate. ('Sandy')

But for a woman to be 'ready for mentoring', more needs to happen than simply getting older. She needs to be able to find value in a non-instrumental relationship (i.e. a relationship that will not yield material outcomes), typically in the case of our study with an older woman who has not had direct experience of offending and imprisonment. In fact, many of the mentees were actively seeking relationships that were specifically not connected to offending or offending related cultures such as substance using. One aspect of this was a conscious acknowledgement by some mentees that moving on from offending necessitated severing past relationships. The other dimension of this part of being 'ready' for mentoring was an acknowledgement of the importance of developing relationships, commonly described by the mentees as 'normal'.

> Well, when I went into jail I felt that this was going to be easy, I can breeze through the sentence, not a problem. While I was in there I had a bad attitude about everything, you know, nothing was going to change, I wasn't going to change, there was nothing wrong with the way I live my life, but as time went on and associating with younger women who were just starting out in their criminal lives, I sat back and thought "wow, this isn't what I want to do for the little bit of time that I have left". I've wasted so much of my life, I've lost family, children, grandchildren, homes, everything. I'm now sitting here with nothing, ('Jill')

A related theme from some mentees that we alluded to earlier is whether one can form a meaningful relationship with a mentor who doesn't share the experiences of offending and imprisonment. Several women rejected the idea that ex-prisoners could have a productive relationship with a straight mentor, arguing instead that mentoring should be from ex-prisoner to ex-prisoner.

> I personally believe that the Mentoring Program should be from prisoner or ex-prisoner to prisoner. Not from someone who doesn't understand a word of what you are saying ... For those who have bad experiences (in prison), they don't need a mentor who doesn't know, they can't talk to a mentor about it. ('Caroline')

However, although there is some inherent value in peer support, especially within the prison environment, it was clear that there are significant difficulties with a peer mentoring model in the post release phase. At least a couple of participants had attempted to provide informal support to other women exiting prison, with some problematic consequences. It appeared to be not uncommon for women who had exited prison to try to assist other recently released women by letting them stay at their homes. However, in the examples we heard, this often presented real risks around safety and non-offending to the mentees who had yet to overcome many of their own issues regarding income security or substance use, for example. For most of the mentees, the very fact that the mentors were grounded in the mainstream community was the most important aspect of remaining engaged with the program with a strong theme about being able to do 'normal' activities.

Lifestyle Stability

Lifestyle stability is a third 'ready for mentoring' requirement. Women exiting prison may lead a life that is so focused on dealing with immediate material needs that maintaining a mentoring relationship is nigh impossible. While the mentees all had the availability of material and other support from VACRO or through their parole, many of them continued to face serious problems in finding accommodation and establishing and maintaining themselves in the community. These problems were exacerbated because, as we observed earlier, few of them had any family or other social resources to draw on. Where women also

had drug and alcohol problems, their lives could become so chaotic that mentoring was, in effect, an irrelevance.

Our data therefore suggest that while mentoring may be an important and useful tool for assisting offenders motivated to desist from criminal behaviour, there exists within the mentoring model a number of dynamic factors that may influence both the uptake of a mentoring opportunity and the possible scope of a mentoring relationship. These factors include the age gap between mentor and mentee and what we might refer to as the social distance between the two—as reflected in suggestions that only ex-prisoners might be able to provide truly effective post release mentoring. At the same time, however, our data are equally clear that the influence or significance of such factors is not universal. For many women, for instance, it was precisely the fact that their mentor was not connected with or knowledgeable about crime and prison lifestyles that conferred many of the perceived benefits of the mentoring relationship. Similarly, although extensive criminal histories were generally predictive of failure to engage with the program, some of the longest standing mentoring relationships were to be found among women with such histories. Engagement and retention in a mentoring program, such as that which we have studied, thus seems to reflect a complex mix of personal stability and lifestyle stability factors. No simple calculus for determining mentoring readiness emerges from our data, but they are at the same time not devoid of guidance. What we might say most conclusively is that readiness for mentoring is not a simple product of either social or environmental factors, leaving us with the question of how the two might best be integrated for purposes of post-release planning. Put another way, if lifestyle stability appears as a significant influence on the personal capacity of women leaving prison to take up forms of assistance like mentoring, what might be done to promote this and to ensure its quality? It is to this issue that we now turn.

III. Toward a Gender Responsive Model of Post-Prison Service Delivery

Our findings concerning the interaction of personal and environmental factors in determining women's capacity to take up post-release services dovetails with other research reported in this special issue. In particular, Eileen Baldry's work on women entering and exiting New South Wales prisons helps fill in some of the blanks left in our own study. It will be recalled we began this article with the observation that our sample was attenuated and self-selected in important ways. The women who stuck with the Women's Mentoring Program—attending in-prison meetings with their mentor and continuing contact upon release—seemed to live lives characterised by greater personal and lifestyle stability than those who dropped out in prison or directly upon release. We might suppose that many of the women who quickly dropped out of the program, or who failed even to see its relevance, may exist in what Baldry terms 'a liminal, marginalised community/criminal justice space' that is 'neither in the broader community nor fully in the criminal justice system' (Baldry 2010:77) and is marked by limited contact with the mainstream community and rapid circulation in and out of prison. They experience, she suggests, a kind of physical and psychic space-time lived through 'institutional child protection services, police, juvenile justice, prison, community corrections, hospitals, rehabilitation units' and the like, all of which 'engenders abuse and homelessness or poor housing' (Baldry 2010:77). For the women caught up in this space, offending is not always criminality per se. Indeed it oftentimes arises as the iatrogenic effect of the space itself, which produces rather than ameliorates the chaotic lifestyles that eventually generate breaches of correctional orders,

fine defaults or petty social order infractions that land a woman back in prison. The solution to the problems posed by the existence of this space, and women's entrapment in it, seems to Baldry to lie in its replacement by 'a safe and supported space' (Baldry 2010:79), the features of which would cover both time—providing opportunity to deal with stress, trauma and long standing legal problems—and space itself, in the sense of there being a place of physical safety for women and their children.

We feel Baldry's conclusions fit well with our own, even if the language and focus are slightly different. If we may re-describe her notion of safe and supported space as an element, or adjunct, of social and lifestyle stability, then the needs of both groups will seem to be common. For those caught in the revolving door of prison, stability is needed to break the cycle; for those who found mentoring relevant, stability in personal and lifestyle domains seemed to be key to making mentoring work. Yet how to achieve such safety and stability is far from clear. Baldry proposes it should be a responsibility of state agencies. But our own observation of post-release work is that it is quickly becoming a devolved responsibility of the state, achieved at best through service agreements with non-governmental agencies. In other words, it is moving in the opposite direction to that hoped for by Baldry. Moreover, such arrangements are often multi-agency in character, such as the LinkOut model used in Victoria. All of this raises questions of progress or regression in post-release planning, at the broadest level, and the matter of by what means stability or safety is to be achieved at the individual level. We therefore need to expand the question that has formed a focus of the article so far—of how to determine what kind of woman-focused intervention is right for whom, and when—to include recognition of the broader system within which such services are delivered. We now turn to these issues.

The Outsourcing of Post-Release Support and Assistance

Any analysis of supports for women exiting prison must take into account the shift in the mode of correctional service delivery from traditional state-based 'probation and parole' services to more differentiated programs delivered by a mix of state-based services and non-government agencies. While this change is evident across the correctional spectrum, it has particular significance for post-release programs for women. Viewed in one light, the greater inclusion of non-governmental actors might seem to provide opportunity to deliver services in a manner more closely aligned with the relational model that underpins mentoring or with the safe space/stability ideals described above. Alternatively, however, and recalling Stan Cohen's (1985) fears about community control more generally, this model might effectively lock non-governmental agencies into male-centric risk-need based modes of service provision, thereby extending the reach of current (inappropriate) state-based models and norms. At the same time, this new service delivery approach also involves considerable challenges for the community agencies involved and for the women releasees who must navigate their way through the new and more complex service environment.

One can discern at least two distinct forces driving these changes. The first is the move in correctional services away from traditional welfare-oriented service models and an increased reliance on justice managerialist approaches involving risk assessment, problem-focused programmatic responses, and the enforcement of statutory requirements through compliance management. This change was identified more than a decade ago in the United Kingdom in the form of a decrease in the role of voluntary aftercare services by probation officers (Maguire et al 2000) and more formalised interactions between probation officers and offenders that emphasised accountability and risk management (Barry 2000). Understanding such changes in community supervision and post-release support practices in

the Australian context is more difficult because there has been little systematic scrutiny of how Australian community corrections services work. Victoria is the only jurisdiction that has published substantial analyses of community corrections practice models, in the Arthur Anderson review conducted in 2000 (Arthur Andersen 2000), and the evaluation of the CCS redevelopment process by the Collaborative Institute for Research, Consulting and Learning in Evaluation (CIRCLE) at RMIT University (CIRCLE 2005). Both of these documents identify the central corrections management principles as a mix of risk and compliance management on the one hand, and 'systematic' approaches to offender management on the other. These systematic approaches include case management, the use of 'evidence-based' offender programs, giving priority to 'high risk and high need' cases, and 'throughcare' models for post-release programs (see Baldry 2010's commentary on the latter).

The second driver of change has been the increased use of contracted service providers in corrections, and particularly in community corrections and post-release programs. Traditionally, voluntary or charitable organisations have been important providers of welfare and support services to ex-prisoners, but the last decade has seen dramatic changes in the range of organisations involved, the variety of services provided and the level of funding being directed at contracted providers. There is considerable variation across Australian jurisdictions in the extent to which post-release services are available, but where they are present contracted service providers are central to their delivery. In Victoria the two primary post-release programs (LinkOut for men and the Women's Integrated Support Program (WISP)) are delivered by consortia of community based agencies (ACSO, VACRO, Jesuit Social Services and The Salvation Army—in the case of LinkOut—and VACRO, Jesuit Social Services and Melbourne Citymission—in the case of WISP).

These changes in service delivery modes have been associated with significant changes in the interactions that take place between workers and clients. Perhaps the most salient is the increasing degree of differentiation in service delivery. Although traditional welfarist models of probation and parole involved significant elements of compliance monitoring, these were part of an integrated service approach where an individual probation officer had responsibility for almost all of the interactions that took place with a client. Contemporary community corrections models involve a much greater degree of functional specialisation, with the result that no single person has this kind of overarching responsibility for an offender. Risk assessment may be done by one person, supervision of community work by another, drug treatment program delivery by a third and general supervision and compliance management by a fourth. In the case of post-release support, another layer of specialisation is involved, with a case manager with overall responsibility, but with the capacity to refer the offender to specialists providing housing, drug and alcohol, mental health or family support services.

While Barry (2000) argues in respect of the UK that relationships between workers and their clients have ceased to involve any significant pastoral/mentoring role, it is probably more accurate to say that whatever pastoral care used to take place now has to fight for space in the more complex and demanding environment of case management. On the evidence of the CIRCLE report into Victorian community based service delivery, with its focus upon 'evidence-based' and risk-need approaches, it would indeed appear the environment for generating safe and stable conditions as a primary goal of post-release programming is at best difficult. Yet it is also true to say that 'evidenced-based' approaches are not in principle antithetical to a relational or gender-focused approach and indeed too that not all research on men's offending is irrelevant to the goals at hand. What is needed is

a way of moving forward the safe space/lifestyle stability goals in an environment framed and delimited by managerial concepts and methods. To this end we briefly consider two issues arising from our research on mentoring of women released from prison that bear on the future development of correctional programming.

Embedding Lifestyle Stability in Post-Release Programming

Working in the field of male offender rehabilitation, Willis and Grace (2008, 2009) noticed that while many studies had observed the importance of what they call 'ecological' variables—stable housing, employment, links to pro-social support networks, support for alcohol, drug and mental health difficulties—as risk factors for recidivism, few studies had estimated the magnitude of their impacts or worked out how to integrate them into post-release planning. Over a series of two studies, Willis and Grace sought to rectify this somewhat perplexing gap in the literature by examining the link between release planning and long-term recidivism among child molesters. Superficially the connection with predominantly male child sex offenders may seem tenuous, however there are several aspects of their analysis that are apposite to the current discussion of gender responsive service provision for women.

First, they distinguish between the dominant risk factors approach, reflected in risk-needs and 'what works', and an approach that would look to the ecological system within which offenders live, thus looking more toward social connections, capacities to operate in employment and social environments, and so on. Since the risk factors approach is all about individuals' history and personality, it has no effective way of dealing with ecological variables such as quality of social networks or the value of pro-social connections. Generally, these are discarded as 'responsivity' factors or pathologised into personality defects, a fact keenly observed by proponents of gender responsive approaches (Davidson and Chesney-Lind 2009). An alternative, Willis and Grace suggest, would be to examine the power of these ecological variables as agents of change in their own right. This is what they attempt to do.

In the absence of any existing release-plan-quality measures, Willis and Grace developed (2008) and then refined (2009) such an instrument. A total of seven release planning dimensions were eventually scored: accommodation; social support systems; social support numbers; idiosyncratic risk factors (i.e., linking individual-specific risk factors to the release plan); employment; motivation; and unsupervised access to children (an offence specific risk factor). Willis and Grace examined the independent value of these release planning factors over and above the static and dynamic risk factors typically found to be predictive of recidivism and to form the focus of intervention efforts. What they found that was when static and dynamic risk was controlled, certain ecological variables provided important information that would predict whether an offender would reoffend or not. In other words, reoffending was strongly associated with poor release planning. In their pooled sample of 141 individuals, the quality of planning for post-release accommodation, employment and social support independently predicted whether or not an individual would reoffend and the predictive accuracy of these three variables alone was equivalent to that achieved by mainstream actuarial risk models. The power of release planning to affect post-release outcomes is revealed in the recidivism rates of each group. In the group of offenders for whom pre-release planning was rated poor, 100 per cent failed on release (9 out of 9 committed further offences). For the average planning quality group the recidivism rate dropped to 56 per cent (50 out of 90 reoffended), while in the group of offenders for whom

good quality release plans were made the recidivism rate was just 24 per cent (10 out of 42 reoffended).

Engagement of the Community in Correctional Programming

One of the central challenges in post-prison reintegration is establishing effective linkages between releasees and the community agencies and systems to which they are returning. Typically, this is constructed as an instrumental problem of access to resources. The severance of existing links through incarceration is well-documented, as are the barriers that releasees face in gaining access to service and support systems (Lynch and Sabol 2001; Social Exclusion Unit 2002). The experiences of the participants in the Women's Mentoring Program demonstrate that there are important relational aspects to this process as well. Making connections is also a function of how one perceives one's place in the community and whether these connections are embedded in relational networks. The establishment of mentoring programs is important not only because they offer practical assistance to women being released from prison, but also because they provide a gateway for greater collaboration between correctional institutions and the community.

Mentoring can only work if community-based agencies are able to create and sustain the commitment of mentors, and if correctional programs are oriented towards creating the basis for effective participation by releasees. The history of correctional systems is one of insularity and exclusion of the community, but effective post-release programming (including mentoring) requires the kind of collaboration and communication with the community referred to by Hannah-Moffat in her contribution to this issue (Hannah-Moffat 2010). The outsourcing of post-release services to community-based agencies is a start, as is the involvement of businesses in post-release employment (see for example the Second Step Program established by Toll Holdings). However, these remain firmly within the instrumental paradigm of service access. Establishing relational connections to the community requires that correctional programming takes into account the relational needs of women offenders and institutions seek a greater degree of engagement with ordinary community members.

Conclusion

This article has considered the question of whether mentoring, as a technique, strategy or form of post-release support, can answer the needs of women transitioning from prison back to community. Even a cursory look at our data, however, would suggest the answer should be 'no'. Many women who expressed initial interest in mentoring while in prison failed to keep appointments to meet a mentor, and around half of those who met a mentor while in prison failed to make even one contact upon release. Our question has thus been finessed to ask what it is about mentoring that seems to make it relevant to some women and not others. On this our data pointed to the importance of personal and lifestyle stability as key factors that allowed mentoring to become imaginable and indeed do-able. Our findings showed strong impacts for mentoring on the lives of women who engaged with the program, but we recognised that mentoring was in some sense shoring up the reintegration of women who were, through personal and lifestyle conditions, already well positioned to give up crime. The hole in the centre of our study—the lives and experiences of those who dropped out of the mentoring program or who could never imagine its relevance in the first place—is somewhat spoken to by the work of Eileen Baldry in this special issue. Yet her work on short term and highly disadvantaged prisoners also points to the crucial importance of

stability in these women's lives. We have thus concluded this article with a discussion of contemporary correctional managerialism, pointing to the way it tends to fragment the very holistic person-centred programming that our work and that of Baldry would recommend. In light of this, we have sought to find a model for how the importance of post-prison personal safety and lifestyle stability might be advanced in the current correctional environment. Our review of the work of Willis and Grace is intended not only to highlight the power of social/lifestyle variables to measurably affect outcomes for individuals transitioning from prison to community (the vaunted 'evidence' requirement). Their research also points to the rigor with which the quality of such planning must be undertaken and evaluated. But perhaps most importantly, this work provides an example of the way concerns about the quality of a woman's post-release environment might be translated into the empirical, risk sensitive, administrative modalities of contemporary correctional practice. Making a case for improved lifestyle stability and the provision of safe spaces will be easier, and indeed may be more effectively achieved, if the kind of detailed planning tools developed by Willis and Grace can be developed and applied in post-release programming for women.

References

Andersen A (2000) Review of Community Correctional Services in Victoria. Final Report to the Correctional Services Commissioner, Department of Justice, Melbourne

Baldry E (2010) 'Women in Transition: From Prison to ...', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice,* vol 22 no 2

Barry M (2000) 'The Mentor/Monitor Debate in Criminal Justice: 'What Works' for Offenders', *British Journal of Social Work,* vol 30, 575-95

Brown M and Ross S (2010) 'Mentoring, Social Capital and Desistance: A Study of Women Released from Prison', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology,* vol 43, 31-50

Cohen S (1985) *Visions of Social Control,* Polity Press, Oxford

Collaborative Institute for Research, Consulting and Learning in Evaluation (CIRCLE) (2005) *Evaluation of the Redevelopment of Community Correctional Services: Final Report,* Department of Justice, Melbourne

Covington S (2002) *A Woman's Journey Home: Challenges for Female Offenders and their Children,* The Urban Institute, Washington DC

Davidson J and Chesney-Lind M (2009) 'Discounting Women: Context Matters in Risk and Need Assessment', *Critical Criminology,* vol 17, 221-45

Farrington D (1999) 'Human development and criminal careers' in Maguire M, Morgan R and Reiner R (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology,* Oxford University Press, Oxford

Farrall S (2004) 'Social Capital and Offender Reintegration: Making Probation Desistance Focused', in Maruna S and Immarigeon R (eds) *After Crime and Punishment: Pathways to Offender Reintegration,* Willan Collompton, Devon

Hannah-Moffat K (2010) 'Sacrosanct or Flawed: Risk, Accountability and Gender-Responsive Penal Politics', *Current Issues in Criminal Justice,* vol 22 no 2

Hubbard D and Matthews B (2007) 'Reconciling the Differences between the 'Gender Responsive' and the 'What Works' Literatures to Improve Services for Girls', *Crime and Delinquency,* vol 54, 225-58

Lynch J and Sabol W (2001) *Prisoner Re-entry in Perspective,* The Urban Institute, Washington DC

Maguire M, Raynor P, Vanstone M and Kynch J (2000) 'Voluntary After-Care and the Probation Service: A Case of Diminishing Responsibility', *The Howard Journal,* vol 39, 234-48

Porporino F and Fabiano E (October 2005) 'Is there an Evidence Base Supportive of Women-Centered Programming in Corrections?' *Corrections Today,*, 26-7, 101

Rettinger L and Andrews D (2010) 'General Risk and Need, Gender Specificity and the Recidivism of Female Offenders', *Criminal Justice and Behavior,* vol 37, 29-46

Social Exclusion Unit (2002) *Reducing Re-Offending by Ex-Prisoners,* Social Exclusion Unit, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, London

van Voohris P, Wright E, Salisbury E and Bauman A (2010) 'Women's Risk Factors and their Contributions to Existing Risk/Needs Assessment: The Current Status of a Gender-Responsive Supplement', *Criminal Justice and Behavior,* vol 37, 261-88

Willis G and Grace R (2008) 'The Quality of Community Reintegration Planning for Child Molesters: Effects on Sexual Recidivism', *Sexual Abuse: a Journal of Research and Treatment,* vol 20, 218-40

Willis G and Grace R (2009) 'Assessment of Community Reintegration Plans for Sex Offenders: Poor Planning Predicts Recidivism', *Criminal Justice and Behavior,* vol 36, 494-512