

‘I wanted to feel the way they did’: Mimesis as a situational dynamic of peer mentoring by ex-offenders.

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Abstract

Despite growing enthusiasm for peer mentoring as a criminal justice intervention, very little is known about what actually happens within these relationships. Drawing upon an ethnographic study of peer mentoring in the North of England this article will foreground the concept of ‘inspiration’ in these settings. It will argue that Rene Girard’s theory of mimesis offers a framework with which to analyse role modelling in mentoring relationships and that a Girardian reading also offers interesting insights into the unresolved problem of the origins of personal change.

Introduction

This article will consider the practice of peer mentoring in a criminal justice context, more specifically it will consider mimesis (Girard 1962) – or the mimicry of desire – as an active element of this practice. It will argue that one of the unacknowledged processes in peer mentoring is the imitation of desire. Both the practice of peer mentoring and Girard’s important work are neglected in the criminological literature, bringing the two together offers important new insights, which have international relevance given the increasing use of peer mentoring in countries outside of the UK, including the USA (Collica 2010; Clayton 2009; Tolan, Henry, Schoeny and Bass 2008; Devilly, Sorbello, Eccleston and Ward 2005; Brown 1991) and Australia (Brown and Ross 2010; Adair 2005). The article will begin by introducing the concept of peer mentoring and the related field of study which explores how people ‘desist’ from crime, before introducing Girard’s (1962) theory of mimetic desire. The article will then detail the methods used within this study and analyse the resulting data in light of mimetic theory. The respondents speaking here not only describe times when service users (or mentees) are inspired by the example of their peers (their mentors), but also times when these role models are consciously rejected. Speakers also vacillate between emphasising the importance of role models and of individual agency. Their reflections bring new understandings of how intended beneficiaries engage with proffered role models and the ways in which mentoring relationships are utilised to support individual efforts at desistance.

What is peer mentoring?

Peer mentoring has grown in popularity as a criminal justice intervention in recent years. In the UK context, interest in the practice has been buoyed by an idealist discourse wherein peer mentors are framed benevolently as ‘wise friends’ or ‘old lags’ [ex-convicts] helping offenders onto the straight and narrow (Grayling 2012) and by some small but promising evaluations of the practice. Evaluations commissioned by the *St Giles Trust* charity, for example, claim that peer supported “‘Through the gates” clients’ re-offending rate is 40% lower than the national re-offending rate’ (Frontier Economics 2009:15) and that ‘the reconviction rate for WIRE [female ex-offender led service] participants was 42%, against 51% for the national average for women offenders’ (The Social Innovation Partnership 2012:5). Despite rising interest and some positive quantifications of outcomes, the concept of peer mentoring remains under researched and ill-defined. Related literature in the fields of addiction recovery and prisons (Reif, Braude, Lyman, Dougherty, Daniels, Ghose, Salim & Delphin-Rittmon 2014; Kidd 2011; Jaffe 2012) has highlighted the importance of role modelling and the visibility of recovery models, yet there has been a significant lack of academic research into peer mentoring in community justice settings. Furthermore, those studies which have been done have struggled to define or detail mentoring with clarity (Finnegan, Whitehurst and Denton 2010). This may be because:

Taken together, the mentoring theory remains underdeveloped... The work is, commendably, multidisciplinary and, thus, draws from many theoretical perspectives... [Yet] In most instances it is not easy to sort mentoring from adjacent concepts such as training, coaching, socialization, and even friendship (Bozeman and Feeney 2007:735).

Mentoring itself therefore crosses a number of fields and lacks a well-developed theoretical base. Indeed, many of the direct definitions of the practice relate to the fields of education or health rather than to criminal justice. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provides one of the few definitions of peer mentoring, which is relevant to this field:

The use of same age or same background educators to convey educational messages to a target group. Peer educators work by endorsing ‘healthy’ norms, beliefs and behaviours within their own peer group or ‘community and challenging those who are ‘unhealthy’ (UNODC 2002, cited in Finnegan, Whitehurst and Deaton 2010).

Clinks, a charity supporting voluntary organisations that work with offenders, whilst not using the term ‘peer mentoring’ directly, defines *volunteer peer support* in this field as:

[W]hen people with the same shared experience provide knowledge, experience, or emotional, social or practical help to each other. It commonly refers to an initiative consisting of trained individuals volunteering to support people with specific or multiple needs to provide practical advice and guidance. This can take a number of forms such as mentoring, befriending, listening, counselling, advocating or being an advisor (Clinks 2012:8).

Notwithstanding varieties of practice, peer mentors are presented here as having similar experiences or backgrounds to their mentees and as transmitting of norms and behaviours along with help, support and guidance. Peer or ex-offender mentors are additionally claimed to be ‘successful role models’ (Fletcher and Batty 2012), providing inspiration, hope and proof that it is possible to turn lives around (Boyce, Hunter and Hough 2009; Hunter and Kirby 2011). This is a model of practice which has resonated with the UK Ministry of Justice, as illustrated by policy plans for ‘offenders’ to play a key role assisting their peers in the transition from prison to community:

There are roles for offenders acting as mentors... They can be particularly effective during transition from prison to outside world... Each NOMS [National Offender Management Service] region is delivering an element of mentoring as part of programme delivery (Ministry of Justice 2011:23).

This discourse represents something of a significant shift in terms of criminal justice given that usually the ‘prisoners’ version of “the truth” is located at the bottom of the hierarchy of knowledge – subjugated, disqualified, or “muted” altogether’ (Ballinger 2011:110). Through peer mentoring, the ex-offender, the ex-prisoner’s version of ‘the truth’ is elevated, indeed it is central to the intervention. One factor which appears to have contributed to this shift has been the emergence of a growing field of research into how people desist from crime.

Desistance from Crime

‘Desistance’ refers to ceasing a pattern of criminal behaviour, or: ‘going straight’. Desistance studies ‘explain not why people get into crime but how they get out of it and what can be

done to assist them in this process' (McNeill 2012:95). Most academic studies present desistance as a process, whereby people either grow out of criminal behaviour, make new decisions based on social ties, or experience an identity shift through new stories, narratives or scripts about their true 'good' self (McNeill 2006:46). Knowledge of how people desist is important to any service working with offenders because 'desisting from crime is what practitioners in the field of offender programming and treatment have always wanted for their clients' (Maruna, Immarigeon and LeBel 2011:10). Interestingly, however, Maruna et al., (2011:11) also highlight that the study of desistance emerged out of a critique of the professionally driven 'medical model' of corrections, to explore desistance was to 'study those persons who change *without* the assistance of correctional interventions' (Maruna et al. 2011:11, emphasis in original). Indeed '[a]most all of the research suggests that "programmes" have a remarkably minor impact on life outcomes like going to prison' (Maruna and LeBel 2010:68). In contrast, desisters' 'own resources and social networks are often more significant factors in resolving difficulties than professional staff' (Hill 1999, cited in McNeill and Maruna 2007:229). As a result:

The desistance paradigm suggests that we might be better off if we allowed offenders to *guide us* instead, listened to what they think might best fit their individual struggles out of crime, rather than continue to insist that our solutions are their salvation' (Porporino 2010:80, emphasis in original).

The implication here is that 'offender management services need to think of themselves less as providers of correctional treatment (that belongs to the expert) and more as supporters of desistance processes (that belong to the desister)' (McNeill 2006:46). These arguments partially explain how the notion of peer mentoring has gained ground. Peer mentoring, in theory, draws upon the perspectives of people who have experienced crime and change *and* invites ex/offenders to take a central role in their own (and others') change processes.

Whilst it remains to be seen whether peer mentoring is related or relevant to 'desistance' there is an alluring correspondence between the language of desistance and peer mentoring that has led to claims that they might well be. Considering mentoring in the light of desistance research, Brown and Ross (2010:37) argue that whilst maturational changes 'lie beyond the scope of mentoring projects' social factors such as 'ties to family, community, employment and the like, seems to lie squarely within the domain of mentoring and concerns the acquisition or maintenance of social capital'. Furthermore, they suggest that

[T]he narratives offenders construct around themselves, their circumstances and their future goes to the issue of human capital and would also be a reasonable process target for mentoring relationships (Brown and Ross 2010:38).

Reflecting upon peer mentoring specifically Shadd Maruna (2012a) stated:

It was shocking how many [voluntary sector] staff and managers were familiar with and motivated by the desistance literature. As several told me, if desistance is the theory, the *St. Giles Trust* [charity] (with its commitment to hiring ex-prisoner resettlement mentors) is very much the practice (Maruna 2012a:1).

Peer mentoring is therefore theorised as ‘desistance in practice’. First and foremost it provides a solid opportunity for people with criminal convictions to ‘do’ and ‘make’ good (Clinks and MBF 2012). This may be particularly important in a system where ‘released, ex-prisoners [are often] prohibited from finding legitimate means of self-support as a result of their involvement with the system meant to “correct” them’ (Maruna 2012b:75). Peer mentoring offers a practical opportunity to make amends, to realise strengths and skills and to heal. It therefore potentially presents a vehicle for ‘allowing individuals to identify themselves credibly as desisters, rather than on trying to “cause” desistance explicitly’ (Maruna 2012b:75).

In summary, little is known about the increasingly popular criminal justice practice of peer mentoring. Despite a lack of empirical studies, scholars have theorized that the practice may support processes of desistance and there is an alluring relationship between the two. This paper will offer some support for this claim, but perhaps not in ways which are expected.

Mimesis and mentoring

Rene Girard’s theory of mimesis (1962) offers as a rich framework for analysing the interpersonal dynamics of peer to peer work in criminal justice settings. As indicated above, one of the implicit goals of peer mentoring is often personal improvement or transformation. Girard (1962) argues that personal transformation does not occur spontaneously, but is inspired by others. More specifically, he theorises that human desire – including the desire to change – is not innate nor individual, but dependent on social models:

If desire is only mine, I will always desire the same things. If desire is so fixed, it means that there isn't much difference between desire and instincts. In order to have mobility of desire – in relation to both appetites and instincts from one side and the social milieu from the other – the relevant difference is imitation; that is the presence of the model or models... Mimetic desire is [what makes it possible for us to] construct our own, albeit inevitably unstable, identities (Girard 1962:58).

These ideas have not yet been applied to an analysis of peer mentoring, yet they are completely congruent with any practice that is reliant upon role modelling. In Girard's model identity is a construct of mimetic desire, 'we do not desire to change spontaneously, but according to another person; we imitate the Other's desire' (Doran 2008:xv). Imitating the desires of others is, therefore, a key feature of identity formation and mimetic models (or role models) are fundamental to what people come to desire and who they become:

The mimetic model directs the disciple's desire to a particular object by desiring it himself. That is why we can say that mimetic desire is rooted neither in the subject nor in the object, but in a third party whose desire is imitated by the subject (Girard 1977:180).

This dynamic is palpable if unarticulated within peer mentoring. The practice is constituted of mentees (the intended 'disciple'), desired behaviour change (the object) and mentors (the third party). Mentors are positioned as 'role models' (Kavanagh and Borrill 2013; Finnegan et al. 2010; Parkin and McKeganey 2000), suggesting implicitly that mentees will come to desire that which they see within their mentors (their mimetic models). Desire to desist from crime, in these terms, is not inherent in a mentee from her or his own side, nor is there anything inherently desirable about 'going straight', but rather mentees require a model to direct their desire in this direction. The role of the peer mentor is to activate mimetic desire in mentees. The reformed offender as role model constitutes a lived invitation to become: 'desire to desist, as have I'.

However, *peer* mentors are also positioned as role models on the basis of some perceived or constructed point of connection, usually that their previous experiences of offending make them more 'credible'. The *Princes Trust* for example, assert that: 'offenders are more likely to relate to a mentor who has previously been in prison' (2008:4), whilst the 'Routes out of Prison project uses... ex-offenders to mentor released prisoners, precisely

because they have the credibility that statutory agencies don't often have' (Nellis and McNeill 2008:xi). What makes people with a history of offending viable as role models is their appeal to people who have shared similar past experiences. This makes them more credible, their stories of change more worthy of admiration. This aspect too is congruent with Girard's conception of mimetic desire. For Girard, the mimicker (in this case the mentee) selects a model that s/he admires and respects; 'if he had not done so, he would hardly have chosen him as a model in the first place' (Girard 1987:290). It is reasoned that: '[w]e desire what we see others desire, and if we admire other people, our desire for what they want is all the sharper' (Hull 2008:594). The *status* of a mimetic model (or mentor), as perceived by the protégé (or mentee) is, therefore, regarded as important as the presence and actions of that model.

For Girard, people are capable of adapting their identity. Moreover, identity constantly shifts as a result of individuals selectively mimicking the desires of those whom they admire and respect. Importantly, however, this is not a predictable process. People do not *always* imitate what they desire in another, but rather desire can also result from an urge not to imitate:

When we imitate successful rivals, we explicitly acknowledge what we would prefer to deny – their superiority. The urge to imitate is very strong, since it opens up possibilities of bettering the competition. But the urge not to imitate is also very strong. The only thing that the losers can deny the winners in the homage of their imitation (Girard 1991:240).

Thus power relations are integral to Girard's thesis. To mimic is to defer to, to acknowledge another's pre-eminence, it is to pay 'homage'. Girard sees this process as essential in the human drive toward self-betterment, but he also argues that individuals reject this theory of self because it contradicts the dominant discourse in a modern world which is 'arch-individualistic' (Girard 2010:58). Thus whilst our desires, indeed our very identities, are intrinsically linked to the social world we observe, this is not an aspect of ourselves we are comfortable with:

The mimetic quality of childhood desire is universally recognized. Adult desire is virtually identical, except that (most strikingly in our own culture) the adult is generally ashamed to imitate others for fear of revealing his lack of being (Girard 1977:155).

In the context of peer mentoring, role models (mentors) may actually inspire a strong urge (in mentees) to become something other than what is modelled. This could potentially lead to a mentee rejecting the modelled desire to desist, or to 'go straight', as the intention of a mentee to deny a mentor their homage is so strong. The very presence of mimetic models therefore introduces the potential for resistance to the offered ideal.

In addition to the potential for mentees to reject their mentors, there is also a need to consider the ethics of encouraging imitated desire through the use of *ideal* models. Consider, for example, the recollections of bell hooks, as she details her experiences as a black scholar entering predominantly white institutions:

Nonconformity on our part was viewed with suspicion... those of us from marginal groups who were allowed to enter prestigious, predominantly white colleges were made to feel that we were not there to learn but to prove that we were the equal of whites. We were there to prove this by showing how well we could become clones of our peers (1994:5).

hooks highlights how aspects of self can be subtly devalued or relegated as people are offered ideal models, whether these are implicit or explicit. In hooks' account these models are implicit, whereas in peer mentoring they are more explicit. People are overtly positioned as mentees (protégés) and offered mentors (role models). Within this dynamic of presumed superiority and lack there is potential for mentees to feel a similar pressure to become the 'clones of their peers'.

Whereas Girard theorises the mimetic practices underpinning identity, mentoring works to exploit such processes. Indeed Girard himself argued that 'everything that we know under the titles of apprenticeship, education and initiation [to which I would add mentoring] rests on this capacity for mimesis' (1987:290). Mimetic theory, therefore, appears to hold a particular relevance for the practice of peer mentoring. The practice can be read as a pure manifestation of 'mimesis', in that it offers up 'role models', with the implied intention that mentees come to mimic the desire for acquisition of the same thing as their mentors have achieved. Whilst other forms of rehabilitative intervention, such as 'offender management' or cognitive behavioural work, promote desistance as a desirable *end* to be attained, peer mentoring invites desire for desistance by offering *models* who have already achieved it, in the hope their desire will come to be shared. Like Girard, peer mentoring 'replaces an object-oriented conception of desire... with an intersubjective or 'inter-individual' conception predicated on the power of the social' (Doran 2008:xv). Nonetheless this process is

problematic. Whilst mimesis can result in mimicked desire it can also result in a rejection of the model, an urge not to imitate. To employ ex-offender role models is as likely to inspire a rejection of modelled desires as imitation, dependent upon the will of the protégé (in this case the mentee). Furthermore the presence of ideal models may serve to devalue aspects of the person on the ‘receiving’ side of the exchange.

Methods

This study adopted qualitative research methods in an attempt to capture multiple and situated meanings with regard to mentoring and to represent lived experiences. The approach was ethnographic, in that it balanced ‘detailed documentation of events with insights into their meaning to those involved’ (Fielding 2008:267). It would have been difficult to access some of the nuanced personal reflections that will be introduced here without such a close qualitative focus on respondent activities and narratives. The researcher adopted a mixed methods approach, including forty four semi-structured interviews with peer mentors, mentees, mentoring coordinators and probation staff. Overt observations of mentoring practices were also undertaken, these included participant observation in two volunteer training events and two peer led group events, the researcher also observed a number of volunteer recruitment interviews and selection panels along with a one-to-one reflective supervision session. Finally, documentary analysis of organisational literature was undertaken, including promotional material, evaluations and reports, in order to trace the origins and rationale of programmes.

A ‘purposive sampling method’ was adopted, meaning projects were ‘hand-picked’ based on their relevance to the issue being investigated and their knowledge of the topic (Denscombe 2014:41). Projects were only contacted if they were operating in the voluntary sector and were delivering peer mentoring in a criminal justice context. Data were obtained from four community peer mentoring settings in the North of England, including a mentoring project attached to a Probation Service; a charitable mentoring service for ex-offender care leavers (adults who grew up in the care of the local authority); a charitable mentoring service for women seeking employment; and a mentoring service attached to a social housing provider for young women at risk of ‘gang’ involvement. The coordinators of each project were contacted and asked to select five mentors and mentees to invite for interview. This approach relied on intermediaries as research ‘gatekeepers’ (Remenyi, Swan and Van Den Assem 2011:67). An advantage of using gatekeepers was that they had prior knowledge of respondents’ personal wellbeing and capacity. They therefore provided a safeguard against

the unintentional recruitment of especially vulnerable people who were unable to give fully informed consent. A clear challenge this posed, however, was that the gatekeepers were all employed as Project Managers and as a result were interested parties. This afforded a lot of influence to people who could select the most *positive* cases or most *critical* cases, depending on their own agenda. In order to broaden the scope and reach some of those less ‘successful’ stories the sampling method was enhanced by using direct advertising within projects. This included the distribution of posters and leaflets around offices and group work rooms.

‘Snowball sampling’ was also employed whereby members of the ‘target population’ that had been reached through gatekeepers were asked ‘to locate other members of that population who they happen to know’ (Babbie 2011:208). The author also spoke to people informally, in group sessions, about their experiences in both group and one to one settings. In order to analyse the amassed data, techniques of thematic analysis and critical discourse analysis were employed. Thematic analysis involved three stages of coding: descriptive coding, interpretive coding and overarching themes (King and Horrocks 2010:153). Critical discourse analysis involved ‘finding a regular pattern in texts... and proposing an interpretation of the pattern, an account of its meaning and ideological significance’ (Cameron 2001:137). Through this process a dominant theme of ‘inspiration’ was interpreted using Girard’s theory of mimesis as a theoretical framework.

‘I wanted to feel the way they did’ – tracing mimesis in mentoring settings

One of the strongest claims made about peer mentoring by those involved is that it can inspire people to change:

If I’m looking to deter young people from crime, I’ve got to be that positive change, to make them know that I’ve made it...I made a change. It wasn’t easy, but look what I’ve done. I’ve got to inspire people (Keisha, Mentor).

They can see people like myself and [the coordinators], and several other mentors that have come from an offending/ drug using background, and can say ‘Well look they’ve done it, why can’t I do it? They’ve gone straight; they’ve sorted their lives out, they’ve got good jobs why can’t I do it?’ That’s basically, the basic idea behind it (Brad, Mentor).

These perspectives offer support for claims that peers can be effective inspirational role models (Boyce et al. 2009; Hunter and Kirby 2011) and for policy plans to make ‘good use of

the old lags in stopping the new ones' (Chris Grayling, Justice Minister, November 2012). They also fit with Girard's (1962; 1991) theory that people come to mimic the desires of those they admire:

I wanted to feel the way they did, they weren't beaming out happiness, but they weren't sad, they was that content in their life they were offering to other people, to help them and I wanted to be able to do that (Georgie, Mentee).

To meet people who were just as twisted as I was, they've gone through change, having to change my own view on the world... You see somebody for yourself go through them changes and be like a positive member of the community, you know it's possible (Lin, Mentor and previously a Mentee).

[A]n ex offender comes in here [to the prison]; he's inspired me quite a lot, coming into the places where he's been... He's a young lad, been there, took drugs, done everything, experienced, learnt the dos and don'ts, mentored himself, fair play (Anthony, Prison Peer Group Member).

Because I can see her... Like, what she was telling me about her school life, I thought that about mine, and then now looking at her where she is. I think it's a good experience, because she's got far with her life... I just think they're inspiring (Karina, Mentee).

The speakers here appear to be inspired by peer mentors because they admire them. They mimic their desire for self-improvement. Importantly, they also see the change which is expected. It becomes visible. They therefore 'learn enough pieces of expression to be able to "fill in" and manage' (Goffman 1959:79). However, there appears to be more to these accounts than simply imitated desire or directed performance. Rather, mentors appear to provide inspiration in subtly different ways. Whilst all appeared to recognise and respond to the invitation to 'look what I've done, you can too', the voices of these mentees also illustrate the complexity of inspiration when at work in different subjects. For Lin, her role model offered a shift in perspective, indeed she 'changed her view on the world' and in doing so introduced the possibility of newness, a map to redemption when none had seemed possible. For Anthony, identity and connection were important for inspiration; for someone not just to know and have done similar things to you, but to have helped themselves in such contexts and returned to the places where he has been in order to help others. The message is not just

that people can share ‘deviant’ experiences and move on, but that there is something or someone worth coming back for. For Karina it was important to see someone who has prospered, but who crucially had also been in a similar place to her. This allowed her to relate more easily to potential within herself. Success was not something that just happened to others, but to people like her. For Georgie the process of being inspired most clearly resonated with the notion of imitated desire: ‘I wanted to feel the way they did’. The object of desire inspired in her is not specifically ‘going straight’ however, or even just a feeling of ‘happiness’, but rather it is the desire to give to others: ‘they were offering to other people... I wanted to be able to do that’. Future self-projection is key to these narratives. Mentors are not just inspirational because they are admirable, or offer pieces of direction, but because they offer a template of a future life which appears attainable regardless of problematic histories.

For many of the speakers who contributed to this study, inspiration does not simply require a model, to construct a ‘vision’, but a model who has faced similar challenges and has found a new route, who now has something to give. This notion of giving is one I want to stay with for a moment. A significant number of mentees, like Georgie, came to share the desire of their mentors to volunteer or to give:

[Mentor name] is now working for probation; I’d like to do that. I’d love to work with ex-offenders and people with drug problems, cos like I said, who’s the best person to talk to? Someone who’s been there and done it. I’d like to do something like that, like [mentor name] (Don, Mentee).

They [peer mentors] must have a lot of good in them to do that, because personally when I get myself right and get off everything [substances], I’d like to be a mentor, I’d like to be a volunteer (Fiona, Mentee).

One of the lads [mentees], I was telling him how I’ve changed, he said: ‘I could do your job’, I said ‘you could do my job – maybe in a few years get rid of your probation order’, ‘Yea, yea I could do’ (Brad, Mentor).

I’d like to do something like a peer mentor... I’ve always wanted to do youth work, better myself (Michael, Prison Peer Group Member).

I’d love to do counselling, be a listener. Not just for them; it helps me, makes me feel better (Al, Prison Peer Group Member).

This pattern could be interpreted as a form of reciprocity (see Burnett and Maruna 2006) in that mentees persistently described a wish to help in the ways they had been helped by their mentors. However, it also resembles Girardian mimesis, given that mentees come to imitate their mentors' desire to help, '[t]he mimetic model directs the disciple's desire to a particular object by desiring it himself... mimetic desire is rooted...in a third party whose desire is imitated by the subject' (Girard 1977:180). Given that *desistance* itself does not appear to mentees as a clearly defined *object* of desire in mentors, they come to mimic desire for the thing their mentors most visibly want – the desire to mentor others, or to *give*. Whilst this process is not perhaps the intended aim of peer mentoring projects, it is not necessarily a problematic dynamic. Quite the contrary. For example, Uggen and Janikula (1999) found 'real reintegration requires more than physical re-entry into the community, but also should involve 'earning' one's place back in the moral community' (in Burnett and Maruna 2006:84). If peer mentoring results in mentees becoming volunteer helpers themselves, therefore, it encourages a number of subtle processes which underpin and maintain desistance. Mentees become involved with an activity that decreases their chances of arrest (Burnett and Maruna 2006:88) and which demonstrates their moral reparation. More than this, however, it offers a platform for mentees to reframe their past in new ways: 'who's the best person? / I could do that'. This resembles a feature of 'secondary desistance' (Maruna and Farrall 2004), wherein people can distinguish 'between the 'old me', that is the self who had offended, and the 'new' or 'real me', that is a person who is caring towards others and able to use his/her shameful past in order to help others' (Burnett and Maruna 2006:94). It also helps mentees' to gain a sense of social and emotional wellbeing – 'better myself... make me feel better'.

Problematizing peer mentors as mimetic models

Whilst those respondents speaking above suggest that peer mentors can be inspirational and that they can offer templates for new ways of being, it is important to note that this position was not universally supported. In fact one of the more surprising findings in this study was the repeated description of peer mentors as *inauthentic* role models: 'How can he help me? I've burgled houses with him!' (Peer group member). This scepticism that past experience could be positively reframed to inspire others was also communicated by Don, himself an advocate of peer mentoring:

Some say about [mentor name], he's a fucking nob working here. They know him, know what he was like, he used to run everything round here, now he's working for probation, it can put some people off. I know a few, they say: 'You'll never guess who they want me to go and see? He's telling me after what he's done!' (Don, Mentee).

These perspectives represent blocks to peer mentors making the transition from 'offenders' to inspirers. Mentors become stuck in their risk-defined pasts as opposed to their self-defined presents (Buck 2014) because their own *peers* express doubt and concern. In Goffman's terms, these observers: 'develop conceptions, whether objectively grounded or not, as to the sphere of life-activity for which an individual's particular stigma primarily disqualifies him' (1963:66). They are unable to see their criminalised peers as authentic mentor figures as the stigma of criminality is too strong. Interestingly, however, both the sceptical group member and Don's associate do not just draw upon collective notions of criminal stigma here, but rather they draw upon *lived memories* of their peers as 'offenders'. They therefore struggle to believe they now have a credible voice which can assist rehabilitation. 'Peers' who knew a mentor's criminal history, either personally or by reputation, can vividly bring to life a remembered identity and in doing so, at least partially dismiss the new identity which the mentor assumed. The problem this poses for mentoring approaches built around an identity position is that there is as much potential for rejection of the model on this basis, as there is imitation of the model:

The urge to imitate is very strong, since it opens up possibilities of bettering the competition. But the urge not to imitate is also very strong. The only thing that the losers can deny the winners in the homage of their imitation (Girard 1991:240).

Role modelling emerges here as something of an imprecise science. Whilst many people do draw inspiration from the example of their mentors, a significant few reject these models. This outcome is also difficult to predict. For some mentees a mentor with a criminal history is more credible, they enable bonding, admiration and the mimicry of desires. For other mentees, however, this same history signals inauthenticity. Mentors appear implausible as role models, which disables trusting connections and leads to an urge not to imitate. There was also a second problem for the claim that mentees are inspired by their mentors, in the form of an interesting tension between external inspiration and individual 'readiness' to change.

The interplay of mimesis and personal agency

This article has so far constructed personal change as a mediated process. In Girardian terms: ‘The mimetic agent is moved by a passionate admiration of the other, who plays the role of a mediator’ (Tomelleri 2005:245). However, the origin of personal change remains one of the unresolved problems within criminology. Giordano and colleagues (2002), for example, theorise that there are ‘four types of intimately related cognitive transformations’ (Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph 2002:1000), which accompany desistance from crime. The first of these is not an external mediator, but ‘a shift in the actor’s basic openness to change’ (Giordano et al. 2002:1000). Secondly, they develop the notion of ‘hooks for change’, these are external opportunities to which a person is exposed (for example, a job or marriage), arguing that ‘while a general openness to change seems necessary; by itself it is often insufficient’ (Giordano et al. 2002:1000). Whilst, like Girard (1962), they acknowledge the power of the social environment, therefore, their chronological concept of change begins with the *will* of the individual agent. This suggests that there is a process which happens to an individual mentee before the ‘inspirational’ mentor can even come to play a role. In contrast, Maguire and Raynor (2006) outline a less sequential concept of change, arguing: ‘Individuals differ greatly in their readiness to contemplate and begin the process of change’ and that ‘readiness can be affected by a wide range of factors, including age, major life events or ‘transitions’, physical and social circumstances and social bonds’ (Maguire and Raynor 2006:25). Moreover, they point out that ‘individuals do not move through their cycle of change in a regular, predictable fashion, nor is the process irreversible’ (Maguire and Raynor 2006:25). Where their account meets with that of Giordano et al, is an assumption that ‘a frame of mind receptive to narratives of change’ (2006:25) is a necessary condition for gathering the will to alter one’s life. These commentators agree that it is the agent (in this case the mentee), not a mediating other (in this case the mentor), who initiates the process of change. Worrall and Gelsthorpe (2009) however, reflecting on Eaton’s (1993) work with women leaving custody, suggest that whilst respondents had all made a conscious decision to re-direct their lives ‘such motivation was not something that just happened’ (Worrall and Gelsthorpe 2009:337). They submit that ‘In order to make that decision, [women] had to feel confident that change was possible. And to feel confident, they had to achieve recognition – both self–recognition and recognition from others’ (Worrall and Gelsthorpe 2009:337). In doing so they also suggest that a person’s *will* to change may actually be nurtured externally.

These debates have implications for the argument that peer mentors can inspire change. Indeed we can trace similar debates within respondent narratives. Whilst mentors and mentees often spoke of ‘inspirational’ role models motivating personal change, there was also a strong parallel, and potentially conflicting, view that mentees need to be independently ready to change in order to benefit from this approach. Phil, for example, is an ex-prisoner who is now employed as a young people’s mentor in the community. He also volunteers to mentor adults in prison. Phil was mentored himself by prison education staff and enthusiastically advocates the importance of setting an inspirational example. Nonetheless, Phil is also keen to articulate the role of individual will: ‘I do believe it’s down primarily to individual agency, plays a big part, you’ve got to want to do it, first and foremost, where it starts from I wanted to be crime free’ (Phil, Mentor). Whilst Phil acknowledges the power of other parties in supporting change, he conceives that the process begins with the will of the mentee and, therefore, is not instigated by a model. There is the possibility, of course, that such phraseology is formulaic; the result of messages that mentors have heard during training sessions. Three of the project coordinators I spoke with, for example, reinforced the notion of being ‘ready to change’ and advocated prioritising services for those who are ‘at this stage’, fearing that accepting referrals for people who are not ‘ready’ to change can be detrimental to both the mentee’s impression of mentoring, and demotivating for volunteers. However, this belief in a resting ‘readiness’ in mentees was just as dominant among mentees:

They’ve got to want to do it, no point you being given a mentor if you don’t want the help, just flying in the wind (Fiona, Mentee).

If you don’t want to help yourself no-one can help you, can they? It’s nice to have that kick up the backside, but if you’re not going to do it yourself man you’re not going to do it are ya? (Paul, Mentee).

You can draw a horse to water but can’t make it drink, if you don’t want to stay out of jail yourself, mentors, PO [Probation Officer], no-one can help you, but they are important, they are good (Will, Mentee).

If someone is adamant ‘I am not going to change, you are not going to do anything to change me’ then you’re not going to change them are you? (Ben, Mentee).

For both mentors and mentees it seems important that people feel they own this decision, this desire to change, it cannot belong to the intervener or inspirer on their behalf. However, there is a problem here which indicates another tension inherent in this work. If people must be 'ready' independently of mentoring why have inspirational models at all? Indeed, how can people be inspired to change by an external party if the desire to change must come from within? For Girard (1977), this is not an insurmountable conflict. He reasons that whilst our desires are inspired by what we see in others, we simultaneously reject this image of ourselves as imitators because we fear our lack of originality (Girard 1977:155). One reading of the tension voiced in mentoring settings, then, is that mentees (who are deemed to be changing) and their mentors (who are deemed to have changed) maintain the concept of individually owned desire, in each of their narratives, because it is such a dominant cultural discourse: 'resisting social power is the stuff Western narratives are made of from history to television dramas' (Ewing 2002:93). It is how we believe ourselves as social beings to be, even whilst we acknowledge that inspiration can play a part. Mentees may, therefore, find inspiration to change by looking at their mentors, but so that they do not relinquish their own role in the change process, they insist they were 'ready' all along. However, an application of Girard's theory of mimesis (1962) does not reduce mentees to docile followers. For Girard, all learning involves the imitation of desire. This process requires not only people to learn from, but also people who are willing to learn. Whilst motivation or readiness to change may not have taken full shape in mentees prior to mentoring, they are required to engage with the role models on offer. We can develop this reading further by listening to the words of respondents themselves. Will, a mentee, for example, argues: 'if you don't want to stay out of jail yourself, mentors, probation officers, no-one can help you' whilst dually acknowledging: 'but they are important'. In this statement Will describes the complexity and interconnectedness of the model-protégé exchange. In these terms mentees are not singularly inspired by an external model, whilst convincing themselves that they had some individuality in that choice, nor are models irrelevant, but rather the self *and* the other play a role. This reading is closer to the conception of motivation offered by Shapland and Bottoms (2011:272), who agree 'that the first stage in desistance is a wish to try and change one's life' yet they do not think that the formation of this wish should always be characterised as 'rational' or a 'conscious decision [but instead as] gradual, and sometimes spurred by outside events'. The offer or experience of peer mentoring may indeed constitute one such 'outside event', as articulated by Steve, a persistent offender who was offered mentoring on release from prison:

It wasn't just the [mentoring] system, although that was good. That was just getting me involved in stuff that I'd never really done. I never used to go out, all my life was just chaos and then, from that on, I decided you know what? I'm going to give this a really good go! (Steve, Mentor and previously a Mentee).

Mentoring provides Steve with an invitation to try out, to become something new, but the choice to engage remains with him. In this regard, 'individual agency plays a big part' (Phil, Mentor). What this dualism seems to suggest, however, is that peer models may represent one of the factors which can enable a person's will or intention to be 'spurred' or realised. Moreover, the process is dialectic; both the agent and model play roles, in ways which are not neatly sequential or conscious. Paul, for example, a mentee who had spent most of his youth and young adulthood in prison, did not feel 'ready' for change at the start of his mentoring relationship, expecting he would just 'go through the motions'. However he came to see his mentor as a crucial model and helper, playing an important role when his own will was vacillating:

I didn't think I was gonna get anything out of it. I just thought it would be someone talking to me for four appointments, then sending me on way. 'Cos it can be like that sometimes when you get these Court orders. But it's not like that... Most of the time I would say I wanted it [to go straight], but I wasn't making the right choices, so obviously I didn't want it enough... I think it's the fact that I've had help there, but I wanted it myself as well (Paul, Mentee).

Readiness to change does not appear to be present in any conscious way for Paul, therefore, but rather change occurs as a stumble, a wavering advance, involving both his own will and the help of his mentor. Georgie describes a similar lack of conscious 'readiness' for mentoring at the outset:

To be honest, I didn't think I needed a mentor, but I went ahead anyway and it was quite shocking, because I was quite willing to talk to her. It was quite shocking how much I was willing to let her know... you gotta be ready for something, something ticked in your brain to accept mentoring... Anyone that accepts a mentor gotta know they kind of want to change, but it's just doing it, even with your mentor, it's doing it (Georgie, Mentee).

With regard to change, then, Georgie separates the process of mentoring from her will to change and it is the process she becomes aware of before her own will, believing initially that she did not need to change. She appears to accept a 'hook for change', before she is aware of her own 'openness to change' (Giordano et al. 2002:992–1000). Despite this sequence, however, Georgie is understandably reluctant to relinquish the influence of her own will. Indeed, despite explaining that she was inspired by the mentors she met and 'wanting to feel the way her [mentor] did', she retrospectively prioritizes the role of her own will as paramount in this process: 'you gotta be ready for something'. External inspiration and internal readiness to change may work concurrently, therefore, and in ways that are understood differently at different points.

There is a complex and unpredictable interplay of social influence and self-direction at work in these relationships. Some of the inspiration that peer mentors offer may prompt the 'period of re-evaluation' (Farrall and Calverley 2006:9) that people, like Steve, often experience before coming to a decision to desist. For others, like Georgie, a subconscious decision may have been made already, but the mentoring process brings it into being and into awareness. Moreover, when motivation does not seem to be present, or dips as Paul describes, external help is there. Such interaction between mentors and mentees takes us beyond Girardian mimesis. Peer mentoring does not just provide a vehicle for the mimicry of desires, but also a platform on which people can 'come to feel like masters of their thinking... explicitly or implicitly manifest in their own suggestions and those of their comrades' (Freire 1970:105). It also echoes Ferguson's (1996) arguments that yearnings for change can only be transformed into reality when shared with and recognised by others, who enable agents to make a 'reconstitutive leap' (Ferguson 1996:122). In this light, mentors do not simply inspire the desire for change, nor are mentees alone with individual yearnings, but mentors can bring into reality, into action, the will of the mentee through multiple processes of inspiration, partnership and social nurturing.

Conclusion

Girard's (1962) theory of mimesis offers a theoretical explanation of how 'role modelling' works. Utilising this inter-individual theory, I have argued that desistance from crime may not just depend on maturation; a person's self-concept; or social opportunities, but can also be triggered by desire for what people see others desire. Peer mentors are significant to galvanising this process because they are often respected by mentees, and mentees repeatedly mimicked their desires. Interestingly, it was not desistance itself that mentees most clearly

came to desire in mentoring exchanges, but to help others in ways that they had seen modelled by their mentors. This in itself is an important finding, given that desistance often involves ‘earning’ one’s place back in the moral community’ (Burnett and Maruna 2006:84). However, within Girard’s mimetic theory is also the potential for rejection of a model, given that ‘the adult is generally ashamed to imitate others for fear of revealing his lack of being’ (Girard 1977:155). Correspondingly, both mentees and potential mentees often expressed concern, doubts or a complete rejection of peer mentors’ example. This is problematic for policies which aim to offer mentoring to all as a generic good (National Offender Management Service 2011). This mimetic conception of desistance also speaks to the unresolved criminological problem of the origins of personal change. Respondents here suggest that openness or determination to change can be influenced by the presence of role models, who inspire a desire to change and sustain such desire through the offer of their lived example.

The processes of modelling, inspiration, rejection and desire introduced here are not easily quantifiable. They are often processed internally and appear in large part to be subconscious. It is only through close readings of reflective narratives that we can trace and unravel these tangled interpersonal dynamics. This qualitative depth helps us to make sense of the promising quantifications of peer mentoring (Frontier Economics 2009; The Social Innovation Partnership 2012) and begin to bridge some of the theoretical gaps that pertain to this practice.

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