

THOUGHT PIECE

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UNDERSTANDING THE “SOCIAL DEPRIVATION MINDSET”: AN EX-OFFENDER SPEAKS

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Abstract

As an offender, even as an ex-offender, I always felt I was at war in some way with this society, from an early age, and it has been a long journey to get to the point where I now believe I must take on some moral responsibility, and put something back, based on my experience. When I look around at the young people of today and see the same things happening to them as happened to me when I was young, it seems to me that the politicians and professionals have still not learnt how to deal with “problematic youth”, the dangers and difficulties they face, and the problems they cause for others. The purpose of this article is to enable people to understand what I term the “Social Deprivation Mindset” (SDM) - the outlook of many young people today - and to suggest that the criminal justice system should place more emphasis on changing the mindset of problematic individuals, rather than placing most of their efforts on challenging their re-offending. I believe that there are and can be people like me, ex-prisoners, who have changed their own lives around and who can now play an important role helping others to change. I am not saying that all ex-prisoners can or are able to do this, and, of course, even I would advocate stringent rules and regulations being put into place by government agencies like probation to constrain harmful behaviour.

Introduction

I did not have a particularly promising start in life. No father around, and a mother who left me “in care”. From the age of 16 I waged war on this society in the sense that I was disruptive, uncooperative and never felt part of the respectable mainstream. At 15 I came out of care into hostels, then detention centres and borstals, eventually spending ten years of my life, on and off, in prison. And I was pretty disruptive there too. But I managed to turn my life around and have written two books that have been well received by the media and even used by academics who are interested in “desistance” and by trainee probation officers (Nellis 2001). “I was a product of a life lived with violence, as were others from the cesspools of urban slums like the one I came from, Ladbroke Grove” I wrote in one of my books “I had an aura of violence, it was in the way I walked, talked” (Hercules 2006). I’m not like that now.

When I first came out of prison, having served seven years for armed robbery, I wrote a book called *Labelled a Black Villain* (Hercules 1989). I was more political and better informed than I had been when I first went in, and I could see more clearly what life was like for young black people in Britain, and I was better able to articulate it. I was much more conscious of how racism worked, and I never underestimated the damage white people did. I wanted anybody to read my book, but some of it was addressed specifically to people in the black community, who could not see just how self-destructive some of our behaviour was becoming:

If we’re not very careful we’ll be sucked into a vacuum of hostility and aggression not only towards those we believe are enemies but also towards ourselves. We’re gradually losing our grip, our control. We are frightening the community. We are frightening our mothers and fathers, our brothers and our sisters, our woman especially, our children. We are frightening them with our own blood, their blood, and our dogmatic, unbending rigidity and inflexibility to reason politely calmly and lovingly. If you don’t we all know what’s coming next, GANG WARFARE and KILLINGS, we only have to look at America to see that. As with all under-privileged people, the lack of opportunities to channel our frustration can lead us to take it out on each other (Hercules 1989, p26, emphasis in original)

My book got noticed - a section of it was reprinted in *The Observer* - but I never made a living out of it because that was not the object. I was an angry young man bursting at the seams to tell my side of the story, undiluted: how I and other black people felt about living in a white society. I was basically still living the same type of lifestyle even after that first book, and for better or worse I committed another crime, and did another prison sentence. I had not really changed as much as I thought or hoped I had, but by reoffending I realised I was letting the system win.

I had changed, and those people around me with goodness could see that change. And they were the ones I hurt the most. I cared nothing for others feelings, I was obnoxious, unforgiving, ruthless, and most of all frightening. I was a terror. Society was afraid of me, but I couldn't have cared less because I deemed myself not part of society' (Hercules 2006, p85)

The second time I came out I was determined to do something about the situation I could see around me, and since then I have been educating and mentoring young people in schools, re-educating gang members and doing courses for young men in prison. This does not exactly make me a living either, but I know it is useful and appreciated, and it sustains my sense of self-respect. And in many ways it is part of my own healing process; compensation for much of the negative things I have done in my life. Working with these young people has confirmed and deepened my understanding of what I knew from my own experience - although tragically the situation for them is even worse than it was for me, because people back then did not heed the warnings of what would happen if nothing was done.

Why has it got worse? Observation and experience tell me that in many of our most deprived communities a mentality has developed among young people - and some older people too - which I choose to call a Social Deprivation Mindset (SDM) and it is this that I believe has to be challenged and addressed if any real difference is to be made to the individuals concerned, concerning their re-offending behaviour. Just because I call it a "mindset" does not mean I do not think structural and cultural factors are in play. On the contrary, structure shapes their lives, and in the long run the only lasting solution is structural change which creates greater family stability and better educational and employment opportunities for young people. But we cannot wait for that to happen. We have to do something now, with the individuals who are affected by structural injustice, because if we do not they will harm other people - other vulnerable people - in their own communities - and harm themselves, and incidentally cost society a small fortune in dealing with them. We have to challenge the Social Deprivation Mindset as it plays out in their heads, challenge their outlook and preconceptions, tell and show them there is a better way to live even when their circumstances do not seem to change.

In the rest of this article I will explain what the social deprivation mindset is. There is a "hardcore" of people who are deeply affected by it, a "periphery" who are on the fringes of it, and many of whom would like to avoid it, but cannot. Even "the experts" seem to agree on that (Pitts 2009). We have to do something to help both groups. I think I know how.

The Social Deprivation Mindset and "the Hardcore"

What is this social deprivation mindset which is increasingly, in my opinion, becoming a feature of the lives of young people, both black and white, living in deprived circumstances? From my own personal experience and observations, it is mainly born out

of being deprived economically, living on large council estates where people struggle to make ends meet. Parents, where they are still around - fathers in particular may well be absent - and extended family members are often unemployed and cannot afford any luxuries, they have to make do with the bare essentials. Feelings of negativity and despair begin to rub off on young people, seeing how limited the opportunities have been for the older generation, how little they gained, even when they conformed and tried to get on. They begin to feel like social outcasts, alienated, abandoned by society and left to their own devices. All too often this is reality; they come from broken homes and no-one gives them moral or spiritual guidance. They do not have much enthusiasm for social responsibility. They know about drugs, crime and violence because it goes on all around them. They see people making money without having to work for it. They see and feel temptation. Quite probably someone in their extended family or peer group has already been caught up in the criminal justice system. They begin to think they have nothing to lose, they like the idea of taking some control over their lives, and they cease to care what anyone else thinks. That is the beginning of anti-social behaviour. Individuals see others thinking like them and band together to support each other; the mindset becomes a group thing, a shared thing. The more hostile they become towards society, the more they need each other and they develop tight rules, their own sense of justice and their own ways of enforcing it.

Although it is not an easy word to use, many of these people are like I was, “damaged” in some way or another. Both home life and society *are* to blame; young people *are* in a real and obvious way the products of our society. Without proper parenting, they may never have been shown real and true moral values, or if they once had them, only superficially, easily neglecting or repudiating them. They see things that people of that age should never have to witness: prostitution, drug use, domestic violence, alcoholism and a host of other things. Many stay away from their homes to avoid these things, knowing they would never have any privacy or security there. They learn early to live with material insecurity: no money to go to the pictures, or to go on school trips, no trainers to do gym, no new shoes or new clothes. Nothing compensated for this in their schooling. Their parents, perhaps, gave them no encouragement to learn, and even when good teachers tried to engage them, the pull of the streets was stronger. They glibly denounce a system that has rejected them, which it largely has, although they may exaggerate that to justify their own rebelliousness. Never having had much love or affection, they have none to give. They would rather be feared than loved. In doing what they like, they can be reckless with drugs, alcohol and sex, not caring who gets hurt as a result.

Once you believe you have nothing, and nothing to lose, who and what will you respect or even listen to? They decide what they will do to survive in a world they have no sense of having made. They mainly adopt this mindset to feel part of something that society does not offer them, belonging. They also believe it will ease the everyday pressures and confrontations that they and their siblings will have to face.

Respect is crucial to understanding the social deprivation mindset. We all need self-respect, and initially we build it in ourselves by drawing on the respect that others give to us. Suppose no one gives us respect? Where do we then get it from? In a deprived environment, with no sense of hope in a long term future, self-esteem, pride and respect

come from acquiring qualities that many would regard negatively; the ability to be ruthless and violent, to make easy money, to acquire the flashiest consumer goods. These have their equivalent in the social mainstream; bankers like to make easy money and be flashy consumers, but on the streets of deprived areas the specific ways that young men gain respect are very fragile, and need constant defending from people who would take them away and humiliate them. They will fight for status just like anyone else. In the Social Deprivation Mindset, in a situation where you have nothing else, maintaining respect, being somebody, is everything. Joining gangs, carrying knives and guns, fighting, taking drugs, often all stem from this. Being disrespected can lead to murder. The importance of this should not be underestimated. Once people start disrespecting you, your standing within that community is threatened, and, in addition, you yourself always have a strong incentive to challenge someone who is already well respected, just to enhance your own standing. But you disrespect them at your own peril. It is never easy to climb the ladder within that community, but being violent stands you in good stead. Status-driven and anger-driven violence is never far away in deprived communities. Violence, that others looking in from the outside will dismiss as "senseless", but to those who live and understand the code, this is the way things are; the status quo. That is why it is so hard to get people to come forward as witnesses, especially young people, even in cases of extreme violence.

The desperate need for respect hardens you and anaesthetizes you to others' feelings and this enables you to do things that most decent people would find wholly unacceptable. The lack of love, care and direction in your life, physically, morally and mentally, gives you a false perspective on right and wrong, and you begin to justify anything you do. How do I know this? I felt it keenly myself. I wrote in one of my books:

I held the cold gun in my hand and stared straight ahead contemplating what I was about to do. Now in my coat pocket, the gun seemed even heavier. I opened the front door and stepped out into the cold October night. As the tears rolled down my cheeks, I looked heavenwards and silently asked god to forgive me for what I was about to do. However no man was going to disrespect me like that and think he could go on living. (Hercules 2006, p12)

This is what it means to become "hardcore", to be in thrall to the Social Deprivation Mindset, and to become dangerous. Such people learn to dominate by fear and violence in their own communities; their "territories" would be a better word. They come to carry a lot of sway over the territories they occupy. While they are understandably feared, it is often true that the "hardcore" have also been the most victimised, and may once have been among the most vulnerable. Those who have no fathers, those who come from broken homes, those who have been abused physically and mentally, those in care, children's homes, those who have been incarcerated in one institution or another. Among them are those who conclude they are being discriminated against by society; one set of hostile people after another, and that no conventional future is open to them. So what does this turn into out on the street? It means no 'grassing', join a gang, stealing, robbing, social disobedience, dislike of the police, stay in your post-code, carry knives, join in with any collective bad behaviour, confrontation or riot. The basis of their sense of grievance

may be real but they may well lack the words and ideas to articulate it any other way than by perpetual aggression. These people become progressively more angry. I called this the "rage within" (Hercules 2008) and it manifests itself as violence, always expecting and demanding respect and deference from others, responding with vicious fury when it is not given, hating whole categories of people who in their mind's eye have let them down.

The Social Deprivation Mindset is not just out there in the community. It is endemic in our prison institutions, at their very core, where it is fed and reinforced. There you are in prison, with nothing and no prospects, your life can seem ruined, and with lots of hard dangerous people around you. They might become a threat to you, but just as easily you might bond with them, start to discuss your hated enemy the police (after all, they put you there) and all the wrongs society has ever done to you. If you were not already there, you are now well on your way to becoming "hardcore". You are in the worst place you can be and there is no need to be afraid any more: it is easy to start thinking, "who cares? ... bring it on!". On one level, being in jail adds to a sense of stigma that you are flawed and a failure, but to those with a pronounced Social Deprivation Mindset, this gets turned round; prison becomes a badge of honour, and having "done time" goes a long way to bestowing respect on you. Not all those involved in the August 2011 riots were "hardcore". But those who were not are now likely to be influenced in some way due to the draconian prison sentences imposed on them.

The Social Deprivation Mindset and "the Periphery"

Not all young people commit themselves fully to the Social Deprivation Mindset, but living in the same areas as the "hardcore" people who do, they cannot avoid them or their influence. These I am calling the "peripheral" youngsters, and we should certainly be trying to work with them before they succumb to the same temptations, and take the "hardcore" path themselves. The older "hardcore" kids, inevitably see the younger ones as weaker than they are, and feel they can do things to anyone they see as vulnerable. How do young people on the periphery cope? Not signing up to this mindset you are in danger of abuse, physical harm, bullying and real violence against you. So there is pressure to adopt it, to defer to the hardcore at least superficially. From my experience and observations many young people on the periphery feed into the SDM when they are with their friends and peer groups; talking the slang, trousers hanging low, trying to impress each other. They cultivate a brash and aggressive manner.

It may be that this behaviour does not manifest itself when they are with their parents or authority figures, but once with their peer group this mindset takes over. Even the best-behaved child can get caught up in the moment, and do things they would never do when not adopting the SDM. Surprised parents will sometimes say, "my child is innocent, my child would never do that, my child knows better, my child was not brought up that way". That may well be true, but teachers often know better. Out on the streets, outside their family, and within school-based peer groups, they have to survive on terms set by others.

Many on the periphery of the SDM find ways to make themselves popular with those with a hardcore SDM by trying to befriend them, being subservient, joining in with any kind of

general disobedience against authority. They are easily engulfed. Even though they may say they did not actually do any looting or any other crime during the riots (that maybe true), but they got "caught up". It is as if some part of them says, "heh, we're with you, we're part of what's going on, we're part of the riots, part of the rebellion, sticking two fingers up to authority". "We're with you guys, you guys who don't care, those of you on our estates and on our streets, who says who's cool and who's not". "We are with you guys who have influence over who gets beaten up and who gets bullied". "Heh, please leave my brother and sister alone on the streets, don't take money off them, I'm here with you". Such is the power and intimidation of the hardcore that many on the periphery would rather go to jail, risk their families, than break these emerging bonds.

Teenage girls are also affected by the SDM. They are less likely to be "hardcore", and more likely to be "peripheral", but that does not mean they are not harming themselves or others, or that they do not need help in equal measure. Sometimes girls can be the instigators of much trouble, especially between rival gangs, or with rival girls. Status matters to them too, and they vie for favours from respected boys. They are also involved in carrying weapons and hiding weapons when the boys are about to be searched by authority or at any venue they may be attending. There was a famous case in the press about the murder of a young man who was deliberately set up by a seemingly trustworthy young lady from a rival gang. The papers called it 'The Honey Trap Murder' (Senior 2012). Today's young people, I am sure, were meant for better things than this.

The Attributes of the SDM

How does the social deprivation make you think and act in the world? I think it has four inter-related attributes which I have called "justification", "self-preservation", "shut down" and "I don't care". Throughout my teenage and adult life these things were a constant presence, shaping what I did and how I felt (or failed to feel) about it. I will describe each one, and illustrate it with an example from my books.

Justification

The SDM, once you get into it (or it gets into you!) enables you to justify consciously or subconsciously almost any of your own wrong doings by feeding into the sense that you are deprived. And you really might be! It is just that that fact does not actually give you a reason or a right to abstain from moral and social responsibility; selling drugs, robbing, stealing, assaulting. You just think it does, at the time. I once did abstain from such responsibility. I suppressed all moral sense and I really did the robbery I describe here:

"Do not move, get your hands above your head, quick. We were in now. I held the gun to his head. Open the safe, said Dave as he dragged him towards it. I have not got the keys, said the terrified jeweller. But we had not come this far to be mugged off. If the safe is not open by the time I count to five your dead. He produced a key and began fumbling with the lock but was pushed aside by our youthful impatience. We rifled through the safe, then the shop for choice pieces of jewellery. We ran to the car, laughing, laughing

like two demented lunatics on a high, buzzing without a care in the world. We had the goodies and that was all that mattered"
(Hercules 1989, 11)

Self-Preservation

Looking after number one, being alert to every threat or danger, real or imagined – that is what the SDM makes you like. Only, it is a type of learned, anti-social reaction to a perceived hostile environment; you develop it to protect yourself against real or imagined antagonism or violence. Carrying a knife, fighting, joining gangs, getting access to a gun all stem from this. Self-preservation may make a person look strong, from the outside, but the root of it is an ever-present fear and paranoia; fear of other gangs, fear that other people always have weapons and want to rob and harm you, fear of being a target for no greater reason than that someone else will gain respect from being seen to harm you, even a simple fear of leaving the small territory where you feel secure. This was me, once:

"I saw them approach from the corner of my eye, but late. They stood around the table looking at me. My line of exit was not cut off so at least they had not come to surround and trap me. I had no weapon, but then the thought came to me that perhaps I should put my hand in my pocket, as though I did have one. Quickly I dismissed the idea as highly dangerous. If they had theirs and really believed me to have mine, experience had taught me that this would only induce them to use theirs immediately. Self preservation - get yours in first before the other guy" (Hercules 2006, p 33.)

Shut-Down

It's hard to deal with some of things you see going on in deprived communities; hard to be psychologically ready for violence all the time, hard to live with some of the things you yourself have done just to get by and stay respected. If you let yourself feel what most ordinary people think would be normal emotions, you would become weak, so you shut-down, numb yourself, and in that state of mind you can do things that a more sensitive person could not contemplate. Shutting-down is a learned mechanism that switches off and on, but the more you do it, the more permanent, unconscious and uncontrollable it becomes. The signs are: not caring, not listening, not communicating, and taking pride in being cold and unemotional. In some young people, shutting-down starts early, before they have any glimmer of understanding what is happening to them. As I wrote in *Labelled a Black Villain (2006)*, I was a sullen and uncommunicative kid: now I know why:

"For as long as I can remember, social workers, child care officers and probation officers have tried to talk to me about my mother and family in general, but not a word would pass my lips even though they had the basic facts" (Hercules 2006,p17)

I Don't Care

Shutting-down can lead to a conscious sense of indifference towards the wellbeing of others; not seeing them as people with feelings and even indifference to your own

wellbeing, other than in terms of whatever makes you feel good at any particular time. In your mind, "I won't feel" becomes "I don't care", a pro-active strike against the weight of perceived unfairness, injustice and the threat of being disrespected. It can be directed against authority in general, those "with money", and the police in particular. It can even be against your own peers, who you might easily feel are also rivals, against whom you should retaliate first. It can move from "No we're not moving, no we're not leaving" or "We don't care, we're coming in" to outright criminal activity and rage-filled rebellion. The August 2011 riots were a very good example of the SDM in action. Well before then I understood how I had become someone who "just didn't care":

"We were a challenge and we challenged anything and anyone that did not agree with our point of view. We became isolated from the normal everyday members of our society that went about their normal everyday business. We found and joined with those regardless of skin or creed who had also become isolated or alienated for whatever cause. We formed and bonded together and pointed our accusing fingers at those we believed to be our oppressors and enemies. The anger and frustration just continued into adult life" (Hercules 1989, p 183)

Doing something: changing the Social Deprivation Mindset

It is my firm belief that many young people have not had proper moral guidance from family, schools or society, nor have they been educated to see that they could have other real options. I know from experience that life is very tough for these young people but I do not agree they have no options. Even though life is hard and you have to negotiate all the pitfalls and minefields of living in a deprived environment you do not have to give up hope of achieving something and making life for you and your family better. Things do not have to go on the way they are. There is a way out there; there is a light at the end of the tunnel. The fact is these young people do have something to lose - the change of a happy and fulfilling adulthood - but as teenagers they do not realize or fully understand that, any more than I did when I was young. I was a classic case of someone with a SDM.

Who can tell them this, get through to them, help them find the courage and confidence to break out of this mindset? Not many of the professionals, most of whose lives are too different from theirs ever to be credible. I think that what these young people need are adults who have been there, seen it and done it. Someone they can have empathy with, someone they can relate to, who they do not consider part of the system that alienates them, someone who they will listen to and ask questions of, like "how did you make it legit", "what can I do to get away from the everyday madness that is effecting my whole family?" "How do I get out of carrying that gun for them, how can I save face if I don't stab him?"

There are such people and I believe I am one of them. It is often only when people get older and realise that too much of life has passed them by that a sense of regret and, on the back of that, the motivation to change, kicks in. Sometimes it is only after repeat offending and repeat imprisonments that they do eventually come to realise they have

done a lot of harm and need to change and, like me, start to feel they really ought to try and stop other young people taking the same path they did, and making the same mistakes. I do not feel I'm the only person who can do this; there are other ex-offenders out there with the same idea and I cannot understand why the professionals are not more enthusiastic about taking us up, unless it's because they feel threatened by us.

Obviously training programmes have to be devised; it is probably not enough to give people a one-off talk; although some people might be inspired by that. I am not all that sure of the accreditation process that the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) wants to put people through before their programme can be run in a prison or in the community. That will probably exclude a lot of experienced ex-offenders like me; my own experience of NOMS has not been good in this respect. I think it is not so much how programmes are designed, but who delivers them, who has got credibility, that gives them the edge. Mike Nellis tells me that 'desistance' researchers are starting to move away from the question of "what works?" to the question "who works?" About time too.

I probably am obsessed with giving something back to society now. I am never off duty when it comes to challenging anti-social behaviour. A few years ago I was travelling on a packed bus. A young black guy was standing next me. A white man got on the bus and accidentally tripped over the young black guy, who chose to think it was on purpose, and began to abuse the white guy. Having seen for myself what happened, I intervened and explained to the young man that it was indeed an accident, asking him to consider what impression he was giving of himself and black people in general by mouthing off like that when he was in the wrong. We spoke for a few minutes. I suggested that he was not really like that, that this behaviour probably was not typical of him, certainly not the best of him, but that all the people on the bus were now looking at him as if he were an animal, and that if I was him, I would apologise. It cost nothing and it was the right thing to do. He took the criticism from me in a way he might not have done from someone else because in the moments we talked he knew and understood that I had been there, seen it, and done it; we had empathy and he trusted my judgment. He grasped this in the few minutes we spoke. He turned to the man and said "I am sorry", loud enough for everyone to hear. The man accepted the apology, and the whole bus began to clap. I obviously cannot be sure that my intervention helped that young man develop a more tolerant attitude towards others, but I would like to think it did. It was better than doing nothing, turning a blind eye. It made me feel good doing it.

Working in Schools

In school the mindset might remain muted for a while, but it still causes trouble; playing up in class, being a bully or a thug, being rude, not learning, doing graffiti, abusing teachers, bunking off school, general disruption. In general, my observations from working in several schools and in the community, it produces kids who say 'I don't care, what can you do to me?' This social disease has already spread to many of our inner city schools, where even teachers at times fear for their safety. Head teachers tell me the number of children having to be excluded from the classrooms because the teacher cannot cope with them has reached very high proportions. The Pupil Referral units where these children are sent can become more like places for the mentally insane. The abuse I have witnessed of teachers, who are just doing their jobs, is pretty commonplace. Many

schools I have worked in or visited seem to be having difficulty coping with this situation. In some places, police patrol outside schools at the end of the day to stop rival gang members confronting each other, and even special buses have been provided to take children home safely.

I have been asked to work with these difficult pupils in some London schools. The "Hercules Programme" I use with them is based on a set of core ideas, derived from my experience and is underpinned by my belief in the Social Deprivation Mindset: a) you have to start with the young in schools to forestall later problems on the streets b) many young people, especially in the inner cities, do need help with moral guidance and everyday decision making and c) this needs to be given by people who really know, and can show, that they know and understand the crazy pressures the kids are under. Professionals do not always know or understand this. Call me old-fashioned, but I know I needed this help; I may not have seemed to at the time, but I do know it now! And I believe that programmes such as these should be incorporated into the mainstream school curriculum, they should not just be add-ons.

Working in Prisons

A lot of the "hardcore", and some of the "peripheral" youngsters, will find themselves in prison. That is a tragedy, but many of them will have committed serious crimes of violence, including murder, because that's where, in extreme cases, the Social Deprivation Mindset leads. We cannot afford to write off the people who go to prison, no matter what they have done; one day they will come out, and we do not want them to be worse than when they went in, which they can easily become, because of all the pressures to be a bad man that prison puts on you. We also do not want their spirits broken by long sentences, which can also happen if people do not keep their minds active and get themselves an education which helps them understand themselves and society better, and why their lives turned out the way they did. I think with the right kind of effort it is possible to manage and perhaps change the social deprivation mindset while people are incarcerated. Prison is a place where, with the right handling, people can become amenable to change. When I have been invited into prisons I have tried to convince staff of this. It is not that some professionals are not already trying to do this, but they seem to be going about it in the wrong way. There are already cognitive skills programmes going on in prison, and I accept that some young people do get benefit from them, but the Home Office's own evaluation of these programmes in 2004 indicated that they did not fully acknowledge "the realities of life for some prisoners":

"Programme staff reported that the requirement to rigidly follow instruction manuals when delivering programmes made it difficult for them to respond to what were the realities of life for some prisoners. This lack of saliency and sensitivity of programme delivery and content resulted in programmes being perceived as patronising by some programme staff and programme participants (Clarke, Simmonds and Wyndall 2004, p 40).

That is quite an indictment. How can you expect to get anywhere by ignoring “realities”? I figured, on the basis of experience, that maybe I could do something better. So building on the work I had done in schools, my life experience, and the two books I had written. I adapted the Hercules Programme for use in prisons. It is attuned to “the realities of life” and will reach people which official programmes may not reach. Some of these troubled and troublesome young people may indeed have psychological problems but I do not myself emphasise “cognitive deficits”. These young people have been told many times what they lack, as if this alone defined them. Some of these young people do lack manners, and the verbal skills to extricate themselves from a confrontation without violence, and it helps to acquire these. But why would you listen to somebody telling you what you lack, if you did not also feel that they liked you, understood you, saw where you were coming from and saw potential in you? I prefer to concentrate on young people’s strengths and to challenge the attitudes they have developed, not to deny that they are excluded from society and often treated badly, but to show them that the mindset they have developed in response to this makes matters worse for them as individuals and for their communities. I can tell them brutal truths about themselves, in blunt language, that they are highly unlikely to take from a white, or even a black, professional.

I cannot by myself change the prison regime or the world of the streets to which they will return, but I can show them a better way of thinking and living, and, because I have a credibility that a lot of professionals do not have, can maybe inspire them to try it. I am the living proof it can be done. Because I started where they started, but then turned my life round, I can become the hope that they need to see, until they have that hope for themselves.

Changing Individuals Is Not Enough

Suppose an individual does change while they are in prison; commits themselves to not offending, to living a new sort of life? What happens when they leave prison? A lot of the old pressures will still be there. There are still peer groups to contend with. Employment, I think is a big problem: society still sees those of us with a criminal past as mainly unemployable, more untrustworthy than the average bloke and probably unable to change. Yet many an ex-offenders will think: “prison doesn't define me, that’s not who I am” and yearn for the chance to prove themselves. All the good they achieved in prisons can be undone back in the community if they do not find employment. Yet if they change or manage their SDM they will go a long way to freeing themselves and integrating back into society. I do firmly believe you first have to change that SDM before you can fully address peoples’ offending behaviour, but even that is not enough.

Since leaving prison all those years ago I find I am still defined and judged especially in trying to find work, on the fact that I have been locked up. Maybe it matters less to me, because I am trying to find work that actually utilises my prison experience, and while I am not alone in that, not every ex-offender wants this. They just want ordinary work to support themselves and their families, to live reasonably well and to reduce the temptation to re-offend. I am a great believer in willpower, in motivating yourself to change and sticking at it when things get rough, but I am not so stupid as to think people

can always do it on their own. People need friends and networks; the support of people who have gone through the same kinds of bad experience, and they do also need the right kind of professional help - that is from professionals who have bothered to find out what the realities of life are like for them.

So it is not enough to change individuals. Society has to change as well. Opportunities have to be created. Professionals have to be trained properly; exposed to a few realities. So we also have to change the thinking of government. The government has to do its bit to help ex-offenders in from the cold and back into society, to support their efforts at "desistance". They need to create job opportunities; to do all they can to take away the stigma of being an ex-offender and they need to improve training for professionals. They could do worse than recommend my books on training courses. Above all, though, they need to challenge the SDM, because if that is not done a lot of the other efforts might be wasted, and that is where people like me come in. So the government needs to reduce obstacles to employing people like me in prisons and probation services, and to give us less of the bureaucratic runaround when it comes to accreditation.

Conclusion

So, have I convinced you? Although I cannot claim to be an academic, or even a "convict criminologist", although I have heard they exist, I do believe there is room from outside of academia for someone like me with life experience of the subject matter to put forward my own views about causes and solutions. Let's face it, no disrespect, the professionals do not seem to have made much progress over the years I have been around; things are worse for young people now than they were in the nineteen seventies. I do believe, however, that we should be exploring every avenue in the pursuit of understanding our social ills, listening to voices that are all too often ignored, as well as those from the government and academia. I know only too well from direct personal experience that there is SDM, how it arises, what its effects are and how to deal with it. I know this on a daily basis because, quite apart from my own past experience, I am confronted with it in the community I live in, and through my work in schools and prisons. Managing this mindset, as best I could, was part of what gave me the motivation to put something back, to prevent others doing the same kind of harm I did to myself and the community. It is not enough just to "reduce reoffending" - which sometimes seems like that is all the government wants - as if you could do that without first addressing the mindset that gives rise to offending in the first place! Tackling the SDM is a way forward because it can also be a way to give young people better lives, a better sense of their options, and a better sense of what they are personally capable of. That is what I, and others like me, want for the upcoming generation - not just reduced offending. We believe that there are many people caught up within our communities in spirals of despair and anger that they would gladly change if they knew how. Addressing what I term the Social Deprivation Mindset will not be some kind of magic cure - addressing structures matters too - but experience has taught me it is a practical place to start, and that people like me, ex-prisoners, are well equipped to take on this task.

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