

Inside Out and Think Tank Participation in Australia: Can Engaging with Lived Experience of Incarceration Promote Desistance?

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ABSTRACT

The recognition of lived experience as an invaluable resource for reform and program development in criminal justice has seen a positive shift in recent years. Unexamined, or at least unarticulated, is the value that this inclusion of lived experience could have in efforts toward desistance. This article suggests the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program and the associated prison and community-based Think Tanks established in Victoria, Australia, can be more than a place for advocacy, but indeed a motivator for desistance among participants. Through a discussion of desistance theory, this paper outlines how these programs can promote desistance efforts as a result of their voluntary nature and continuity during and after incarceration. In these spaces, incarcerated individuals are given opportunities to engage with community members, contribute in prosocial capacities, and gain significant knowledge and skills surrounding criminal justice reform. This meaningful educational environment is one which can foster self-determination, non-offender identity development, and community connection, all of which are significant factors in the journey of desistance.

1. Introduction

The harms associated with incarceration and the stigma attached to criminal status extend beyond a sentence and into the post-incarceration journey, threatening the success of an individual's transition to life without crime (Binnall, 2022; Maruna & Mann, 2019). The process of abstaining from crime has evolved in criminology as the theory of desistance and explores the life variables primarily relating to behaviour, identity and belonging that influence a person's decision to restrain from reoffending (Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Maruna & Mann, 2019; McNeill, 2015). This article proposes that active participation in the Inside Out Prison

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Exchange Program and prison and community-based Think Tanks currently running in Victoria, Australia, could promote engagement with these variables for current and formerly incarcerated people, thereby improving the likelihood of desistance. It will begin with a broad discussion of desistance theory, followed by an elaboration on how the programs have the potential to promote desistance through their provision of opportunities for self-determination, education, non-offender identity development, prosocial advocacy and engagement, and community support. Such potential is inextricably connected to the programs' recognition of people with lived experience of incarceration as valued and respected community members, capable of significant (and arguably necessary) correctional and social innovation.

2. Desistance Theory: The Complexities of Ceasing Offending

Desistance is understood to be a complex process of discontinuing involvement in offending behaviour (Farrall & Maruna, 2004). It is rarely linear and does not occur as an abrupt termination of offending, rather as a gradual reduction in the frequency, severity, and versatility of offending (McMahon & Jump, 2018). Desistance can thus be viewed as a process that occurs across different periods of an individual's life course over time (Kazemian 2007). Farrall and Maruna's (2004) primary and secondary desistance represent two phases of desistance an individual may engage with across this time. Primary desistance refers to any hiatus in criminal activity, making it largely a behavioural shift, while secondary desistance describes a long-term process during which individuals must gradually develop a new sense of identity as a non-offender (Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Healy, 2010). Beyond behaviour and identity, McNeill (2015) has suggested that a third phase, tertiary desistance - which involves the growth in a sense of belonging to community - is also integral to successful long-term desistance. Whilst all phases of desistance take effort to achieve for ex-offending individuals, both secondary and tertiary desistance can also take significant time. Additionally, the institutionalisation of prison and the harsh experiences of stigma faced by previously incarcerated people re-entering the community often make secondary and tertiary desistance a difficult prospect (Feingold, 2021; Haney, 2002; Moran, 2012; Reed, 2015). Research also indicates prison environments, which can utilise extreme, 'torturous' measures to ensure compliance and supposed safety (Wolfendale, 2020), are actively counterproductive to the establishment of positive self-concept (Feingold, 2021; Kamoyo, 2018; Umamaheswar, 2021), likely impeding individuals further on their journey toward prosocial identity development and community belonging.

Desistance efforts inherently rely on the motivation an individual has to abstain from criminal activity. Villeneuve et al. (2019) reported that examining early stages of desistance can provide insight into how individuals transition from simply ceasing offending to developing new prosocial roles and identities. In many cases, correctional facilities are places of first engagement with primary desistance, making them integral to understanding desistance more broadly (Redondo et al., 2022). In one study, Martínez et al. (2019) found that the stage of a prison sentence influenced an individual's motivation for desistance, with individuals at the beginning of their sentence expressing more interest in desisting than those at intermediate stages. This increased interest was the result of multiple factors. For instance, individuals at the beginning of a sentence were typically more emotionally connected to the offences that led to their incarceration, and thus often experiencing guilt about the wrongdoing. They were also grieving the losses of social connection and separation from family, friends, and freedom. This suggests incarcerated individuals are more reflective and introspective earlier on in their sentence than upon release when the onset of prisonisation is fully developed into their identity and connection to their offending behaviour is often distant. If introspection and reflection are indeed integral to motivating desistance, then programs that encourage or sustain these processes may have significant impacts on post-release outcomes. The potential of the Inside

Out Prison Exchange Program (hereby referred to as ‘Inside Out’) and Think Tanks to reorient and maintain incarcerated individuals’ efforts toward desistance throughout and beyond incarceration is therefore considered hereafter.

3. From Inside Out to Think Tank

The Australian Inside Out programs and Think Tanks (three prison-based and one community-based) that operate within Victoria maintain a unique position in the corrections environment. The space that they provide is unlike any other vocational or educational course offered to incarcerated individuals (at least in Australia), and although both are distinct in their delivery, purpose and modality, their ability to bring a sense of belonging and connection to community for participants is shared (Allred et al., 2020). This community orientation begins in Inside Out, a university elective running the length of a semester, where incarcerated (‘inside’) and university (‘outside’) students are brought together onsite to study various criminal justice systems around the world (Martinovic & Liddell, 2020). Learning about justice systems outside of, and particularly in comparison to Australia, provides all participants with direct insight into the many ways in which the experience of incarceration can be significantly improved. By the time Inside Out reaches the end of semester, many inside students feel motivated to engage with the issues they have long recognised but have otherwise felt too disempowered to attempt to change (Martinovic et al., 2018). A natural progression for these students to advocate for better correctional policies has thus been provided, with graduates of Inside Out given the opportunity to move into prison-based Think Tanks and, upon release, a community-based Think Tank. These groups meet fortnightly to discuss and coordinate upcoming opportunities for reform in the correctional space, seeking ultimately to improve the experiences of the CJS from pre- to post-incarceration for those enduring it now and in the future.

Since the first Think Tank’s establishment, the groups have gained recognition as a safe space for currently and formerly incarcerated people to champion their stories and begin a transformative journey from incarceration to advocacy. This recognition has also seen the Think Tanks consult and participate in numerous collaborative projects with government and non-governmental agencies. Their contributions ranging from art installations to court-house designs and parliamentary inquiries (see Martinovic et al., 2022a; Martinovic & Stringer, 2022; Martinovic et al., 2022b). Within these spaces, incarcerated individuals are treated with respect, their perspectives and voices are centralised, and they are reminded of their capacity for prosocial participation. As the lived experiences of members are central to the work of the Think Tanks, group discussions are places where vulnerability is encouraged, and support and trust are necessary. This takes considerable courage from all participants, but especially from ex-incarcerated members whose experiences have often left them with significant trauma. For this and many more reasons, the Think Tanks often represent more than just a program, with one incarcerated member describing it as a “lifeline to the world outside” that allows them to feel a sense of contribution (Allred et al., 2019; Martinovic et al., 2022a, p.159; Antojado & Martinovic, 2023). For most, it is the only safe space to discuss their experiences of the CJS free of judgement and express the difficulties and frustrations they face/d whilst incarcerated. This support and sense of community suggest that, although participation in the Think Tanks is not a comprehensive methodology exercising the rehabilitative and transitional goals stipulated within desistance theory, they can provide an environment conducive to desistance (Martina et al., 2019). The potential impact of both Inside Out and Think Tanks thus extends beyond advocacy and empowerment to the social and individual benefits, particularly relating to desistance that evolve from participation. Although long-term engagement in Think Tanks sees the majority of these benefits, participation in them is dependent on the personal growth an incarcerated individual illustrates in Inside Out. Therefore, although Think Tank

participation is not the outcome for all participants, Inside Out remains an essential part of the journey to desistance that Think Tank can facilitate. Notably, Inside Out is also where members are often reintroduced and re-invigorated by education and learning.

4. Education and Self Determination

The value of education in prisons and the opportunities it can create for members upon release has been well documented (Runell, 2018). Individuals who participate in university-level education whilst incarcerated have greater likelihood of employment post-release and are more likely to engage in primary desistance (Ford & Schroeder 2010; Runell, 2018). In their personal experiences of desistance, Macpherson (2022) and Binnall (2022) recount how in-prison education provided them with a sense of purpose and direction, which not only maintained their effort towards desistance but improved their outlook on, and achievement of, opportunities post-release. Educational activities also have the potential to promote prosocial sentiments and, as is often the case in prison programs, include a reflective element through which individuals can begin or continue the self-work necessary to reorient their identity as a non-offender.

The education received in Inside Out, which focuses on group work, self-reflection, and respectful discussion and debate, aims to do just this. Working from a strengths-based approach, this program seeks to highlight student's positive personal attributes - as opposed to correcting or dwelling on negative attributes - and provide a safe space for discussion that encourages contribution and vulnerability. In turn this promotes individual and group wellbeing. Additionally, the delivery style of this program, which involves non-incarcerated students and incarcerated students working and learning together, can increase incarcerated students' feelings of inclusion in a society that has otherwise ostracised them (Allred et al., 2019). As the assessments undertaken in Inside Out are largely reflection-based, they also provide foundation for the consistent and continuous introspection that Think Tank engagement requires. It is partly the continuity provided by the Think Tanks (which are an option made available to all incarcerated students after graduating from Inside Out) that sets them apart from other correctional programs. This continuity enables a sense of control and stability for incarcerated individuals. Such stability, which is continued post-release should they choose to engage in Think Tanks, is arguably an essential part of successful desistance efforts. However, stability is only one part of the desistance equation.

As noted by Runell (2018), feelings and perceptions of agency are undeniably integral to desistance. After all, one cannot choose to desist if they do not first perceive themselves as being able to make that choice (Runell, 2018). Needless to say, institutions such as prisons - where individuals are subject to disciplinary external forces, policies and procedures that govern almost every element of their lives from what they can eat and wear, to who they can have contact with - greatly diminish opportunities to be agentic (Stillion Southard, 2019). Many of the rehabilitative programs designed to promote desistance that are engaged in during incarceration have also often been prescribed in their sentence, again negating opportunities to exercise agency. Micklethwaite (2022) describes the experience of this compulsory rehabilitation as being one of hopelessness and powerlessness - feelings that are inherently counterproductive to the efforts of genuine rehabilitation work.

In contrast to this, both Inside Out and Think Tanks are voluntary programs that members are not obligated to partake in or attend. This voluntary nature supports self-determination as it allows for environments in which the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness can be nurtured (Ryan & Deci, 2017; 2020). This can be seen in how members lead discussions, propose relevant solutions and strategies, and actively participate in the

development of the projects, all of which demonstrate an ‘autonomous motivation approach’ (Ryan & Deci, 2017; 2020). Through promoting self-determination, this engagement can enable incarcerated members to re-establish a sense of self-efficacy, as well as remind them of their potential for prosocial contribution and foster hope for a future in social justice advocacy.

As both programs centralise the value of lived experience and imbue this value among participants, engagement can help members re-evaluate their time spent in prison as something that has provided them with invaluable insight into the problems present in the criminal justice system. Such engagement also sees considerable knowledge growth regarding the political nature of criminal justice (Allred et al., 2019), thereby granting them greater understanding of how reforms can be marketed to agencies, as well as how desistance and rehabilitation programs can be better engaging and appealing for those incarcerated. In turn, this can open opportunities for employment with the agencies Think Tanks consult with, as member’s lived experience and involvement in the program unveils new dialogue, and provides an advantage to understanding the cause and effect of punishment, treatment, and rehabilitation, qualifying them for lived experience advisory roles (Macpherson, 2022).

In essence, these programs provide meaningful education, offer incarcerated individuals a genuine chance to re-evaluate their self-perception and promote new identities, and have the potential to create opportunities for employment and advocacy post-release. It is during this post-release period, however, that another significant obstacle to desistance arises, that being the often-hostile attitude that society adopts towards people leaving incarceration due to the stigma surrounding incarceration and criminality (Feingold, 2021; Martína et al., 2019).

5. Stigma, Identity Development, and Community Connection

Stigma is potentially the greatest barrier in one’s process of desistance and is something incarcerated individuals will likely encounter throughout the rest of their lives (Binnall, 2022; Feingold, 2021). Having consistent sources of social support is thus of crucial nature to reintegration efforts (Binnall, 2022). Here, the community-based Think Tank can be seen as a significant aid to reintegration, providing a source of social stability for members exiting prison in both the short term, immediately post-release - a daunting and often isolating time where criminogenic social circles may be reengaged with - and long term (Allred et al., 2020). The routine nature of the group meetings also helps individuals ease back into a non-regimented lifestyle and be re-socialized in a supportive environment where they are valued, not met with hostility.

Central to these benefits is the fact that incarcerated people can re-establish a valuable connection to the community through collaboration with non-incarcerated members of Inside Out and the Think Tanks who are, notably, not criminal justice employed. Utnage (2022) suggests community contact and connection is of extremely high importance to many incarcerated individuals, who often feel rejected by the communities they were once part of, and whose acceptance is thus desired. She argues that this acceptance is an essential aspect of reintegration, with the majority of rehabilitation and desistance efforts made toward achieving this outcome. In this way, Inside Out and Think Tanks may successfully move beyond secondary desistance promotion and play a role in tertiary desistance (McNeill, 2015).

Tertiary desistance involves the shift in one's sense of belonging to a community and subsequently in how one is seen by others (McNeill, 2015). McNeill (2015) highlights that theories of desistance, which have largely focused on the individual’s prosocial behavioural changes and identity development (Farrall & Maruna, 2004), have tended to ignore that these changes occur in a socio-political context, and that they therefore must be socially negotiated. This is not to diminish the contributions and value of primary and secondary desistance

theories, but simply to reiterate what they have often hinted at but not directly acknowledged in their theorisation: desistance cannot truly occur on *just* an intrapersonal level (McNeill, 2015).

The idea that incarcerated individuals require a connection to community for successful desistance post-release seems almost obvious, with the purpose of prisons being to physically remove them from communities. Beyond the literal barrier between incarcerated individuals and community, however, stigmatisation on a personal level (self-doubt, lack of confidence, shame) and at a tangible, societal level (active discrimination, difficulty gaining employment, social exclusion) create new, complex obstacles that must be overcome. Binnall (2022) furthers that as this stigma is a social phenomenon, it too can be socially negotiated, and suggests that for those with a criminal history, this negotiation can occur when they are viewed as pro-socially involved, or ‘trying to give back’. Participation in Think Tanks provides just this. Whether it be how to ensure better relief and support to families of incarcerated people, or the health programs required to assist reintegration, incarcerated members are constantly thinking beyond themselves towards the betterment of others (see Martinovic et al., 2022a; Antojado & Martinovic, 2023; Martinovic & Stringer, 2022). These actions also align with Maruna and LeBel’s (2009) ‘reintegration advocacy’ or the ‘third mile’ toward reintegration and de-stigmatisation. In their work, they argue that this final ‘mile’ is rarely sought as it necessitates the confrontation of incarceration-related stigma, which many hope to limit proximity to as quickly and wholly as possible. Notably, both reintegration advocacy and the third mile ultimately seek stigma reduction, with the broad process of reintegration advocacy also seeking de-stigmatisation of incarceration not just for the self but for all (Maruna & Lebel, 2009). In enabling incarcerated members to positively reconnect themselves to community and reintegrate in a supportive environment, the Inside Out and Think Tank programs can promote desistance through establishing *visible* prosocial identities for incarcerated and ex-incarcerated members that better equip them for their journey toward community acceptance and de-stigmatisation. These perspectives can be manifestly demonstrated by the work of Antojado (2022), a previously incarcerated individual that has not only worked and led the community-based think tank in various projects post-release, but is also using his lived experience of imprisonment as an epistemological resource and foundation for his scholarly, advocacy and professional efforts to enliven important reform in the CJS.

6. Conclusion

The Inside Out programs, and prison-based and community-based Think Tanks, provide a space where current and ex-incarcerated members are able to utilise their lived experience to the betterment of society. Members are passionate social justice advocates and creative consultants who propose solutions to complex issues based on self-reflection and personal experiences. Their work involves critical, deep, personal, group discussions, meaning safety, trust and community are essential elements of these programs’ environments. This article suggests these environments and the consistent introspection and vulnerability they promote could be conducive to desistance for those who actively engage. For instance, the direct contact with community members in both programs can increase incarcerated individual’s feelings of community support and connection that are integral to successful reintegration and tertiary desistance (McNeill 2015; Utnage, 2022). They each also provide engaging criminal justice and policy education via group discussion and consultation, thus developing knowledge and soft skills that are extremely useful for post-release employment and adjustment (Binnall, 2022; Macpherson, 2022; Runell, 2018). The voluntary nature of these programs promotes self-determination and assists individuals in regaining a sense of control and self-efficacy that are

often difficult to achieve due to prisonisation (Micklethwaite, 2022). The prison- and community-based Think Tanks also enable previously and currently incarcerated individuals to engage in meaningful, prosocial capacities, allowing them to align themselves with a non-offender identity essential to secondary desistance (Binnall, 2022; Healy, 2010; Maruna & Lebel, 2009). Although much of this article has been propositional, dwelling on the potentials of these programs, it remains true that over the past two years, all community-based Think Tank members have been successful in abstaining from further criminal interaction. Desistance theory could therefore be a useful framework for interrogating the outcomes of Inside Out and Think Tank engagement, especially in regard to their possible facilitation of desistance.

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