

# **An Examination of the Impact of Formerly Incarcerated Persons Helping Others**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study builds upon theory and research concerning the helper therapy principle, mutual-help groups, wounded healers, and retroflexive reformation to examine the possible benefits of helping others in a sample of 228 formerly incarcerated persons in prisoner reintegration programs. A 4-item helper/wounded healer orientation scale was developed. OLS regression analysis was used to determine if this orientation is related to psychological well-being and/or acts as a sort of buffer against criminality. The results indicate that the helper/wounded healer orientation has a positive relationship with higher self-esteem and greater satisfaction with life, and a negative relationship with having a criminal attitude and the forecast of rearrest. The finding that helping helps the helper suggests that this principle should be recognized for its potential in facilitating the recovery and reintegration of formerly incarcerated persons.

**KEYWORDS** Helper principle, mutual-help, peer support, role model, mentor, prisoner reintegration, recidivism, rehabilitation, criminal attitude, self-esteem

## **AUTHOR'S NOTES**

Thomas P. LeBel is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His current research focuses on prisoner reintegration, the stigma of incarceration, and substance abuse treatment. The author wishes to thank the executive directors and staff of the prisoner reentry programs where this study was conducted: Father Peter Young's Housing, Industry, and Treatment Network (PYHIT), The Fortune Society, Exodus Transitional Community (ETC), The Women's Prison Association (WPA), The Osborne Association, and The Center for Community Alternatives (CCA) – The Syracuse Recovery Community Service Program (SRCSP). Moreover, the author is particularly grateful to the formerly incarcerated men and women who participated in this study.

In the 1950s and 1960s, researchers, most notably Cressey (1955, 1965), began to outline the theoretical and practical reasons why prisoners and former prisoners should be recruited and trained to work as practitioners in the rehabilitation of other offenders. Cressey (1955) began to apply Sutherland's (1947) theory of differential association in order to reform offenders. In laying out the social psychological foundations for this process, Cressey (1955) stated that

The most effective mechanism for exerting group pressure on members will be found in groups so organized that criminals are induced to join with non-criminals for the purpose of changing other criminals. A group in which criminal A joins with some non-criminals to change criminal B is probably most effective in changing criminal A, not B. In order to change criminal B, criminal A must necessarily share the values of the anti-criminal members (p. 119).

Cressey (1955) called this process "retroflexive reformation" and argued that "in attempting to reform others, the [offender] almost automatically accepts the relevant common purpose of the group, identifies himself closely with other persons engaging in reformation, and assigns status on the basis of anticriminal behavior" (p. 119).

Also occurring in the 1960s in the field of social work, Frank Riessman (1965) began to document the "helper therapy principle," which calls attention to possible benefits the "helper receives from being in the helper role" (p. 32). This principle simply says that it may be better (that is, more reintegrative) to give help than to receive it because "those who help are helped most" (Gartner & Riessman, 1984, p. 19).

Riessman's (1965) helper principle and Cressey's retroflexive reformation principle were implemented in several programs in the 1960s, including Grant and Grant's (1975; Grant, 1968; see also Pearl & Riessman, 1965) New Careers Development Program. The central premise of

the New Careers Movement was that the disadvantaged (including former prisoners) could be trained and placed in entry-level social service jobs that would take advantage of their life experiences as well as their geographic, cultural, and functional similarities to other persons in need. This program involved training prisoners for “change agent” roles and utilizing formerly incarcerated persons as a manpower resource in correctional rehabilitation and reentry programs (Grant, 1968).

For many prisoners and former prisoners in the 1970s, mutual-help was viewed as an important component of “going straight” (e.g., Erickson, Crow, Zurcher, & Connett, 1973; McAnany, Tromanhauser, & Sullivan, 1974). In support of this idea, McAnany et al. (1974; McAnany & Tromanhauser, 1977) in a study of former prisoner groups in Chicago found that a self-help orientation “comes very close to being the identifying mark of the groups, and appears to be based on a realization that their identity as prisonized persons requires self-help” (p. 26). The Delancey Street program for formerly incarcerated persons based in San Francisco, founded in 1971, provides a good example of an organization that utilizes a helper orientation in that it has no professional staff and takes an “each one teach one” approach where more senior residents mentor and train newer arrivals.

More recently, researchers have begun to recognize a coping orientation among recovering substance users and formerly incarcerated persons involving becoming a “professional ex-” (Brown, 1991) or “wounded healer” (White, 2000; Maruna, 2001). Brown (1991) asserts that it is important to consider how one might “adopt a legitimate career premised upon an identity that embraces one’s deviant history” (p. 220). Essentially, these persons utilize their past experiences to help others who are less far along in the recovery or reintegration process. Maruna (2001) found that many former prisoners assumed the role of wounded healer or

professional ex-. In fact, he argues that “the desisting self-narrative frequently involves reworking a delinquent history into a source of wisdom to be drawn from while acting as a drug counselor, youth worker, community volunteer, or mutual-help group member” (p. 117).

Today, there is very limited empirical investigation (or even acknowledgement) of the extent of, and possible benefits of, help-giving in populations of prisoners and former prisoners (for exceptions see Maruna, LeBel, & Lanier, 2003; Bazemore & Karp, 2004). This study builds upon theory and research concerning the helper principle, mutual-help groups, wounded healers, and retroflexive reformation to examine the possible benefits of this sort of helper orientation in a sample of formerly incarcerated persons in prisoner reintegration programs.

### **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE HELPER/WOUNDED HEALER ORIENTATION**

Several characteristics appear to describe the helper/wounded healer orientation for formerly incarcerated persons as well as for prisoners and persons with mental health and/or substance use disorders. White, Boyle, and Loveland argue that “the centerpiece of all successful recovery mutual-aid groups is the process of sharing experience, strength, and hope” (2004, p. 246). Self-help group participants often emphasize that their expertise comes from “having been there too” (Humphreys, 2004, p. 15), and that they have valuable knowledge and skills gained from these experiences that can be shared with others to improve their lives (see e.g., Irwin, 2005, p. 178; Maruna, 2001 for former prisoners; Davidson et al., 1999 and Randall & Salem, 2004 for persons with mental health disorders; and Humphreys, 2004 and White, 2000 for persons with substance use disorders). In discussing retroflexive reformation, Cressey (1955, p. 118) suggests that prisoners must have a “we” feeling and a “strong sense of belonging to one group.” Similarly, in discussing recovery from substance use, White (2000; see also De Leon,

2000 about therapeutic communities) argues that wounded healers have an emotional identification or kinship with those they are helping. These strong bonds and the sharing of common experiences are thought to enhance the ability to establish rapport with other offenders (Cressey, 1965), and some mutual-help groups for former prisoners argue that only those who have undergone the experience are qualified to help (McAnany et al., 1974).

In sharing their experiences, strength, and hope with others, these persons often become role models for persons less far along in the process of recovery or reintegration (see e.g., De Leon, 2000, chapter 11 about role models in TCs; Davidson et al., 1999 for persons with mental health disorders). In a documentary that appeared on PBS about Father Peter Young's Housing, Industries, & Treatment Program (one of the organizations where recruitment for this study occurred), a participant explained that:

The real role model to me is the guy who has been in prison for 20 years...I couldn't think of anyone more I could look up to today. Because he's a man who walked in my shoes and he can tell me today, you don't have to live like that (Glidepath to Recovery, 1999).

A step beyond role modeling involves acting as a mentor. Many prisoners and former prisoners express a desire to receive mentoring from formerly incarcerated persons who are "making it" in conventional society (e.g., Erickson et al., 1973; Irwin, 2005; McAnany et al., 1974; Richie, 2001; Sowards, O'Boyle, & Weissman, 2006). This helping role is similar to Anderson's (1990, p. 329) description of the "mentor-protégé relationship" between "old heads" (or respected adult members of a community) and the neighborhood youth.

In the 1960s, Empey noted that a remarkable aspect of the New Careers Development Program "is in the notion that a *career* in corrections might be the objective of the correctional

experience, at least for some offenders” (Empey, 1968, p. 19). Although it is impossible to measure the true extent of the wounded healer phenomenon as it relates to former prisoners, it appears that a substantial number choose to exit the “convict role” by helping others in an occupation such as a paraprofessional, lay therapist or counselor (e.g., Irwin, 2005; Maruna, 2001). In the course of data collection for this study, several staff members at the organizations where participants were recruited expressed that “this is the only job where my criminal record is viewed as an asset.” Lofland (1969, p. 287; see also Maruna, 2001) notes that this sort of helper/wounded healer career role “serves to make acceptable, explicable and even meritorious the guilt-laden, ‘wasted’ portions of an Actor’s life.”

In its most general form, then, a helper/wounded healer orientation can be thought of as the desire and commitment to “reach back” and help other similarly stigmatized people make it in the world (see Maruna, 2001; White, 2000). This is often accomplished by sharing one’s experiences, strength, and hope; acting as a role model; mentoring others; and, for some, making a career of helping others who are less far along in the recovery and/or reintegration process.

## **THE HELPER/WOUNDED HEALER ORIENTATION AND DESISTANCE FROM CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR**

Although empirical evidence that the helper/wounded healer orientation reduces recidivism is lacking, Maruna’s (2001) research on the psychology of desistance from crime offers evidence of a link between helping others and criminal reform. Maruna (2001) found that the self-narratives of former prisoners who were able to go straight were significantly more care-oriented, other-centered and focused on promoting the next generation. In a similar vein, Uggen and Janikula (1999) have found that helping others through involvement in volunteer work

reduces the likelihood that young persons (under 21 years old) will engage in criminal conduct. In addition, research about taking on the role of sponsor in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) indicates that providing direction and support to other recovering addicts is associated with improved success in terms of sustained abstinence for the sponsors, but does little to improve short-term success of the persons being sponsored (Crape, Latkin, Laris, & Knowlton, 2002).

Although this research does not provide firm evidence in favor of the helper principle, these studies suggest a basic incompatibility between helping activities and criminal attitudes and lifestyles. Moreover, Cullen, Wright, Gendreau, and Andrews (2003, p. 346) assert that “correctional treatment research is clearest in providing evidence supportive of differential association/social learning theory.” That is, the most successful interventions for offenders are those that target antisocial attitudes, values, and associations, and reinforce prosocial conduct.

### **THE HELPER/WOUNDED HEALER ORIENTATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING**

Riessman (1965, p. 31) argues that the benefits for the helper are related to the actual demands of the specific helper role, new feelings associated with the meaning and prestige of the role, and the way the person is treated because of engaging in the helping role. The alleged benefits of assuming the role of helper include the reinforcement of personal learning, increased feelings of interpersonal competence, a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, improved self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, and social approval and acceptance (see e.g., Brown, 1991; Maruna, 2001; Riessman, 1990; Skovholt, 1974; Toch, 2000). Research supports these assertions as quantitative studies of mutual-help groups (e.g., persons with mental health

disorders; substance use disorders, etc.) have found that engaging in the helping role is related to better psychosocial adjustment and treatment outcomes (Crape et al., 2002; Roberts et al., 1999; Zemore, Kaskutas, & Ammon, 2004), and higher self-esteem and self-worth (e.g., Hutchinson et al., 2006; Maton, 1988; Schiff & Bargal, 2000). Overall, general population surveys find that helping others is strongly related to one's psychological health and that "one does well by doing good" (Piliavin, 2003, p. 227).

## **STUDY OBJECTIVES**

The main objectives of this study are to examine the helper/wounded healer orientation of formerly incarcerated persons, and to assess whether endorsement of this orientation enhances psychological well-being and acts as a sort of buffer against criminality. Specifically, three research questions are addressed: (1) To what degree do formerly incarcerated persons think of themselves as helpers/wounded healers?; (2) What factors account for any differences in the helper/wounded healer orientation?; and (3) Is thinking of oneself as a helper/wounded healer related to psychological well-being, criminal attitude, and the forecast of rearrest?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### ***Sample and Data Collection***

A formerly incarcerated person is defined as someone who has served a prison sentence for a felony conviction. A purposive and targeted sampling technique was employed to recruit 228 male and female formerly incarcerated persons from New York City and upstate New York. Sampling was aimed at recruiting adults, aged 18 and older, who were released from prison fairly recently (i.e., in the last 24 months or so). Participants were recruited from six

organizations that provide a variety of services (e.g., counseling, drug/alcohol treatment, education, job training, and other employment services) to former prisoners who come to them voluntarily or due to parole and court mandates. At each organization participants were recruited from a variety of programs, groups, and classes.

This is a cross-sectional study and the method of data collection is a self-completed questionnaire using a paper and pencil format that was delivered to groups of former prisoners at each of the organizations. Data collection was completed between April and September, 2004. The questionnaire asked about a variety of topics concerning life as a formerly incarcerated person including: perceptions of stigma, social identity as a former prisoner, coping strategies, psychological well-being, as well as demographics and criminal history. The questionnaire primarily utilized a fixed-choice “closed” format with response sets ranging from 5 to 8 items. The majority of participants completed the questionnaire in 30 minutes or less.

### *Analytical Method*

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analysis is used to determine how well a set of variables predicts the score on the helper/wounded healer orientation scale. Then, the same set of variables, with the addition of the helper orientation scale, is used to predict outcomes for psychological well-being (self-esteem and satisfaction with life), criminal attitude, and the forecast of rearrest. These OLS regression analyses provide information on the predictors of the helper orientation as well as a good test of the impact of the helper orientation on these four outcomes, after controlling for the effect of the other independent variables in the models. The sixteen independent variables and four dependent variables are discussed in the Measures section below and descriptive statistics are displayed in the Results section. As the key construct in these

analyses, special attention is given to the indicators in the helper/wounded healer orientation scale.

### *Measures*

#### *Both an Independent and Dependent Variable*

##### *The helper/wounded healer orientation.*

The helper/wounded healer orientation emphasizes a more informal role to make it a possibility for former prisoners with only a few months (or weeks) back in society. The specific indicators include:

- I often share my past experiences to help others avoid making the same mistakes I made.
- I am a good role model for other former prisoners who are trying to go straight.
- I act as a mentor of sorts for prisoners and former prisoners that need help to get back on their feet.
- I plan to pursue (or am currently pursuing) a career where I can give back and help other people such as former prisoners, youth in trouble with the law, or people with drug/alcohol addictions.

This scale, as well as all to follow, was constructed by adding the scores together and dividing by the number of items in the scale (see Spector, 1992 on the summative method).

#### *Dependent Variables*

##### *Criminal attitude and forecast of rearrest.*

The criminal attitude of offenders has been measured in a wide variety of ways (see Brodsky & Smitherman, 1983 for a review). In this study, three items are used to measure pro-criminal attitudes (e.g., “To get ahead in the world you may have to do some things that are

illegal”). The study participants were asked to predict or forecast the probability that they will recidivate (see e.g., Dhimi, Mandel, Loewenstein, & Ayton, 2006). Respondents were asked “Realistically, how likely or unlikely is it that you will be arrested for a new crime in the next three years?”

### ***Psychological well-being.***

The psychological well-being of respondents is measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). This 10-item scale has five positively worded items (e.g., “I feel that I have a number of good qualities”) and five negatively worded items (e.g., “I feel I do not have much to be proud of”). Negatively worded items were reverse scored so that higher scores on the scale reflect feelings of positive self-worth. A single question from Andrews and Withey (1976) was used to measure former prisoners’ “global” well-being, “How do you feel about your life as a whole?” This variable is scored using Andrews and Withey’s (1976) D-T (delighted-terrible) scale.

### ***Independent Variables***

#### ***Demographic characteristics.***

Demographic characteristics include age, gender, and race/ethnicity. An effort was made to over-sample female former prisoners in relation to their percentage of the population released each year in New York State.

#### ***Program-related items.***

A question was asked to determine if respondents attend the program voluntarily or as a requirement of community supervision. The study participants were also asked to indicate how long they have been involved with the program using a 5-point scale.

#### ***Social bonds.***

A 4-item scale was developed to measure the quality of respondents' social bonds. Sampson and Laub (1993) argue that beyond the mere existence of bonds to conventional society; it is the quality of the bonds that count. Participants were asked to indicate "how you feel about": the way things are in general between you and your close relatives, you and your children, the relationship with your partner, and the amount of friendship in your life. These measures are answered using Andrews and Withey's (1976) D-T scale.

***Education and employment.***

For this study, education level is scored using three categories ranging from 0 (*did not complete high school or earn a GED*) to 2 (*some college or more*). Respondents' employment status has been dichotomized with 1 indicating employed full-time and 0 representing all others.

***Remorse.***

A largely unexplored facet of the perspective of former prisoners is whether or not they feel sorry for their crime(s). However, feeling remorse is increasingly being linked to the desistance and recidivism process (see e.g., Braithwaite, 1989; LeBel, Burnett, Maruna, & Bushway, in press). To measure remorse, participants were asked to respond to the statement, "I am sorry for the harm caused to others by my past criminal activities."

***Criminal history.***

The criminal history of participants was measured in several ways: number of felony convictions in lifetime, prison time served in lifetime, any violent felony conviction in lifetime, and current community supervision status. Each of these measures involves self-report.

***Group identification.***

Group identification represents the extent to which respondents' identify or feel close ties with other formerly incarcerated persons. The three indicators in this scale are similar to items

used by many researchers to measure group identification (see e.g., Ellemers et al., 1997). The specific items include: I have a number of things in common with other former prisoners; I identify with other former prisoners; and Former prisoners need to stick together.

***Personal stigma.***

Goffman (1963, p. 3) defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting.” It is generally believed that formerly incarcerated persons are stigmatized and discriminated against (e.g., LeBel, 2006; Petersilia, 2003; Travis, 2005). In this study, respondents were asked for their perceptions of what “people” think about them personally because of their status as a former prisoner. Items were modified from Link’s (1987) devaluation-discrimination scale for persons with mental illness and Harvey’s (2001) scale concerning stigma and race. In addition, several new items were developed (see LeBel, 2006). The 9-item scale includes many of the stereotypes of formerly incarcerated persons (e.g., dangerous, dishonest, untrustworthy, etc.).

***Normalization.***

The geographic concentration of returning prisoners in the most socially and economically disadvantaged inner-city communities has recently become a topic of interest for prisoner reentry researchers (see Travis, 2005, chapter 11 for a review). In this study questions were asked about the normalization of the incarceration experience in the neighborhood where the respondent grew up. Three items (e.g., “A kid growing up today in the neighborhood where I grew up will probably end up in prison some day”) were combined to form a normalization scale where higher scores indicate that serving time in prison is seen as a likely occurrence and is not considered shameful.

## RESULTS

### *Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. The sample of formerly incarcerated persons has a mean age of 36.14 years, is 85% male, and is 58% Black, non-Latino. The modal response category for education is having a GED or high school diploma (44%), while 19% of the sample is employed full-time. On average, participants have served 87 months in prison, have 2.18 felony convictions, and 41% have been convicted of a violent felony. Nearly half (46%) of the participants reported voluntarily attending the reintegration program, while about one-third were not under any form of correctional supervision. The largest percentage of respondents (39%) has been involved with the program for less than 30 days. Most participants agreed or strongly agreed (74%) that they feel sorry for the harm caused to others by their past criminal activities, and many identified strongly with other former prisoners. The mean of the personal stigma scale (3.79) and the normalization scale (4.29) are near the mid-point (neither agree nor disagree) and have a substantial amount of variation. Meanwhile, the social bond scale has a mean of 4.75, where 5 is for “pleased.”

[Insert Table 1 about here]

For the dependent variables, the crime-related measures have relatively low means indicating that respondents reported that they were unlikely to get rearrested and disagreed that it is permissible to do something illegal to get ahead in the world. For the psychological well-being measures, self-esteem is quite high ( $M = 5.44$ ), but satisfaction with life is very close to the mid-point of the scale (*mixed feelings*).

### ***Helper/Wounded Healer Orientation Scale***

Table 2 displays means, standard deviations, factor loadings, and Cronbach's alpha for the helper/wounded healer orientation scale. Higher scores indicate attitudes and behaviors that support taking on this role. The four indicators have means ranging from 4.88 for acting as a mentor of sorts to 6.00 for sharing one's past experiences to help others avoid making the same mistakes. The scale mean is 5.32 (SD = 1.21) with an alpha of .722. A principal component analysis shows that all four indicators load on a single factor that explains 54.81% of the variance. Overall, many of the formerly incarcerated persons agreed or strongly agreed with each of the four indicators.

[Insert Table 2 about here]

### ***Predicting the Helper/Wounded Healer Orientation***

Table 3 displays the results for the OLS regression model predicting the helper/wounded healer orientation. The table reports the unstandardized coefficients (metric slopes), standard errors, standardized coefficients (betas) and statistical significance (at  $p < .05$ ) for each of the sixteen independent variables. This analysis yielded a significant equation,  $F(17, 225) = 3.235$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $R^2 = .209$ , indicating that the set of predictors accounted for a substantial amount of the variance in the helper orientation scale. Table 3 shows that four of the independent variables uniquely predict this orientation. In this sample, those most engaged and interested in helping others are Black, non-Latino, identify more strongly with other former prisoners, are not under any form of correctional supervision, and have more remorse for their past crimes. A comparison of the standardized coefficients indicates that remorse (Beta = .177) has the largest impact on the helper orientation, while group identification (Beta = .161) has the next largest impact.

[Insert Table 3 about here]

### *Predicting Psychological Well-Being, Criminal Attitude, and Rearrest*

In the next step, the same set of independent variables and the helper/wounded healer orientation were used to predict respondents' self-esteem, satisfaction with life, criminal attitude, and forecast of rearrest. Table 4 displays the unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors, statistical significance (at  $p < .05$ ) of each independent variable, and  $R^2$  value for each regression equation. The results show that the independent variables explain a significant amount of the variation in each of the dependent variables with  $R^2$  values ranging from .158 for the forecast of rearrest to .309 for criminal attitude.

[Insert Table 4 about here]

Both of the psychological well-being measures (self-esteem and satisfaction with life) are uniquely predicted by the same four independent variables. Respondents who have higher self-esteem and are more satisfied with their life right now have: stronger social bonds with family and friends, completed more formal education, lower perceptions of being personally stigmatized due to their status as a former prisoner, and scored higher on the helper orientation scale. A comparison of the standardized coefficients or betas (results not shown) indicated that social bonds has the largest impact on both self-esteem and satisfaction with life, while the helper orientation has the next largest impact for predicting satisfaction with life.

The results in Table 4 show that six of the independent variables uniquely predict the criminal attitude scale. Formerly incarcerated persons with higher criminal attitude scores perceive more personal stigma and report that serving time in prison is a common experience in the neighborhood where they grew up. In contrast, higher scores for the helper orientation, more formal education, having a full-time job and expressing more remorse for past crimes are negatively related to having a criminal attitude. The standardized coefficients indicated that the

helper orientation has the largest impact on respondents' criminal attitude. The set of predictors accounted for the smallest amount of variance for the forecast of rearrest ( $R^2 = .158$ ). After controlling for the effects of the other variables in the model, only three (higher education level, more remorseful, and the helper orientation) significantly predict a lower forecast of rearrest. Respondents' education level has the largest impact on the forecast of rearrest in the next three years with the helper orientation having the next largest impact.

In summary, the helper/wounded healer orientation significantly predicts all four dependent variables and has a positive relationship with the psychological well-being measures and a negative relationship with criminal attitude and the forecast of rearrest.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study had three main objectives: to measure the helper/wounded healer orientation in a sample of formerly incarcerated persons; to determine the factors that predict the helper orientation; and to determine if the helper orientation is related to psychological well-being, criminal attitude, and the forecast of rearrest. Formerly incarcerated persons' helper/wounded healer orientation has not been previously measured in any systematic way. This study used four indicators to measure this construct: sharing experiences, acting as a role model, mentoring others, and interest in pursuing a career helping others. As hypothesized, respondents strongly endorsed each of these four characteristics of helpers/wounded healers, while the overall mean (5.32) for the scale was quite high and the internal consistency of the scale was good ( $\alpha = .722$ ). The majority of the sample agreed or strongly agreed with three of the four indicators, and 46.6% responded similarly for "acting as a mentor of sorts." It is notable that many formerly incarcerated persons plan to pursue a career where they can give back and help other people as is

suggested by both Irwin (2005) and Maruna (2001). In fact, this indicator has a mean of 5.21 and 58.2% of the sample agreed or strongly agreed that they plan to pursue a wounded healer career of this sort. These findings suggest that there “may be a natural tendency to help and serve others that characterizes a significant portion of the incarcerated population” (Bazemore & Karp, 2004, p. 29; Irwin, 2005; Maruna, 2001).

The OLS regression analysis provides the first empirical evidence regarding the explanations for formerly incarcerated persons’ helper/wounded healer orientation in the criminological literature. Identification with other formerly incarcerated persons was found to be strongly associated with helping others to live a law-abiding life. This finding supports Cressey’s (1955; see also McAnany et al., 1974) idea that for retroflexive reformation to occur the prisoners must have a strong sense of belonging to one group. Feelings of remorse was the strongest predictor of the helper orientation, which suggests that the internalization of regret for the harm caused by one’s past crimes might be a necessary condition before one can wholeheartedly engage in helping others to desist from crime. The finding that African-American formerly incarcerated persons are more engaged in helping others, as compared to white and Latino respondents, deserves further investigation.

A person’s supervision status appears to play a large role in acting as a wounded healer. Being under some form of community supervision may suppress the tendency to help others as criminal justice agencies may prohibit fraternization among former prisoners (see e.g., Irwin, 1980; Petersilia, 2003). This common supervision restriction (Petersilia, 2003, p. 83) fits the differential association notion that if former prisoners are allowed to associate, the more seasoned criminals will somehow teach or contaminate the ones with less criminal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. However, the finding that group identification is related to helping others,

but unrelated to criminal attitude or the forecast of rearrest suggests that former prisoners can form positive, prosocial groups with their peers (see also De Leon, 2000, about the “positive peer culture” in TCs). Irwin (1980), for example, emphasizes that self-help groups for prisoners are “fundamentally conservative” (p. 93) and “open doors...to a variety of conventional endeavors” and roles (p. 94; see also Hamm, 1997). Why differential association among prisoners and former prisoners cannot be reversed in this way to emphasize the positive aspects of peer groups has rarely been raised since Cressey (1955) first introduced the idea of retroflexive reformation.

The relationship between helping others and four outcomes was examined. The literature on the helper/wounded healer orientation suggested that helpers would have higher self-esteem and be more satisfied with their lives, while Cressey’s (1955, 1965; see also Maruna, 2001) retroflexive reformation principle argued that offenders engaged in reforming other offenders would have more prosocial attitudes, and possibly be less likely to recidivate. Each of these hypotheses was supported in this study as the helper/wounded healer orientation was found to be a statistically significant predictor of all four dependent variables. In fact, the helper/wounded healer orientation was found to be the strongest predictor of a non-criminal attitude, the second largest predictor of satisfaction with life, and one of the three predictors of the (lower) forecast of rearrest in the next three years. Thus, becoming more involved in helping others appears to have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of formerly incarcerated persons and possibly acts as a sort of buffer against criminality as well.

Although not of primary concern in this paper, additional findings of note were that level of education had similar relationships with the dependent variables as the helper orientation, having remorse was negatively related to the two crime-related measures, stronger social bonds were positively related to psychological well-being, and perceptions of personal stigma were

negatively related to psychological well-being and positively related to having a criminal attitude. These findings suggest that education and the internalization of remorse for the harm caused by one's past crimes are related to desistance from crime (see LeBel et al., in press, for a similar finding for remorse), and that perceptions of stigma are harmful to psychological well-being (see Markowitz, 1998, for persons with mental health disorders) and possibly exacerbate problems in the reintegration process for former prisoners as well (see LeBel, 2006 for a review; LeBel et al., in press).

This study has a number of limitations that must be considered when interpreting the findings. This study employed a cross-sectional design, and as a result, no conclusions can be drawn about causality. The relatively high scores on the helper/wounded healer orientation scale might be an artifact or byproduct of the sample. The reintegration programs from which participants were drawn employ many former prisoners and/or recovering substance users in important capacities. In addition, a substantial number of participants reported attending the program voluntarily and not being under any form of supervision, which suggests that this sample might be quite motivated to obtain the services offered by these programs. Consequently, participants' responses might be affected by the programs themselves, and/or the endorsement of helping others may simply indicate the role they see themselves exercising at this juncture (i.e., "talking the talk"). Therefore, these results must be interpreted with some caution and might not be generalizable to other populations (e.g., non-service recipients) of formerly incarcerated persons. Establishing the generalizability of the findings from this study, or the lack thereof, is a priority for future research.

Today, prisoner reintegration programs appear to be making great use of formerly incarcerated persons as staff (see e.g., Solomon, Waul, Van Ness, & Travis, 2004; Re-Entry

Policy Council, 2005). Although it appears (at least anecdotally) that many released prisoners are turning to mutual-help settings for assistance (Hamm, 1997; Irwin, 2005), we know very little about the appeal and the effects of these groups on their participants and workers. The lack of research on mutual aid organizations, self-help groups, and informal mentoring among prisoners and formerly incarcerated persons is rather startling considering how much research is funded each year to examine the impact of greater controls and, less frequently, treatment programming (see Uggen & Piliavin, 1998, pp.1421-1422). In contrast, for persons with mental health disorders, there is considerable research on peer-run programs and a growing appreciation for consumer-providers in all levels of service provision (see e.g., Clay, Schnell, Corrigan, & Ralph, 2005; New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003; and Goldstrom et al., 2006 for a study of the number and types of mutual-help groups for mental health consumers). Similar research is needed to document the growing role of formerly incarcerated persons employed as workers in a range of settings and capacities within service providers for prisoners and former prisoners. For example, how many formerly incarcerated persons take on viable careers as professional exes of this sort? The effectiveness of mutual-help groups in terms of improved psychological well-being, reduced recidivism and other outcomes for both the helpers and the recipients of help also need to be examined.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study provides preliminary evidence of the benefits of the helper/wounded healer orientation and retroflexive reformation for formerly incarcerated persons' psychological well-being. Moreover, these findings indicate a basic incompatibility between a helper/wounded healer orientation and criminal attitudes and behavior. This orientation appears to transform individuals from being part of "the problem" into part of "the solution" as they give their time in the service of helping others who are less far along in the recovery and reintegration process (see Maruna et al., 2003; Riessman, 1990, p. 225). If helping others has adaptive consequences, then an argument could be made to make opportunities to engage in reciprocal processes of mutual support (i.e., mutual-help groups) more widely available to prisoners and former prisoners (see Maruna et al., 2003). For example, the "Lifers" group at Graterford prison in Pennsylvania argue that "one ensures change by assisting in the efforts to change others" (p. 60), and that "society should begin to use the experience, knowledge, insight, and expertise of transformed ex-offenders to do the work that members of the community and those in positions of authority are not equipped to do" (Lifers Public Safety Steering Committee, 2004, p 65). The goal of this sort of strengths-based corrections approach (see Maruna & LeBel, 2003), like the New Careers Movement before it, would be to:

Devise ways of creating more helpers! Or, to be more exact, to find ways to transform *recipients* of help into *dispensers* of help, thus reversing their roles, and to structure the situation so that recipients of help will be placed in roles requiring the giving of assistance (Riessman, 1965, p. 28).

The findings reported here suggest that the helper principle should be recognized for its potential in facilitating the recovery and reintegration of formerly incarcerated persons.

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**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for the Independent and Dependent Variables**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>(SD)</b>
Age	Years	36.14	(9.68)
Gender	0 = female; 1 = male	.85	(.36)
Black, non-Latino	0 = all others; 1 = Black, non-Latino	.58	(.49)
Social bonds	Quality of bonds to family and friends. 1 = terrible; 7 = delighted. 4-item scale. $\alpha = .74$ .	4.75	(1.24)
Education level	0 = did not earn GED or receive high school diploma; 1 = GED or high school graduate; 2 = some college or more	1.02	(.75)
Employed full-time	0 = not employed full-time; 1 = employed full-time	.19	(.39)
Remorse	Sorry for harm caused to others by past criminal activities. 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree	5.74	(1.70)
Voluntarily attend program	0 = attend program as a requirement of supervision; 1 = voluntarily attend program	.46	(.50)
Time in program	Time involved with the program. 0 = less than 30 days; 4 = more than 1 year	1.22	(1.27)
Time served	Prison time served in months (lifetime)	87.23	(71.42)
Felony convictions	Number of felony convictions (lifetime)	2.18	(1.02)
Violent conviction	0 = only property, drug, or other felony convictions; 1 = violent felony conviction (lifetime)	.41	(.49)
Supervision status	0 = on parole, work release, or probation; 1 = not under correctional supervision	.32	(.47)
Normalization	Normalization of prison experience in the neighborhood where the respondent grew up. 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree. 3-item scale. $\alpha = .69$ .	4.29	(1.50)
Group identification	The extent to which respondents' identify with other former prisoners. 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree. 3-item scale. $\alpha = .55$ .	5.12	(1.06)
Stigma (personal)	Perceptions of personally being stigmatized due to status as a former prisoner. 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree. 9-item scale. $\alpha = .87$ .	3.79	(1.30)
Self-esteem	Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale. 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree. 10-item scale. $\alpha = .78$ .	5.44	(.95)
Satisfaction with life	"How do you feel about your life as a whole?" 1 = terrible; 7 = delighted	4.38	(1.19)
Criminal attitude	Measure of pro-criminal attitudes. 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree. 3-item scale. $\alpha = .65$ .	2.66	(1.39)
Forecast of rearrest	Likelihood of rearrest for new crime in next 3 years. 1 = very unlikely to be rearrested; 5 = very likely to be rearrested.	2.08	(1.09)

Note. SD = standard deviation.

**Table 2: The Helper/Wounded Healer Orientation Scale**

Indicator	Mean (SD)	Factor loading
Share experiences	6.00 (1.46)	.671
Role model	5.20 (1.67)	.817
Mentor	4.88 (1.65)	.765
Pursue career helping others	5.21 (1.78)	.699
Scale	5.32 (1.21)	
Eigenvalue		2.19
Total variance explained		54.81%
Alpha		.722

Note. N = 228. Principal component factor analysis was used. SD = standard deviation. 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree.

**Table 3: Regression Analysis Results for the Helper/Wounded Healer Orientation**

Variable	B	SE B	Beta
Age	.012	(.009)	.104
Gender (male)	-.177	(.224)	-.056
Black, non-Latino	.319*	(.147)	.140
Social bonds	.094	(.061)	.102
Education level	.071	(.101)	.047
Employed full-time	-.055	(.190)	-.019
Remorse	.119**	(.044)	.177
Voluntarily attend program	.110	(.159)	.048
Time in program	-.013	(.061)	-.015
Time served	.001	(.001)	.059
Felony convictions	.069	(.079)	.061
Violent conviction	.064	(.159)	.027
Supervision status (none)	.357*	(.174)	.142
Normalization	.011	(.050)	.014
Group identification	.170*	(.074)	.161
Stigma (personal)	-.080	(.058)	-.093
Constant	2.684**	(.648)	
R <sup>2</sup>	.209		

Note. Results are for the regression equation with outliers removed (n = 225). Mean substitution is used for missing data. \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05.

**Table 4: Regression Analysis Results for Self-esteem, Satisfaction with Life, Criminal Attitude, and Forecast of Rearrest**

Characteristic	Self-esteem	Satisfaction with life	Criminal attitude	Forecast of rearrest
Age	-.001 (.007)	-.012 (.008)	-.018 (.010)	-.003 (.009)
Gender (male)	.247 (.183)	.129 (.219)	-.392 (.259)	.352 (.224)
Black, non-Latino	.032 (.117)	.052 (.143)	-.009 (.170)	.014 (.148)
Social bonds	.217** (.048)	.250** (.059)	-.018 (.070)	-.077 (.061)
Education level	.197* (.079)	.245* (.097)	-.238* (.117)	-.382** (.102)
Employed full-time	.115 (.150)	-.022 (.184)	-.617** (.221)	-.158 (.190)
Remorse	-.002 (.035)	.064 (.042)	-.155** (.051)	-.087* (.044)
Voluntarily attend program	.175 (.125)	-.019 (.153)	.117 (.182)	-.167 (.158)
Time in program	.053 (.048)	-.046 (.059)	.004 (.070)	.062 (.060)
Time served	-.001 (.001)	-.002 (.001)	-.002 (.002)	.001 (.001)
Felony convictions	.021 (.063)	.063 (.077)	.055 (.091)	.005 (.079)
Violent conviction	.144 (.127)	.064 (.154)	-.307 (.183)	-.011 (.158)
Supervision status (none)	-.065 (.138)	-.054 (.170)	-.203 (.200)	.115 (.173)
Normalization	-.074 (.040)	-.025 (.049)	.181** (.058)	.060 (.050)
Group identification	.066 (.059)	-.035 (.072)	-.117 (.086)	.091 (.075)
Stigma (personal)	-.152** (.046)	-.208** (.057)	.214** (.067)	-.005 (.058)
Helper/wounded healer orientation	.125* (.053)	.248** (.064)	-.253** (.076)	-.137* (.066)
Constant	3.796** (.540)	2.763** (.650)	5.530** (.772)	3.105** (.666)
R <sup>2</sup>	.268	.307	.309	.158

Note. The unstandardized coefficients and standard errors are shown. Results are for the regression equations with outliers removed: self-esteem (n = 225), satisfaction with life (n = 226), criminal attitude (n = 226), forecast of rearrest (n = 227). Mean substitution is used for missing data. \*\* p < .01, \* p < .05.