Change Readiness as a Rehabilitative Factor: A Report on Research

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This paper reviews research conducted by the author into how offenders in a remand centre indicate their readiness for positive life change. The author offers a model of change readiness and outlines 5 ways that offenders indicate their change readiness in oral communication.

Introduction

In presenting this report to you today my aim is to engage you on two levels. First, I would like to offer you an invitation to enter my world for a short time and listen to what I have learned about change readiness. I will tell you a story about how this topic has captured my attention over the past nine years, ways I have endeavoured to explore it, what it has shown me about people, and how you can use it to the benefit of students in your classes. Second, I would like to offer you a challenge to go away from this conference and think through the implications change readiness could have for your individual practice as a professional and for correctional rehabilitation more generally.

If you ever have the inclination to conduct a literature search on the topic of change readiness in correctional contexts, you won’t find much. The paucity of literature about this topic may give the impression that it can’t be very important. However, from early in my career in correctional education I developed the impression that change readiness was extremely important in how effective rehabilitation efforts were likely to be. Let me explain how I came to believe in the importance of change readiness. I must explain that my experience in the correctional system was solely with male offenders, so my language reflects that gender bias. However, I consider the points I make in this presentation would apply equally to both genders.
Why Change Readiness?

In 2003 I began running anger management and conflict resolution classes in a maximum security remand correctional centre in Sydney. Over the succeeding years I saw perhaps hundreds of offenders attend my courses. Of course, individual differences abounded, but I began to notice one particularly significant difference between offenders. Some offenders (and I am sure they were in the minority) engaged in my course with great dedication and with a real passion to understand their anger and their behaviour. It appeared they actually wanted to be there, and that they were genuinely trying to change their lives. How I experienced their commitment was through the searching questions they asked, their obvious self-reflection, their desire to explore why they acted as they did in the past, and their willingness to become vulnerable. I had the distinct impression that these students were responding to something inside them, rather than factors in the educational context.

In contrast to these searching people, most offenders in my classes seemed to be there because their legal team had recommended they do an anger management course. Most of these people showed little interest in their anger; often denying its reality, or not really seeing it as a problem. They rarely volunteered anything in class, they showed little insight when issues were raised, and they were much more interested in gaining a certificate than any form of self-awareness. These offenders didn’t appear ready to make any sort of positive life change.

Does any of this sound familiar? I’m sure most people working in correctional rehabilitation would resonate with observations like these. This experience suggested two things for me: that some people appeared more ready for change than others; and that how they acted in class was an artefact of their level of readiness. At the time I wasn’t sure what change readiness actually was, or how offenders would indicate it. I had no evidence of change readiness other than my experience, yet it seemed of great importance in determining how successful my course was.

Research into Change Readiness

Change readiness interested me so much that I decided to commence PhD research into how remand offenders indicate their readiness for positive life change. I collected data in 2006 and presented the results of my thesis in late 2009.
My research was qualitative in nature and followed a grounded theory model. I invited a select group of offenders to tell me their unstructured personal narratives and from the data I uncovered evidence of how they indicated their change readiness. I approached the data with no preconceived expectations of what it would tell me, looking very carefully for patterns in the data. Five indicators of readiness emerged from these patterns. I then compared the indicators with other data – interview data collected from workers in the correctional centre, and insights collected from an extensive literature review. The comparison of data with data and data with theory provided strong validation of the indicators.

Towards a theory of Change Readiness

Since I could find little theoretical understanding of change readiness in the academic literature, it was important to lay the foundations of a theory of change readiness. 

Bringing together the unrelated works of various theorists and academics, I constructed a theory of readiness based on 7 readiness components. These components are:

1. Motivation – having a clear motivation for change is a necessary condition of the change process (Ajzen, 1985; Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Motivation is more than vague intention: it involves decision-making and a clear commitment towards change (Prochaska, 1986). This decision-making and commitment must be sustained and reaffirmed throughout the entire change process (Becker, 1964; Born, 1997). The motivation for change may derive from a desire to avoid some unpleasant consequences or situations (Lee, 2004; Seligman, 1991), or the desire to attract things that would make the person’s life more coherent (Korotkov, 1998; Salvolaine, 2002). Importantly, the motivation to change must make sense to the person – it must appear to them as a ‘logical next step’ in the story of their life (Maruna, 2001).

2. Agency – having agency means a person has a confidence in his or her ability to accomplish things. It is a feeling of self-empowerment; a belief in the efficacy of personal decision-making; a belief that the person can effectively manage their own life (Korotkov, 1998). Maruna (2001) says that people with high agency see themselves as “masters of their own fates” (p. 76). Snyder (2005) says that people with high agency have ‘agency thinking’ (agency permeates how they think about life), and they also have ‘pathways thinking’ (they actively
seek out pathways around problems to reach their desired destination. People with high agency are more likely to take the initiative with change; they are more likely to be self-starters, and they are more likely to persist with change (Fay, 2001).

3. Insight – insight refers to the realistic assessment of problems; personal needs, goals, and limitations; and people who can be trusted and relied upon. People need to be able to 'read the signs' that change is needed – sometimes these signs take the form of dissonance (Festinger, 1957); sometimes they are the realisation that the world consistently fails to conform to expectations (King, 2001). People need insight into what they really need (Maslow, 1943) and what they really want to live a ‘good life’ (Ward, 2002).

4. Beliefs – worldview beliefs are particularly influential in the change process. Worldviews are beliefs about ‘the way things are’ and ‘the way things should be’ (Koltko-Rivera, 2004). Beliefs about the way things are and how they should be become so deeply engrained that they become ‘scripts’ that determine patterns of behaviour (McAdams, 1993, Seligman, 1991; Tomkins, 1987). Some scripts can see people become victims of circumstance, or victims of society, where their only real power is the power to fail (Maruna, 2001). Disempowering scripts and negative belief systems are incompatible with readiness for positive life change.

5. Vision – change readiness needs the vision of meaningful and desirable goals (Ward, 2002), hope (Snyder, 1995), and optimism (Seligman, 1991). Seligman says there is an art to hope and optimism: it is “finding temporary and specific causes of misfortune” (p. 48). In other words, it is in not feeling trapped and disempowered by misfortune, but finding ways out of undesirable circumstances, and not giving them the power to set the course of a person’s life. Offenders with change readiness have the power to see beyond the current reality of the prison walls, and have vision and hope for a different kind of life.

6. Trust – Prochaska (1986) says that being open and trusting is one of the processes that drive change. Trust needs to be combined with the insight to know who is trustworthy, but trust is recognition of the fact that change is often
complex and difficult, and may not be achievable without help. Trust combined with the openness to receive help is an important element of change readiness (Frankl, 1977).

7. Balance – change is not positive if it hurts other people and it results in an unbalanced and unsustainable life. Change needs to make sense to the person, but it also needs to be responsive to the interests and needs of other people and society (Sternberg, 1998). People are ready for change only when they commit to maintaining a workable balance between their personal interests and those of other people.

The 7 readiness components listed above provide guidelines of what to look out for when seeking to identify change readiness in offenders. However, they do not tell you how you are likely to encounter them when you are speaking with an offender. My research suggests that offenders are likely to express their change readiness verbally using five indicators. Some of these ways they may express these indicators are shown below, along with actual quotes from offenders (names have been changed, ages between 19-57 years).

**How Offenders Indicate Change Readiness**

My research suggests that offenders verbalise their change readiness using five indicators.

1. **Wanting to Change** – offenders who are ready for change express their desire to change in a variety of ways:
   a. Talk of commitments and promises: “I told my family, I promised my family and I can’t break my promise to them. Every promise I make my mother, I have to look her in the eye, I mean it, and I keep it.”
   b. Wasting my life: “I don’t like this lifestyle, I might be accustomed to it, used to it, but it’s such a waste. A waste of life.”
   c. Sick of it: “I know I am not going to use again, I have said it heaps of times before and people say it, but this time something is different inside. I am sick of it.”
   d. Made up my mind: “I have made up my mind what I want to do with my life, get out of here, go back to my family, open up the shop again and do the usual thing.”
e. Sense of shame: “The thing is that I am very ashamed about my past. I look down on myself, you know, and I have a lot of shame about it. I don't like talking about it so when I talk about the past I am ashamed of it and that is why I put my head down.”

f. Accepting the struggle: “But just putting everything, all the bad points behind me and just starting again, it's like, you know, learning to walk for the first time. You've got to work on the beginning again. It's going to be a long journey.”

g. Seeing opportunity: “If I hadn't come to jail I would still be in that same hole I was in and I needed this to happen to jolt my brain or something, to make me think what have I done. I am in jail, I have got to get my life on track. This gave me a kick up the arse, which is what I needed.”

Some of the marker expressions you may encounter from offenders who are ready for change are: Sick of it, Sick and tired, Dying to let it go, I’m over that, I'm getting too old for it, Waste of time/life, I've missed out on…, Haven't got the energy, Had enough of it, Not doing anything for me, I've had this, I never got to…..

2. **Owning the Problem** – offenders who are ready for change show insight and accept responsibility for their problems. They may show this by:
   a. Facing unpleasant truths: “I was lost, no guidance, no goals, just a slave of my evil desires and bad habits. I used to just cover all my problems with drugs. I was just losing my humanity, I was blind and didn't even see it. I was just eating off everyone.”
   b. Auditing the self: “I started asking myself the big questions, reflecting, pondering, contemplating on life. I said to myself one day, "Look if you die now, what have you left behind? What have you achieved"?”
   c. Seeing strengths: “If there's something I want to do, then I give it 100%…I know I can get there.”
   d. Developing insight: “I managed to learn how to play checkers and a bit of chess and the main strategy is that you must think before you move. I was just moving everywhere I went outside, I never thought about my actions.”
   e. Accepting responsibility for past: “I put myself in here you know and I don't blame nobody for it. I just feel very not smart in what I did…But nobody pulled me into this, I just stepped into it.”
f. Accepting responsibility for future: “You have psychology and all that ...but people don't use them. I never used them before, like, I used to talk with them but now I’m trying to use them, use what I can in jail to actually change.”

3. **Seeing a Future** – offenders who are ready for change see something positive in their future:
   a. Has plans and goals: “I have this plan and I have a book in my cell with everything I want to do. My music, my first album, what is going to be called when I get out. I always look to the future because this is not the end. Don't dwell on the past, you know, just think to the future.”
   b. Has agency: “I am confident and I want to do it and I don't want to fail. I am not going to quit because quitting is for losers. That is part of the change, not quitting. Before I would just quit, but now I don't want to quit, now I am trying. I want to change, I want to live up to my potential and I can do it.”
   c. Has optimism: “I thank God that he has given me a chance, he has made me realise that he wants to give me a chance.”

4. **Valuing Support** – offenders who are ready for change value support from trustworthy people:
   a. Family support: “My mother and father, they've always been supportive, they've always done everything they can for me to help me...they've been supportive, just that itself gives you the strength and helps you.”
   b. Gaol support: “The chaplains have been lot of help, I've been seeing them, talking to them, to drug and alcohol workers, and they just gave me encouragement and hope.”

5. **Persisting with Transformation** – offenders who are ready for change are encouraged to persist by seeing evidence of their transformation:
   a. From changed behaviours: “I'm off drugs, I feel good, I have been off drugs for 16 months. It's because I don't need that. Don't worry about abstaining from drugs and alcohol, abstaining from drink and water for a whole month, that's discipline, that's what I built because of Islam.”
   b. From reports of others: “Other people have seen the change in me. They just say to me, "I can tell you were naughty before but now you..."
have changed”. They see that, you know, they see that. My mum sees that.”

Implications of Change Readiness

The findings presented in this paper raisea number of possible implications that deserve further attention. I would like to present three of them here for your consideration.

1. Correctional systems should view offenders as potentially empowered agents of change, not just constellations of risks and needs.
2. If offenders with change readiness are more likely to change than those lacking in change readiness, change readiness should be recognised as a legitimate rehabilitative factor.
3. All else being equal, rehabilitative interventions are more likely to be effective when delivered to offenders who are ready for change.

References


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