The Importance of the Mentor-Mentee Relationship in Women's Desistance From Destructive Behaviors

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Article begins on next page
The Importance of the Mentor-Mentee Relationship in Women’s Desistance from Destructive Behaviors

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THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN’S DESISTANCE

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Abstract

According to the literature on desistance, the process of reentering society after imprisonment is distinct from the process of desistance as the former is a broader, institutional process that may influence the latter. Scholars have also acknowledged gendered differences in both reentry and desistance processes. Among the array of players in the lives of formerly incarcerated individuals, mentors have become an increasingly popular form of social support in postincarceration programs—particularly for women in reentry. Given the increasing interest in mentoring programs, this study uses semi-structured interviews with mentors (n = 10) and clients (n = 11) in a women’s postincarceration mentoring program to assess the role of mentors in the reentry process and the desistance process. It was found that mentors aid in these processes by serving as facilitators of change for women who are open to such change and by facilitating in constructive behavioral adjustments.

Keywords: reentry, reintegration, desistance, women, mentoring
The Importance of the Mentor-Mentee Relationship in Women’s Desistance from Destructive Behaviors

Desistance is the ongoing process of change in which an individual lowers his or her involvement in destructive acts. It is not a matter of being cured from criminal or delinquent behavior but rather, a process of self-discovery and transformative adjustments in self-identification (Maruna, 2001). Such changes correspond with shifts in one’s cognition undertaking more “openness to change,” more “perceived availability” of opportunities to change, a new conventional identity, or a fresh assessment of one’s previous lifestyle (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002, p. 507). In addition, desistance is not only an internal process (Giordano et al., 2002) but also one that may be shaped by external factors such as an individual’s environment, circumstances, and overall ability to reintegrate back into society postincarceration (Bui & Morash, 2009; Farrall & Bowling, 1999). As noted by Cobbina (2010), “reintegration directly affects criminal outcome because when former inmates have difficulty adjusting postrelease, they are more likely to reoffend rather than desist from crime” (p. 211).

Thus, it is of value to understand the role of external influences within the context of prisoner reentry and desistance. The utilization of mentors, specifically, has shown promise – particularly for women in reentry (see Bauldry, Korom-Djakovic, McClanahan, McMaken, & Kotloff, 2009). Considering mentoring initiatives to aid in the reentry and desistance processes of formerly incarcerated adults as well as the gendered experiences within these processes, the purpose of this article is to evaluate mentors as a social support network in a female-centered platform and to investigate the processes by which mentors shape women’s efforts to desist from destructive behaviors.

Social Support Networks, Reentry and Desistance
There is consistent evidence demonstrating the importance of social supports during the reentry process. Specifically, research suggests that the presence of a social support network may better assist individuals’ efforts to desist than the use of crime control practices (Cullen, 1994; Cullen, Wright, & Chamlin, 1999). Cullen (1994) argues, “social support lessens the effects of exposure to criminogenic strains…increases the likelihood that offenders will turn away from a criminal pathway…[and] lessens involvement in crime” (p. 541-544). While formal agents (e.g., parole officers) may serve as a form of social support (Cobbina, 2010), familial and marital support is often described as a critical dimension of social support for individuals in reentry. It is important to note, however, that the family and spouse may also be detrimental to the reentry process if the relationship or family dynamic is problematic (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986). Thus, an abundance of positive social networks in comparison with negative social networks is important in individuals’ efforts to reintegrate back into society and desist from nonconventional activities.

There have been recent efforts encouraging the implementation of reentry programs that provide formerly incarcerated individuals with positive social networks – in particular, matching the formerly incarcerated with volunteer mentors (see Bauldry et al., 2009; Jucovy, 2006). Research demonstrates mentors providing a source of companionship and partnership (Brown & Ross, 2010; Salgado, Fox, & Quinlan, 2011; Spencer, 2006), mentors easing emotional situations while keeping mentees motivated (Bauldry et al., 2009), and mentors offering their mentees a positively growing relationship (Keller, 2005; Salgado et al., 2011), among many other things. Keller and Pryce (2010) referred to mentoring as a hybrid of voluntary, mutual interactions with someone of unequal social equality in factors such as social experiences. The mentoring of adults involved in the criminal justice system can be described as “the pairing of adult offenders with
members of the community with a view to bringing about positive lifestyle change” (Brown & Ross, 2010, p. 32); yet, this mentor-mentee pairing may last for approximately a year (Bauldry et al., 2009; Brown & Ross, 2010; Jucovy, 2006). There has been an increasing interest in the use of mentors since the United States passage of the Second Chance Act Adult Mentoring Grant Program, which allocates funds to nonprofit organizations and federally recognized Indian tribes who apply for grant money devoted to mentoring programs for incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals. These mentoring grants are one aspect of a larger prisoner reentry initiative to reduce recidivism rates and support individuals in their return to mainstream society. As a result, nonprofit organizations have implemented mentoring programs, calling for studies of their effectiveness in assisting individuals in their reentry and desistance.

Despite the difficulties in implementing and sustaining mentoring programs on account of recruiting volunteers willing to mentor adults who are involved in the criminal justice system (Jucovy, 2006), recent studies suggest that mentors can be valuable and beneficial to their formerly incarcerated mentees (Bauldry et al., 2009; Brown & Ross, 2010; Lewis, Maguire, Raynor, Vanstone, & Vennard, 2007). Bauldry et al. (2009) reported findings on a Ready4Work reentry initiative consisting of 11 sites that provided mentoring services to adults (ages 18-35 years) who were released within 3 months of their enrollment program. Bauldry and his colleagues “found that participants who met with a mentor were 60 percent less likely to leave the program in any given month than were participants who did not” (p. 15). Operationalizing recidivism as the return to prison for committing a new crime, they reported,

Compared with participants who did not have a mentor, mentored participants were 35 percent less likely to have recidivated within a year of being released. Furthermore, restricting our attention to participants who met with a mentor at least once, we found that an additional month of mentoring was associated with a small decline in the likelihood of recidivating (Bauldry et al., 2009, p. 16).
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

Lewis and her colleagues (2007) found that formerly incarcerated individuals who were in contact with mentors ultimately recidivated at a lower rate than a control group—a statistically significant effect. While this study revealed that contact with a mentor was associated with lower recidivism, the role mentors played in the desistance process was left unclear and, yet, the authors speculate that the mentors’ emotional support influenced mentees’ desistance. Mentors serve as a positive influence for formerly incarcerated individuals and their presence may also be beneficial for individuals attempting to desist, but the mechanisms at play remain somewhat unclear. Building on existing literature, this article intends to demonstrate some of the underlying mechanisms in mentor-mentee relationships that support the process of desistance, specifically for women.

What Role Do Mentors Play in Women’s Desistance Process?

Even though research demonstrates mentors’ impact on individuals’ efforts to desist, it is of particular interest to evaluate the role of mentors in women’s desistance process. For one, existing literature maintains that women, in particular, are influenced by their social relationships (Gilligan, 1993; Miller, 1986). In their examination of female offending, Steffensmeier and Allan (1996) found that women’s destructive and criminal behaviors tend to be responses that are “more protective of relationships and emotional commitments” when these social connections are threatened (p. 467). In addition to this, women in the criminal justice system are also more likely than their male counterparts to have histories of substance use, encounters with physical abuse, and experiences with mental health issues both pre- and postincarceration (see Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; La Vigne, Brooks, & Shollenberger, 2009; Richie, 2001). While these circumstances may be associated with a weakened social support network, mentorship provides access to a positive relationship – a social connection that, according to psychological literature,
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

is particularly beneficial for women. This coincides with the finding that in comparison to their male counterparts, females are more likely to volunteer their involvement in mentoring programs (Bauldry et al., 2009). Evaluating the Rhode Island Women’s Mentoring Program, Salgado et al. (2011) report that a “full 85 percent of mentees believed that their relationship with their mentor had made a critical difference in their staying on ‘the right path’ during and after their release” (p. 289). Due to the gendered experiences of prisoner reentry and the apparent correlation between mentoring and desistance, this study seeks to explore, first, how mentors serve as a social support network in female-centered mentoring initiatives for formerly incarcerated women and, second, the role of mentoring relationships in women’s efforts at desisting from destructive behaviors. The purpose of this study is to provide insight into the mechanisms of change for women in reentry and the underlying mechanisms in which a mentoring approach may help shape this ongoing process of change as women make attempts to desist from destructive behaviors.

**Methods**

**Data Collection Procedures**

This analysis uses data from a larger study of a nonprofit reentry program that assists formerly incarcerated women in their transition back into mainstream society. Open for 11 years at the time of the study, this agency provides its clients with one-on-one mentoring in addition to other support services. There are monthly gatherings that not only serve as bonding opportunities for clients, mentors, and program staff but also provide clients with sessions on various topics like preparing for interviews, knowing one’s rights as a tenant, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. While some women reside in one of the two apartment-style transitional housing facilities, others reside in housing that is not affiliated with the reentry program. Clients must be
convicted of nonviolent charges to be eligible for the reentry program. Women were required to request a mentor before they could be matched with a volunteer mentor for 1 year – the length of the mentoring program. Volunteer mentors, all of whom were women older than 25 years, received a 1-day mentor training on common experiences of formerly incarcerated women and on general situations that have occurred with previous mentees. Once a request was made for a mentor, potential mentor-mentee pairs met in-person to converse and ensure mutual comfort before a 1-year match. Both were required to sign an agreement with each other to have at least one in-person interaction per month and to exchange daily phone calls for the first month, regardless of who initiated the calls. After the first month, mentor-mentee pairs managed phone contact as they saw fit to meet needs or address concerns.

The goal of this study was to analyze narratives of a women’s postincarceration mentoring program from the perspective of formerly incarcerated women and matched mentor-mentee pairs in order to offer different standpoints of shared interactions. The program served a total of 87 mentees during the year 2008. Thus, a purposive sampling strategy was used with the objective of recruiting 10 mentor-mentee pairs and 10 additional mentees to obtain a sizable number of formerly incarcerated women and a considerable number of matched pairs. The Client Services Director informed mentors and mentees of this study. Interested participants were contacted by phone for interview scheduling, but some individuals were inaccessible or unable to schedule an interview. Subsequently, a convenience sampling strategy was used as the Client Services Director was asked to identify additional participants willing to be interviewed, even when matched pairs could not be included. The final sample includes 11 mentees and 10 mentors, including 7 mentor-mentee pairs. After initial contact during the scheduling of interviews, semistructured in-depth interviews were conducted in the year 2008. The interviews
were held at locations of participants’ liking, such as their homes (including transitional housing), nearby restaurants, and the office of the reentry program. Interviews lasted for approximately 1 to 3 hours and each participant was assigned a pseudonym.

**Participants**

The mentees were involved in the criminal justice system due to cases concerning fraud/theft ($n = 4$), possession of drugs ($n = 4$), both drug possession and economic gain ($n = 1$), and other non-violent offenses such as child endangerment and weapons possession ($n = 2$). All but one mentee had previous experiences with substance abuse. Of the 11 mentees, 6 had mental health issues including bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD), among others. On average, mentors were older in age than mentees – 55 and 37 years, respectively. Mentees were clients in the reentry program for an average of 13 months, ranging from 2 months to approximately 5 years. At the time of the interview, mentees had been paired with their mentors for an average of 7 months, ranging from 3 weeks to 1 year. One mentee did not have a mentor when interviewed because she had completed the 1-year match with her mentor but was still in the reentry program. Two mentors did not have a mentee at the time of their interviews but each held experience mentoring at least 1 mentee. The majority of mentors ($n = 7$) had multiple mentees over time, with an average of 5.

**Analysis**

Considering the use of semistructured in-depth interviews, it is no surprise that a number of the interview questions stimulating the most informative narratives about mentors’ role in women’s desistance actually pertained to the nature and extent of mentor-mentee relationships and the mentors’ support during women’s lives postincarceration. Participants were questioned about the challenges faced during reentry, the impact of the reentry program, life experiences
pre- and postincarceration, as well as the relationships held between mentors and mentees. Overarching questions were asked (e.g., Can you tell me about your relationship with your mentor?), which served to gauge the essence of the mentor-mentee relationship, and these were followed up, as appropriate, with probes to elicit more detail. Interview questions allowed for an assessment of similarities and differences between participants’ accounts of the mentor-mentee relationship. For example, mentees were asked how they benefitted from the relationship with their mentors, while mentors were also asked how they believed their mentees benefitted. Similarly, mentees and mentors were asked about mentors’ role in working with their mentees on personal goals. Both groups were also questioned about challenges or difficulties in the mentor-mentee relationship. Mentees were asked additional questions about their mentors’ involvement. Specifically, mentees were asked if their mentors were involved at all in their drug and mental health treatment or with finding or keeping a job. Responses to these questions were followed by probes to elaborate on the extent of mentors’ role. Mentors were also asked additional questions regarding their role to uncover potential acts and strategies in their mentoring approach that were unknown to their mentees. For instance, mentors were asked the following questions: “Can you tell me what you do as a mentor?” “What role do you think you play in your mentee’s transition process?” “What kinds of things do you do to help with challenges [with goals]?” and “Are there some challenges you can’t help with?”

Interviews were audiotape-recorded, transcribed, and coded using grounded theory techniques, which allow for the “construction of reality” grounded in themes within participants’ narratives (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). Initial coding of preliminary themes was manually conducted within each interview. After meticulously coding for overarching themes, NVivo 10 software was used for subsequent focused coding within, first, mentee interviews and, then, mentor
interviews. Though there are concerns about the use of software quantifying qualitative data and potentially dissociating the researcher (see Lee & Fielding, 1991), existing work acknowledges the benefits of software to enhance qualitative data management and assist in its data analysis (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2006; Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010; Lee & Fielding, 1991). NVivo 10 software was used for the focused coding of mentees’ acts, remarks and hopes of making constructive adjustments or addressing destructive behaviors. Constructive adjustments, here, were acts that interviewees considered beneficial to mentees’ desistance; destructive behaviors may be criminal or nonconventional but also includes other acts that interviewees deemed detrimental, such as the continued engagement with negative influences and irrationally acting out of anger. In addition to this, focused coding was also conducted of mentors’ role in these processes and of accounts regarding mentee setbacks. Narratives were further analyzed for reoccurring themes within these larger categories, reaching a point of saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2012). As described by study participants, these reoccurring themes are understood as the underlying mechanisms in mentor-mentee relationships supporting desistance and, in the case of mentee setbacks, the identified explanations for such incidents. In order to distinguish the role of mentors from that of other influences, the focus in mentor and mentee interviews was narrowed to actions specifically made by mentors and actions taken by mentees in response to their mentors. This was useful to distinguish the influence of the mentor-mentee relationship from that of other external players (e.g., sponsors) and factors (e.g., employment). Within all major themes, further assessment was conducted of similarities and differences between mentees’ accounts and that of the mentors.

It is important to note that this study focuses on women’s narratives of their intentions and behaviors, but does not include “official” data such as arrest records. Official data does not
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN’S DESISTANCE

capture the daily obstacles faced by women in reentry, the everyday interactions that shape constructive and destructive behaviors, or the distinctive actions that are not included in official reports. Thus, narratives provide a different set of insights into the women’s behaviors, including information about successes and setbacks that are unlikely to be found in official records. It can also be argued that narratives from matched pairs in mentoring relationships may serve as a form of data triangulation as they provide different perspectives of shared interactions. This study also focuses on the meaning of mentor-mentee relationships for women in reentry and, as a result, does not present follow-up data since such information is not essential to this report. As previously noted, desistance is an ongoing, internal process of change that is influenced by external players and factors. Thus, this study can accurately provide insight into how a mentoring relationship shapes mentees’ process of desisting without the use of outcome data, and its ability to do so is not hindered by the absence of follow-up data. In fact, the data in this study may benefit mentoring programs seeking to assist women in reentry as it provides valuable information about mentor-mentee relationships conducive to supporting women’s desistance.

Findings

In order to grasp the ways in which mentors shape mentees’ ongoing process of desistance, it is essential to understand mentors as the mentees’ social support network and to understand the mentor-mentee relationship for women in reentry. Participants described mentors as nonjudgmental, trustworthy, patient, consistent and caring individuals. They were individuals who listened and talked to the women during times of need, who spent quality time with the women, and who functioned as a positive source of support during their reintegration back into society. According to the interviewees, mentors appear to share the greatest similarities with sponsors as they both provide positive inspiration and support. Yet, mentors were unique to the
women in at least three aspects: the nature of their knowledge, the extent of their care, and their focal concerns in helping the women.

**The Nature of the Mentor-Mentee Relationship**

Mentors either had vicarious experiences with the substance abuse of others or knowledge that was learned during their time as a mentor. For instance, all mentors noted vicarious experiences during other volunteer work with individuals facing domestic violence, drug addictions, and other traumatic occurrences. Mentors also discussed experiences with their family members. Helen, for instance, described her vicarious experiences with substance abuse:

> My husband’s recovering as of 31 years….I have a sister who’s been recovering for way over that length of time - way back when, when they didn’t even have treatments. So addiction runs in our family and uh, having come up from those ranks, from that kind of recovery, I understood far better what this kind of thing could lead to.

Even though mentees seldom noted their mentors’ secondhand experiences, as this was possibly unknown to them, mentors viewed these experiences as beneficial to the mentor-mentee relationship. Vicarious experiences with substance use influenced mentors’ genuine interest in supporting other women through the obstacles they faced, but these mentors had not “lived it.”

Despite the absence of personal experiences with incarceration or substance use, mentors were viewed as dependable women who remained nonjudgmental and provided their mentees with unconditional support. Rachel, a mentee, believed mentees differed from their mentors because mentees “may have a totally different way of thinking until they get into living and back out here in society…. And really get that way of thinking, and changing their self and their life.” Still, her mentor was dependable and nonjudgmental towards her while providing needed support: “She never hung up on me, she never told me ‘I don’t want to hear that’ or ‘That’s wrong.’ That just kind of makes you feel like there is somebody who totally accepts you for who you are.” Faced with various postincarceration barriers, mentees considered these mentor
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

characteristics to be a value to the mentor-mentee relationship and essential in its development. Although developing the mentor-mentee relationship may be difficult, interviewees revealed a supportive and mutually affectionate bond once a relationship was established. Both mentors and mentees used family-like references to describe the mentor-mentee relationship, as one often referred to the other as a “mother figure” or being similar to a “sister” or “daughter.” Mentors were repeatedly perceived as fictive kin and as women who “loved” their mentees, a relationship far more personal and “more caring” than one held with other players.

Mentors’ focal concerns in helping women were also considered to be unique. Mentors were described as providing a broad range of assistance in comparison to other individuals like sponsors, who were likely to have a designated focus in the women’s lives (i.e., primarily assisting them in maintaining sobriety). For instance, Eleanor noted: “With my mentor, I really don’t get personal about my drug usage. I just get personal about life.” While mentors aided in mentees’ efforts to recover from alcohol or drug abuse, they helped the women with obstacles beyond the avoidance or prevention of relapse since their help also addressed factors such as re-building familial relationships, submitting job applications, and finding housing. Overall, mentors were described as supporting the women during their reentry process and doing so in a variety of ways. The remainder of this article will examine the importance of mentees’ willingness and openness to accept assistance in order for the mentor-mentee relationship to flourish. It will then explore mentors’ role in shaping mentees’ abilities to make constructive changes and avoid destructive behaviors. Lastly, this article will examine the scope of mentors’ support in facilitating desistance from destructive behaviors.

Mentors for Mentees Working on Change
Within the interviews, both mentors and mentees made note that formerly incarcerated women must want to change in order to refrain from destructive behaviors and make constructive adjustments. All eleven mentees made references about the desire for and readiness to change serving as essential factors to allow constructive changes in their lives. For instance, Florence explained: “It’s not rocket science, [you] just gotta want to change deep down in your heart and soul and have to want to change and then do it….If I don’t want to change my life, and no matter what kind of goals I got, if I don’t want to change me, it’s not gonna happen.” Of the matched mentor-mentee pairs, all seven pairs noted the importance of women’s desire and readiness to change. The matched pair with the most references was Callie and her mentor Veronica. Callie had been incarcerated for drug and economic charges. When asked to elaborate on her perception of program effectiveness, Callie replied: “It feels totally different now because, and a lot of people say, when you have to, you’re miserable but when you actually want to stay clean, things roll a lot more smoothly. And that’s where I’m at, so I’m thinking I want to do it.” She also noted that she was now “more open-minded to change,” a statement supported by her mentor’s description of Callie’s progress during their five-month match. Callie’s mentor explained that mentees are “gonna do what they want to do” so those who do not want to change may consequently engage in destructive behaviors. But in reference to Callie, Veronica noted: “She’s very smart and knows what she wants, and she won’t do that.” Knowing that her mentee wanted to make constructive changes in her life, this mentor was certain that her mentee would refrain from engaging in destructive behaviors that could lead to her recidivism.

Coinciding with the notion of success among formerly incarcerated women who are ready to change, both mentors and mentees discussed the extent of mentors’ ability to help the women avoid destructive behaviors. Gwen, a mentee, admitted: “I thought I could do it all
myself,” but later realized that she could not work towards desistance alone. She also noted that formerly incarcerated women “didn’t come out wanting to be back where they started, but they didn’t have a support system that we have now.” This mentee made a remark commonly expressed throughout the interviews: “First, a person has to want to help [herself]” and subsequently, her mentor should “just be there for [her].” This order of operations was frequently noted throughout the interviews. As described by one mentor, Janice: “I can’t do anything with them if they don’t want to change themselves….If they don’t want to change, I can do somersaults, handstands, flips, whatever, and they’re not going to change, they’re going to be the same.” Thus, interviewees commonly held the belief that “if you want to change your life, the mentee and mentor program is a great program.” While more references were made by mentees, both mentees and mentors expressed an understanding that mentors served as a resource for those who were ready to make constructive changes in their destructive behaviors and also for those who were willing to reach out to mentors for help.

Mentor Support in Desistance

Mentors were found to shape transformative changes among the formerly incarcerated women. Mentors and their mentees recognized that most women in the reentry program had troubled relationships and weak social skills that could present obstacles to successful reentry and their efforts to desist. Accordingly, it was found that mentors monitored mentees’ behaviors and associations in order to protect their mentees from negative influences and guide them through constructive changes. When asked how they have benefitted from the mentor-mentee relationship, mentees frequently noted their mentors’ ability to provide different outlooks on negative situations, their capacity to provide suggestions on how to deal with destructive feelings and situations and their presence as someone to speak to during difficult times. These were all
noted as underlying factors in the mentor-mentee relationship that facilitated women’s desistance from destructive behaviors and their engagement in more constructive activities.

Mentors’ role in providing their mentees a different outlook on various situations was noted by each of the seven mentor-mentee pairs as well as every interviewee, with the exception of one mentee named Audrey who was matched with her mentor for the shortest period at the time of her interview - three weeks. For example, Gwen, a mentee, was addicted to drugs for a number of years leading up to her incarceration, which was a result of her shoplifting to support her habit. Louise, her mentor, believed it was important for mentors to “give them a different perspective on life. I think that’s basically the main…components to being a mentor.” Shown by her mentor that drug usage and incarceration are highly correlated, Gwen discussed an example when her mentor provided a different outlook on a situation that saved her from that cycle:

I was so offended when I didn’t get a Mother’s Day card and I kinda blew it out of proportion. And she kinda [made me] see how society puts on such a big issue on Mother’s Day. You know, it made me look at it in another light….She really made me look at that in a different light because something as minute as that could have caused a chain reaction in my mind….That could have set me up, [set] up a thing in my mind, set me up to fail.

While here Louise directly provided her mentee with a different outlook on a particular situation, other participants noted how different perspectives were given indirectly. For instance, another mentor named Ernestine stated: “I listen and ask questions so that she can hear herself and the decisions she is making.” At the time of her interview, Ernestine’s mentee Renatta had graduated from an outpatient treatment program. Yet, Renatta discussed negative interactions with others in the program and later described her mentor’s ability to ask questions that offered a different outlook on such negative circumstances:

She’s like, ‘Okay. Well, what are your goals?….If you’re not willing to give it your all, you know, go all the way for your goals, whatcha gon’ go halfway and keep…?’ So she would say stuff like that….I was seein’ I was complainin’ when I
was done…. So she said somethin’ to really make me look at it and be like, ‘Yeah, everything not just gonna come easy.’ Yeah, so she helped me in that area.

As shown in the previous examples, mentees often revealed feelings of defeat but attributed their ability to manage these negative circumstances (and potentially destructive behaviors) to their mentors’ capacity to help them view things from a different perspective.

Another common theme throughout the interviews was mentors’ role in helping mentees deal with feelings, attitudes, temptations, and situations. Eight of the eleven mentees made such references and all ten mentors noted their role in helping mentees in this manner, which helped them refrain from engaging in destructive behaviors.

Natalie, a mentee, believed improvement was “about thinking different and living different.” She was incarcerated due to the possession and manufacturing of methamphetamine. While manufacturing methamphetamine, Natalie found herself less concerned with budgeting for long-term goals, but during her reentry, she found herself needing to learn how to budget her funds in order to legally achieve her goal of home ownership. When asked in what ways she benefitted from the mentor-mentee relationship, she explained being shown how to budget and admitted: “She made me think. Yeah, at the time it was almost irritating but looking back, it was helpful. Because she taught me a lot from those things I did through her.” Such a demonstration of alternative ways to deal with situations was also noted by Florence, another mentee who said: “My mentor, she was teaching me how to live life on life’s terms, basically, you know, stuff I don’t normally do…And, I’m just enjoying life on life’s terms, that’s it.”

Callie stayed in an abusive relationship for twelve years despite the physical abuse and introduction to drugs that eventually led to her incarceration for forgery, possession, and distribution. In response to the trauma in her relationship, Callie developed a defense mechanism where she would not “tolerate” people approaching her inappropriately or speaking to (or about)
her offensively. She described an altercation with a co-worker and explained how her mentor helped her deal with the accompanying anger management issues: “[S]he’s been on to me about…letting people get to me like that….That I just need to keep my mouth shut and walk away from people.” She admitted: “I could have lost my job if me and him actually got into it….I could possibly go to jail and I think that is what she is trying to teach me.” Also faced with temptations to re-engage in drug use, Callie believed her mentor was “amazing” in her ability to “detour” her mind from temptations by suggesting other activities. She also admitted, “There’s never been a problem that I haven’t been able to talk to her about that she has not gave me good advice. And advice—not only good advice—but advice that I listen to.”

While few mentors noted a straightforward approach in helping their mentees through various circumstances and situations, most mentors took an indirect and more suggestive approach. Linda described asking her mentee questions in order to provoke her to think of constructive responses to negative circumstances. Linda had served as a mentor for approximately eight to ten years at the time of her interview, and described how she helped mentees overcome problems with their social skills:

Because a lot of them don’t have those skills at all, all they know is to say ‘F-you.’ Well you’re not going to keep your job if you say that to your employer. “Is there another way you can say, ‘I’m really angry when this happens’?” Trying to teach how to be assertive without being aggressive.

Another mentor explained: “I tell them all the time and I try to let them realize the fact that no matter what you do, you have choices.” Taking a range of approaches, mentors helped the women find ways to handle their feelings, attitudes, and temptations while also providing the women with pointers to consider when responding to negative circumstances.

To some extent, mentees noted their perceptions of themselves as being individuals who made bad decisions but not individuals who were bad people. Natalie, a mentee, noted that she
was not proud of everything she did in her past, but she also explained that she was not ashamed of her past either. She believed “bad places have been learning experiences.” Mentors helped their mentees recuperate from these “bad places” by guiding them through minor goals towards self-sufficiency and demonstrating great pride in their successes. Throughout the interviews, both mentors and mentees discussed ways in which mentors provided positive reinforcements in their mentoring, acknowledging accomplishments and praising the mentees for their achievements. Such pride in the mentee and positive reinforcement by the mentor is captured in the following accounts made by a mentor-mentee matched pair:

She tell me she’s proud of me. I’ve come a long ways from when I first got into the program. I just came up the wrong way and she’s very proud of me….She makes me feel so good about myself to where I don’t have to feel down….I set my goals, I got my kids, I got a job, kids are on their way back home and I got a house. (Rhonda, mentee).

When they do really good things I always praise them and tell them how proud I am. ‘Cause we can always sit down and tell them how bad they were or how wrong they were and how they’re not gonna do nothing. But when they do something good, don’t they deserve the same type of influence on them? And praise for them? To make them feel good about themselves? And I tell them, “Oh, you did a real good thing, come on down, let’s go to lunch.” And I tell them, “You know, you are role models.” (Janice, mentor).

By providing positive reinforcements, Janice was described as empowering her mentee to be pleased with herself and her ability to make accomplishments towards self-sufficiency.

The Scope of Mentors’ Support in Desistance

It is worth noting that while mentors supported mentees in their efforts at desisting and provided positive reinforcements of their accomplishments, participants often discussed the presence of boundaries within the mentor-mentee relationship and the extent to which mentors were successful in helping the women desist from destructive behaviors. With the exception of one woman, mentees often described disinterest in their mentors’ direct involvement in familial
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN’S DESISTANCE

situations and in drug treatment meetings. Callie was the only woman who did not make note of boundaries between herself and her mentor but, instead, focused on the ways her mentor, Veronica, tried to protect her from negative influences. Even though this mentee did not perceive a boundary in the mentor-mentee relationship, her mentor did establish a boundary that went unnoticed by her. Specifically, Veronica admitted that she sealed her personal life from their conversations while also being selective about when to address particular issues: “I try to keep me out of it. You know what I mean? I focus on her a lot… and sometimes I say things and sometimes I don’t.”

Susan, another mentor, noted that she was concerned about “not crossing the line” and not “doing too much” for her mentee, believing it was a challenge since she would like to treat her mentee to some things, like lunch or a manicure, but understood that it was best to refrain from doing so. Helen, another mentor, advised that this was a “very fine line and it’s not easy to ride that fence, but you need to learn it if you’re going to be a mentor.” She also provided an example of the way she addressed setting boundaries with her mentees:

I just simply say, “Look, I get to go home, I’m going home and I have my own life to live. So, what you do with your life is entirely up to you. And if you want me there, I can be there. And if you don’t, then you don’t.” You see? So, therefore, you’re immediately saying to the person, “Honey, you’re responsible for your life just like I’m responsible for my life. So that’s life, that’s the way it is. So what you do with it is entirely up to you….I’m not responsible for you, but I care about you. And I want to be there for you if you need me. If you need me, I will be there for you.”

Even though she informed mentees of her presence as a social support network during times of need, Helen believed it was important that mentors “don’t enable” their mentees. This boundary in the mentor-mentee relationship was often noted throughout the interviews. Some mentees – like Florence – explicitly noted that they were independent from their mentors but had confidence that their mentors would be available when their assistance was needed.
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN’S DESISTANCE

While both mentors and mentees discussed the desire to change as a vital factor in order to refrain from criminal and nonconventional behaviors, a few factors were argued to inhibit desistance from destructive behaviors. While explaining women’s failures, mentees focused their attention on the failures generally experienced by formerly incarcerated women but did not note reasons specific to women matched with mentors. In describing failures, a commonly held notion among mentees was that “it is easier to give up then it is to strive forward.” Mentors, however, discussed specific reasons for mentees’ failures to desist from destructive behaviors; they largely believed setbacks resulted from the influence of negative associations and environments as well as the reluctance to reach out to mentors during difficult times. Mentors believed it was important that mentees “cut off all communication” with negative influences and “really withdraw from the environment” that influenced their involvement in the criminal justice system. For instance, Marilyn conveyed mentees’ need for “totally new friends because they can’t go back to the old way of life. And if they get dragged down and try and reacquaint themselves with their past friends, then that is just putting them into the box of where they were before.” During her interview, Ernestine described the downfall of her previous mentee. Even though her previous mentee wanted a better life for herself, Ernestine believed she had not been “strong enough in will power” to defend herself against negative influences and despite Ernestine’s attempts, she was unsuccessful in helping her mentee avoid a return to destructive behaviors. Mentors also believed that those who were unsuccessful in their efforts did not reach out to them during their time of need. Although mentees were held responsible for setting small goals and working towards the larger goal of constructive and legal independence, they were also expected to ask for help along the way when it was needed. Explaining her experience with a mentee who eventually left the program, Janice believed her mentee did not open up about the barriers she
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

faced, making it difficult to help her mentee. Other mentees lied about their progress with goals as they tried to demonstrate a more stable standing, which interfered with mentors’ ability to support them in a way that was suitable to their true obstacles. For instance, Veronica, a mentor, said of a former mentee: “She lied to me and it’s unfortunate. I can’t really think that she didn’t want to [recover], but there are resources out there that will definitely help you. If you want to.”

Callie was a mentee who stressed the importance of confronting problems rather than avoiding help. When asked about the motivating factors keeping her from returning to prison, she replied:

I know that my life is different today because when I do mess up, I’m not scared to be honest about [it] and I face what happens to me. And then I learn from it. Back in olden years, I would not have faced anybody. I would’ve ran. Just like I ran before, I went back to prison the second time. I went on the run. And it takes a strong person who’s willing to learn from your mistakes in order to come back.

Both mentees and mentors mentioned this notion of avoiding others and evading a social support network when describing mentees who were unsuccessful in desisting.

Even though some mentees faced setbacks and risked destructive responses, mentors were sometimes able to draw mentees back into more constructive environments conducive to progress. At age 64, Linda had experience mentoring numerous women over the years. Her mentee, Sheila, had previously left the reentry program. Sheila described her experience and Linda’s ability to bring her back into the program: “She saved my life actually. I was on the run a year ago, and [my mentor] continually tried keeping in contact with me, and I wasn’t keeping in contact with anyone. She finally was persistent enough to get me back in the program. So I think she saved me.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Desistance may be viewed as a “result of the interplay between individual choices and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of
the individual” (Farrall, Sharpe, Hunter, & Calverley, 2011, p. 224). This study does not serve to dismiss the importance of other external factors in desisting from destructive behaviors but, instead, it examines the unique influence of mentors on women who are making such changes in individual choices. Although mentors were most comparable to sponsors, as both provided inspiration and guidance for women in reentry, mentors were distinguished from other social support networks due to the nature of their knowledge, the extent of their care, and their focal concerns in helping the women. This study builds on existing literature by clarifying the underlying mechanisms in which a female-centered mentoring approach may help shape the ongoing process of desisting from destructive behaviors. By evaluating qualitative data on mentor-mentee relationships, this study found that once women held a desire and readiness to make constructive changes, their efforts at desistance were guided by mentors’ ability to facilitate in the development of constructive long-term behaviors as well as their presence as someone to speak with, to watch over them, and to provide positive reinforcement when they overcame obstacles.

As a positive social support network, mentors facilitated in their mentees’ management of negative circumstances and avoidance of destructive behaviors by providing them with different outlooks on negative situations, supporting the women in dealing with destructive feelings and conditions, and encouraging them with pointers in responding positively to hostile situations. These were described as some of the underlying mechanisms in which mentors provided social support conducive to the women’s desistance from destructive behaviors. Existing research on desistance examines the significance of agency in desisting and also suggests the importance of positive social support networks in efforts to desist (Maruna, 2001). This study contributes to existing research as it explores the interplay of the two; specifically, this study provides insight
into how the women’s openness to change was complemented with support from mentors on ways to carry out such change in the face of detrimental circumstances. Faced with various postincarceration barriers in reintegrating back into conventional society, women looked to their mentors for assistance in dealing with their daily struggles. Women are likely to encounter postincarceration obstacles in their efforts to recover from substance abuse, re-establish familial ties, regain custody of children, arrange suitable living arrangements, and maintain stable employment (Baer et al., 2006; La Vigne et al., 2009; Richie, 2001). These social-structural barriers, coupled with troubled relationships and weak social skills, may further inhibit women’s reentry and hinder their efforts at desisting from destructive behaviors. Mentors alleviated the impact of these additional burdens as they provided a balance of support and accountability, providing the women with alternative responses and standpoints to the detrimental postincarceration circumstances the women were faced with and simultaneously facilitating their desistance from destructive behaviors.

Though they often expressed feelings of defeat, mentees believed their individual ability to desist was reinforced by the support they received from their mentors. Mentors gave women reassurance of their capabilities by openly expressing their delight and directly congratulating the women when they displayed a transformation in their behaviors. Such positive reinforcement may shape the desistance process through reinforcement of the mentees’ confidences in their own abilities to make constructive changes. In fact, Maruna’s work on explanatory styles shows how one’s cognitions are influential in the persistence and desistance from destructive behaviors. Specifically, Maruna (2004) discusses biases in explanatory styles that are internal and external to the individual. He states that individuals who attribute positive events to internal factors may be more likely to desist than those who attribute such positive events to factors external to their
own characteristics. Considering the women’s search for assistance through their request for mentors, findings from this study suggest that mentors’ positive reinforcements may have helped the women look within themselves for the causes of their successes and helped them acknowledge their own role in achievements.

Salgado and her colleagues (2011) found that after some time involved in a mentoring program, “mentees reported changes in their view of themselves and their abilities” and they argue that mentors “act as the foundation for change to occur, encouraging accountability for past transgressions while also providing support and empowering mentees to be successful in the future” (p. 291). Maruna (2001) describes a process of self-discovery that may be influenced by empowerment from a third party – like a mentor – who believes in the individual’s ability to desist. Giordano et al. (2002) describe a type of cognitive transformation that occurs when individuals “are able to envision and begin to fashion an appealing and conventional ‘replacement self’ that can supplant the marginal one that must be left behind” (p. 1001). While this study cannot claim with certainty that mentees experienced changes in their self-identification as a result of the mentor-mentee relationship, it is evident that mentees attributed changes in their destructive behaviors to the mentor-mentee relationship. Thus, while mentors may or may not aid in the envisioning of a “replacement self,” the mentor-mentee relationship appears to facilitate this process of change.

Setbacks, however, were still possible for mentees in this program as mentee failures were attributed to a weakened ability to “knife off” from negative influences and seek mentors’ assistance during difficult times. Mentees were expected to speak with their mentors during times of need, but they were expected to do so while simultaneously seeking self-sufficiency. Thus, this study finds that such complexity of expectations in the mentor-mentee relationship
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

may limit mentors’ guidance for women in reentry attempting to desist from destructive behaviors. Also, mentors’ presence alone does not indicate how they will approach the various situations presented to them. For instance, suitable mentors were described as nonjudgmental and caring individuals who were persistent in helping mentees. Successful mentors were described as those who did not directly involve themselves with mentees’ interpersonal conflicts or intrapersonal issues but, instead, indirectly helped their mentees manage detrimental circumstances and shape their ability to make constructive behavioral adjustments. Agency, therefore, played a crucial role in the women’s ability to desist and in the nature of the mentor-mentee relationship, but the same is true of mentors as their supportive characteristics and mentoring relationships facilitated women’s ability to desist from destructive behaviors.

It is important to note that this study is not without its limitations, yet has implications for future research. First, this study is not necessarily generalizable to other groups due to its sample size and its recruitment from one mentoring program. Though not broadly generalizable, this study provides insight into the processes by which mentors may shape the desistance process of formerly incarcerated women who volunteered their involvement in a mentoring program. Second, due to eligibility requirements for the reentry program, this study is restricted to women with nonviolent charges. However, it is also important to note that nonviolent charges are common among women in the criminal justice system (Greenfeld & Snell, 1999; Snell & Morton, 1994). Third, participants were self-selected into the study and program staff assistance to recruit additional participants may have been directed at more successful clients. Fourth, the program requirement to request a mentor presents a self-selection of mentees into the mentoring program. Though women’s request for a mentor demonstrates an “openness to change” (see Giordano et al., 2002), this is an important limitation as the request may serve as a “desistance
signal” – that is, a voluntary and characteristic behavior of a desister (Bushway & Apel, 2012). Yet, such agency may be beneficial to the scope of this study as the “signaling value of certain programs might actually be undermined by forcing compliance” (Bushway & Apel, 2012, p. 42). Still, future research may comparatively analyze mentors’ role in desistance among mandated mentees as opposed to mentees who volunteered their involvement. Likewise, future research should strategically interview mentors of varying backgrounds and experiences. Assistance from others without personal experiences of incarceration is often described by women in reentry as being limited (Leverentz, 2014, p. 31), yet a number of mentors in this study held vicarious experiences through family members and friends. This familiarity motivated their desire to consistently guide mentees through their experiences and efforts at desisting from destructive behaviors. Thus, in order to assess potential differences across mentor-mentee relationships, future research may comparatively examine matched mentor-mentee pairs in which mentors have varying backgrounds and experiences. Yet, according to this study, it is likely that volunteer mentors may be likely to share some vicarious – if not personal – experiences with their mentees.

While this research cannot speak to the extent of recidivism or continued engagement in non-conventional activities among women in the program, it adds to existing literature as it explains the role of mentors in women’s efforts to desist from destructive behaviors and also reveals the processes by which women in reentry re-engaged in destructive behaviors despite the presence of a mentor-mentee relationship. “[I]n order for individuals to desist from offending they should be given the knowledge, skills, opportunities and resources to live a ‘good’ life” (Ward & Maruna, 2007, p. 111). This was revealed in the current study as mentors aided in mentees’ efforts to overcome barriers, refrain from destructive conduct, and make positive
adjustments in their lives. Consistent with Brown & Ross’ (2010) findings, this study finds that mentors assisted mentees “in thinking through a particular problem in ways that were either new to them or, if not new, certainly not part of their normal repertoire” (p. 44). While mentors are merely a form of social support and cannot transform structural barriers to reentry, mentors serve as a resource to women who are open to change while also shaping their development of constructive long-term behaviors to deal with detrimental circumstances – factors that both mentors and mentees believed facilitated efforts to desist from destructive behaviors.
THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

References


THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE


THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE


THE MENTOR-MENTEE RELATIONSHIP IN WOMEN'S DESISTANCE

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