

Too Much Recidivism, Too Little Treatment

By: Lucine Hamilton

There is not a single explanation for recidivism. Rather, varying circumstances and combination of factors which include socio-economic disadvantages, unhealthy life styles, zero tolerant parole guidelines, personal pathologies, residential and employment segregation, and a lack of substantial psycho-social programming before release from incarceration.

Assessing the relative contribution of these factors is complicated by the fact that they often overlap. Nevertheless, one area that has gone largely unexplored is the impact of the lack of healthy operational need demands. One of the major shortcomings in combating the nations 70% recidivism rate is down playing emotional and psychological threats to offenders within his/her subjective world of feelings and beliefs. That is, some offenders have experienced emotional and psychological trauma and cannot or have not been able to reconcile with it and move forward. As a result, when they act, or react, it is the unresolved trauma influencing their behavior, rather they are aware of it or not.

As human beings we are equipped with a natural set of healthy operational "need demands," emotional and psychological as well as physical. Deprive the body of nutrients and vitamins and a person will not be relieved of malnourishment, no matter how full the stomach is kept with food that is nutrient and vitamin deficient. Likewise, deprive a person of feelings of self-worth, and no matter their material trappings or social position, they will feel unvaluable and unworthy i.e., emotionally and psychologically deficient.

Other basic need demands that cannot be artificially compensated for are self-confidence, self-love, self-affection, self-acceptance, and self-determination. The degree to which people, offenders in particular, fulfill these basic need demands has the greatest influence on attitudes and experiences in life. Recidivism is often rooted in the lack of basic need demand fulfillment.

Recidivism

The profound impact a lack of healthy need demands has on recidivism can best be illustrated by cigarette smokers forced to stop smoking but smoke again when the opportunity presents itself.

Take fifty cigarette smokers and place them in an environment where smoking is prohibited and access to cigarettes is completely blocked. If these fifty people could smoke they would. But instead they are forced by external conditions to cope without cigarettes. As well as adjust their thinking in an effort to decrease the hardship of withdrawal symptoms. Naturally

some of them will experience withdrawal symptoms with less intensity than others. However, this does not mean they are less prone to smoke again.

After the elapse of a few months some of the fifty will more likely than not consider themselves as having quit smoking merely because they have not smoked. Their belief is that the restraints of the external environment put in them an internal change. This is called self-delusion. No internal process of change or commitment was ever initiated. In other words, they never took responsibility for themselves in terms of engaging in a protracted internal struggle. And as often is the case, when the external restraints are lifted, those that failed to endure self-initiated, internal protracted struggle, smoke again.

In this same sense, merely incarcerating a person does not prevent future offenses. There must be an internal purging, so to speak.

Pseudo Solutions

A pseudo solution is attitudes and action that appear to be the answer to a problem but proves not to be when put to the test. What makes so many conventional ideas and programs pseudo solutions for offenders is, the root of their problems do not rest in the absence of such wisdom. But in the obstruction of healthy emotional and psychological fulfillment. Many offenders may appear to possess basic need demands on the the surface, but are unable to call them to bare when life requires them to.

Therefore, conventional solutions that are effective to change the thinking and behavior of some offenders e.g., G.E.D., vocational training, religion, even college do not guarantee against recidivism, even though they are pursued with feelings of sincerity. For offenders to move to the very high probability against recidivism ratio, they must achieve something greater: healthy emotional and psychological need demands. Lacking them the offender often develops a false image. A way of coping with the world around him/her and the tormenting conditions within, as if s/he were a typical, average person.

A False Image

At some earlier point in life the conditions of an offender's relationships and/or environment, for example, robbed him/her of self-esteem. It could have been abuse, poverty and its social stigmas, lack of love and attention, rejection, perceived slights, or other emotional and psychological trauma. The lack of self-esteem undermined the development of confidence. Which in turn ruined genuine effort toward achievement. Eventually denying feelings of self-worth. Reinforcing one another until self-contempt and self-hate developed. Both of which had to be repressed. Giving rise to a false image. Which comes to the desperate, artificial, rescue.

An example of this is an offender who is void or deficient in basic need demands. Within the context of society's cultural values, money becomes the pseudo solution (compensation) for the lack of feeling of self-worth. The possession of it gives the offender a sense of worth and prestige in the eyes of others. Without money s/he fears being perceived by others as they unconsciously perceive themselves--meaningless and worthless. Their means of frequently possessing money is through "recidivism."

What is not understood is that the pattern of thought that compels this behavior is unconscious. The offender is not able to admit hating and resenting who they are. That they lack basic need demands. Therefore, they cannot successfully resist re-offending.

When basic need demands are deficient the false image steps in as a substitute e.g., the "thug," "killer," "cat burglar," "computer hacker," "drug dealer," "tough guy/girl," and so forth. Which, literally, becomes a knight in shining armor. Almost every thought and action in this condition exists as part of a self-perpetuating vicious cycle that offenders are overwhelmed by. A slave to the unconscious forces within, as well as the false image that s/he mistakenly thinks can offer freedom from life's most pressing challenges.

Combating The False Image

Many offenders are unaware of the role that past trauma plays in their recidivism. They are unaware that in order to overcome recidivism they must upset conditions within themselves. For the majority of offenders sheer will power, academics, vocation nor religion will suffice. It is not always what an offender does with him/herself while incarcerated, but what s/he does within him/herself.

The difference between a false and real image is based on the all consuming need to glorify oneself. For the offender to raise him/herself above their real condition and status. Not by actual work and achievement, but by imagination. As long as the false image operates as the mainstay the offender's emotional and psychological sense of stability and confidence will be artificial. S/he will be unable to put forth realistic effort. What this means is that in order to defeat recidivism the offender must begin to see him/herself realistically; sever dependence on the false image.

In order to sever the false image an offender must see him/herself as they really are: identify the lack of basic need demands. Otherwise the false image will simply switch from one expression to another. This process begins by realizing that self-esteem is solely dependent on an offender's relationship with self. No one can add or take away self-esteem. In the similar way that self-confidence arises from successful exercise of creative and physical powers.

Real Solutions

While feelings, anxieties and fears lurks like tyrants in the subconscious, they torment the conscious life with all sorts of detrimental behavior. As long as they are repressed there is potential for pathological behavior. But when the strength to consciously feel and experience them are developed, the opportunity to control them exist. The point is not to avoid them, but face them in order to transform them. Thereby uprooting the condition that brings self-defeating attitudes and behavior into being.

Challenging the false image, developing healthy need demands is actually embarking on a journey of self-realization. A war within one's self. It is up to each offender to conduct an honest self-evaluation of their life. How much depends on the offender and his/her personal life history. A clear, honest and level look at themselves and life to acknowledge what basic need demands require work. In order to pinpoint and set up a real constructive path to overcoming internal and external difficulties. Best accomplished with the assistance of professionals and trained practitioners.

Conclusion

The circumstances and combination of factors documented above are complex, and by no means minimize structural factors--such as poverty and social stigma--that create or reinforce deviance and recidivism. This is just a first step in such an analysis. I will conclude with, however, that prison rehabilitation programs are of little value and that the overall setting of prison negates the value of even the better programs. It is against the backdrop of this conclusion that more attention needs to be paid to developing programs centered on need demands of offenders, rather than isolation and retribution.

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