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Stories of Transformation: Aboriginal Offenders' Journey from Prison to the Community

Teresa Howell

Research indicates that Aboriginal peoples are overrepresented within the Canadian Criminal Justice System (CJS).¹ In Canada, Aboriginal peoples constitute a large percentage of federal and provincial inmates, even though they represent a small percentage of the general adult population.² The most recent statistics reported by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC), indicate that in 2013, Aboriginal adults only represented 4 percent of Canada's population, yet they constituted 23 percent of the federal inmate population (with a two-year or longer sentence).³ To make the situation more challenging, Aboriginal inmate admissions have been growing; according to CSC statistics, from 2002 to 2012, the population of incarcerated Aboriginal men increased by 34 percent, from 2,209 men to 2,966 men.⁴ A number of factors contribute to the overrepresentation of Aboriginal offenders in the CJS—for example, sentencing, release rates, recidivism, reintegration—but this study does not address all of these issues. Rather, it focuses on one important component of the CJS: the reintegration of offenders into the community. To decrease incarceration rates and enable Aboriginal peoples to maintain a crime-free lifestyle in their communities requires understanding the concept of transformation from an Aboriginal person's perspective.

Very little research has examined the reintegration potential of Aboriginal offenders living crime-free in the community. Most studies have investigated incarcerated men or specific rehabilitation programs, which typically evaluate specific treatment programs and their effectiveness (for instance, sexual offender treatment programs), rather than engage in more broad-based research concerning reintegration.⁵ Studies have

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investigated the particular characteristics related to recidivism, such as the risk-needs-responsivity principle, and often evaluate risk-assessment tools.⁶ We have learned that correctional programming can be beneficial for incarcerated Aboriginal offenders. In 2011, research from CSC reported that the odds of success of Aboriginal offenders who participated in correctional programming while incarcerated were 1.45 times greater than those of Aboriginal offenders who did not participate in programming.⁷

However, the Aboriginal voice is often neglected in these studies, and the offenders' stories about transition from prison to the community are often not told. Because storytelling imparts traditional knowledge and allows the storytellers to be the teachers, utilizing such Aboriginal knowledge is a positive and necessary step that can enhance program design and reintegration strategies. Attempting to discover appropriate reintegration strategies for Aboriginal offenders from an Aboriginal perspective is important to better meet the needs of this marginalized population. In addition, much of the research focuses on recidivism data, without gaining the perspective or hearing the voice of the offenders themselves; thus, researchers neglect to look at the *process* or *experience* that is occurring when offenders are in transition. As Petersilia states:

Recidivism is an important, perhaps the most important, measure of correctional impact, but it is insufficient as a sole measure of the effectiveness of reentry programs. After all, the ultimate goal of reentry programs is reintegration, which clearly included more than remaining arrest-free for a specified time period . . . if we truly want to measure reintegration, we need to build into our evaluation measures of attachment to a variety of social institutions. Research shows that these factors are related to long-term criminal desistance.⁸

The theory of desistance is a foundation of this study's view of offender transformation, and is specifically connected to culture and spirituality.

Desistance is not easily defined. The concept stems from criminology and sociology. Farrington notes that desistance has been used in two contexts: as an empirical variable and as an underlying theoretical construct.⁹ As an empirical construct, Laub and Sampson simply define desistance as ceasing to offend, which would simply mimic the term *recidivism* and suggest that it was a static variable.¹⁰ The underlying theoretical construct of desistance introduces the notion of a *process* necessitating continuous change that occurs when offenders reenter society after prolonged institutionalization. Farrington views desistance as the "decrease in the underlying frequency, variety, or seriousness of offending."¹¹ Continuous change requires a dynamic process to occur, indicating that offenders gradually shift away from crime.¹² However, the mechanism of this process is not entirely known, partly due to the lack of consensus in the literature concerning the definition of desistance and the difficulty in measuring it.¹³

In spite of this lack of definitional consensus, a large body of literature investigates the correlates of desistance.¹⁴ Laub and Sampson present a seminal review of desistance, including an examination of the key elements that contribute to its processes. They emphasize that "desistance stems from a variety of complex processes—developmental, psychological and sociological—and thus there are many factors associated with it."¹⁵ Factors that often surface include, but are not limited to: aging, a good

marriage, employment, and a “go straight” attitude (weighing the costs and benefits of crime). Farrington summarizes developmental and life-course theories that contribute to desistance.¹⁶ These theories each include significant life events such as marriage and employment, but the process of desistance is described in different ways: life events decrease antisocial potentials, thus increasing desistance; life events may influence changes in opportunities, rewards, costs, and bonding, thus leading to desistance; increasing internal and external constraints, bonding, prosocial models, and maturation contribute to desistance; and, increasing social controls and structured routine activities facilitate desistance.

Specific to Aboriginal offenders who experience gang life and prison, Deane and colleagues investigate the factors that contribute to desistance from a criminal life. Their findings fall into three main categories: (1) staying away from crime, (2) group values and social support, and (3) Aboriginal identity.¹⁷ Within the first category, factors include not wanting to return to prison, the importance of not leaving family again, beginning to see oneself as different from offenders, and a progression toward a new identity. The second category—group values and support—were represented by acknowledgment of Aboriginal values and gaining social support from peers. Lastly, within the Aboriginal category a number of factors contribute to desistance and the maintenance of a crime-free life: recognizing the importance of Aboriginal identity, acknowledging the impact of colonization, attending ceremony, engaging in traditional practices, forming a positive identity as an Aboriginal man, and developing and solidifying Aboriginal values. They note:

Perhaps the greatest importance was the recognition of Aboriginal values and identification of one’s self as an Aboriginal person, experienced through acceptance of and participation in Aboriginal traditions and ceremonies and the roles this played in a break from criminal activity.¹⁸

This is well-established literature on healing and wellness among Aboriginal peoples.¹⁹ In reference to rites of passage rituals among Navajo adolescents, Markstrom and Iborra capture a sense of identity transformation through cultural involvement. They emphasize that the “understanding of values, roles, and beliefs of a culture are acquired through participation in ritual activities that are thought to influence and transform the identity of the initiates.”²⁰ Cultural and traditional experiences can be seen as the catalyst for transformation and thus a part of desistance.

Through qualitative interviews with Aboriginal healers and persons seeking healing, McCabe reports twelve therapeutic conditions in Aboriginal healing that are helpful in effecting positive changes in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Most notably, examples related to culture include the sacred teachings, as Aboriginal spirituality facilitates change; ceremonies and rituals, which are essential when an Aboriginal person is on the healing path; belief in the healing spirit, which is a therapeutic condition for healing to occur; and self-acceptance and discovery, because accepting oneself and discovering one’s Aboriginal identity facilitate change and growth.²¹

Hodgson and Heckbert stress the importance of spirituality and culture in their findings, reporting that nineteen of their twenty participants indicated that spirituality

and learning about Aboriginal culture had a significant impact on getting and staying out of trouble.²² For eighteen of the participants, forming a spiritual and cultural identity was imperative to staying out of prison. Heckbert and Turkington report that 94 percent of the sixty-eight participants in their study mentioned that participating in Aboriginal spirituality, ceremonies, and cultural activities was vital in maintaining a crime-free life.²³ Johnston states that participation in cultural and spiritual activities, as well as having a relationship with elders, strongly correlated with a decrease in recidivism and had an impact on the success of the reintegration of Aboriginal offenders.²⁴ Deane, Bracken, and Morrisette comment that “ceremonies experientially present the thought forms and values that have aided Aboriginal people in survival for millennia. The teachings are a sacred experience of one’s positive identity.”²⁵ There appears to be a clear link between cultural experiences, identity, and living a crime-free life, which are key components of desistance.

Johnston conducted a study with 556 Aboriginal offenders from across Canada.²⁶ One aim of the study was to investigate reintegration strategies for Aboriginal offenders. Participation in cultural activities was strongly related to a decrease in recidivism. Education and employment program participation that was Aboriginal-specific was strongly correlated with a decrease in recidivism. Participation in spiritual activities and having access to Elders were both strongly correlated to a decrease in recidivism and had an impact on reintegration success. Programs targeting the emotional, social, and community needs of offenders were strongly correlated with a decrease in recidivism. Johnston also remarked that although some programs targeting the specific needs of Aboriginal offenders exist, access to these programs is limited.

Howell interviewed forty Aboriginal men incarcerated on the west coast of Canada and gave them the opportunity to voice their opinions concerning correctional programming, effective support persons, and views of decreasing recidivism.²⁷ Participants reported that spirituality and culture are fundamental components of effective treatment programs for Aboriginal offenders; more than half (52%) of the participants considered Aboriginal programs effective because of their cultural and spiritual components. An encouraging discovery was that these participants reported that Aboriginal programs are moderately (28%) to highly (40%) likely to decrease their recidivism, a finding not previously investigated. With respect to effective support persons, participants most often solicit assistance from Aboriginal people when experiencing personal and institutional problems and consider Aboriginal people to be the most supportive people to them.

In reference to offenders who have been released into the community, Smallshaw and colleagues interviewed seventeen Aboriginal offenders on probation, as well as six Aboriginal probation officers (PO), thirty-one non-Aboriginal POs, and fifteen providers of traditional healing services that used Aboriginal approaches when supervising offenders who had been released on probation. Smallshaw et al. reported that, while on probation, 65 percent of Aboriginal probationers attended at least one culturally specific program or activity (e.g., smudging, sharing circles, sweat lodge, Elder teachings); 57 percent of the POs reported that it was very important to them to assist their clients in engaging in these activities; and 43 percent indicated that they believed that culturally specific programs and services were very important in probation.²⁸

The concept of retraditionalization and/or decolonization incorporates Aboriginal ways of being, knowing, and living to aid in overcoming substantial hurdles like incarceration. LaFromboise speaks of retraditionalization and the importance of utilizing Aboriginal beliefs, traditions, and customs as a means of strengthening identity and self-determination.²⁹ Hart emphasized that “decolonization involves coming to know ourselves, our histories and our worldviews,” and both likely enhance the process of desistance.³⁰ Programs that reassert Aboriginal identity, cultural beliefs, and practices are a form of treatment and should be considered useful in Aboriginal offenders’ transition from prison to the community.³¹

It is proposed that in order for Aboriginal offenders to successfully transition from prison to the community, maintain a crime-free life, and experience desistance, the Canadian Criminal Justice System and community programs must specifically address the unique circumstances of Aboriginal offenders and hear the voices of these men. Therefore, this study explored Aboriginal offenders’ perspectives on their transition from prison to the community and asked the question: What factors facilitate and hinder Aboriginal offenders in the maintenance of a crime-free lifestyle?

METHODOLOGY

The critical incident technique was utilized as the methodology for this study (CIT). The CIT was chosen for three reasons. First, because CIT utilizes interviews, participants were given an opportunity to share their perspectives and voice their knowledge, feelings, and experiences. Second, this technique allowed for the exploratory nature of this study because it captured an exhaustive number of incidents. Third, this methodology yielded a detailed description and comprehensive map of the factors that facilitate and hinder Aboriginal offenders’ process in maintaining a crime-free lifestyle.

Originating with the work of John Flanagan, the CIT methodology attempts to capture descriptive accounts of events that facilitate or hinder a particular aim. According to Flanagan, “The critical incident technique consists of a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles.”³² The CIT has been described as a set of flexible principles for qualitative research. Fields that have utilized the CIT include, but are not limited to: counseling psychology,³³ clinical psychology and psychiatry,³⁴ library and information management,³⁵ and nursing.³⁶ The CIT is adaptable and useful in various domains of research. Butterfield and colleagues have provided an excellent summary of the origin, evolution, and utilization of the CIT during the past fifty years and have outlined important future directions for the CIT.³⁷

Method

Forty-two participants met the following criteria and were included in the study:

(1) Self-identified Aboriginal men who (2) have maintained a crime-free lifestyle for at least two years (because offenders are most likely to reoffend within the first two

years of being released from correctional facilities) and (3) have been incarcerated for a federal crime (i.e., minimum sentence of two years).

Twenty-four participants (57.1%) reported to be status Aboriginal persons by law, seven (16.7%) self-identified as Métis, six (14.3%) reported to be non-status, and five (11.9%) indicated they were Inuit. Participants were asked to report their cultural background, resulting in approximately twenty different Aboriginal backgrounds. Consistent with correctional statistics, these were collapsed into four geographical regions: Western (British Columbia), Northern (Northwest Territories, Yukon Territory, Nunavut), Prairies (Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba), and Eastern (everything east of Manitoba). The cultural backgrounds representing the four geographical regions break down as follows: Prairies—e.g., Cree (47.6%), Western—e.g., Haida (28.6%), Northern—e.g., Gwich'in (11.9%), and Eastern—e.g., Anishinaabe (11.9%).

The participants in this study represent a marginalized group, which is consistent with experiences of Aboriginal offenders in general. On average, they have a grade-9 education, with one-third having attended residential school. Most were unemployed at the time of the study. Many of the participants also had substantial physical and mental health concerns, had suffered abuses as children, had considerable struggles with substance misuse, and had attempted suicide (about half) at some point in their lives. In addition, the participants had extensive offending histories, with more than half committing violent offenses; in addition, more than half were not released from prison until close to the end of their sentence. On average, the participants spent six and one-quarter years incarcerated. Participants were approximately ten years older ($X=44.7$ years) than the average age of men incarcerated; however, since these men were out of prison, it was expected that they would be older. Considering the difficulties these men have endured, they have overcome substantial challenges and have been able to maintain a crime-free life, on average, for ten years, signifying that transformation is possible. At the time of the interviews, the participants also identified themselves as currently being mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually healthy. The participants have been able to overcome substantial challenges, suggesting that change is possible and that Aboriginal offenders can maintain crime-free lives.

Procedure

Participants were asked to fill out a consent form and a background information form, followed by a digitally recorded interview. Participants were welcomed in a culturally appropriate manner and were invited to complete the necessary paperwork. Once this was completed, the interview began with a brief introduction to the purpose of the interview, followed by the research question: "During your transition from being incarcerated to living in the community, what *helped* you maintain a crime-free lifestyle?" The participant was able to tell his story at his own pace. Once the participant was finished telling his story, the second research question was asked: "During your transition from being incarcerated to living in the community, what *interfered* with maintaining a crime-free lifestyle?"

FINDINGS

Based on the research question, incidents were collapsed into the two categories: helpful incidents (341) and hindering incidents (78).

Helpful Incidents

Three hundred and forty-one incidents were coded and collapsed into nine major categories: (1) transformation of self; (2) cultural and traditional experiences; (3) healthy relationships; (4) having routine and structure in daily living; (5) freedom from prison; (6) purpose and fulfillment in life; (7) attempting to live alcohol- and drug-free; (8) professional support and programming; and (9) learning to identify and express oneself. The categories are presented in order of the number of incidents; however, this does not necessarily represent the level of importance. To respect research participants and their voices, they were asked on the consent form whether or not they would like their names attributed to quotes. This allows for the participant to choose anonymity or attribution. Of the forty-two participants, twenty-five did want to be acknowledged for their quotes. Therefore, in the transcript examples, R stands for researcher (author) and P stands for participant (or his name was inserted). Please note that the number of incidents and the participation rate are two different things. The incident rate is how often an incident was reported (so a participant could have said the same thing more than once) and the participation rate is the percentage of the total participants represented in that category.

TRANSFORMATION OF SELF (63 INCIDENTS). This category embodies an underlying transformation of oneself. The participation rate was quite substantial, with 69 percent representation. A number of factors contributed to the creation of this category: identity transformation, self-learning, self-esteem, self-awareness, self-reflection, decision-making, awareness of choices and options, maturity, growth, acceptance and making amends with self, positive thinking, and change (behavior, patterns, attitudes, and thoughts).

Participants acknowledged the significance of the process of change, through awareness and conscious decision-making to change thoughts, feelings, behaviors, patterns, and/or attitudes. For this process to occur, learning about oneself, increasing self-esteem, having self-awareness, acknowledging and owning a cultural identity with pride, and being aware of the consequences of actions are just a few steps in the process of transformation. Two examples of the self-awareness that occurred are cited below:

P39: because for my alcoholism and my drug addiction and stuff, when you are living that kind of lifestyle and stuff, changing your thinking, so if you have the desire to change and you know what you are doing is wrong. If you change your thinking and stuff like that, you just change who you are as a person, you change your character.

Barry: For me it's all about wanting to, uh, looking for who I am in here (points to heart). My past really messed me up, eh. It really messed me up. But, uh, also too, I am learning things. It seems like this time around I am looking at myself more, you know. I am learning to be more open-minded.

CULTURAL AND TRADITIONAL EXPERIENCES (57 INCIDENTS). Cultural and traditional experiences was a significant category that emerged, with more than half (60%) of the participants speaking to this. Factors that are represented in this category included: attending Aboriginal gatherings, having relationships with Elders, participating in ceremonies, expressing cultural values, living a spiritual life, feeling connected to the Creator, and acknowledging the importance of cultural practices. These experiences formed the foundation of the transformation participants were undergoing. Participants learned to embrace their Aboriginal culture, their traditions, and their teachings, which have permitted growth, transformation, and identity formation.

Art: I brought myself into the sweatlodge to talk about this stuff quite a bit, and I practiced my spirituality quite a bit. . . . I went and did vision quests, and I went to sweatlodges, spirit winter sweats, buffalo sweats, yuwipis, and sundances.

Don: My smudging, my smudge, my prayers. Every two weeks, I buy some broad cloth and tobacco and I go to the bush and I take tobacco and broad cloth and I hang it and give thanks to the Creator for, just for helping me be out here, helping me be strong, and walking in a good direction. I think that without that, I'd probably be back inside. It's just that, it's a feeling that, it's something, I don't know. I get away. My spirit, my spirit wanders, but it comes back clean. It comes back feeling good. It doesn't come with negativity, you know.

P9: [Spirituality] for me, it gives me something to believe in. . . . If I didn't believe in spirituality, I don't know what I would be doing. I believe in the Creator. . . . Just gotta keep the spiritual side alive. That's one thing. Getting out [of prison], you've gotta have that spirituality on your side. You can't do it on your own.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS (48 INCIDENTS) Sustaining healthy relationships was acknowledged as a vital component of maintaining a crime-free life. Thirty-three of the forty-two participants spoke about healthy relationships, representing a 78.6 percent participation rate. The healthy relationship category includes being around people who are supportive, loving, and caring; around people who are not using alcohol or drugs; around people who are not living a criminal lifestyle; and around people who exert a positive influence. In addition, because of a fear of losing important relationships, participants referred to their personal responsibility to maintain healthy relationships by abstaining from criminal behaviors. Similarly, participants acknowledged the importance of being available and present for others in their lives, as well as being a good role model for their children. Feeling a connection to others and the community, as well as having a sense of belonging, also emerged in this category.

Glenn: I would have to say the support of my family. Well, I mean it doesn't matter how bad I messed up and stuff like that, they were always there, especially my wife. . . . I have been with her since I have been out of jail, the day after I got out. I have known her for about 30 years now. . . . She has remained clean and we got kids together and stuff like that. So every time I messed up . . . [s]he was there for me. . . . There was no judgment and no blame.

Daniel: I feel part of community, feel part of the world and I really feel a connection. That's one of the biggest part of the whole thing that we've been talking about in NA, just being around people, it's about feeling connected. I have to feel like I am part of society. If I feel like I am not part of society, then I am going to rebel against it. And I'm basically going to tell everyone to just beat it because I just couldn't care about anyone. So it's really important for me to feel like a part of the community

Tom1: All kinds of relationships, friends, family. I mean you get to know your family. After a while, you look back at all the stuff where you couldn't do for them and now you can . . . because you can be there. That all builds on not going back, right, you don't want to lose all that.

HAVING ROUTINE AND STRUCTURE IN DAILY LIVING (44 INCIDENTS). This category emphasized having routine and structure in daily living. The participation rate for this category was 55 percent. The factors encompassed the basic necessities to function in society: food, shelter, income, work, routine, and structure. Participants frequently acknowledged that financial stability was helpful in maintaining a crime-free life because it allowed them to support themselves, thus decreasing the need to be involved in criminal activity. Participants also acknowledged that being able to stay busy, work, and have routines and schedules was equally important in maintaining a crime-free life because it not only instilled values, but fostered structure and stability. In addition, being able to have a home and afford food was helpful to participants.

Daniel: Working is another great big thing that I have to admit has probably been a big part of me not going to prison. Because I was trapped in that cycle before where you get this little welfare check . . . but if I go out and work . . . I feel like I am at least a little bit a part of society cuz I'm working.

Mike: keeps me occupied . . . busy hands, can't remember the old cliché . . . idle hands or whatever it is. It's better to keep busy and have some kind of structure; you know get up every day and go to work.

Brian: Getting into Native housing . . . like that was a big influence, having my own stable place.

FREEDOM FROM PRISON (32 INCIDENTS). Twenty-five (60%) of the participants firmly emphasized that freedom has motivated them to maintain a crime-free life, citing reasons such as not wanting to return to prison, acknowledging that freedom is precious, and recognizing the deterring effects of incarceration.

Mike: Memories of doing time. God you have to have done it to even begin to understand it. It's pretty harsh, that's an understatement. It can be very, very, harsh . . . I did 3.5 years in one shot and it seemed like 20 years. I don't know if I could go through that again.

Brian: . . . the 2 years that I did, never again. That was hell . . . It was scary, a lot of scary stuff there. I don't even want to mention it.

Vincent: The will to stay out. Just to stay out, helps a lot. I don't like incarceration. It's not the kind of thing a man wants.

Alfred: Umm, what helps me is I just crave freedom. Freedom. If I wanna stay out of jail, I do not do the crime. Cuz otherwise you're gonna lose all that freedom. . . . I want freedom, I don't want the time.

PURPOSE AND FULFILLMENT IN LIFE (30 INCIDENTS). Striving to have a sense of purpose, meaning, and fulfillment in life was deemed a significant incident in maintaining a crime-free life during the transition from prison to the community. Almost half (47.6%) of the participants reported an incident in this category, signifying its vitality. Factors that emerged to form this category were on a continuum from having an abstract sense of purpose or meaning in life to having a simple sense of daily goals. In addition, being able to give back and help others was strongly represented as a motivator to maintain a crime-free life. Volunteer work was often discussed as a method of giving back to others, as well as finding a sense of purpose for oneself.

P42: My purpose. I believe that all First Nations people have a purpose in life. . . . That is how I maintain who I am today.

Art: Also, a lot of volunteer work. I talk a lot about volunteering work. I could take on a job, but I haven't had a paid job in 5–6 years . . . without any kind of volunteer work or doing things for people without expectations, it all comes back to me in other ways, you know. [Volunteer work] keeps me in balance. If I done something nice for you without expectations, I would feel good, happy.

Daniel: Also just volunteering. I mean I did some volunteering with, um, a church group . . . So, just for me to go and volunteer my time is really important . . . just giving back to the community in general.

ATTEMPTING TO MAINTAIN AN ALCOHOL- AND DRUG-FREE LIFE (28 INCIDENTS). Thirty-eight percent of the participants were represented in this category. The relationship between alcohol and drug use and criminal behavior was frequently emphasized; thus, participants highlighted the significance of maintaining sobriety and a drug-free life. Participants reported that being involved in recovery activities such as attending Alcoholics Anonymous and/or Narcotics Anonymous or attending treatment centers and/or recovery houses was very helpful. On occasion, harm reduction (e.g., a methadone-maintenance program) was reported to assist with maintaining a crime-free life. Lastly, participants acknowledged that spending time with those not using alcohol or drugs was vital in sustaining their own alcohol- and drug-free life.

John: Methadone. And I am not saying that sarcastically, I mean that. I don't need any more drugs. I don't need it anymore, it's uh, it's only a want and I don't steal because I want to get high. I only stole because I needed to get high. There's a big difference. I'm not trying to justify anything in the past that I've done, I'm just stating what happened. The addiction to heroin was too overwhelming. I couldn't beat it myself, but I thought I could.

P13: Um, sobriety . . . I've never been in trouble since I left alcohol alone and pills and stuff like that.

Barry: When, I'm, uh, cuz when I do drugs and alcohol, that's when my crime kicks in, you know. I've never been convicted of anything when I am not under the influence. . . . When I am straight, I am straight. When I am bad, I am bad.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT AND PROGRAMMING (21 INCIDENTS). Support from professionals and having the opportunity to attend programs were deemed helpful. Twelve of the forty-two participants (28.6%) reported incidents in this category. Psychologists, counselors, medical doctors, and parole officers were each mentioned as supportive professional allies. In addition, utilizing programs in the community that addressed life skills, education, or Aboriginal-specific programs assisted offenders in maintaining a crime-free life. Halfway houses were also noted to be helpful during the transition from prison to the community because of their imposed structure and the support from others in the house.

P9: The Aboriginal outreach . . . [t]hey pointed me in the right direction. When I got out of prison, I didn't know where to go. They were the first people that I walked into. They help me today, yeah. It kept me busy . . . didn't keep me out there doing nothing. Kept me away from crime, I could say.

P42: I, like so many other people, had no living skills, ok. And programs that were in the institutions like life skills had helped, ok. I had to take that program not just once; I had to take it a couple of times . . . but something sank in every time that I took it. Now, upon release I had some skills, but . . . I had to . . . learn more myself.

LEARNING TO IDENTIFY AND EXPRESS ONESELF (18 INCIDENTS). This category reflected the value of learning how to acknowledge and express feelings in a healthy way. Simply being able to share feelings, thoughts, experiences, and problems with a keen listener was noted as vital. Furthermore, being able to ask for help was considered essential, especially because participants sometimes believed that asking for help was a sign of weakness, thus diminishing self-esteem. Being able to ask for help, acknowledge feelings, and express feelings and experiences to others has aided participants in maintaining a life free from crime. Twelve participants are represented in this category, producing a 28.6 percent participation rate.

Daniel: Being able to talk about things . . . I think it's a release and acknowledgment. I think that when I live in secrecy, it's a very oppressive place. I don't like be stuck by myself with my own thoughts. Having people to express what's really going on, it's just freeing.

Andy: Just being able to talk to people, stuff like that, it's always good to do.

P21: I've been able to talk about my problems. Because if I didn't have anybody to talk to it would all build up and then I'd get into trouble . . . might end up fighting or get mad and end up going to the bar and drinking and then end up fighting. Or end up getting into crime. Being able to talk . . . that makes it a lot easier to stay clean and out of crime.

Hindering Incidents

The research question that participant's answered to capture the hindering incidents was: During your transition from being incarcerated to living in the community, what interfered with maintaining a crime free lifestyle? From the transcripts of the interviews, 78 incidents were coded and collapsed into four major categories: 1) self; 2) unhealthy relationships; 3) substance use; and 4) lack of opportunity and professional support. Following is a discussion of each major theme, together with a description of the factors in each theme and the participation rate. Additionally, for the reader to gain a deeper understand of the themes, passages from the transcripts are presented.

SELF (20 INCIDENTS)

In contrast to helpful incidents, this category represents the opposite of the transformation-of-self and the learning-how-to-express-oneself categories. Fourteen of the forty-two participants reported incidents in this category, representing a 33.3 percent participation rate. A number of factors emerged, indicating that participants felt a responsibility to live crime-free. Having criminal and negative attitudes, including thoughts and behaviors associated with antisocial lifestyles, were documented as interfering with a crime-free life. Similarly, engaging in poor decision-making, being in unsafe environments, putting others' needs before oneself, and not reaching out for help were also recognized as being harmful. Poor emotional regulation and not talking about feelings could also potentially result in the return to a criminal lifestyle. Lastly, being unaware of social expectations, feeling unsupported by society (e.g., prejudice), and not knowing options were also potential hindrances in the transition from prison to the community.

Barry: Just my anger I guess, you know. Anger, rage, undealt with issues related to childhood. That is the most things that have held me back. Not talking about it.

Charles: But sometimes, I always didn't have that genuine attempt to reach out—"I can do it on my own." But I, I fall into a trap and I uh, have to lift myself back up and talk to the Elders again and say, look, "I am still struggling."

UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS (20 INCIDENTS). Forty-one percent of the participants stressed that engaging in unhealthy relationships created obstacles in attempting to maintain a crime-free life. This generated the opposite effect that healthy relationships have on living crime-free. Being around others who could potentially lead one to crime, substance use, or an unhealthy lifestyle was reported to interfere with the transition from prison to the community. Friends, family members, and spouses all fell into this category, with those who were actively participating in criminal activity or substance use causing the greatest influence and likelihood of hindering a crime-free life. This category was easily coded, as participants were succinct in their description of bad influences.

Ralph: Stopped seeing my friends because they influence and some of the influence ain't good. So I did what was best for me. I made new friends, went to new places.

Mike: Yeah the old friends that I knew that were on the shady side. I gradually pulled myself away from them. Spent more time with my quote unquote

hardworking straight people that aren't into drugs or possibly guns or any of that kinda stuff. . . . I could've gone back into that group of friends and I guarantee that somewhere along the way, something would go wrong again. You want to be hanging out with a certain group, there is a far higher chance of something going wrong. . . . Don't take Einstein to figure that part out I really don't think.

P32: Old friends, old behaviors. Yeah. Old friends and old behaviors . . . they'd drag you into their old style again. I have a hard time saying no.

SUBSTANCE USE (20 INCIDENTS). Participants strongly acknowledged the relationship between substance use and criminal behavior; thus, substance use was highlighted as very probable in influencing criminal activities and making the transition from prison to the community challenging. Since attempting to live an alcohol- and drug-free life was acknowledged as helpful, it is not surprising that using substances was considered a hindrance to maintaining a crime-free life. The participation rate for this category was 41 percent. Similar to the unhealthy relationship category, this category was easy to code as participants' descriptions were succinct.

John: Alcohol. I've never been involved with the law, unless alcohol was involved. Never. Never. Not one single time.

Clyde: Alcohol.

Vincent: Drugs . . . drugs is a bad thing because it makes you make a choice between good and bad. You can go and do drugs or alcohol and you can get the bad things that go with it. You can go to jail along with it, if you want to.

P29: Drugs.

P36: Alcohol.

LACK OF OPPORTUNITY AND PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT (19 INCIDENTS). Lacking educational, training, and work opportunities, as well as not being supported by parole officers, police, halfway houses, and the community, were described as creating a barrier in the transition from prison to the community. When compared to the helpful incidents, this category reflected the opposite of the professional support and programming theme. Sixteen of the forty-two participants (35.7%) indicated that the lack of opportunity and professional support interfered with maintaining a crime-free life.

Stephen: Lack of support, obviously is what hinders. Of course lack of support. Even in the halfway houses I didn't even have to take a program. So I mean that's lack of support, right?

Daniel: Employment is huge for helping. So I guess it would be the other side, unemployment is a very much difficulty in maintaining a crime free life. . . .

Lack of education, lack of employment.

P18: Lack of education. I didn't think of it at the time, but you know, I think back about it now. I had only my grade 10 at the time and I didn't do a GED 12 because I never finished high school . . . lack of education kind of hindered me in getting into college. That was a barrier.

DISCUSSION

Based on the rigorous credibility checks utilized, the findings from this study are considered to be an accurate representation of Aboriginal offenders' journey from prison to the community. The themes represented in the helpful and hindering categories are interrelated and capture the participants' stories of transformation. A multitude of factors appear to be working together during this process and it is difficult to discuss the categories independently of each other. The categories that hinder maintaining a crime-free life can be seen to reflect the opposite category of what is helpful in maintaining a crime-free life. The self category is contrary to the transformation-of-self category; unhealthy relationships is the opposite of maintaining healthy relationships; the substance-use category counteracts the attempting to live alcohol- and drug-free category; and the lack of opportunity and professional support category reflects the opposite of having professional support and programming. The categories were not purposely labeled to represent opposites of each other, but instead were formed based on the participants' accounts, and only later were they acknowledged as opposites. The relationship between helpful and hindering incidents substantiates the findings because, intuitively, factors that promote a criminal lifestyle would have opposite factors that inhibit a criminal lifestyle. Thus, if policies and programs can enhance factors contributing to the helpful categories and minimize the obstacles simultaneously, offenders will have the opportunity to be more successful during their transition from prison to the community. Not all of the themes can be discussed in this paper; therefore, because of its value within the Aboriginal community, the academic literature, and its connection to desistance, the role of culture/spirituality will briefly be discussed concerning the implications for policy and practice when Aboriginal offenders transition back to the community.

The Role of Cultural and Traditional Experiences in Transition

The significance of cultural and traditional experiences was well substantiated by the participants in this study. Attending Aboriginal gatherings, having relationships with elders, participating in traditional ceremonies, enhancing cultural values and beliefs, living a spiritual life, feeling connected to the Creator, and acknowledging the importance of cultural practices were recognized as essential components of this theme. It is not surprising that cultural and traditional experiences emerged as an important category in the findings, as this theme is prevalent in the literature and is supported by prior findings.³⁸ Cultural and traditional experiences can be seen as catalysts for change and contribute to an underlying foundation of the transformation category, with literature supporting this view.³⁹ In addition, the theme of cultural and traditional experiences fits well within the theory of desistance, and it makes sense that these experiences support a major life transition.

A number of policy and practical implications are supported by this category. Incorporating cultural and traditional practices into reintegration strategies strongly supports the continued strategies of the Aboriginal Initiatives Branch (AIB) of CSC.⁴⁰ To briefly summarize, the AIB has created strategies to address the unique needs of

Aboriginal offenders, which include programs such as Aboriginal treatment and healing programs, healing lodges (there are currently eight across Canada), halfway houses, agreements with Aboriginal communities to offer services to Aboriginal offenders, a national Aboriginal employment/recruitment strategy, elders working in institutions and in the community, Native brotherhood and sisterhood groups, offender employment and job placement, and a gangs reintegration project. The findings of the current study clearly support these initiatives and encourage AIB to continue employing these initiatives and implementing policies that support cultural and spiritual programming for Aboriginal offenders, both within the institution and during transition to the community. The participants in this study substantiate the importance of cultural and traditional experiences as a part of their transition into the community.

A component of the Correctional and Conditional Release Act (CCRA) has been specifically created to address the needs of Aboriginal offenders. Section 84 was implemented to facilitate the release of Aboriginal offenders to Aboriginal communities (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and urban). According to the act: "Where an inmate who is applying for parole has expressed an interest in being released to an Aboriginal community, the Service shall, if the inmate consents, give the Aboriginal community: a) adequate notice of the inmate's parole application; and b) an opportunity to propose a plan for the inmate's release to, and integration into, the Aboriginal community."⁴¹ According to Aboriginal Corrections, there have been approximately one hundred releases under this act; however, the time frame is unknown. What is known is that Aboriginal offenders are much less likely to be released early in their sentences compared to non-Aboriginal offenders. For example, according to a study by the AIB, which gathered data from 1993 to 1998, Aboriginal offenders were more likely to be released on statutory release than on full parole: of the 609 Aboriginal people on day, full, or statutory release supervision, 292 (48%) were on statutory release; 230 (38%) were on full parole; and 87 (14%) were on day parole. Comparable figures for the non-Aboriginal supervised population were: 1,826 (29%) on statutory release; 3,744 (59%) on full parole; and 779 (12%) on day parole. The relationship between Aboriginal offender release and the implementation of CCRA section 84 is unknown, as there isn't any good data on the relationship between the rate of release from prison and the use of CCRA section 84. The findings from the current study suggest that increasing CCRA section 84 releases would be beneficial to Aboriginal offenders.

Enabling cultural and traditional experiences during the transition from prison to the community is vital in maintaining a crime-free life. The findings in this study support future Aboriginal-specific programming and activities during and post incarceration. To gain a better understanding of cultural and traditional experiences, future research should investigate the impact that the AIB initiatives have had, specifically concerning the reintegration strategies of CCRA section 84. It would also be beneficial to become more aware of the relationship between cultural and traditional experiences and identity transformation of Aboriginal offenders.

CONCLUSION

Through sharing their stories, the participants have voiced personal experiences and wisdom concerning their journey from being incarcerated to maintaining a life free of criminal behavior. The findings from this study are substantiated in the literature and contribute knowledge to theory, policy, practice, and the community. Information obtained from this study provides an increased understanding of the needs of Aboriginal offenders and offers guidance concerning useful strategies to incorporate into their wellness plans when entering the community. The findings also add awareness of those circumstances, issues, and problems that arise during transition that may be harmful or create obstacles to a successful transition.

The categories are well substantiated in the literature, contributing knowledge to theory, policy, practice, and the community. Information obtained from this study provides an increased understanding of the needs of Aboriginal offenders and offers guidance for incorporating useful strategies into their wellness plans when they reenter the community, most notably respecting culture and traditional practices. It is hoped that the information gathered from this study will inform policies and procedures that affect the lives of the Aboriginal men involved in the criminal justice system. More importantly, it is hoped that indigenous knowledge and ways will be acknowledged as integral for Aboriginal offenders during their transition from prison to the community.

NOTES

1. Although I use the term *Aboriginal* throughout this study, it may also refer to people who identify as First Nations (status and non-status), Native, Indian, Inuit, or Métis. Using any one term is problematic because it implies that these people are homogenous when they are not; however, for simplicity, the term *Aboriginal* will be used. For a definition of overrepresentation, see Carol LaPrairie, "Aboriginal Over-representation in the Criminal Justice System: A Tale of Nine Cities," *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 44, no. 2 (2002): 202.

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