Caring and Compassion when Working with Offenders of Crime and Violence

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Abstract

Getting tougher on men who use violence is a rallying cry for people on both sides of the political spectrum. This paper challenges the notion that a punitive framework increased safety and promotes nonviolence. The author highlights that the dominant world view in today's culture and science is based on a fragmentary perspective which reinforces disconnections that facilitate rather than prevent further violence and abuse. He contrasts this with the nonfragmentary perspective which is also scientifically valid but has very different implications for how we treat each other. He highlights that this perspective makes visible compassionate responses to violence that can be more effective in ending abuse and building peace in our lives and relationships. Research to support this conclusion is provided.

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> *One man cannot do right in one department of life whilst he is occupied in doing wrong in another department. Life is one indivisible whole. ~Mahatma Gandhi*

Getting tough on crime and criminals is an easy sell these days. People from opposite ends of the political spectrum tend to agree on this one issue. Speaking of caring and compassion for individuals who have perpetrated acts of crime and violence, however, invites animosity even from the most liberal of listeners. Indeed, in today's socio-political context of government deregulation, the drive to punish and incarcerate continues to be seen as one of the few legitimate government functions (Snider, 1998).

To some degree this is an understandable reaction. Individuals are victimized by criminal acts and society is vicariously victimized by the fear and outrage that is a consequence of these acts. Disharmony and imbalance are created. The most significant factor in recreating harmony and balance involves offenders' being held accountable for their actions. The tough-punitive response, however, does not appear to promote responsibility but rather seems to create more disharmony. Consequently, individuals who pass through this punitive-retributive system become ostracized from society.

To promote a society of equality and respect, however, we must enter into a relationship with those who are disenfranchised in our society. Perhaps one of the most disenfranchised groups in our society, and those often considered unworthy of respect and compassion, are the individuals who have perpetrated acts of crime and violence. In this essay I will argue that a society cannot promote or teach equality, respect and compassion when it is perpetuating abuse towards some of its members regardless of

their actions.

Consequently, this paper is an invitation to consider something very controversial - taking a compassionate approach when dealing with offenders. The challenge is to articulate a compassionate vision without minimizing individual responsibility and without making the suffering of those victimized invisible. This is not an easy task but it is essential for lasting change. Let me establish the need for change by first describing the failure of the current punitive response.

Punitive Response

Official forms of punishment refer to the use of state legislated power to fine, monitor, imprison and in some jurisdiction in North America, execute offenders (McGuire, 1995). Although the direct infliction of physical pain is considered rare in Western countries there is enough evidence that it is an unofficial form of punishment that continues to be used either implicitly or explicitly (Cooke, 1992; Cooley, 1992; Gilligan, 2002; Welch, 1995). The goal of punitive measures involves holding the offender accountable for their actions. In addition, there are three outcomes that are expected to occur as a function of using punitive measures with offenders. First, there is an expectation that the punitive measures will deter offenders from re-offending. Second, it is expected that the population at large will be deterred from engaging in criminal acts when they see specific individuals punished for those acts. Finally, the separation of the offender from the community is expected to increase the safety of the community during the period of incarceration.

The evidence over the last few decades, however, reveals that punitive

measures do not reduce recidivism but on average increase re-offence rates by approximately twenty-five percent (McGuire, 1995). In addition, research on the effects of capital punishment highlight that violent crimes are not less frequent in states that legislate execution of offenders and that there is actually a small increase in interpersonal violence following executions (Gilligan, 2002; Snider, 1998). In other words, state legislated violence seems to legitimize the use of violence in other spheres of life.

The utility of separating offenders from society needs to be explored in more detail. Although at face value imprisonment does increase the safety of the community during the period of incarceration, some very significant concerns are raised when we critically examine this strategy. First, our jails tend to be over-represented by the young, the poor and the visibly different suggesting inequities in the distribution of justice. In intimate partner violence research the evidence suggests that for those men that are socially marginalized (rather than socially bonded), arrest and incarceration increases re-offences (Dutton & Corvo, 2006; Garner & Maxwell, 2000). Second, the use and threat of punitive measures prevent people from coming forward and taking responsibility for their actions (Ross, 1996). In fact, the punitive and adversarial system of justice creates strong disincentives to accepting responsibility for one's actions (Jenkins, 1991) as offenders struggle to maintain a normative identity and avoid criminalization (Buchbinder & Eiskovits, 2004). Finally, prisons are hierarchical, lack in respect, trust and safety and promote physical and emotional victimization. Indeed the neural impact of surviving in prison promotes neurological functioning that primes the amygdala "for paranoid hypervigilence, plus protective emotional distance or outright

distrust, and a readiness to fight" (Goleman, 2006, p. 288). Thus, prisons provide the ideal context for abuse to thrive.

It is not surprising then that incarceration is associated with increases in recidivism. Consequently, for the removal of offenders to be a successful strategy we would have to incarcerate them forever.

In summary, punitive measures have done little to reduce crime; in fact they have made it worse. Research has always favored treatment over punishment[1]. It is tempting to say that people who have committed acts of violence deserve the abuse they experience because of the harm they have inflicted on others. It is interesting to note, however, that this is the same type of justification that offenders' themselves use to account for their own use of violence or criminal behaviour. Thus, we perpetuate the same attitudes and behaviours that we are trying to prevent. In other words, more of the same leads to more of the same.

Obstacles to change

Why do we continue to emphasize the use of the punitive response when it is clearly ineffective? To answer this question we need to look at how we make sense of our world. Our experience of reality is not only filtered through our physical senses but also through cultural lenses and belief systems. These cultural lenses are organized and maintained through the stories or narratives we live and tell (Howard, 1991; Sluzki, 1992). These stories are not merely descriptive of life; they are constitutive of life (White

[1] This does not mean that criminal sanction are not useful in addressing violence. In intimate partner violence there is mounting evidence that a coordinated community response that includes the criminal justice system as well as appropriate and accessible services for those victimized by violence and those perpetrating violence has the largest impact in reducing re-offending (e.g., Gondolf, 2002; Stover, 2005).

& Epston, 1990). In other words, they shape lives by making certain forms of relationships and certain actions visible while obscuring other forms of relationships and actions. We often take these versions of interpreting the world as given or nonarguable. Therefore like fish who are unaware of the water in which they swim, we do not pay attention to how we privilege certain ways of being and limit other, perhaps more adaptable ways.

Nuutilainen (2000) has pointed out that there are four main root cultural narratives in Western culture. These include the scientific account of the universe, the dominance of anthropocentric religions, the human centric view of evolution and the material work ethic which guides our commercialized way of life. A common denominator in all of these perspectives is that they each highlight a fragmentary perspective of life. The scientific perspective most strongly guides our approaches to intervening with offenders of violence. I would like to explore, therefore, how this dominant worldview serves to sustain violence and inhibit change to nonviolence.

The basic premise of this dominant worldview stems from the orthodox view of science, which states that the world is a collection of distinct and separate elements that are related to each other by systems that are ruled by mechanical laws (Weil, 1994). This worldview has led to many scientific advances and discoveries that have provided Western society with levels of material prosperity previously unknown in our history. This worldview has also privileged cultural narratives that have facilitated ways of being which emphasizes our separation from each other and our environments. This experience of separation has reached the point of endangering the survival of all life-forms on the planet. Specifically, this has led to the objectification of nature (i.e., nature

is a resource) and our consequent attempts to control nature. Some of the negative implications of our actions towards nature are obvious (e.g., ozone layer depletion).

How we treat nature, however, is not so different from how we treat each other. For example, violence is often justified or supported through the objectification of individuals (e.g., in war the enemy is dehumanized through labels). In domestic violence we see how men's violence against women is sustained within a culture promotes separations based on gender, that objectifies women (e.g., through their bodies) and that accepts accounts of life which state men are entitled to control women (e.g., women have historically been seen as property). We can do the same kind of analysis for racial violence or child abuse. Table 1 summarizes the general premises highlighted by this worldview and how these premises get translated to human interaction.

Table 1: Framework of Exclusion

General premises		Premises as related to human interactions
Prediction	⇨	Continuity and stability in personality and behaviour
Control	⇨	Entitlements
Objectification	⇨	Compartamentalize individuals (part is taken as a whole)
Separation	⇨	Individualized explanations
Causality	⇨	People are seen as passive objects acted upon by internal (e.g., anger) and external (e.g., provocation) forces

I have labeled this worldview as the "framework of exclusion" because the impact of actions based on these notions is to exclude members of our communities from our communities. For example, the root cultural narratives that spring forth from this framework are used to justify our system of punishment. Specifically, individuals

convicted of crimes are seen and described as unchangeable (stability of behaviour and personality)[2]. In the spirit of separation we highlight how social problems can be explained by problems with these individuals, they are therefore labeled and pathologized on the basis of their criminal behaviour. This in turn supports our decisions and our need to control them. By objectifying these individuals with labels we create the new urban monsters (e.g., domestic terrorist). Consequently, we dehumanize them and thus violence as a tactic of control becomes meaningful.

Perhaps paradoxically, personal responsibility also becomes misattributed or lost within this framework. The pathologization of crime leads to a sense of unchangeability. When the person is forced to be the label they are stuck with limited ways of behaving. An offender offends. When all other aspects of a person's humanity are denied, few other choices are perceived. Furthermore, by objectifying people we suggest that they, as objects, can be affected by internal and external forces that are beyond their control. Consequently, we create a series of excuses for inappropriate behaviour that mitigate personal responsibility. Finally, the experience of separation, exclusion and objectification facilitates a "nothing to lose" attitude which serves to perpetuate the same behaviours we are trying to stop (Gilligan, 2002).

Through this analysis I am not suggesting that this worldview, the framework of exclusion, causes violence. Instead I am highlighting that the ways of understanding the world that are privileged within this framework create contexts which make violence and controlling behaviours meaningful and plausible as ways in which we relate to each other and our environment. In addition, by privileging these ways of understanding the

[2] Although it is true to the best predictor of future violence is past violence this is not invariably true nor is true across the lifespan of an individual. Consequently this tenet is useful for risk assessment but not useful for treatment.

world as statements of **truth** (i.e., because they are based on scientific theory) they also inhibit change by obscuring alternative ways of being.

Barriers to Change

Why do we separate, ignore and ostracize the disenfranchised in our society? According to Jean Vanier (1996), if we listen to their stories we may begin to see the whole person and discover that they are human beings and not the labels or categories we have given them. This discovery of our common humanity, beneath our differences, seems so dangerous because not only do we lose some of our power, privilege and our certitudes in doing so - but we are also forced to look at the shadow side of ourselves. We are forced to examine our own imperfect behaviour and our responsibilities in participating in the creation of a culture where violence is permissible. This is why it feels so dangerous to enter into a relationship with these people. If we do, we risk our lives being fundamentally changed. Fear, then, is at the heart of exclusion.

In the spirit of Carolyn Ellis' (2000) work on the importance of personal narratives in creating understanding around compassion, I would like to share with you a little of my own experience with having to face the shadow side of myself as I entered into a relationship with incarcerated men. When I first began working with men who had committed violent crimes I entered the situation with some trepidation but also with a sense of confidence that I could teach them a better way of life. After all, I was the upstanding member of society and they were the ones with the problems. They were different but I could help them. Looking back I can see now how I had entered this situation with the idea of exclusion and separation despite my avowals that I was a

liberal thinker that would treat these men as human beings rather than just numbers in the system.

Consequently, at times, I engaged in activities that I usually advocated against. I acted as an expert, devalued their opinions when they were different than mine (devaluing is different from disagreeing) and at times acted coercively to try and get the message across that violence was wrong. The irony of this approach is obvious.

At the same time, as I taught and worked with the concepts of nonviolence and cooperation, it started to impact my own life through a greater awareness of how I was acting relative to these concepts. It became painfully clear that I was not always practicing what I was preaching. In addition, I had similar excuses and justifications that the men did as to why I violated my values. At first I resisted this insight. I struggled with what it would mean to acknowledge that, in some ways, I was not so different from these men. I became afraid that if I admitted this insight then I too would be excluded. I became afraid that I would lose status, privilege and power. I also became afraid that I would become inadequate to help.

After this period of resistance, I began to appreciate that my acknowledgement of our similarities aided in my ability to help both the men and myself. I also began listening more closely to their stories about themselves and was able to appreciate our commonalities both in terms of positive and negative attributes and behaviours. I began to finally appreciate more clearly Ghandi's opposition to any form of coercion even for the best and noblest of causes. Like Ghandi, "experience convinces me that permanent good can never be the outcome of untruth and violence" (cited in Easwaran, 1997).

Acknowledging my commonality with these men helped me begin to explore the

ideas that are hidden behind the dominant framework of exclusion and separation and to recognize that ideas may be more meaningful or more useful in creating lasting change. This led to an exploration of the role of compassion in psychological intervention with offenders and to an exploration of other paradigms of thought.

One more obstacles needed to be addressed before I could fully embrace these other paradigms of thought. The traditional scientific account had plenty of positive features that led to undeniable benefits (e.g., medical advances). It helped to recognize, therefore, that it is not necessary to see the view represented by the traditional scientific account as false in order to acknowledge and look for other ways of understanding and organizing our world.

It became clear to me that worldviews are like flashlights that illuminate a dark room. They can be very useful in making certain things visible but at the same time they obscure other possibilities. Consequently, we can begin to examine what is obscured within a perspective without denying the validity of that perspective.

Invitations for a compassionate approach

The framework of exclusion obscures notions that would promote a narrative or framework of inclusion. The notions that make up the narrative or framework of inclusion are not new. They are sustained through various secular and religious traditions and supported by a wide variety of research across a number of disciplines. Indeed, as Weil (1994) has written, this framework is based on a non-fragmentary theory of space-energy in which energy manifests in the form of matter, life and information that is linked or inter-connected. As noted physicist David Bhom has pointed out quantum principles imply that all matter and energy (including us) is entangled so

that it is impossible to consider them independent elements (Peat, 1997). Molecular biologist Bruce Lipton notes that all living organisms integrate their cellular communities (even across species) and thereby concludes that organisms can no longer be seen as disconnected entities (Lipton, 2005). Daniel Goleman (2006) has summarized research that points to how we are inherently neurologically connected to each other and similarly Daniel Stern (2004) concludes that on the basis of neurological evidence our minds are not independent, separated and isolated but are designed rather to be linked to each other. Table 2 summarizes the general premises of this worldview and how these premises get translated to human interaction.

Table 2: Framework of Inclusion

General premises	**Premises as related to human interaction**
Change is natural and expected ➡	Encouragement/Respect Invitations to Responsibility
All life and matter are inter-related ➡	Compassion/Understanding/Love
Individual elements can only be understood in context ➡	Communal Responsibility
Holistic perspective ➡	Forgiveness (seeing persons as whole beings)
Agency ➡	Individual Responsibility (people are agents of their actions)

This framework opens up the ability to envision a new way of creating change and promoting nonviolence. For example, if we accept that change is natural and expected in human behaviour and that people are agents of their actions, instead of determined by internal or external forces, we are in a better position to hold people accountable for their behaviour and to facilitate contexts in which change is not only

encouraged but expected. In other words, under a belief that change is plausible and agency in human behaviour is central, the traditional excuses that sustain violence become untenable.

Thus, in this context, a man who commits an act of violence cannot minimize his responsibility for his actions or his ability to change. This type of behaviour would simply not make as much sense. In addition, members of the community in which the man lives must also take responsibility for their role in facilitating change because it would not make sense to argue that we need to just lock away people who we know can change. Thus, the man who acts violently may also be more likely to accept responsibility for his actions because acceptance would mean engaging in a process of change rather than exclusively punishment. In addition, individuals victimized would be less at risk for being re-victimized by being blamed or being held partly responsible for actions of violence against themselves.

In translating this vision into working with men who have perpetrated acts of crime and violence the importance of a compassionate approach became visible. Compassion is centrally a process of connecting by identifying with another (Cassell, 2002) and the creation of social connections is associated with reductions in crime and violence (Goleman, 2006). Furthermore, compassion not only evokes empathy for the suffering of another but also a desire to do something to relieve that suffering. I will now articulate five reasons for the essential nature of this approach along with the research evidence to support my conclusions.

First, compassion is an emotional competency and a target of intervention for men who use violence and abuse. Compassion has neurological correlates that increase in

activity with practice. It is a flexible skill that can be trained (Davidson, 2003) Teaching Compassion is essential in our work: As men begin to identify with other's feelings, needs and concerns (empathy) and they begin to care about the other person's feelings, needs and concerns such that they wish attend to these needs (compassion), control and power as choices of interaction become less visible.

Furthermore, Compassion regulates physiology and increases cognitive capacity for problem solving. Based on her research on the impact of various emotional experiences, Fredickson (2000; 2003) developed the Broaden and Build Theory of positive emotions. She notes that while negative emotions narrow an individuals momentary thought-action repertoire towards survival function (decreases frontal lobe activity); positive emotions (e.g., compassion) broaden an individuals momentary thought-action repertoire which helps with problem solving and builds enduring resources. Research in neurocardiology further supports this premise and further points to the fact that the quickest way to create a shift in heart rhythms (and thereby brain function) is to feel more love, caring and compassion (Childre & Rozman, 2003).

Second, we need to model what we teach. Reviewing a number of research studies Schlitz and Braud (1997) conclude that the intention to help calm down anxious individuals as measured by sympathetic nervous system activity indicate that others can have almost the same mind-body effect on you as you have on yourself. Similarly, noted emotions researcher Paul Ekman (2003) used physiological data to show that an aggressive person's physiological activation diminishes in the context of a person demonstrating compassion and loving-kindness. Additionally, research in neurocardiology suggests that the heart rate variability in one person can have an

impact on another person (McCraty, 2002). Finally, research on mirror neurons highlight how observed emotions, whether of contempt or compassion, activate neural circuitry in the perceiver's pre-motor cortex to respond as if they were experiencing that same emotion (cf. Goleman, 2006). If we show contempt rather than compassion for offenders we risk facilitating further emotional dysregulation, decreasing opportunities for learning and change and entrenching defensive and reactive patterns of behaviour. Consequently, I would conclude that if we cannot generate compassion for our clients then we should not be in the room with them.

Third, approaches based on compassion build therapeutic alliances. This keeps offenders in treatment longer and therefore reduces risk and recidivism. This is essential in the field of domestic violence because attrition rates in these groups has been in the order of 50% even though we should expect it to be about 20% (Gondolf , 2002). Those who drop-out tend to be younger, single, unemployed and generally a higher risk for re-offending (i.e., they are the men that are most socially marginalized and disconnected). Thus, facilitators' skills in engaging these clients reduce attrition and manage risk. (Andrew's, 1995; Stefanakis, 2000; Taft et al., 2001; Ward & Maruna, forthcoming).

Forth, compassion also indicates that we need to be clear about accountability. From this perspective when a man is engaged in tactics of control he is suffering even as he creates suffering. Compassion moves us to hold him accountable as it is the only way out of long-term suffering. Skilful action is based on a compassion that is intelligent. So compassion here does not imply softness or sympathy. Although there is always warmth and caring there can also be sharpness and directness when it is called for

(DeMello, 1990). Compassionate approaches then attend to responsibility and agency in choices.

Fifth, a compassionate approach makes change (and obstacles to change) visible and invites men into change process. If change is natural and expected, as the framework of inclusion makes visible, we are compelled to focus on how to facilitate change and remove obstacles from change. Thus, instead of getting caught up in blame, rhetoric of resistance or pathologizing labels we focus on asking questions regarding obstacles to change and how we can intervene to facilitate further change. This is made easier when we see people holistically. Some of the challenges offenders face in taking responsibility and negotiating nonviolent identities include (cf. Stefanakis, 1998, 2000):

- How do you acknowledge abuse while protecting self from pathology/dehumanization (Mad or Bad)?
- How do you take responsibility for using violence/abuse and still remain redeemable as a person?
- If you have acknowledged abuse, how do you make change comprehensible to self and others?

Finally, for effective treatment, we need to add positive alternatives for offenders rather than on just working on stopping inappropriate behaviour (Ward & Maruna, forthcoming)

<u>Conclusion</u>

> *We are not truly free if we are taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as we are not free when our own freedom is taken away. To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but also to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. To do this we have to take a leap into trust. Trust in the sacredness of the human heart, trust in the beauty of the universe, trust that in working for peace and unity, we will find a*

treasure. ~ Nelson Mandela

In conclusion, the responsibility for ending crime and violence in our culture lies with all of us. Individual responsibility for one's actions does not excuse social or community responsibility. After all we all inhabit and create the socio-cultural framework of meaning and belief systems that serve, in part, to sustain crime and violence. Therefore, although we need to continue to hold individuals accountable for their actions, it is incumbent on all of us to create a loving and compassionate society by challenging notions that sustain abusive interactions or inhibit change to nonviolence and compassion. Finally, we need to remember that we are interconnected at a deeper level of reality and consequently what we do to each other or to our environment we do to ourselves. When we take the risk to accept this, change will be inevitable.

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