

Getting out and staying out: A conceptual framework for the successful reintegration of Aboriginal male young offenders

Patti LaBoucane-Benson¹

Evaluation and Communication, Native Counselling Services of Alberta

The purpose of this research project was to better understand the process of successful reintegration of male Aboriginal young offenders, focusing specifically on those who have been repeatedly involved with the young offender system. Project objectives were to identify key concepts in the development and maintenance of successful behaviours and lifestyles for Aboriginal young offenders; develop a conceptual framework that describes the process; and make recommendations for policy and programming for Aboriginal young offenders, based on the findings that can effect a positive change in the type of programming available to this population of youth.

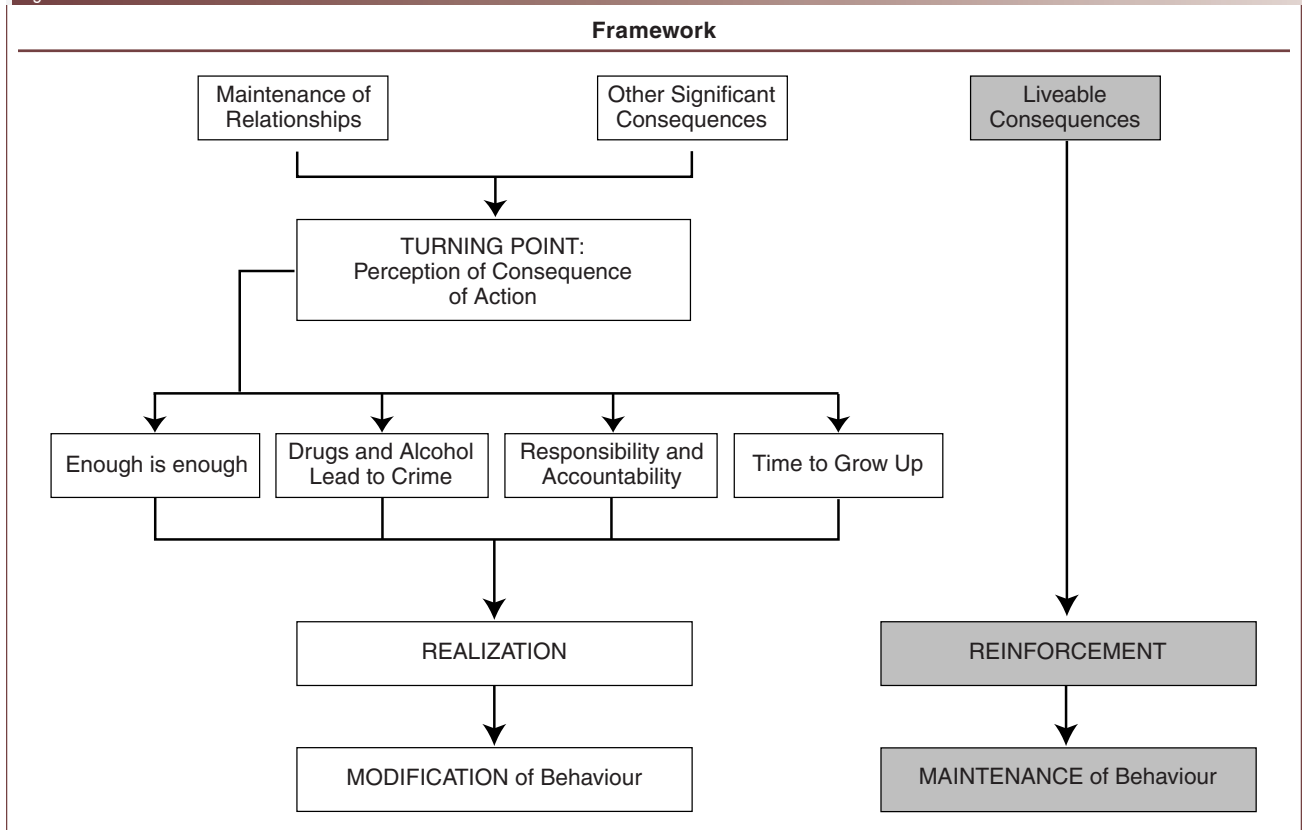
Method

The grounded theory approach was utilized to study the subjective experiences of successful reintegration of Aboriginal male young offenders and the results therefore reflect the researcher's interpretation of the respondent's perspective of how they achieved success and why.

The respondents were adults reflecting upon their experiences as young offenders and their personal process of reintegration. The sample included six participants that were of Aboriginal ancestry with varying connections to traditional Aboriginal cultures. All spent the majority of their lives in urban settings (most in the city of Edmonton). Five of the participants spent a significant amount of time in youth custody - four experienced both closed and open custody; and one experienced only closed custody. The sixth, although a repeat offender, received community dispositions and did not serve any time in custody. Two participants had been charged as adults but never convicted nor incarcerated; one participant spent time in the provincial adult correctional system.

The interviews were semi-structured in nature, with open-ended questions focusing on three subject areas: getting into trouble, getting out of trouble, and staying out of trouble. Participants

Figure 1



were encouraged to elaborate on the nature of their key relationships, their perspective of what helped them to make changes in their lives and what those changes were. All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Findings

The conceptual framework that emerged for the successful reintegration of Aboriginal young offenders was centred around the core concept of “weighing the consequences”. The respondents referred to both meaningful consequences they had experienced in their lives that prompted them to make significant lifestyle changes, as well as consequences they had experienced that only reinforced their criminal lifestyle. Behaviour maintenance versus modification, therefore, was based upon the subjective perspective of the individual, and whether they were willing to sustain the outcome of specific behaviour. Figure 1 illustrates the framework.

Turning Points versus liveable consequences

For Aboriginal youth caught in the cycle of crime, perceived negative consequences caused turning points or pivotal moments that forced the individual to reflect upon how his actions were affecting his life. The most salient consequence for this population of people is centred on relationships. The respondents unanimously indicated that peer relationships (including intimate/romantic relationships) had the most influence after the age of 10 and throughout their adolescence. Early on in their criminal careers, the maintenance of peer relationships, usually those that exerted negative influences on the individual, was more important than the fear of being caught doing something they knew was wrong and the possibility of going to jail. In fact, for most respondents jail was seen as a manageable consequence by a young person, and an environment that could be made comfortable.

Later on in their lives, other relationships began to become more important than those with negative peers. For many respondents, a girlfriend who did not participate in a criminal lifestyle caused a turning point in the individual’s life. Maintaining that relationship became more important than the negative peers, eventually causing a modification of behaviour. In addition, many respondents were either going to be fathers very soon, or were already caring for their children. Their relationships with their child became the most salient relationship in their lives, eventually causing a modification of behaviour.

The respondents also spoke of other meaningful consequences that caused reflection and change.

These included the prospect of adult incarceration (as opposed to youth custody) as an environment that could not be managed successfully or the permanent consequences of a negative lifestyle (i.e., permanent defects from drug use). While these consequences were less salient than those relating to relationships, they were a part of the change process.

Realization versus reinforcement

When the respondent spoke about experiencing a turning point in his life, or a need to reflect on his actions, inevitably he then had a realization about his life and the need for change. These realizations can be categorized in four areas.

The first sub-category is where the individual saw himself at a crossroads in his life and said “enough is enough”. Upon sober reflection of his circumstance, he decided that he never wanted to be in this situation again. Often this was associated with being tired of the whole process of crime - feeling it was not fun anymore, feeling paranoid about getting caught, dealing with the remorse he felt as a result of his actions and the lack of excitement he got from crime.

The second sub-category is the realization that “drugs and alcohol lead to crime”. In this area, the respondent made linkages between his substance abuse and the likelihood that he puts himself at risk of being incarcerated again. While most respondents still used drugs and/or alcohol, all made the connection between substance and crime, and most were actively trying to move away from use or abuse.

The third sub-category is the realization that it was “time to grow up”. At the centre of this concept was the individual’s desire to act like an adult and be seen as a responsible adult by the people around him. The respondents indicated that they thought the crimes that they had committed in the past were associated with being a child and, now that they were adults, they needed to act more maturely.

Finally, the fourth sub-category is the realization that the individual wanted to take on responsibility and be accountable for his actions. This area is directly associated with the relationship that the individual has or desires with his child(ren). All respondents indicated that they wanted to be good parents and not make the mistakes that their parent(s) may have made. They expressed an earnest desire to be good fathers and prevent their children from having the experiences they did while growing up.

Behaviour modification versus maintenance

All respondents indicated that the process of behaviour modification occurs slowly. It is marked

by a gradual adoption of behaviours that are acceptable to the larger society. This process does not happen instantaneously, but rather involves a period of time when the individual hangs on to some questionable behaviour in one area of his life, but takes on positive behaviours in other areas. Most participants demonstrated this by still using alcohol or drugs somewhat regularly; even though they knew that by using they could put themselves in a vulnerable situation, which could result in an arrest for illegal behaviour.

Most important to them, however, is the fact that they had stopped doing crime as a means to get money or excitement, and that they are looking at more legitimate ways of existing in society. In addition, the research has noted another pattern associated with behaviour modification as a result of discussions with the respondents. All the respondents reported having early childhoods that they described as lacking in discipline and adult guidance. This lack of structure seems to have resulted in getting into trouble at a young age and the onset of poor, uninformed decision making. In the process of getting out of trouble, the respondents appear to be young adults creating structure for themselves, taking responsibility for their own actions and learning to make better choices for themselves.

Discussion

It has become apparent that the most effective way to achieve change in the behaviour of Aboriginal young offenders is to change the dynamic or the peer group that most influences the individual or change the peer group completely. From an ecological perspective, if the peer environment is the one that has the most influence on the individual at the time, young offender service providers need to influence changes that will lead to positive behaviour modification. Effective prison environments, therefore, should focus more on the development of a positive peer environment, and less on the punitive aspects of incarceration.

To enhance the prison environment, service providers can include programs that focus on encouraging the individual to reflect on his life and behaviour, creating the opportunity for realizations on the results of his behaviour. These will only be effective if a meaningful consequence for not making the changes exists as well.

At this time, the prison environment for young people is one of negative peer interactions with very few meaningful consequences or positive interventions. Many times boys are put in jail with marginally bad behaviour, only to be surrounded by negative peers, resulting in even worse behaviour. This research asserts that a more sustainable intervention would be to make changes in the peer dynamic affecting the individual in the community, foregoing incarceration altogether. Models of programs exist in North America that deal specifically with the family, peers and school environments of a young person, attempting to make changes in these areas, which will cause changes in the individual's behaviour.

Summary

The conceptual framework for the successful reintegration of Aboriginal young offenders can best be described as a process of weighing the consequences. If a consequence is meaningful (perceived negative enough), it prompts the individual to experience a pivotal moment or turning point. The result is the realization that something must change. The results indicate that these changes involve being "fed-up" with circumstances, a change in the way he views his use of drugs and alcohol, an acceptance of responsibility or accountability for specific things in his life and/or a desire to just grow up/feel like an adult. If the consequence of his action is not perceived to be negative, or is negative but manageable, this will reinforce the behaviour and the individual will continue to behave as before.

Through this process of adopting a crime-free lifestyle, the individual is constantly analyzing consequences of behaviour in order to choose a course of action. How he judges whether a consequence is positive or negative is based upon what he considers important. What the individual deems as most important, or a priority in his life - in this case the maintenance of important relationships in his life - appears to be the guiding thought or principle upon which he makes all of his decisions around behaviour. ■

¹ 12527-129th Street, Edmonton, Alberta T5L 1H7.