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Walking the walk: Ex-prisoners, lived experience, and the delivery of restorative justice

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Abstract
Although the role of prisoners and ex-prisoners has recently received significant attention in restorative justice research, the literature typically treats them as the ‘offending’ party within restorative justice processes. This article instead focuses on ex-prisoners as facilitators of restorative justice, highlighting their ability to lead such programmes. Using a case study from Northern Ireland, the article examines the way that experiences of incarceration have directly influenced practitioners’ skills and their ability to uphold restorative justice principles. It is contended that qualities developed and honed in the prison environment ultimately translate to unique characteristics that can improve the restorative process. As such, this research suggests that the future of restorative justice might be greatly enhanced by including ex-prisoners as practitioners.

Keywords
Ex-prisoner, lived experience, Northern Ireland, practitioner, restorative justice

Introduction
One of the main innovations of the Northern Ireland peace process following the region’s conflict was the prominent involvement of former politically motivated prisoners and ex-combatants in positions of leadership within community-based restorative justice (RJ) programmes. Although significant research has examined the broader political significance of this work in relation to societal peacebuilding (Eriksson, 2009; McEvoy and Mika, 2002; Shirlow et al., 2001), there has been comparatively little analysis concerning how involving ex-prisoners as RJ practitioners has impacted the inner-workings of

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RJ practice. These processes – which I refer to as the ‘micro-dynamics’ of RJ – include all the minute interactions and concepts that occur within a specific RJ proceeding, involving the relationships between participants as well as the relationships between participants and facilitators.

These dynamics have been largely overlooked within the field’s academic literature, and the facilitator role in general has been under-researched (Crocker, 2016; Paul and Borton, 2013). Thus, while the restorative field has witnessed a growing number of programs that include formerly incarcerated or currently incarcerated individuals in the practitioner role, particularly in prison settings (see Beck et al., 2022; Millana et al., 2020; Ross and Muro, 2020), research has lagged, especially in looking beyond the outcomes of restorative systems and in focusing on the specific relationship between carceral history, practitioner skillsets and restorative dynamics.

In fact, despite trends that emphasise lived experience more broadly within the criminological field, the topic has been relatively unexplored academically until recently (Buck, 2017; Sandhu, 2017). Of the literature that does examine lived experience, attention tends to centre on the service users and programme outcomes (i.e. the rehabilitative success of the programme, recidivism rates, etc.), rather than the experiences of practitioners (Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2020). As such, although RJ is increasingly carried out within prison (typically manifesting in restorative courses, victim–offender mediations or whole prison approaches) and sometimes includes ‘inside’ facilitators (Campbell et al., 2020; Dhami et al., 2009; Johnstone, 2014; Nowotny and Carrara, 2018), few studies specifically focus on the impact of lived experience on the practitioner role. These programmes are additionally distinguishable from schemes that incorporate formerly incarcerated individuals into leadership positions outside of prison (such as the scheme examined within this study).

In an effort to fill this gap, this article focuses on the impact of ex-prisoner practitioners and their influence on RJ proceedings. Using an ex-prisoner led organisation in Belfast as a case study, the research explores ex-prisoner practitioners at Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI), examining the relationship between their pasts and their current leadership. In doing so, this unique perspective supports ‘wounded healer’ theories concerning lived experience and enhanced helper abilities. This concept contends that a person’s ‘woundedness’ increases an individual’s ability to help effectively heal others, as a person who has been able to assess his or her sufferings ‘may turn those sufferings to account as sources of knowledge, as a basis for understanding, appreciating, and empathising with the wounds and sufferings of others’ (Jackson, 2001: 36; see also Dwyer and Maruna, 2011).

The first section of this article will outline the methods undertaken during the course of this research. The second section will provide a brief background of CRJI’s formation and the context of community-based restorative practice in Northern Ireland. The third section will examine the ways in which past imprisonment informs the facilitator roles of ex-prisoners at CRJI, exploring their background’s impact on the development of specific skillsets. As is detailed below, I will not argue that any ex-prisoner could serve as an effective practitioner solely by virtue of his or her past incarceration. However, I will contend that the Northern Ireland case study demonstrates that former political prisoners’ past experiences can translate into skills that enrich their roles as facilitators, and ultimately improve the RJ process.
Research methods

The article draws on data collected between October 2018 and October 2021 in Belfast as part of doctoral research related to the RJ organisation CRJI. This project aimed to investigate how the inclusion of ex-prisoner practitioners impacted the micro-dynamics of RJ processes, and included three sub-focuses: (1) delineating the skillsets of ex-prisoner practitioners and exploring the way that their previous life-history affected the development of their skillsets; (2) investigating the impact of ex-prisoner identities and skillsets on relationships within the restorative process; and (3) examining the effect of the practitioner role on ex-prisoner re-entry and desistance mechanisms (Albert, 2023). The analysis contained within this article relates to the first focus concerning ex-prisoner practitioner skillsets (see Albert, 2023 for an analysis of the third focus).

The project received approval from the university ethics committee and upheld robust qualitative research standards. Fieldwork involved three strands of data collection. First, I participated in approximately 1950 hours of insider observation, studying ex-prisoner practitioner and non-prisoner practitioner behaviour alike through involvement in client consultations, mediations, meetings with statutory bodies and general staff interaction. As someone who underwent CRJI’s standard training process to become an accredited practitioner and administrative worker during the period of study (with previous experience as a RJ facilitator in the United States), I brought in-depth knowledge to the research and had direct access to everyday casework and restorative interventions. By observing staff during these interactions, which I recorded via fieldnotes, I familiarised myself with practitioner traits and styles and gained a general understanding of practices and behaviours, which helped to triangulate my other data. To help mitigate potential bias associated with my insider researcher position, I also routinely practised reflexivity and debriefed my understandings with my participants and supervisors (Brannick and Coghlan, 2007), and additionally held a dual ‘outsider’ identity due to my researcher status and US nationality.

Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all consenting practitioners located in the six Belfast offices at the time, comprising both ex-prisoner practitioners (8) and non-prisoner practitioners (17). Invitations to participate in interviews were extended to all practitioners working at CRJI at that stage in the study. Only one non-prisoner practitioner declined to participate, noting an engrained culture of silence developed during the conflict (i.e. ‘say nothing’) and referencing a negative past interview experience not related to this study. All other practitioners gave their full consent, although two asked for their interviews not to be audio recorded and permitted notetaking instead. The ex-prisoner practitioner cohort included seven men and one woman, with their ages ranging from their fifties to sixties, while the non-prisoner practitioner cohort included four men and 13 women, with their ages ranging from their twenties to sixties. Within both cohorts, the longest serving practitioners had worked at CRJI since its foundation. Additional interviews were held with academics, experts and board members associated with the early development of the organisation (7) and one non-politically motivated ex-prisoner client (1). I also conducted three pilot interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals serving as restorative practitioners in the United States (3) to probe the research’s potential relevancy outside of Northern Ireland with non-politically motivated individuals.
The interviews explored a range of thematic issues, but, pertinently for this article, focused on the development of practitioners’ skillsets and their current practice styles, as well as the way ex-prisoner practitioners’ attributes impacted the restorative process. I additionally distributed a short survey to practitioners which further focused on these themes, for example, asking participants to describe the most important qualities of a good facilitator, the strengths and challenges of an ex-prisoner background and (for ex-prisoner practitioners) whether any activities within the prison environment contributed to their current skills and abilities as practitioners. Special consideration was taken due to the ethical concerns around the possible solicitation of guilty knowledge, and it was stressed to participants that the research was focused on their practitioner work rather than any potential historical involvement with proscribed organisations. Interviews were manually transcribed and edited for identifying information, with personal information and consent forms stored on an encrypted laptop and hard drive in a separate file location from transcripts and interviews. All participants provided full and informed consent prior to their engagement in the research and the management of participant data complied with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines.

Third, the researcher conducted an unprecedented review of the organisation’s foundational documents and archives. This included a large repository of meeting minutes, draft reports, handwritten notes, training documents, newspaper clippings, RJ materials and other papers gathered by individuals involved in the formation of the organisation. I also had access to more current yearly reports and statistics, as well as full access to all case data and files at one of the local Belfast offices. This allowed me to examine some of the early challenges encountered by the organisation, particularly in relation to outside critiques that centred on the involvement of ex-prisoner practitioners.

Acquired materials, including all interview transcripts, fieldnotes, survey results and notes on relevant literature and archive documents, were then coded using NVivo (see further Albert, 2023). Data were thematically analysed to identify key characteristics of ex-prisoner practitioners and their effects on the RJ process. I began with familiarising myself with the material and then conducted an initial descriptive coding of the data. From there, I started to interpret, organise and generate themes from the data in a secondary coding process. I completed a third level of coding by refining and restructuring the codes, and interpreted patterns and linked themes to theory. Throughout these cycles, I employed a recursive and reflexive style, revising the codes, investigating different conceptual formats and debating themes with my supervisors and participants. I synthesised the data into thematic narratives and analysed their relation to the research questions, producing my findings, which serve as the basis for the subsequent sections of this article.

**Context: Northern Ireland and community-based restorative justice**

Conflict in Northern Ireland reached a zenith during the late 1960s and lasted until the mid-1990s, in a period of violence colloquially referred to as ‘the Troubles’. During this conflict, more than 3600 lives were lost, and approximately 25,000–30,000 people were
imprisoned (Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). Fighting stemmed from ethno-nationalist divisions involving, on the one hand, nationalist/republican communities who desired a united and independent Ireland and viewed the British state’s presence as illegitimate, and on the other, unionist/loyalist communities who identified as British and wished to remain part of the United Kingdom. Despite common portrayals depicting these two communities as the sole actors within this conflict, the British government additionally played an active role, deploying the criminal justice system, directing military operations, inflicting causalities and colluding with both republican and loyalist paramilitaries (Hearty, 2017).

As a result of such tactics, and in large part due to the state’s militaristic response to the conflict, many communities – both republican and loyalist – suffered a ‘void’ in ordinary formal policing (McEvoy and Mika, 2002). The police focus on prioritising the ‘fight against terrorism’ and the regular use of harsh tactics within ‘suspect communities’ (particularly republican) engendered mistrust from residents and intensified their refusal to cooperate with police, which in turn prevented police from entering communities and providing customary services (Mulcahy, 2006). This produced a situation in which communities did not have access to formal justice mechanisms, nor the ability to address day-to-day crime and anti-social behaviour in their areas. Communities soon came to rely on local paramilitaries to handle local crime, misbehaviour and neighbourhood conflict. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), in particular, developed a complex and often brutal system for addressing alleged infractions and providing ‘justice’ in republican areas. This system, known as punishment violence, could include warnings, mediations, curfews or other nonviolent methods, but was more notorious for its beatings, shootings (‘kneecappings’) and killings.

During the 1990s, as the peace process evolved and ‘military’ cease-fires were organised, continuing punishment violence received greater attention, and political pressure to find nonviolent alternatives became more prominent (McEvoy and Mika, 2002). A process of dialogue began between local republicans and four members of civil society with extensive backgrounds in human rights and peace-making work. Although a lengthy and embroiled process, this eventually led to the creation of CRJI in 1998 (Auld et al., 1997). Based on restorative principles and focused on peacefully resolving conflict within the community, the organisation provided a range of services (which continue today), including victim–offender mediations, mentoring programmes, advice and other practical support projects. Uniquely, the organisation was founded by a partnership involving not only the four civil society activists, but also formerly incarcerated individuals and republican combatants, many of whom took on key practitioner roles. These programmes garnered early support and buy-in from their neighbourhoods, receiving aid from community members – including women and individuals who were not affiliated with the Republican Movement – to instil them at the local level (Ashe, 2015).

Although not the focus of this article due to limitations of scope, a similar process occurred within loyalist communities, producing the organisation Northern Ireland Alternatives (see McEvoy and Mika, 2002). This restorative organisation was also founded through a process involving civil society workers and a loyalist ex-prisoner (Winstone, 1997) and incorporated ex-prisoner practitioners alongside non-prisoner practitioners. The two organisations now function within their respective communities.
but occasionally collaborate on cases as needed and are part of some of the same programmes (CRJI Case Records; NIACRO, 2021; Northern Ireland Alternatives, 2019; STARS Project, 2020).

The state took an interest in these programmes, and RJ more broadly, but developed a protectionist version of such practices, believing justice should remain under the purview of the state and viewing the programmes as a threat to its own authority (Northern Ireland Office, 1998). Common to other post-conflict societies where states have suffered legitimacy deficits, Doak and O’Mahony (2011) note that governments often become concerned with establishing criminal justice control as a crucial aspect of security and democratic governance, which in turn fosters state integrity and legitimacy. Subsequently, community-based RJ in Northern Ireland was perceived as a challenge to the state’s hegemony and ownership of justice, and the state adopted a position of ‘defensive formalism’ (McEvoy and Eriksson, 2007). Moreover, the involvement of ex-prisoners in prominent leadership positions caused many to fear that community-based schemes would operate as a front for paramilitary activity and drew heavy criticism, not only from government officials, but from local politicians, RJ supporters, and community members as well (Criminal Justice Review, 2000; McEvoy and Albert, 2020). As a result of the above concerns, the state contested the legitimacy of such schemes to operate (McEvoy and Eriksson, 2007), and attempted to maintain control through the announcement of an accreditation scheme and the outlining of protocols for community-based RJ initiatives some years after the programmes came into existence (Chapman, 2012; Chapman and Campbell, 2016; Hogg and Butler, 2018).5

Despite such initial controversy, ex-prisoners and former combatants have proven to be important agents in challenging cultures of violence and contributing to societal peace processes through their RJ organisations (McEvoy and Shirlow, 2009). Their leadership has been instrumental in transitioning communities away from punishment violence and building bridges with statutory organisations (Eriksson, 2009). Furthermore, as argued here, the leadership of ex-prisoner practitioners has served to enhance the various components and functions of restorative encounters.

**Ex-prisoners as skilled practitioners**

It is generally understood that practitioners provide a vital role within the RJ field, serving as ‘custodians of restorative justice values’ (Dignan et al., 2007: 13). Such individuals are responsible for a great number of the practical tasks related to the facilitation of restorative encounters, including the formation of guidelines, the creation of a safe environment, the promotion of balanced participation, the development of restorative outcomes and the monitoring of agreements (Dignan et al., 2007; Paul and Borton, 2013). The Restorative Justice Council (RJC) (2011: 9) outlines a range of basic skills that restorative practitioners are expected to meet, including ‘effective and confident communication and personal skills’, ‘an ability to promote dialogue’ and an ability to ‘maintain confidentiality’. In turn, it is hoped that these skills will enhance the micro-dynamics of restorative encounters, foster reparative outcomes, and promote transformative effects (Johnstone and Van Ness, 2007).
While practitioners typically undergo significant restorative training, the knowledge and expertise that a practitioner brings to the facilitator role is additionally influenced by their past lived experiences, with Paul and Borton (2013) noting that a practitioner’s orientations, value systems, experiences and biases form the basis of the restorative response adopted. Goffman’s (1974: 21) framing theory suggests that when an individual experiences an event, the individual interprets it through one or more frames referred to as ‘schemata of interpretation’. These frames give meaning to the event – enabling the person to locate it, identify it, label it and make sense of it. This assessment is impacted by what information individuals take in, their perspectives, their spans of focus and the time or place considered (Goffman, 1974). These cognitive frames and lived experiences can not only shape a person’s perceptions and thoughts, but also their ensuing actions as well (Cornelissen and Werner, 2014). According to Weick (1988, 1995, 2010), such dynamics are especially true when decisions must be made under pressure, are time-sensitive or have the potential to have dangerous impacts. Because restorative practitioners often work in contexts of crisis, a practitioner’s frame of reference is arguably rendered particularly salient – with the potential for their frame to impact the conclusions that they draw about a case, the decisions they make as a result, and the subsequent restorative outcomes selected. Thus, in addition to official RJ training, a practitioner’s role can also be influenced by their past history and life experience and the frames those experiences engender.

In line with such concepts, many restorative guidelines argue for the need to recruit a variety of practitioners, procured from ‘all sections of society’ and possessing ‘good understanding of local cultures and communities’ (Council of Europe, 2018: Guideline 40). In particular, it is emphasised that such facilitators should be ‘of the community’ and should reflect the characteristics of the local residents, as this representation also promotes the perception of inclusivity, equity and legitimacy of the programme (Crawford and Newburn, 2002; Shapland, 2003). However, this effort for inclusion rarely extends to the formerly incarcerated, and ex-prisoner practitioners remain an overlooked population within RJ literature, and, in some cases, are actively discouraged from assuming facilitator duties (Dhami and Joy, 2007: 17; Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2020).

However, I contend herein that ex-prisoner traits and experiences ultimately correspond to important qualities for the facilitator role, informing frames of reference, knowledge and skill. Thus, although all CRJI practitioners are skilled and undergo significant training – completing a Level 3 Certificate course in Restorative Practice covering restorative principles, human rights, facilitator duties and a range of other topics – ex-prisoner practitioners bring unique experience-based skills to the position (Eriksson, 2009; Shirlow et al., 2001), making them uniquely suited to the facilitator role. In the ensuing section, I examine the particular traits and qualities that ex-prisoner practitioners transfer to their positions, demonstrating how attributes that were formed during incarceration and other past experiences can contribute to their facilitative skillset. I will focus on four key findings identified during analysis, including ex-prisoner practitioners’ familiarity with conflict management, their assertive and resilient nature, their interpersonal skill and emotional composure and their knowledge of local communities.
Conflict navigation and familiarity

Akin to Goffman’s framing theory, Weick (1995) explains that meaning is created through the interaction of people’s expectations and external cues, and that individuals use meaning to gradually interpret and make sense of situations. Leaders within organisations that face potentially dangerous or ambiguous situations must constantly utilise this type of sense-making – appraising hazards, benefits and solutions with the information available to them to understand events and prepare reactions (Baran and Scott, 2010). The ability to quickly recognise cues and anticipate effective reactions is especially important in these high-risk settings, and having leaders with strong evaluative skills, situational awareness, communication abilities and behavioural agility can improve responses (Baran and Scott, 2010; Mumford et al., 2007).

Ex-prisoner practitioners – as individuals intimately familiar with navigating and managing conflict through their time in prison or association with paramilitary organisations – bring substantial conflict-related experience to their current roles as facilitators (Eriksson, 2009; Monaghan, 2004). As noted above, many ex-prisoner practitioners were exposed to intense violence and conflict while in prison (Rolston and McKeown, 2017). Often, they lived in an environment that centred on mistrust, fear and violence (Campbell et al., 1994; Evans and Wallace, 2008). McEvoy (2001) has detailed the way that political prisoners developed a variety of resistance techniques in response to prison management styles, involving the use of law, self-sacrifice, violence, escape, self-help and negotiation. Prisoners navigated such conflict on a daily basis and became familiar with handling hostile situations, including in nonviolent forms. For ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI, these inevitable interpersonal conflicts equipped them with further conflict management skills, leading to novice mediation work and experiential methods of resolving disputes. Indeed, especially from the early 1980s onwards, prisoners partook in regular discussions regarding strategy and progress, practised considering problems from different angles and learned to compromise and negotiate on practical arrangements (Campbell et al., 1994; McEvoy, 2001; Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008). These refined skillsets directly prepared them for restorative facilitation. As an ex-prisoner practitioner explained:

I think the skillsets that [ex-prisoners] developed within prison had a lot of bearing on restorative justice . . . [we] learned to debate, to tease out, look at all the issues. And not only looking at solving the issue in the short term – how would this pan out a year later? Or six months later, or two years later? So we brought those skills to [restorative justice].

In addition, several of the ex-prisoner practitioners involved in this study stressed that these experiences with conflict did not come solely from prison, and were also impacted by their past roles as combatants. As people who were involved with settling disputes in the community (Silke, 1998, 1999), interviewees expressed that they had acquired conflict resolution skills during their time with the Republican Movement. They described:

Being an ex-combatant, you would’ve been used to conflict, you would’ve been used to confronting problems, and you would’ve been vocal in that there, and I think that has lent itself to CRJI . . . that came through trial and error, and you learned how to handle those things.
In fact, many ex-prisoner practitioners felt that this lived experience was more informative than their official facilitator training. Such individuals emphasised the importance of their experiential knowledge and indicated that they valued their years of practice over any academic knowledge of RJ (Fieldnotes, 7 March 2019). They stressed that the practitioner role could not ‘be learned in a book’, and in some of their informal conversations with me, noted the irony of being taught by an academic who had not actually carried out practitioner work before. They commented that they had problems with these trainers telling them how to do their work, feeling that such individuals were ‘preaching’ to them. Several ex-prisoner practitioners also repeated to me that the academic trainers had stated they were learning from the CRJI practitioners, in a testament to the value of their experience. For this reason, some of the ex-prisoner practitioners took issue with the state-imposed protocols which required them to receive formal training (Northern Ireland Office, 2007), feeling that they were being forced to jump through hoops to receive approval for work they were already doing, although they still often acknowledged the necessity of accreditation. One practitioner summarised:

I’ve got my life experiences of years upon years of working within my community, which amounts to a hell of a lot more than somebody telling me that they’ve sat and read a textbook, and they haven’t been out there, and they haven’t done it. That’s the difference – not that I’m running the textbook down – I mean obviously we all have to learn, but we also have to get out there and get our hands dirty and get into it.

This type of practical knowledge and familiarity with conflict resolution has been directly applicable to ex-prisoners’ roles as facilitators, improving their ability to mediate encounters and employ restorative approaches in designing outcomes. Although the exclusive commitment to nonviolent techniques perhaps differed from some of their previous conflict management tactics, nevertheless, the range of this experience contributed to their ability to adequately assess situations and respond with proficiency. As such, their background improved their competency in managing restorative encounters, identifying complex problems, considering different knowledge perspectives, and designing appropriate restorative responses that mitigate risks (National Occupational Standards (NOS), 2013a).

Resistance, resiliency and advocacy

Within prison, inmates are forced to cope with the physical, psychological and emotional ordeals and pressures of incarceration (McKeown, 2001; Shirlow et al., 2001). As Goffman (1961) and others have described, such institutions strip individuals of their identities, break their wills, remove self-control and impose forced indignities and humiliation, provoking many incarcerated individuals to develop coping mechanisms and resistance strategies to these pains (Giddens, 1984; McEvoy, 2001; Sykes and Messinger, 1960). Crewe (2007) suggests that this gives rise to conditions in which resistance – whether through open rebellion or efforts just short of absolute consent – becomes a normality. Such experiences can lead to fundamental identity changes, as Hulley et al. (2016) suggest, and can prompt the development of resiliency through
efforts to protect dignity, identity and a sense of agency (Bazelon, 2018). In fact, Lawson et al. (1996: 298) found that negative assertion, or the ‘ability and willingness to stand up for personal rights and refuse unreasonable requests’, was positively linked to the degree of an inmate’s prisonisation. This practice of confronting issues and defending oneself in ‘highly intimidating’ circumstances can imbue incarcerated individuals with the assertiveness to advocate for themselves and others (Campbell et al., 1994: 11; Keltner et al., 1981), with McKeown (2001) noting that republican prisoners actually began to see themselves as advocates and ‘agents of change’.

Many practitioners at CRJI remarked on this strength, noting that ex-prisoner practitioners were incredibly competent in standing up to authority and ‘commanding the room’. Interviewees conveyed that ex-prisoner practitioners possessed a confidence in challenging the behaviour of others in a way that de-escalated conflict, including for instance, the ability to call participants ‘on their bullshit’ while maintaining the restorative tone of the encounter. This same type of assertiveness could also apply to situations involving outside groups, such as statutory organisations, the police or armed groups. An ex-prisoner practitioner explained this proclivity to challenge and defend others, stating:

We’ve been through so much, you know, and we’re not afraid. I’m not afraid to speak up. Not afraid to challenge people. ‘Cause been there, done that, wore the t-shirt. And that’s crucial. You know, sometimes you’re there to support or advocate for that person, and when you’ve got a strong person sitting beside you, who you know is not afraid to challenge things, that gives that person confidence . . . If they’re with me, they’ll feel safe . . . that’s important.

Since one of the primary duties of the facilitator is to ‘safeguard the wellbeing of participants’ (Restorative Justice Council, 2016: 3), such resilience is clearly a desirable attribute for practitioners. Guidelines often highlight the need for restorative facilitators to keep interactions free from ‘judgement, discrimination and oppression’ (NOS, 2014: 2), stressing the prevention of physical, psychological or emotional damage to participants (NOS, 2013b). Practitioners are also tasked with addressing distress and disrespect within restorative encounters and are expected to ‘challenge constructively and positively’ when ground rules are not met (NOS, 2013c: 5; see also RJC, 2016: 21). In these situations, practitioners must intervene to protect the parties and re-establish a safe environment. Being able to step in and stand up to such attacks on behalf of clients was seen as instrumental in protecting the overall RJ process.

At times, however, this same attribute was acknowledged to cause problems. A non-prisoner practitioner noted that such behaviour could be ‘borderline inappropriate’ in certain cases, stating that it can appear that ex-prisoner practitioners ‘don’t give a fuck about what other people think is proper, they do what needs to be done’. Despite this comment, however, the interviewee noted that this type of challenging attitude was often necessary, and that although ex-prisoners typically did not tiptoe around issues, which could be off-putting for some clients, the style was effective and was in many ways a ‘more genuine’ approach.

While it is true that some of these qualities could be attributed to personality traits, rather than the ex-prisoner experience, the research suggests that individuals
gained substantial practice with challenging individuals and advocating for themselves and others during their time in prison, and several ex-prisoner practitioners specifically noted that their strong characters and ability to assert themselves derived from their experience within prison.18 Such abilities translated into the capacity to uphold practitioner responsibilities, rendering ex-prisoners capable of protecting participants, managing conflict and aggression and redressing power imbalances (NOS, 2013b: 2).

Interpersonal communication skills and affect control

Becker et al. (1987: 9) have defined interpersonal skill as an individual’s ability ‘to identify the emotions or intent expressed by [another] person and make sophisticated judgements about the form and timing of the appropriate response’. Interpersonal skills thus depend on the ability of an individual to perceive and consider the behaviour of others, as well as the ability to adapt one’s responses meaningfully (Hargie, 1997). Notably, like the other dimensions of practitioner qualities discussed in this article, these skills are learned and influenced by familiarity with particular stimuli (Bentley, 1993; Hargie, 1997).

Related to the high-risk setting and the general lack of security in the prison environment – including a high degree of mistrust and wariness (Bosworth, 1999) – such skills become uniquely refined for ex-prisoners (Lawson et al., 1996). For instance, they become quite practised at quickly assessing people and interpreting their cues,19 judging whether information is reliable or accurate (Hargie, 1997; Hinton, 1993), and utilising controlled language (Clemmer, 1940; see also Rolston and McKeown, 2017). Ex-prisoners also carefully learn to assess what is not revealed during their time in prison, with Clemmer (1940) explaining that they gain substantial experience withholding information. These experiences equip ex-prisoner practitioners with the capacity to tailor their interactions to garner the necessary information, relay material and nudge discussions towards a desired outcome (what one ex-prisoner practitioner described as ‘charming the situation’20). In turn, these skills can assist ex-prisoner practitioners with their responsibilities to reframe client stances, promote open dialogue, validate and normalise experiences, avoid judgement and foster cooperation (Heron, 1999; Hogan, 2002; Woolford, 2009).

Indeed, Pavlich (1996: 723) notes that mediators must ‘extract and fashion particular sorts of confessions by constantly probing for information, rephrasing issues, praising or castigating confessors – all of which are directed at dispute settlement’. Many ex-prisoner practitioners expressed that this type of information management became an engrained way of life as a result of their experiences, enabling them to discern the truth, accurately judge character, assess when to disclose information to clients and refrain from revealing too much.21 An ex-prisoner practitioner reflected:

I think [reading people] is a well, truly tested thing for ex-prisoners. Personally speaking . . . I like to face people to see their reactions . . . and their facial expressions and what way they are. I think it says a lot. Is that borne out through my experience through the years? Yeah, it is. And I don’t think that someone who is a non-combatant practitioner has that type of experience.22

In addition, the particular experience of living in secrecy and adhering to the maxim ‘say nothing’ undoubtedly helps the facilitator maintain client confidentiality and refrain
from carrying tales beyond the office walls (RJC, 2011). Academics have asserted that this confidentiality can foster better client participation and make people feel more comfortable disclosing sensitive information (Lauwaert and Aertsen, 2002; Reimund, 2004; Van Ness, 2003). Several practitioners described this effect, noting that some clients seemed to feel more comfortable with ex-prisoner practitioners because they trusted them to maintain confidentiality. As a non-prisoner practitioner and community member stated:

I think you would have more confidence in telling the ex-prisoner practitioners information that you felt was personal to you, in the strictest of confidentiality, [knowing] they’ll work hard . . . and they’ll never discuss it.23

Exposure to the prison environment also promoted skilled control over emotions. Emotional regulation involves the way that individuals ‘influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions’ (Gross, 1999: 275). Related to Goffman’s (1959) theory of dramaturgical discipline, suggesting that individuals present themselves differently in private than in public, people often attempt to cover up inappropriate behaviour and suppress spontaneous feelings to promote an appearance of desirable qualities. The lack of distinction between public and private spheres within prison, as noted by Crewe et al. (2014), as well as regular exposure to situations involving emotional strain and distress, renders this practice especially important for prisoners. Inmates often manufacture or modify an emotional response or use the technique of ‘masking’ to stifle or suppress emotion to hide ‘traces of fear, pain, weakness and vulnerability’ in order to maintain a particular ‘front’ (Crewe et al. 2014: 64; Goffman, 1959; Laws and Crewe, 2016). For instance, republican prisoners often retained a sense of bravado in front of prison authorities – making sure guards did not see embarrassment when they were naked, masking pain during physical attacks and generally hiding their emotions through ‘emotional reticence, stoicism, even callousness’ (Campbell et al., 1994; Darragh, 2011; Rolston and McKeown, 2017: 276).

This practice of emotional regulation resonates with Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labour, which suggests that workers in service-oriented positions are regularly required to disguise or feign affect in order to be effective in their interactions with clients. Restorative encounters can clearly be emotional places for participants, who are dealing with the repercussions of harm or trauma (Larsen and Prizmic, 2004; Zehr, 1990). Such an advanced skill can therefore be especially beneficial, associated with the facilitator’s task of appearing impartial and maintaining a safe environment (RJC, 2011). Many interviewees remarked that ex-prisoner practitioners were particularly able to contain or control their emotions, or were not outwardly affected by them (and perhaps were more desensitised to certain issues).24 As several practitioners explained:

It isn’t that they aren’t empathetic, it is that they are able to hide their emotions. They’re able to mask them more, probably because of their own trauma – doesn’t mean there aren’t emotions there, because they care an awful lot about the people coming in – but you probably don’t see it on their face.25
You can handle . . . them heavy cases where there’s maybe bad outcomes. You’re used to hearing it . . . you’ve got like a protection on you . . . you’re calm, you’re not panicking . . . because when that person comes through the door, you’re supposed to keep thems calm – you don’t show facial expressions. It’s an everyday thing you know, somebody says they got a death threat, I go, ‘Okay’.

That said, some of these ex-prisoner attributes could also be a barrier for certain participants. A few clients specifically asked to deal with non-prisoner practitioners. In such instances, clients indicated they felt that the ex-prisoner practitioner was abrasive or appeared to be unsympathetic, and preferred to speak to a non-prisoner practitioner; in other instances, clients felt that questions from the ex-prisoner practitioner were off-putting and the clients became frustrated, requiring a non-prisoner practitioner to intervene to calm them. Despite rubbing some clients the wrong way, practitioners expressed that certain individuals responded well to such approaches, and highlighted the importance of having multiple perspectives within CRJI to meet the personal preferences of clients.

Such instances aside, in general terms the circumstances of prison life (as well as combatant experiences) clearly fostered impressive social and emotional skills among ex-prisoner practitioners. These skills unmistakably assisted practitioners in their duties to relay information between participants in indirect mediations and oversee participant encounters in direct mediations (NOS, 2013c). The practised judgement and discernment enabled them to adeptly interpret behavioural cues, tactically direct conversations, select ‘appropriate’ information for sharing and give feedback (NOS, 2013b: 2) in a way that promoted the ‘positions, interests and needs of participants’ (NOS, 2013c: 5). Their ability to suppress fear or anxiety – or feign happiness or contentment – served as a protective factor in managing the environment and maintaining a safe space for participants. Such composure could additionally be applied to help clients with reappraising the situation (Gross, 1999; Stemmler, 1997), repressing negative emotions (Gross, 1999) and ‘up-regulating’ positive emotion (Larsen and Prizmic, 2004). Emotional composure and interpersonal skill thus not only help practitioners protect their own well-being, but also equip them with the facilitation skills to control mediations and manage clients with aplomb.

Connectivity with local cultures and neighbourhoods

In working class communities in Northern Ireland, ex-prisoners have a deep comprehension of local attitudes and customs, and additionally are connected to a vast circuitry of resources, people and places (Eriksson, 2009; Shirlow and McEvoy, 2008; Silke, 1998). Many ex-prisoners were extensively involved in their neighbourhoods during their time as political combatants, participating in community development efforts, residents’ networks, civil society organisations and conflict management projects. As a result of such activities, many interviewees believed that ex-prisoners were uniquely familiar with the local people and areas. Participants commonly suggested that this type of knowledge and connectivity was helpful for contextualising cases and assessing pathways forward. Indeed, such bottom-up, culturally relevant models have increasingly been recognised
for their ability to empower local communities and promote innovation (Braithwaite, 2002; McEvoy and Albert, 2020), and are often acknowledged as producing facilitators who are familiar with the struggles, customs, needs and values of the relevant stakeholders (Merry, 1982; Mika, 2002). As a non-prisoner practitioner stated:

It’s not just knowledge of restorative practises, this is on the ground knowledge . . . that’s where the whole ex-prisoner thing comes in . . . say there was a young fella shot somewhere, and his parents come in to talk to us and tell us where he was shot . . . instantly [this ex-prisoner] will know the ins and outs, where to go to, who to speak to . . . See someone textbook educated . . . where nobody knew them in the community, you wouldn’t get the same amount of work done, because you don’t have that history, you don’t have that knowledge, and that is the part and parcel of the job.32

Ex-prisoner practitioners noted that this relationship with the community was important in encouraging an organic credibility among residents. At times, this social and cultural capital could facilitate a greater willingness from clients to listen to advice or to adhere to recommendations.33 As such, ex-prisoners’ detailed understandings of local contexts helped enhance their ability to design and manage restorative encounters, bringing insight into clients’ prior behaviours, cultural comprehension and knowledge of possible risks (Braithwaite, 2007; Clamp, 2014). The National Occupational Standards highlight that such skills related to the awareness of potential attitudes or sensitivities that impact complex cases can help facilitators anticipate how proceedings may affect clients and the overall restorative process (NOS, 2013a: 6). Thus, in contrast to many practitioners who are knowledgeable in theoretical studies but lack practical applications (Bosworth, 1999), or practitioners who come from different neighbourhoods and socio-economic classes and ‘parachute in’ to restorative organisations, ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI come to the role with extensive practical experience that can enhance the system.

It is important to note, however, that this research should be seen as highlighting the skills that ex-prisoner practitioners bring to their positions, not as detracting from the capabilities of non-prisoner practitioners, who also bring lived experience to their roles but have simply developed their skills in different contexts. Arguably, it is the mix of these various backgrounds and strengths that makes a restorative organisation so robust (Hogan, 2002), and many interviewees highlighted this point, stating that they complemented each other in a variety of ways – bouncing ideas off of each other, consulting each other and providing alternative perspectives.34

Conclusion

Ex-prisoner practitioner contributions have been largely unresearched within the RJ field, with few answers as to how their involvement might impact restorative proceedings. This article helps address this oversight, demonstrating that although some critics believe that promoting ex-prisoner leadership privileges former perpetrators (Edwards and McGrattan, 2011), their ability to enhance the micro-dynamics of restorative processes underscores the necessity of promoting their participation. Indeed, their experience-based knowledge and practical engagement with conflict give them an acute
understanding of the challenges that clients face and deep personal beliefs in restorative practices, rendering them particularly effective and knowledgeable.

While not all participants thought these skills were attributable to an ex-prisoner status, believing such qualities were largely related to general personality traits rather than an ex-prisoner identity, other studies involving formerly incarcerated individuals have reaffirmed the importance of incarceration experiences, noting that political ex-prisoners possess a wisdom gained through their own life histories that can be used to help others (Dwyer, 2010; Dwyer and Maruna, 2011). This resonates with research on ‘ordinary’ ex-prisoners serving as mentors, mutual-aid leaders and wounded healers that suggests formerly incarcerated individuals make exemplary practitioners due to their ability to support, understand and relate to clients (see e.g. Buck, 2018; Leverentz, 2014; Lopez-Humphreys and Teater, 2020).

Such literature indicates that this case study might therefore have implications beyond Northern Ireland’s unique context. On the one hand, the study directly speaks to debates concerning post-conflict societies, disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) and the role of former combatants in justice structures, providing lessons to other post-conflict contexts where former combatants have become involved in local restorative organisations. On the other hand, the exposure to the prison system experienced by political ex-prisoners is shared by ‘ordinary’ ex-prisoners, rendering the development of similar coping techniques and conflict management skills a potential outcome among the wider ex-prisoner population, signifying broader ramifications. Thus, while the circumstances of post-conflict contexts are arguably quite particular, many of the dynamics discussed within this article concerning past incarceration and enhanced practitioner roles may be applicable in non-conflict settings, and should be developed as a new strain of research in the RJ field.

Ultimately, the specific qualities and themes identified in this study indicate that ex-prisoners bring extensive experiential knowledge to their roles, rendering them incredibly competent in managing conflict, advocating for others, regulating social interactions and utilising local knowledge. These skills and qualities help uphold restorative principles and exemplify the duties of facilitators. As previous research has shown that a practitioner’s understanding of, and adherence to, RJ principles can play a pertinent role in preventing restorative systems from being co-opted and can strengthen commitment to restorative outcomes (Crocker, 2016; Karp et al., 2004; Paul and Borton, 2013), ex-prisoner practitioners’ experiences of imprisonment and their conviction in restorative ideology make them particularly suited to restorative leadership and can enhance overall RJ systems. It is therefore asserted that the involvement of ex-prisoners in restorative leadership benefits the restorative process as a whole – providing skilled facilitators who possess a desire to uphold restorative philosophy, improve the micro-dynamics of encounters and promote better outcomes for all involved. The onus now rests with the RJ movement to acknowledge the value of this experiential knowledge and to actively work towards the creation of more inclusive leadership paradigms.

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**Notes**

1. The term ‘ex-prisoner’ reflects the terminology and preferences of the participants, not the author, and is often used euphemistically by ex-political prisoners in Northern Ireland to denote a former combatant identity (see Albert, 2023).

2. This training, undertaken by all CRJI practitioners, is led by an accredited outside centre approved by Skills For Justice Awards, and results in a Level 3 Certificate in Restorative Practice, and includes ongoing writing exercises and formal assessment, as well as general mentoring from serving practitioners. Some practitioners (myself included) choose to expand this training into a Level 4 Diploma in Restorative Practice and Processes, which is a five-unit course that covers restorative principles, relevant legislation, human rights, confidentiality, group dynamics, communication techniques, recording procedures, conflict assessment, participant preparation, facilitation, evaluation, co-working, stakeholder engagement and other duties related to the practitioner role. Practitioners also receive regular training opportunities provided both by CRJI and outside organisations, on topics such as human rights, child protection, substance abuse and so on, to uphold high standards of care.

3. I had originally intended to interview more CRJI clients, but the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted my data collection and it was decided to omit these plans and instead focus on the existing interviews. Also of note, one of the interviewees categorised as a member associated with CRJI’s early development was also once an ex-prisoner practitioner, but is not counted in the above total of ex-prisoner practitioners.

4. The specifics of these interviews are not detailed within this article because of the small sample size and the fact that this article is focused on ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI, but themes identified in those interviews seem to indicate that similarities exist across contexts.

5. The government remained supportive of restorative practices tied to the formal system, however, and developed its own restorative youth conferencing model under the Justice (Northern Ireland) Act 2002, which was inspired by the family conferencing system popularised in New Zealand (Criminal Justice Review, 2000; O’Mahony and Doak, 2017).

6. Goffman (1974: 21) argues that individuals utilise both natural and social frameworks to interpret, process and communicate data, both consciously and unconsciously. These frameworks
enable humans to form conjectures about what occurred and expectations about what is likely to happen next, developing a ‘frame-relevant view of the workings of the world’ (p. 563). While the purpose of this article is not to conduct a frame analysis of practitioners or their potential analysis of clients’ stories, it is useful to understand the basic precept of Goffman’s frames, highlighting that an issue can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, which has implications both for how a practitioner interprets and conceptualises an issue, and in turn for what they do with that information (Feste, 2011; Goffman, 1974).

7. As previously described in Footnote 3, practitioners at CRJI complete a Level 3 Certificate course, and can additionally continue training to achieve a Level 4 Diploma, both of which are accredited by SFJ Awards. CRJI has recently achieved Registered Training Provider status to start providing these trainings in-house (Simon, 2023).

8. While I do not want to overly generalise the experiences of political ex-prisoner practitioners, who each have their own unique incarceration history, practitioners who have been previously imprisoned share the experience of having been confined within a total institution (see Goffman, 1961). Many authors have noted that total institutions, and prisons in particular, have their own unique cultures and social processes, often defined by violence, hierarchy, resistance and emotional reticence (Giddens, 1984; Sykes and Messinger, 1960). These circumstances and characteristics can be observed in Northern Ireland’s prisons in contexts involving political prisoners, and additionally align with some of the practices and tactics disseminated by the Republican Movement (see McEvoy, 2001; Rolston and McKeown, 2017).

9. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 26 June 2018.

10. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 22 July 2019.

11. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 23 October 2019.

12. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 22 July 2019.

13. Giddens (1982) notes that subordinate players can find ways to push back against power holders since power is dialectic. In Northern Ireland’s context, prisoners routinely had to advocate for themselves and their political status. This included overt forms of resistance such as violence, hunger strikes, escape attempts and legal petitions (Bryson et al., 2021; McEvoy, 2001), but also included subtler forms of resistance, such as negotiations over food, dress codes and furniture (Campbell et al., 1994; Crewe, 2007). Of course, many of these same experiences also led to trauma and a range of psychological and physiological impacts. While some of the practitioners I spoke to readily discussed the negative impacts of the trauma, all of them also spoke about a comfortability confronting conflict and speaking out.


15. This might include challenging a participant on a statement that the facilitator knew to be false, for example, in order to ensure honesty and accountability within the restorative encounter. Interview with non-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 19 November 2019.

16. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 27 June 2018.

17. Interview with non-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 19 November 2019.

18. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 27 June 2018; conversation with ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI from fieldnotes, 6 March 2019.

19. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 23 October 2019.

20. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 23 October 2019.

21. Interviews with republican ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI, Belfast, 22 July 2019 and 27 June 2018; Interview with non-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 19 November 2019; see also Rolston and McKeown, 2017.

22. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 22 July 2019.

24. Interview with non-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 5 December 2019.
25. Interview with non-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 9 December 2019.
26. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 27 June 2018.
27. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioners at CRJI, Belfast, 23 October 2019 and 22 July 2019; Interview with non-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 5 December 2019.
31. Interviews with non-prisoner practitioners at CRJI, Belfast, 1 August 2019 and 9 July 2018; Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, 28 October 2019.
32. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 28 October 2019.
33. Of course, their status as ex-prisoners could also impede relationships, both with those from outside of their communities as well as those within the community who disagreed with their beliefs or past associations and behaviours. Interviews with non-prisoner practitioners at CRJI, Belfast, 23 July 2019 and 24 October 2019.
34. Interview with republican ex-prisoner practitioner at CRJI, Belfast, 27 June 2018.
36. This point has been inspired by discussions led by Paula Harriott at the European Society of Criminology Conference 2023 in Florence, Italy, which noted that the criminological field tends to value academic knowledge over experiential knowledge.

References


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