
Learning work skills on the outside: Opportunities for self-development and reintegration among former prisoners in Ghana

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Abstract: This study focused on the training of two ex-offenders out of three who were employed by the Prison Ministry in Ghana. The instrumental case-study research design was used for this study and the sampling method used was the “unique case selection”. The researcher used in-depth interview which was individually focused as the instrument for data collection. The study revealed that the two former prisoners were tasked to do on-the-job training and it targeted the development of their cognitive skills. This is because their previous knowledge and skills had been eroded through long term of imprisonment. The findings of the study indicated that the trainees acquired knowledge about human-relations and work ethics. Additionally, they developed a sense of self-esteem and they were able to perform their social responsibilities. A further research should be conducted into the Prison Ministry’s role in repairing damaged relationships between former prisoners and their families in Ghana.

Keywords: Self-Esteem, Human-Relations, Work-Ethics

1. Introduction

Ex-offenders have their individual characteristics made up of pre-prison circumstances, prison experiences, as well as post-release experiences and state policy that make their reintegration into society difficult. For instance the poor employment histories and job skills of returning prisoners create diminished prospects for stable employment and decent wages upon release. On the contrary, ex-offenders who are able to rejoin the labour market, through previous employers or contacts from family or friends, are more likely to have successful outcomes after release (Nelson et al. 1999, Sampson & Laub 1993). Conversely, ex-offenders who were deeply embedded in criminal lifestyle for many years prior to imprisonment may be at highest risk of poor outcomes after release (Adler 1992, Hagan 1993, Nelson et al. 1999, Western et al. 2001). Some research indicate that lengthy exposure to the harsh, impersonal conditions of prison life and the institutionalization that results from living in such an environment may have short and/or long-term effects on an individual’s ability to readjust to life outside of prison (Adams 1992, Bonta and Gendreau 1990, Haney 2003, Irwin 1970, Ross & Richards 2002). Again,

societal laws serve as barriers to those with felony convictions from getting employed (Samuels et al. 2002, Travis et al. 2001, Uggen et al. 2003).

Additionally, most ex-offenders are noted for limited educational achievement hence I agree with the view that ex-offenders have potentials which can be developed through education or training in order to transform their knowledge, skills, and moral values which will put them into legitimate jobs. Secondly, education or training will serve as avenues for social mobility and it will help ex-offenders in Ghana to get rid of the negative attributes that pose a challenge to their reintegration.

In Ghana many ex-offenders are not well received at home and in the church because of suspicion of criminal activity or fear that they have not truly repented. Many return to find their homes broken, with their spouses married to others. Even those who are received at home become economic burden on their families as extra mouth to feed. Additionally, the law in Ghana prohibits employment of ex-offenders in the Civil Service. Though the law applies to only the Civil Service, other public organizations and private businesses do

not engage individuals with criminal record. Besides, it is difficult for such individuals to travel internationally on account of past record of imprisonment. The ex-offender in Ghana is, therefore, tempted to commit a crime that will send him/her back to prison where he/she has friends who will care and provide support. Again, the ex-offender in Ghana will like to go back to prison where there is food, shelter, and probably even work to do (The Prison Ministry of Ghana, 2003).The purpose of this study is to find out how the prison ministry of Ghana support reintegration of ex-offenders and the aim is to discover how ex-offenders at the Prison Ministry acquire knowledge and skills for reintegration into the Ghanaian society, because the most difficult part of the life of the prisoner is when he/she is released.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Training in Ghanaian Prisons

In Ghana, the Prison Service is specifically charged to “establish in every prison, courses of training and instruction assigned to teach simple trades, skills and crafts to participants who may benefit from such training.” The aim is to equip the participants with employable skills. Vocational training is carried out in the walled prisons. These are the maximum and medium facilities. Major industries exist in the central prisons. Trades which are taught include carpentry and joinery, cane and basket weaving, black-smiting, masonry, shoe-making and repairing, tailoring and dress-making, textile-manufacturing, ceramics, automobile repairing, electrical and electronic goods repairing. The Service relies exclusively on specialist prison officers for trade instruction and supervision of the industries (A Paper presented by the Director General of Ghana Prison Service at the 10th UN Congress on the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders in Austria 10-17 April, 2000). However, Dissel (2008) states that though African countries have the objective of rehabilitating prisoners, the prison institutions have numerous problems and this virtually make it impossible for them to achieve this objective. She clarifies that most of the countries researched in Africa have prisons which are over-crowded with inadequate resources and facilities. As stated by Dissel (2008), poor conditions such as over-crowding has resulted in inadequate sleeping space, improper sleeping mats or beds, poor ventilation and lighting, and limited time out of the cell. According to Dissel (2008) there is excessive and inappropriate discipline and punishment, forced and hard labour, and paltry access to medical treatment. Dissel (2008) explains that these factors impact negatively on the mental and physical health of prisoners. Besides, they do not create a conducive environment for rehabilitation. Again, Dissel (2008) intimates that in many African countries, the prisons are understaffed and most of the personnel are not trained to enable them facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of prisoners. Resulting from these problems, the Prison

Ministry of Ghana provide opportunities for rehabilitation both within and outside the prisons.

2.2. The Prison Ministry of Ghana

The Prison Ministry was founded in March 1993 by some Reverened Ministers of the Presbyterian Church namely Rev E.S. Mate Kodjo (Synod Clerk), the late Rt. Rev D.A. Koranteng (Moderator), Rev Professor Ayettey, Rev Professor Adukwei Hesse, Professor George Ankra Badu, Rev Dr Chris Hesse and the late Col. Nyante. The Ministry is now a legally registered body in Ghana under the name “The Prison Ministry of Ghana” effective September 2002 and its head-office is located at Osu in Accra. The Ministry has branches in all the ten regions of Ghana. It was recognized that the Presbyterian Church alone could not effectively handle the work in the prisons. As a result, partnership has been formed with other churches such as the Methodist, Anglican, Baptist, Charismatic, Apostolic, and Pentecostal Churches to serve in the prisons. The work of the ministry covers mainly preaching of the gospel, teaching of the scriptures and communion and baptismal services. Medical Doctors and nurses who join teams that visit the prisons provide free health care for inmates and warders who need help. The services also include counseling for released prisoners and issue of letters of introduction to Ministers of Churches to provide spiritual nurture and job opportunities for released prisoners (The Prison Ministry of Ghana, 2003). Additionally, the Prison Ministry employs ex-offenders at its head-office and provides on- the-job training for them. This is because a lot of inmates are not given any training as indicated by Dissel (2008). Those who are usually not trained are the high risk prisoners. Amartya Sen’s capability framework/approach will be used to explain the employment and training that is provided for ex-offenders in the head-office of the Prison Ministry. Chiappero-Martinetti (2006) states that the capability approach characterizes individual well-being in terms of what a person is actually able to do or to be. Functioning and capabilities are two of the key concepts within this theoretical framework, and identify two interrelated spaces that can be used to understand and assess well-being. Basically functioning refers to valuable achievements, actions, and activities that determine individual well-being: In Sen’s words “the various things a person may value doing or being” (Sen 1992). These include achievements such as being nourished, being healthy, being educated, taking part in social life and in political decisions etc. By application, this aspect of the framework suggest that ex-offenders in Ghana, particularly those who serve long sentences cannot function in free society because they do not have the resources and the freedom to make choices of their own. Their knowledge and skills prior to incarceration are completely eroded due to the incapacitating conditions in prison. In addition they cannot provide accommodation, food and clothes for themselves. What they have achieved that is given recognition in the Ghanaian society are the

offences or crimes committed and the fact that they have been prisoned. Again, Sen quoted in Pucher (2013) defines capability as an individual's ability and opportunity to achieve a given functioning ("beings or doings"). The capability set for a given person are both influenced by internal or personal factors such as age, gender, health, and disability as well as by external or environmental circumstances including household structure, socio-economic context, cultural and social norms, institutions, the natural environment etc. The process of conversion of available resources (e.g market and non-market goods, commodities and services, income, etc) into well-being is closely related to, and dependent on these individual and environmental features. An important part of the definition is the "freedom to achieve". While functioning depend on resources, capability depend on the state of mind. From a capability perspective the employment and training of ex-offenders by the Prison Ministry is viewed as equipping them with the ability to provide themselves food, clothes, shelter, and avoiding preventable morbidity. The ex-offenders are also equipped with the ability to make social achievements such as reintegrate into their communities. In other words, ex-offenders are able to take part in the life of the community and they are able to appear in public without shame. The Prison Ministry itself serve as a conducive natural environment for the ex-offenders to work and learn on the job. Personnel at the head-office of the Prison Ministry are proactive towards ex-offenders and the religious discipline that prevails enables them to distinguish between what is right and wrong. The religious discipline also teach former prisoners about the need to work to earn a living. Again, it makes them aware about the need to acquire knowledge and skills through training.

3. Methodology

The instrumental case study research design was used for this study. Stake (1995) refers to instrumental case study as research into one or more particular situations in order to try to understand an outside concern. The instrumental case study approach was used in conducting this research because the ex-offenders had their knowledge and skills eroded through long sentences and they were trained at the head office of the Prison Ministry which is a bounded system. The population of ex-offenders who had been employed at the Prison Ministry at the time of the study was four (4). The sample size for this study was three (3) ex-offenders. The appropriate criterion-based strategy for sampling in this case-study at the Prison Ministry was the "unique case selection". This is because of the rare occurrence of the phenomenon of interest. In this case study, the three ex-offenders had served long but various terms of imprisonment, and on their release from prison, had been employed by the Prison Ministry. Two of them did on-the-job training in social work and office duties over a period of five months. This was done simultaneously. The third former prisoner worked as an accountant at the

Prison Ministry. The ex-offenders as a group and individually had the following characteristics:

- They were all high risk prisoners
- They have fairly good educational background
- They are from stable homes
- They were well received by their families when they came out of prison but there was no care and support.
- They have varied experiences of reintegration

The sample unit was chosen because it had particular features or characteristics which enabled detailed exploration and understanding of the central theme which I wished to study. These were socio-demographic characteristics or related to specific experiences, behaviors and roles (Ritchie, Lewis and Elam, 2008). Members of the sample were chosen with a "purpose" to represent a location or type in relation to a key criterion. This had two principal aims. The first was to ensure that all the key constituencies of relevance to the subject matter are covered. The second was to ensure that within each of the key criteria, some diversity was included so that the impact of the characteristics concerned can be explored. I used in-depth interview which was individually focused as the instrument for data collection. The study was conducted in one of the offices at the Prison Ministry in Accra the capital city of Ghana to ensure confidentiality. I informed the former prisoners that the research was for academic purpose and that the interview will be recorded. However, it took sometime to convince them to grant the interviews. Upon an agreement between me and the former prisoners individually, I paid each of them twenty Ghana Cedis. Due to the sensitive nature of their stories, I was able to interview them just once. Two of the interviews lasted for two hours each and the third one lasted for forty-five minutes because the participant was economical with his story.

3.1. Data Analysis

The first step of analysis was familiarisation of the data. In the first phase of the analysis, I focused on transcribing the raw interviews into documented data. I then read through the data several times to ensure that I had become familiar with it since this was a case study analysis. As stated by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) I organized the data by identifying themes. Essentially, these forms of data organization involve looking at discrete parts, cases, contexts or holistic units. Having identified the themes, I coded the data or indexed categories from the data. This is normally referred to as the general level coding. The coding was done to address my theory, and the research question of the study. Essentially, the coding or indexing categories was done interactively with the theory, and research question. I also developed notes on the construction of the categories around the themes to ensure that they have common properties and instructions on how to apply them. These were done to produce an explanation of processes, practices, or whatever, that characterize the themes, cases, contexts or holistic units.

Again, as indicated by Richards (2005) in the second

phase of the analysis, I put the categories or data units given the same code together and subcategories were generated to segment the data. I derived the subcategories from what ex-offenders seemed to be referring to at particular points in the data. After generating the subcategories, I noticed that I got to a stage where nothing new was emerging from the data (saturation). I also gained a clear picture of the case and the process involved (focus).

The third phase of the analysis was the interpretation. The move from coding to interpretation was done at a number of discrete levels. First of all, I read through the coded data thoroughly. Then I went on to explore the categories that were created. Essentially, the categories and subcategories that I selected enabled me to trace how and why ex-offenders were imprisoned. I also discovered how their families responded to their imprisonment and their experiences in prison. Apart from what have been stated, I discovered the reception, care and support that were provided for ex-offenders at home, and how they became employees of the prison ministry. Finally, I discovered their job description as social work, office duties and accounting in the prison ministry as well as their perceptions about the job (pathway). The next level in the interpretation stage involved the transformation of the categories into meaningful data.

4. Findings

4.1. Demographic Data of Ex-Offenders

Age of Ex-offenders

Age	Frequency	Percentage
48	1	33.3
50	1	33.3
60	1	33.3
Total	3	99.9

Educational Background of Ex-offenders

Education	Frequency	Percentage
Middle School	1	33.3
“A” Level	1	33.3
Polytechnic	1	33.3
Total	3	99.9

Work experience of Ex-offenders

Employment	Frequency	Percentage
Electrician	1	33.3
Electrical Installation	1	33.3
Accountant	1	33.3
Total	3	99.9

Marital status of Ex-offenders

Marital status	Frequency	Percentage
Married	2	66.6
Single	1	33.3
Total	3	99.9

4.2. Case One

4.2.1. Ex-Offender’s Explanation of Action that Led to Imprisonment

“I was imprisoned for 25 years for embezzlement of funds, and I was released just five months ago. I served my sentence in Sunyani Prison, Ussher Fort, and Nsawam Prison.” (Olando)

4.2.2. Employee of the Prison Ministry

“Whenever the prison ministry visited us in prison I attended their spiritual and moral lessons so they got to know me. When I came out of prison I decided to thank the leaders of the prison ministry so I visited Professor Seth Aryeetey who recommended that I should join the Prison Ministry.” (Olando)

“When any prisoner is admitted to hospital I visit him or her and write the inmate’s needs and then submit the list to the ministry to purchase the items. Apart from that I take charge of office duties, namely posting and collecting of mails to and from the post office and buying of stationary.” (Olando)

“Training occurring while working is good for mature people. As an adult my brain is developed so I can easily perform a task without waiting for further instruction. I usually combine my little education, and prison experience to help me to perform my tasks. In other words, I always rely on my experience to perform my task. Besides, I am able to cope with the two-activity-system because I like the job. My educational background enables me to perform the mathematical and literacy components of any task that is assigned to me.” (Olando)

4.2.3. Positive Outcome Resulting from Training

“At the moment I’m doing on the job training at the prison ministry. I’m being trained as a social worker and in office duties. I’m highly interested in both the social work and the office duties because I am paid monthly salary by the prison ministry.” (Olando)

“Working eliminates boredom; you are also relieved psychologically from mental torture. You have a higher esteem because you are a worker and at the end of the month you will be paid. I can now provide or satisfy my basic needs in bits. It has helped me to reintegrate into society.” (Olando)

“Initially I thought there will be problems but with time everything is going on smoothly. There is a cordial relationship between me and my colleagues.” (Olando)

4.3. Case Two

4.3.1. Ex-Offender’s Explanation of Action that Led to Imprisonment

“I was involved in an armed robbery outside Accra and we were arrested. I was imprisoned for 22 years. I went to prison on 10th July, 1985 and I was released on 15th May, 2007.” (Adjingo)

4.3.2. Employee of the Prison Ministry

“A day after I was released from prison I visited the prison ministry on the instruction of Rev. Jim Thomas who told me in prison that, whenever I’m released I should go to the prison ministry and work.” (Adjingo)

“The role of the social worker responsible for prisoners on admission is to make sure that you communicate to the family exactly what the patient has requested and secondly by reading books on social work in the prison ministry library.” (Adjingo)

“I’m able to cope with the two-activity-system because when I was in the condemned cell in the prison, I was taking care of my cell mates and at the same time attending spiritual and moral education classes. In addition, I am able to do a lot of work involving literacy because I read a lot in the prison ministry library.”(Adjingo)

4.3.3. Positive Outcome Resulting from Training

“I have been taught not to look down on others and should be content with what I have. The secretary at the prison ministry educates me to live peacefully with others and should not be a litigant. The secretary has also taught me that you do not rip where you have not sown. Besides, I have learnt when to say “please” and “sorry”.” (Adjingo)

4.4. Case Three

4.4.1. Ex-Offender’s Explanation of Action that Led to Imprisonment

“I was imprisoned for 10 years for embezzlement of funds and I served my sentence in the Nsawam Prison. It is a very bitter experience so I don’t like talking about it.” (Amingo)

4.4.2. Employee of the Prison Ministry

“I was at home when NiiTackie invited me and subsequently appointed me an accountant of the prison ministry.” (Amingo)

5. Discussion

The struggle for survival contributed to the deviant behavior of the former prisoners. Upon their release from prison, Orlando and Adjingo went to the prison ministry to solicit for jobs. However, Amingo got employed at the prison ministry through a family contact. The purpose of finding jobs at the prison ministry is to earn a living and reintegrate into the Ghanaian society. Orlando and Adjingo were employed as trainees and placed on on-the-job training in office duties and social work. Amingo was however appointed an accountant. The trainees had good knowledge about their job description and the method of training was convenient for them. The trainees made some modest achievements from the training program such as gaining self-esteem and knowledge acquisition in human-relations and good work ethics.

It does appear that the unfavorable economic environment in Ghana made it difficult for the three former

prisoners to perform their social responsibilities and the embarrassment it generated might have forced them to resort to crime in order to perform their responsibilities as adults. Braithwaite (1978) argues that it has become a comprehensively demonstrated fact that poverty and powerlessness encourage anti-social behavior. White (1994) also argues that youth unemployment and poverty are directly linked to alienation, anti-social behavior, riots, banditry, predatory crime, and violence. In his view, these are products of a society in which the economy is perceived as more important than social problems. While Amingo was employed through family contact Orlando and Adjingo contacted the prison ministry themselves for a job because of acquaintance that had been established with officials of the prison ministry when they were in prison. Farrall and Sparks (2006) clarify that the extent and effectiveness of any practical support offered will vary according to the material and social resources available to families. Prisoners’ family members can themselves encounter a number of difficulties as a consequence of imprisonment. These difficulties are financial and housing problems; social stigma and victimization; loneliness, anxiety and emotional hardship (Murray, 2005).

Amingo worked as an accountant in the prison ministry and this enabled him to tap into his previous knowledge in accounting which he acquired while working at the Accountant General’s Department in Accra prior to his incarceration. On the contrary, Orlando and Adjingo were employed and tasked to do on-the-job training in social work and office duties. This is because the two former prisoners served longer time in prison and suffered knowledge and skills erosion of their previous occupations. Again, the two ex-offenders were trained on-the-job because of their experience in structured learning which they acquired from school and which might have been put to use in prison. As a result of their advancement in age (50 and 60 years respectively) the prison ministry trained the former prisoners to do jobs which require more cognitive skills rather than psycho-motor skills. The less use of psycho-motor skills indicates that the former prisoners have suffered from burn out and have become physically weak. Both Orlando and Adjingo had positive perception about the training because they gained self-esteem and acquired knowledge about human relations and good work ethics respectively. Again, both of them had good knowledge about their job description and they were able to meet their social obligations. The fact that the trainees have gained self-esteem indicates that their work is perceived as good, desirable and of value to the prison ministry and this has triggered a sense of self-worth within the trainees. It should also be noted that ethics involve moral issues and choices. It is concerned with distinguishing between right and wrong. The trainees were challenged, supported and assisted at the prison ministry to do the right things because it determines how successful one can hold onto a job as well as reintegrate into society. Similarly, the former prisoners learned how to work and relate with others in the prison ministry for positive growth. Having good

knowledge about their job enabled them to learn the specific skills required for the job. The former prisoners were able to satisfy their basic needs with the salary they earned from their employers. The capability approach focuses on what people are able to do and be, as opposed to what they have, or how they feel (Sen, 2009). From this perspective, knowledge gained by Olando and Adjingo through training constitute the ability they require to be able to take part in the life of their communities. Similarly, functioning refer to the various things a person succeeds in “doing or being”. From this perspective the Prison Ministry has made it possible for the two former prisoners to participate in the life of the Ministry through employment and training.

In conclusion we can see that the prison ministry of Ghana play an important role in the rehabilitation of ex-offenders. This is because of the numerous problems that virtually make it impossible for the Prisons in Ghana to rehabilitate prisoners (Dissel, 2008). The former prisoners were employed because officials of the prison ministry knew them in prison. It is important to note that the ex-offenders were all assigned duties that require their cognitive skills. This is due to their educational background and the ability to tap on previous experiences. This suggests that literacy and numeracy skills are basic requirements for employment and training of former prisoners. I suggest that a further research should be conducted into the Prison Ministry’s role in repairing damaged relationships between former prisoners and their families in Ghana.

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