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Introduction: Towards Arts and Physical Activity as Mindful Alternative Rehabilitation

Wesley Crichlow and Janelle Joseph

The criminal justice system is replete with challenges to rehabilitation. Traditional responses to treating violence and aggression, including incarcerating offenders, are ineffective. This is particularly true when dealing with youth, for whom the intersections of low socio-economic status, mental health issues, and race can create a pressing crisis and high rates of reoffending. Increasingly punitive strategies to reduce crime have not produced the desired results. Furthermore, there is minimally adequate research on which to base “what works” with offenders (Sherman et al., 1998). Many of the same problems that were endemic to prison life in the early 1970s – overcrowding; too much time spent in cells; gang rape; the curtailment of movement, association, and contact with the outside world; lack of program capacity; the paucity of meaningful prison work or vocational skills training; and the polarization between inmates and custodial staff – continue to be features of contemporary correctional practice.

Research by litigator and legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010) on Black male imprisonment in the United States and the report by politicians Roy McMurty and Alvin Curling (2008) on youth crime in Canada clearly indicate that the current punishment-oriented practices and policies of the criminal justice system are racialized, costly, and ineffective at reducing recidivism. Similarly in the UK, Black and minority ethnic prisoners account for 21 per cent of the prison population (Berman & Dar, 2013), more than twice their representation in the general population. In the UK, covert, subtle, and institutional racism are rampant (Edgar, 2010). Rehabilitation
programs, therefore, should take into account age, race and gender dimensions.

Corrections institutions themselves are criminogenic environments. They are characterized as violent and threatening places, making aggression an expected adaptation among incarcerated people. This, in combination with dominant understandings of gender performances, ensures that young men exit typical correctional programs with even more maladaptive behaviours than when they entered. Crichlow informs us that masculinities, weaponized and prisonized through state structural violence, are articulated in narratives that originate with children born into spirals of poverty, child welfare systems, school neglect and abandonment, interpersonal violence, disenfranchised communities, discrimination, physical and sexual abuse, paramilitary policing, hyper-incarceration, and everyday racism (Crichlow, 2014, p. 114). For decades, objective assessment of the research literature on traditional offender rehabilitation programs has demonstrated that these have little or no lasting impact on long-term criminal behaviour because of faulty implementation of a model of behaviour change in individuals and resistance to change from legal, political, and social institutions (Bartol, 1980; Farabee, 2005; Cheliotis, 2012). Alternative rehabilitation and early intervention strategies are long overdue in order for offenders to be helped and ultimately to reduce recidivism, generate healthy individuals, and ensure safe communities.

Studies on alternatives to incarceration programs (Cheliotis, 2012; Russell, 2006) have demonstrated that these approaches not only play an integral role in dispute resolution but also succeed in developing pro-social attitudes and improving mental, physical, and spiritual health for youth and adults in prison and community settings. There are several types of alternative rehabilitation programs currently in use in criminal justice and community settings with youth and adults. These include psychotherapy, sport, poetry, and art programs, for example, which give offenders an outlet for creative expression and therapy. However, there has been a lack of sustained discussion and critique of these programs. For example, basketball and football are increasingly used as interventions for Black youth offenders. Eurocentric sports participation can be empowering; however, without a decolonizing mandate, these popular sporting forms can end up
serving as a means to assimilate, socialize, and socially control racial minorities and reinforce relations of socio-political, racial, and colonial dominance (Cavallo, 1981; Darnell & Hayhurst, 2011; Hartmann, 2001; Pitter & Andrews, 1997). The limited research on alternative programming in international settings is expanded with this text, *Alternative Offender Rehabilitation and Social Justice*, which investigates the mechanisms of alternative programming used to rehabilitate adults and youth.

A central theme throughout the chapters of this book is the use of mindfulness as a foundational tool of self-reflexivity in arts and physical engagement programming. Mindfulness is defined as the awareness that arises through purposefully and non-judgementally paying attention to the unfolding of experience moment by moment (Kabat Zin, 2003, p. 145; Dreyfus, 2011, p. 46). This strategy, based on ancient Hindu and Buddhist traditions that ask practitioners to live completely in the present moment, has been adapted in the Western world as a form of stress relief termed “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR). Originally advocated by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979, mindfulness involves attending to experiences with the intention of cultivating non-reactive states of awareness. There is now over 30 years of research into MBSR, and it is being used to alleviate the negative effects of stress, obsessive-compulsive disorder, anxiety, and drug addictions (Khoury et al., 2013, p. 76). Mindfulness has also been popularized over the last decade with more clinical, psychological, and sociological research showing its effectiveness in allowing one to become aware of cognitive processes instead of reacting to thoughts in repetitive and detrimental patterns (Carlson, 2013, p. 176). Therefore, its utility for alternative rehabilitation programs is obvious.

Desistance, rehabilitation, and reintegration programming that incorporates mindfulness-based activities teaches offenders to remain in contact with and relate differently to challenging affective or physical states, use alternatives to avoidant-based coping, recognize underlying reasons for maladaptive behaviors, and identify and increase contact with natural contingencies (Bowen et al., 2014, p. 548). The chapters of this book demonstrate that mindfulness-based activities help participants to understand themselves, discover how they “do gender,” and unlearn crime-prone behaviours and performances such as hypermasculinity. *Alternative Offender Rehabilitation*
and Social Justice is also about everyday coping and survival for incarcerated or recently released individuals. MBSR allows them to not feel like they are tied to their past problems and shows them that they can change without being judged. Awareness in and of itself is liberating as well as encouraging for offenders who would like to change their lives and remove themselves from ongoing, recurring prison stays. MBSR can also help reduce the stress associated with the transitions back into society as well as prevent a relapse into criminal activity (Witkiewitz et al., 2014, p. 537). Stress reduction is key to improved health and behaviour.

Mindfulness has long been used in clinical psychology and is now being used in juvenile and women’s correctional facilities (Milani, Nikmanesh, & Farnam, 2013, p. 127; Witkiewitz et al., 2014, p. 540). Juveniles and women may be easier to approach with mindfulness techniques (including yoga) due to classic gender roles, social stereotypes, and gendered prisons. From these populations, it has already been acknowledged that mindfulness reduces stress, aggression, and recidivism and also improves pro-social skills (Suarez et al., 2014, pp. 6-7). But what are the opportunities and challenges presented by MBSR programming with adult men? Social constructions of gender and gendered incarceration rates must be taken into account when thinking about how to rehabilitate. This book highlights how mindfulness programming must be gender sensitive and can play a part in breaking down traditional hypermasculine gender roles within prison culture and among youth in rehabilitative community programming – roles that are linked to criminal behaviour, drug abuse, and mental health disorders.

Throughout this book, the authors describe the significance of mindfulness in a wide range of arts and physical engagement programming to enhance rehabilitation. Clements (2004) claims there is reason to believe prison adult education programs that focus narrowly on sets of basic cognitive skills are minimally effective in reducing recidivism in comparison to those that also focus on arts and humanities. He argues that learning within the arts and humanities encourages autonomy, creativity, and self-discipline and that such study enables a personal transformation better aligned with contemporary conceptions of rehabilitation (see also, Johnson, 2008; Leibmann, 1994; Witkiewitz et al., 2014; Omidi et al., 2013). Studies of physical culture in prisons also elucidate the importance of mindfulness and
reflexivity to improve the perceived therapeutic benefits and social control dimensions while diminishing the negative gendered dimensions associated with traditional sport (Martos-Garcia et al., 2009).

*Alternative Offender Rehabilitation and Social Justice* brings together multiple perspectives on alternative rehabilitation as a contested and contestable space for youth and adults. In so doing, this edited volume highlights the complex interplay of social, creative, technical, economic, and political factors that construct the landscape for alternative rehabilitation. This inquiry focuses on North American and UK contexts and highlights the critical importance of mindfulness-based programming in arts and physical activity for incarcerated and at-risk youth and adults. The chapters detail the salience of social identities constituted by, but not limited to, class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability and the importance of self-reflexivity and sharing for transforming crime-prone behaviours and developing pro-social skills. Anchored deeply in empirical evidence, this book provides international case studies of innovative alternative rehabilitation interventions and provides an overview for students and practitioners alike working in or concerned with alternative rehabilitation models and best practices. The chapters are organized in three sections. Though mindfulness forms the basis of all of the interventions described, the first two chapters discuss programs that focus exclusively on mindfulness-based strategies. The subsequent three chapters concern physical engagement interventions, and the remaining three chapters feature arts-based programming.

**Part 1: Mindfulness Programming**

In Chapter 1, Gwen Hunnicutt and Daniel Rhodes set the stage for the chapters that follow, describing meditation practices and their use in correctional settings. They situate their gender-sensitive, humanitarian, healing-based intervention approach within a larger socio-cultural framework that considers the history of contemplative practices in correctional history and the gender-specific subjectivities of a majority male correctional population. They explore both the promises and pitfalls of contemporary spiritual and secular movements that champion the relationship between meditation practices and the reduction of violence and aggression. Hunnicutt and Rhodes make the case for a humanitarian system of intervention that emphasizes
respect, care, empathy, community, empowerment, healing, and personal transformation among incarcerated individuals.

The type of intervention they suggest was implemented by Carla Barrett, who in Chapter 2 discusses her research on and experiences within a unique program that teaches mindfulness-based strategies to Black and Hispanic young men involved in the juvenile justice, criminal justice, or child protective systems in New York City. The program, run by a local non-profit organization, uses an “awareness-based practices” model that incorporates fostering of self-awareness (accepting, non-judgemental awareness of body and mind and external environments), self-knowledge (ability to discern what creates suffering and what relieves it, seeing repercussions of negative emotions and behaviours, increased capacity for making healthy choices), and compassion (the cultivation of an attitude of kindness and empathy towards oneself and others). Her qualitative research shows that the creation of a class environment that cultivates mutual respect, cooperation, and a space for self-reflection helps to humanize the all-too-often dehumanizing institutional contexts that troubled youth find themselves in.

Part 2: Physical Engagement Programs

In Chapter 3, Janelle Joseph provides insights from a mindfulness-based martial arts intervention program with young offenders diverted from regular court procedures by attending a court-sanctioned community program. Her research indicates that capoeira, a martial art with African-Brazilian roots, has the capacity to improve pro-social skills among African-descended adolescents in Canada. Capoeira can be used to promote self-reflection, facilitate conversations about and practice reducing aggressive behaviours, encourage humility, and develop resilience. Training in the class and performing in the roda (circle) can also advance awareness of cooperation skills and the necessity of initiative, awareness that is essential to transforming relationships, securing employment, and, ultimately, reducing recidivism.

Mark Norman’s research on meditative yoga in Canadian correctional institutions also highlights the importance of politics and self-efficacy in rehabilitation programming. He compares the competing political framings of yoga as, on the one hand, a luxury prisoners don’t deserve that does not contribute to long-term recidivism and,
on the other hand, an essential component of the rehabilitation of offenders that will reduce violence within institutions, improve prisoner health, and facilitate more effective societal integration after release. Norman’s analysis of mindfulness-based yoga as an alternative form of carceral physical culture, an alternative form of rehabilitation, and an alternative form of social control highlight the many meanings and contradictions of physical engagement programs in prison settings.

The third chapter in this section outlines the process and highlights the outcomes of a unique equine-facilitated psychotherapy treatment program studied by Allison Foley. Relatively little research within criminology and even less within alternative physical engagement rehabilitation programs focuses on treatments implemented with institutionalized girls. Foley’s research, however, discovered that an innovative gender-specific treatment program at an off-site horse ranch in the midwestern United States better equipped young female participants to navigate the challenges of institutional confinement. Once an approach utilized almost exclusively with adults and/or individuals with disabilities, equine therapy holds promise for improving the targeted domains of empowerment, focused attention, emotion management, relaxation, and behaviour – although differing results for particular ethnic groups are noted. This chapter demonstrates that physical activity, when combined with animal therapy, can offer an alternative means of rehabilitating some young female offenders.

Part 3: Arts Engagement Programs

Chapter 6 focuses on the link between parental incarceration, crime-prone behaviours among children, and the effectiveness of extracurricular activities, particularly those related to the fine arts, such as theatre and music programs, in reducing aggression. In this chapter, Bryan L. Sykes, Alex Piquero, and Jason Gioviano provide quantitative data to support their proposal that extracurricular activities constitute a form of alternative rehabilitation for disadvantaged families likely to experience intergenerational incarceration. Understanding when, where, and how to implement these programs is discussed in detail.

In Chapter 7, Laura Kelly, Victoria Foster, and Anne Hayes explore methodological innovations that offer the possibility of engaging with the aesthetic and political dimensions of drama-based
interventions and advocate for a participatory arts-based approach to research and evaluation practice. In preparation for forthcoming research that evaluates a UK-based play that aims to teach young people about gang culture, they review international evaluative literature, including theoretical arguments for why drama-based interventions might “work,” but also critique dominant under-theorization and methodological blind spots within the field. Kelly, Foster, and Hayes suggest that research methodologies that focus on the emancipatory coproduction of knowledge and “affects,” rather than the assessment of practice and “effects,” offers rich possibilities for the achievement of shared rehabilitation goals.

The final chapter, by Michael Lockett, Rebecca Luce-Kapler, and Dennis Sumara, indicates that writing and reading short fiction with men incarcerated in a medium-security Canadian federal penitentiary is a good way to facilitate mindfulness. Hour-long discussions of short fiction and critical texts combined with hour-long writing workshops in which students critiqued their classmates’ short fiction works in progress facilitated participants’ self-reflection, collegiality, and appreciation of communal, arts-based identities. Most interesting for this book are the ways in which Lockett, Luce-Kapler, and Sumara used sport metaphors within an arts-based mindfulness program to foster a sense of community and collaboration, develop technique and work ethic, and mobilize effort. These metaphors supported dialogue both within and beyond the classroom setting, especially amongst participants who claimed they would not interact otherwise due to ethnic or affiliative differences.

The book ends with a concluding chapter by Wesley Crichlow and Livy Visano. The conclusion highlights the complex interplay of social, creative, technical, economic, and political factors that construct the landscape for alternative offender community rehabilitation brought together in the volume. The authors tie together the often ignored relationship between arts, physical activity, and corrections and demonstrate how judiciary, corrections, practitioners, and community gang-exit program facilitators can benefit from the evidence-based knowledge generated from this volume.

The chapters that make up Alternative Offender Rehabilitation and Social Justice each indicate the need for practitioners and policy makers to access current theory and best practices for alternative rehabilitation programming. While all admit that the long-term effects on
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recidivism among the program participants are unknown, the short-
term transformations in attitudes, behaviours, and pro-social self-man-
agement skills were apparent. The chapters assembled here examine a
range of alternative offender rehabilitation programs from equine ther-
apy to short fiction analysis to martial arts. The authors answer these
questions: What works? Why? What are the unique contexts that make
programs successful? What skills do the staff require? What changes do
the participants undergo? How can programming be made more gen-
der and ethnicity sensitive? How can the short-term transformations
be translated into long-term reductions in recidivism? Where is more
research needed?

This book scratches the surface of alternative rehabilitation research
and acts as an opening for future theory-practice dialogue about
alternative rehabilitation strategies.

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