Original Paper

Feasible and Ethical Dilemmas of Rehabilitation - Focusing on Community Sanction

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Abstract

Imprisonment and rehabilitation are two widely used approaches to crime control in countries around the world. In recent years, numerous scholars have engaged in theoretical reasoning and empirical research from various angles in an attempt to argue that rehabilitation is superior to imprisonment in both feasibility and ethical considerations for offenders. Community sanctions, as a primary form of rehabilitative punishment, indeed exhibit several advantages over traditional retributive incarceration. However, the feasibility and ethical dimensions of rehabilitative community sanctions face significant challenges in the absence of personalized needs assessments, resource constraints within the criminal justice system, a tendency towards conservatism, and a theoretical inclination towards explaining crime through social factors. It is imperative to recognize the complexity and limitations of rehabilitation and adopt a more nuanced approach in sentencing and correction, striving to find a balance between offenders' rights and the public interest.

Keywords

Ethic, Rehabilitation, Community Sanction, Crime Management

1. Introduction

Crime has been prevalent in various domains of our society and will persist in different forms. How can crime be reduced? This question has riddled legal philosophers and criminal justice thinkers and scholars at all times. Ancient thinkers thought that proportional retribution in punishment may reduce the consequent waves of vendettas and feuds (Canton, 2020). In modern times, empirical research competencies have been developed to supplement, validate, or falsify theories of answers to scientific questions, including theories that were first proposed (Popper, 1959). Eventually, rehabilitation as a purpose of punishment has emerged as a new method of crime management. Both methods, incarceration and rehabilitation, are used in various jurisdictions with different forms and have

achieved different degrees of success in certain specific eras and regions.

The different streams of thought, represented by thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Foucault and Dürkheim, have always diverged on the purpose of punishment and how it should be carried out (Ruggiero, 2010). In Hegel's retributivist view, proportionality is central to the provision of 'just desert' in response to crime (Ruggiero, 2010). In the utilitarian view, on the other hand, the protection of the public and the prevention of crime and recidivism are key to the goals of punishment, sentencing and correction (McNeil, 2014). Deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation are often used in order to achieve these goals and, to some extent, reduce crime (McNeil, 2014). Incarceration has been used for a long time and is still used as a means of deterring and punishing lawbreakers. Generally speaking, the more heinous the act, the longer the incarceration time. This method has many purposes and is used extensively. It subjects the guilty to strict control before the case is submitted to the court and serves as a penalty because once they are convicted, their freedom will be deprived. In addition, it is also considered to prevent offenders from committing more crimes and protect the public from their harm (UNODC, 2006). For a long time, international organizations have emphasized that incarceration should be used as a last resort and recommended that countries adopt alternative measures, such as the *United Nations Tokyo Rules* (UNODC, 1990). Research on community sanctions has been ongoing with the changes in the concepts of criminal justice purposes, criminal sanctions functions and effects (Raynor, 2007). However, scholars seem to pay little attention to community sanctions as a genuine alternative to incarceration (Robinson, 2016). This can be understood as the punitive attribute of community sanctions is not clear enough (Robinson, 2016). It is often questioned as being too lenient and generous to offenders, but this is actually a manifestation of its penal welfarism roots (Robinson, 2016).

Therefore, it is necessary to examine whether rehabilitation is an ethical and feasible goal of sentencing, especially in the area of community sanctions, which are widely used by States worldwide.

2. Conception of Rehabilitation and Community Sanction

Rehabilitation, both as a set of concepts and as a set of practices, is a state of 'tangle' (McNeil, 2014). Rehabilitation has been considered one of the core aims of punishment since the 17th century (McNeil, 2014). However, as with many other goals, rehabilitation has been conceptualised differently across time and regions (McNeil, 2014). Therefore, before discussing the feasibility and ethicality of rehabilitation, we need to clarify the definition. According to Oxford English Dictionary, rehabilitation is defined as 'the action of restoring something to a previous (proper) condition or status' (Raynor & Robinson, 2009). While in the sense of criminology, rehabilitation is predominantly used as means to change offenders and reintegrate them into society (McNeil, 2014). The goal of rehabilitation materializes in the normalization and resocialisation approach of offenders to reconnect them with the general community (Lösel, 2012).

Rehabilitation has been applied in different forms of correction after a long period of development and there have been attempts by academics to examine their effectiveness. McNeill (2014), for example, suggests that four forms of rehabilitation, namely personal rehabilitation, judicial rehabilitation, social rehabilitation and moral rehabilitation, contribute to positive outcomes of crime reduction by reintegrating offenders into the community. Based on empirical research findings, psychotherapy, medical treatment, vocational training and educational programmes are some of the methods that have been found to help reduce recidivism through rehabilitation (Lösel, 2012). Although rehabilitation has demonstrated its positive effects, on an academic level, concerns and criticisms remain as to whether rehabilitation is an ethical sentencing goal (McNeil, 2014).

Although community sanctions are widely used as a term by people, not only in the area of rehabilitation but also retributive punishment, it is still not easy to give it a clear definition (Raynor, 2007; Robinson et al., 2012). This essay discusses community sanctions under the definition given by the Council of Europe (1992), which means:

"those maintain the offender in the community and involve some restriction of his liberty through the imposition of conditions and/or obligations".

This is a more neutral and inclusive definition, which covers a wider range of punitive measures and early release schemes (Robinson et al., 2012).

3. The Feasibility of Rehabilitative Community Sanctions are Dubious

Feasibility refers to whether it is possible to deliver a rehabilitation programme in a criminal justice context, including the physical and cultural practicalities of implementation (Troy, McPherson, Emslie & Gilchrist, 2018). The utilitarian view holds that punishment is appropriate in both moral and future effects aspects (Owen, 1988). It aims to reduce the evil within society and maximize the good, which mainly means two aspects: preventing future possible criminal activities and reducing the harm they cause (Ruggiero, 2010). In order to achieve the goal, utilitarianism tends to use two ways, namely deterring the public from committing crimes for the first time (general deterrence) and deterring the convicted from reoffending in the form of losing their ability to act or rehabilitation (specific deterrence) (Ruggiero, 2010). Rehabilitation in the criminal justice system as a goal of sentencing is expected to have the effect of reducing the risk of recidivism and facilitating the offender's successful reintegration into the community (Ruggiero, 2010; Lösel, 2012). In order to achieve these results, rehabilitation programmes need to be individualised to suit different circumstances of the offenders. The feasibility of rehabilitation programmes depends on factors such as resource availability, programme design and the commitment of the criminal justice system to prioritise rehabilitation over punitive measures.

The availability of resources is an important influential factor. Adequate funding, staffing and infrastructure are essential for the implementation of effective rehabilitation programmes. If a criminal justice system faces resource limitations, this may hinder the viability of rehabilitation. For example, inadequate funding may result in reduced access to cognitive behavioural therapy, educational and

vocational programmes, and mental health services. Insufficient staffing can also affect the quality and intensity of interventions, which make it difficult to provide individualised and adequate support to individuals involved in rehabilitation. Ensuring adequate resources is therefore crucial to ensuring the viability of rehabilitation programmes within the criminal justice context. After conducting a survey in Shanghai, Sun (2007) found that it was approximately 10.68 times more expensive to operate a prison than to implement community probation for the same number of people for the same length of time. Sun (2007) points out that lower cost and its positive effectiveness are important reasons why courts in Shanghai were increasingly preferring to apply community service and probation when dealing with minor offences and first offences. In China, the number of short-term prisoners generally accounts for about 25% of the total number of prisoners, but after being released from prison, they account for more than 70% of the reoffenders (Wang, 2001). The reasons for the high recidivism rate of short-term offenders are certainly multifaceted, but it reflects the serious defects of imprisonment. If the execution of short-term punishment adheres to the mode of imprisonment, it can hardly get anything other than increasing the probability of acquiring new criminal methods (Wang, 2001). In the Netherlands, Wermink et al. (2010) found in a study that the recidivism rate of offenders who were sentenced to community sanctions and measures was significantly lower than that of offenders who were incarcerated, both in the short and long term. The difference between community sanctions and incarceration in reducing recidivism was very significant, with the recidivism rate of offenders sentenced to community service being 46.8% lower than that of short-term incarceration (Wermink et al., 2010). However, it is difficult to predict what the outcome of legal transplants in different contexts will be, even when the social and economic environment remains the same (Canton, 2020). Therefore, the example from China and the Netherlands cannot prove that the same resources are sufficient to establish an effective rehabilitation system in all jurisdictions.

Programme design is another key factor affecting the feasibility of rehabilitation in criminal justice. An effective programme should be case-based and tailored to the specific needs of the offender. The design and implementation of rehabilitation programmes should take into account the different needs of offenders, such as substance abuse treatment, mental health services, educational and vocational training and social support. Through addressing these multifaceted needs, rehabilitation programmes can improve the chances of successful reintegration and reduce the probability of recidivism. This may require the social worker to have sufficient contact with the offender and provide reasonable advice. By providing individuals with the necessary tools and resources to rebuild their lives through scientifically designed programmes, the feasibility of recovery can be greatly enhanced. This example also highlights the role of the subsequent reentry support and aftercare services in the design of the programme. Successful reintegration into society is a key component of rehabilitation, as it reduces the probability of the offender returning to criminal behaviour, which is the ideal result that rehabilitation is intended to achieve. A viable rehabilitation programme should also include a comprehensive programme to help offenders return back to the community, such as addressing housing, employment, education and social

support needs.

The commitment of the criminal justice system to prioritise rehabilitation is a fundamental factor in determining feasibility. Shifting the focus from punitive measures to rehabilitation requires a systemic change in both concept and policy. When the criminal justice system adopts rehabilitation as a core principle, it can allocate resources, develop supportive policies and implement practices that contribute to successful reintegration. It also needs to switch to a restorative justice concept that emphasises supervision, rehabilitation and community reintegration rather than punitive sentencing. Through a proportionate and restorative approach, the criminal justice system can create an enabling environment that supports the viability and effectiveness of rehabilitation programmes. For example, approaches which are based on the risk-need-responsibility model are significantly more effective than the unstructured, counselling and therapy treatment (Lösel, 2012). Evaluating the effects after applying such rehabilitation measures, it has been found that the reduction in recidivism rates is estimated to be around 10% to 25% on average (Lösel, 2012). When the criminal justice system establishes policy safeguards for such approaches and is more in line with the concept of restorative justice in sentencing, the feasibility of rehabilitation will also be upgraded.

4. Rehabilitative Community Sanctions are not Ethical in all Circumstances

Ethical treatment is a treatment that upholds basic standards of ethics and respects the rights of the person on whom the act is directed. In this context, the ethical standards should be proportionality and liberty. In order to achieve the goal of sentencing ethically, both of the requirements need to be met, namely ensuring that rehabilitation does not cause excessive pain to the offenders and respecting the offenders' right to consent to the choice of rehabilitation.

The core content of restorative justice contains many basic concepts of community sanctions. Unlike the traditional retributive justice concept, restorative justice holds that crime, in its essence, first violates the rights of the victim, secondly violates the rights of the community, and finally violates the legal order of the state (Zehr, 2002). Therefore, the responsibility of the offender is not to passively accept the punishment of the penalty but to actively make up for the adverse consequences caused by the crime and eliminate the damage caused by the criminal act to the victim and the community (Preston, 2011). This requires that in the process of dealing with offenders and criminal acts, the needs of victims and communities should be considered (Braithwaite & Strang, 2001). At the same time, the concept of restorative justice also proposes that after a crime occurs, in addition to offenders taking responsibility for their actions, communities should also be responsible for dealing with a crime, because crime is a manifestation of poor community relations. Community members should be collectively responsible for crime, and everyone around offenders should provide them with as much help and support as possible to reform (Zehr, 2002).

Traditional retributivist view holds that punishment as a response to unlawful conduct is justified (Canton, 2020). Punishment is generally regarded as a natural and inevitable response to crime

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(Ruggiero, 2010). The penalty is a retribution for the offender, and the more serious the offender's crime, the more commensurate the penalty should be, that is, the greater the harm of the crime to the public interest, the stronger the force that induces people to commit crimes, the more powerful the means to deter people from committing crimes should be (Beccaria, 2016). Under the influence of this view, Kant and Hegel asserted that there is no need to provide any future useful or beneficial effects for the offender or society (Ruggiero, 2010). As a typical representation of traditional, incarceration has been used for a long time and is still used as a means of deterring and punishing lawbreakers. This compulsory correction, based on the traditional concept of retributivism, separates the offenders from the general community, marginalises them from the social interactions of their previous daily lives, which creates a sense of alienation that further encourages criminal behaviour (Bales et al., 2011). This marginalization labels offenders as "outsiders". Becker (1963) proposed that a part of the social group makes rules and defines the behaviour that violates these rules as deviant and applies these rules to a part of people, treating them as socially excluded individuals. Deviant behaviour is essentially the result of the interaction between a specific person and other people related to that specific person, where other people apply specific norms to that behaviour and label it as deviant (Triplett & Upton, 2015). According to this theory, society's severe condemnation and bad libelling of someone's occasional mistake in primary deviant behaviour can easily lead to another stage of more serious deviant behaviour (Becker, 1963). Sentencing offenders and imprisoning them is undoubtedly the most profound labelling process because prison will physically and psychologically isolate offenders from society, cutting off their ties with school, work, family and other supportive influences, which increases the likelihood of firmly branding them as criminals (Triplett & Upton, 2015). The experience of incarceration may also cause them serious anxiety about their identity, dignity and self-esteem (Crewe, 2011). Over time, the pain of incarceration brings new psychological stress, including the pains of uncertainty and indeterminacy, psychological assessment, and self-government (Crewe, 2011). The dual identity alienation of self and society that comes with incarceration disproportionately affects the offender. Traditional punishments, mainly in the form of imprisonment, are clearly unethical in terms of their mandatory nature and the pain they inflict on the offenders.

Rehabilitative community sanction seems like a more proportionate punishment in terms of identity recognition for offenders. Compared with incarceration, community sanctions, which represent a concrete measure of rehabilitative justice, have greater flexibility and can be adjusted according to the specific circumstances of the case, so they can better reflect the principle of proportionality. Hucklesby et al. (2021)'s study on electronic monitoring proposed that the depth, weight, and tightness of community sanctions can vary. For example, different frequencies of mandatory contact with inspection authorities have very different impacts on the lives of those monitored (Hucklesby et al., 2021). Labeling theory also put forward criminal policy recommendations for reforming institutions and systems that control crime that are more similar to community sanctions, such as decriminalisation, diversion, decarceration, restitution and reparation (Triplett & Upton, 2015). Sentencing offenders to

prison is the most profound labelling process, so under this concept, there are scholars argue that some offenders should be transferred from serving their sentences in prison to community sanctions, to reduce the stigmatization of prison on the punished, so that they are not bound by the identity of criminals (Wermink et al., 2010). Moreover, there are also academics hold the view that sentencing offenders to compensate victims by paying compensation or other means or providing community service to compensate for the damage caused by their criminal acts, would also reduce the negative effects of punishment (Triplett & Upton, 2015).

The author, rehabilitation, usually being considered as an alternative to traditional punishment (McNeil, 2014), is not always more ethical for the offenders. From the example above, we can see that traditional punishment is applied to all types of offenders primarily through a mixture of retribution and deterrence, which often harms them in both physical confinement and discipline of the soul. Foucault (1979) stated that, "Rehabilitation procedure has more to do with discipline of the soul than the torturing of the body". Reducing the physical torture and bringing the offenders to a reform that changes their minds and repents of their sins is ethical for some of them. Lösel (2012) proposes a typology of offender groups, where all offenders can be divided into three groups: the first group are those who do not need reform, where the application of regular sanctions will deter them from reoffending; the second group are offenders who cannot and are not willing to be resocialised through reform, where incapacitation is a better option; and the third group are offenders who are both willing and capable of change, and for these people providing treatment interventions will achieve the goal of reform and deter them from reoffending. For the first two types of offenders, it may be counterproductive in terms of effectiveness to apply rehabilitation to them when there are more appropriate forms of correction for them. However, according to differential association and learning theory, offenders can learn criminal behaviour through interaction with other offenders in prison (Wang, 2001; Wermink et al., 2010). In this sense, prison cannot make individuals reform and return to society, because the prison system actually does not have plans that can help offenders normalize and integrate into society (Comfort, 2013). Prison instead becomes a "crime school", providing these two types of offenders with opportunities to acquire criminal behaviour, which in turn increases the likelihood of these prisoners recommitting new crimes after release (Wang, 2001; Wermink et al., 2010). Community sanction, especially community service can provide offenders with opportunities to learn new survival skills, which will help them return to normal life in society (Wermink et al., 2010). Scholars use social control theory to argue that criminal behaviour should be attributed to the weak social ties of offenders (Wermink et al., 2010). Community sanctions can maintain or strengthen the ties between offenders and society, but incarceration may weaken or sever these ties. However, the wishes and personal circumstances of the offenders are often ignored by law enforcement officers in judicial practice. It is obviously unethical when criminal justice policy and practice (for example in England and Wales) ignores the consent of the offenders and only objectifies them as part of the crime management process and a required element of an imposed legal order (McNeil, 2014). This is because they may not have a suitable environment to do the community

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service that is able to help them reintegrate into society and are stigmatised during their contact with society, which can result in their further social exclusion.

For the third type of offenders, who have the subjective desire to change and are assessed to be well-positioned to do so, it is ethical to apply rehabilitation to them. In this case, the application of rehabilitation is the result of a careful consideration of the offender's interests, with a clear restorative intent. One example is community service. By engaging offenders into work assigned by the authorities that benefits the community, it helps to repair the damage they have caused and helps them to make positive changes in their lives (Robinson et al., 2012). This restorative correction also provides participants with the opportunity to become part of the community again (Robinson et al., 2012). Offenders are then able to feel positive and build supportive relationships with those who are also trying to make positive changes.

Community-level factors are also influential in the ethics of rehabilitation. Numerous factors influence the ethical considerations surrounding the rehabilitation of offenders, with the composition of the surrounding society being a pivotal element. It is deemed unethical to enroll offenders in rehabilitation programs if their reintegration into the community is not assured. Community acceptance is vital, as a lack thereof may result in stigmatization and hinder successful reintegration, ultimately increasing the risk of recidivism (UNODC, 2018). The financial costs of rehabilitation are significant, and should reintegration efforts fail, these resources would be in vain. Some scholars, like Marx, argue that societal factors play a dominant role in shaping criminal behavior, while individual factors hold comparatively less significance (Ruggiero, 2010; Cullen & Gendreu, 2001). In light of this perspective, mandating rehabilitation for offenders who are essentially products of their environment can be considered unethical (Cullen & Gendreu, 2001). This viewpoint aligns with critics of the "what works" approach, as outlined by Lösel (2012), who contend that it neglects the institutional and societal factors contributing to crime and overemphasizes individual factors. On the other hand, if a society's norms promote the pursuit of lawful goals, as posited by the Good Lives Model, which is a contemporary rehabilitation theory, using rehabilitative community sanction to address individual deficiencies becomes an ethical imperative (Lösel, 2012). These shortcomings can be rectified through targeted training programs that provide essential goods, including education, creativity, happiness, a sense of belonging, craftsmanship, and autonomy (Lösel, 2012).

The interpretation of the causes of crime can also influence judgements about the ethical aspects of rehabilitation. Bottoms (1980) points out that when the causes of crime are understood to be primarily of a social and structural origin, rehabilitation, as a way of placing greater emphasis on the reformation and repentance of the offender, wrongly conceptualises the causes of crime as individual reasons. By attributing crime primarily to the offender, rehabilitation actually misunderstands the nature of crime and fails to recognise that crime itself is socially constructed (Bottoms, 1980).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the feasibility and ethical implications of rehabilitation as the goal of sentencing and correction depend on a range of circumstances. As McNeil (2014) suggests, rehabilitation is a 'tangle'. It is very difficult to draw a one-size-fits-all conclusion about the feasibility and ethicality of rehabilitation in different jurisdictions, for different offenders, and under different socio-economic conditions. While rehabilitation can offer meaningful opportunities for reformation and successful reintegration back into the community, its feasibility can be obstructed by limited resources, unscientific programme design and criminal justice system preferences. In addition, ethical considerations must be carefully weighed, especially in cases involving high-risk or recidivist offenders where rehabilitation may not be appropriate, to ensure that public safety issues are properly addressed and the victim's perspective is fully considered.

While rehabilitation in the criminal justice system does face challenges and limitations, dismissing it entirely as unfeasible and unethical is an oversimplification of the complex nature of criminal behaviour and the potential for positive change. Concerns about feasibility and ethics are important, however, they are more about the proper administration of rehabilitation rather than the concept itself (McNeil, 2014). By understanding the complexities and limitations of rehabilitation, we can take a more detailed approach to sentencing and correction, striking a careful balance between the possibilities of rehabilitation and the imperatives of justice, responsibility, and the public interest.

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