Paper Review

Paper Review of Maruna S. (2011) 'Re-entry as a rite of passage'
Rebekka Marcuk

Abstract

This paper critically examines Shadd Maruna's (2011) 'Re-entry as a rite of passage', which explores how structured rituals can facilitate the reintegration of ex-prisoners by reducing stigma and promoting social acceptance. Maruna argues that the absence of such rites contributes to high recidivism rates, proposing public acts of remorse and community involvement as solutions. While his framework offers valuable insights, this review highlights key limitations, including the oversimplification of societal attitudes, the ambiguity of 'community', and the neglect of mental health challenges. It concludes that while reintegration rituals hold promise, they must be supported by systemic reforms and targeted social policies for lasting impact.

I.   Introduction

Shadd Maruna's 'Re-entry as a rite of passage' is a compelling article from 2011, which addresses the contemporary issue of ex-prisoner reintegration. In his article, Maruna, Head of Department of Sociology, Social Policy, and Criminology at the University of Liverpool, presents a persuasive theoretical exercise that merges anthropological ideas on the significance of rituals in human life with criminological research to propose potential solutions in reintegration processes.[1643] Written in the context of persistently high reoffending rates (26.5% between April 2011 and March 2012 in the UK), the article addresses ongoing challenges faced by former prisoners struggling to find their way back into society.[1644]

In his work, he examines the concept of rituals to support the rehabilitation of former prisoners into society.[1645] Such rituals would consist of public ceremonies, deeply rooted in community participation, that symbolically acknowledge both the individual's hardships and their achievements. Subsequently, Maruna argues that the absence of structured rituals, or 'rites of passage' which play a crucial role in navigating significant life transitions, hinders successful reintegration.[1646] While rituals remain performed publicly during trial, they are neglected once incarceration ends.[1647] Consequently, this disregard leaves former convicts to navigate the transition from incarceration to society without societal support. The void of public rituals may aggravate stigmatisation and challenges faced by these individuals further, making recidivism more likely. Drawing on neo-Durkheimian theories, Maruna proposes that rituals possess the power to shape emotions and facilitate moral integration.[1648] In practice, rites of passage could include symbolic acts such as repentance and forgiveness, promoting both the individual's transition into a member of society and their acceptance by the public.

II. Role of Rituals in Reintegration: Emotional Bonds and Community Support

Maruna's argument on ritualistic practices as tools for giving meaning to action is both

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[1643] Shadd Maruna, 'Reentry as a Rite of Passage', *Punishment & Society* 13, no. 1 (2011): 3–28; University of Liverpool, 'Professor Shadd Maruna | Our People | University of Liverpool', Liverpool.ac.uk, n.d.

[1644] Ministry of Justice, 'Proven Reoffending Statistics - April 2011 - March 2012', GOV.UK, 2014.

[1645] Sharuna's theory is primarily based on the Anglo-American world; Maruna, 'Reentry as a Rite of Passage', 4.

[1646] Ibid.

[1647] Rituals during trials, or 'degradation rituals' after Garfinkel, diminish individuals to criminals while revoking their membership in society; Harold Garfinkel, 'Conditions of Successful Degradation Ceremonies', *American Journal of Sociology* 61, no. 5 (1956): 420–24.

[1648] Maruna, 'Reentry as a Rite of Passage'.

compelling and remains highly relevant today, particularly given the continuous high reoffending rates.[1649]

Rituals as a passage to integration not only represent symbolic change but could also evoke emotional rewards in the minds of former inmates. Such emotional dimensions may be activated through the brain's reward system by ritualistic acts like community forgiveness, thereby releasing a sense of achievement. Neuroscientific research indicates that this process may reinforce positive behaviours and encourage desistance from reoffending by generating emotional meaning.[1650] Furthermore, when a community is involved in the process, witnessing the 'transformation' of the ex-convict into a member of society while enforcing positive emotions, the individual is provided with a stronger incentive to continue on the path of reintegration.

In line with this, Maruna continues to emphasise ritual as an instrument of transition due to the interplay between society and the individual. This remains significant, as evidence from 2024 highlights that family bonds constitute a central aspect of successful reintegration.[1651] In many cases, former prisoners credit family support as crucial during their transition to a 'normal' life.[1652] Rituals strengthen bonds between ex-prisoners and their communities by fostering connection through shared emotional experiences. Positive feelings associated with a meaningful ritual are therefore associated with the other party, especially salient as many former convicts have reported that alienation from family and community has caused further difficulties in rebuilding trust.[1653]

III. Challenges and Limitations in Maruna's Approach

However, the theory of rites raises some problems that Maruna disregards too quickly. This is particularly evident in his discussion of society's role in reintegration, which may lead readers to perceive his ideas as overly generalised. He emphasises the importance of public perception in a prisoner's reentry into society. While Maruna rightly recognises the hostile attitude of the media and wider society's negative

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[1649] In the UK, those released from prison in 2022 had a 25.5% recidivism rate, an increase from the previous year; Ministry of Justice, 'Proven Reoffending Statistics: January to March 2022', GOV.UK (Ministry of Justice, 2024).

[1650] Suzanne Hidi, 'Revisiting the Role of Rewards in Motivation and Learning: Implications of Neuroscientific Research', *Educational Psychology Review* 28 (April 22, 2015): 61–93.

[1651] Ahmet Kılıç and Mustafa Kaan Tuysuz, 'Exploring the Challenges of Reintegrating Ex-Offenders into Society', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics* 3, no. 3 (2024): 4–11.

[1652] Ibid.

[1653] Maruna, 'Reentry as a Rite of Passage'; Kılıç and Tuysuz, 'Exploring the Challenges of Reintegrating Ex-Offenders'.

perception of ex-prisoners, he oversimplifies the moral conduct of the public. Symbolic acts, even when repeated and thus normalised, are often insufficient to address grievances, particularly in cases of violent crimes like murder or rape. Maruna argues that emotional labour, such as the acts of remorse and forgiveness involving both parties, is a key prerequisite for the effectiveness of rites of passage.[1654] However, remorse, regardless of how sincere, is not always accepted by the victims of the offence. If the victim is unwilling to participate in the ritual, the community may take on the role in the reconciliation process. Nonetheless, certain crimes are deemed 'unforgivable', adding negative emotions to the ritual and illustrating a paradox of the text. Although the author acknowledges the hostile perception of former prisoners, he remains optimistic that the repetition of rituals, even if initially met with resistance, has the potential to gradually reshape emotions and reduce stigmatisation. However, Maruna also warns of the danger of 'empty, forced' rituals that can occur if the process is not embraced by all involved, ultimately perpetuating a counterproductive cycle.[1655] Additionally, challenges emerge upon closer examination of Maruna's concept of 'community'. The text does not specify which community Maruna is referring to and leaves this as a possibly intended open end, as by 2011, when the article was published, globalised and multicultural societies were already well established. In the context of today's globalised world, it is no longer realistic to refer to a singular, unified society as envisioned in Durkheim's theories. Instead, moral principles can vary widely within a single country or city, where communities often become fragmented.[1656] While such diversity opens possibilities for more reintegration rituals, it also presents significant challenges, such as determining who is responsible for representing the other party in the transition. It remains unclear which specific communities Maruna refers to, and it is arguable whether a unified community exists in contemporary society at all. This ambiguity raises the question whether the concept of community should be reexamined on a smaller scale, focusing on entities such as religious organisations or other groups operating within distinct social circles.

Furthermore, one could argue that Maruna's ideas are slightly idealistic. He emphasises the stigmatisation of prisoners who continue to wear 'invisible stripes' even

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[1654] Ibid.

[1655] Maruna, 'Reentry as a Rite of Passage', 22.

[1656] Kate Connolly, 'Atheist Berlin to Decide on Religion's Place in Its Schools', the Guardian (The Guardian, April 26, 2009).

after their release.[1657] Research shows that openly accessible criminal records render it impossible for former inmates to shed their identity as criminals, which subsequently prevents them from finding employment and housing.[1658] The 'electronic scarlet letter', not only marks individuals symbolically but also legally and socially, often indefinitely.[1659] Despite growing calls for reforms such as record sealing, background checks remain entrenched in employer and landlord screening practices.[1660]

Maruna accurately identifies the difficulties faced by individuals upon release and proposes eliminating elements like criminal records, allowing former prisoners to begin their new lives without being permanently marked or separated from society. However, certain technicalities, potentially involving the harbouring of negative emotions and obstructing the concept of rites of entry, may be considered necessary in the context of certain offences. For instance, community notification laws such as Clare's Law, sex offender registries, and employment prohibitions in child-oriented settings for formerly convicted child sexual offenders are not only legally mandated but are also widely endorsed by the public as safety measures.[1661] This division between ex-prisoners and the community, while necessary, highlights that reintegration rituals should not be generalised and might be more suited to those convicted of non-violent offences. Furthermore, communities may resist such rituals, particularly when justice is perceived to be inadequate, as in cases of early release due to overcrowding.[1662] This reality challenges Maruna's suggestion that ritualised reintegration can or should apply universally, particularly for individuals convicted of violent offences.

Another important consideration is the mental health of former inmates. The text stresses the importance of prisoners actively demonstrating redemption to gain acceptance.[1663] However, many prisoners face significant challenges, such as

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[1657] Maruna, 'Reentry as a Rite of Passage', 12.

[1658] Ibid.

[1659] Daniel S. Murphy et al., 'The Electronic 'Scarlet Letter': Criminal Backgrounding and a Perpetual Spoiled Identity', Journal of Offender Rehabilitation 50, no. 3 (April 21, 2011): 101–18.

[1660] Ispa-Landa, Simone, and Charles E. Loeffler. 'Indefinite Punishment and the Criminal Record: Stigma Reports among Expungement Seekers in Illinois', Criminology 54, no. 3 (June 8, 2016): 387–412.

[1661] Home Office. 'Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme Factsheet', GOV.UK, January 3, 2024.; Levenson, Jill S., Yolanda N. Brannon, Timothy Fortney, and Juanita Baker. 'Public Perceptions about Sex Offenders and Community Protection Policies', Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy 7, no. 1 (2007): 137–61.

[1662] Anne-Marie McAlinden, *The Shaming of Sexual Offenders: Risk, Retribution and Reintegration*, ed. Ralph Cunnington and Djakhongir Saidov (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2007).

[1663] Maruna, 'Reentry as a Rite of Passage'.

untreated mental health issues and substance abuse, which inherently complicate the process of 'proving' their worth.[1664] While the text acknowledges mental health struggles, it should focus more on the profound burden these issues place on prisoners. Imprisonment exacerbates the trauma and mental health problems of the individuals concerned.[1665] Such a situation underscores the necessity for improved support and enhanced collaboration between the justice system and mental health services. Since the time the article was written, suicide rates among former convicts under post-custody supervision has increased six-fold in 2018-19 in the United Kingdom.[1666] Further, without such efforts, ex-prisoners remain at high risk of reoffending.[1667] Rituals can play a role in overcoming some mental health barriers, but they are not a standalone solution. This aligns with the argument that degradation rituals in incarceration worsen mental health barriers. Addressing the harm caused by prison and improving support is key to successful reintegration, and active support and reintegration efforts must begin within the prison system itself to be truly effective.

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, Maruna's work offers more opportunities to advance current reintegration processes. Given the high recidivism and suicide rates among ex-prisoners, it is evident that current reintegration strategies are not efficient enough.[1668] The addition of a ritual component, which has been shown to have positive psychological significance on people's minds, could facilitate the transition process of returning to society.[1669] However, it would have been beneficial to further investigate the publics' negative perception of offenders and strategies to address them. Another important consideration is the mental health of former inmates, as untreated mental health issues and substance abuse significantly complicate their reintegration, highlighting the need for improved support systems and collaboration between the

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[1664] Kristal May S. Vivares, 'The Reintegration of Ex-Convicts in Society: A Case Study', *International Journal of Social Science and Human Research* 6 (October 23, 2023): 6173–80; Paul E. Bebbington et al., 'The Mental Health of Ex-Prisoners: Analysis of the 2014 English National Survey of Psychiatric Morbidity', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 56, no. 11 (March 22, 2021).

[1665] Vivares, 'The Reintegration of Ex-Convicts in Society'.

[1666] Grierson, Jamie, 'Freed prisoners killing themselves at a rate of one every two days', *The Guardian,* November 18, 2019.

[1667] Bebbington et al., 'The Mental Health of Ex-Prisoners'.

[1668] McCarthy, 'High Risk of Suicide Seen in Formerly Incarcerated People'; Ministry of Justice, 'Proven Reoffending Statistics: January to March 2022'.

[1669] Hidi, 'Revisiting the Role of Rewards in Motivation and Learning'.

justice system and mental health services.

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