

Working With the Ex-Offender's Family in an Asian Context—Part I: The “Impossible” Task of Engaging the Family

by Timothy Sim*

***Author's Note:** Working with the family members of ex-offenders is a daunting and newly developing aspect of offender rehabilitation in Singapore. A practice research project carried out by three social work practitioners and two academics over a period of 22 months explored the pertinent issues and challenges in working with family members of ex-offenders. This two-part paper documents the process and lessons learned in working with the ex-offenders and their families from engagement to termination. The first part of this paper introduces the project and focuses on the issues pertinent to engaging ex-offenders and their family members.*

Introduction

The President of the Republic of Singapore, His Excellency S.R. Nathan, who is also a trained social worker, once aptly said of ex-offenders that:

Although they [ex-offenders] have made a mistake in life, they deserve a second chance. We all make mistakes; we all come out the better for it.

I would like to push this graceful statement further by arguing that ex-offenders' families play an important part in not only giving offenders a second chance, but in helping them to come out of the better for it.

There has been a surge in the literature that stresses the need to connect offenders to prosocial networks and relationships in the community. One of the most social networks

is, unsurprisingly, the family (Gavazzi et al., 2003; Graffam et al., 2004; Gideon, 2007; Johnson et al., 1998; Kenemore & Roldan, 2006). The advantage of engaging family members includes providing ex-offenders with additional support, encouragement, and guidance as well as making the program more emotionally demanding because there may be additional family expectations for the ex-offender to succeed (Harrison, 2006). Nelson, Deess, and Allen (1999) found that ex-offenders returning to the community with weak or no family support were less likely to succeed in reintegration than those with strong family support. Moreover, involving family members may be less costly than traditional approaches and may hold the potential of prevention (Johnson et al., 1998). Yet, the families of ex-offenders can be difficult to engage for a number of reasons (Loeber et al., 1998; Perkin-Docks, 2001):

- Some family members may not be familiar with the daunting ex-offender rehabilitation system;
- Some may have been hurt by the ex-offenders repeatedly and may be reluctant to reconcile with them;
- Some may have a host of other problems, such as family financial and health situations, which await their attention; and
- Some may find that the service providers have been less than helpful.

The ex-offenders themselves may also be reticent about engaging their family members because they do not want to be seen as the problem or to be blamed further by the family members. Moreover, ex-offenders and their families are generally not given preference or high priority by many traditional service agencies with regard to advocacy and the building of supportive relationships with service providers (Johnson et al., 1998). This difficult business of engaging the family must not be left aside, however, because for the reintegration of the ex-offender into the community, the family may be a risk factor (Gavazzi et al., 2003; Klein et al., 1999), a protective factor (Harrison, 2006; Johnson et al., 1998), or a combination of both. This is especially the case where the family is highly regarded in the Asian community (Chan, 2002; Thang &

Yu, 2004). Yet, there is a paucity of knowledge about engaging family members of ex-offenders upon the offenders' release from prison. This deficit in knowledge has been evident for many years (Johnson et al., 1998). The field of corrections has rarely focused on the ex-offenders' relationships outside of prison, and the family studies field has paid insufficient attention to the families of ex-offenders.

This is a two-part paper. This first part introduces the rationale of the practice research project and devotes attention to the specific lessons learned in engaging the ex-offenders and their family members. It outlines the experience of using unconventional engaging methods and consolidates the key dilemmas and challenges encountered in engaging ex-offenders and their family members. The second part of the paper will focus on the issues in carrying assessment and intervention for the ex-offenders' family members, as well as the discussion this practice research project generated with policymakers and stake-holders of prison services in Singapore.

The Practice Research Project

Study Objective. With the aim of serving ex-offenders and their family members, a practice research project, supported and funded by the Association of Social Workers in Singapore, operated for 22 months from May 2006 to March 2008. This project specifically aimed to work with three cases intensively from engagement to termination, carefully documenting the pertinent issues, the relevant measures and tools used, and the skills and techniques employed for each stage of work.

Study Method. The worker concerned and I would visit the clients and their family members at the locations convenient for them, in addition to inviting them to the agencies where appropriate and necessary. These locations included the prison, clients' homes, community centers, or any other locations deemed appropriate. All sessions, wherever they were conducted, were audiotaped or videotaped with the consent of the clients. In addition, I invited

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*Timothy Sim, Ph.D., is an assistant professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hung Hom, Kowloon, Hong Kong. He can be reached by email at timothysim@yahoo.com.sg.

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another professor from the Department of Social Work at the University of Singapore who is, among her other areas of expertise, an authority in the area of service evaluation, to help in designing and documenting the work that we carried out with the ex-offenders and their family members.

Study Design. Single-case evaluation design was adopted to carefully monitor the process and outcome of each case (Dallos & Vetere, 2005; Roysse, 2004). Based on the logic of time-series designs, we used repeated measures obtained during our initial meetings with the ex-offenders before their discharge from prison and repeated the measures during and after intervention to see if patterns were sustained. Some of the advantages of using single-case evaluation design included obtaining immediate, inexpensive, and practical feedback that was helpful in systematically monitoring the ex-offenders' progress (or lack of it).

Dallos and Vetere (2005) maintain that single-case studies can be adapted to produce research that explores meaning and experience; that is reflective, collaborative, and doable; and that allows a consideration of the clients' experiences in the wider contexts of their relationships, community, and cultural location. These authors encouraged collaborative case study research that incorporates the perspectives of clients, family members, and other people involved in the process of therapy. By adopting single-case evaluation, we hoped to find a "doable" form of research that is familiar to practitioners. What we as practitioners needed to do differently in this project included documenting greater details, collecting evidence (e.g., through use of different tools, careful analysis of videotaped sessions), and using alternative explanations of the evidence in a more systematic way. By so doing, we aimed to be more than descriptive and to become explanatory with what we have found. This was possible because we carefully followed through in detail the complexity of the ex-offenders' situation and the unfolding events using the single-case design (Yin, 2009).

Referral Sources and Case Selection Criteria

The project team agreed that "cases" would be selected for inclusion based on four criteria. It was decided that the study would include:

- Ex-offenders who explicitly indicated a desire to improve family relationships as a goal;
- Ex-offenders' family members who were willing to be engaged in treatment;

- Ex-offenders and family members who consented to take part in the research process, involving videotaping (formal informed consent would be obtained from the clients and family members); and
- Ex-offenders and family members who were willing to travel to our office for family meetings when necessary.

Eventually, we were privileged to work with the first three ex-offenders who signed up with reference to the above criteria. Their personal data are presented in Table 1:

The overall goal of our intervention was to improve family relationships so that the family can become a support for the ex-offender's rehabilitation. We drew heavily from the Structural Family Therapy theory (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin et al., 2007). The format of treatment also took reference from the multidimensional family therapy model (Liddle, 2002; Liddle et al., 2010), which has its roots in structural-strategic family therapy tradition. One aspect of multidimensionality in assessment and intervention is its inclusion of extrafamilial factors in maintaining and treating problems. These include peer, educational, and the juvenile justice system, in addition to individual and family domains.

We met each ex-offender after he indicated the desire for us to work with his family. Before his discharge, we would meet with his family members either in the agency or at their home to discuss their concerns about and expectations of the ex-offender upon discharge; we would also make the necessary discharge arrangements, such as picking up the ex-offender from the prison. After the ex-offenders' release from the prison, we continued to meet with the individual ex-offenders and their families over a period of six months.

The "Impossible" Task of Engagement: Process, Methods, and Issues

From a structural family therapy viewpoint, it is paramount for workers to accommodate to the family in order to "join" them. This emphatic connection opens the

way for family members to begin listening to one another and establishes a bond with the worker that enables them to accept the challenges to come (Nichols, 2010). We will first highlight four main issues we encountered in engaging the individual ex-offenders and then discuss three salient issues we considered important in engaging the family members of the ex-offenders.

Engaging Individual Ex-Offenders. The four critical issues we experienced when engaging the individual ex-offenders were related to:

- Timing;
- Goal setting;
- Engagement methods; and
- Service coordination.

Timing: In considering the timing of engaging the individual ex-offenders, the specific question at hand is: "When do workers start engaging the ex-offenders?" From working with the three cases, we found two months before the ex-offenders' release from prison to be a reasonable time frame. This allows adequate time for us to introduce ourselves, get to know the ex-offenders, get to meet the family, and have enough time to work on relevant issues with the individual offender before his release. Specifically, we recommend three individual meetings with the ex-offenders before their release from the prison, each session dealing with a specific focus—providing information to the ex-offenders, conducting the intake, and reporting back to the ex-offenders after contacting his/her family members (see Table 2).

Goal setting: When setting goals, we found that it is essential to set a specific time frame because it gives the workers and the ex-offenders a sense of boundary and direction. We recommend a period of three to six months to begin with. Moreover, for ex-offenders who have to observe a specific period of curfew via electronic tagging, it may be useful to review or even reset goals if the individuals would like to continue working after the curfew period is fulfilled.

Engagement methods: What are the useful methods in engaging the individual

Ex-Offender	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Previous Offense
Case 1	19	Male	Chinese	Robbery
Case 2	21	Male	Chinese	Caused grievous harm to others and drug abuse
Case 3	33	Male	Malay	Drug trafficking

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Table 2: Session Goal, Format, and Specific Tasks When Engaging the Ex-Offender Before Release From Prison			
	First Session	Second Session	Third Session
Goal	Providing information	Intake	Report outcome of family session, set specific goals & make administrative arrangements
Session Format	Group or individual session	Individual session	Individual session
Tasks	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explain the process of help (e.g., the duration, intensity of the help process; what is involved, what help is provided and what is not, video/audiotaping, etc.) to the ex-offenders; 2. Clarify the role of workers and clients (e.g., agency policy on contact, the commitment for ex-offenders to look for a job, attend sessions, etc.) with the ex-offenders. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Rapport building; 2. History taking (e.g., previous offenses, employment history, educational background, family history); 3. Assess the individual ex-offender's strengths and weaknesses; motivation and reasons for change; family dynamics; risk and protective factors for recidivism; support networks. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explore strategies in facing family upon discharge; 2. Set short-term (one month) and long-term goals (six months or longer); 3. Make arrangements for when and where to meet whom, etc., on the day of discharge.

ex-offenders? From our experience, we found that it is important to reach out to the ex-offenders, because they were usually not active or forthcoming in contacting the workers initially. Moreover, they may lack the finances to use the conventional contact modes, such as traveling or making telephone calls. We recommend the use of a variety of formats, including less conventional methods—especially for younger ex-offenders—such as home visits, taking a walk near the neighborhood or going for a meal, making telephone contacts (and not expecting them to call because they may be conscious of the cost), and using emails and short-message-service (SMS), which may be more economical for them. When using the less conventional emails or SMS, we found that the ex-offenders would reveal different kinds of information, as well as to establish a different relationship with the workers.

An example of an email exchange, followed by an SMS between “Andy,” the 19-year-old ex-offender of Case 1, and me during the engagement phase upon his release from prison is shown in Box 1.

We realized that digital media (such as emails and SMS) can help the ex-offenders and the workers efficiently build rapport. However, social workers would need

to consider carefully the implications for practice and policy. For instance, the issue of boundary between the workers and the clients would need to be duly considered. There is also a resource implication for the cost of SMS, and even the provision of an “official” mobile phone or a Subscriber Identity Module (SIM) card for individual workers so that the workers do not use their personal mobile phones.

Service coordination: Early in the engagement phase, we found it important to address the issue of service coordination. Specifically, we think that it is important for workers to carefully tease out the issue of “who will do what from in-care to aftercare for the individual ex-offender” so as to avoid overlap and even confusion between different law enforcement agencies and the helping agencies working with the individual ex-offenders. The need to clarify the roles of different agencies and professionals involved (e.g., prison officers, workers from family resource centers that focus on financial and employment issues, and aftercare case managers) cannot be overemphasized. We recommend the need for the team of professionals to carefully map out guidelines for the timing, roles, and procedures for different professionals and agencies involved

with in-care and aftercare. One particularly important aspect is the clarification or division of the care and control roles between workers from the social service sector and aftercare officers from prison, for instance with regard to the observation of curfew, reporting, urinalysis, etc.

Engaging Family Members of Ex-Offenders

None of the three social workers had previous experience in working with family members of ex-offenders before their release. It was intriguing for them to have to deal with additional information and different perspectives provided by the family members. As a consultant, I found it important to provide support to the practitioners by jointly planning each family session carefully and encouraging the social workers to take on new challenges in meeting the family members. The periodic review of videotaped sessions was a useful platform for me to explain to the social workers what was done for what reasons, and to review what could be done differently. In the process of our work, we found three salient issues in engaging the family members of the ex-offenders.

Engage Prior to Discharge. First, it was apparent to us that social workers should attempt to engage the family members of the ex-offenders prior to discharge, so as to prepare both the ex-offenders and their family members. The issue was, however, which family member to engage first? Family members may not be clear about what to expect when the ex-offender is released from prison, and family members may not believe in the ex-offender, especially if he/she has been repeatedly incarcerated. Most family members and ex-offenders do not have experience in working through difficult issues conjointly.

With regard to which family member to engage, we found it useful and important to first obtain permission from the ex-offender. This is a deliberate show of respect to the ex-offender as well as a clear demonstration that he/she is in charge of the work to be done. Also, we found that the decision on who to engage first in the family rests with the family, too.

Workers also need to be careful in defining what constitutes a family and to be open to the different “types” of families in terms of family structure and make-up. For instance, in one of the cases, the family is not the biological family, but a surrogate family that has reluctantly taken up the responsibility to help the ex-offender. His close network of friends often played the role of a nurturing

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Box 1: Exchanges During the Engagement Phase

Email During Engagement Phase

-----Original Message-----

From: Andy [pseudonym]
 Sent: Thursday, March 08, 2007
 11:16 AM
 To: Timothy Sim
 Subject: Sorry...

hi... it's me Andy... i don't think i can make it this week... maybe next week i will give u a call.... i still don't have a hand phone.... when i have one i give u a call. k....

Best regards
 Andy

-----Original Message-----

From: Timothy Sim
 Sent: Thursday, March 08, 2007
 11:17 AM
 To: 'Andy'
 Subject: RE: Sorry...

Great to hear from you Andy. How are things since you returned home?

Dr. Sim

SMS Message During Engagement Phase

Time	From "Andy"	From Timothy Sim
0955	Dr, are you there?	What's up?
0959	Well, today I m not working again. . . I have gastric pain for 2 days. . .	Are you taking medicine?
1006	I am at the polyclinic now. Sigh. . . almost half of my salary gone to [the] clinic. . .	You must plan your money properly. Do you have enough?
1031	I am now left with not much. You [are] not working today?	I am working from home. You must be careful.
1041	OK. . . I want to take a nap while waiting. Wish u good luck	Can I meet you for dinner tonight?
1053	I am meeting my nightingale (nurse friend). . . haha. . . for dinner	Ha ha, now I know you are not sick.
1114	Yes	Did you tell your family about your girlfriend?
1117	Haha. . . very angry with the doctor. She wouldn't give me an mc [medical certificate]. . . only give excuse. Shit!	

family, too. In such a situation, the roles and tasks of helping the ex-offender need to be carefully negotiated with all concerned. The workers may even become “surrogate” parents, if there is little support from the family, while being cautious of the dangers of “parentified” roles that may create dependency of the ex-offender on the workers.

Discuss Expectations. The second key issue was that family members might not be clear about what to expect when the ex-offender returns home. We found it useful to explore with the family members their own “genda” because they did not know what to expect upon the ex-offender’s discharge. There may be a need to set concrete goals (e.g., successfully get off the electronic tagging without trouble). We also found that family members might

be more convinced when workers have sufficient knowledge or assessment of the ex-offender (e.g., motivation of the ex-offender to change).

Advocate for the Ex-Offender.

Third, we found that family members did not believe in the ex-offender during the engagement phase, especially if he/she had been repeatedly incarcerated. We focused on promoting the trust of family members toward the ex-offender by advocating for the ex-offender that he/she seemed to want to make a difference this time, and advocating for the ex-offender to be given another chance—even if there were still doubts—weighing the “pros” and “cons” with the family members on their decision to believe or not believe the ex-offender while sensitively considering the family’s past hurt and

ill feelings. Perkins-Dock (2001) suggested that one approach to engage resistant family members is to begin by asking each family member how the behavior of the ex-offender has affected him/her. This is probably a good way of joining with the family members. One important “mantra” we learned from one member of the family is “just do it” versus “just prove it.” In this way, the family members may make a difference in the life of the ex-offender without giving the ex-offenders and themselves too much pressure. Vignette 1 from Case 3 (Box 2), shows the first session with the ex-offender’s eldest sister and her husband before the ex-offender’s discharge and illustrates the way one of our workers attempted to build trust between the ex-offender and his family members—an uphill task.

One of the greatest obstacles that ex-offenders may face is the lack of trust and hope from their family and even the larger community, and they may end up in going into the “second prison” upon discharge when they have to face this critical and cold treatment. We think one of the most critical responsibilities of the social workers is to help in advocating for the ex-offenders when their family members and the community are suspicious of their attempts to change.

Some Study Findings

We found that preparing the individual ex-offenders in facing their family members, and the expectations of those family members, is key to prepare them in returning home. The need to be respectful to the individual ex-offenders as well as the family members cannot be overemphasized. This may be crucial in engaging them to take on more responsibilities.

Graffam and colleagues (2004) have recommended training for ex-offenders to support their life “outside” and pre-arranged contacts and support services with clear commitments to provide support.

We also found that flexibility and creativity in engaging the individuals, as well as family members, could be vital. This may be especially salient when engaging younger ex-offenders. The use of digital media with this group may be more efficient, and probably less costly.

It was also important to define “family” dynamically to include a significant other with whom the offender is living or who the offender identifies as an important part of his family network. We found that the engagement of the family helps in retaining the offenders in therapy. However, when

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Box 2: Case Vignette 1—Building Trust Between the Ex-Offender and His Family Members

Worker 1: Thanks for sharing with us. Some of the things that he has shared with me are something similar . . .

Sister: Okay.

Tim (Consultant): [to Worker 1] Can you say more? What is this “something similar”? I’m curious. . .

Worker 1: For example, being responsible to himself. One thing he said is that he wants to take up a driving license, so that he can get a job.

Sister: Okay.

Worker 1: That’s one thing he was saying about. Another thing he was interested in is to continue his studies.

Sister: Oh.

Brother in law: Yes, hopefully.

Worker 1: So he was exploring with me the different opportunities that would be available. Whether the polytechnics would take him in, or whether he can go to the ITE [Institute of Technological Education]. So these are the things that he has talked to me about.

Brother in law: I think he should know.

Tim (Consultant): [to couple] Are you surprised to hear this?

Sister: Yes, sort of.

engaging the family, one of the most trying aspects is connecting the offenders and their family members. This is not unconnected to the impasses between the offenders and their family members, and it is not surprising that difficulties associated with family reunification, assuming responsibilities within the family unit, and family alienation are well documented (Baldry et al., 2002; Graffam et al., 2004; Waul et al., 2002). Moreover,

ex-offenders ordinarily do not seek or use counseling and therapy services (Kenemore & Roldan, 2006). This often also applies to their family members. From a structural family therapy viewpoint (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin et al., 2006), the worker needs to help to resolve family members’ defensiveness or lower their anxiety. Without joining or accommodating to the family, resistance may occur, and the therapist tends to blame

the family. Rosenthal Gelman (2004) argued that addressing the concrete problems of the client is fundamental to establishing a trusting relationship. Once the external stressors are addressed, then insight-oriented work will be possible. I will elaborate further on this in the second part of the paper as we present our experience in conducting assessment and intervention with the individual ex-offenders and their family members.

Kenemore and Roldan (2006) have warned that we, as clinicians who are supposed to help ex-offenders in reintegration, may become barriers for them with regard to service and eventual reintegration to the community. One barrier is our biased and negative perception of the ex-offenders and their family members. Another is our tendency to use a practice approach with which we are comfortable, regardless of its fit with the needs and preferences of the ex-offenders. This paper presents a challenge to workers who are not comfortable in working with the family members of ex-offenders and provides, we hope, a small contribution to encouraging workers to include a family perspective to ex-offender rehabilitation.

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