



AT-RISK SOCIAL GROUPS FACE LONG-STANDING CHALLENGES AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP PLAYING AN EMANCIPATORY ROLE CAN DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. THIS BRIEF OUTLINES THESE CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDS WAYS FORWARD.

AT-RISK GROUPS GAINING EMANCIPATION THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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"I try to explain to the service users that "your drug addiction is not the problem, the reason for your drug addiction is the problem". If the money was being spent on early intervention we wouldn't have half the problems we have with service users"
Local Service Provider

Common within society is the accepted marginalisation of certain at-risk groups of people. Increasingly within the UK we operate from individualist rather than communal, and neoliberalist rather than socialist frameworks. This is evidenced with changes made towards the probation service, and with how people with drug dependency problems are considered. From the early 1990s a shift occurred from an appreciation of the social components of drug dependence, towards focus being placed upon the individual drug taker and lifestyle choices [1]. Equally from the 1970s the probation service has "experienced the logic of neoliberal ideology ... become firmly embedded within the UK criminal justice system" [2] resulting in an emphasis upon commodities and products that can be competed for in the marketplace via Outcomes Based Commissioning such as Payment by Results, rather than being driven by a once 'humanitarian' ethos [3].

With such individualist mentalities, being viewed as ascribing to society's accepted social norms becomes more important to avoid marginalisation, being labelled as 'at-risk' and the loss of access to resources and status.

AT-RISK GROUPS & THE THIRD SECTOR

We define at-risk social groups as those groups vulnerable to marginalisation from the accepted norms, values and beliefs of the society they exist within [4]. These groups share the same complex challenges including lack of access to resources, obstructed employment prospects, and poor physical and mental health, which may include (though is not limited to) such labelled groups as being homeless, an ex-offender, an asylum seeker, a drug addict or an alcoholic.

Although at-risk social groups present complex and challenging problems, many organisations, collectively termed as Third Sector Support Organisations, provide emancipatory pathways as a form of rehabilitation, attempting to remove oppressive constraints and reintegrate individuals back into society.

Due to the complex needs of supporting at-risk individuals, it is imperative that third sector organisations have the appropriate support and strategy. Today, there are over 160,000 voluntary organisations in the UK [5]. Most of them are small local operations with an average income of less than £100,000. Yet, the sector contributed a total of £17.1bn to the UK economy in 2017.

These organisations and the groups they support face many challenges, and we believe that entrepreneurship, as a human activity and set of skills, has something to say and do with regards to the emancipatory role rehabilitation services provide.

ENTREPRENEURSHIP & EMANCIPATION

Our conviction stems from collective experience and a growing body of entrepreneurship research [6] viewing entrepreneurial projects as emancipatory efforts, departing from mainstream entrepreneurship which assumes venture creation and wealth generation as the sole objective. Instead focus should be placed upon entrepreneurial change-oriented activities and projects aimed at overcoming or removing perceived constraints in the individuals' environments. While the process may evolve into self-employment, this is not assumed to be a necessary outcome that would determine the success of the rehabilitation process. Emancipation occurs as a result of the process of entrepreneuring.

This emancipatory view of entrepreneurship has been embraced by practitioners and welcomed by scholars and policy-makers alike, since entrepreneurial action with a prosocial orientation can potentially lead to **positive societal change, addressing the wider causes of marginalisation.**

CHALLENGES & LEVELS

As we look across service providers exploring the possibility of entrepreneurial projects as part of the intervention, many challenges arise. Some areas are relevant to all third sector organisations such as funding and government support. There are other barriers however, unique to these groups, pertaining for example to stigma, moral treatment, self-awareness and timing of intervention. In addition to being experienced throughout the rehabilitative ecosystem, creating obstacles to delivery, access and facilitation of a truly emancipatory process, they operate

across four levels: the **individual** seeking support, the **process** of emancipation, the **facilitation** of emancipatory processes and the **context** the above three are situated within.

Although each challenge by itself is detrimental to the rehabilitation process, each challenge operates in conjunction with each other and across levels, skewing the success of rehabilitation and promoting a negative self-fulfilling prophecy. A gap in research and policy exists to address these challenges.

There are ways of breaking this self-fulfilling cycle. Support agents and at-risk groups can use entrepreneurial skills and practices to mitigate, alleviate or overcome social problems, counteracting individualist causal mentalities which ignore contextual and environmental factors, whilst promoting community engagement and awareness. We label this multi-level intervention as 'Restorative entrepreneuring' [7].

RESTORATIVE ENTREPRENEURING

We define restorative entrepreneuring as: *a set of entrepreneurial practices and a system of support that enable individuals at-risk to reconstruct their identity, sense of ownership and self-worth and engage in a progressively autonomous rehabilitative life project, away from deviant behaviour and out of detrimental and stigmatizing circumstances.*

Restorative entrepreneuring goes beyond the sole pursuit of opportunities for economic gain, but still ties marginalised individuals into the accepted social norms of western neoliberal society, as such reclaiming status and identity. It is about using change-oriented activities and projects with the aim of overcoming or removing perceived constraints in the individuals' environments. It is about seeking autonomy, impetus, breaking free from authority, removal of constraints and making declarations about the intended change [8].

This is a new and promising approach, yet many questions remain. If we are to move beyond traditional rehabilitation and entrepreneurship practices, several questions need to be answered.

At the level of the **individual** seeking support, we need to resolve how restorative entrepreneuring can contribute to

generating greater awareness of the development of at-risk contexts for the individual. How the cycle of self-stigmatization can be broken or prevented before it sets in and establishes counterproductive mentalities, feeding stigmatization and marginalization.

At the **process level** of emancipatory rehabilitation, we need to facilitate a re-humanization of the rehabilitation process, contribute to relabelling the transition out of at-risk circumstances and decouple the counterproductive effect of bringing the process of emancipation to the public and the ascribing of societal stigma.

At the level of the facilitation of emancipatory processes, we need to resolve how restorative entrepreneuring can enable an earlier awareness of the at-risk situation. How it can counteract the negative tropes applied to individuals when moving through the process of rehabilitation, helping instead to build status and social capital.

Finally at the **contextual level**, how can restorative entrepreneuring address misaligned resource allocation to ensure funding is both adequate for the service, and sends a clear public message of support for at-risk groups and inclusion into societal care? In doing so reducing the extent of marginalization of people, increasing both their neoliberal economic worth, and their rights to be treated with the same level of compassion as those who profit most from societal structure.

We invite policymakers and researchers to explore these questions as they will aid not just research development, but will carry real impact towards rehabilitation and social work policy.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

For further detail regarding restorative entrepreneuring please find the full report available here: www.researchgate.net/publication/339365364 [Entrepreneuring and emancipation in at-risk social groups challenges and ways forward](#)