**Movements towards desistance via peer-support roles in prison**

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Introduction

Many peer-support programs are currently operating in prisons across the United Kingdom (U.K.). Through these programs, prisoners are able to access support for issues ranging from emotional distress and addiction to practical and educational needs. Although such programs have existed in U.K. prisons for decades, limited research has focused on those who occupy peer-support roles. This chapter aims to generate a deeper understanding of how adopting a peer-support role in prison can shape offenders’ experiences of imprisonment. This chapter will highlight how individuals carrying out such roles in prison can reshape their lives, and will thus illuminate some of the broader implications of peer-support volunteer programs in prison contexts. This book recognises the financial constraints suffered by criminal justice systems worldwide, and the resultant growth of volunteer-based programs. Simultaneously, it is recognised that little research exploring such programs exists, and it is therefore difficult to speculate upon the potential impact and trajectories of such programs. This chapter aims to assist in the bridging of this knowledge gap, and in doing so offers an insight into peer-support volunteer roles as opportunities for offenders to gather meaning and purpose in prison and begin to make some movements towards desistance.

**The Rise of Peer-Support in Prisons in the U.K.**

Peer-support programs in the U.K. have traditionally operated in high-risk environments, such as areas with high rates of crime, unemployment, poverty, and a high density of ethnic minority members (Devilly, Sorbello, Eccleston, & Ward, 2005). Research has consistently revealed positive effects of peer-support programs in distressed communities. These benefits include enhanced community cohesion, reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness, and increased perception of social and emotional support (Bean, Shafer & Glennon, 2013; Field & Schuldberg, 2011; Walker & Bryant, 2013). For example, some research has positively assessed the use of effectively structured neighbourhood watch programs on the grounds that they provide members of local communities with a sense of control over the crime and deviance occurring near their homes (Bennett, Holloway & Farrington, 2009).

Perhaps the best recognised peer-support program, and one that typifies the notion of mutual reciprocity and shared problem solving, is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). The AA program encourages recovering alcoholics to share their stories of alcohol addiction and their transitional experiences that led to sobriety. Individuals who are in recovery invite newcomers to share their stories and adopt a mentoring role that involves guiding new members through the Twelve Steps program. The mentors themselves benefit from this exchange, in that they remain in a position of heightened self-awareness regarding their own history with alcohol, and are surrounded by people who can support them, should they relapse or lose hope. Experts have suggested that the system of giving and receiving help lies at the heart of peer-support (see, for example, Devilly et al., 2005). Peer-support programs can therefore be defined as involving reciprocal emotional exchanges and the sharing of experiences of overcoming great personal challenges (Mead, Hilton, & Curtis, 2001). Whilst there is a clear direction of support (there is a provider and receiver of support) the provider may also benefit from exchange because of the sense-making process involved in giving support and the natural requirement for self-reflection and experiential learning (Solomon, 2004). By providing support to others, individuals may reflect upon their own experiences and coping strategies. Mead et al. (2001) has argued that this can result in a sense-making process whereby effective self-regulation strategies are practiced and solidified. For these reasons, one can see how peer-support programs have emerged in prisons and how they could have a positive effect on both the recipients and providers of such support. Indeed, there is a need to develop interventions that address the well-documented problems associated with prisons, such as high rates of suicide and self-harm; increased levels of violence, drug taking, sexual assault, and bullying; and higher incidences of severe mental illness compared the general population (Dye, 2010).

There are many types of prison peer-support programs in the U.K. Such programs focus primarily on the areas of HIV/AIDS and health education, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual assault/offending, prison orientation, anti-bullying and anti-racism, and suicide/violence prevention (Devilly et al., 2005). In general, peer-support in prison encompasses a range of different structures and approaches including training, facilitation, counselling, modelling, and helping (Parkin & McKeganey, 2000). This chapter focuses on the most widely implemented peer-support programs in operation: the Listener scheme (Foster & Magee, 2011), the Insiders program (Boothby (2011), Toe-by-Toe (also known as the Shannon Trust program) (Shannon Trust, 2005a), and the RAPt (Rehabilitation of Addicted Persons Trust) mentoring program (Kopak et al., 2014).

*The Listener Scheme*

The Prison Service Headquarters established the Listener scheme in 1991 in collaboration with the Samaritans. The Samaritans operates a 24-hour, volunteer hotline across the U.K. and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) that aims to provide people with an outlet for their emotional distress. Given that prisoners would otherwise be unable to access such a service while confined, the Listener scheme was introduced to help tackle especially high rates of suicide in prisons. Via the Listener scheme, prisoners suffering distress, despair and suicidal ideation are able to talk face to face about their feelings without judgement and with utmost confidentiality. Prisoners who volunteer to become Listeners go through several weeks of training. This training covers the same modules as the community-based course and is delivered similarly, with adjustments made according to the context of prison and prison rules. Listeners receive a certificate upon completion of their training and they sign a contract that binds them to the same policies to which Samaritans working in the community also adhere.

The Listener team establishes a rota within each prison with the aim of providing a 24-hour service to any prisoner in need (referred to as a ‘caller’). Callers have two options to contact a Samaritans Listener: 1) they can use a Listener phone in the prison to call a Listener working in a community branch; or 2) they can request to speak to a prison Listener. The majority of prisons in the U.K. now have cordless phones that prisoners can access at any time of the day or night to call Samaritans. This phone is capable only of calling Samaritans branches, and the officers control the use of the phone. The callers in these circumstances are connected to community-based branches of Samaritans, and are able to speak to a Listener working in one of these branches. If a prisoner prefers to speak face-to-face to a prison Listener (they are still referred to as a caller), they can do this by speaking to an officer and requesting to meet with a Listener. In these circumstances, officers will use discretion to arrange the meeting in the most convenient and safest way possible. When feasible, face-to-face meetings are held in a private environment to allow complete confidentiality (either in a Listener suite if one is available, or in the caller’s cell if staff consider this safe). Prisoners either wishing to make a telephone call to a branch or speak to a prison Listener in person must approach prison staff first. Staff will then facilitate the process by providing a private space and the time to either contact a Listener by phone or speak to a prison Listener in person. Prison Listeners needing to debrief after a face-to-face meeting (referred to as a call), or needing confidential support, can ask to contact their supporting Samaritans branch by telephone privately (NOMS & MoJ, 2012). Community volunteers from supporting Samaritans branches attend Listener meetings every two weeks at their allocated prison(s) in order to provide emotional support for Listeners and to regulate the programs and address any emerging issues. The Listener scheme is currently the foremost peer-support program in prisons (Samaritans, 2012).

In addition to listening, members of the program also meet weekly to discuss issues relating to ‘caller care’ and the general running of the scheme. Furthermore, every prison Listener has a chance to coordinate the program, to be involved in the recruitment and training of new members, and to serve as a representative at safer custody meetings which address prisoners’ rights and safety issues (Foster & Magee, 2011). Prisoners are not paid for becoming Listeners, or for occupying other similar volunteer roles. However, employment in prison is categorised in bands, and each band is associated with different levels of privilege (that is, extra and improved visits, access to in-cell television, and the opportunity to wear one’s own clothes). Listeners and Insiders, discussed below, operate within the ‘red band’ and have the highest level of privileges (NOMS & MoJ, 2011).

*The Insiders Program*

Research has revealed that initial experiences for new prisoners are traumatic, with around 50 per cent of all prison suicides occurring within the first week of custody (Shaw, Baker, Hunt, Moloney, & Appleby, 2004). The Insiders program operates in prisons throughout the UK and aims to address this problem through reducing anxiety experienced during prisoners’ early days in custody. Much of this work involves preventing and addressing bullying issues, and Insiders often promote themselves as anti-bullying mentors. Volunteers also provide basic information and reassurance to new prisoners shortly after their arrival. Insiders are not an alternative to Listeners; they offer a different but complementary peer-support service. As such, it is crucial that Insiders and Listeners understand each other’s roles and are able to refer distressed individuals to each other. As with the Listener scheme, the Insiders program also involves the vetting and selection of prisoners (carried out by Safer Custody Departments in U.K. prisons) who then go through extensive training. Insiders are not bound by the same confidentiality procedures as Listeners and the Insiders program is directed more towards providing practical advice and support. In terms of the setup, the Insiders program works very similarly to the Listener scheme. Each volunteer not only fulfils a weekly shift commitment, but also has the opportunity to run different elements of the program, attend standardisation and continual improvement meetings, and represent the program at safer custody meetings. For such reasons, staff view Insiders, like Listeners, as holding positions of responsibility within the facility.

*Toe-by-Toe*

A 2008 Prison Reform Trust study found that 48 per cent of prisoners had a reading level at or below Level 1 (equivalent to a reading age of 14 to 15), and 65 per cent had a numeracy level at or below Level 1. Additionally, 67 per cent of all prisoners reported being unemployed at the time of imprisonment (Clark & Dugdale, 2008). There is no shortage of research that highlights the need for educational interventions in prison. Indeed, a broad body of research suggests that educated prisoners are less likely to return to prison (King, 2010; Kim & Clark, 2013; Vacca, 2004).

Toe-by-Toe is the leading program addressing literacy tutoring in prisons and began in 2000 at Her Majesty’s Prison (HMP) in Wandsworth. Whilst this program only operates in England and not all parts of the U.K., it is regulated by the Shannon Trust, a U.K.-wide charity. The charity’s vision is to help prisoners to better engage in their rehabilitation journeys by helping them to read. Once the Shannon Trust has helped to establish a Toe-by-Toe program within a prison, prisoners run the program, supervised and facilitated (in terms of resources, allocation of rooms, and so on) by prison staff via monthly meetings. The foundation of the program lies in a ‘buddy system’ through which older, fluent readers adopt mentor roles and coach lesser able students through a reading program.

In prisons, the Shannon Trust trains volunteer prisoners on a needs basis and equips them with the materials (principally a Toe-by-Toe manual) required to carry out the role. Trained mentors are allocated a small number of mentees, who they meet with for hourly sessions each week. During these sessions, mentees receive support to develop basic literacy skills, in a journey that aims to enhance the self-esteem of both the mentee and mentor (Trust, 2005). To the best of the researchers’ knowledge, there is currently no research on the Toe-by-Toe program. Furthermore, there is limited information concerning the scale of these programs across English prisons. Nevertheless, the Shannon Trust website reports that in 2005, Toe-by-Toe covered 95 per cent of English prisons, with 80 per cent of the programs in place considered active. The website also reports that at this time, 954 active mentors were working with mentees across English prisons.

*RAPt Mentors*

RAPt (Rehabilitation of Addicted Persons Trust) provides a range of services in prisons across England and Wales (it does not currently run throughout other parts of the U.K.) but is particularly well known for its drug and alcohol treatment programs. The RAPt Substance Dependence Treatment Program (SDTP) is a rolling, abstinence-based treatment program lasting between 16 and 22 weeks. This program is based on the Twelve Steps principles of AA and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and has been adjusted specifically for prisoners and offending populations. RAPt trains recovered prisoners (those who have completed the Twelve Steps program) to serve as mentors. These mentors provide support to recovering prisoners through advice, guidance, and effective modelling of pro-social recovery attitudes and behaviours.

**Peer-Support and Criminal Desistance**

Research in the area of prison peer-support has generally focussed on the recipients of the support, posing questions about the extent to which such support can alleviate the negative emotional impact of imprisonment. Many studies have found that peer-support programs are indeed effective in reducing stress and anxiety for those who utilize these services (see, for example, Boothby, 2011; Jaffe, 2012; Sirdifield, 2006).

Although research has principally focussed on the recipients of peer-support programs, some studies have found that such programs are also beneficial for the peer-supporters themselves. For example, such programs may increase peer-supporters’ insight into their own lives and empower them to change their offending behaviour and lifestyles (Keller, 1993; Maruna, 2001; Parkin & McKeganey, 2000; Sirdifield, 2006; Snow, 2002). Due to this process of self-reflection and the contribution that being a peer-support volunteer can have on the self-change process, some have argued that peer-support may assist with an offender’s desistance journey (see, for example, Jaffe, 2012; Perrin & Blagden, 2014). Although criminal desistance can be defined as the cessation of all criminal activity, a more sophisticated conceptualisation of crime desistance is that it is a non-linear process of change involving a blend of multiple internal and external factors. Thus, desistance is directly tied to the psychological mechanisms that drive changes in criminal behaviour patterns. In short, desistance appears to rest on the interactions between internal psychological mechanisms (for example, a constructive and positive self-identity) and external frameworks (social support and capital) (Serin & Lloyd, 2009).

Desistance researchers have also emphasized the need for individuals to address protective factors (goals that people can achieve) as well as risk factors (the offender’s criminogenic needs) (de Vries, Mann, Maruna, & Thornton, 2015). Being a peer-support volunteer may help to promote and maintain certain protective factors, such as traits or social factors that assist or enable desistance from offending (de Vries et al, 2015). Protective factors include positive self-identity and personal autonomy, sobriety, being believed in, hope, stable relationships, closeness to others, constructive social support networks, and receiving emotional support (de Vries et al, 2015; McNeill & Maruna, 2007).

There are several ways in which being a peer-support volunteer may help with the desistance process. Boothby (2011), for example, explored Insiders’ views of their roles. In this qualitative study, participants described elements of personal growth and increased self-confidence resulting from their work. Scholars have suggested that these outcomes represent a constructive resource that may assist offenders’ desistance processes by contributing to redemption scripts (a desire to give something back) (Blagden, Winder, Throne, & Gregson, 2011; Vaughan, 2007). Perrin and Blagden (2014) found that having a meaningful peer-support role in prison, enabled prisoners to “counter negative prison emotions,” gain perspective, and forge supportive relationships (p. 913). The ability to form and foster supportive relationships is crucially important to the desistance process. Involvement in a peer-support program could help prisoners foster such social relationships, help provide meaning and purpose for prisoners, and assist them in building a range of skills and attributes (for example, social skills) (Stevens, 2012). Being a peer-support volunteer is a trusted position and often involves social interaction with prison officers. Such interactions allow for an offender’s self-identity and personal change process to be validated. Vaughan (2007) has argued that change narratives require continuous validation. This validation provides desisting offenders with hope and belief when things become especially difficult. The reciprocal nature of interactions within peer-support roles (both between peer-supporter and mentee and peer-support and prison staff) can constitute a source of validation for prisoners. Whilst more research is needed in this area, the literature discussed here points to the relational properties in the ‘self-change’ process (Mead et al., 2001) and how peer-support roles might influence such dynamics.

In light of this available research, it appears that peer-support programs may represent an innovative approach in terms of offender rehabilitation. Traditionally, the offender rehabilitation framework views the offenders themselves as passive recipients of treatment (Devilly et al., 2005), with the offender being externally advised and coached through a professional’s proposed course of action. Some studies have found this approach to elicit frustration and resentment among the targets of the interventions (Perrin & Blagden, 2014), who feel they deserve to contribute towards their own process of change. This aligns with McHugh’s (2002, in Snow, 2002) assertion that offenders themselves represent an expert yet underused resource, capable of positively influencing their own desistance journey. This chapter will build on this idea by examining how peer-support roles can influence an offender’s experience of rehabilitation.

Although the overarching aims of peer-support programs are conceptually linked with protective factors, they are not directly linked with reducing reoffending. However, there is evidence to suggest that holding a peer-support role may help offenders build self-esteem and a sense of belonging. Thus, the protective elements of peer-support and their link with desistance are aligned with the good lives model (GLM) of rehabilitation. The GLM is a model of offender rehabilitation that builds on the traditional risk, need and responsivity approach (see Andrews & Bonta, 2006), and focuses more on offenders’ strengths rather than deficits. In the GLM, ‘goods’ are positive states or experiences that are obtained via legitimate means (Ward, Mann & Gannon, 2007). Destructive behaviours result when offenders are socially isolated, become frustrated with finding their place in society, and consequently rely on criminal behaviours as a social outlet. As such, the GLM centres on enabling the formerly incarcerated person to achieve ‘goods’ through pro-social activities and behaviours. When an offender is able to do this, he or she is more likely to see rewards such as a sense of autonomy, purpose, friendship, and excellence in work and play (Ward et al., 2007). In terms of rehabilitation, the GLM would assert that offenders should be afforded opportunities to attain meaningful primary goods through pro-social means (Ward et al., 2007). Peer-support roles, such as those under investigation here, may represent such opportunities. Nevertheless, few scholars have examined peer-support programs in the context of desistance, or their potential contribution to offender rehabilitation. Therefore, this chapter will highlight key findings from research that the authors conducted as part of a broad investigation into prison-based peer-support and desistance.

METHOD

**Setting and Participants**

This research took place in five adult male prisons in England, all varying in terms of risk category and size. Prisons in England and Wales are categorised based on the type of prisoners they hold, the type of crime they committed, the length of their sentence, the likelihood of their escape, and the potential danger to the public if escape were to happen. The four categories are A) escape from this category of prison would be considered highly dangerous to the public or national security; B) prisoners in this category do not require maximum security, but escape for such prisoners still needs to be very difficult; C) prisoners here cannot be trusted to reside in open conditions, but are considered unlikely to try to escape; D) open prison conditions in which prisoners are reasonably trusted not to try to escape. Table 5.1 contains key information relating to all of the prisons included in this study.

*Table 5.1. Summary of Research Sites*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Category / risk | Type | Operational capacity | Cell occupancy |
| C | Sex offender treatment facility | 841 | Mainly single, some double and multiple |
| C | Local | 770 | Single and double |
| C/D | Resettlement | 798 | Mainly double |
| D | Open | 581 | Single and double |
| Uncategorised | Young offenders institute (YOI) | 550 | Shared residential units |

The Governor at each research site and the National Research Committee regulated by the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) approved this study. The psychology departments within the prisons and occasionally the peer-support program coordinators facilitated recruitment and data collection. Resettlement staff nominated participants and subsequently, the researchers sent recruitment letters to nominees outlining the research and inviting them to participate. The researchers then sent letters to all active members of each program (92 potential volunteers in total) and a final sample of 17 responded stating that they were interested in participating. All refusal reasons related to clashes of appointments, treatment sessions, or education commitments. Eligibility requirements included six months or greater volunteer experience, current participation as a volunteer, and at least two years served in prison. These eligibility criteria assured that quality information concerning peer-support roles in prison could be generated. The researchers did not offer participants any benefits in exchange for their involvement and participation was purely voluntary. To minimise the risk of potential participants of coercion, we made each aware at all stages of the research (on the information sheet, at the first meeting regarding the subject area, when gaining consent, and before interviews began) that their participation was entirely voluntary. The written consent form reiterated the voluntary nature of the study.

Among the sample of 17, participants’ crimes were varied and time spent in prison ranged from two years and four months to over 27 years. Table 5.2 presents further demographic information, including age and sentence length.

*Table 5.2. Participant Information*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Pseudonym | Role | Age | Offence details | Sentence | Time served |
| 1 | Andy | Listener | 29 | Drug related | 6 years | 3 years 4 months |
| 2 | Kyle | Listener | 39 | Drug related | 5 years | 2 years 4 months |
| 3 | Steve | Listener | 52 | Drug related | IPP sentence | 6.5 years |
| 4 | Ben | Listener | 48 | Murder | Life (99 years) | 27 years 4 months |
| 5 | Cliff | Listener | 64 | Murder | Life (99 years) | 27 years 1 month |
| 6 | Jason | Listener | 28 | Violent | IPP sentence (recommended 5 years) | 4 years 3 months |
| 7 | Jason | Toe-by-Toe | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 8 | Charles | Toe-by-Toe | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 9 | Jamie | Toe-by-Toe | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 10 | Ash | Insider | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 11 | Charlie | Insider | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 12 | Stewart | Insider | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 13 | Simon | Insider | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 14 | Drew | Insider | W\* | Sexual | W\* | W\* |
| 15 | Harry | 12 Steps | 35 | Attempted robbery | W\* | W\* |
| 16 | Joel | 12 Steps | 52 | Murder | W\* | W\* |
| 17 | Victor | 12 Steps | 38 | Robbery | W\* | W\* |

\*W (withdrawn) NOTE: The lead researcher and the prison liaison officers at specific sites agreed that certain demographic information be omitted to ensure the protection of participants’ identities.

**Data Collection**

The lead researcher (and first author of this chapter) carried out all of the semi-structured interviews in private interview rooms at the prisons. These interviews were recorded using a password-protected digital Dictaphone and they lasted 62 minutes on average (range: 34 – 88). The interview schedule was divided into four sections and covered the following areas:

* Introductory questions – arrival into prison, initial perceptions of prison life, first encounters with peer-support programs.
* Views and attitudes regarding peer-support work – initial perceptions of peer-support programs, first involvement, motivations for volunteering.
* Impact of program involvement on the person – thoughts and feelings regarding peer-support role, exploration of how the role impacted on the individual and their experiences of imprisonment.
* Future – views of future in the context of the peer-support role, exploration of how this role has shaped thoughts about future self.

The lead author transcribed all of the data and engaged in discussions with the second author that helped to identify potential themes. The researcher also took some brief notes relating to emerging thoughts and ideas during the data collection period.

**Analytic Technique**

This study adopted Braun and Clark’s (2006) phenomenologically-oriented approach to thematic analysis. We selected this method of analysis as the sample size (n = 17) exceeded that recommended for studies taking a traditional phenomenological stance.

The goals of phenomenological enquiry are to generate a detailed perspective of personal lived experience, develop an understanding of the meaning of experience to participants, and explore how participants make sense of that experience. As such, phenomenologically-oriented analysis is particularly useful when examining experience which is of “existential import to the participant” (Smith, 2011, p. 9). This strand of analysis necessitates the detailed analytic attention of each transcript and the search for emerging patterns across all transcripts. It requires a rigorous qualitative analysis of rich personal accounts.

Initially, notes relating to interesting thoughts and ideas were made in the left hand margin of the transcripts. The next level of analysis involved focussing on more psychologically-based concepts and turning initial thoughts and ideas into more specific phrases or labels. The aim here was to generate a summary of the data, in the form of a broad range of labels and phrases relating to key concepts. Finally, we carried out a data reduction strategy whereby emerging concepts were redefined and categorised under superordinate and subordinate themes. Superordinate themes represented particular phenomena evident within the data set through analogies, metaphors, or free discourse (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Subthemes were clustered and assigned to superordinate themes based on how participants’ expressions interweaved with other subthemes, and how they shaped their parent (superordinate) themes. This entire process was repeated for all transcripts, with equal attention dedicated to each. Of course, as qualitative researchers, we remained vigilant of the possibility of blurring the boundaries between the participant’s account and our own interpretations (Smith, 2011). In order to ensure quality in this regard, we both read through a sample of transcripts independently and made separate notes regarding emerging themes. These notes were contrasted against each other and disputes resolved through conversation and re-examination of the findings.

FINDINGS

Following transcript coding and analysis, we identified two superordinate themes, each comprised of three subordinate themes. These themes are presented in Table 5.3.

*Table 5.3. Summary of Themes*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Superordinate Themes | Subordinate Themes |
| Change and Transition | New Me  Earning Trust  Giving Back and Making Meaning |
| Keeping Sane | Acquiring a Stake in Conformity  Addressing Personal Trauma  Channelling |

**Change and Transition**

The analysis illuminated various ways in which the participants had changed during imprisonment. These changes appeared to be directly related to the peer-support roles in that carrying out such a role acted as a form of validation that change had occurred. As such, ‘change and transition’ seemed most appropriate as a label encompassing the subordinate themes in this section.

*New Me*

The first of these subordinate themes is ‘new me’. In outlining some of the internal changes that participants experienced, they often made comparisons between their past and new lives. Participants’ recognition of past lives and a subsequent process of change allowed them to reflect on their ‘old me’ and differentiate the ‘new me’. Research has emphasized the importance of these types of narratives (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005), and has argued that offenders who experience qualitative shifts in their attitudes towards themselves are more likely to commit to pro-social “possible selves” (Stein, Roeser, & Markus, 1998, p. 102). Participants consistently described their old offending selves as ‘bad’, ‘destructive’ or ‘hindering’ and their new selves in terms such as ‘good’, ‘calm’, and ‘positive’. In this sense, peer-support roles, appeared to have a transformative effect on enhancing positive views of the self. The following interview with a Listener illustrates this theme:

Interviewer: What does it mean to you to be a Samaritan Listener?

Steve: If you’re out through life causing destruction and distress to people and yourself, you can quite quickly fill your bank up with negative ways of thinking and negative thoughts…. It’s like having a big tub of dirty water, that’s negative. And then someone gives you a positive drip, and eventually, with more drips, the water gets less murky, overflows, and then it’s just nice and clean. That’s what happens basically. It’s learning to accept that positive.

Interviewer: So Samaritans was a big drip?

Steve: I believe so yeah. Steve (Listener)

In this extract, Steve conceptualises his old self as a tub of dirty water, full of negativity. Over time, he has learned to accept help and support and has undertaken a range of courses within the prison, which he tags as ‘drips’ of positivity. Everything he has learned as he has completed his sentence has diluted the negativity in his life. He talks about his experience as a Listener as being very influential, and it appeared throughout his interview that listening may have assisted the beginning of his movement towards his ‘new me.’ Crucially, the positive drips in Steve’s life have also allowed him to reflect on the negative behaviours associated with his old ways. In this sense, ‘being’ a listener has allowed for a momentum of change (Göbbels, Ward, & Willis, 2012) in that he is learning to accept a positive view of himself through purposeful activity. For Steve, listening appears to catalyse self-evaluation and promote profound personal realisations.

Steve’s role may also represent a turning point, or at the very least an influential factor in his experience of transformation. In this respect, although offenders may be motivated to change before becoming peer-support volunteers, such roles seem to provide the perfect environment for change to actually happen. Steve’s analogy of the tub of dirty water gathering drips illuminates this point well; he is allowing many positive influences into his world and this is enabling him to re-story that world. Other participants echoed a similar viewpoint. Kyle, a listener, stated:

I was more ignorant before. I mean, judgemental. ‘Don’t wanna talk to him, don’t need to know him’ … that kinda attitude. That’s all I knew for so many years so there was nothing I could really do about it. When I did eventually learn something else being a Listener, it had a big impact. Just on general day-to-day life, like, how I deal with people from how I would before. Even some of my mates, ‘pftt, that’s not the same guy.’ I’m a good boy now…. I don’t do the things I used to do. Listening calms you down as a person, ‘cos you realise, that person here’s going through this and he’s going through that…. When you listen to people it’s different. You really help without actually doing anything. Just listening, it’s empowering. Kyle (Listener)

Kyle here distinguishes between his old and new attitudes. Ignorance and resistance were all he knew, and sensing limited opportunity to change, he was unable to break loose. Being a Listener prompted Kyle to reflect on his ‘self’ and he has found reward in the new way in which he’s able to deal with people. Interestingly, Kyle comments on how he’s ‘a good boy now.’ This self-construal of being “a good boy” represents a narrative shift from “bad boy, who does bad things,” to a “good boy capable of doing good things and making amends.” Such narratives are important as they allows offenders to portray ‘good selves’ and assert that the person who offended is not really who they are, such shifts in narratives have been associated with redemptive episodes and personal change (Maruna, 2001; Presser & Kurth, 2009).

Participants also appeared to be very connected to their peer-support roles. Crucially, the requirements associated with these roles encourage the individual to form a new, law-abiding life in prison. Whilst behaviours and realisations that emerge in prison are not forced to travel through the gate with offenders, the analysis revealed a strong suggestion that the participants were able to practice pro-social behaviours via their peer-support roles in prison. Hence, Kyle doesn’t ‘do the things he used to do.’ These movements towards a changed self-identity offer some hope for reintegrating offenders, who may be galvanised by their peer-support roles to implement the necessary controls to lead law abiding lives on the outside.

*Earning Trust*

Participants emphasized the importance of earning the trust of staff in the prison. Indeed, researchers have discussed how earning trust in the context of prison can prompt positive change in offenders and feed into their narratives of desistance (Blagden, Winder, & Hames, 2014; Vaughan, 2007). The quotations listed within this subordinate theme illustrate how important it was for participants to build trust and in doing so, to nourish their transitioning selves. Stewart, an Insider explained:

You kind of get a bit of rapport with the staff, because when the staff see that you can do a job and you can do a job well … you then … kinda get a bit of trust with them – they trust you to deal with things … so the way some wings work … you’re not allowed to go to other landings and stuff like that … so if you’ve got a rapport with them and you’re doing your job correctly and efficiently … they’ll allow you to go onto the other wings, or to the other landings … and talk to people who’ve come on if they’ve got any issues and help … so it’s about kind of building up that trust with them so they can see you can do a job, you’re not messing them around and not swapping things or dealing stuff or whatever … it’s about taking it seriously. Stewart (Insider)

Here, Stewart discusses how his role as an Insider has enabled him to build rapport with staff members in the prison and gain trust and freedom. What he is describing is akin to a cycle of positive behaviour, reinforcement, and continued positive behaviour. It is in Stewart’s best interests to behave well within his role and to follow prison rules, as he is rewarded for doing so by earning trust and some freedom. As such, peer-support roles in this context appears to create an environment whereby prisoners can actually ‘do’ trust (not just feel trusted) and enact ‘good’ and ‘moral’ selves. Receiving trust, appraisals and validation from others in a prison context can inspire positive change toward desistance (Göbbels, Ward, & Willis, 2012). Jamie, a Toe-by-Toe volunteer, illustrates this idea in the quote below:

You get a bit more trust. And I think … looking at it where you get that trust level that shows that you are improving yourself. You are still treated as if you’re a prisoner but you get that slight better respect and you get that much better rapport with the officers and the staff … it makes you feel a bit like a human still. Again it’s all about that rehabilitation, I am a strong believer in that if you’re treated poorly by officers or staff then you can’t really be rehabilitated. Jamie (TBT)

Jamie’s extract suggests that earning trust and some recognition for ‘doing good’ equates to a form of validation that he is ‘improving himself.’ Jamie inadvertently describes a process of self-assurance, via which he does good things, earns trust and recognition, and consequently lives up to his objective to change. All of this makes Jamie feel more human, and while he is not looking to log favours, this process of doing good and receiving appraisals appears to be giving him hope that he is changing for the better. There is a body of literature within the realm of desistance that encourages this kind of process. For example, the enhanced expectation and trust in Jamie appears akin to the Pygmalion effect (high expectation equals high outcome) that Maruna, LeBel, Naples, & Mitchell (2009) describe. Peer-support role holders seem to become recognised as good people, and this seems to have a self-fulfilling effect.

*Giving Back and Making Meaning*

Along with the establishment of ‘new selves’ and positive self-images, participants also evidenced a desire to give back in some way. In exploring criminal desistance, Maruna (2001) posits that offenders who are going straight construct a redemption script. This script is typified by a desire to ‘give something back’ and an acceptance that although they cannot change the past, they can contribute positively in the future. These redemptions scripts are also linked to successful community reintegration (Marsh, 2011). Across all of the interviews, participants provided descriptions of how they thought they had given something back through their peer support roles. These thoughts provided them with deep satisfaction, as evidenced in the two excerpts below:

You could see someone was upset or whatever, and after you speak to them they’ve perked up a bit … they start relaxing a bit and they say ‘yeah, I’m ready to go back out to the prison’ … and when you see it happen it makes you feel good because you’ve done something good and given something back. I’m not saying it makes up for the crime you’ve committed, but you are giving something back and you’re turning something into a positive. Even if it’s just for that hour or that day, you know you’ve tried. Andy (Listener)

I would be extremely gutted if I lost it (the Insider role). I’m very proud to be an Insider and to help other people…. I feel it’s a role which I should be doing, with the experiences I’ve got of prison life … and I see it as putting something back into the prison. It’s about being human in a sense … and about being a normal person, not the criminal aspect of ‘oh it’s always take, take’ … but actually to be a real human on the outside. And it’s something which this program does … it allows me to give something back into the prison system. Even if that’s just mentoring somebody who’s come on to the wing and going and having a chat with them … that in some instances can mean all the difference to that person … so this role allows me to be able to do that on a sort of legitimate basis … Obviously if you try and do it out of that … then all questions can be asked as to what you doing in there and things like that … so it’s just more, a legitimate way of being able to help somebody. Stewart (Insider)

A key theme in this analysis was that peer-support roles provided meaning and purpose in prison, and this seemed to come as a by-product of ‘giving back’ and ‘earning trust’. In 2010, the Prison Reform Trust asserted that: “prisons should not allow offenders to simply mark their time in a purposeless fashion. Rather, prisons should be seen as places where prisoners are engaged in challenging and meaningful work” (Edgar, Jacobson, & Biggar, 2011, p. 5). Peer-support roles certainly appeared to help prisoners establish meaning and build purposeful lives in prison. This appears complimentary with the principles of the GLM, which is influenced by self-determination theory, and which asserts that humans naturally seek autonomy and connectedness, and have an intrinsic desire to effect the environment around them, not just exist within it. When these needs are not met, individuals construct illegitimate substitute strategies. However, when these needs are met, individuals become motivated to reflect and realise change (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Through peer-support roles, participants were able to generate meaning and purpose. More than that, though, participants were pointing to the benefits of ‘owning their own rehabilitation.’ The following extracts highlight how participants moulded themselves important roles and gained a feeling of being needed:

I’ve got more experience and understanding of some of the stuff than some of the guys, so I’ll give my feedback and that’s what I’m here for, just try and give a bit of constructive feedback as well, try and build them up a little bit. So I’m just there to give a bit of feedback, and offer them a bit of hope as well. That’s part of my job. Victor (Twelve Steps)

These people have spilled their heart out to you. And you’ve got that, in a little box, just there, never to be revealed. So he’s put his life (pause)…. He’s took everything and he’s put it in this basket here (hand gestures a box and passes the box to the researcher). “Please look after it” (whispers). That’s what it’s like. Like, don’t let no one see it. You’ve gotta protect that. Kyle (Listener)

**Keeping Sane**

This superordinate theme relates to avoiding the negativity traditionally associated with imprisonment (Dye, 2010). The subordinate themes here can be viewed as strategies that participants use to distance themselves from the stresses and strains of imprisonment. As noted previously, involvement in constructive and positive activities provided the impetus and tangible opportunities for participants to construct desirable new selves (Perrin & Blagden, 2014). Furthermore, the mechanisms underlying these subthemes also appeared to help the participants address personal issues that may have been previously unaddressed. Via peer-support roles, volunteers seemed able to create space in which to experience personal growth and a sense of inner peace and calm through times of adversity.

*Acquiring a Stake in Conformity*

This subtheme categorises extracts relating to how participants perceived their peer-support roles as valuable and as something they did not want ‘to lose’. Laub & Sampson (2001) have neatly tagged these types of processes as striving to ‘acquire a stake in conformity’ – a legitimate social bond via which individuals can satisfy basic human needs. In these narratives, participants were clearly investing in legitimate and normative behaviours via their roles and indirectly making sure they didn’t ‘slip up’. Having this focal point appeared important for participants, who were able to carve out some satisfaction from their roles and thus maintain a level of wellbeing in prison. Stewart, an Insider, explained:

I wouldn’t have met the people I have … so … the other Insiders … I wouldn’t have known them like I do … the safer custody department. I wouldn’t have known them … as well as kind of higher ranking, if you like, governors and that when I go to the meetings … I know all the governors and they kind of know me … and, whenever I see them in the corridor they’ll ask me how I am … so to have that kind of rapport in the place is in some ways beneficial … not something to be abused … but to kind of be proud that I’m in that kind of position. Stewart (Insider)

In this extract, Stewart discusses how his volunteer role has enabled him to forge positive relationships with staff. He takes pride in the fact that he knows everyone, and they know him, even the higher-ranking staff (governors). Stewart enjoys his status as an Insider, which appears to give him a feeling of being appreciated. He values his role so much that he would never do anything to compromise his position, which he respects as ‘not to be abused’. Stewart’s narrative, in which he describes how he has something good to potentially lose, perfectly exemplifies this theme. Many participants viewed their roles in the same way – they respected their privileged position as peer-support role holders and this appeared to be influential in keeping them moving forward.

*Addressing Personal Trauma*

Another subtheme in this category was the notion that helping others (listening, teaching, supporting emotionally) could elicit realisations about personal challenges and past difficulties. Through supporting others, many participants seemed to be double sense-making, that is – they were assisting people with their specific issues whilst also reflecting on the difficulties and personal traumas they had experienced in the past. This experience was a prominent feature in the data and appeared to contribute to many powerful realisations: The following quotes from Gary and Drew illustrate this theme:

I was on constant watch every four minutes, I was that low … I’d hit rock bottom, I didn’t know where to turn to or who to talk to…. I was on A1 or A2 [wings] … and then they moved me on here and I just didn’t know what was happening I felt like I’d been punished, guilt … everything … and I just didn’t’ know where to turn to, who to speak to at the time and…. I think you know, with the Listeners … and the staff … I don’t think I’d be here today if I didn’t get the help and support and so … that’s why I decided I wanted to become a Listener, once I knew I was ready. Gary (Listener)

I thought, ‘well I’ve been through that experience,’ and I know it wasn’t very nice and I managed to come through it and I managed to keep stable … so I’m using my experiences and the way I’ve dealt with it to try and pass it on and to help somebody else. So yeah … I think it makes you a stronger person too. Erm, you know ’cos obviously I had to deal with my own personal problems and if I’ve helped somebody who’s had a similar problem and it’s worked for them then I can take what I’ve used on them for myself and learn from that as well. You sort of realise what sort of person you actually was and where you are today and where you wanna be tomorrow. Drew (Insider)

*Channelling*

This theme refers to the notion that peer-support roles kept prisoners focused on constructive and legitimate activities. The nature of imprisonment, often characterised by loss of liberty, deprivation, and a range of antagonistic conditions (Dye, 2010) cannot only cause despair but can also result in destructive behaviours. Indeed, a vast body of research cites the volatility of the prison environment and the heightened presence of social issues such as gang violence, drug use, violent and sexual abuse, bullying, and discrimination (Carpentier, Royuela, Noor, & Hedrich, 2012; Fleisher & Decker, 2001). Prisoners overwhelmed by such conditions often re-offend due to this negative socialization (Cullen, Jonson, & Nagin, 2011). In this study, participants spoke of a protective element associated with their peer-support roles; their work prevented went some way to inoculating them against to the destructive forces and pains of imprisonment:

I suppose there’s the possibility that I would’ve been in a lot of trouble … because the Shannon Trust has given me the opportunity to seize the amount of patience I have … and for me to recognise that that actually affects everything I do … without that … I’d be an impatient bugger … you know … if I asked a member of staff for something and I didn’t get it straight away then … I would tend to lose my rag … you know. Charles (Toe-by-Toe)

Here Charles recognises that he may well have found himself getting ‘into a lot of trouble’ had he not been able to ‘seize’ positive traits via his mentoring role. He goes on to identify that an inclination towards impatience could have led him astray, and that his Shannon Trust role occupied the space where destructive traits might have otherwise prevailed. Through this role, Charles is actively addressing a behaviour that he has recognised as harmful. Charles is able to let trivial annoyances pass by and avoid getting into trouble. For many participants, this investment in peer-support roles kept them focussed and enabled them to harness constructive traits and skills as the quote below shows. This apparent feature of peer-support roles is once again reminiscent of the GLM and again further emphasizes how being involved as a peer-support volunteer may act protectively, in that positive behaviours that may exist, but lay dormant, are unearthed via engagement in pro-social activities (Ward et al., 2007).

To be able to sort them out, get them through that it’s just enjoyment really, for me, at least I’ve done something good for that day … which is what we need to do … it makes you feel good, it just raises you up, your sense of responsibility and your sense of awareness around you which is what we need to do. So I find it gets you through the day, otherwise you’re just gonna be bored out your head all day … and obviously that can lead onto something else so being able to do something, be involved erm you know no matter how small it is … (stutters) … it is a good feeling. Drew (Insider)

In this extract, Drew echoed Charles’ experience of peer-support roles as protective, but also introduced the idea of peer-support roles raising awareness and increasing a sense of responsibility. Again, it appears that having such a meaningful role places individuals in the present moment and enables them to stake stock of their situation and surroundings. This type of focus not only gets prisoners ‘through the day,’ it also prevents boredom and ‘something else’ from happening.

Summary, implications, and trajectory

Using the GLM as a guiding model, this research aimed to generate a phenomenological understanding of how prison peer-support volunteers experience their roles in the context of imprisonment. Participants from four different peer-support programs described their experiences in very positive terms, and appeared to be having deep realisations and life changing revelations through their work. In addition to cultivating constructive relationships with prison staff and other prisoners, enjoying personal growth from ‘doing good,’ honing positive skills, and keeping busy, participants were also able to have a more generally positive experience of prison life because of their volunteer roles. This experience was a product of meaning making, positivity gathering, and the avoidance of negative labels and destructive stigma. All of these benefits appeared to protect participants against the negativity associated with imprisonment, and enable them to serve their sentences more constructively than if these opportunities were not present. As such, this study supports prior research suggesting that peer-support in prisons goes beyond basic peer to peer helping and actively assists the process of offender rehabilitation (see for example, Davies, 1994; Boothby, 2011; Perrin & Blagden, 2014).

There was an interlocking nature to the subordinate themes discussed in the analysis. ‘Earning trust,’ for example, appeared to result from participants channelling their energies into something positive, and in turn generating more and more positivity and a sense of belonging. This acquisition of positivity and enhanced self-esteem placed participants into a position where they were able to focus on doing good deeds and occupying positive roles in prison, and this in turn appeared to drive their experiences of transition and change.

Furthermore, participants were able to carve out meaningful and purposeful roles for themselves, through which they could feel autonomous, independent, and more human. There are clear links to the GLM here, and it appears that being involved in peer-support roles could encourage desistance in this context. This places this area of research in front of broader questions about prisons as institutions of wellbeing. Helliwell (2011), for example, argued that prisons are generally constructed as “schools for criminals rather than creators of wellbeing” (p255). This author draws on Singaporean prison reforms, which have led to the re-conceptualisation of prisons as ‘schools for life,’ which emphasize the importance of prisoner wellbeing, social context, benevolence, trust, building positive outcomes, and top-to-bottom engagement in a shared purpose. These factors underpin and best fit the interview data in this study. Whilst Helliwell’s research is not seamlessly transferable to peer-support, it offers an insight into the possible future of peer-support in prisons.

Indeed, the participants unanimously spoke about ways in which they managed to cope with the strains of imprisonment and this seemed connected with improving general wellbeing. The meaningful and purposeful roles that participants developed through their peer-support roles significantly helped to counter negative prison emotions and experiences. Participants were coping and developing via their roles as well as accumulating positivity and ‘meaningful goods’ (Ward et al., 2007). Participants’ narratives were akin to those discussed more broadly in the desistance literature in that they focused on meaningful personal change, and qualitative shifts in identity towards more pro-social and positive self-images. Indeed, being involved and invested in peer-support roles allowed for momentums of change and the development of new selves. This is vitally important as LeBel Burnett, Maruna, and Bushway (2008) found that self-identification and positive self-image were significant predictors of post-prison outcomes. In contrast, feelings of stigmatisation predicted recidivism. It may be that peer-support roles are a positive “drip” in the self-change process (Perrin & Blagden, 2014, p. 916).

A fundamental aspect of the desistance literature, and in line with the GLM, is that desistance is about discovering agency. Interventions thus need to encourage and respect self-determination (McCulloch, 2005). Peer-support roles, at least in this study, allowed for personal agency, as this is something participants wanted to do and be a part of, not something they had to confirm to in order to meet institutional demands. It appears that peer-support deserves a space for discussion in the ever-growing research field of desistance. Furthermore, current penal policy objectives align with what peer-support roles appear to offer to volunteers. For example, a 2011 Ministry of Justice policy document identified that providing purposeful activity was a key aim in order to improve rehabilitation, and meaningful prison work is now ingrained in political narrative concerning prisons. In line with these propositions, this study asks for peer-support schemes across the U.K. prisons to be acknowledged on a wider academic and political scale.

This current research adds, albeit incrementally, to existing understandings of how personal and institutional change can occur vis-à-vis peer support roles. Such programs appear to have a positive impact in terms of prisoners’ views of themselves, their experiences of prison, and their perceptions of life beyond prison. Many respondents made an explicit connection between their peer-support role and reduced offending and all participants expressed a strong desire to become better people and reintegrate successfully after serving time. Whilst this study cannot claim that peer-support roles might reduce reoffending, it has been argued that such roles can assist desistance by enabling individuals to develop better images of themselves, to help prisoners obtain basic human needs, and to prevent prisoners from becoming ‘institutionalised’ or consumed by harmful labels. Ultimately, peer-support roles offer prisoners a chance to ‘re-story’ their lives. Nevertheless, there still exists a gap in knowledge regarding the relationship between positive roles in prison and the impact on reoffending, and further research should begin to unpack this interaction.

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ENDNOTES

Recommended further reading

For a holistic insight into the Insiders program and Insiders’ early views of their work:

Boothby, M. (2011). Insiders' views of their role: Toward their training. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice, 53*(4), 424-448.

For a general overview of peer-support models and the structures of peer-support programs in prison contexts:

Devilly, G. J., Sorbello, L., Eccleston, L., & Ward, T. (2005). Prison-based peer-education programmes. *Aggression and Violent Behaviour, 10*(2), 219-240.

For an in-depth understanding of how peer-support roles (specifically Listener roles) can feed into offenders’ experiences of desistance:

Perrin, C., & Blagden, N. (2014). Accumulating meaning, purpose and opportunities to change ‘drip by drip’: the impact of being a Listener in prison. *Psychology, Crime & Law, 20*(9), 902-920.