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Moving forwards: Using creative methods for people in prison with care experience

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Introduction

Prisons in England and Wales hold some of society's most vulnerable people who often come from and return to the poorest or most socially excluded sections of society,¹ exhibiting complex and challenging needs arising from chaotic and troubled lives. Highlighting this is the fact that those who enter prison are disproportionately likely to be addicted to substances, have mental health problems and histories of abuse and to have been in care.² This final point is of key importance to this article and is emphasised via the disproportionate representation of people in prison who have been in care at some point.³ While experience in care is not always negative, it is common for people to experience trauma, abuse and neglect, as well as feelings of rejection, disempowerment and abandonment.⁴ This can be further compounded after their release from prison because they often do not have a secure family base to return to and lack wider support networks.⁵ Support is available to care leavers both in prison and afterwards, however it tends to be fragmented, with multiple systems and sectors involved; primarily the criminal justice and children's social care systems, but also health, education, employment, housing and the voluntary sector.⁶

To access these limited services, individuals are often expected to be forthright in acknowledging their experience of care. However, in reality and across the life course, people are commonly unwilling or find it difficult to disclose or meaningfully discuss such experiences.⁷ This can have far reaching consequences for imprisoned people, including preventing them from processing their past or gaining an understanding about their behaviours and choices. It can also hinder the development of skills such as self-reflection and awareness, both of which are central to the formation of a 'non-criminal' identity.⁸

Given that people in prison often keep their care experience hidden, it is important to explore different and innovative ways of encouraging discussion about it. As such, in this article we argue that arts-based creative methods such as theatre/drama and visual methods such as participatory photography, could be used as powerful tools to encourage these important discussions to take place. From the disciplines of Criminology, Health Promotion and Public Health, both authors have experience of using these methods in a variety of settings such as schools and youth centres, prisons and residential care homes for children and young people and have seen personally the positive and powerful impact that they can have on those involved. These experiences are discussed throughout via two reflective case studies: the first looking at Forum

1. Ministry of Justice (2019) *Population bulletin weekly 27 September 2019* [online] [Accessed on 18/5/21] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/prison-population-figures-2019>
2. Fitzpatrick, C. and Williams, P.K. (2017) 'The neglected needs of care leavers in the criminal justice system: Practitioners' perspectives and the persistence of problem (corporate) parenting', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 17(2), pp 175–191
3. Prison Reform Trust (2021) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile*. Winter 2021. Prison Reform Trust: London
4. Rogers, J (2011) 'I remember thinking, why isn't there someone to help me? Why isn't there someone who can help me make sense of what I'm going through?': 'Instant adulthood' and the transition of young people out of state care'. *Journal of Sociology*, 47(4): pp 411–426
5. Shaw, J. (2014) 'Why Do Young People Offend in Children's Homes? Research, Theory and Practice'. *British Journal of Social Work*, 44(7), pp 1823–1839
6. Fitzpatrick, C. and Williams, P.K. (2017) 'The neglected needs of care leavers in the criminal justice system: Practitioners' perspectives and the persistence of problem (corporate) parenting', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, 17(2), pp 175–191
7. Ibid
8. Rogers, J. (2011) 'I remember thinking, why isn't there someone to help me? Why isn't there someone who can help me make sense of what I'm going through?': 'Instant adulthood' and the transition of young people out of state care'. *Journal of Sociology*, 47(4), pp 411–426
7. For discussion around this see for example, Dansey, D. Shbero, D. and John, M. (2019) 'Keeping Secrets: How children in foster care manage stigma'. *Adoption and Fostering*, 43(1), pp 33–43

Theatre and the second, participatory photography. The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the creative ways that practitioners and researchers can seek to overcome the boundaries that people in prison often erect around their life experiences specifically in relation to having been in care, and to create safe spaces within the prison environment where they can explore these experiences authentically.

Why are arts-based creative methods important?

For many years arts-based programmes and creative methods have been used as vehicles for positive change with vulnerable populations such as people in prison. It is widely known that these techniques can be used to encourage the development of an array of skills which include building confidence, self-esteem and emotional resilience, developing and improving communication self-awareness and opportunities for self-expression, relationship building and impulse control⁹. In addition, arts-based creative methods can have a positive impact on how social issues are understood, creating vital spaces for reasoned debate and helping to build democracies to overcome fear and suspicion.¹⁰ This is highlighted by the Arts Alliance, a national network that supports the arts in criminal justice settings, which maintains that 'the arts produce exactly the skills and the common humanity that offenders need if they are to be rehabilitated backed into our communities'.¹¹ Theatre/drama is the most commonly utilised art form in prison settings¹² and as such, there

is a growing body of academic literature which acknowledges the powerful impact that it can have on prison-based participants¹³. This is illustrated by Heritage¹⁴ who states that 'theatre in prison can be a powerful place to... reinvent the present and to imagine a new future'.

A Case Study Evaluating Forum Theatre in Semi-Secure Children's Care Homes and Prisons

This case study is oriented around the use of a drama based technique called Forum Theatre, and draws on findings from a research project which evaluated the use of a Forum Theatre based programme in settings such as semi-secure children's care homes and prisons¹⁵. Forum Theatre was created by the Brazilian theatre maker and political activist, Augusto Boal, in 1971. It is based around the idea of working with participants to stage real life situations which then create new opportunities for discussion that explores and challenges negative behaviour/experiences that are shared by the group. Sessions work towards a performance, where the audience act as 'spect-actors' and have the opportunity to interrupt the show to suggest alternative behaviours that they or the participants then act out on stage.^{16,17} This technique has been incorporated into theatre programmes in custody on a global scale¹⁸. Despite variations in the format of such programmes, it has been found that:

'In most [Forum Theatre]... prison projects the final forum play has been developed by a long

8. Bottoms, A. Shapland, J. Costello, A. Holmes, D. and Muir, G. (2004) 'Towards Desistance: Theoretical Underpinnings for an Empirical Study'. *The Howard Journal*, 43(4): pp 368–89.
- Keehan, B. (2015) 'Theatre, prison & rehabilitation: new narratives of purpose?', *The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*. 20(3), pp 391–394
9. Maruna, S. and LeBel, T. (2003) 'Welcome Home? Examining the "Re-Entry Court" Concept from a Strengths-Based Perspective'. *Western Criminology Review*, 4(2), pp 91–107
- Hughes, J. (2005) *Doing the Arts Justice: A Review of Research Literature, Theory and Practice*. Canterbury: The Unit for Arts and Offenders
10. Kara, H. (2020) *Creative Research Methods. A practical guide (Second Edition)*. Bristol: Policy Press
- Slutskaya, N., Simpson, A and Hughes, J. (2012) 'Lessons from photoelicitation: encouraging working men to speak'. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 7(1), pp 16–33
11. The Arts Alliance (2011:2) *What Really Works? Arts with Offenders* [online] [Accessed on 18th May 2021] Available at: https://www.artsincriminaljustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/ArtsAlliance_brochure_FINAL_SECURE.pdf
12. Ibid
13. Thompson, J. (1998) 'introduction', in, Thompson, J. (ed) *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Balfour, M. (2004) 'Introduction', in, Balfour, M. (ed) *Theatre in Prison: Theory and Practice*, Bristol: Intellect Books
14. Heritage, P. (1998) 'Theatre, Prisons and Citizenship: A South American Way', in, Thompson, J. (ed) *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
15. For further information, see Froggett, L., Manley, J. and Kelly, L. (2018) *Creative Leadership and Forum Theatre: an evaluation report for Odd Arts*. Preston University of Central Lancashire Research Repository Available at: <http://clok.uclan.ac.uk/21735/1/Creative%20Leadership%20Project%2C%20Final%20Evaluation%20Report%20o10218.pdf>
16. Boal, A. (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, London: Pluto Press
- Froggett, L. Kelly-Corless, L. and Manley, J. (2019) 'Feeling real and rehearsal for reality: psychosocial aspects of 'forum theatre' in care settings and prisons'. *The Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 1(1), pp 23–39
17. The ethos of Boal's ideas is encapsulated here by Cardboard Citizens (N.D), a UK-based theatre company which utilises his methods; "It is a school of theatre-making... which offers theatre as a tool for liberation and empowerment to people in all stations of life in all parts of the world – a means of using theatre as a way of better understanding ourselves and how we fit into the worlds around us – and, most importantly, how we might consequently change those worlds. It is a concrete embodiment of the arts as a real instrument for social and political change" (Cardboard Citizens (No date) 'Our Story', [online] [Accessed on 24th April 2018] Available at: <https://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk/our-story>)
18. For further discussions on this, see Thompson, J. (2000) 'Critical citizenship: Boal, Brazil and Theatre in Prisons', *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*. 2, pp 181–191

*process of discussing personal experiences of the participants, then projecting these onto a fictitious protagonist character (thereby it becomes easier to talk indirectly about oneself) and then finally acting it out. Eventually the play is the result of everyone's story and ideas combined. In the safe space of theatre participants often dare to express their genuine feelings and thoughts more openly'*¹⁹

These programmes have been shown to enable incarcerated people to reflect on their lives and their behaviours at a deeper level than they otherwise would, and to develop a greater appreciation of the opinions and feelings of others. This is highlighted by Hughes²⁰ who, in the context of one Forum Theatre based programme states:

'The workshop can be a powerful tool assisting individuals in looking at their lives... and devising and testing for themselves potentially more positive ways of responding to those pressures. It can provoke honest, personal and profound discussions with offenders around a variety of issues. Working with a fictional character created by the group makes the focus of the workshop both representative of the group's experience and distanced enough to function as a safe context through which to discuss personal issues'

As such, although other drama/theatre techniques have been widely shown to act as vehicles for personal growth, it is argued here that Forum Theatre could be particularly effective at encouraging discussion around and disclosure of care experience. Throughout the research around which this case study is based, it was found that Forum Theatre can provide a 'third space' for participants²¹; a place where they are able to incorporate their own biographies into a performance without specifically being asked to do so, or often even

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realising that this is what they are doing. Evidence of this was shown clearly in an instance where the programme was being run at a care home designed as an alternative to custody for young people who had been involved in serious gang related offences. When the workshops began, the participants appeared disruptive, uninterested, unwilling to engage and a little disrespectful. There were a number of instances when individuals refused to participate, and either walked out of the room or sat in silence. However, this changed drastically as the programme progressed, and while it was not without its problems, the use of Forum Theatre in this context was transformative and engendered much personal revelation. During an activity where the participants were asked to create the main character for their performance with the facilitators, the following discussion ensued:

'Shane was very influential with coming up with ideas for how the scenes would work — Very serious. His ideas were prompted with questions from the facilitators ['He does it a few times [drug deals for Reece his brother] and then gets caught, and cautioned'; Facilitator 'Does he go back to it after this'; Aaron and Shane in unison 'Yes']. This is clearly set on the trajectory of their lives — The tone of this part of the session is very deep and thoughtful. Facilitator; 'Do things

*change with his mum?', Shane; 'He's more distant with mum, who doesn't initially know what is going on. But then she gets a call from school, and throws Billy out'... This conversation was really interesting to watch as it was clear to see that the narrative was switching between the characters life and Shane's'*²²

The intertwining of biography with fiction continued throughout the rest of the sessions, where the storyline for the final performance was developed

19. Buchleitner, K. (2010) *Glimpses of Freedom: The Art and Soul of Theatre of the Oppressed in Prison*. Berlin: LIT Verla
20. Hughes, J. (1998) 'Resistance and Expression: Working with Women Prisoners and Drama', in, Thompson, J. (ed) *Prison Theatre: Perspectives and Practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp 51
21. Winnicott, D. (1971) *Playing and Reality*, London: Routledge
- Froggett, L. Kelly-Corless, L. and Manley, J. (2019) 'Feeling real and rehearsal for reality: psychosocial aspects of 'forum theatre' in care settings and prisons'. *The Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 1(1), pp 23-39
22. Kelly-Corless (2018) *Unpublished fieldwork journal*

and refined in line with common themes from the participant's lives. The final performance itself was truly inspiring; powerful, thoughtful, reflective and importantly, performed with pride. The audience (made up of staff from the establishment and some family members) were clearly moved by the insight that they were given and interacted enthusiastically as spectators throughout. Their role as spect-actors was particularly important as it created opportunities to draw attention to points in the performance where participants could have behaved differently in ways that could have positively affected their future. As well as raising awareness as to the influence that participants have over their own lives, such an activity can also help people to see that their choices can be limited significantly by the broader context within which they exist, for example their family situations, poverty or homelessness.

The extent of the impact of Forum Theatre depends on a number of factors, including (but not limited to) the characters of the individuals in the group, the rapport between participants and facilitators, the type of institution that programmes take place in, and the sort of issues explored in the workshops.²³ While the example discussed above was the most overtly impactful display of Forum Theatre observed during the research, participants engaged positively in most other settings too, utilising the 'third space' to discuss issues in their lives. This is highlighted further in the below quote, where prison-based participants had initially been largely uninterested and closed off during the workshops:

'The...prisoners... staged the temptations and hazards of drug dealing to meet legitimate demands of a family caught up in blackmail when the small-time dealer, having succumbed to the pleas of his 'customers' for deferred payment, fails to pay his suppliers. There were complex layers of choice, responsibility, entrapment, coercion, ingratiation and desperation in this short drama. The story 'struck home' — underlined by 'performance anxiety'. Thirty or so prisoners and the Governor watched. Their

*life experiences 'hung in the air' freighting the play with a sense of reality.'*²⁴

In both of the contexts set out above, with the guiding of facilitators participants created a character whose life story very much aligned with their own. The distance provided by the fictional character seemed to act as emotional protection, allowing them to explore their histories openly yet subtly, via a veil of ambiguity. By not overtly probing participants about their lives, facilitators were able to create a safe space for them to discuss difficult and often traumatic themes without the requirement of formal disclosure or even acknowledgement that it related to them. Whilst it is important not to overplay the role that a Forum Theatre based method could have in provoking disclosure of care experience, it could certainly be used as a tool to encourage open discussion about such experiences in an indirect way.

A Case Study of Visual Methods: Using Photographs in Prison Gardening

This case study focuses on the use of participatory photography with prisoners and draws on findings from an ethnographic study where this method was used alongside others to explore participants' involvement with the Greener on the Outside for Prisons (GOOP) programme, a health and justice horticulture programme running in all NW Public Sector Prisons.²⁵ Participatory photography is a methodology or tool used to engage community members in creatively making change to improve their environments by using photography. It is a type of social action research which involves engaging communities in actively examining together current conditions which they experience as problematic in order to improve it.²⁶ In the context of this research, prisoner participants used a digital camera to take photographs during their work on GOOP as a personal diary-keeping method (which drew on photovoice and photo-elicitation methodologies). The photographs were used to reflect on their involvement with GOOP and elicit connections and meaning beyond it.

23. Buchleitner, K. (2010) *Glimpses of Freedom: The Art and Soul of Theatre of the Oppressed in Prison*. Berlin: LIT Verla

24. Froggett, L. Kelly-Corless, L. and Manley, J. (2019) 'Feeling real and rehearsal for reality: psychosocial aspects of 'forum theatre' in care settings and prisons'. *The Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, 1(1), pp 23-39

25. Informed by research demonstrating the wide-ranging benefits of contact with nature, GOOP is more than working in the prison gardens, it is most effective when working across the whole prison and beyond and tailored to specific individual and organisational needs and contexts. Recognising its effectiveness in relation to improving physical and mental health, developing key skills and work readiness, building relationships and prosocial behaviour, enhancing staff morale and wellbeing and enriching the built and natural environment, GOOP is being used as a key intervention across NW Public Sector Prisons to support the shift towards a rehabilitative culture. For further information on this, see Farrier, A. Baybutt, M. and Dooris, M. (2019) 'Mental Health and Wellbeing Benefits from a Prisons Horticultural Programme'. *International Journal of Prisoner Health*. 15(1): pp 91-104

26. Community Health Partnership (N.D) *Participatory Photography Project Guide From Community Assessment to Political Action* [online] [Accessed on 14/10/21] Available at: https://ophi.org/download/PDF/healthy_planning_pdfs/ophi%20photovoice%20guide_0916.pdf

Visually-based research techniques can provide data that might otherwise be unavailable via language-centred approaches.²⁷ Such approaches aren't about generating more information, but different kinds of information that enables the facilitation of a dialogue that spans the life-worlds of participants and researcher.²⁸ In this research it was important to recognise that many people in prison may feel 'researched'²⁹ which has the potential to impact negatively on engagement and responsiveness. In line with the participatory nature of GOOP, the photographic diary keeping ensured participants had an active and engaged role in the research. Methods of research using photographic imagery can be powerful tools in giving voice to marginalized groups through active and thoughtful engagement with the interview material.³⁰ They suggest that such methods can do several things: help facilitate subsequent discussions as photographs become key talking (and action) points — surfacing what respondents choose to share; assist in self-disclosure through story-telling while at the same time allowing distance (for instance, through use of the 'third person' in the stories told); and allow 'hidden' aspects of lives to become more visible and help surface alternative meanings and interpretations.

In this research context, participants took photographs using a digital camera and were observed by the researcher with images monitored by prison staff. The photographs were printed, selected (by the participants) and used in guided interviews and focus group discussions. This enabled participants to reflect upon and explore the reasons and experiences that guided them to choose particular images. Throughout the six months, discussions would start with developing an understanding as to why the photographs were chosen and what was symbolic or meaningful about them. The emphasis is on the participants interpretation of the photograph. For example, one participant used a photograph of a collection of vegetable produce, naming it 'the harvest' to illustrate belonging (to the GOOP project and building relationships with other

participants): reflecting on potential recategorization and noting how the group had formed on the project, that they had a common purpose that had brought them together other than their offences and one where they could invest a part of themselves that would have a positive impact on others. In this reflection the participant explained the photograph:

'The reason for mine is because we're coming to the end of the growing season and we've hardly anything left now. So, I thought I'd take this photograph of the cauliflower and the cabbage and the pumpkin together, because it's probably the last thing you might see. Do you know what I mean? I just thought it was precious, so I'm going to take a photograph to remind me.'

Participants were serving long sentences and talked about the importance of connectedness including how family contact had been compromised by geography or the nature of the crime.

In this focus group discussion, participants collaborated in developing a common understanding of 'belonging' in this context — with a consensus that developing a sense of individual and collective belonging within the wider prison community was engendered by the GOOP project. Participants were serving long sentences and talked about the importance of connectedness including how family contact had been compromised by geography

or the nature of the crime. The photographs prompted a participant in a focus group to talk about how being involved in the project had helped to keep a normal connection with family:

'Well...I've got quite a big garden, so I grow strawberries and tomatoes with my granddaughter. She's down every other weekend to stay with me...and she's got her own little plot that we just put some bedding plants and some seeds in. And when she knew I was coming here, she went on the Internet and Googled it and she sent me a card saying there's a garden there, you've got to go and work in the garden. So, I wrote to her yesterday and told her where I was.'

27. Slutskaia, N. Simpson, A. and Hughes, J. (2012) Lessons from photoelicitation: encouraging working men to speak. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management: An International Journal*, 7(1), pp 16-33

28. Pink, S. (2007) *Doing Visual Ethnography*. Second Edition. London: Sage

29. Moore, L. and Scraton, P. (2013) *The Incarceration of Women: Punishing Bodies, Breaking Spirits*. London: Palgrave.

30. Oliffe, J. and Bottofff, J. (2007) 'Further than the eye can see? Photo-elicitation with men'. *Qualitative Health Research* 17(6) pp 850-858

And another referred to someone moving to an open prison stating:

'I'm lost without [...], keep wanting to say 'look how big this has grown' or something like that.'

This led to a discussion of leaving prison and feeling vulnerable to old and new challenges and provoking anxiety and questioning the freedoms of being released from prison. While there was obvious enthusiasm for being released from prison, in depth discussions centred on their concerns and anxieties of life post-release. One participant highlighted this:

'I've got to the stage where I'm frightened of...I want freedom and I want...all I want out of life is to be stable, work, maintain staying off substances and continue a relationship with my family. But it's not that simple because feelings is the reason why you use substances in the first place. And I cope, I find it hard sometimes to cope with feelings more than on an hourly basis, you know, every minute really.'

Unlike direct conventional interviews, the distance and anonymity provided by visual data are key to 'opening up' dialogue and for safely disrupting commonly held views and attitudes.³¹ The use of photography requires that participants distance themselves somewhat from embodied experience, taking on the role of contemplative 'quasi-outsider', which in turn invites deeper reflection and more meaningful interpretation of events and circumstances.³² In this research, participants used their photographs as prompts to tell stories of their lives that connected past with present. Participants who would normally come to the project and keep their heads

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down became active in discussions revealing their stories and supporting others. Having both worked with the participants setting up and delivering the project then as a participant-observer in this ethnographic research, it was evident that using photographs provided a different stimulus and improved their narrative accounts bringing to the fore more complex issues than interviews alone and offering more detailed insights into sensitive personal histories.

Thereby offering a further method for engaging people with care experience in the prison setting to reflect on their life histories: helping to understand how such lived experience can embed meaningful change to improve systems and services.

Discussion and Conclusions

The above case studies provide examples of creative and innovative ways to encourage discussion around and disclosure of care experience for individuals in a prison setting. Attention is drawn to the power of arts-based creative methods to create spaces where people feel safer to explore sensitive and often hidden parts of their life histories (such as care experience). When considering this in the context of care experience in prison settings, this is as important and relevant for engaging an older person who has never disclosed their lived experience as for a younger person or someone new to prison; and equally for practitioners and decision-makers

to be aware of the individual life histories of care experience and the impact of that care experience across the life course. This is particularly important against the backdrop of evidence that highlights that those who have been in care are more likely to enter the criminal justice system early and more likely to be returned to prison within a year of release.³³

The first case study showed clearly that Forum Theatre can be used as a way to evoke powerful discussion and reflection about shared difficult

31. Mitchell, C. (2011) *Doing Visual Methods*. London: Sage

32. Dennis, S. F. Carpiano, R. M. and Brown, D. (2009) 'Participatory photo mapping (PPM): Exploring an integrated method for health and place research with young people'. *Health and Place*. 15 (2) pp 466-473

33. Ministry of Justice (2019) *Guidance: Care leavers in prison and probation* [online][Accessed on 19/5/21] Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/care-leavers-in-prison-and-probation>

experiences of participants when used as part of an externally delivered programme. The active role played by the audience is also important as it can provide outsiders with an insight into the lives of those they interact with regularly, and also the limitations of the choices that certain populations of people have as a consequence of broader structural oppression. Whereas the second case study focused on the use of participatory photography that used pictures as a mode of inquiry to elicit authentic contributions and a collaborative engagement with the research process. This visual practice also acted as a way of disseminating participants learning and experiences back into the project and contributed to informing changes at a systems level for the individual prison and for the wider, regional-level programme and can arguably be transferred to developing a greater, more in-depth understanding of the experiences of people in prison who also have care experience.

Despite this, it is important to recognise the limitations of alternative 'creative' interventions of this type, including the fact that not all people with care

experience will want to participate (and it is vital not to force them to). Additionally, practitioners may not feel skilled to deliver or have the budget to commission and sustain external providers of creative interventions. Budget justifications could indeed be met with obstacles in that it can be difficult to quantify/measure the benefits that they may have. Even with these limitations, creative strategies such as those outlined in our case studies can be used as important, powerful and reflexive tools for researchers, practitioners and participants alike, giving greater insight into the personal journeys and the needs of imprisoned people with care experience, and encouraging dialogue about these journeys, in a secure and open way.

The extent to which creative methods can be utilised and transformative will depend on a culture change that is open to embracing new and diverse ways of working that become embedded in systems and practice: which speaks to the extensive work being championed across the prison estate and set out in this special issue, to improve outcomes for people in prison with care experience.