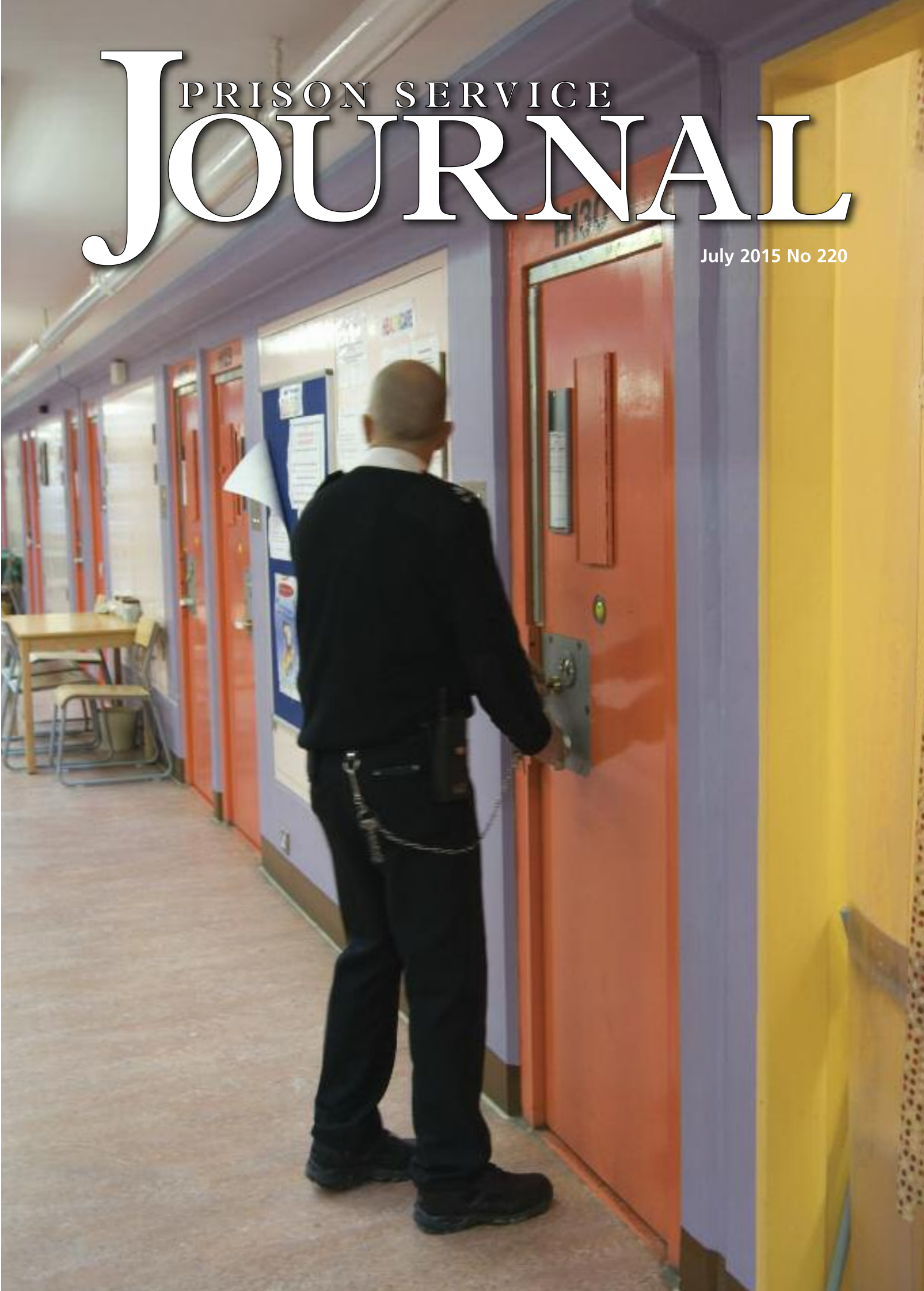

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The role of hope in preparation for release from prison

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Introduction

Release from prison can be an exciting and daunting prospect. Prisoners will be tasked with, for example, making arrangements for accommodation, employment, childcare and benefits. Both long and short prison sentences are very disruptive and the process of adjustment after release is not to be underestimated. Circumstances and support outside of prison will influence how smoothly people are able to transition back into society. Thus, while prisoners have various challenges in common, their individual situation can make the process substantially easier or more difficult. This is reflected in people's expectations about release and has an impact on their psychological well-being; an optimistic outlook on the future was associated with better psychological adjustment in my study of prisoners who were close to their release. In this article I will unpick the concept of 'hope', offer thoughts on the extent to which it is beneficial and the differences in expressions of hope among prisoners.

Case study of Max

First, I will introduce Max, who had high hopes for the future, despite his extensive prison history. His hopeful narrative shows many characteristics that are considered important in the process of moving towards a crime-free life (i.e. desistance). This highlights the potential implications of a person's subjective mindset in prison for life after release.

Max was in his late thirties and had recently become a grandfather. He described himself as institutionalized and found it easier to be in prison than outside. However, he said he had reached the point in his life where he was done with the life of crime. This time around, he had found it much more difficult to be separated from his family and wanted to be out of prison.

> ***Max:*** *It is a lot easier in here than outside, but this time around I wanna get out, I don't wanna be in here. It's the point in my life where I actually want out of jail. (…) Before it didn't bother me, but just lately, I want out of jail so, so much. It's the hardest sentence I've done so far. I just want to be home with my kids, my son, my daughter, granddaughter and my missus. Be back at work, be on a proper life.*

While one may doubt Max's ability to stay out of prison, he had a typical desistance narrative. First, he had positive and concrete goals for the future: He wanted to be out of prison, work and see his granddaughter grow up. He felt like he was missing too much while in prison and wanted to be there for her. His desire for 'normality', including legitimate employment and family life, is illustrative of what has been described as a 'positive possible self'.[1] Secondly, Max saw himself as a changed man; and this new identity was reinforced by people around him. He was behaving well in prison (apparently he used to be known as a bit of a trouble maker) and people had said to him that they believed he would not be returning to prison. This gave him confidence that he would be able to maintain his good behaviour after release.[2]

> ***Esther:*** *How do you think you're gonna go straight this time?*
>
> ***Max:*** *I know I am... Everybody's just saying to me... Officers who I've known for years, 'cause this is my city, there's officers in there that I've gone to school with and they've seen me getting kicked out of school, going to*

1. Paternoster, R. and Bushway, S. (2009) Desistance and the 'feared self': Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, 99(4): 1103–1156.
2. The importance of the belief from others in a person's ability to desist has been described by Maruna, S., LeBel, T. P., Mitchell, N. and Naples, M. (2004) Pygmalion in the reintegration process: Desistance from crime through the looking glass. *Psychology, Crime & Law, 10*(3): 271–281.

jail... and they say 'but [Max], you're coming back no more, when you get out this time you ain't coming back'. Everyone's noticed it. They've seen a big change in me. I don't do crime, I can't be bothered with it no more. I'd rather work, pay for my living.

Thirdly, he felt in control of his life. He said he had an extensive history of drug abuse, but that he had managed to overcome it. He emphasised that he was responsible for this change, not the prison. This showed a sense of agency and self-efficacy.

Max: *Just stopped, just had enough. They put me on methadone this time around, I stopped it all. Stopped everything. Don't want it. Clean. Don't wanna do anything. This is my decision, something I've done, you know what I mean. I'm not gonna let the system have the credit for something they have not done.*

Max's desire for normality, the affirmation of his identity change by others and his sense of agency contributed to his positive outlook on the future. He was hopeful that he could stay away from crime and out of prison, because he believed in his own ability to make changes. The definition and different components of hope will be discussed in detail below, after a brief outline of the study's methodology.

From the interviews it appeared that a positive outlook on the future was one of the elements that set apart prisoners who were 'doing well' from those who were 'just doing time'.

Methodology

Max was one of the thirty prisoners (fifteen men and fifteen women) I interviewed for my research project on psychological adjustment in prison. These interviews lasted an average of one hour and covered the following topics: current and previous prison experiences, release expectations, health, coping and support. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I also administered questionnaires related to psychological well-being. The study was conducted in HMP Peterborough (local, Cat B, private), which holds male and female prisoners. Participants were serving determinate sentences between five months and five-and-a-half years. Most prisoners were within two months of their release, so they could reflect on the time they had spent in prison, as well as on their expectations for life after release. In my analysis of the interviews, I aimed to describe participants' subjective experience and to interpret how participants make sense of their experience.[3]

What is hope?

From the interviews it appeared that a positive outlook on the future was one of the elements that set apart prisoners who were 'doing well' from those who were 'just doing time'.[4] While prisoners in the last group were surviving in prison, they were pessimistic about their ability to desist. They were going through the motions of every-day-prison-life, but their subjective well-being was low; they lived in quiet desperation. Prisoners who were doing well, on the other hand, had seemingly found purpose in prison life and were more actively preparing for release. Crucially, 'hope' was more than just a wish for a good future — something which is arguably shared by all prisoners. Hope among the prisoners who were doing well consisted of three components: *goal-oriented thoughts* (the positive things someone would like to achieve); *pathways to achievements* (plans about how these goals can be achieved); and *agency thoughts* (a motivation to achieve these goals as well as a belief in one's ability to reach them). This is in line with Snyder's Hope Theory.[5] Below I will elaborate on each of these elements and illustrate them with examples from the interviews, but first I will address the importance of hope and its relationship with desistance.

Is hope beneficial?

Hope has been linked to a wide variety of positive outcomes, including academic and athletic performance, physical health and psychological adjustment.[6] Similarly, optimism (positive expectations,

3. For more information about Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, see Smith, J. A., Flowers, P. and Larkin, M. (2009) *Interpretative phenomenological analysis: Theory, method and research*. London, England: SAGE.
4. See also Van Ginnekin, E.F.J.C. (2015) Doing well or just doing time? A qualitative study of patterns of psychological adjustment in prison. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice* (advance online publication).
5 Snyder, C. R. (2002) Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological Inquiry,* 13(4): 249–275.
6. Cheavens, J. S., Michael, S. T. and Snyder, C. R. (2005) The correlates of hope: Psychological and physiological benefits. In J. A. Eliott (Ed.), *Interdisciplinary perspectives on hope* (pp. 119–132). Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Publishers.

including confidence that goals can be attained) appears to protect one from distress.[7] The mechanism that may account for the benefits of hope and optimism is persistence in trying to achieve one's goals, even in the face of adversity. In contrast, pessimists may be more likely to avoid problems and even give up trying. In the face of negative outcomes that cannot be changed, optimists are more likely than pessimists to reframe the experience positively, accept it, or use humour as a coping strategy. This is considered more beneficial for well-being and goal attainment than the pessimist's typical approach of denial.[8]

The extent to which hope is helpful in the process of desistance is under-researched. Most desistance research is retrospective, so any identified differences in optimism and agency are likely to be a consequence of desistance, rather than a precursor to it. Nonetheless, there is tentative evidence that shows that confidence in one's ability to go straight and a strong intention to desist predict actual desistance.[9] It is worth exploring this further, in order to better understand how people make the transition from active offending to desistance.

Goal-oriented thoughts

The longing for normality after prison was a recurring theme in the narratives of prisoners. Normality encompassed the 'English dream': having such things as a job, a family and a home.[10]

> ***Tony:*** *I'd like to see my future, as in, you know, working with the St. Giles Trust, my own place, in a relationship, or at least have a dog. I just [want to] be content and normal, instead of before, always trying to be-, you know, trying to have everything.*

Shapland and Bottoms found that most of the young adult recidivists in their study had similarly conventional aspirations.[11] Feeling satisfied with living a normal life was characteristic of desisting lifers in Appleton's study.[12] Those who had settled for 'a life more ordinary … had developed a strong social-psychological commitment not to return to crime'.[13]

Of course, it may be difficult for prisoners to achieve such desistance-facilitating aspects of normality (e.g. having a partner and a job).[14] To illustrate: Peter said he was doing alright, had managed to stay out of prison for longer than he ever had before, until he lost his job. Following this setback, he started using drugs again, which he funded with shoplifting.

> ***Esther:*** *When you were released previous times, what did you find most difficult about being outside again?*
>
> ***Peter:*** *Just getting back to normality innit. The main thing is just getting a job. I don't really care about anything else.*

Sex offenders also tend to face more challenges in living a normal life, due to the additional stigma that society attaches to their offences. Appleton describes how the small group of desisting sex offenders in her sample of lifers 'often faced a menial and lonely existence'.[15] The two prisoners convicted of sex offences in the current study were also lonely and had little hope for a good life after release. On top of uncertainties about accommodation, they had poor physical health, which would make it difficult for them to take care of themselves and engage in enjoyable activities.

Some prisoners had more ambitions than simply leading an ordinary life. Desisting offenders tend to feel a need 'to be productive and give something back to society'.[16] This desire to help others was also a recurring theme in the interviews. Peter, for example, aspired to a job caring for other people.

> ***Peter:*** *I would be a nice, like, carer. But… I know, because of my drug use, because of my criminal past and that, I'm never gonna be able to do that. I wanna, like, I wanna do something for others, like, I wanna be a bit of a mentor.*

7. Carver, C. S., Scheier, M. F., Miller, C. J. and Fulford, D. (2009) Optimism. In S.J. Lopez and C.R. Snyder (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (2nd. Ed.) (pp. 303-311). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
8. Ibid.
9. See Burnett, R. and Maruna, S. (2004) So 'prison works', does it? The criminal careers of 130 men released from prison under Home Secretary, Michael Howard. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, 43*(4): 390–404. And also: Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A. (2011) Reflections on social values, offending and desistance among young adult recidivists. *Punishment & Society, 13*(3): 256–282.
10. Bottoms, A., Shapland, J., Costello, A., Holmes, D. and Muir, G. (2004) Towards desistance: Theoretical underpinnings for an empirical study. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice, 43*(4): 368–389.
11. Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A. (2011) op. cit.
12. Appleton, C. A. (2010) *Life after life imprisonment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
13. Ibid. p. 166.
14. Laub, J. H. and Sampson, R. J. (2003) *Shared beginnings, divergent lives: Delinquent boys to age 70*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
15. Appleton, C. A. (2010) op.cit. p. 167.
16. Maruna, S. (2001) *Making good: How ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association: p. 88.

Peter saw this desire as part of his identity; illustrating what Maruna considers part of a redemption script:[17]

> ***Peter:*** *I just wanna help others, innit. That's what I've always wanted to do is-, Really, I've always wanted to help older people and that, 'cause I've got a lot of respect for-, I respect my olders and that. It's just the way I am.*

This concern for other people can give a sense of meaning and purpose to life and lend credibility to claims of reform;[18] although, some prisoners rightly noted that prison and a criminal history may pose obstacles in achieving a job caring for other people. Nevertheless, a few participants had already acted on their wish to 'make good' while in prison, for example through working as a peer supporter in prison or as a volunteer outside of prison (facilitated by release on temporary license). This facilitated positive goal-oriented thoughts for life after release, with the simultaneous benefit of giving meaning to the experience of imprisonment.

Pathways to achievements

Pathways-oriented thinking involves making concrete plans for life after release. Prisoners who showed evidence of pathways-oriented thinking had plans about where they were going to live, how they would stay away from crime, the support they were going to use and what they would do if specific plans did not come to fruition (i.e. they generated multiple pathways and made contingency plans). LeBel and colleagues found some evidence for the hypothesis that one's subjective mindset influences one's experience of social problems upon release; which in turn has a significant impact on reconviction and re-imprisonment.[19] In effect, this may mean that a positive mindset leads people to create and seek out opportunities to improve their situation, and an improved situation reduces the chance that they will commit crime.

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Katie, for instance, made arrangements for her children to stay with her mother after release, so that she could focus on creating a stable life for herself first. She had anticipated that taking care of her children would add stress to her situation and found a pathway to reduce this stress.

> ***Esther:*** *What will happen [with your children] when you get out?*
>
> ***Katie:*** *They'll still live with my mom for a bit, until I get myself up on my feet and... be fully recovered. And then I'll think about taking them back.*

Other prisoners had made preparations for accommodation and employment after release.

It should be noted that the ability to create opportunities and avoid problems is likely related to a person's social capital — that is, to the resources and relationships that are available to them for achieving their goals in social interactions. For example, prisoners can only ask family members for help if they have a relationship with them in the first place. Unfortunately, a substantial number of prisoners are in a situation where they do not have contacts outside of prison who are in a position to provide support. In these cases, there is an important task for agencies to provide a support system (initially) and help individuals to build their own.

Agency thoughts

The final important component of hope is a sense of personal agency, which was found in expressions about feeling able to make changes and being in control of life, even in the face of difficulties. In addition to the perceived ability to carry out an action, agency also encompasses the motivation or intention to do so. There is conceptual overlap between agency and self-efficacy, but the former is regarded as more global and

17. Ibid.
18. Aresti, A., Eatough, V. and Brooks-Gordon, B. (2010) Doing time after time: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of reformed ex-prisoners' experiences of self-change, identity and career opportunities. *Psychology, Crime & Law, 16*(3): 169–190. See also: Maruna, S., LeBel, T. P. and Lanier, C. S. (2004) Generativity behind bars: Some 'redemptive truth' about prison society. In E. de St. Aubin, D. P. McAdams, & T.-C. Kim (Eds.), *The generative society: Caring for future generation*s (pp. 131–152). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
19. LeBel, T. P., Burnett, R., Maruna, S. and Bushway, S. (2008) The 'chicken and egg' of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime. *European Journal of Criminology, 5*(2): 131–159.

trait-like, and the latter as specific to particular goal objectives.[20]

Vicky was serving her first prison sentence, during which she had successfully detoxed from drugs. She wanted to stay away from drugs and crime after prison, and expressed a desire to 'try and live life normal, whatever normal may be'. She appeared motivated and confident in her ability to achieve this:

> ***Vicky:*** *Now I know I can do it, yeah, I'm quite motivated, I'm positive that I'm not gonna return back to drugs, definitely. No. It's in the past, I've just always thought 'oh God, I can't do it, I can't put myself through that', you know... But luckily it weren't as bad as I thought it was gonna be and I've done it and, you know, I've done all that hard work, so it'd be a bit stupid to throw it all down the drain again and come back to jail.*

Typically, hope also involved assertions about being the agent of change, that is taking responsibility for positive changes and recognising that future success also depends on personal action.

Most prisoners have goal-oriented thoughts; they differ in planning and agency. It may be that these components are essential for understanding why some prisoners manage to desist and others not, because they help prisoners prepare for the difficulties they will face after release. For example, although Tommie wanted to achieve positive change, he was pessimistic about his ability to do so. He felt that his life was determined by chance and ruled by bad luck. Because of this attitude, he had stopped making plans.

> ***Tommie:*** *I ain't in control... If I was in control of my life, I wouldn't be here. I just probably tend to take the easy way out of things all the time. 'Cause obviously, like, getting your life sorted out is gonna be hard, but it can be done. It's not something that can't be done, but it's gotta be me that wants it. When I get out, I think to myself 'I got the best intentions'. And then when I get out and see how things are, I just think to myself 'fuck', you know, go do drugs.*

Most prisoners have goal-oriented thoughts; they differ in planning and agency.

Previous research, such as Maruna's Liverpool Desistance Study, suggests that expressions of agency and self-efficacy distinguish desisters from non-desisters.[21] Liem and Richardson's recent study with released lifers confirmed this, but they also found that there was no distinguishable difference between the groups in terms of their perceptions of themselves.[22] Both desisters and non-desisters saw themselves as essentially good people, but they differed in terms of the extent to which they felt in control of their lives — although it is not clear whether a sense of agency developed after successful desistance rather than being a necessary precursor to it. In my study, however, all participants were at the same stage, with the same prospect of release and subject to similar probable difficulties upon release. The main reason for why hope may predict desistance is that it can motivate people to keep trying to find pathways, even in the face of difficulties. By continuously acting upon their circumstances, they are more likely to achieve change.

Optimism as a trait has been found to predict positive outcomes in many different situations, including serious illness and is related to more adaptive ways of coping; that is, reducing or eliminating stressors and negative emotions rather than avoiding them.[23] An optimistic disposition will probably make it more likely that someone has hope during imprisonment and succeeds after release.

False hope?

It is important to consider whether *unrealistic* optimism, or false hope, can have negative outcomes. For instance, Natasha described a previous release experience where she was very optimistic but not realistic, and ended up back in prison. However, her optimism in that case appeared not to have involved any planning — so lacked an essential component of what I have described as hope.

> ***Natasha:*** *I thought it was gonna be like a fairy tale. I had a fairy tale sort of idea in my head and it hit me fucking hard that it wasn't like that. I wanted normality so much, I wasn't prepared for being realistic, what reality really*

20. Rand, K.L. & Cheavens, J.S. (2009). Hope theory. In S.J. Lopez & C.R. Snyder (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology* (pp. 323-333). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
21. Maruna, S. (2001) op. cit.
22. Liem, M. and Richardson, N. J. (2014) The role of transformation narratives in desistance among released lifers. *Criminal Justice and Behavior, 41*(6): 692–712.
23. Solberg Nes, L. and Segerstrom, S.C. (2006) Dispositional optimism and coping: A meta-analytic review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(3): 235-251.

is. I had, like, the fantasy in my head. This time I'm prepared, I know what to expect. […] I thought that I could do it all, so I didn't take no offers up for any help. And, like I say, it hit me hard. This time I took different measures to what I'm gonna do; I took advice on what benefits I should do and things like that. I took budgeting thing I done in here, but there's one I'm gonna do on the out as well.

This is similar to findings from Soyer's recent study with young offenders, who all had aspirational, positive narratives, but many of them failed to desist after their release.[24] These narratives were not realistic in the sense that they lacked pathways-oriented thinking. Thus, prisoners should not only be encouraged to set positive goals and imagine a non-offender identity, they should also be given assistance to realise these goals and put support networks in place. Importantly, this support should be easily accessible after release, when the hard work really begins. Prisoners should be made aware that they will face challenges in the process of resettlement, but that persistence is the key to success.

There is some disagreement in the literature about the extent to which false hope is potentially harmful.[25] Arguably, some degree (slight to moderate) of positive illusion is adaptive, as long as it does not involve denial or repression of reality. Furthermore, high-hope people tend to set more ambitious goals, but they are also more likely to achieve these than low-hope people. This may be partly attributable to an ability to sustain effort, endure setbacks and think flexibly.

Conclusion

This article has applied Snyder's Hope Theory to the narratives of prisoners preparing for release. Hopeful thinking is more than wishful thinking, because it also encompasses planning and a sense of agency. Most prisoners have positive goals for the future and want to stay out of prison. However, they do not all feel confident in their ability to achieve these goals, nor do they all have concrete plans for how to achieve them. Arguably, prisoners with positive goals, high agency and multiple pathways are more likely to make positive changes (including desistance) after release. This is supported by retrospective studies of desistance, which have shown differences in agency between desisters and non-desisters. The implication is that offenders might benefit from support with outlining the pathways (and potential obstacles) towards their goals, identifying or creating opportunities, and tapping into resources. It needs to be considered how this support can reach especially those who are difficult to engage, without further restricting their sense of agency. This is particularly important in a prison environment, where any sense of autonomy (and therefore agency) is already severely limited.

24. Soyer, M. (2014) The imagination of desistance: A juxtaposition of the construction of incarceration as a turning point and the reality of recidivism. *British Journal of Criminology, 54*(1): 91–108.
25. See for an overview and rebuttal Snyder, C.R. et al. (2002) 'False' hope. *Journal of Clinical Psychology, 58*(9): 1003-1022.