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A crisis of hope? Long term prisoners' experiences in Category A environments

Will Styles *is Governor of HMP Whitemoor*

Introduction

In England and Wales, there are over 900 Category A male prisoners. These men can expect to spend decades in maximum security conditions, often not knowing when, or even if, they will be released. Arguably, these men may be living hopeless and miserable lives. Yet those visiting a high security prison are likely to find a busy and often apparently cheerful daily routine of work, education, gymnasium and social activities; where men choose their meals and think about what canteen goods they will buy each week. Many of them will talk positively about their lives, families and hopes for the future. That is what I found when I took up post as Governor at HMP Whitemoor in 2016. It surprised me and struck me as an important first impression. At the time I was also studying for a Criminology Masters at Cambridge and focussed my dissertation on what 'hope' means to, and for, Category A prisoners in dispersal prisons. The key aims of this study were to identify:

- *How Category A prisoners define hope, and what impact they believe it has for them and for dispersal prisons;*
- *If hope exists for Category A prisoners, how it is generated; and;*
- *Factors, circumstances, experiences and conditions that extinguish hope.*

In 2017 I conducted one to one and groups interviews with twenty five Category A prisoners at HMP Whitemoor, HMP Full Sutton and HMP Long Lartin. In this paper I offer an overview of my findings.

In England and Wales, the number of prisoners serving long sentences is increasing. As Crewe, Hulley and Wright suggest,

> *changes in legislation have increased the 'starting points' for consideration of the minimum period of custody for a range of homicide offences. As a result, the average tariff imposed upon people sentenced to life (excluding whole life sentences) increased from 12.5 to 21.1 years between 2003 and 2013. In sum, an increasing number of men and women are serving sentences which, until fairly recently, were not only extremely uncommon, but were also considered more or less unsurvivable.*[1]

Moreover, Category A prisoners are a unique group, likely to be imprisoned significant distances from home and family, subject to extreme security and supervision, serving very long sentences, experience a high degree of uncertainty regarding their futures and a very low level of control over their prison life. They are perhaps the prisoner group that experience the greatest and most enduring difficulties associated with imprisonment. How then in such circumstances could these men have and hold on to hope?

Hope

Dufrane and Leclair suggest, 'hope can be defined as an inner confidence that an expected and desired outcome will occur'.[2] But for Adam, serving a 30-year sentence at HMP Whitemoor, the highly emotional experience of hope can also be described in much more vivid terms. For Adam, hope is:

> *the day after the night…it's the dawn, it's not seeing a wall in front of you, it is seeing a road that you can walk down and having a target and reaching the end. I don't know how to explain, it's just that glimmer of light, that beacon.*

Asking men who are serving very long prison sentences to talk about hope presented them with a

1. Crewe, B, Hulley, S & Wright, S. (2017). Swimming with the Tide: Adapting to Long-Term Imprisonment. Justice Quarterly, 34:3, 517-541, 518.
2. Dufrane, K. & Leclair, S. (1984). Using Hope in the Counselling Process. Counselling and Values. October 1984. Volume 29 (1), 32-41, 33.

significant and at times painful challenge. David was given a 28-year tariff and said:

> *I don't really believe in hope. I have got 28 years. My tariff will expire when I am 46 so there is no hope, no matter how you look at it. Everyone has washed their hands of you and you're in this environment, compressed and concentrated with the most dangerous criminals in the UK for the next forever years.*

Thus, faith and dedication to feelings of hope are usually conditional on one's circumstances and special and temporal environment. This is corroborated by Corrigan who raises an important question:

> *At times, hope seems to have limitless potential for promoting well-being and quality of life, which begs the question, might there be limits to the phenomenon of hope?.*[3]

A small number of the participants talked about their view that hope has very clear limitations in their case. They suggested that time was easier to serve when they felt they had no hope and nothing to lose. Abdi, for example, is 12 years into a 35-year tariff, and has clearly struggled with making progress:

> *I think having hope is the whole problem in prison. I was sold a dream, that I will be downgraded, progressed, go to a therapeutic community, sort out my problems or whatever I needed towards finishing off my sentence. I never felt bad like this until I started to behave myself and engage in courses and look to a future that really, is impossible for me to get. Before I started to do all these courses I felt happy because I knew where I stood, I was happy being wherever I was, I knew I wasn't going nowhere. And then I thought, let me try something new, be good, do these courses and I saw one or two people progress and that could be me — it gave me false hope. Yes, I bought the dream, that I still can't get… and now I give up on it. When I didn't care about what was happening, that was the best time, I was getting in trouble because I didn't care, I was in prison, I was going to die in prison, I had nothing to lose. Now, I've got things to lose, I've got things to worry about. I have got a responsibility to my family. I feel worse now than I did when I first started this sentence... Yes, it's a hundred times worse now for sure.*

Many of the participants were able to feel and express personal hope, but a minority claimed to be able to do neither. This then raises an interesting question; why are levels of hope so variable and where does hope come from? The participants suggested hope was generated not as a result of help from others for example prison staff or other prisoners, but from inside themselves. Kevin commented:

> *it's good when you see staff helping someone, that boosts it up a bit more but as for where does hope come from, that would be me, that is the type of person I am. If it's going to happen it's going to happen inside. Yes, self-determination.*

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The experience of a long prison sentence

Generally speaking, participants that had served longer appeared more settled and accepting of their sentence. They appeared better able to recognise hope in their life. All those interviewed described difficulties in the early stages of their sentence and a challenging period of adjustment spanning years. For example, Arthur said:

> *when I first got that 36 years, I was absolutely numb. I was here 3 weeks after being sentenced and a switch went, I'm never going home, that is it, you are dying in prison. I switched off and I wanted to die. I had no hope whatsoever, and at that point I would rather they had given me the death penalty.*

Ben described fighting against the system for four or five years before he could stop blaming others, accept responsibility for his actions and come to terms with his sentence. Other men

3. Corrigan, P. (2014). Can there be false hope in recovery? The British Journal of Psychiatry. 205, 423–424, 423.

described a painful monotony and pointlessness in their life. Josh explained:

> *I'm in prison, I know I'm going to die in prison, so I just go through the motions, eat food, go to work, come back, call my family. Existing just existing. We are like zombies in reality.*

The experience of being Category A

Almost all those interviewed shared a story of frustration and distress regarding various issues, including the visitor checking process. Leroy explained:

> *It has been years and years since I seen my mum. As a Cat A if someone from Jamaica comes over they can't get to see me. That is part of our Cat A depression, that is very harsh, no-one can come and see you. If you don't hope, you don't care, simple.*

A strong sense of hope was attached to having a belief in making progress through the prison system. In those participants for whom that belief was weak, there appeared to be a corresponding weak sense of hope. Crewe asserts that progression through the system is a vital part of the experience for prisoners serving long sentences.[4] There was a clear feeling that the Category A system is unfair, secretive and irrational. Thus, John linked hope and legitimacy:

A strong sense of hope was attached to having a belief in making progress through the prison system.

> *you asked us if we feel the system is legitimate, well there isn't any legitimacy. Right now, the whole length of sentence that people are being given is not legitimate and being on A Cat for 15 or 20 years is not legitimate. No legitimacy equals no hope to me.*

Part of the lack of legitimacy talked about frequently by the men related to a belief that any mistake they made was blown out of proportion and held against them forever. Abdi talked about the potential for one mistake in a year to negate anything good he had done and remove any chance of being downgraded that he might have had:

> *you can have one bad day and as a result of that it affects your whole year, no matter how much work you have done.*

Family

Hairston's work on family ties during imprisonment suggests that external ties are important at all stages, even for those serving long prison sentences.[5] Indeed, Gibbs's work on the disruption and distress of going from the street to jail, suggests a heightening of the importance of family during imprisonment: *'the importance of family can reach metaphysical proportions in the eyes of the confined.'*.[6] This is supported by the fact that the most consistent theme in my interviews was the importance of family. For instance, Kevin, who has served 12 years and has a 28-year tariff, linked his sense of hope with being a parent:

> *having someone that you see grow and someone who is the most important person in my life, that is my daughter. That definitely gives me a sense of hope and some sort of purpose.*

For many of the men, the connection to family was clearly the most significant factor in developing and maintaining hope and coping with very long sentences. Dav, a foreign national prisoner is 2 years into a 25-year tariff and similarly to Kevin, said:

> *You have to find something to survive. This is my young son, my wife and my daughter. I have somebody waiting for me. Maybe I am not a good father, and now I will never get the chance to be one. But I have hope to be a good grandfather one day, and this gives me power to survive and to think about the future.*

4. Crewe, B. (2011). Soft Power in Prison: Implications for staff–prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy. European Journal of Criminology, 8(6), 455–468, 459.
5. Hairston, C. (1991). Family Ties During Imprisonment: Important to Whom and For What? Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, Vol 18. 87-103, 94.
6. Gibbs, J. (1982). Disruption and Distress: Going from the Street to Jail. In Parisi, N. (ed), Coping with Imprisonment. (pp. 29-44). USA: Sage Publications, 37.

But for many of the participants there was also a clear association between hope and pain when discussing their families. Being apart from them, and knowing that situation would probably have to be endured for decades was clearly painful. There was a clear sense of loss amongst men, when describing time, people and an outside world that continues without them: Leroy said with clear sadness:

> *oh man, my oldest kid is 18, I came to prison when he was 3, I don't even know my kids, I came to prison when the second child was in the belly, so I don't even know my kids. I really wish I did though.*

For some men the upset and anxiety they felt leading up to, during and following a visit was such that it deterred them from receiving future visits. For Simon, the emotions attached to visits were hard to cope with:

> *to be truthful I don't even want visits right now. Seeing them when they come and leave, it brings up a whole heap of emotions. If I hear my family are doing alright, then I am alright. They are my hope, and that is what matters to me. But visits right now, no, it's just too much.*

Observations regarding staff were generally neutral, though most participants acknowledged that many staff do a difficult job.

Authority, bureaucracy, frustration and legitimacy

Zelditch argues, *'something is legitimate if it is in accord with the norms, values, beliefs, practices and procedures of a group.'* [7] Jack commented on an issue raised by several participants; that of staff not having answers, or there being no consistency in the answers that were provided:

> *one thing that is very annoying is that you can go to three different officers and ask the same question and you will get three different answers. You can never have confidence in what staff tell you, you have to ask a lot of them and go with the average answer. Honestly it makes you angry and tired at the same time.*

The men understood the need for rules and their enforcement, but expressed frustration about rules that didn't seem legitimate, that even staff could not explain. These relatively minor issues were small pains, that endured day after day could become hugely corrosive and draining. Danny summarised it:

> *it's not the major things, because we understand the need for them, it's the petty minor things; that is what destroys your soul and eventually kills your hope in here.*

Prisoners are of course not alone in their prison community; their lives and living environment are shared by the staff working with them. Observations regarding staff were generally neutral, though most participants acknowledged that many staff do a difficult job. Few of those interviewed were able to talk about experiences where staff members have had a notably positive influence in their life. Jake suggested with a note of sarcasm:

> *well I haven't really met a member of staff that's changed my life in a massive way yet, but I've only been in three years so its early days yet.*

Pete however was able to recall a recent incident where members of staff showed him care and kindness in his break up with his wife after seven years in prison:

> *I had some good help, when I was on the phone one day when I split up with the Mrs and I got off and I was sobbing, I didn't show it, I walked back to my cell and there was a female officer, Rachel. She knew, and she came in there and sat on the bed with me, and was talking to me. Yes, staff were helpful, there were quite a lot of them, they used to chat with me. I live here now, I suppose, it's my extended family.*

7. Zelditch, M. (2001). Theories of Legitimacy. In J. T. Jost & B. Major (Eds.), The social psychology of legitimacy: Emerging perspectives on ideology, justice, and intergroup relations. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 33.

Interestingly in almost every example offered of a member of staff being helpful, kind or generous, they were female.

The power of trust

Trust was presented as a powerful element in maintaining hope and resilience and in this regard, workshop and education staff were seen in a positive light, particularly those that had managed to build a culture of trust and respect in their classes. Being treated as an equal and someone that could be trusted seemed to have a profound impact on participants. Arthur's 36-year tariff has left him resigned to dying in prison, but he has found a role that gives him a sense of purpose:

> *I will be honest with you, most days it's a struggle to even get up, let alone have hope. The good thing is the jobs that I have here mean people depend on me. Linda in the cookery class depends on me to help her. So, I suppose it's being needed, trusted and relied on that gets me up every day.*

For some, faith and communal worship activities were only relevant when times were particularly difficult.

Having a sense of control and faith

Many participants were clear that they could make limited choices in prison, but there was very little meaningful control over their daily life. Those areas where they could exert some control therefore became extremely important to them. One area that was mentioned positively by many of the men was the gymnasium. It meant much more to them than just exercise, fitness and building muscle mass. Many of the men talked about the gymnasium as a place of mental escape, personal control and a temporary sense of freedom. David described the gym as a way of managing his emotions and energy:

> *It's a place of hope for me, its independence, and a good stress reliever. It is better than any drug. I can go down the gym, I can set my own targets and achieve them without some psychologist who I haven't even met, approving it.*

Marranci suggests that the acceptance of their imprisonment as God's will and the transferral of control over their lives from the prison system to an abstract idea, such as God, can help prisoners to accept their existential realities and provide hope for future change or a promise of change.[8] In all three prisons studied, religion was a very significant element in the culture of the establishment. For a small minority of the men, their faith was a strong part of who they are and how they spend their time in custody. For James, his faith and religious observance were central to his life:

> *what keeps me going now then, the source of my hope? Faith, my religion that is exactly it.*

However, those expressing strong religious views were a small minority. Most participants had little interest in faith. For some, faith and communal worship activities were only relevant when times were particularly difficult. Many of the participants saw religious activity and corporate worship as 'safe space', somewhere to mix with friends and feel safe: *'for some of the blokes, the true believers, they get hope from going to services. But mostly it is about safety and something to do for most of them'* (Ken).

The impact of the environment

Generally, little was said by participants about their environment, facilities and services. But where basic needs weren't being met, there was a clear sense of frustration that this wasn't taken seriously by the prison authorities:

> *you see sometimes people from the establishment look and think it's only a washing machine, or a cooker, but these things are very serious here. As I was walking here someone said to me, don't forget to speak to the Governor about the washing machines* (Adam).

And while paint schemes and décor were infrequently mentioned, it was an issue to some participants:

> *I'm doing 22 years, so I can tell you, I've seen a lot of magnolia. It's depressing after a while you know* (Ben).

8 Marranci, G. (2009). Faith Ideology and Fear: Muslim Identities Within and Beyond Prisons. Continuum International Publishing Group, 69.

Unsurprisingly, prisoner movement from one part of a high security prison to another, generally involves moving through secure corridors. Most of the men felt there were very few opportunities for them to have quality time in the fresh air. Many of the participants suggested this was an important issue for them and the corridors of the prisons were criticised vehemently.

Safety and friendship

A view shared by many of those interviewed was that, as an individual they had limited control over their safety. The general feeling was that one could partially mitigate the risks, but that other prisoners could be unpredictable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the longer they had served in prison, and at their current prison, the less negative were their perceptions about their personal safety. This appeared to be a benefit of simply knowing people and having the time to manage relationships. Mike, who has served 12 years of a 27-year tariff and has lived on his current wing for a number of years, explained:

> *I've probably made it safe for myself now. I just adapted and made things better for myself. I know who's who now, but it takes time. When you move jails, it can be like starting again.*

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During group interviews, discussion regarding friendships was warm, with descriptions of 'mates', 'homies' and 'brothers'. In one to one interviews however, views were much less charitable. Participants were generally 'lukewarm' at the mention of friendship in prison. Friendships, where they existed, consisted of a very small group of individuals and were limited in their nature. Friends we not described as a source of hope and more often were something to be wary of. In many cases what participants described were friendships of convenience, established strategically to mitigate threats and risks from others, or just for companionship. Jake, is 3 years into a 31-year tariff, and explained that he is still 'learning the ropes' about life on the wings:

> *if you get close to people and they get into stuff, you are going to have to take their side…, that always ends badly. It's no good having hopes if you get close to people and they take you down and all your hopes along with you.*

Keeping busy

Having a routine and keeping busy was frequently highlighted as an effective means of making time pass quickly and reducing the risk of being drawn into activities that might be detrimental to self-progression. Arthur's perception is that his sentence is so long that he will die before he has any prospect of release. Security for him centred on predictability and not having to worry that he will be moved, or his routine interfered with:

> *hope for me is because I've got my little routine here to have the peace of mind that I can wake up tomorrow knowing I'm still going to be doing that.*

The men who had been able to carve out a sense of routine and keep themselves busy seemed to have an ability to partially 'switch off' to the difficulties of imprisonment, by operating in what might be described as 'auto-pilot'. But for some participants the daily routine, and prospect of living that regime for the next 10 or 20 years was seemingly unbearable:

> *when I wake up in the morning, I'll tell you what is going through my head. Another boring day. Another day of exactly the same as what you have just gone through yesterday and the day before that and the day before that. Fuck, sometimes hope for me is just to do something different. It is mind numbing. Boredom is a massive fear, a really big thing. That is where depression starts I think.* (Martin).

Education was a popular activity, being described as something interesting to do but also a route to bettering oneself. Adam had been enthused by participation in a 'Learning Together' activity with a local university, which involved studying together with students from the community:

> *well I personally love education. When I did Learning Together, I loved that, I think this is*

great for prisoners. When I feel hope in my life in here, it really makes me want to get involved in that sort of stuff much more.

Ben however explained how funding issues prevented him from realising his academic potential:

listen, I wanted to do a sports science degree. You have got to have 7 years or less left before you can do an OU, otherwise you can't get the funding. So instead of doing an OU degree I am a wing cleaner. You tell me, where is the hope in that?

Conclusions

The importance of family to Category A prisoners cannot be overstated. It was repeatedly offered as the greatest source and focus of hope, and the factor that made the biggest difference for men in managing to cope with prison sentences of a duration which have been described as almost unsurvivable. It is interesting that when the men talked of what they hope for, in most cases they first talked about being reunited with their families, rather than being free. But family relationships can also be a source of loss, pain, guilt and anguish. Separation from family was without doubt, for most of the men interviewed the greatest difficulty of their imprisonment. Those difficulties were often increased by a requirement for security checks to be carried out on visitors; a process which they had little control over and could be protracted.

Being a Category A prisoner brings additional difficulties and frustrations. There was a clear perception that the Category A process is an unfair, inconsistent, secretive and unjust system and that once a prisoner became Category A they were likely to remain so for many years. In fact these perceptions were not without merit. The Category A Team at HMPPS Headquarters report that in 2016, the status of 805 Category A prisoners was reviewed and only 58 were downgraded to Category B. From January to September 2017, just 38 men were downgraded from 573 reviews.

Irrespective of the merits and necessity of the Category A system, it is not perceived as legitimate, fair, consistent or transparent, by Category A prisoners. Inevitably then, such perceptions create anxiety and diminish hope.

Concerns regarding feelings of safety were raised, but few of the participants talked of fear as a predominant feature of their experience. Perhaps this reflects the apparent skill the men have developed in managing their routines and associations strategically, to mitigate personal risk and maximise their sense of security and safety.

To this end, routines and activity matter. Staying busy provided a means for men to partially tune out their unpleasant predicament. The gymnasium and education centres in particular provided meaningful opportunities for a temporary form of mental escape. Engaging in physical activity gave the men a sense of control in their life and the ability to independently set and achieve personal targets. It also provided hope that they could maintain their health and survive their long terms of imprisonment. And academic education was a revelation for many of the men, who had found confidence, hope and self-esteem in their achievements, which in some cases extended to degree level qualifications. It was disappointing that in many cases, their further learning ambitions were stifled by funding hurdles.

The significant efforts made by prison staff should also be acknowledged. It is unfortunate though that however good the intentions of staff, they were not apparently resulting in a commensurate positive impact on the lives of prisoners. The workings of the prison system was a factor that in most cases served to erode hope. As such, participants expressed low levels of perceived legitimacy in the rules of the institutions. Perceived indifference, inconsistency, pettiness, lack of knowledge, unreasonable expectations and a lack of 'common sense' from staff, created anxiety, uncertainty and a loss of hope.

In summary

Notwithstanding several frustrations, hope does exist in dispersal prisons. Those that expressed feelings of hope suggested that it helped them maintain resilience and be motivated to engage in the regime and progress through the system. A significant range of factors exist that can clearly influence levels of hope amongst Category A prisoners and can, at least partially, be enabled and changed, (such as access to family and education). But whilst it has been established that hope can help motivate men to try and progress, this needs to be supported by a personal belief that progress and change can be made, and that they will be recognised respected and rewarded by those in authority. To conclude then, particularly as our prisons are currently experiencing significant challenges, it is important to remember that:

'Devoid of hope, imprisonment is a pointless pain' [9] *and thus, perhaps one of the most crucial crises prisons ought to avoid at all costs is a crisis of hope.*

9. O'Donnell, I. (2016). The aims of imprisonment. In: Jewkes, Y. Bennett, J. & Crewe, B. eds. (2016). Handbook on Prisons (2nd ed). Routledge, 46.