Identity, imprisonment and narrative configuration

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Abstract

This article addresses the role of self-narratives for coping with the laws of captivity. By focusing on how confinement can disrupt narrative coherence, the intention is to examine the role of self-narratives for interpreting previous events and anticipating future actions. Drawing on a range of interdisciplinary research on self-identity, imprisonment, and offender narratives this article highlights how narrative reconstruction can alter our desires, commitments, behaviour, beliefs and values. By (re)telling a story about our lives it is possible to reinterpret existing circumstances and make new connections between our past, present and future selves. Whilst research suggests the importance of narrative reconstruction for protecting against a sense of meaninglessness, this article shows how self-narratives have the potential to be empowering *and* divisive. The final part of the article examines how the narratives inmates construct about themselves and others can serve to legitimise violence against other prisoners.

Key Words

Identity, Imprisonment, Self-narratives, Violence

Introduction

Human beings are storytellers. We tell stories to understand who we are and our internalised, evolving self-narratives help to guide and shape our lives (Bruner, 1993; McAdams, 1993; Polkinghorne, 1991; Richardson, 1990). This article addresses the literature on self-identity and narrative configuration and explores the role of self-narratives for providing a sense of meaning and unity to our lives. Our sense of who we are is an evolving process and relies on our ability to reflect on our subjective experiences. Self-conceptions are open to change, and to comprehend this process it is necessary to understand how people construct and reconstruct their life story. This article focuses on how offenders adapt and change their self-narratives to cope with the laws of captivity, laws that aim to produce normalised subjects by regulating the opinions and behaviour of inmates (Foucault, 1980, 1991; also see Polizzi, 2017).

Rather than understanding self-narratives as a fluid and open-ended process, research on offender narratives shows how the construction and reconstruction of self-narratives are restricted by the narrators lived experience (see Arrigo & Ward, 2015). This, I suggest, provides further support to Layder's (2004) work on 'emerging' narratives. By bringing together very different research findings on how self-narratives are used by offenders, I examine how narrative identity work can be both an empowering and divisive process. Whilst research has shown how the construction of a more enabling self-narrative can protect offenders from feelings of existential despair and meaninglessness, narrative identity work can also lead to the exclusion of others and justify violence against prisoners. My overall aim is to explore the dialogical and phenomenological dimensions of imprisonment and to reflect on how offenders reconstruct their self-narratives to inform their identity-claiming choices and actions.

Understanding identity

To think about who we are, who we have been, and who we may become in the future is to think and reflect about our sense of identity. There have been many attempts to capture and define identity, and one of the most succinct is provided by Scott who understands identity 'as a set of integrated ideas about the self, the roles we play and the qualities that make us unique' (2015, p. 2). Understanding these requirements involves having a sense of personal continuity, that I am numerically the same person today as I always have been, together with an understanding of how we are both similar and different from other people (Baumeister, 1986; Billington, Hockey and Strawbridge, 1998; Oshana, 2010). To complicate this process, our sense of who we are and why we are unique is constantly evolving. Recognising identity as a process of becoming reflects how our thoughts, feelings, beliefs, attitudes, values and desires are open to change (Douglas, 1987; Ebaugh, 1987; Moulder, 2016). People have a sense of personal autonomy over their thoughts and actions.

We are not exactly the same person we once were, and we will not always be exactly the same person we are today. People can choose to define themselves in ways that are fundamentally different from their previous self-conceptions (Ebaugh, 1988). We may decide to change our priorities, intentions, aspirations, political beliefs, sexuality or even our dietary requirements in order to demonstrate to ourselves and to others how we are no longer the person we used to be. Apter's (1983) research on identity and negativism provides a useful approach for thinking about performative identity work. To have a secure sense of personal identity it is necessary to know what one is for, but it is also necessary to know what one is against:

> In terms of 'Me', to know who one is also implies knowing who one is not. One's sense of *distinctiveness* therefore can be gained and sustained by doing everything possible to demonstrate to oneself what one is not. To be a socialist means in an obvious way not to be a conservative, and the feeling of being a socialist at least in part depends on contrast with, and opposition to, conservatism. In other words, we understand what we are to some extent in terms of our rejections, be they rejections of parents, school, political party, religious belief, or whatever. Knowing oneself is saying 'No' to what one is not. (Apter, 1983, p. 80)

Knowing what one is *against* allows individuals to engage in a process of dis-identification (Scott, 2018). As he argues, 'in order to gain and maintain a sense of identity, the individual must *search out* or provoke forces to be negativistic against' (Apter, 1983, p. 81). To define oneself it is necessary to know what one is antagonistic towards.

Our sense of identity is the result of 'how the self conceives of itself and labels itself' (Matthews, 2000, p. 16-17). Thinking about who we are and who we are *not* relies on our ability to have private mental lives that reflect on our everyday subjective experiences. Indeed, it is 'the capacity for self-reflection that lies at the heart of the self' (Leary & Tangney, 2005, p. 3). The self is the centre of our awareness and can be defined as 'the "I" or "me", an individual's reflective

consciousness of being a separate human being' (Moulder, 2016, p. 28). The 'I' and the 'me' represent the subjective and objective parts of the self and the highly reflexive social self is involved in a dynamic process of acting and reflecting on oneself (Mead, 1934). The world is not inhabited by 'normotic' personalities who rigidly conform to behavioural norms (Craib, 1998, p. 9; see Bollas, 1987). Contra to the claims of anti-humanist social theorists (see Althusser, 1969), people are not the 'mere bearers of structure' (Jewkes, 2005, p. 381) who live their lives without their own private experiences and inner negotiations (Craib, 1989, 1994, 1998; Layder, 2004). As Porpora argues, 'only we ourselves are ourselves' (1997, p. 253). Understanding deeply subjective experiences is vital for a detailed appreciation of why identity matters.

Human beings are creative and *imaginative* beings. Wollheim (1984) makes an important distinction between 'acentred' and 'centred' imagining. Mackenzie (2010) captures this difference with the following example:

> If I am imagining a scene or a sequence acentrally, I imagine it from a point of view that is not represented within the imagining. For example, I might imagine a conversation among people walking along a beach. While imagining the content of the conversation as it unfolds, I also visualize the people's faces and body shapes, as well as the surrounding scene. In addition, I might represent to myself the tone of their voices, as well as the sound of the waves crashing behind them, the scent of sea spray in the air, and so on. In imagining this scene acentrally, I imagine it as a kind of moving tableau unfolding before me, where the point of view from which I view the tableau is outside the sequence it represents. In contrast, if I am imagining the same sequence centrally, I imagine it from a point of view that is represented within the content of the imagining. So I imagine that I am one of the people walking along the beach, and the imagined scene and the conversation that is taking place, are represented from my point of view. The protagonist whose point of view I adopt, however, need not be the empirical, or the actual, 'me'. The protagonist may simply be one of the characters in my imagining, but a

character whose persona I occupy from the inside, as it were. That is, the protagonist may be a notional 'me'. (Mackenzie, 2010, p. 124)

Imagining a scene both acentrally and centrally can be a powerful and emotive experience. Imagining being on a relaxing holiday with a good friend can create a strong desire to actually *be* on holiday. In a similar way, imagining a scene of walking into a new house can motivate the imaginer to have their house valued and to consider the benefits of moving. Depending on the content of the imagined projection, both of these examples could produce the opposite affects. After vividly imagining a scene of being on holiday the imaginer may decide that it is not a good idea to ask their friend to go away with them. And the person who imagined a scene where they were walking around their new home may become acutely aware of all the friends they would miss if they moved to a different area. In a similar way, Mackenzie explains how people can take both internal and external perspectives on their own autobiographical memories. By taking an internal perspective it becomes possible to remember events in order to try to relive particular conversations, interactions and experiences. It is also possible to take an external perspective on our autobiographical memories. For example, I can 'recall what happened, what I did, and what I felt in order to make sense of the experience, but without being reinvolved in it' (Mackenzie, 2010, p. 126). People can switch between these two different kinds of remembering just as people can shift between acentred and centred future projections.

It is possible to imagine internal and external perspectives as high levels of self-awareness and self-objectivity allow individuals to reflect on their own experiences (Lippens, 2009). As Becker (1971) emphasised, human beings are "time binding" animals who reflect on their past experiences, contemplate their present circumstances and anticipate future possibilities. This 'time stream' is being continuously scanned and assessed and allows human beings to be their own 'internal observer' (Wollheim, 1984). Marcel (1951) contributes to this debate by making an important distinction between primary and secondary reflection. Primary reflection refers to instances that suddenly

disrupt our usual levels of conscious awareness. For example, whilst sitting on a train I see the ticket collector walking towards me. This observation suddenly prompts me to reflect on where my ticket is. All my concentration is now focused on finding my ticket. I search through my pockets. I look in my bag. I remember I put the ticket in my shirt pocket. I put my bag down, find my ticket and the reflection ends. We experience these kinds of reflections on an everyday basis. Whatever issue needs to be resolved, once it is resolved, the reflection ends. Secondary reflection is a very different type of reflection. Secondary reflection focuses back on the self as the internal observer questions who one is. For example, I am out with friends and find myself laughing at a sexist joke. Everyone in the group is laughing. At the time my reaction feels awkward and disingenuous. The following day I reflect on my memory of the event and observe my behaviour. I feel disappointed about how I responded to that situation. Why did I laugh? Perhaps I value the approval of others more than I thought. Am I really the kind of person who is afraid to stand out from the crowd? Maybe I am not as independent and confidant as I like to think. Another example. I have been convicted and I am sitting in a prison cell. My family relied solely on my income and as a consequence of my actions my wife and two year old child are at home, struggling to survive on welfare payments. What kind of selfish person am I? Why did I sacrifice their wellbeing and happiness? I do not deserve to be a father and so on. As Marcel (1951) notes, secondary reflection critically interrupts our usual and familiar sense of self. Unlike primary reflections, secondary reflections are not easily resolved. As one is both the *subject* and object of such interruptions, this type of disruption directly questions and undermines previous self-conceptions. Difficult questions have to be confronted. Secondary reflections can be transformative in terms of how people view both themselves and others.

Human beings are self-conscious beings who are aware of their own self-awareness and have the imagination to think about future courses of action (Fromm, 1949). This literally means 'that each person is already somewhat

"ahead of himself" simply by virtue of being human' (Becker, 1975, p. 34). As self-conscious beings, individuals are able to take a step back from themselves and monitor their own beliefs, feelings, thoughts, behaviour, emotions, values, intentions and desires. People can reflect on their past experiences and transcend their current situation by projecting themselves into an imagined future (Sartre, 1998). We have the ability to imagine situations both acentrally and centrally (Wollheim, 1984) and can take internal and external perspectives on our autobiographical memories (Mackenzie, 2010). This capacity for self-conscious reflection opens up many challenges and possibilities (Leary, 2004) and can have a lasting effect on how people view themselves (Marcel, 1951). To understand how people can continue to live with a sense of personal continuity *despite* questioning and changing their beliefs, values and desires it is necessary to understand how people tell and retell autobiographical stories about the person they have become.

A coherent sense of self

Our lives are not a series of fragmented and disconnected experiences. As McAdams has shown, people make connections between significant events in their lives and turn their lives into stories:

> If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if *I* want to know *myself*, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story…It is a story I continue to revise, and tell to myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living. (1993, p. 11)

People reflexively construct their own biographical narrative to unify their lives (McAdams & McLean, 2013). A unified sense of self relies on autobiographical memories, private thoughts, actions and feelings and certain experiences and memories will be considered to be particularly important and significant. McAdams defines narrative identity as 'an individual's internalized, evolving, and integrated story of the self' (2008, p. 242), and this ongoing subjective

process of self-interpretation allows people to make sense of their lives. Our ability to self-narrate permits people to select and organise meaningful events into a coherent and overarching story that reflects and defines who they are (Polkinghorne, 1991). Self-narratives are not a factual or all-inclusive 'report on one's life so far' (Presser, 2009, p. 179). Certain past events are incorporated to explain the present and to make sense of an anticipated future self. In contrast to fictional narratives, biographical narratives do not have a clear structure of a 'beginning, middle or an end' (Atkins, 2004, p. 349). Narrative configuration is an active process, and as the master narrative of the narrator changes, so do the experiences, actions and events emphasized by the narrator to forge a coherent and meaningful story. As Williams states:

> The narrative perspective…retains the idea that grasping identity requires the linking together of actions and ideas that occur in the course of biography, but it understands the form of that linkage to involve more than a succession of events registered in consciousness or available to consciousness through memory. Instead, it stresses the claim that such recollected and projected events have to be linked together by the individual as an ongoing process or sequence organised as an unfolding story. (Williams, 2000, p. 81)

Self-narratives, or personal myths (McAdams, 1993), provide a sense of personal continuity to make lived experiences both meaningful and intelligible (Layder, 2004).   Our personal lives are viewed as unfolding, following 'an intelligible trajectory, where present states follow meaningfully from past ones, and the future is anticipated' (Schechtman, 2005, p. 18). An individual's self-conception requires constant monitoring. Experiences are updated, revised and connected in order 'to make sense of those experiences and understand where they are leading us' (Schechtman, 2005, p. 18). Having a self-conception that successfully manages to unify and incorporate different life experiences is something that has to be achieved (Atkins, 2010). Personal continuity and cognitive congruity matter. By strongly 'identifying with or

distancing ourselves from certain characteristics, emotions, desires, and values, we develop a self-conception that brings about the integration of the self over time' (Mackenzie, 2010, p. 12).

Narrative plots include high points (*when life is going well*), low points (*when life becomes difficult*) and turning points (*experiences that lead to significant personal change*) (Smith & Liehr, 2014). There are many experiences that can undermine and challenge narrative coherence and foster an identity crisis (Brison, 1999). Serious accidents, violent assaults, sexual violence, illness, divorce, imprisonment, aging and bereavement can all lead people to question their previously coherent and stable sense of self. One way people manage to cope with challenges to their sense of self-identity is to identify possible benefits that have emerged from such experiences (Frank, 1995). Seligman's (2011) research on post-traumatic growth is a good example of how people have managed to incorporate incidents of extreme adversity into life affirming self-narratives. Seligman provides the example of Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum, an MD urologist, who was captured and held as a prisoner of war in Iraq. Her helicopter attracted enemy fire as it was flying over the Iraqi desert. The tail boom was blown off, the helicopter crashed, and five out of the eight person crew were killed. She survived the crash, but both of her arms and one of her legs were broken. She was captured and taken prisoner by the Iraqi forces. The treatment she received from her captors was brutal and she was sexually assaulted by the soldiers. Reflecting on her experience she identified the significant ways the succession of traumatic experiences changed her view of both herself and others. The main changes were in relation to how she related to her patients ('*the concerns of my patients were no longer academic*'); her personal strength ('*I felt far better equipped to be a leader and commander…I feel much less anxiety or fear when faced with challenges*'); an appreciation of her family ('*I became a better, more attentive parent and spouse…No doubt, coming that close to losing them made me appreciate them more*'); an openness towards issues of

spirituality ('*An out of body experience changed my perceptions*') and priorities ('*While I had always organized my life into the A, B and C piles of priority, I became much more rigorous about dispensing with the C pile*'). Rhonda's story captures how personal tragedy can inspire positive forms of self-transformation (See Seligman, 2011, p. 160). As Seligman explains, post-traumatic growth 'is characterized by renewed appreciation of being alive, enhanced personal strength, acting on new possibilities, improved relationships, and spiritual deepening, all of which often follow tragedy' (2011, p. 161).

Unless people manage to successfully integrate traumatic events into a revised, updated and meaningful self-narrative, their sense of ontological order can rapidly descend into existential chaos and narrative wreckage (Frank, 1995). Individual self-narratives may be pessimistic and self-condemning, but as the example of Brigadier General Rhonda Cornum demonstrates, they can also be life affirming and provide individuals with a renewed and coherent sense of meaning and purpose. Criminological research has also shown how self-narratives can be revised and re-written in order to cope with a sense of personal crisis. Whilst sociologists and criminologists have long paid attention to offender accounts (Lyman & Scott, 1989; Matza, 1964; Sykes, 1958), more recent research has revealed how offenders create and re-write their life narratives (see Brookman, 2015; Presser & Sandberg, 2015). Narrative criminology is especially insightful for understanding how people manage emotionally difficult lifecourse transitions that disturb 'the orderliness of life' and 'bring the meaning of life itself into question' (Crawley & Sparks, 2005, p. 349). A particularly unsettling transition involves having to accommodate to the mundane routines and rituals of prison life (Cohen & Taylor, 1972; 1995; Crewe, 2009b; Jewkes, 2012). In addition to being forcibly removed from their usual everyday familiar environment, prisoners may suffer from the harm they have caused others (also see van der Kolk, 2015). As Maruna and Ramsden state, 'It is not uncommon for individuals

in prison to experience profound emotional emptiness, shame, and existential despair' (2004, p. 35).

Whilst autobiographies are never 'uniquely' true (Bruner, 1993, p. 39), creating a sense of meaning and purpose out of an uncertain and chaotic existence is a challenging and difficult task. Drawing on the research findings of Ramsden (2002), Maruna (2013) and Ugelvik (2015) the following sections will consider different forms of narrative response used by offenders. Before addressing these issues, I will first examine how imprisonment disrupts and upsets narrative coherence.

The experience of imprisonment

Whilst there are many lifecourse transitions that produce disequilibrium and require some form of readjustment (Becker, 1997), there are few transitions as difficult and demanding as adapting to life behind bars (Crewe, 2009a; Liebling, 2012; Toch, 1996). The pervasive experience of imprisonment can result in severe emotional disturbance (Arrigo et al, 2011; Kupers, 1999; Polizzi, 2017; Rhodes, 2004; Toch, 1992). These are not disturbances that can be easily resolved (Harvey & Smedley, 2010; Saunders, 2001). When people face such dreadful circumstances one's whole sense of self may become uncertain (Crawley & Sparks, 2005). The following prisoner describes his new life within prison walls:

They have separated me from my family, deprived me of touching my young boy. They have hidden the sun, moon and stars from my view, exchanged their concrete and steel for earth and flowers and everything soft. The wind through my hair is replaced by their rules in my ears…They have tried to negate my existence - and almost succeeded. (Prisoner cited in May, 1999, p. 56)

After being separated from their family, job, social life and friends, prisoners are forced to adapt to living in a tightly monitored, controlled, structured and unfamiliar environment. In this strictly timetabled environment presentations of self are precarious (Goffman, 1959) and previously familiar identity markers including their clothes, possessions, hobbies and leisure pursuits are restricted. Prisoners are constantly observed, limited possessions can be searched and private conversations overheard. In this closed, hostile and mortifying environment (Goffman, 1961), prisoners can be exposed to sexual assaults, intimidation and violence. A personal sense of control and autonomy is challenged and inmates may experience feelings of anxiety, confusion, anger, fear and helplessness (Liebling, 2012; Sykes, 1958). Prisoners have to adapt to a new 'universe of meaning' (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). As Toch's (1996) research clearly demonstrated, this is an environment where privacy, safety, structure, support, emotional feedback, activity and freedom are greatly restricted. These 'environmental concerns' generate a vast amount of pressure on inmates. Cohen and Taylor's (1972) study of prison life further documented the claustrophobia experienced by inmates and explained how the prisoners' experiences of time, trust, friendship, work, loneliness, aging, privacy and self-identity are affected. Research studies on the psychosocial pains of imprisonment have shown how the experience of being 'disculturated' (Somner, 1959) from our everyday familiar and predictable environment can have a shattering impact on an individual's sense of self and psychological well-being (Mills & Kendall, 2010). Anxiety, fear, isolation, bullying, loneliness, depression, trauma, violence, uncertainty and powerlessness 'are all part of the experience of prison life' (Liebling & Maruna, 2005, p. 3).

The experience of imprisonment can dramatically disrupt narrative coherence. Ramsden's (2002) research with prisoners is particularly insightful in relation to how offenders tell stories about themselves. His research findings are based on qualitative interviews with 30 male persistent offenders. Interviews with the prisoners were conducted in two separate prisons in the United Kingdom. The 30 prisoners interviewed for this study had 'a combined total of 1,068

convictions and 291 custodial sentences' (Maruna & Ramsden, 2004, p.135). The following responses were provided after the men were asked how they would characterise their life so far:

What a waste! There have been good points like me kids and women but most of it has been a waste. I would like to start again-but you can't. (40-year-old, 10th prison sentence)

I mean, I'm not silly, in the sense of-this is a waste of life. We know that. I mean put all my sentences together and I've probably spent 9 years, probably 10 years, out of my life, a whole 10 years in through the prison service, through the system. (42-year-old, sixth prison sentence)

(cited in Maruna & Ramsden, 2004, p. 136)

Such pessimistic accounts were provided by the majority of respondents in Ramsden's study. These accounts reflected their view of the difficulties and obstacles preventing the men from reforming their lives (see Bennett, 2012). Another research question focused on what would need to happen to avoid engaging in future criminal behaviour:

Winning the lottery. If I had the money, Guv, to do what I wanted to do, then there'd be no need to go thieving or earning dollars the way I have to do. (47-year-old, 8th prison sentence)

Um, death? Yeah, that's it. Because when I get out of here, fair enough I've got loads and loads of fucking good intentions, but it's like anything else, one little thing can smash it all to pieces. (41-year-old, 12th prison sentence)

(cited in Maruna & Ramsden, 2004, p. 136)

Maruna and Ramsden explain how the men justified their pessimistic assessments by focusing on their inability to escape their past. Their past actions now labelled them as a criminal, a label that both excluded and condemned:

> It's just a case of, "Fuck off, criminal, we don't want to know you," and that's it. And you'll find that nearly all the lads in this jail, or any other jail, when they get out of prison, they go through the same shit, and it's bang out of order. (41-year-old, 12th prison sentence)

> Well, a prime example is, you've got a criminal record and if you're stopped in the street (by the cops)...as far as they're concerned...you are a criminal from your past...It's so frustrating because everybody gets this impression that because you're a criminal you'll always be so, it's hard to get away from it. (41-year-old, 13th prison sentence)

> (cited in Maruna & Ramsden, 2004, p. 137)

Many of the prisoners were pessimistic about their chances of living a different kind of life. There were too many practical, personal and social difficulties to overcome. However, not all interviewees recounted such 'sad tales' (Goffman, 1961). One of the prisoners recognised the need to understand himself in order to create a new self-identity. Other interviewees had started to develop their own redemption script:

> I look back and I think I was misunderstood, you know what I mean. My intentions was good but methods was wrong, sort of thing. ...I think now, as you get older, you get more religious and spiritual and I'm kind of like looking at it that way. I know I've done wrong. ... And I tend to think I can make up for it. ...I've always tried to pay for my crimes. ...I've always tried to pay penance, that sort of thing. So I think there is still hope for me. (41-year-old, eighth prison sentence)

> (cited in Maruna & Ramsden, 2004, p. 137)

A redemption narrative is a coherent, meaningful and persuasive narrative used by inmates to convince both themselves and others they are capable of living a very different, more productive, life. As Maruna (2013) has explained, the redemption script begins by identifying the narrator as someone who has previously been a victim, a person who has unfortunately been subjected to difficult circumstances and was forced to adapt and survive. Yet despite living with such dire and tragic circumstances, the narrator now recognises how their adaptation led to a 'viscous cycle of crime and imprisonment' (Maruna 2013, p. 87), and as a consequence they have not been able to become the person they should be. The experience of imprisonment has allowed the narrator to reflect on their behaviour, recognise previous mistakes and acknowledge their own personal limitations. Maruna described this process as 'making good'. This is different from 'knifing off' one's troubled and shameful past (see Elder and Shanahan, 2006). Whilst Maruna's research has been criticised for unwittingly accepting and endorsing 'a process of desistance and offender treatment that only furthers status quo conditions' (Arrigo, 2015, p. 9; also see Arrigo & Milovanovic, 2009), his research is important for appreciating the personal transformations prisoners can experience. In a redemptive narrative the narrator's bleak and often traumatic past is fully acknowledged, incorporated and rewritten into a meaningful and enabling story. The following example illustrates this point:

> I wasn't happy with my identity before I came in, I felt a failure. Now I need to prove I can do what I'm doing. I'm doing an Open University degree…I read newspapers and watch TV, but select things that are a lot more intellectual than I would have before. It's all part of the re-invention of myself. I've matured more in the past five years than in the 34 years before. I'm studying Ancient Greek and I read proper newspapers. If I'd been put inside when I was sixteen, I might have turned out a better person. I was a wimp when I came in; now I'm much more assertive.
>
> (Prisoner cited in Jewkes, 2005, p. 375)

As the above example demonstrates, the prisoner claims that the experience of imprisonment has made him more assertive and allowed him to re-invent himself. Rather than feeling like a failure, this prisoner is now studying for a degree and trying to become a better person than they used to be. The process of *making* good 'involves more self-reconstruction than amputation' (Maruna, 2013, p. 87) and allows the narrator to feel a sense of empowerment and personal agency. Redemptive narratives provide an example of what Frankl (2004) described as 'tragic optimism'. Frankl's work has shown how even the most extreme form of human suffering can be a source of both insight and power (Frankl, 2000, 2004, 2010; also see Hardie-Bick, 2011; Jewkes, 2005). If people are able to find meaning in their traumatic experiences they can use their experiences to gain personal insights and become a stronger person.

Narratives of exclusion

Ramsden (2002) and Maruna (2013) have shown how prisoners can protect themselves against the strains of institutional captivity by constructing optimistic self-narratives by re-evaluating significant events to create a new sense of meaning and purpose. Nevertheless, recent prison research has shown how offender narratives can also be divisive and exclusionary. Ugelvik carried out important research on 'practices of exclusion and hierarchy building' and argues that such narrative practices should be 'interpreted as part of the self's work on itself' (Ugelvik, 2015, p. 23). Ugelvik's ethnographic research was carried out in Norway's Oslo Prison, a male only facility with a capacity of housing 392 prisoners. Research observations and interview data were collected over the course of one year and most of the prisoners he spent time with identified as being 'proper' criminals. Proper criminals is a label the prisoners applied to themselves to indicate their solidarity with those who had committed the type of crimes accepted by the prison culture. Typical examples included property crime, drug related offences and violent crime. As long as the victims were not women or children, such crimes were usually

accepted by other prisoners. On the other hand, rape and sex offenses were condemned by the prison culture. These prisoners isolated themselves from the other prisoners and often withdrew from the usual everyday interactions on the wing. Rapists and sex offenders were believed to be immoral and the narratives used about 'truly evil' or 'perverse' prisoners served to differentiate the 'proper' criminals.

Ugelvik shows how the proper criminal's positioning of the immoral other is an important part of the prisoner's ethical self-work. Prisoners claimed that those who deliberately target and intentionally hurt 'weak' and 'defenceless' women deserve to be excluded. On one occasion during his fieldwork Ugelvik observed a prisoner pointing his finger at another prisoner (the prisoner used his finger to represent a pistol) and pretended to shoot him with the appropriate sound effects. Tom, one of the other prisoners, explained to Ugelvik what happened:

> Tom: That guy [the one who got "shot"], you know, he's one of those rapists. Damn, he took a seventeen-year-old girl and raped her for hours. Fuck! But he got what he deserved, too; an Albanian guy in here, he has the body mass of me and you combined, took him out. One blow, that was it. He stayed down. Another guy, he was put in the washing machine. They have these big machines down at the laundry. They just threw him inside and started the cycle.
>
> Thomas [Ugelvik]: What? But that could kill him?
>
> Tom: Heh, heh, that's right, that could kill you, no doubt, it gets hot as hell. And it takes a few minutes to stop the machine once it's started. And you can't open the door right away, there's a time stop. But he made it that time.
>
> (Ugelvik, 2015, p. 29-30)

Even though violent attacks were not common occurrences in Oslo Prison, talk about violence and the threat of imminent violence were commonplace. The

prisoners constantly reminded the 'scum' that they would not forget about or forgive them of their crimes. Prisoners frequently told each other stories about the righteous violence other prisoners had been subjected to. These stories were exchanged in common areas of the prison and were likely to have been overheard by those who feared attack. The 'proper' prisoners felt it was right to intimidate those considered to be sick, immoral perverts. Telling intimidating stories or aggressively banging on a rapist's cell door was accepted and encouraged.

Rapists and sex offenders were constantly reminded that they were not part of the prison community. An unusual situation involving one of the prisoners further emphasised this division. Towards the end of his fieldwork the prisoners discovered that a prisoner who was both liked and accepted by the men was actually a rapist. The prisoners were able to discover this by reading the courtroom reports in the newspaper. Although the newspaper reporters attempted to ensure the prisoner's anonymity, the men soon realised the prisoner's true identity. This prisoner originally claimed to have been arrested for an 'episode of drunken violence'. On his court date the newspaper reports described a very different type of crime. The prisoners realised they had been deceived. Unknown to them at the time, they had actually been socialising with a rapist:

> It's the worst, the most fucked up, you know, that he has said something else all this time, that he has been taken in like one of the guys. He seemed like a nice enough bloke, but fuck, what a pig, a bastard like that, but he will get what's coming to him, this will explode, mark my words. We are all pissed off at him, [prisoner X] is really pissed off, he went to school with him in the same class, they talked, you know.

> (Prisoner cited in Ugelvik, 2015, p. 33)

Prisoner X hated the fact that he had been tricked: 'I'm going to make sure that he remembers what he's done. Fucking, fucking rapist! I get physically sick

almost, just talking about him' (cited in Ugelvik, 2015, p. 34). Although the prisoners in Ugelvik's study believed they were all treated the same by the prison management, many prisoners rejected this form of equality. The narratives of exclusion used by the 'proper' prisoners positioned a small group of prisoners as immoral, sick, perverted and evil. Rapists and sex offenders transgressed the rules of the prison culture and their transgression of this ethical code allowed prisoners to symbolically reposition themselves as morally superior and trustworthy. As Ugelvik explains, the narratives used by these prisoners to divide, exclude and stigmatise provides an important defence mechanism. Excluding and intimidating the 'immoral' prisoners allowed the 'proper' prisoners to gain a strong sense of belonging. The men could embrace feelings of moral superiority and feel part of an ethical community of professional criminals.

Discussion

Creating a sense of meaning and purpose out of an uncertain and chaotic existence is a challenging and difficult task. It is understandable that one of the main narrative responses to imprisonment are self-condemning and pessimistic. These men are reacting to very real circumstances and personal set-backs that have restricted their life chances. They may have experienced a poor education and criminogenic environments. Their social connections may be severely limited or non-existent. They may be struggling to cope with traumatic history abuse and neglect. They may also be having to cope with powerful feelings of guilt and shame about the harm they have caused others (see Liebling, 2009; Maruna, 2013; Wheatley, 2009). Prisoners have often been exposed to the direst circumstances and it is of little surprise that some of the interviewees in Ramsden's (2002) research described their lives as a 'waste'. These men faced many obstacles and difficulties that restricted them from turning their lives around. Some were also open about the likelihood of engaging in future criminal behaviour. In addition to this, there was an awareness of how the label of being a 'criminal' stopped them from escaping

their past. This was a label that both condemned and excluded. Self-condemning narratives are one form of response to the existential facets of institutional captivity. These offenders self-identified as someone who engaged in criminal behaviour in the past and would most likely do so in the future.

Not all prisoners offered such sad tales (Goffman, 1961). As I have discussed, the experience of imprisonment can severely disrupt narrative coherence and encourage prisoners to engage in what Marcel (1951) refers to as secondary reflections. Secondary reflections, reflections where one is both the subject and object of their own critical judgements, are not easily resolved and some prisoners constructed a more positive self-narrative to manage feelings of shame, guilt and inadequacy. Prisoners cannot change their past, but they can re-evaluate and re-interpret significant experiences, acknowledge and understand the harm they may have caused and make sense of their behaviour by taking responsibility for their choices and actions (see Vaughan, 2007). The challenge is to create and develop a more life-affirming narrative, a narrative that both acknowledges and incorporates problematic and fragmented experiences into a meaningful story. This can be achieved by examining and re-examining the past, reinterpreting the significance of key events and understanding previously unacknowledged motivations, aspirations and beliefs. Replotting autobiographical constructions can be transformative. If traumatic events and experiences can be reconceptualised an overwhelming sense of existential despair and hopelessness may be replaced with a new sense of coherence and meaning. Directly confronting painful experiences can lead to new forms of self-knowledge (Lifton, 2005). Previous difficulties now take a more prominent role in the restructured self-narrative. How one has directly confronted such difficulties and obstacles may become a major part of an internalised life story that provides a new sense of order, meaning, stability and purpose.

Ugelvik's research reveals a darker side of how narratives are used by prisoners. Constructing a more life-affirming redemptive narrative can enable individuals to find a renewed sense of meaning in their suffering, but self-narratives can

also be used to exclude and condemn others. Ugelvik shows how 'proper' prisoners differentiated themselves from the 'immoral' and 'evil' others. Identifying with the we/they demarcations of their own in-group provided a way for prisoners to achieve strong sense of belonging, solidarity and empowerment (Hardie-Bick, 2016; Hogg, 2004; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Not only were these men excluded from social gatherings on the prison wing, they were also physically intimated by the prisoners. There was always an imminent threat of violence. As Hogg (2007) has shown, categorising people as being either in-group or out-group members can be beneficial for providing clear guidelines concerning who to like, who to hate, as well as providing clear instructions in relation to how one should think and behave. This form of 'associational distancing' (Snow & Anderson, 1993) is an important psychological defence mechanism. Despite their crimes, they were not like those 'perverted' men. Their categorisation of 'evil' others was an important distancing technique and part of the inmates ethical self-work. This performative identity work repositioned the prisoners as morally superior. By strongly identifying with their chosen in-group these men were able to feel they belonged to a respectable and trustworthy group of professional criminals.

Conclusion

May (1999, p. 54) makes a distinction between the freedom of *doing* and the freedom of *being*. Freedom of doing refers to 'the capacity to pause in the face of stimuli' before committing to a particular course of action. This kind of existential freedom, a freedom that involves selecting from a range of possible alternatives, 'is experienced by each of us hundreds of times every day'. The second, deeper level of freedom, the freedom of being, refers to the '*context* out of which the urge to act emerges'. This essential freedom, or freedom of being, captures our ability to critically reflect and to stand back from ourselves (Marcel, 1951). This is an important distinction. Even when people are powerless to change their circumstances, they still have their freedom of being, the 'ultimate freedom' to choose their attitude

towards how to view and respond to their situation (see Bettelheim, 1991; Frankl, 2004, 2010; Jewkes, 2012; Todorov, 2000). Research on how people construct and reconstruct their own unique personal narrative emphasises this freedom of being (McAdams, 1993, 2008). People are self-reflexive (Giddens, 1991) and can view themselves from both an internal and external perspective (Wollheim, 1984; Mackenzie, 2010). As self-conscious imaginative beings (Becker, 1971; Fromm, 1949), it is also possible to imagine future possibilities and scenarios (Leary, 2004). Biographical narratives are reflexively constructed, but how they are constructed, and the range of possible (re)constructions are also limited. Research on offender narratives are important as this research highlights how biographical constructions are constrained by the lived experiences of the narrator. Human beings are self-directing, inquisitive and imaginative beings whose self-narratives change and evolve, but the ability people have to rewrite their self-narrative is not 'unhindered by social forces' (Layder, 2004, p. 159). People are agentic but they are not 'self-creating chameleons' (Craib, 1998, p. 7).

Narratives emerge out of the impact of an individual's lived experience. Research on how offenders self-narrate supports Layder's research on narrative identity. Narratives should be seen as 'emergent' rather than 'disposable' storylines (Layder, 2004, p. 17). The latter 'disposable' or open ended approach is problematic as it 'suggests that people have unfettered mastery over their destiny' (Layder, 2004, p. 18). No matter how traumatic, a person's living conditions, life chances and problematic relationships cannot be simply erased:

In this sense the self is the outcome of the dual influence of volitional decisions on behalf of the person as they buck against the constraints of life circumstances. The self is never freely revisable, it is always conditioned by life events, relationships and social circumstances. Thus the evolution or personal growth of the self is better captured by the notion of an

'emergent narrative' which is able to incorporate this dialectical process. (Layder, 2004, p. 18)

This process reflects the importance of both agency and circumstance. As a response to the turmoil of confinement, prisoners often become their own critical observer, standing back from their own self to assess and question who they are. Some prisoners feel their problems and personal circumstances are too overwhelming, and this is reflected in their pessimistic and often self-condemning narratives. Even those prisoners who have reconsidered their lives, made new connections, reconstructed and reclaimed their personal story are still restricted by their life experiences. Narratives have to be convincing. They have to be believable to both the narrator and audience. It is often by recognising the emotional impact of problematic events that can create a new sense of meaning and purpose (Frankl, 2004, 2010). A new sense of unity and purpose is found by *incorporating* difficult experiences into a more enabling, adaptive and meaningful story.

Maruna argues that recidivist offenders find themselves facing 'something like a brick wall' (2013, p. 55). There are two ways of viewing this wall. The first way may recognise that the wall is 'surmountable' but that it is also 'enough of an obstacle to make most turn around and "head back"', back to a life of crime and often back to prison. The other way of viewing this wall involves a logical and meaningful self-story to recognise why they are facing a wall and helps the prisoner manage feelings of guilt and shame. A convincing and persuasive story allows prisoners to 'redeem themselves', and as Maruna argues, without a revised self-narrative offenders 'would likely interpret the brick wall facing them as reason enough to turn back' (2013, p. 55). Ugelvik's research is important as he reveals a darker side to this ongoing and imaginative process. Whilst there are two ways of viewing a brick wall, Ugelvik's study shows how prisoners' self-narrative identity work can construct psychological walls between offenders. These walls are not viewed as surmountable. Redemptive narratives and narratives of exclusion

are both capable of helping prisoners cope with the pressures of institutional confinement. Redemptive narratives provide offenders with a sense of hope, whereas narratives that intentionally exclude others provide offenders with a strong sense of belonging and in-group solidarity. Self-narratives certainly have the potential to be both enabling and life-affirming, but the same process of identity work can also result in divisive and exclusionary practices. Whilst prisoners who construct powerful 'them' and 'us' narratives may well interpret the 'brick wall' as a reason to turn back to a life of crime, their narrative constructions will continue to provide feelings of moral superiority towards offenders who transgress the ethical rules of prison culture. This too is an important defence against the laws of captivity that attempt to inscribe the inhumanity of prisoners. Reclaiming a sense of personal identity and engaging in ethical self-work can be personally transformative, but the ability to self-narrate can also lead to the derogation of others and serve to legitimise brutal forms of violence and social exclusion.

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