

Co-producing Desistance Opportunities with Women in Prison: Reflections of a Sports Coach Developer

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ABSTRACT

The following paper provides a sport coach developer's reflective narrative account of his first experience of delivering a football-based development programme within a women's prison. The account highlights the notion that initial 'up-front' desistance work can be a process of co-production where all those involved engage in a journey of discovery in which the seeds of desistance are planted and begin to take root. The *interplay* between practitioners and service users involved navigating issues including vulnerability, trust and the impact of environmental factors, as well as highlights the idea that initial desistance efforts result from co-produced efforts between the person initiating change and those tasked with supporting this process. The paper calls for greater attention to the lived experience of *facilitating* early desistance transitions, as this will result in furthering our understanding of desistance processes.

INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognized within the study of criminology that those who are involved in offending will, at one time or another, cease this involvement (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Yet, interestingly, attempts to understand the processes through which individuals move away from offending (also referred to as 'desistance from crime') have only gained prominence in recent years (King, 2013a). While it is generally accepted that desistance is a process of identity transformation "that is produced through an *interplay* between individual choices, and a range of wider social forces, institutional and societal practices which are beyond the control of the individual" (Farrall & Bowling, 1999, p. 261), questions remain about how desistance from crime is *actually* undertaken and subsequently maintained.

In part, this may be because the majority of desistance research has tended to focus on the latter stages of the desistance process. Perhaps the most well-known typology of desistance was offered by Maruna & Farrall (2004, p. 4) who propose a two stage "labelling theory of desistance", where "primary desistance" concerns lulls in periods of offending, whilst

“secondary desistance” concerns movement from non-offending “to the assumption of a role or identity of a non-offender or a ‘changed person’”. Subsequently McNeil (2016) proposed an additional tertiary stage of desistance which involves recognition by others that change has occurred, along with the development of a sense of belonging for the individual concerned (also see Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). Given the zig-zag nature of desistance processes, with regular lulls throughout a criminal career, these lulls did not warrant much theoretical interest in comparison to the latter stages of the desistance process (secondary desistance) where we can begin to understand how an individual becomes an ex-offender (Maruna et al., 2004). The concern here, however, is that such a position neglects a lot of the ‘up-front’ work that goes into initiating desistance transitions in the first place, along with factors which may kick start desistance efforts “in the minds and lives of individuals *on the threshold of change*” (Healy, 2012, p. 35 – original emphasis). Studying the early stages of the desistance process may be valuable. King (2013b, p. 137) suggests that “the mechanisms which underpin primary desistance may be different from those which underpin secondary desistance, [and that] experiences during primary desistance may provide an insight into how secondary desistance develops and also into the specific areas which may be more appropriate for intervention”.

The early stages of desistance have recently received increased academic scrutiny (Goodwin, 2020; King, 2013b). A common theme is that maintaining desistance efforts is rarely a solo endeavour. Indeed, Weaver (2013) in her work on the relational nature of desistance argues that our actions are, in part, down to a reflection of how we see ourselves and also how we see ourselves reflected in the eyes of others (also see Maruna et al., 2004). Therefore, while it is important to remember that the desistance process is agentially driven, requiring both the will of the individual to desist as well the ways in which to do so, we must also consider the role of the supporting players in this process. Maruna (2001, p. 96) noted that while desistance “almost always came from within”, there was usually a “catalyst for change” – an outside force – which “removes the brick wall, but it is up to the individual to ‘take-off’”. Whilst it is acknowledged that there are complex broader structures that can undermine the desistance process, the role of external forces in supporting the desistance process is increasingly documented, with some arguing that positive testimony from such forces can solidify “the initial

tentative moves towards desistance” (King, 2013a, p. 159; also see Rex, 1999). Interestingly, firsthand narrative accounts from this outside force or ‘catalyst for change’ are largely absent from the available desistance literature apart from scholarship surrounding peer mentoring (Stacer & Roberts, 2018). It is this concern the current article addresses.

The Twinning Project involves a partnership between Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) and professional football clubs that links prisons in England and Wales with a local professional football club. Through the Twinning Project prisoners engage in football-based development programmes which aim to improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing, whilst also aiming to improve life-chances on release. This article presents a reflexive account of the lead author’s first experience of delivering a Twinning Project course in a women’s prison in the south of England to a cohort of women who (for the most part) were due to be released within a few months of completing the course. Access to sport and physical activity (SPA) within the prison environment is a core component of prison policy, with prison rule 29 stating that “arrangements shall be made for [...] a convicted prisoner to participate in physical education for two hours a week on average” (The Prison Rules, 1999). This rule is informed by legislation from the United Nations (2015) and the European Prison Rules (2006) regarding access to SPA. A limited, but expanding, body of literature suggests that SPA can be significant elements of daily life for some prisoners (Norman, 2017), and that these experiences may result in positive outcomes including promoting mental health inside prison and supporting successful reintegration post-release (Meek, 2014; Meek & Lewis, 2014a, 2014b; Norman, 2015).

Yet while research has demonstrated that SPA within a prison environment has been considered valuable in supporting rehabilitation efforts, it has also found that “availability of such opportunities [are] locally contingent and highly variable between institutions” (Meek and Lewis, 2014a, p. 167). Indeed, it has been argued that to be most effective “tailored sports provision should be embedded within multimodal interventions which draw on internal and external partnerships and promote opportunities for ongoing sporting participation” (Meek & Lewis, 2012, p. 117). A national initiative such as the Twinning Project allowed for another avenue for engagement with SPA within the prison environment. The Twinning Project course delivery combines classroom

activities, for example learning about the qualities of an effective coach, and practical coaching sessions which provide participants with an introduction to coaching football. The course is delivered over a minimum of 36 guided learning hours. The intention here was not to develop competitive footballers, but rather the course sought to develop a range of qualities and skills in the learners such as teamwork, trust, resilience, and confidence through a range of football related activities both in the classroom and on the football pitch. The women who took part in the course were recruited by prison staff who believed that the women who were selected would be the most willing (or least unwilling) to participate in this pilot project. It was important for all stakeholders involved that this course was perceived to be successful by the women involved to ensure that the Twinning Project would continue and therefore provide opportunities for other women to be involved in the future. Minimising the risk of the project being unsuccessful for the women involved was a primary consideration and therefore the recruitment of the women for this pilot was deliberate and focused.

The account highlights the importance of agency and identity, and the relational dynamics at play in the early formation of desistance efforts by the women enrolled in the programme.¹ Tom is a sports coach developer with 20 years of experience coaching at different stages of the player development pathway, from the grass roots (recreational) through to academy level (elite). As a sport coach developer Tom's role supports the development of athletes, usually young people playing football, and the people who support the athletes, such as tutors and mentors. In this instance, Tom utilised the skills of a tutor to deliver a football-based coaching course. This, however, was his first experience of delivering within a prison setting. While this provides a valuable opportunity to explore the experiences of those who potentially facilitate and support initial desistance transitions, it also allows for an exploration of the lived experience of delivering within a criminal justice setting for the first time. While there are academic accounts reflecting on the experience of conducting prison research for the first time (Quina et al., 2007; Liebling, 1999), there are few accounts of this experience from non-academic outsiders.

Some of the ideas presented in Tom's narrative reflect the available desistance literature, with themes such as identity transformation (Maruna, 2001) and co-production (Weaver, 2013), along with more practical factors

such as vulnerability and the importance of listening (King, 2013b; Rex, 1999) all evident in the account provided. Tom's account also provides an example of how tensions that arose on the pitch through their engagement in competitive sport enabled the women involved to manage confrontation and achieve a resolution. There are, however, contextual insights rooted within the discussion which bring to life the 'up-front' work which must be undertaken by each of the women attempting to change their lives. Tom draws on his experience as a sports coach developer to reflect on the experience of delivering a football-based development programme *with* a cohort of women in an unfamiliar environment. As such, the narrative provided below offers a unique insight into the ways in which early desistance transitions are relationally developed, along with an understanding of the ways in which this brick wall is removed, one brick at a time.

This paper was inspired by the work of both Weaver and Weaver (2013) and Hart and Healy (2018) who call for a greater use of complete insider narratives within criminology. Both sets of authors adopt a convict criminology approach, which aims to "aims to authentically represent offenders' lived experiences, correct misconceptions about crime and criminal justice and formulate policy and practice recommendations" (Hart & Healy, 2018, p. 104). While this paper is not within the remit of convict criminology, it does answer the call for the greater use of first-person narratives in desistance studies. This is significant because whilst "unbroken narratives reveal the messy, complex and often contradictory reality of human existence" (ibid, p. 104), they are often omitted from criminological research. Where such narratives are presented they tend to "have been fragmented, lifted out of context, trimmed to support particular criminological theories or policy initiatives in ways that make nonsense of taking offender perspectives seriously" (Weaver & Weaver, 2013, p. 260). While the paper provides a discussion of the links between academic theorizing and the lived experience of facilitating initial desistance transitions, the reflexive accounts provided below are provided in their entirety, unedited by the second and third authors. It is hoped that the discussion will contribute to the field of desistance studies by highlighting the 'up-front' work that goes into supporting initial desistance transitions and the importance of reflexivity in the process.

TOM'S STORY

Misconceptions About Prison

Before I had any connection with the prison world, I can honestly say my view of prison and the people inside it was one dimensional. I had never seen myself working in prison and, looking back, I had some fixed views on the purpose of the prison establishment. I looked at the prisoners in a narrow context and generalized my feelings to people in this environment. I was not able to think about some of the circumstances and wider context of why people may have been involved in crime. Everything changed when I started to deliver football coaching in prison. Now, my understanding of prison, and the role it plays in society, is transformed. I can appreciate that going to prison is the punishment, but life for the people in prison should be a journey to return to society the best possible version of yourself, whenever that may be. Ultimately prison is not full of prisoners. It is full of people.

Alien in Your World

As someone who had spent their whole career working in coaching and football at various levels of the game, predominantly with young people, stepping into the prison environment to lead a football coaching and coach development programme was one of the most extreme environments that I have ever been placed into. Building on this change of coaching environment, while also being a man in a women's prison, was more significant than I had anticipated it to be. Over time, I realised that a significant amount of these women's experiences with men had been complicated at best, and necessarily it took time to build trust and rapport. I believe that I was able to gain credibility and some social capital by demonstrating to them that I was stepping into something outside of my expertise by coming and coaching in prison. The simple use of a smile, handshake, and investing time to understand the women as people went a long way to building strong bonds. Before stepping through the gate and into the prison I was (understandably so) apprehensive and anxious about what might unfold in front of me when coaching in prison. I had never knowingly spent any time with people who had committed serious crimes and the thought of being placed into a space which was completely unknown to me felt unsettling to say the least. However, when the initial nervousness and apprehension fell away, the experience of supporting people in an unorthodox environment was one

of the most humbling, impactful, and important moments of my coaching career. The opportunity to step into the prison estate as an alien in their world gave me a privileged opportunity to see prison life with fresh eyes, from a different point of view, and completely changed my perception of the criminal justice system. It also highlighted the potential that exists to transform lives on a human level.

From quite early on prison life felt cold, unwelcoming, and hostile. The tall walls, wire, cell doors, and regulation reinforced what you would expect from a prison in a physical sense. However, to support positive change it felt important to dig deeper than the aesthetics of the environment and to truly connect with people. This was not an environment that I had been familiar coaching in and the football content of the coaching course was not familiar to the women involved. As a result of this the prison landscape provided a context to co-create an environment where everyone was playing an active part as an architect of learning. The co-creation of the environment allowed individuals to take ownership of the skills, confidence, and self-belief they needed to reinvent themselves and reconnect with forgotten identities. Football was the vehicle for inspiring transformational change and was certainly not the most important element of the course. People regularly talk about football being an “international language” and the term “the power of football” is commonly associated with social engagement projects. On this project, football had made an introduction between club and prison, however the importance of developing strong interpersonal relationships and genuinely caring for the person in front of you enabled the bond to flourish.

Shaping an Effective Micro-environment

On the morning of day one of the coaching programme I met 16 women who sat on two benches in the prison gymnasium with their heads down, arms crossed, with no desire to connect. Their body language demonstrated that there was an apprehension about making a connection, and possibly a complicated and challenging relationship with learning or meeting new people. The environment in which these women lived their lives was heavily controlled and lacked a large degree of autonomy. Thus, it was important to develop an environment which was, on the surface, friendly, informal, and interesting, but on a deeper level was psychologically safe and co-created. At the prison I was fortunate to work with a group of progressive and other-centred prison officers who genuinely cared about the women in

their supervision. Together, we made changes to the physical environment that the women entered on a weekly basis, which played a significant part in building trust, relationships, and confidence to be themselves. The walls were covered in positive imagery with key words and phrases linking to several of the development intentions for the coaching course. Beyond the setup of the room, all learners were given a green Twinning Project kit, which figuratively and literally aided each individual stepping out of prison and into a micro-environment that was radically different to the rest of prison life. The learning environment proved vital to helping the women have positive, authentic, and memorable experiences regarding the football course. Greeting each of the women with a smile, a high five or a handshake reduced formality, and facilitated an environment that was shared and organic. This environment was not mine that the women entered, but rather it was something that was mutual between us. This approach afforded each individual the opportunity to take responsibility for the standards of the environment, but also the accountability to contribute to its maintenance. When looking back at how the room felt, it was happy and connected and a place where the women could be themselves without the traditional shackles of prison life.

The co-created learning environment was extended onto the artificial turf football pitch where the same principles of teamwork and trust applied. As an outsider to the prison world my assumptions were that the prison system makes an attempt to help people reflect on their true identity and take appropriate action to modify it so that when stepping back into the wider society they are more likely to break the cycle of offending and ideally find employment. However, when standing on the edge of a cold, wet, and windy artificial turf pitch watching women of all ages charge around with every atom of their being smiling and laughing there was a realisation that perhaps in the outside world, and especially in prison life, who these women truly are is buried under layers of status and stigma. From my experiences at this prison, facilitating and supporting an environment where these women could shake off their emotional disguise and at heart be playful, created an opportunity for them to reconnect with their true identities. They were liberated despite not having their freedom.

The Beauty of Vulnerability

Modelling pro-social behaviour such as vulnerability has been proven to be transformative in its impact on the people that you coach. Sometimes when

coaching and working with academy players being intentional with these types of behaviour is important, to make them stand out. However, when working at this prison I did not need to try too hard to bring this to life. By stepping into the prison, I put myself in a position where I felt I was making myself vulnerable and taking a calculated risk. How is this going to go? Am I at risk? How will the content land? Will I struggle to connect? What will they make of me? However, from very early on in my experiences of coaching at the prison I found that by stepping into the world these women lived in I noticed that this vulnerability went both ways. When looking back at my time working with the learners in this cohort, it became clear to me that their relationships with learning and trust are complex to say the least. Add to that the fact that I am a male coach with perceived authority in a female and hierarchical environment highlights a plethora of ecological challenges that could be perceived by some as barriers to supporting development and positive change. The outcome, however, could not have been more different. The women were clearly conscious that I was taking some risk. I was trying something new, with participants who were not the usual cohort of a coach development course and I was trying out some new ways of making a connection and impact. I was embracing vulnerability by investing time, energy, and commitment in them. It felt that a mutual respect had been fostered, and with this, an invitation for the women to take a risk themselves. For them, however, the risk of being open, sharing their thoughts, feelings, and exposing themselves to making mistakes was vulnerability in its truest sense.

One occasion, which compounded this as a ‘wow’ and ‘ouch’ moment almost simultaneously, springs to mind. We were working on the football topic of refereeing but disguised in the learning was the opportunity for the women to have, and to challenge, authority in an appropriate way. One of the learners was refereeing a game on the artificial turf pitch and awarded what can only be described as a dubious free kick and red card in a moment of hot-headedness. This did not land well with the rest of the group who quickly began to shout loudly at each other ineloquently sharing their views on why the infringement was not a free kick and absolutely not a red card offence. Very quickly, however, the women began to recognize the situation and started to manage and deal with each other in an appropriate way. The intensity of the shouting decreased and the women started to talk about the situation, and point out to the referee why their decision was not entirely correct. I did not need to do anything but acknowledge the bravery that it

would have taken to approach the situation in a balanced and mindful way. The women took agency in their own learning and experience, and were bold and brave to take a risk at trying something new.

Learning in this environment feels like the wind. It is always there, sometimes we notice it and sometimes we do not, and sometimes the learning almost knocks you off your feet. For me, it was my role to help the wind blow a little stronger at poignant moments throughout the coaching course. I wanted the women to understand that there was learning in everything. Not just the PowerPoint slides and flipchart paper tasks, and not just from what I said to the group. Collectively there was a lot of life experience, knowledge, and life skill amongst everyone taking part. Everyone had areas to develop, but everyone also had a lot of the answers within themselves and needed the support in enticing these out. Learning was in the walk to the football pitch and talking about the women's children and family life. Learning was in supporting each other to get through leading a coaching practice. Learning was in recognizing when other people had done everything they could to get the best out of the day.

Together We Create

At the heart of the learning environment in this prison was taking the opportunity to build authentic and caring relationships with the women taking part in the coaching course and some of the wider prison community. As a sport coach developer, I am aware of the importance of developing meaningful relationships with learners, but again the importance and consequence of this in a prison environment is paramount. It occurred to me quite quickly that seeing these women on a weekly basis for seven weeks was possibly the most consistent contact they had with someone from outside of the prison during the whole time they had been in the establishment. I was physically and emotionally connecting with these women more often than their families and friends. This connection came with great responsibility as I found it significantly important to be consistent with my attendance – there was nothing that was going to stop me getting to the prison on the days that I had committed to. The football was completely secondary (at most) on every visit to the prison. It was simply the mechanism for creating the foundations for building positive relationships. It was important to adopt a position of caring to understand before being understood. To give the opportunity to the women to be themselves and to cultivate trust and confidence was vital.

One of the most important things to date that I have learnt from the experience of coaching in prison is that listening is crucial. The people you meet have interesting, sometimes complicated, and very personal stories and perhaps along the way have not had someone who is impartial to share these stories with. For me, listening and just being present and patient was incredibly valuable with every interaction with every person. The perception of the support I was able to offer was as impactful as the support itself. Understanding this helped me be subtle and intentional with the way I supported and interacted, tailoring the learning environment and knowing the learners as people first. I firmly believe that if you look after and care for the person in front of you the other qualities within them that you have the intention of developing will look after themselves. From listening to challenges about ‘bang up’, the ‘crap food’ or how much people miss their families and young children helped me understand the complex and challenging life that people in prison lead, inspiring me to want to play a part in making that experience a tiny bit more personal, enjoyable, and progressive.

Dialling Up Choice

Self Determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) explains the three main components of motivation: autonomy, relatedness, and mastery. Without a shadow of a doubt, allowing these components to flourish when working at this prison was a significant contributor to the engagement and connectivity of the group of women taking part in the coaching course. When driving home from one of the coaching days at the prison and reflecting on how things went (and there was a huge amount of emotional luggage that came out of prison with me) it became clear that these women had very little choice in any element of their lives currently. Prison life had taken that choice away but the way in which the coaching course was delivered gave an element of choice back, and allowed the women to take some control about the direction and pace of their learning. Choice lived in every element of the coaching course. From where you sat, who you would work with, what workshop you would like to do and what type of coaching practice would you like to take part in or coach. Choice gave the women the opportunity to select their preferences on how they would like to contribute to the course in a way that was right for them. The choice gave them the opportunity to embrace vulnerability for themselves, but with handrails and support, to

feel safe and supported. If someone was having a bad day or something else was happening in their wider lives the coaching course could be flexible and bend around what they needed at that point in time. This choice was energizing and allowed the women to learn, develop, and flex at a rate appropriate to them.

Without doubt one of the most impactful questions I asked the group was, “how would you like to learn today?” I assume that this approach is not consistent with other environments the women have learnt in and it was effective with the appropriate support. In essence, the activities and tasks that were created to engage and support the women took them on a journey from high structure to high support, with more prescriptive activities at the start which set the tone and helped the women understand more about coaching, football, and each other, moving to moments of learning where my role was to guide, ask questions, and offer support, rather than provide instruction. Learners were provided with tools to aid their understanding of some of the technical elements of the course such as coaching session plans and models for example. Individuals could choose the practice they wanted to coach based on their confidence and preference, and as the course developed they were supported to design their own practices based on a set of overarching principles. Nothing within the course was prescriptive and the design of activities was less like a flag planted in Everest – a definite learning outcome, but more like a treasure map with multiple possibilities and consequences. For learners, and for me as the coach, the experience of the coaching course was a journey of discovery and curiosity, rather than a highly structured framework or syllabus.

On a Journey Together

It could be considered by some that learning support offered to people in prison by third parties is a one-way process. People who hold the keys to qualifications and learning come into the prison environment and provide a service which is enriching and developmental for the men and women in jail, but then leave again and repeat this process later in the year or within another establishment. From my experiences, this could not be further from the truth. The experience of becoming a regular guest at this prison and sharing some of the ‘football stuff’ that I know has been as impactful, important, and inspiring for me as I hope it has been for the women I have worked with. Learning is multidimensional and is in everything. What I

have been fortunate to learn about prison, and life within it, has impacted me on a professional and personal level, contributing to me becoming a better coach, as well as a more compassionate and understanding person.

Approaching and during the experience of working at the prison, nothing was certain. With no experience in this environment and no formal education in this area, everything that we (learners and coach) tried was, in essence, an experiment. And as we know, experiments can go wrong or go well, and either way they tell us things we did not already know. Some days in prison things did not go well at all. I recall one occasion when our coaching session had to dramatically change based on the disposition of the women. It was the Tuesday after Easter weekend and the women were argumentative, aggravated, and struggling to concentrate on the activities. I learned subsequently that over the long weekend the women had spent the majority of the time locked up in their cells and quite honestly, if that had been me, I would have probably responded in a very similar way. We changed course on that day and quickly abandoned any classroom-based activities switching our plans to being solely on the football pitch. Coaching or trying to step in was senseless and the most critical idea was to step back. Making no intervention was an intervention in itself. This reflection is not critical, it was about working with people in prison, and it is important because it is about working with people and being empathetic, as well as responsive, to their needs.

Final Thoughts

As a curious coach I am always interested in asking questions and searching for learning on the fringes of the sports coaching world. Coaching in prison has shone a light on what is really important about working with other people and has reinforced my opinion that if you look after, and support the person, the athletic qualities within them will look after themselves. Rather than adding barriers, working in prison has enabled me to be creative with my approach to supporting others, and challenged my thought process as a sport coach developer on the qualities of an effective and memorable learning environment. It has highlighted that the learning happens around the football activities and that if you build an appropriate learning environment with the person you are trying to impact the most you can make a difference on a very personal level. I have been a sport coach developer for over 20 years, and it has always been important to be critically reflective of myself and the

programmes I have developed or coaching sessions that I have delivered. When stepping into coaching in prison, it was the first time in a long time when I have felt a novice at something and that is at times a little scary, but also really important. It is a reminder of what it is like to try something out for the first time, making mistakes, being persistent, and resilient. This brought the women and myself closer together from day one. Our stories up until that point may have been quite different, but this was new for everyone and we were *all* in that moment a novice.

CO-PRODUCING DESISTANCE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN IN PRISON

The remainder of this article presents an academic commentary provided in to consolidate Tom's reflections through the lens of the desistance research that is currently available. While there are certain points of resonance between the two, there are also points of divergence which allow for an exploration of the experience of co-producing desistance transitions in custody. But first, the authors provide a brief discussion of the power of sport within the context of the prison environment, particularly a women's prison.

Prison, Sport and Desistance

The growing body of literature surrounding the role of sport in a prison environment has demonstrated multiple advantages, in relation to both health and rehabilitation potential, for prisoners who participate in some form of sport and physical activity during their time in custody. While research has demonstrated perhaps some of the more obvious benefits of involvement in sport such as improved fitness (Meek & Lewis, 2012), it has also demonstrated improvements in prisoner mental health, particularly around anxiety and depression (Buckaloo et al., 2009). Involvement in sport within a prison environment has also been shown to support the rehabilitation process by boosting self-confidence, supporting the development of pro-social identities (Meek & Lewis, 2014a), while also improving communication skills and coping strategies (Leberman, 2007; see also Woods et al., 2017). Most of this work, however, still focuses upon experiences in male prisons. The research that does exist has highlighted that there are "gender specific gains associated with females' participation in sport, including increased confidence, assertiveness, self-worth, empowerment

and improved body image”, while also alleviating some of the psychological pains associated with imprisonment, thereby supporting desistance efforts (Meek & Lewis 2014b, p. 152, see also Leberman, 2007). Despite women making up only 5% of the prison population, 80% of female prisoners report mental health concerns, and nearly 20% of all self-harm incidents in prison in 2019 were by women (Prison Reform Trust, 2019). The need for investigation into the role of sport in improving outcomes for incarcerated women has never been greater.

Identity

A central idea in Tom’s account relates to the notion of identity in several forms. This is consistent with the available desistance literature, where notions of identity and identity transformation are widely discussed. Throughout his reflection, Tom refers to multiple identities at play and interacting with each other, within the micro-environment of the prison classroom and football pitch (i.e. prison identities, twinning project participant, true selves, coach identities, etc.), all of which were equally important to facilitating initial desistance attempts. This aligns with literature which suggests that an individual’s larger self is made up of multiple personalities that are “sometimes said to be organised in a hierarchy in service of the self” (Rocque et al., 2016, p. 47; see also Stryker & Burke, 2000). In this instance, some of the ‘up-front’ desistance work taking place was about facilitating a reshuffling of this hierarchy for the women on the course.

At various points, Tom mentions the women were able to express their “true identities” or “true selves” during the programme whilst wearing the green Twinning Project kit, in stark contrast to the standard grey prison PE attire. The notion of a true self being central to early desistance efforts is evident throughout the available literature. Maruna (2001, p. 88) argues that the establishment of a “true identity” or a “real me” is “essential to every desisting narrative”, and that by drawing on these true identities the women were able to “deemphasize the centrality of crime in the life history” (ibid; also see Stone, 2016). Expressing this true self can be difficult however within a prison environment, which can not only be seen to centralise crime in the life history of prisoners (Rowe, 2011), suspending full engagement with one’s “true self” while inside. Research has highlighted that those in prison can sometimes be seen to put their identities ‘on hold’ until they are released (Jewkes, 2012). Jewkes (2002) utilised a study of a maximum-security prison

in the United States (Schmid & Jones, 1991) to argue that in order to make sense of, and articulate their imprisonment, prisoners tended to suspend their pre-prison identities and fashion for a less authentic identity in order to mask their ‘true self’ (see also Goffman’s [1959] work on front-stage and back-stage identities). This is something Tom refers to in relation to the women he worked with as an ‘emotional disguise’. Other research has gone so far as to suggest that periods of incarceration can result in an “organic corrosion to the self and person” (Rowe, 2011, p. 578). As such, we can see a clear distinction between that which is required to undertake the initial tentative steps towards desistance, and the impact of the prison environment on one’s ability to do so, something which Tom identifies in his discussion.

Reconnecting with, and expressing, this true self can be a difficult and frightening process, particularly so in the face of high levels of stigma, exclusion, and victimization experienced by women in prison (Corston, 2007; LeBel, 2012; Singh et al., 2018). Fredriksson and Gålander (2020, p. 4) suggest that reconnecting with one’s true self is a process of “re-making sense of [at times long standing] boundaries between the self and its circumstances”, which can be an unfamiliar and frightening prospect. In embracing the unfamiliar and engaging with the course, the women in the prison were allowing themselves to be vulnerable, in an environment where expressing vulnerability represents a significant risk, in order to make tentative steps towards desistance.

Vulnerability was evident throughout Tom’s account. While notions of prisoner vulnerability are evident in the available prison literature (Liebling, 2012), as is the role of vulnerability and taking risks in the scholarship surrounding researching prisons (Liebling, 1999; Quina et al., 2008), vulnerability and risk taking within the field of desistance studies remain underexplored. Tom’s narrative provides an interesting discussion of the role of vulnerability and risk taking in the desistance process. The women demonstrated their acceptance to be vulnerable by expressing themselves freely on the football pitch and in the classroom, by embracing new skills and by openly engaging with Tom – an outsider – who expressed his own sense of vulnerability through his engagement with the women on the course. This is interesting in that it suggests that the desistance process requires an element of vulnerability from all involved. Most desistance efforts, by their very nature, demand an element of risk taking and vulnerability, as what is essentially being asked is a reformulation of oneself into something

new or at least unfamiliar. Yet, while the literature may recognise that desistance efforts may require somewhat of a leap of faith on the part of the desister (Maruna, 2001), those facilitating this leap may also have to jump. The women on the course sacrificed a degree of their “frontstage” identity (or image that one wishes to present to another) (Jewkes, 2012), while Tom embraced his own sense of vulnerability in undertaking work in an unfamiliar environment with an unfamiliar cohort. The recognition of this vulnerability, and level of investment from both parties, allowed for the development of a desistance narrative that was co-produced between the women and their coach.

Co-production

Co-production broadly describes an approach which involves professionals and others working collaboratively to achieve better outcomes for those involved (Bovaird & Loeffler, 2008). Co-production has been described as a fluid and elastic concept (and practice) valuable because it is considered to be foundational to desistance whilst also being recognized as being a distant and idealised concept, reliant on respect, collaboration, equality, and empowerment (McCulloch & Members of Positive Prison? Positive Futures, 2016). Very little is known about the contribution of professionals to the relationship (Brandsen & Honingh, 2016) and this paper therefore makes an important contribution in focusing exclusively on the experiences of one of the professionals engaged in co-production with women in prison.

Slay and Stephen (2013) describe six general principles underpinning co-production namely assets-based approach, building on existing capabilities, reciprocity and mutuality, peer support, blurring distinctions between professionals and recipients, and finally facilitation instead of delivery. These principles are all evident within Tom’s account. From the outset, Tom perceives his role to be one of a facilitator, enabling the participants to draw on the assets and capabilities that they possessed at the outset of the programme. In this way he is not there to create new capacity but instead he aims to support the women find their assumed, pre-existing, capacities through a structured and supported journey of discovery. Importantly, Tom is on a similar journey of discovery during the process where he constantly reflects and revises what he thought he knew about the women and about life in prison, and this helps create a relationship based on reciprocity and mutuality. As noted previously Tom recognizes that he is vulnerable

due to his reliance on the women choosing to engage in the programme in meaningful ways. Football is a team endeavour providing opportunities for the women to engage in peer support, both on and off the field, and the example of the controversial refereeing decision highlights that peer support can take on numerous guises.

Tom's reflections on his experiences indicate a blurring between his role and those of the women he worked with. Whilst he was responsible for ensuring the delivery happened, the women had the greatest influence in the way in which delivery took place as evidenced by the session where the classroom learning was abandoned and by Tom's concern to ensure the women had control over how they learned. Brandsen and Honingh (2016) argue that participants engaging in co-production each bring different types of knowledge to the process and again this is very evident in Tom's experience where he identifies several gaps in his knowledge in areas on which the women were experts. As an experienced coach developer Tom is flexible in his approach and he is willing and able to adapt planned activities to work with the women participants in ways that prioritize maintenance of the relationship that he has built with them.

In creating opportunities for learning Tom has provided opportunities for the women engaged in the programme to succeed and partake in novel activities where they gain social acceptance from others in real-time. Galnander (2020) states that the idea that desistance requires desisters to re-evaluate their past may be more relevant to the men who have predominantly featured in desistance research (Stone et al., 2018), and suggests that additional shaming of women may be counterproductive due to their experiences of multidimensional stigma and shame. Galnander (2020, p. 16) further suggests that the desistance of heavily stigmatized women may be better supported when they are viewed on their current and future actions and are not dependent on changing "from something 'bad' into something better". Tom aspires to help the women reconnect with themselves, and in so doing, Tom indicates that he makes no attempt to encourage these women to distance themselves from a former self, but instead he listens to what these women wanted to tell him. Some of the women chose to speak about their lives before, and during prison, but this was organic and was not expected as part of their engagement in the football programme. Tom's relationship with the women he met existed in the present and on their engagement in the football programme where women had a chance to 'be' in the moment and not

feel the strain of becoming someone else. In their experiences of learning and engaging in football the women gained personalised glimpses of normalcy associated with the freedoms of an idealized childhood – running, playing, laughing, arguing, resolving disputes – within the confines of a prison setting. It seems possible that these experiences may help these women to familiarize themselves with both personal and social acceptance without having to make a wholesale commitment to embarking on their change to something better. These opportunities may also enable them to find previously undiscovered positive elements of their identities which may assist them in re-evaluating their past when starting their desistance journeys.

The Prison Environment

Finally, it is necessary to say a few words about the prison environment and its impact upon an individual's initial steps towards desistance. As part of their context of change model, Burrowes and Needs (2009, p. 43) argue that it is important to consider the "environment of change" in the desistance process, asserting that "the prison as a building, the prison regime, the staff and other inmates [...] may affect an individual's readiness to change". Indeed, the account provided by Tom demonstrates that the prison environment played its part in the facilitation of early desistance work with the women. Yet while he notes the imposing physical presence of the prison itself, the main points of reflection come from the impact of incarceration for the women on the course. The available literature suggests that there are a range of deprivations that people experience during periods of incarceration, generally referred to as the "pains of imprisonment" (Sykes, 1958). Such deprivations relate to things like the deprivation of liberty, individual choice and security, but also factors such as loneliness (Nugent & Schinkel, 2016), shame and stigma (Rowe, 2011), along with the identity deprivations and 'erosion of the self' as discussed above. Imprisoned women are also more likely to be further removed from family networks and children owing to the smaller number of women's prisons in England and Wales, meaning attempts to maintain family ties, which are fundamental in the desistance process (Farrall, 2011), can be more difficult. These difficulties surrounding the experience of incarceration were evidenced in Tom's account of his interaction with the women. As such, Tom notes that it was important to create an environment – both physical and relational – within the prison that made the pains of imprisonment a little less painful. Firstly, the learning

space was created *with* the women on the course, which was centred around ownership and autonomy. The women were involved in discussions surrounding not only how they wanted to learn each week but were also responsible for the upkeep of the learning environment, making them active participants in the process. Indeed, the link between co-produced, active, and participatory involvement in interventions and successful intervention outcomes has been well documented in the available literature (McGuire, 1995; Rex, 1999).

The learning environment evidenced by Tom in his account also included a relational aspect which has been shown to be effective in supporting the change process. For instance, Tom talks about the importance of effective communication and active listening both amongst the women and in his interactions with them. Here the account mirrors research on the components of successful supervision. King (2013b, p. 138) noted that “talking and listening are fundamental aspects of probation work, both as a method of dealing with particular problems and as a means of nurturing the relationship necessary to enable probationers to be receptive to more direct guidance”. Tom also stressed the importance of consistency, whereby he made sure that he kept his side of the bargain by delivering the course on the days outlined at the start. In doing so, Tom evidenced a commitment to the women and to the course which was returned to him in kind. Research has shown that such commitment by practitioners to their clients can engender loyalty upon which change efforts can be built (Rex, 1999). The key here is that while there was little that could be physically changed about the external environment in which the course was delivered, there were a range of co-produced opportunities within the learning environment which could be seized to promote learning and change.

An important point to remember, however, is that although efforts were made to reduce the pains of imprisonment experienced, and to provide element of choice and empowerment by the women on the course, the nature of the prison environment/regime will always limit any sense of empowerment and choice that the women were able to exercise (Cruikshank, 1993; Hannah-Moffat, 1995; Moore & Hannah-Moffat, 2005). It has been argued that women in prison “lack the power and autonomy to make even the most mundane decisions and choices” and that such factors “frame women’s experiences as a prisoner” (Hannah-Moffatt, 1995, p. 148). The relations that can be found between prisoners and non-prisoners are also

“structured by unequal power relations”, which delimit the potential for empowerment (ibid, p. 148). While Tom worked to overcome some of these issues with the women on the course, it is important to remember that the environment in which the course was being delivered will dictate the extent to which this is possible.

CONCLUSION

In recent years the early stages of desistance transitions have grown in prominence as a core component of desistance studies. Such accounts, however, tend to provide sterilized academic accounts of these processes and how they are undertaken by people on the ‘threshold of change’ (Healy, 2013). The growth of the discipline of convict criminology has sought to provide a greater voice to those who are experiencing these transitions firsthand, both in the form of academic research and narrative accounts, and there is a growing body of work within this field (Weaver & Weaver, 2013; Hart & Healy, 2018). This should be commended and encouraged, but it is also important to note that desistance is rarely undertaken in isolation, and the narratives from the supporting cast in desistance efforts (these ‘catalysts for change’) are rarely evident in the literature. We have attempted to add to the body of single narratives within desistance studies by providing the account of the lead author’s first experience of delivering a rehabilitation program with women in prison. While it cannot be said that these women were necessarily desisting, what we can see is an account of the ‘up-front’ work that takes place with individuals who may be taking their first steps towards change and how this change is supported externally. While some of the common factors relating to the seeds of desistance were evident in Tom’s account (e.g. identity and agency), there was also an identification of the struggles the women had to work through in order for these seeds to plant roots (e.g. vulnerability, trust, environmental factors). From this account, we can see the value of the *interplay* between practitioners and service users, highlighting the idea that initial desistance efforts are a result of a co-produced effort between the person initiating change and those tasked with supporting this process. Moving forward, it is recommended that more attention is given to the lived experience of *facilitating* early desistance transitions. Without this knowledge, our understanding of desistance processes can only go so far.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Given the non-linear or ‘zigzag’ nature of initial desistance efforts (Phillips, 2016), the authors are not able to categorically state that the women in the course were desisting at the time.

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