

ARTICLES

Emotional Perspectives from Carceral Spaces and Beyond

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INTRODUCTION

To provide context for this work, it is first important to understand a bit about the authors that have written this piece. Wes and Ron are incarcerated at Warkworth Institution, which is situated approximately 200 kilometers east of Toronto in Trent Hills, Ontario, Canada. The other three authors – Nadia, Ogo, and Varina – were students at Durham College who participated in the Walls to Bridges (W2B) program through an elective course. Walls to Bridges courses bring together inside students, those who are incarcerated, and outside students, from a university or college, to learn together as a collective (see Pollack and Mayor, 2023). This unique program is only possible due to the diligent efforts of the students, along with Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) staff that support the initiative and, in the context of the course the authors completed, Durham College Professor Dale Burt.

A W2B classroom is comprised of students who are there to learn from and with one another with no preconceived notions or privileges being held over each other. In this instance, the classroom quickly became a safe space for students to learn and discuss ideas without judgment or fear. The overarching theme for this class was “Resilience in Society” – the ability to persevere, overcome adversities, and “bounce back” after facing challenges and hardships. The experiences the authors faced in this classroom together and the issues discussed from various readings by authors such as Viktor Frankl (2006) and Carol Dweck (2008), gave insight into many emotions and challenges that are faced within incarcerated spaces, as well as an understanding of how such challenges contribute to or hinder one’s resilience.

The concept of emotions in carceral spaces aligns perfectly with the theme of resilience as we discuss key features, including growth mindset, motivation, and a support system, along with the importance of regulating emotional barriers to resilience such as guilt, fear, and shame. We discussed these topics both during our W2B class and for the purposes of this article, the focus of which is the emotions incarcerated individuals experience throughout various parts of their sentence. The article discusses the personal

experiences of the inside authors during their incarceration and highlights the struggles they encounter whilst trying to understand, embrace, and interact with positive and negative emotions. From this, ultimately, one can gain a deeper understanding of how emotions are felt, expressed, and coped with inside institutionalized spaces.

Due to the inside/outside dynamic of the group from the W2B classroom, the following work was completed as part interview and part research conducted through phone calls, the occasional video call, and emails with the help of individuals within Warkworth Institution. During the writing of this piece the inside authors experienced a lockdown, which meant communication was impossible. As a result, we were not able to complete the interviews in their entirety, but all the authors initial thoughts and ideas are included herein. Through our virtual meetings, we were able to express our thoughts, emotions and feelings, which we share in this piece.

EXPRESSING AND FEELING EMOTIONS

In gaining understanding of emotions in carceral spaces, it is first necessary to see if expressing an individual's emotions are welcomed whether through sharing emotions with or amongst other incarcerated individuals, CSC staff, or friends and family that may visit or call.

Nadia: What does it feel like for you to feel and express emotions in your environment?

Wes: It's difficult to feel emotions in here other than what's necessary to get through each day. If you feel fear, don't show it. If the time calls for it, show I'm not scared to die. Although I don't want to live this way anymore, the fact is I'm in a place where you can't look weak no matter what, cause you don't know who's watching or plotting. The only emotions safe to show in here are anger and frustration. Anything else makes you look weak and to be weak makes you an automatic target. If you need to express emotions, share it with a mental health professional. I had a friend who has since been released, but he told me a few times if I needed to talk to come to his cell, so I guess if you have a true friend, share with them, otherwise keep the softer side to yourself.

Ron: It doesn't feel like anything for me. I'm not sure if there's a stigma with expressing emotions. I'm sure if I wanted to tell another prisoner I'm sad, I'm sure I could. But it's not an environment where you could get the right feedback that could satisfy my emotional state. I also don't think it helps to dwell on things here, it's best to ignore and compartmentalize. I once was getting down and sad when I first got in the system and a Hells Angel¹ member told me to try not to get too down in a place like this because in his experience, it's extremely hard to pull yourself out. That was sound advice. I think I feel more stigma to show all my true feelings to my family, friends and community supports. I feel like people don't really want to hear you grovel no matter how much they ask me. And I think they're more at peace knowing I'm in good spirits.

During our research we found that this idea of hiding emotions or only sharing with those you most trust, such as a close friend or a mental health professional was also studied by Crewe, Wart, Bennett, and Smith (2014), whose incarcerated participants noted that "protective functions of emotional self-control" such as anger, was necessary to save or protect themselves from being exploited or teased by others. As Wes mentioned, displaying emotions such as fear is often seen as a weakness, in turn making you a potential target for violence. Exhibiting emotions such as anger would prove to others that you are able to protect yourself, or hiding your emotions altogether would perhaps reveal that you are indifferent or disinterested with the environment or events around you.

Stamatakis and Burnett (2021) suggest that prisoners can struggle emotionally as they are pressured to adhere to social norms through restricting emotional expression. This is why it may be easier to not show any emotion as Viktor Frankl (2006) mentions a symptom or rather "mechanism of self-defense" is apathy. As he explains his own experiences, he repeatedly mentions apathy in that "all efforts and all emotions were centered on one task: preserving one's own life and that of the other fellow" (Frankl, 2006, p. 28). Being angry or apathetic to protect oneself or our emotions coincides with Hochschild's (1979) concept of "feeling rules", which she explains are social guidelines that govern how we should feel in different social contexts. For instance, the idea that fear equates to weakness in prison and anger demonstrates strength. Considering how carefully emotions are expressed or withheld inside

carceral spaces in order to protect oneself from violence or ridicule, led us to look at how emotions are managed.

Varina: What practices or sources of support do you draw on to help manage your emotions?

Ron: I draw on phone calls and letters with friends or writing of any kind. Also, I rely on anything creative such as writing TV or movie scripts and memoirs or making homemade birthday cards and collages from magazine scraps.

Wes: I'm, and continue to learn to be, open-minded and open my heart. I'm learning to listen. I've taken up yoga and I practice meditation. I'm learning to share my emotions and talk about mental health. The cultural centre, going to sweats and listening to elders are what I practice. Also listening to elders and listening in general and talking, I think are starting to help a lot. I also have a really good P.O. and CX2,² my mom is a huge support, doing W2B, grief and loss, going to AA, and just trying to listen.

From our discussions, we established how a carceral environment generally affects emotional stimulation and expression. It is clear that the fluid nature of emotions calls for proper regulation in order to influence healthy outcomes. Crewe and Laws (2016) believe that prisoners have a degree of autonomy over their emotions, and can utilize internal and external resources to adequately affect such emotions if they choose to. They also assert that when prisoners divert their feelings toward educational and religious activities such as art classes, reading books, praying and the like that it helps them control factors that stimulate unhealthy emotions in prison (Crewe & Laws, 2016). This reflects what Wes explains in terms of his involvement with the cultural centre and practicing meditation to help stay open-minded and open-hearted, and Ron's explanation of how his creative writing and craftsmanship help keep his emotions afloat. Despite the benefits of these practices, some things may be unavoidable that make it difficult to regulate your emotions, such as events like lockdowns or interactions with certain people.

Varina: How do interactions with other individuals play a role in affecting your emotions on a daily basis?

Ron: Boy it does! The ignorance and selfishness – it’s strange, it’s less of the violence that seems to be a major problem. It’s more the selfishness of everyone – literally only looking out for themselves. But most people are pretty open when and if you need to talk to someone.

Wes: Interactions can play both a positive and negative role in affecting my emotions in here. I truly want to change and become better. Anyone in here who wants to do the same has to deal with the subculture, as well as the staff and guards who want to tear us down. Sometimes you come across a small percentage of staff, CXs, P.O.s, volunteers, or program coordinators who want to help us change and want to see us succeed. I’ve been fortunate for the most part in having support. I’m also very selective in who I interact with – guards, staff, and prisoners alike – because not everyone in here is willing to support and help you. Within the general population people hate on you and can be envious when they see you doing well. There’s a lot of politics within this system.

Given the diversity of individuals with differing values, principles, goals or expectations in prison, it becomes essential for prisoners who wish to stay attuned to their emotions to be mindful of the kind of interactions they have. While some prisoners or authors, may believe that being in prison warrants specific standards of emotional expression or behaviour (Laws, 2016), others, such as Haney (2001) are cognizant of the fact that one’s emotions and mindset are malleable and are impacted by their interactions, thus necessitating the need to filter out some unwanted relations. It is not only these, more social aspects of carceral spaces, that can be a factor in feeling and expressing emotions, but also the physical environment.

EMOTIONS AND PHYSICAL SPACES

Understanding that culture and interactions with various people have a significant influence on how an individual experiences emotion, it is necessary to consider the impact of physical spaces. Crewe and colleagues (2014) mention that prisoners enter a “temporary limbo” between the time they enter and the time they leave – there are a different set of rules and practices in prison. Carceral spaces are their own worlds separate from

the outside world, experiencing not only different practices and rules, but different experiences of time and space as well.

Ogo: How do different physical spaces affect your emotional state?

Wes: I would say most physical spaces will, or at least can, find a way to impact my emotional state in a negative way. But with a certain mindset I can look for the good in the bad. The physical spaces in prison are not exactly motivating when you look around. Right down to the colour of paint used within prisons. They have an aura of oppression and depression. It's up to us – we have to be willing to grow mentally and emotionally, even spiritually, and physically to impact our emotional state in a positive way. This takes willingness to have a growth mindset within these walls. Even the ones who are tasked with helping us make the corrections we need to, they're also the same ones trying to keep us down a lot of the time.

During our W2B class, we often discussed the importance of having a growth mindset to help encourage perseverance and resiliency. Carol Dweck's (2008) book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, explains two different mindsets: the fixed mindset and the growth mindset. The growth mindset we are speaking about here entails developing and transforming through learning and overcoming challenges, which is a basis for resiliency. Dweck (2008) states that an individual with a growth mindset will view success as stretching themselves, as opposed to limiting oneself to only the things they are good at to ensure success. A growth mindset is about "learning something over time: confronting a challenge and making progress" (Dweck, 2008, p. 24). Growing mentally and emotionally by utilizing a growth mindset, can help one cope with the "oppression and depression" that the physical spaces of the institution impose. Institutional environments are not meant to be welcoming or warm, often making it difficult to be positive and make constructive changes, in addition to being hard to cope with.

Ron: Being confined to small spaces like these four walls is very depressing, more so when you must share a space – lack of privacy for obvious reasons but also a lack of space for emotional reasons. Sometimes you're unable to create your own routine. Metal doors versus a regular wooden door and a doorknob can make one feel like an animal in a zoo.

Carceral spaces are governed by rules, practices and routines that people on the outside are not used to obeying. This is a jarring change that can make individuals feel dehumanized. As Ron mentions, the lack of privacy and your own space can lead to negative emotions. However, in visitation rooms or classrooms there may be a different atmosphere where different emotions can be seen, providing small areas for positivity. Crewe and colleagues (2014) observe that in a visitation room for instance, there is often warmth, tenderness, and vulnerability as people are talking with their family or sharing hugs. Similarly, in classrooms, there can be pride, generosity, and camaraderie between students as they help and encourage each other to accomplish different tasks (Crewe et al., 2014; Fayter, 2016; Kilty & Lehalle, 2018).

Nadia: How does involvement in different programs, such as W2B or any other educational or work programs, affect your emotional state?

Wes: Education and work programs can help improve my emotional state because I feel like I'm doing something productive. It also helps occupy my mind from everyday life in here and keep you out of trouble. If we're open minded and open hearted, some programming in here can help but the system can use improvements to say the least, and that's putting it lightly.

Ron: It motivates me more than anything to not slip up. It simply makes my mood better and I feel special. It's almost addicting. Almost wish there were more meaningful programs. Also, I would equate programs to work as well, but I work in the kitchen. I wish I could work in a trade department or even plumbing where I can learn something new, but you can only work a job if you have qualifications. This isn't a place where you can learn new crafts. I think that [having the opportunity to learn a new handiwork] would have a drastic positive impact on my and our [i.e. other prisoners] emotional states.

As discussed above, the physical space of prison adds to prisoners' struggles, as they navigate their feelings and emotions of being within the four walls of "oppression". These feelings and emotions are mixed, as each day poses a new challenge.

EMOTIONS AND THE SELF

As our final focus, it was paramount to consider each inside author's personal feelings regarding their own journeys and experiences. Since their incarceration, the inside authors have experienced a rollercoaster of different emotions ranging from fear to pain, regret, guilt, and indifference which have impacted how they face their sentence.

Varina: What are some of the emotions that you've experienced from the beginning of your sentence up until now?

Ron: My emotional state has changed a great deal from sentencing until now. When I was presented with the number of years [I would be inside] it was paralyzing. Mainly because most of my fears laid in anticipation of what was to unknowingly become. What the cold cells would be like, the correctional officers, the prisoners, death and violence. Would they turn on me because of my charges? Would they believe me in terms of my innocence or naivete regarding the circumstances of my crime and charges? But the absolutely most dire feeling was that of sadness of not seeing my daughter for six years and who had just turned three, four days before my sentencing. I was terrified overall and deeply angry. I was mentally ready for any fight that presented itself. My emotional state has changed, however, for the better.

Nadia: Was this a similar experience for you Wes?

Wes: The emotions that I've experienced in the beginning of my sentence, throughout pretrial custody, was almost numb due to so many years of alcohol abuse. Almost a year had passed when I started to truly process and realize the impact of my actions. I grew up in a world where it was helpful to be cold like ice and remain on cruise control. The clearer my head became, the more I was able to reflect and feel, but it wasn't until the exact day I was sentenced that my emotions started changing for the better. But at the same time feeling so much shame, guilt, regret, and heartache. On the day of my sentencing, I started to see light at the end of the tunnel. From the day of my arrest in 2017 until this very day, I've had no choice but to feel my emotions, acknowledge them, process all that comes with choosing to

remain sober, and do what I have to do to honour my spirit and the spirits of all those affected by my choices of the past that caused so much pain.

Ogo: Would you say your emotions, or emotional state in general, has changed for the better or worse?

Wes: My emotions have changed for the better, but my emotional state is very up and down as I've been diagnosed with severe depression. Dealing with my problems rather than drinking them is new to me. I learned to think, reach and live in a certain way for so long, and I know it won't happen overnight, but as I continue to learn, to feel, to deal with, and solve my problems, instead of drinking them away. I'd say my emotions in general continue to change for the better. But in a place where I'm trying to build myself up and so many people that we interact with try to tear us down, the struggle is real to maintain a "for the better" emotional state.

Nadia: How have your values, goals, or identity changed since being incarcerated?

Wes: Since I've been incarcerated, I've been trying to figure out who I am without alcohol. As long as I can remember alcohol and violence wasn't something I did, it was who I was. I never had goals. Today, I want to help myself so one day I can help another. I want to be more compassionate and understanding. I don't really know who or what my identity is, but I'm trying new things I wouldn't have attempted in the past. I care more about others and myself than in the past. I learned I'm sensitive and, if I'm not paying attention, can be loyal to a fault. I think most importantly I'm learning life is a lifelong journey of learning and like a great elder said, if you know everything, you can't learn anything. So, for me learning to listen is a very important skill. If I keep my mouth shut sometimes, and keep my eyes and ears open all the time, I can learn a thing or two about a thing or two.

Ron: My values haven't changed per se but some goals have changed, as has my identity. I'm now a quote, un-quote convict. I can't work in TV or be a host. The company I helped start – I can't be publicly a part of. The potential to be deported and I've been here since I was seven years old. I can't travel. I wish there was a rehabilitation program for travel.

The unique nature of the prison environment is a major driving force behind one's ability to thoroughly process their emotions, to reflect on past and/or present actions, and to be proactive about personal growth, future goals, and development. Through this experience, it is obvious that the inside authors of this piece exhibit the resilience and perseverance we discussed in our W2B class.

REFLECTION

Before concluding, the authors wanted to reflect on their time working together. After learning and growing together for months, it felt essential to discuss the importance of our time together and what we had been feeling.

Ogo: Does participating in this article bring up any emotions for you?

Wes: This article brings on emotional frustration. What landed me in prison is hard to let go of, but each day I have to try. Doing things like working on this article is a way to kind of let go of the past, but not completely close the door on it. My past doesn't have to be my future. I'm not my crimes. My criminal history doesn't define me. There's also a lot of emotional frustration because of the everyday nonsense that goes on in here and although I'm sure anyone who is locked up tries to let go of the things that aren't good to hold on to, it starts again each day. What made you want to do this article?

Nadia: I know there are more than two sides to a story. I like to hear directly from the horse's mouth and don't like to cast judgment upon people. I think each and every one of us has choices to make in life. Should we be condemned for the choices we make whether good or bad? For me, I feel everyone should have an opportunity to be heard and get to tell their side of the story, which is why I was excited to be a part of this great venture with my former classmates.

Varina: Much like Nadia, I thought it was a really amazing opportunity. Both the W2B program and this article were something incredibly interesting that I've never experienced before, and it was definitely something I wanted to be a part of and contribute to. Collaborating on this article gives us the chance to continue to work together and learn

from each other, which I also think is really important to understanding different perspectives and experiences.

Ogo: The W2B program provided me with some understanding of the different dynamics in the prison environment. Through our ice breaker sessions, side conversations, and other activities in class, I got firsthand insight into the mental and emotional state of all my classmates. I also observed how the inside students felt at ease when sharing fragments of their story in class. I was excited at the idea of extending my learning experience through this article, while also concretizing the inside students' stories and perspectives in written form.

Wes: What are your thoughts on it now?

Nadia: I feel this is a great experience so far. It has provided us with more insight and understanding. It has allowed us to see that there definitely are gaps within the prison system and rehabilitation seems to be more than a stone's throw away. I think it is important for readers to understand this. Eventually, individuals will be released from prison and integrated back into society. How can they become productive members of society if all they are being taught is how to survive in prison? They're being stunted and shunned for their wrongdoings, rather than helped or 'corrected' in a correctional facility, is what it seems like to me.

Ogo: It has been a wholesome and unique experience for me, and I'm grateful that I opted to be a part of it.

Varina: I think this article is so much more than I expected it to be. It really proves just how resilient you guys are and how hard you work. I'm so proud of all that we accomplished with this, and I think it's an amazing opportunity to share this knowledge and experience with others.

Wes: Do you think people can change?

Nadia: I think people can change to a certain degree. I think once you get to a certain age, people may be stuck in their ways and it's hard for them to conform to change or medication. Physical deterioration of the mind

or illness towards the mind can halt a person from changing. However, in general, I believe anyone is capable of changing – change is within everyone, it starts with a choice to change, followed by the will to change.

Varina: I think people can change if they're willing to. We learned in our class about how different mindsets and having support from people can affect us, and I think it is entirely possible for people to change with the right mindset and help. You've even explained how much you 've changed and how hard you work, and I think that is a perfect example of someone wanting to change and working to make it possible.

Ogo: Yes, I believe human beings are generally built to evolve physically, mentally, emotionally, and otherwise. Change, however, requires intentionality and discipline which as Nadia alluded to.

CONCLUSION

From our short time together in the W2B classroom, it was clear to see the growth everyone had made in terms of newfound thoughts about their ability to be resilient and utilize the resources not only in their mind, but from the supports around them. Our Walls to Bridges classroom was filled with kindness, supportiveness, vulnerability and creativity. We would not have had it any other way. This educational space gave us all the chance to grow and learn outside of our typical social environments. Outside of our classroom, it is clear that carceral spaces are not typically welcoming of all emotions. Despite the common feelings of fear, anger, shame or other emotions that exist amongst incarcerated people, it is still necessary to mask or 'front' to protect oneself.

Creating spaces that are humanizing and compassionate within such a dehumanizing environment can make all the difference in terms of personal and emotional growth and development. Much like our small W2B classroom or COs, POs and CXs that want to see you succeed, these supports are motivating and can be calming after being constantly surrounded by others where you can show no fear or weakness. The common theme that came up in all our discussions regarding not only emotions in prisons, but how people can change within them, was about wanting correctional spaces to truly be about correcting people's behaviours and helping mindsets change.

A growth mindset is important for an individual to develop but is not always enough on its own. After our conversations about resilience, we determined that having a community and support is just as important as having traits such as grit or courage. While carceral spaces can be traumatic, it is clear that Wes and Ron do their best to overcome this and they continue to do their best for their futures. We are all more resilient than we know and W2B encourages students to continue to overcome all the challenges that are thrown their way.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The Hells Angels Motorcycle Club (HAMC) is the largest international outlaw motorcycle club in the world. Members typically ride Harley-Davidson motorcycles.
- ² P.O. refers to a Parole Officer, whose role is monitoring how sentenced people progress through their correctional plan to make recommendations for release, institutional adjustment, and other similar needs. A CX2 refers to a Correctional Officer II, who is a part of the case management team for an incarcerated individual who is typically involved in providing orientation, information about available programs, monitoring behaviours and progress, providing security within a unit, in addition to numerous other tasks.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ronnice Giscombe is a father to an amazing daughter who he loves very much. After completing the Walls to Bridges program, writing for the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* gave him another opportunity to continue to be creative and work with great people. As a person who has always enjoyed writing and being creative, he wants to be able to share his story, especially for his daughter.

Wes Guzylak's spirit name is Thunderman, only recently given to him by the elder at Warkworth Institution. He is 37 years old, serving life – 14 years and 9 months. He just completed a Walls to Bridges program course and when presented with the ‘emotions in carceral spaces’ theme for the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* felt it was relevant, but also a good opportunity to share and gain knowledge from others. Publications on these topics should be put out into the world for this reason – to further knowledge and understanding.

Ogo Esenwah is an international Lawyer with over four years of experience of law practice in Nigeria. She is registered with the Law Society of Ontario and is currently training to become a licensed lawyer in Canada. She is also a recent alumna of Durham College, where she took the Walls to Bridges course and other mediation courses. Ogo enjoys swimming, wine tasting, spending time with family, and sunbathing. She loves to learn and is very enthusiastic about personal development. She is fluent in English, French, Pidgin (native), Ibo (native), and Yoruba (native).

Varina Gurdyal recently completed Durham College’s Conflict Resolution and Mediation graduate certificate program and also has a B.A. in

Criminology from Wilfrid Laurier University. With a passion for restorative justice and alternative dispute resolution, she hopes to find future work that involves restorative justice practices to help people grow in a welcoming and creative space much like W2B classrooms. Participating in the Walls to Bridges program only furthered this interest as she got to listen and learn from the inside students about their hopes for the future and the goals they have set for themselves. She truly believes she has learned more from listening to peers in W2B circle discussions than she has in any other class and is forever grateful to be a part of such a special group of individuals.

Nadia Judunath is a Student Paralegal who recently graduated from Centennial College in the Courts and Tribunal Paralegal program and graduated from Durham College Conflict Resolution and Mediation certificate program, where she took the Walls to Bridges course. Nadia has a West Indian background and is fluent in English. She has various personal interests including the arts, music, event management and a love for the outdoors. Nadia is actively involved within her community and, when she is not spending time with her young family, she volunteers her time toward various educational causes within the Toronto District School Board, advocating as a Ward 22 representative and a co-chair of her children's elementary school parent council.