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Finishing Time, i-Poems and 'the pains of release' into the community after punishment

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Criminalised individuals remain one of the most vilified, marginalised and excluded social groups.¹ This is particularly felt and enacted on release from prison, yet limited attention is paid to the lived experience of the ‘pains of release’ and to the narratives of former prisoners. ‘Finishing Time’ is a two-year project (2018-2020), funded by a discretionary grant from the Independent Social Research Foundation (ISRF), that aims to explore the lived experience of resettlement into the community after punishment. Overall, the research has become focused on how individual identities are formed through storytelling without assuming that identities are fixed or stable. It aims to explore how individuals develop narrative reinterpretations of the self in relation to criminalisation and/or multiple traumas through a form of collaborative connective labour,² which consists of the doing of timelines, contributing photographs and the reading of ‘i-poems’. To date through a series of in-depth interviews, ten men have mapped their resettlement journeys using images and/or photographs and drawing timelines to help organise their memories and encourage a temporal sense of how their lives may have changed.

These interviews lasted from one to two hours and whilst no two timelines were the same, and the focus of the photographs varied widely, there were some pertinent themes, not least an overriding sense of isolation, particularly for those more recently released, who also documented feelings of fear and shame.

There has been considerable research on prisoners while they’re in prison and the ‘pains of imprisonment’, since the publication of Sykes’s influential work, *The Society of Captives* (1959). There is similarly intense interest in the ‘pains of release’ due to high rates of recidivism. However, post-release models in this context tend to focus on deficits, that is on ‘offenders’ lacking the abilities, capabilities, or resources to manage themselves, or desistance, which builds on human and social capital towards a ‘good lives model’ that incorporates redemption scripts and an internalisation of generativity (doing for others). However, as identified in the background to the PeN project, a previous ISRF-funded project (see www.penprojectlandworks.org), there is a relative neglect of prisoner/ex-offender narratives in the desistance literature and these narratives continue to be excluded from the co-production of knowledge on desistance work. ‘Finising Time’ therefore aims to address this gap and give voice to criminalised individuals, whose stories are rarely seen or heard.

One of the methods used to give authenticity to the voices of the men participating in the research was the creation of ‘i-poems’ from the interview transcripts, which constitutes one element of the Voice Centred Relational Method (VCRM). Following this method, i-poems

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are created from the ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘you’ statements as they appear in the transcripts and become powerful and personal statements of intent that prioritise the voice of the narrator.

It belongs to a social constructionist, epistemological position that recognises that human experience is bound up within larger relational dynamics. It centres on the ‘voice’ of the respondent and is associated with a ‘feminist interpretative lens’, one in which the ‘self is viewed as having multiple selves or voices, in contrast and conflict with one another’.  

The power of the i-poem, as I have noted previously, is intensified when it is spoken/listened to, particularly if it is the voice of the original speaker. It is with this in mind that I gave the i-poems to some of the men, who then read them aloud whilst being audio recorded. These audio files have since been used alongside their timelines and photographs to produce short film clips. Indeed, in an attempt to give voice to one of the most vilified and marginalised social groups, the research has become a process of making and unmaking, organising and arranging a kind of temporal bricolage that reveals alternative rehabilitative conceptualisations of wellbeing and meaning beyond the notion of released subjects as risky and potentially transgressive. Instead, there is vulnerability and resilience.

To date there are three films ready to view, with others in production. The process of creating the films is a collaborative effort. Not only with those participating in the research itself, but others as well. Notably significant input from Rob Giles, a University of Plymouth IT specialist and videographer, who interpreted the i-poems in order to create ‘Red Pen’ and ‘Dreaming of Fishing’. And Daniela Chivers, a stage

9. Ibid.
2 sociology student on a volunteer placement at the resettlement scheme, who worked with Rob on ‘Quentin’s i-poem’. They both engaged in work with the written and audio files of the i-poems, as well as the photographs contributed by the men (see https://collaborations-in-research.org/ for more on this process). The films were sent to the men for them to comment on and for them to suggest changes. The films have since been shown to members of the resettlement team who worked with the men previously and at a number of conferences this year (2020).

What is striking about the i-poem films is that the focus on the ‘I’, ‘we’ and ‘you’ statements distils the overall narratives from the men, with interviews lasting from one to two hours concentrated into four to seven minutes. These become powerful statements about the ‘pains of release’, notably in terms of the enduring impact of criminalisation on the sense of self. When listening to and watching the films, key themes emerge from each of the men. In Anton’s story, he uses a ‘red pen’ to draw his timeline as it symbolises being naughty. He says:

I would never turn my back on my old self
I also think about my old self every day.
I don’t punish myself these days.
I have done in the past.
I’ve still got regrets,
I’m accepting it
I see someone
I don’t say
I gravitate
I can’t have them as friends
[…]

In Bryan’s interview, he sends me photographs of his new wife and the fish he has managed to catch night fishing. He says:

12. 4th European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, 5th-7th February 2020, University of Malta. 7th International Conference of Autoethnography, 20th-21st July 2020 (online).
I’m not in touch with my old friends
One of them,
I am
I realised
I haven’t really got that much in common
I didn’t want to be living like
I was before
I went in prison
One of them I still hang around with
I go fishing
I’ve got new friends
I sort of muscled in
I don’t know whether it’s just getting older
I just prefer to go off with Janine or just be on my own

During Quentin’s interview, he sends photographs and shows me the pottery he has been making in his garage at home. He says:

you’ve been in there for two years and
you’ve lived your life a certain way,
you come home,
you’ve got all this freedom and
you don’t go out the house.
I still don’t.
I’ve not had one friend come to see me
I haven’t got any friends,
I’m ok with that.
I got home,
I was sat on the front there,
you could see him talking
I was just looking at his mouth moving,
I had this little bubble in my head
“why are you talking to me?”

For all of the men there are difficulties in forging new relationships, as well as re-establishing or maintaining old ones as a consequence of criminalisation. They all engage in various strategies, from spending time alone, to night fishing and spinning pots. However, their accounts are also powerful reminders that social reform is needed for
criminalised individuals to be fully reintegrated into the community after punishment. As criminologist Fergus McNeill reminds us, the problem of desistance is social as well as individual; acceptance of a former prisoner is a community matter and not just a private business.¹³

Sometimes, though, as Quentin comments in response to seeing his film a few months after his interview:

Christ! I had to watch that twice! I stand by everything I said. I’m not quite as dark and depressing as I was but I’d say where I was then is 100% genuine. Some of the issues are still very real. I just don’t speak it out loud anymore lol. Crikey I was a bit dour wasn’t I? Perhaps I need to chill out a wee bit lol.

Thanks Julie, for everything you all do at the resettlement Scheme and for being interested in the other side, sometimes that’s enough.

Quentin

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