THE SIGNIFICANCE OF HOPE THEORY FOR PEOPLE RELEASED FROM PRISON

NEW PERSPECTIVES FOR THE PROBATION SERVICE

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I have spent the last 6 years studying hope theory and the proven benefits it brings to people and society. Contemporary hope theory provides the basis for the experience of a better future and was developed by US psychologist, Snyder (1991). It has been used in psychotherapy to reduce depression (Cheavens et al., 2006), is a good coping mechanism for people (Carmichael, 2016), and can lead to a greater purpose in life (Kashdan et al., 2021).

Old psychology primarily used a 'disease' based model to focus on what's wrong with people so they could be fixed, but has since evolved into looking at a person's potential in providing positive psychological interventions, using a strengths-based approach (Seligman, 2002). Hope can be framed within this positive strengths-based model.

My excitement about hope as a positive psychological concept led to my curiosity in its potential to lead to transformations in forensic applications, in what is perhaps regarded as a niche, under-researched discipline of forensic psychological research. I was surprised that more research wasn't available in this important area of forensic psychology. People who have had experience with the criminal justice system are likely to be in a place of despair or turmoil, and projecting oneself into a better future self may make the difference between the merry-go-round and something better that is created by their own imagination. Recent hope successes in forensic settings include hope as a mechanism for positive change (Cheavens & Guter, 2018), and for preparing prisoners for release (van Ginneken, 2015).

I decided to capitalise on hope potential by undertaking research to understand how people in prison experience hope, culminating in a book called, 'Freedom is in the Mind' (a self-help book for prisoners). The research method used was interpretative phenomenological analysis using autobiographical accounts from former prisoners from around the world who have since turned their life around, and their experience of hope. The research aimed to interpret what factors increase hope. My research concludes that hope is volatile. In a moment you can feel hopeful, but in the next hopeless, and hope itself doesn't have to be structured in nature, and can be something more abstract (Adlington-Rivers, D & Yaneva, M, 2023). If we can understand the nature of hope for people in and released from prison, then we can try to measure and increase it.

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My current PhD research goes further, and focuses on the role of hope and resilience in the long-term desistance from crime, using qualitative analysis, by interviewing a range of former prisoners in the UK who have been released from prison and not returned. This is particularly important as a new perspective for the probation service when dealing with clients using a person-centred approach. The underlying hypothesis for this is that what might be regarded as 'bread and butter' outcomes such as getting a job, finding somewhere to live, and dealing with mental health disorders and addictions (as well as other short-term goals) are not the basis by which foundations are built and can be quickly dissolved (e.g. with peer pressure, sudden setbacks, and a general lack of resilience). If it were this easy then why do many people return to a life of chaos and crime? The hypothesis suggests that to become a 'thriver' in society, people are required to do more to reach their full potential, in what becomes an all encompassing driver that motivates people to keep going, and surpasses normal limits. The challenge then becomes how the foundations are formed and maintained, as these are what may enable long term success, provide resilience and desistance from crime.

On my social media feed, I often see comments from people released from prison who have given up. They have lost all confidence in projecting a better future for themselves, and some believe that the probation service is part of the problem. I would rather encourage them to make their own commitments to their future (because only they know what a better future is for them), without reliance on others. Expecting others to solve the future without your own ideas of what this looks and feels like is futile, and must come from within. People need to believe that change is possible. Being told to attend courses or being given other authoritative instructions can affect the level of autonomy a person has. Autonomy is a key driver in increasing hope (Adlington-Rivers & Yaneva, 2023), and therefore its removal could risk non-compliance (e.g. the client does not see its purpose in their future and are simply following orders).

My hypothesis suggests that there are two drivers in reaching full potential – (a) imagining a better future, and (b) understanding the steps to get there. If the role of a future probation service is to facilitate this, then the client becomes more self-sufficient in securing the resources to meet the future, by their own motivations. This shifts the focus of control from probation to the client, in a model where probation becomes the 'facilitator' or 'enabler' of change. It fundamentally changes the relationship between the probation officer and their client, building trust, and belief in the future. The net effect is the potential to transform probation centres into places of hope for people released from prison, starting with the 'bread and butter' outcomes, and moving towards the foundations. This can also be extended to the wider population such as those on community orders and SSOs, providing there is a quality relationship in place.

Hope can be used as a potential protective factor in countering effects of a risk-based approach to clients. Over-emphasis on risk provides a basis for control and lack of autonomy, and shuts down positive, creative thinking. It has remnants of the 'disease' based approach, rather than a 'strengths' based approach. It favours risk over potential. My hope research suggests that when people have more autonomy over decision-making, they will naturally feel more hopeful about the future.

This hope momentum may be the start of a long-lasting positive relationship that can be strengthened over time. As clients regain more control over their future self, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of using hope to help people turn their lives around is that the commitment must come from the individual. Not all people are capable or ready to do this, but for those that are, this is balanced against the excitement that the probation service can become a place where hope is encouraged and practised at the heart of its operation, which in turn may change attitudes and perceptions of what is possible, and improve person-centred outcomes.

Reflecting on the recent Annual Report published by HM Inspectorate of Probation (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2023), overall performance of The Probation Service against quality standards has worsened since the re-unification of the service (p.7). Inadequate staffing levels and excessive caseloads will no doubt have impacted on the quality of the relationship between the probation officer and their clients. In some cases, appointments with probation officers were reduced to welfare check-ins (p.9). When the key to success is all about person-centred outcomes to increase desistance and protect the public, it is critical that quality time is spent with clients. Perhaps the situation can be improved if probation officers are supported by 'hope navigators', much akin to the supporting roles of teaching assistant or healthcare assistant, who can work with clients to plan achievable pathways to goals using 'hope plans'. This would free up time for probation officers to focus on the overall performance of the client, and allow more strategic planning for their caseload.

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