

Unravelling the Complexities of Hope: the experience and potential of hope for people in prison and people with criminal justice experience.

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The nature and potential of hope theory for people in and released from prison is a developing area of academic exploration. The prison population in England and Wales is at record levels,¹ and people in prison can often experience imported trauma on entry, such as childhood abuse, domestic violence, and exposure to community violence.² Prisons can be challenging environments, and places of despair and hopelessness, with prisoners suffering with mental health issues. Former prisoners face structural issues in the community due to social stigma and statutory impositions. If situations of despair can be turned into hopeful moments, this could lead to positive outcomes and support desistance from crime. Conventional hope theory (pioneered by American Psychologist, Rick Snyder, in the 1990s) has yielded results in the general population.^{3,4} Arguably, in the general population, individuals have less barriers to overcome in setting and achieving goals than in restrictive forensic settings such as prisons. People released from prison are often subject to post-release conditions in the community that restrict movement, opportunity, and personal growth. The research set out in this article explores to what extent hope theory could transform the lives of people in and released from prison, and to gain insights into how hope theory is experienced in forensic applications. The purpose of writing this article is to communicate and reflect on

research conducted to date in this important area of Forensic Psychology, and to increase awareness of hope theory in forensic environments. It is hoped that other academics and practitioners in the criminal justice field can begin to explore the potential of hope now and in the future, as part of a wider repertoire of rehabilitative measures, and to further research this niche field of study.

What is hope theory?

Contemporary hope theory, as developed by Charles R. Snyder, is a concept within positive psychology that defines hope as a positive motivational state.⁵ Hope consists of two main components: (a) Agency: a belief in one's ability to initiate and sustain actions towards achieving goals, and (b) Pathways: the ability to generate multiple routes or strategies to reach those goals. This involves planning and finding ways to overcome obstacles.

Hope theory applications in the general population

Research in hope theory has increased over recent years, with successful applications in education, business, sport, social work, psychotherapy, science and medicine.⁶

There have been some measurable improvements in mental health and wellbeing from hope theory application in the general population, including self-

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1. Ministry of Justice (2013). *Prison population statistics*. Ministry of Justice.
 2. Bradley, A. (2021). Viewing her majesty's prison service through a trauma-informed lens. *Prison Service Journal*, 255, 4-11.
 3. Snyder, C. R. (2002). Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind. *Psychological inquiry*, 13(4), 249-275.
 4. Rand, K. L., & Cheavens, J. S. (2009). Hope theory. In C. R. Snyder (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology (chapter 30)*. Oxford Academic.
 5. Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., et al. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 570-585.
 6. Colla, R., Williams, P., Oades, L. G., & Camacho-Morles, J. (2022). "A New Hope" for positive psychology: A dynamic systems reconceptualization of hope theory. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 13, 809053.

reported reductions in adult depression,⁷ reductions in symptoms of anxiety, increases in the meaning of life and self-esteem, and a greater sense of purpose in life, through the setting and achievement of goals using pathways.⁸ Hope is also linked to a greater sense of purpose in life.⁹ If the improvements in mental health and wellbeing demonstrated in the general population can be extended to forensic populations, there is an opportunity to transform the lives of people in prison and those people with criminal justice experience.

Hope transformations in forensic applications

There is an emerging focus on hope in forensic applications which uses the measurable effects of hope in the general population and extends them to forensic populations.¹⁰ Hope theory in forensic settings is a hybrid concept uniquely seated within the disciplines of positive and forensic psychology — the imagination of a better future in a restrictive environment. Hope transformation for people in prison and with those with criminal justice experience at its highest level is the achievement of a positive motivational state. This transformation can be seen from many perspectives, from prison management to the experience of the person serving a prison sentence (or former prisoner). A prisoner should be afforded the right to be rehabilitated, or to make good their actions, as part of a civilised and progressive society, and a person with criminal justice experience should be afforded the opportunity to achieve personal goals and have purpose in their life. From a criminal justice perspective, prison is expensive, but there is a statutory duty to protect the public from harm, and for

justice to be seen to be done. This must be balanced against the potential of people to change and rehabilitate, reducing the risk of harm to the public, and thereby creating a safer society. A rehabilitated prisoner may become an asset to society in the future. Hope to achieve goals provides the potential for positive outcomes, and can be used as a protective factor in forensic risk assessments. Hope can act as a powerful coping mechanism,¹¹ and has a role to play in the preparation of the release of a prisoner.¹² Hope may support the desistance from crime,¹³ and is a fundamental part of the Good Lives Model (GLM), a strengths-based approach to prisoner rehabilitation.¹⁴

Masters Research: The experience and potential of hope in prison

Research in hope theory has increased over recent years, with successful applications in education, business, sport, social work, psychotherapy, science and medicine.

Research on hope undertaken by the author at Coventry University as part of a Masters degree, under the supervision of Dr Mira Yaneva,¹⁵ documents hope experience using autobiographical accounts from former prisoners from around the world using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA); a method ideally suited to lived experience applications.¹⁶ The research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic when access to people in prison was very difficult. In this qualitative study, autobiographical accounts from 7 participants with lived experience of prison who were subsequently released, were interpretatively analysed. The core theme of the research was to understand how people in prison make sense of hope, to understand its nature, and how the experience might differ from hope theory application in the general population.

7. Klausner, E. J., Clarkin, J. F., Spielman, L., Pupo, C., Abrams, R., & Alexopoulos, G. S. (1998). Late-life depression and functional disability: The role of goal-focused group psychotherapy. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 13, 707-716.

8. Cheavens, J. S., Feldman, D. B., Gum, A., Michael, S. T., & Snyder, C. R. (2006). Hope therapy in a community sample: A pilot investigation. *Social Indicators Research*, 77(1), 61-78.

9. Kashdan, T. B., McKnight, P. E., & Goodman, F. R. (2022). Evolving positive psychology: A blueprint for advancing the study of purpose in life, psychological strengths, and resilience. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 17(2), 210-218.

10. Wright, S., Hulley, S., & Crewe, B. (2023). Trajectories of hope/lessness among men and women in the late stage of a life sentence. *Theoretical Criminology*, 27(1), 66-84.

11. Leigey, M.E. (2015). *The Forgotten Men: Serving a Life without Parole Sentence*. Rutgers University Press.

12. van Ginneken, E. (2015). The Role of Hope in Preparation for Release from Prison. *Prison Service Journal*, 220, 10-15.

13. Maruna, S., (2001). *Making good*. American Psychological Association.

14. Barnao, M., Robertson, P., & Ward, T. (2010). Good lives model applied to a forensic population. *Psychiatry, psychology and law*, 17(2), 202-217.

15. Adlington-Rivers, D., & Yaneva, M. (2024). Hope Behind Bars: An autobiographical interpretation of hope experience in prison (preprint).

16. Smith, J. A., & Nizza, I. E. (2022). *Essentials of interpretative phenomenological analysis*. American Psychological Association.

One of the biggest challenges of the research was to nail down a definition of hope, as developed by conventional hope theory. Definitions of hope are nuanced and can be difficult to interpret, because hope usually involves: (a) the imagination of time, and (b) emotions (e.g. feeling hopeful or hopeless). Conventional hope theory requires the setting of goals (time imagination), laying the pathways to achieve them (time imagination and creative thinking skills), and the eventual achievement of the goals (motivation/willpower/resilience).¹⁷ The research discusses that hope in prison is not as straightforward as setting and achieving goals using pathways, as the structural barriers created by the restrictive security regime in prisons makes it difficult for prisoners to imagine long term goals. This requires a high level of imagination and resilience, which is often depleted in prisons. The findings from the research identified themes that can be used as indicators of hope in prison. When hope is maintained, it results in positive changes to behaviour in the present time. This could be achieved through increasing autonomy for prisoners, supporting positive relationships with others, providing a stable prison regime that discourages volatility, providing transparent and predictable procedures, and the right conditions for mental growth and imagination. The provision of a wide range of meaningful activities could equip prisoners with a sense of purpose, and encourage more future-focused, resilient thinking, that could, in turn, support more hopeful thinking. Hope momentum could be implemented as part of a hope-led prison strategy, where hope management is an integral part of prisoner rehabilitation. Sustained hope could overcome short-term, process orientated rehabilitation programmes that can sometimes fail due to lack of momentum and provide long-term continuity, through the momentum of high hope.

Findings: Identification of hope factors

The Masters research identified the following hope factors for people in prison, which could act as hope motivators or depressants.

1. Autonomy and Control

The perceived levels of autonomy and control over a prisoner's life is an important hope factor. If a prisoner is unable to act with a sense of agency in most situations, this will naturally limit their ability to think of opportunities and possibilities in the future. Empowerment creates hope.

2. Positive emotional connections

Positive emotional connections with other people in prison is a strong hope factor. Contact with family is also a strong hope factor but typically led to short lived hope. The natural high of seeing close relatives visiting prison creates a form of escapism and humanisation for the prisoner, which is lost when returning to the prison wing, in what can be described as an emotional rollercoaster.

3. Meaningful activities and altruism

A strong hope factor is meaningful activities and self-development. This is strongly linked to purpose. Prisoners felt more hopeful when they amounted to someone that had a purpose, rather than being seen as a number serving a prison sentence imposed by the state. Prison has the effect of dehumanising people by using practices such as imposed routines, limiting choice, and restricting movement. When prisoners are given opportunities to do meaningful activities, hope plays a positive part in their life. Self-development can include education, and employment (in improving self-worth), and religious faith or spiritual awareness can also be a positive factor in defining a purpose or reframing their existence. For people serving long sentences, where hope of a positive future is arguably more distant than a short sentenced prisoner, altruism was shown to make a positive difference, and create feelings of hope. Helping others provided a reason to feel good about themselves, in the hope that others could benefit in the future.

4. Introspection and reflection

The research identifies that introspection, imagination and dreaming play a part in developing hopeful feelings for some prisoners. Prisoners were able

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¹⁷ Snyder, C. R. (1994). *The psychology of hope: You can get there from here*. Free Press.

to transcend their day-to-day existence in prison, and imagined positive futures, to survive the despair of the present moment. It became a motivating factor, and coping mechanism. Reflection also provided former prisoners with opportunities to analyse and evaluate their experiences in prison and modify their behaviour as part of self-improvement.

5. Volatility

Insights from the research suggests that hope comes and goes and is rarely fixed. Hope in prison indicates a variance from conventional hope theory, due to more structural barriers, including environmental conditions. People in prison are limited to what goals they can achieve within a restrictive regime, and hope is therefore a volatile commodity. This makes sustained hope difficult to achieve in prison, without interventions to promote hopeful thinking, and the enablement of an environment that would allow a prisoner to reach their full potential.

Abstract hope and hope momentum notions

Two notions are proposed from the Masters research to harness the potential of hope in prison, using the hope factors identified. Firstly, 'abstract hope' is proposed as a type of hope that provides hopeful feelings, but without a clearly defined goal. It is characterised by a prisoner not fully forming an outcome in the future (future imagining), but metaphorically planting a seed in the hope of something good happening in the future. The future does not need to be defined as a long term or solidified concept. It is further proposed that if we know what hope factors motivate positive thoughts and actions, or suppress them, it is possible that we can measure them as part of a 'hope momentum' scale, based on the Adult Hope Scale which is used to measure hope levels in the general population.¹⁸ This could be used with prisoners to support hope interventions, through improved cognitive skills.

Limitations of the research

The Masters research provides valuable insights into how prisoners make sense of hope, and provides a platform for development of further investigation of its potential. There were clear limitations such as the use of autobiographical interpretations, rather than participants living in a prison environment. This means that the accounts may be more reflective in nature, rather than a current representation of events or

experiences. The research did however identify common patterns or themes between the accounts, despite each participant being in a different country, and having a different offence and sentence type. The basic ideas from this research were incorporated into a self-help book for people in prison,¹⁹ which is stocked in many prison libraries, available at Broadmoor Hospital and is being used to support neurodiverse people at HMP Grendon.

Current PhD Research: The experience and potential of hope for former prisoners living in the community

Current research by the author is being conducted as part of a PhD programme supervised by Professor Graham Towl and Professor Tammi Walker; two well respected Professors in Forensic Psychology at Durham University, who are both engaged in forensic research.

The Masters research conducted by the author provides a good starting point for understanding how hope is experienced by people who have served a prison sentence, and the differences between conventional hope applications in the general population, when compared with forensic applications. The research provides insights into a range of interpretatively analysed hope factors and cites limitations to 'hope momentum' which would increase hope, due to lack of agency within the prison environment.

The natural development of the research was to take this evidence and to extend it to people released from prison. It was hypothesised (using a working model) that people released from prison would have more agency and be able to set and achieve long term goals, which would be more compatible with hope theory in the general population, capable of yielding similar results. The hypothesis utilised 3 dispositional states (Surviving, Striving and Thriving), with Thriving defined as reaching one's full potential.

The current research focuses on interviews with participants that are now living in the community and have served a prison sentence, to explore their hope experience since leaving prison, and to what extent this has contributed to desistance from crime. This widens the scope of the potential of hope theory, that could be used to develop post-release interventions to reduce reoffending and drive higher levels of life satisfaction.

In 2023, ethics approval was obtained to interview 5 participants who are former prisoners, working with a specialist recruitment agency that places people with criminal justice experience into employment. The

18. Snyder, C. R., Harris, C., Anderson, J. R., Holleran, S. A., Irving, L. M., Sigmon, S. T., et al. (1991). The will and the ways: Development and validation of an individual-differences measure of hope. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60(4), 570-585.

19. Adlington-Rivers, D. (2023). *Freedom is in the Mind*. D. Adlington-Rivers.

participants were interviewed about their experience of hope and the extent to which it contributes to desistance from crime. The participants have successfully lived in the community, and not returned to a life of crime. All the participants are male and served varying sentences in England for different offence types, including large-scale fraud, murder and drug smuggling.

Preliminary findings from pilot interviews

Preliminary findings from the pilot research provide unique insights into how hope is experienced by former prisoners. Conventional hope theory dictates that people can set and achieve goals, using a range of pathways, and provides the opportunity for people to reach their full potential (or to Thrive using the hypothesised model), however, evidence from the pilot research suggests that hope is not experienced as a long-term vision, and 'thriving' is now considered to be too subjective on a case-by-case basis. For one person, thriving can be getting a job, and for others, it can be recovering from substance use. Hope is experienced as an iterative event, within the constraints of daily struggles, and overcoming these become the impending goals that might trigger a hopeful episode.

An example of structural barriers include:-

- Statutory obligations such as licence conditions, court-imposed restrictions (such as orders), probation requirements.
- Finding somewhere to live and security of accommodation.
- Finding suitable employment due to criminal record.
- Mental health support and resources (often to reduce risk of reoffending).
- Reintegration challenges/Maintaining meaningful relationships due to social stigma and loss of good character/reputation.
- Loss of autonomy.

The findings contradict the original hypothesis because the participants did not sufficiently enjoy the level of agency predicted to set and achieve long term goals. A framework has been developed to characterise and reflect how hope is experienced by people released from prison, using a hierarchy of achievement, which includes the following:-

1. Staying out of prison.
2. Dealing with new realities.
3. Stabilisation.
4. Aspiration.

Future direction of research

The future direction of the research is to develop the framework further to explain hope experience for

people released from prison, and to understand the extent to which hope theory contributes to desistance from crime. This will support the efficacy of hope interventions for people released from prison in the future.

The interpretation of whether hope is a factor in desistance from crime is difficult to evidence from the pilot interview analysis without further research, as the evidence suggests that participants directly linked understanding of the trigger of their index offence to desistance from crime. This in some cases involved desistance from using alcohol, drugs, or engaging in behaviours that caused their original offence to be committed. This however could be interpreted as a hopeful feeling and considered a goal in itself within hope theory. The next round of research interviews will investigate this further. The inclusion criteria will include participants that are statistically more likely to reoffend, to provide more credibility to the extent to which hope may have contributed to their desistance from crime.

Conclusion

The emergence of hope theory as a cognitive tool for positive change for people in and released from prison should be explored, at a time when the prison population is too high, and focus and policy is shifting towards rehabilitative approaches to our penal system. It can be used as an intervention by a range of practitioners such as prison officers, probation officers, and other professionals working in criminal justice. Hope theory has proven benefits for people in general society and can be applied in forensic settings to support rehabilitation, by supporting a person in reaching their full potential, if the right conditions exist. Hopeful thinking can be used to project a person into the future, serving as a good coping mechanism for today, and focusing their mind on progressive outcomes.

Understanding of hope in forensic applications is in its infancy, and research is still developing, but the evidence suggests that if hopeful thinking can be encouraged and practiced in prisons to increase hope factors, that it may lead to positive outcomes. This would need the executive support of prison governors and managers, as part of an underpinning hope programme.

It is hoped that other forensic research on hope will be developed in the coming years, to provide further evidence of its efficacy, and that hope programmes can be developed as part of a wider, strategic plan to accelerate rehabilitative practices for people in and released from prison.