The emotional labour of prison Listeners

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Introduction

The Listener scheme was created in response to the suicide in 1990 of 15-year-old Phillip Knight in HMP Swansea (an adult prison), and also in response to a general increase in suicidal and self-harming behaviours across the prison estate (Biggar and Neal 1996). The Listener scheme is a confidential peer-support service offered in prison, to help prisoners who are vulnerable or suicidal.

Prisoners are selected, trained and supported by volunteers from local Samaritans branches, which then provide regular contact for Listeners through weekly meetings that are confidential and private from prison staff. The majority of prisons in England and Wales have Listener schemes in place: in 2017 there were 1,540 active Listeners in post (Bromley Briefings 2018). Prison Listeners are trained to demonstrate appropriate emotional responses and discourses when interacting with vulnerable prisoners. They are also closely monitored by the Samaritans to ensure that they protect themselves from burnout and emotional difficulties. Not every prisoner selected for training proves suitable after an intensive training course. Listeners are taught the values of non-judgement and confidentiality as part of their training, because this is an integral part of the Samaritan's ethos. The Listener scheme plays a key role in the prison service's safer custody agenda and coincides with a move to a multidisciplinary approach towards self-harm and suicide, involving officers, professionals and prisoners (HMPS 1992, 1993, 1994).

'Emotional labour' is normally performed in return for a wage (Hochschild 1983). However, Steinberg and Figart (1999) state that this is not always the case, identifying that work which is not waged can still demand emotional labour. Listeners are expected to regulate their emotions in accordance with the demands of the role, work unsociable hours and exhibit appropriate decision-making strategies, despite the pressure of their own lives in custody and the wider prison environment. They receive no financial remuneration for their contributions but are rewarded on both a personal and institutional level. Perrin and Blagden (2014) found that being a Listener had a transformative effect, developing 'new me' narratives. Listeners are paid back in time; a commodity controlled by the prison regime and prison authorities (Matthews 2009). Listeners receive extra time out of their cell, freedom to access the wider prison environment when other prisoners are locked away, and they can also receive a six-month 'retainer' to perform Listener work, which can facilitate

local family visits. However, Liebling et al. (2005) found that Listeners were sometimes used as a token response to distress in prisons with a high number of staff who hold traditional cultural attitudes. Officers with limited views of prisoner care use Listeners as a way of personally avoiding dealing with the emotional concerns of prisoners (Liebling et al. 2005; Tait 2012). Often informing staff about prisoners' vulnerabilities has led to them being deemed a 'nuisance' by a small number of healthcare staff (Foster 2011). All that said, Listeners provide a vital service to the safe and effective running of prisons. They work tirelessly alongside prison staff whilst simultaneously having to negotiate their own custodial lives with the demands of vulnerable prisoners.

Methods

This research formed part of a wider PhD study around peer work and desistance (Nixon 2018). Male prisoners, probationers and former probationers were interviewed, alongside criminal justice personnel to explore the relationship between peer work and desistance, both in prison and the community. The researcher had prior experience and knowledge of working with male offenders, so an all-male sample was selected to reflect this experience. This chapter draws on interviews with seven prison Listeners who were interviewed as well as interviews with the safer custody coordinator and a Samaritans volunteer. The prison was a category 'B' local holding approximately 380 prisoners. Semi-structured interviews were used, based around an appreciative approach to peer work and the impact upon self-transformation and desistance. As an ex-prison officer and current prison tutor in the same establishment, the number one prison governor granted access to the wider prison to collect data, so prisoners were recruited using a convenience sample. Data was collected over a 12-month period and was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The emotional labour of prison peer workers, particularly Listeners, was not a theme that was expected to emerge during data analysis. Peer work was explored initially from the researcher's assumptions that the role would only yield positive experiences for those involved. However, the emotional toil and role commitment expressed by Listeners emerged as a theme to be explored. As Listeners outlined the complexity of the role and the impact it had upon their custodial lives, it was evident that emotional labour in peer work was a sensitising concept in need of further exploration.

Discussion

Themes identified for discussion are 'doing emotional labour', 'dirty emotional labour' and emotional support for Listeners, which will be explored in turn.

Doing emotional labour

Listeners have to manage a tension that exists when adhering to their role as well as their status as 'prisoner', which is particularly burdensome for them. The confidential nature of Listener work can (temporarily) invert the power relationships in prison and gives Listeners a situated knowledge that prison officers do not possess. Listeners are required to uphold confidentiality at all times and breaching this would be a serious threat to the fundamental ethos of the Listener scheme (exceptions are made in extreme circumstances, for example a terrorist threat, where Listeners are expected to inform staff immediately if threat is posed to the establishment). Listeners can be put under pressure by staff to disclose details around vulnerable prisoners (see Jaffe 2012). For example, one prisoner interpreted confrontation by a prison officer as intrusive and a threat to the integrity of his role, but he stood his ground:

> If you want to know what's up with him, you go and ask him!
> (Andrew[1], Listener)

Prison Listeners are trained to not intervene with a prisoner's desire to take their own life or commit an act of self-harm. This however may conflict with their humanitarian concerns towards others. Andrew states that he uses strategies to help prisoners to find their own solutions, through asking them if they have put a canteen sheet request in; his logic behind this is that if they have, then they show signs of wanting to stay alive. Listeners must display appropriate body language to remain calm and in control, even when faced with the certainty that another prisoner is going to take their own life. Emotional dissonance is the conflict between emotions felt and the emotions expressed to conform to display rules (Abraham 1999). Steve expresses the emotional dissonance (Abraham 1999; Hochschild 1983) that he feels about this, despite the ethos of the programme:

> …if someone said to me that as soon as I leave I am going to kill myself, I would want to do something about it. If…. I got up in the morning and he was dead, I would feel terrible, like I should have been able to stop it.
> (Steve, Listener)

Repeat prisoners harden up to this reality, more so than first timers, often expressing a level of detachment. Dan has been in prison several times and has accepted this aspect of the Listener role more so than less 'prison wise' prisoners:

[1] Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

> I've been called away at some silly hours just to talk. It is nice walking away knowing that that person is going to survive another day…but you also have to be prepared if that person wants to end his life. You have to accept it and not take it personally.
> (Dan, Listener)

John, however, expressed conflict around hearing this particular narrative. He adopts a strategy to address this dissonance, by going to visit the prisoner the next day, in an unofficial and informal capacity. Through checking up on the prisoner (to see if he is still alive), he addresses his own concerns in a way that does not contradict the Samaritan's ethos of respecting a prisoner's intentions, and not trying to control or influence the choice of the individual.

At certain times of the day Listeners will be required to rescind their role, reverting back to 'prisoner', and they must be willing to make this transition instantly at the request of the staff. Part of the Listener role is managing their frustrations at an operational regime that has been hit hard during austere times (Ismail 2019). Staff are not there to open cell doors in a timely manner for Listeners, because of staff shortages. John explains that certain operational decisions make him feel disempowered and angry:

> Nine times out of ten you will get the screws (prison officers) cutting the call for roll count…you can't say "no". They may give you 5 minutes, but they will come back. That's the regime versus the prisoner's needs; they clash. They say "deal with him tomorrow" but by tomorrow he may have cut up or killed himself. It's too late and we feel bad because we spoke to him last night and didn't finish the call. The screws still go home and have a good nights' sleep; it's nothing to do with them.
> (John, Listener)

However, the custodial manager who runs the Listener scheme contradicts John, stating the official prison policy around Listener calls:

> We should never end their call (the Listeners). We have a secure care suite and the majority of calls are facilitated in there….so the calls can go on for as long as needed because it is in use 24 hours a day.
> (Dave, Custodial Manager)

The tensions between Listeners and prison officers are clear and John has to manage his emotions in accordance with the expectations of his dual role as prisoner and Listener. The operational regime at certain times of the day will take precedence over peer support. It is down to the good will of staff to relocate Listeners and their prisoners to the care suite, which is contingent on cooperation and resources. A HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016) report found that there were periods of the prison regime, for example during periods of lock up, and particularly at night time, where staff were reluctant to get Listeners out, or were reported to say that they were 'too busy' to assist. Some Listeners had to talk to prisoners through locked doors, thus conversations were not confidential (2016: 23). Prison Service Instruction 64/2011 states that prisoners should have timely access to Listeners wherever they are located, and where there is a dedicated Listener support suite, a protocol must be in place for its use.

The Listener suite gives prisoners a safe space to open up emotionally – what Crewe et al. (2014) calls an 'emotional zone'. The Listener suite gives both prisoner and listener time out from the highly charged aggression on the landings and permits the expression of emotive displays from both parties. The Listener can use this space to display qualities that conflict with the hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) that prevails on the landings. Crewe (2014) describes the public culture of most men's prisons as characterised by a particular kind of emotionally taut masculine performance. However, there are a number of situations where care and affection can be seen (although they can be hidden). The backstage space of a Listener suite fosters a safe place for both Listener and prisoner to explore the prisoner's needs.

Dirty emotional labour

The focus of this section is the notion of the dark side of emotional labour, described by Hughes (1958) and Ward and McMurray (2016) as situations where individuals encounter social, physical and moral taint in their work. Listeners perform 'dirty emotional work' (McMurray and Ward 2014), often in place of prison officers who deflect 'dirty' tasks to Listeners, for example difficult and challenging prisoners with complex mental health issues, rather than correct referrals being made to qualified healthcare professionals (Liebling and Arnold 2005). Paul, an experienced Listener, identifies the difficult scenarios that he has found himself in:

> … I had a couple of people and they start talking about the voices they are hearing in their head…I thought I'm not kind of equipped with these people...you know serious mental health issues…pacing up and down explaining all the different voices in their head.

(Paul, Listener)

Paul has to manage his emotions in situations like these and using a limited skillset to work with prisoners with severe mental health issues, he has to conceal any vulnerability or fear that he might be experiencing in close proximity to delusional prisoners.

Listeners have to endure negative labelling from other prisoners, thus finding themselves in a liminal state (Van Gennep 1909), caught between the role expectations of being a trusted prisoner, from both prison staff and Samaritans, and also managing the expectations of their peers, with whom they share a landing. This illustrates the dirty side of emotional labour, where Listeners are perceived as 'tainted' for the role that they perform. The proximity they have to prison officers can be misinterpreted as defying aspects of the 'inmate code' (Sykes 1958) (for example contravening perceived acceptable boundaries of 'prisoner' and providing information to staff):

> Yes they call us 'screw boys'…. but as a Listener it is your job to help others. That is our role. If somebody comes in and says they are being bullied and they don't want to tell the staff themselves, then it is our role to do that and keep people safe so that they don't self-harm or commit suicide.
> (Neil, Listener)

The trust placed upon prison Listeners creates difficulty with other prisoners who do not share the same level of privilege and respect from staff. Listeners have to maintain appropriate discourses to uphold the authenticity of their prisoner identity, and they are often seen as a 'soft touch' by other prisoners. Steve elaborated on how he manages this tension and puts his survival in the prison ahead of the expectations of being a Listener:

> … I think people see kindness as a weakness. I try not to let that bug me. There have been a couple of times when I have been in here and people have said they are going to knock me out. I've said to them 'just because I'm a Listener and a nice guy, doesn't mean I won't kick the shit out of you'. They will be quiet then and see a different side of me that I don't normally let out. I don't like being like that but if I need to I will.
> (Steve, Listener)

Prisoners can exploit Listeners for behaving like 'screw boys' and working closely with 'undesirable' prisoners like sex offenders, which renders them 'dirty' and 'tainted' in the eyes of other prisoners. They are often bullied to bend prison rules and bring contraband into the prison. This creates problems of personal safety for Listeners, making them targets:

> I don't mind helping people…. however about two months ago some prisoners tried to bully me, thinking I've got it good and they wanted what I have got. They tried to bully me to get drugs in. I had people in my cell punching me…. If you are a listener you are a trusted person. I can't be seen to be behaving in that way.
> (Andrew, Listener)

Prison Listeners expressed concern that their authenticity was questioned by staff, and their status was inconsistently validated by prison officers. In the following example, one Listener was trying to access a prisoner who had urgently requested to see him, and he needed a prison officer to open the gate for him. It was the Listener's day off, so he was going over and above expectations of the role, and was subsequently challenged in an aggressive manner by a prison officer:

> Yeah but you are not on the rota today. Don't try and bullshit me and pull the wool over my eyes.
> (Gary, prison officer)

The Listener stated that his role was operational 24 hours a day and that he can speak to anyone at any time as a Listener, to which he was told:

> No, you can't. You can go in there now, but don't try and take the piss out of me again.
> (Gary, prison officer)

The Listener succeeded in his task of accessing the prisoner but felt obliged to show deference to the rudeness of the prison officer, so that he did not get in to trouble and lose his Listener post. He expressed his frustrations:

> I seem to get it a lot from the staff. They think being a Listener is a way to stay longer or make your time easier.
> (Paul, Listener)

Prison Listeners have greater access to the prison than other prisoners. This is something that gives a sense of personal agency but can also lead to cynicism and mistrust amongst prison officers, further highlighting the taint associated with the Listener role. Simon and Neil's cell was also a Listener suite (as they are located on the Vulnerable Prisoner Unit) and Simon identified how he was placed under greater surveillance from prison staff, who he felt did not trust and validate his Listener status. This further consolidates the liminal status of Listeners:

> I've had spells within a month where I have had 3 drug tests and had my cell turned over twice…they say it is all done on a random basis, but what's random about that? Compared to before I was a Listener, when I only had it once…. but I can understand why because you are given more opportunities to be out of your cell, you are given that little bit more freedom, so in return they are going to want to see you are squeaky clean and not abusing it.
> (Simon, Listener)

Listeners expressed emotional dissonance around working with sex offenders. Working alongside this demographic further highlights the concept of 'dirty emotional work' (McMurray and Ward 2014). In this particular prison, sex offenders are trained to be Listeners alongside non-sex offenders and these two groups interact during weekly meetings with the Samaritans. During their 'back stage' interview several non-sex offenders acknowledged that whilst they find sex offences and sex offenders distasteful, they are required to behave in non-judgemental ways and conform to display rules associated with the role, because otherwise they will have the role and status removed from them. Many prisoners are rejected for Listener work because they do not demonstrate correct display rules to work safely alongside sex offenders. Andrew describes the emotional suppression and surface acting involved in this type of work:

> I have to sit here and not judge that person. To me they have done wrong and I detest what they have done…but we have done wrong...so I just sit here. I don't give them any indication that I know what they have done. I just do my job and don't think about it.

(Andrew, Listener)

The level of performance management that Andrew adopts as a Listener has convinced the sex offender prisoner that there will be no threat made towards them, which is the correct set of display and feeling rules to keep his job as Head Listener. One of the sex offender Listeners commented:

> I was a bit nervous at first…. I know we are looked upon badly…. there is still that stigma….it was amazing actually…. Listeners have to be coming from that frame of mind…of being non-judgemental.
> (Steve, Listener)

The convict code of not 'grassing' on others is paramount within a prison environment (see Clemmer 1940; Sykes 1958). Neil and Simon (both serving life sentences and waiting for appeal) did defy the inmate code of not 'grassing' on others**,** when it became apparent the extent of the bullying on their landing from one individual. They put their Listener obligations ahead of the convict code, risking potential ostracism as a result of their decision:

> I used to see what he was doing and I thought 'how can he do that to other people?' We are all human beings. He can't be like that. I removed myself; I didn't want to be around him. Something had to be done. All 3 Listeners sat down…. we had a little meeting. Someone came in and said they were going to slash up (self-harm) because of him. We spoke to staff on his behalf. After that another 8–10 people came forward and said that he was bullying them…he is now in the block (segregation). You still have his little followers who keep doing things for him. They walk up and down the landings making smarmy comments. They know it was us Listeners. But our role, we have to do that. We are not part of this violence; we have to do the right thing.
> (Neil, Listener)

The concept of the 'dark side of emotional labour' (Ward and McMurray 2016) is clearly useful in terms of understanding Listeners' interactions with other prisoners. However, these interactions with vulnerable individuals can also have a positive outcome on prison Listeners. From their ethnographic study of Samaritans, McMurray and Ward (2014: 1) found that these volunteers act as 'society's agents in the containment of emotional dirt' and that the management of difficult,

negative or out of place emotions of others can be framed as a positive experience, generating satisfying emotions. Listener work can be a stark reminder of who or what they do not want to become, as they deal with prisoners who are experiencing prison in ways that generate suicidal ideations. Listeners use social comparison (Festinger 1954) as a strategy to distance themselves from vulnerable prisoners, and an opportunity to remind themselves of the relative advantage that they have over those in crisis:

> I looked into his cell and there were no personal touches….no cards to suggest that anybody cares for him … it reminded me of how lucky I am to have my family.
> (Steve, Listener)

This section illustrates the complexities involved in the Listener role, where prisoners have to engage in emotion and identity work to interact with a variety of demographics in the prison, which can place them in positions of uncertainty and liminality. Engaging in tasks that are perceived as 'tainted' puts an enormous amount of pressure upon the Listeners' coping resources.

Emotional support for Listeners

This final section examines the way Listeners are protected by staff in terms of self-care, avoiding burnout and dealing with difficult emotional circumstances. Listeners perform a complex series of interactions with both prisoners and staff and they have to negotiate the boundaries of the role within the wider prison environment, which can affect them both physically and emotionally. South et al. (2014) suggest that prisons and prison staff have a responsibility to provide support for peer workers, to help them to cope and avoid burnout. Chinelo (2010) argues that prison officers who fail to support Listener schemes by making the operational functioning of the scheme more difficult for Listeners. There are, however, prison staff who place great emphasis upon protecting the Listeners from emotional burnout. One prisoner stated that he needed to be reprieved of listener work to deal with a significant emotional event:

> Christmas was the anniversary of my mum's death and I thought at the moment that I shouldn't do any listening work because I can't spend any time on people with these things going through my mind. I was a bit gutted and a bit relieved … I knew I wouldn't be there for the people who are having problems … they wouldn't have my full attention. I would be letting them down, not listening to them.
> (Neil, Listener)

Neil recognises that he could not adhere to the correct set of 'feeling rules' and in spite of the training he had received as a Listener, he recognised that his judgement and emotional display may be impaired by the anniversary of his mum's death. Hochschild (1983) identifies the control that employers have over the emotional displays of their workers and in recognition of Neil's emotional state; the safer custody coordinator removed him from further duties:

> … we just take them off until they are ready to work again. They have got their own custodial lives and sentences to deal with…. you could have callers that are high intensity…we don't want them to burn out.
> (Dave, Custodial Manager)

Front stage performances (Goffman 1959) are hard to keep up in the prison environment because of the visibility and transparency of their lives, particularly in a small prison, where they are recognisable because of their Listener t-shirts. Giving emotional support to others means that the Listeners have to manage their own emotions very carefully. The prison regime controls the pace, timing and flow of emotions and there is very little private space for Listeners to express their own emotion (Crewe 2014). Deprivation of privacy (Schwartz 1972) is expressed as one of the pains experienced by prisoners (see Sykes 1958):

> I found out my grandma has cancer. I love her. I feel a bit of a let-down. I was in the shower yesterday; everyone was banged up. I must have been in there for about half an hour. I was just crying my eyes out. That's one of the hardest things about being in prison; you don't get any time alone. As a Listener, I rang for another Listener. It took the screws an hour to come and my next-door neighbour came in. When you are outside you can find a solution…in here there is nothing I can fucking do about that and that is really hard to deal with.
> (Steve, Listener)

The Listeners have a weekly meeting with the Samaritans, which is strictly off limits to prison staff. This gives Listeners a backstage opportunity to express emotions that they are feeling in their role and provides a collective support network for offloading. Voluntary workers like the Samaritans facilitate authentic emotional expressions amongst prisoners and provide non-judgemental working styles that are distinctly different from the authoritative approach taken by prison officers (Tomczak and Albertson 2016). Weekly meetings allow for honesty and openness, creating a safe space where

Listeners can display vulnerability in front of other prisoners, thus providing a space where they can distance themselves from their prisoner self. Crewe et al. (2014) allude to spaces within the prison that are as "uncarceral as possible" and the weekly meeting allows prisoners to transcend their 'master status' (Becker 1963) for a finite period. Justin, one of the Samaritans, explains the utility of the Listener meetings:

> …they offload to each other…I think that is the most important thing… if they are not getting the listening conditions they would like….eg calls cut short, brisk treatment, nowhere to go that is private, or staff don't know the rules of which we operate, they don't work the rota properly…. they offload…they have to exercise a huge amount of patience in the prison…
> (Justin, Samaritan volunteer)

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the emotional labour required by prison Listeners in carrying out their role. It is evident that Listeners perform an extremely complex role. Listeners have to negotiate many different aspects of prison life in order to survive the role, avoid burnout and placate both prison officers and their peers. Prison Listeners form an integral part of providing a safe prison and without their contributions, prison staff would struggle to cope with the increasingly challenging circumstances they face.

Further research could explore the extent to which Listeners are aware of the emotional labour involved and the 'taint' they may experience when performing the role. This may reduce the tensions experienced between prison Listeners and prison officers and improve current professional working relationships. It may also improve the relationship between Listeners and Samaritan's volunteers, though providing more insight into the 'dirty emotional work' that Listeners perform. The contrast between Listeners and prison officers in the performance of emotional labour is an interesting point with which to conclude; prison officers themselves engage in emotional labour during their work, engaging in culturally accepted feeling rules around emotional detachment from prisoners and an affinity for the punitive rather than the rehabilitative (see Chapter 5, this volume). An understanding of the consequences and costs of emotional labour may assist criminal justice workers, to understand the demands made upon Listeners, and assist them fully in their work.

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