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# 'I just want to give something back': Peer work in prison

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**This article explores the relationships that prisoners develop with other prisoners through peer work, and how the role can prove transformative, contributing to the desistance process. This article also focuses on how peer work can develop enhanced relationships with staff and can signal desistance to others. The term 'peer work' is used, as it encapsulates the diverse range of roles that prisoners engage in, and is inclusive of more than just 'peer mentoring', which is a rapidly emerging focus in criminological research.<sup>1</sup> Peer work is defined as any interactions that are carried out by prisoners that involve the act of working with a person of the same status, 'working with people who are not in authority over us' and 'people that are the same as us'.<sup>2</sup> The focus of this article is on interactions through formal peer work roles, rather than every day, informal interactions between prisoners and staff. There are various peer work schemes that operate in prisons, which are determined by the type of interactions and level of involvement between prisoners. Peer work schemes in this research include prison Listeners, drug peer mentors and education/literacy peer mentors**

## Peer work

Peer support is recognised by HMPPS as a major step in the process of reducing reoffending, by helping prisoners to develop an alternative identity rather than offender identity.<sup>3</sup> Peer support in prisons is high on the 2013 Transforming Rehabilitation agenda, according to Grayling

'When someone leaves prison, I want them already to have a mentor in place to help them get their lives back together. There are some really good examples out there of organisations making good use of the old lags (sic) in stopping new ones'.<sup>4</sup>

Drug peer mentors are recruited to work with other prisoners in a drug detoxification programme on the Substance Misuse Unit. They co-facilitate and deliver sessions with the CARATS<sup>5</sup> team, lead small group activities and focus on their own drug recovery as well as mentoring other prisoners. This research found that repeat offenders were fast tracked as peer mentors, because they are known to prison staff and the CARATS team, and it is expected that they will be effective peer mentors, based on their previous performances as peer mentor on earlier sentences. They are 'trusted' prisoners, having earned this through their conduct on the landing and they are given more autonomy than standard prisoners. Whilst relationships between staff and peer mentors are generally positive, repeat recidivism undermines the longer term desistance-based objectives of the peer mentoring scheme. The Listeners provide confidential and emotional support to fellow prisoners who are experiencing distress.<sup>6</sup> Listener support is non-judgemental and non-directive.<sup>7</sup> The Samaritans and the Listeners are an integral aspect of the Prison Service's suicide and self-harm prevention strategy.<sup>8</sup> Shannon Trust offer a literacy scheme in prison called 'Toe by Toe', where prisoners assist and mentor other prisoners to improve their literacy through a pre-set curriculum.

Listener peer work can generate 'new me' tones and displays a distancing from their old, offending selves.<sup>9</sup> Through peer work, redemptive tones were

1. See for example Buck G (2018) The core conditions of peer mentoring: *Criminology and Criminal Justice* Vol 18 issue 2; Jaffe, M (2012) Peer support and seeking help in a prison: a study of the Listeners scheme in four prisons in England (unpublished PhD) Keele University
2. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2003) *Peer to Peer. Using peer strategies in drug abuse prevention* New York: United Nations.
3. HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2016) *Life in prison: peer support* London
4. Grayling, C (2012) Justice Minister's 'Rehabilitation Revolution' speech, 20 November. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rehabilitation-revolution-the-next-steps](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/rehabilitation-revolution-the-next-steps) [accessed August 2016].
5. Counselling, assessment, referral, advice and through-care (CARATS) who provide substance misuse support
6. South, J, et al (2012) *Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium*. Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium Conference Proceedings.
7. Jaffe, M (2012) Peer support and seeking help in a prison: a study of the Listeners scheme in four prisons in England (unpublished PhD) Keele University
8. PSO (Prison service order) 2700 Suicide and self-harm prevention
9. Perrin, C and Blagden, N (2014) Accumulating meaning, purpose and opportunities to change 'drip by drip': the impact of being a listener in prison: *Psychology, crime and law: Volume 20, issue 9*.

identified, alongside a desire to give something back. Peer work fuelled aspirations to work in fields of mentoring, counselling, social work and youth work,<sup>10</sup> displaying a possible positive future self.<sup>11</sup> Involvement in a prisoner council generates feelings of hope and motivation for the future and a feeling that prisoners have something to offer.<sup>12</sup> Giving service to others has a transformative effect upon self-esteem and respect, reversing the marginalisation that prisoners experience in custody. Offenders who find ways of making contributions to society, through mentoring, assisting and enhancing the lives of other people appear to be more successful at giving up crime.<sup>13</sup> Peer mentoring roles give a new perspective of the self and increase self-awareness.<sup>14</sup> Being an insider<sup>15</sup> gives a sense of accomplishment, a positive self-image and increased self-confidence.<sup>16</sup> Peer work also develops social capital in prisoners. Through helping others, peer workers become 'experts by experience' and through using 'experiential knowledge', helping others develops self-determination and empowerment. Through reciprocal relationships and mutual support, the 'helper therapy principle' applies.<sup>17</sup> Peer work allows prisoners to display generativity, which is described as 'the concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation, manifested through... mentoring'.<sup>18</sup>

Individuals create 'generative scripts'<sup>19</sup> which facilitate desistance and allows for negative experiences to be

recast in a positive light when helping others. Peer workers aspire to, and are motivated by generative goals, and a positive desire to give back and make amends serves to enhance the desistance process. 'Prisoners need opportunities to be useful to others, to discover their own hidden talents and recognise the rewards of...generative activity'.<sup>20</sup>

### Peer work and desistance

Maruna and Farrall<sup>21</sup> distinguish between primary desistance, which is a cessation or lull in offending, and secondary desistance, which is a shift in identity and self-concept. Tertiary desistance<sup>22</sup> is when there is a level of acceptance by the community that the person has reformed and has developed a sense of belonging. Act desistance, identity desistance and relational desistance<sup>23</sup> have been used to capture the various stages of the desistance process. Prison peer workers generally abstain from further offending whilst in prison, but the extent of creating lasting identity and relational desistance is questionable in prison, as prisoners still have to make the transition to the community.

Giordano et al<sup>24</sup> state that there are a number of stages than an individual passes through in the desistance process. Firstly they must have a cognitive 'openness

to change'. Then they 'latch' on to a 'hook for change'; in this research peer work is the 'hook for change'.<sup>25</sup> A

Peer work is a valid way of signalling desistance intentions to criminal justice agencies that have the power to label and define individuals.

10. Jaffe, M (2012) Peer support and seeking help in a prison: a study of the Listeners scheme in four prisons in England (unpublished PhD) Keele University
11. Paternoster R, Bushway S (2009) Desistance and the feared self: Toward an identity theory of criminal desistance. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 99(4): 1103–1156
12. Edgar, K; Solomon, E (2004) *Having Their Say: The work of prisoner councils*: Prison Reform Trust
13. Maruna S (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
14. Mackenzie et al (2012) Agents of Change: Peer Mentorship as HIV Prevention Among HIV Positive Injection Drug Users *Substance Use & Misuse*, 47:522–534, 2012
15. Insiders are trusted prisoners who help new prisoners to settle into the prison, helping them out when required
16. Boothby MRK (2011) Insiders' views of their role: Toward their training. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 53(4): 424–448.
17. Reissman, F (1965) The helper therapy principle: *Social Work*, Volume 10, Issue 2, 1 April 1965, Pages 27–32
18. McAdams, DP and de St. Aubin, E (1992) A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioural acts and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of personality and social psychology* 62, 1003-1015
19. Maruna S (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association
20. Barlow, S and Maruna, S (2011) in Crewe, B; Bennett, J (2012) *The Prisoner*: Routledge: Oxon
21. Maruna S and Farrall S (2004) Desistance from crime: a theoretical reformulation. *Kölnner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 43: 171–194.
22. McNeill, F (2016) in Nugent B, Schinkel M (2016) *The pains of desistance* (2016) *Criminology and Criminal Justice* Volume 16 Issue 5 pp 568-584
23. See 21
24. Giordano PC, Cernkovich SA and Rudolph JL (2002) Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064
25. Giordano et al (2002) used marriage as a 'hook for change'; see also Jump, D (2015) *Fighting for change: Narrative accounts on the appeal and desistance potential of boxing*: Howard League for Penal Reform

replacement self is developed. The final stage is a new self that is incompatible with further offending.

Peer work is a valid way of signalling desistance intentions to criminal justice agencies that have the power to label and define individuals. Desistance signalling, according to Maruna<sup>26</sup>, offers a 'legitimation of a labelling theory of rehabilitation' and the implications to apply this to peer work are worthy of consideration, in terms of restoring the person's reputation and attaining full citizenship. Peer work offers a legitimate opportunity to a criminally stigmatised underclass<sup>27</sup> to signal to others that 'I am not now who I was'<sup>28</sup> and it offers the opportunity to manage a spoiled identity.<sup>29</sup> The peer work role requires a level of compassion and empathy towards others and the experience develops a sense of 'taking the role of the other'.<sup>30</sup> Through the development of an emotional self, they consider how their behaviour is received by their peers and staff, and this level of empathy can facilitate desistance.

Liebling<sup>31</sup> asks the question 'can human beings flourish in prison', answering it with 'sometimes, or under certain conditions'. This paper supports peer work as one of the conditions that allows for prisoners to excel and flourish. Graham<sup>32</sup> suggests that by creating social ties and participating in socially and personally valued roles, responsibility is increased and supportive micro-environments are established. Desistance is facilitated by having someone believe that the person can change for the better. In supporting desistance, individuals must be granted the opportunity to move upwards by increasing their social standing, de-labelling, and changing from being a stigmatised outsider to a stakeholder in society. It is conceivable that, through peer work, the desistance process can be started in prison. Prisoners expressed desires to sustain peer work beyond the prison walls, through continuation with the Samaritans, or through probation or CJDT peer mentoring. However, despite working as a prison Listener, one participant stated that he has about another year of offending to do upon

release, which counter argues against the transformative potential of peer work upon desistance. There was evidence to suggest that peer work does contribute to the development of a replacement self; however peer work was also found to be a situated activity, with no links to desistance.<sup>33</sup>

## Method

The findings are taken from a wider qualitative study into peer work and desistance, both in prison and the community. This article however focuses solely on peer work in prison. The aim of the research was to explore the extent to which peer work influences desistance. Giordano et al's (2002) Cognitive Transformational Model was used as a theoretical framework. The research was undertaken in a category 'B' prison and 15 prisoner peer workers and 8 staff members were interviewed.<sup>34</sup> The 'insider' status of the researcher<sup>35</sup> facilitated the research, through understanding the culture of this particular prison; however, having left the role 10 years ago, 'outsider' status was also relevant as the culture of the prison has changed (new psychoactive substances and radicalisation being key developments). The researcher was a civilian prison tutor at the time of data collection, so familiarity with the prison and ease of access to participants were key to this study.

Current peer workers were selected from drug peer mentors, Listeners and Shannon Trust 'Toe by Toe' mentors. The data was thematically analysed using the stages of Giordano et al's model and this article presents some of the key findings on the relational dynamics of peer work between prisoners, the impact of peer work upon prisoner-staff relationships and also the potential of peer work for desistance. The findings demonstrate the potential of peer work as a 'hook for change'. In addition peer work can help to develop an appealing and conventional replacement self in prison,<sup>36</sup> and a transformation away from further offending. Whilst Giordano et al's theoretical framework underpins this

It is conceivable  
that, through peer  
work, the  
desistance process  
can be started  
in prison.

26. Maruna, S (2012) Elements of successful desistance signalling: *Criminology and Public Policy* Vol 11 issue 1

27. Jacobs 2006:387 in Maruna 2012: 75 see 26

28. Toch, H 2010; in Maruna 2012:75 see 26

29. Goffman, E (1963) *Stigma*: Penguin London

30. Mead, GH (1934) *Mind, Self and Society*: Chicago Books: Chicago

31. Liebling, A (2012) Can human beings flourish in prison? Prison Phoenix Trust lecture

32. Graham, S (2012) *Paying It Back: Does Community Service Activities Promote Desistance in Prisoners?* (Unpublished masters: School of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Tasmania)

33. Further longitudinal work is needed to establish the long term impact of prison peer work.

34. The author is an ex-prison officer who served 6 years in the same category B local prison between 2003 and 2009.

35. As stated earlier, former prison officer 2003 to 2009 at a category 'B' local prison

36. Giordano PC, Cernkovich SA and Rudolph JL (2002) Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064

research, it is important to note that application had limited success in the prison.<sup>37</sup> A transformative approach was taken with this study, as the researcher aims to give a 'voice' to a marginalised and silenced (prisoner) population. The study provides a 'snap-shot' of peer workers whilst they are in prison, so the extent to which desistance was sustained post release was not identified. It is also important to note that for some prisoners, peer work is nothing more than a situated activity, and has no relationship with a future desisting self. Attention is given in this research to those delivering peer work, rather than the 'recipients', which has been the mainstay of peer mentoring research, in terms of impact upon recidivism. This article seeks to explore peer work and self, identity and desistance, alongside the important contributions made by prison staff in supporting prisoners who engage in peer work.

### Benefits of peer work to the prison

Peer interventions in prison can improve the atmosphere of the prison environment, through improved relations with staff.<sup>38</sup> Peer interventions are often co-constructed with staff, which empowers the prisoners, allowing them to feel like agents of change in their immediate social environment, with their voices recognised as sources of authority and credibility. If peer interventions are co-ordinated well and embedded positively into the prison regime, they can create waves of positive organisational change and support improvements in the prison's atmosphere, culture and ethos. Formal peer interventions have become an integral feature of prison life.<sup>39</sup> Peers have a greater sense of empathy than trained staff and offer expertise 'by experience',<sup>40</sup> which makes them an asset to the prison environment. If prisoners are denied the

## Peer interventions in prison can improve the atmosphere of the prison environment, through improved relations with staff.

capacity to care for self, others and future in meaningful, durable and non-violent ways, then prisons are guaranteed to produce a 'large cohort of repeat consumers of the carceral enterprise'.<sup>41</sup>

However, some staff found allowing prisoners greater levels of freedom in the prison a difficult concept to comprehend, because it opposes prison service values and principles.<sup>42</sup> Power shifts in favour of prisoners were perceived as a negative development, and by allowing prisoners more autonomy, there were potential problems in exercising discipline. 'Prisons are high regulation, low trust environments, with deep power differentials and little constructive activity',<sup>43</sup> yet prison conditions can be favourable to the emergence of respected and humane selves, and peer work can facilitate this. Prison staff are instrumental in recognising potential and supporting

prisoners to secure positive roles, for example peer work. Caring prison officers treat prisoners as if they were of equal moral worth, communicate to prisoners with respect and empathise with their personal situations.<sup>44</sup> There is trust found in relationships between prison staff and peer workers, and in a 'compressed living space', there is warmth, humour and empathy in prison life, alongside aggression and fear.<sup>45</sup> Several key themes emerged from this research. Staff provide positive appraisals and recognise potential,

and prisoners provide role models and positive influences for other prisoners through peer work. Generativity and wanting to give back to others were integral themes in peer workers' narratives.

Positive appraisals and recognition of potential from 'significant others'

'Significant others'<sup>46</sup> provide a 'looking glass self',<sup>47</sup> where an individual's self-perception and self-image is based on how they believe others to perceive them. In

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- 37. There were instances where it did apply, but there was greater success in applying Giordano et al's (2002) theory to the community peer workers, which is beyond the scope of this article.
  - 38. South, J, et al (2012) *Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium*. Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium Conference Proceedings.
  - 39. Edgar, K; Jacobson, J; Biggar, K (2011) *Time Well Spent: A practical guide to active citizenship and volunteering in prison: Prison reform Trust London*
  - 40. Durcan, G. and Cees Zwemstra, J. (2014), "Mental health in prison", in WHO (Ed.) *Prisons and health*, WHO, Geneva, pp. 84-98
  - 41. Halsey, M; Harris V (2011) *Prisoner futures: Sensing the signs of generativity: Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology Vol 44, Issue 1, 2011 pp. 74-93*
  - 42. South, J, et al (2012) *Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium*. Peers in Prison Settings (PiPS) Expert Symposium Conference Proceedings.
  - 43. Liebling A (2004) 'The late modern prison and the question of values' *Current issues in criminal justice* 16: 202-219.
  - 44. Tait, S (2012) *custody, care and staff-prisoners relationships in Crewe*, B and Bennett, J (eds) *The Prisoner* (2012) London, Routledge
  - 45. Crewe, B and Bennett, J (eds) (2012) *The prisoner* (pg. 36) Routledge, London
  - 46. Sullivan, H (1940) *Conceptions of Modern Psychiatry*. Washington, D. c.: W. A. White Psychiatric Foundation.
  - 47. Cooley, C (1902) *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Scribner's Confer pp. 183-184 for first use of the term "looking glass self"

the context of this research, prison officers and civilian staff provide the 'looking glass' for the peer workers, through recognising potential and supporting them. Peer work allowed one prisoner to achieve his potential in something that he had a natural aptitude for, and this role was a way of overcoming the negative labels he had internalised about himself

'When a teacher told me that I would be good at doing it (peer mentoring), I started feeling positive about myself. People must see things in me for them to keep saying these positive things. At first, I wasn't really too sure as I'm not used to positive feedback, I'm used to negative feedback all my life' (prisoner)

The relationship between the prisoner and his tutor demonstrates the power of 'reflected appraisals'<sup>48</sup> upon self and identity, and the Pygmalion effect,<sup>49</sup> where increased expectations lead to increased performance. Enhanced relationships are forged with 'significant others' during peer work interactions, and through belief from others, self-confidence grows.

Prisoners recovering from substance addiction use peer mentoring as a way to increase their self-worth; (many expressed a loss of self-esteem during active addiction). This is supported through positive appraisals from 'significant others' who deliver peer work programmes, and this is reflected back to the peer workers

'It felt good because when you are on drugs, no-one has really got time for you have they? It felt good to be approached and asked, when there are 360 people they could have picked. I was talking with my CARAT worker at the time and she was telling me how good I've done, that I should go for peer mentor and help other people coming into the jail, you know that are suffering with the same problems that I used to have. And because I had been there and done it, I could tell them more than they could' (prisoner)

Positive responses from staff impact upon prisoners' drives to commit to peer work roles and demonstrate appropriate pro-social behaviour. Through recognition that they are trusted and respected for the contributions they make, they live up to this trust

## Positive responses from staff impact upon prisoners' drives to commit to peer work roles and demonstrate appropriate pro-social behaviour.

'We put trust in the peer mentors. It is like having 'colleagues' rather than 'prisoners'...you develop a very good working relationship with them, and when they are peer mentors they are the best they have been. Peer mentoring is a priority job in the prison and they are given a sense of responsibility.....and they play up to it. It's away from the main prison and they don't get caught up in the troubles that go on there.' (CARATS staff)

Supportive relationships and praise impact upon future performances. Emotional connections that occur with staff through peer work are characterised by mutual respect, which serves to enhance the prisoner's emerging self as a credible 'colleague'. Embracing prisoners from a strengths-based perspective rather than a deficit perspective<sup>50</sup> allows them to flourish in their roles and recognise the contributions they can make to the development of both self and others

'(prisoner) as a peer mentor in prison, it brings out the best in him, he is wicked in groups, very deep and insightful.....with him here it's like having a prisoner and a half' (CARATS staff)

Prisoners are not just passive recipients of positive feedback; they derive a sense of self 'from the consequences and products of behaviours that are attributed to the self as an agent in the environment'.<sup>51</sup> Peer workers are agents in their own environment and they actively seek out opportunities to become effective peer workers, and contribute to the dynamics of these programmes and relationships.

### Hierarchy of influence

Peer work enables prisoners to act as role models for other prisoners, through demonstrating pro-social behaviour and it is through reciprocal relationships, mutual support and approval that prisoners help themselves by helping others

'When I come to jail I was in a bad way, I was self-harming and stuff and thinking I need to stop this. What made me stop was the Listener that was on this landing. He pushed me and said I need to do something positive and eventually I will get that positivity and I will feel better about it. It is the best thing I have done in prison. He has helped me. I can talk to him when I am feeling

48. See Mead, 1934; Cooley, 1902; Sullivan, 1947

49. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) Pygmalion in the classroom; The Urban Review volume 3, issue 1 16-20

50. Burnett, R and Maruna, S (2006) The Kindness of prisoners: Strengths based resettlement in theory and in action: Criminology and Criminal Justice Vol 6, issue 1

51. Gecas and Schwalbe (1983) Beyond the Looking Glass Self: Social Structure and Efficacy based self-esteem: Social Psychological Quarterly Vol 46 Issue 2 77-88

down and he will bring me back up and make me feel positive' (prisoner)

Prisoners inspire and empower others prisoners to believe that they can also fulfil peer work roles. Positive exchanges between prisoners impact upon self-efficacy levels, and through seeing peers excel in pro-social roles and cope with prison, they too become motivated to get involved. Peer workers become effective 'identity models' for other offenders; living proof that it is possible to turn away from offending<sup>52</sup> (in the short-term) and demonstrate success and achievement in a custodial environment

'I saw AB (prisoner) on the first night centre. He was a listener. I spoke to him a fair bit and there was some training coming up and I asked if I could put in for that. It was something I would like to do. He put me on it. He has helped me out. I respect him a hell of a lot...you could just talk to him, the way he came across, friendly guy...seeing the help that I received from him, I wanted to be that person. I've got a lot of time for him, he showed me the ropes.... when I first came in here I was ready to string up.... without AB, I may have done something stupid' (prisoner)

Peer work generates new social relationships, which provide solidarity and the sharing of experience, strength and hope.<sup>53</sup> There is a hierarchical chain of influence, where prisoners look up to other prisoners who are enjoying positive prison experiences and enhanced relationships, through peer work.

### **Close relationships between peer workers**

Prisons generate feelings of social isolation, apathy and powerlessness,<sup>54</sup> yet close relationships are formed between peer workers. Peer work serves to offer a concept of solidarity and an unwritten code between male prisoners, similar to how other forms of fraternities operate.<sup>55</sup> Two drug peer mentors in this research shared a cell together and developed a strong bond and a non-sexual level of intimacy with each other, which Crewe

(2014) defines as 'homosocial relations'.<sup>56</sup> Commitment to their role, to each other and desistance is mediated through peer work status and cell sharing location. The cell becomes a site of empowerment for their substance misuse recovery and personal transformation as peer mentors. Extending beyond the 'prisoner' label, peer work relationships represent elements of openness and trust which are lacking in the majority of interactions within the prison<sup>57</sup>

*'We clicked straight away, when we are doing groups...I mentioned to the CARAT worker that he would be a good peer mentor.... he got the job and was chuffed to bits, I was chuffed as well and then he moved in with me because it's easier to have one cell for peer mentors. He is quiet, funny and mature and we help each other. We talk about what is going on in the group and what has gone on in the day. We bounce off each other. If one is feeling a bit down, depressed or worn out, we help each other. And it's a nice time at night for us, no one is pestering you, we have a coffee and a smoke...favourite time of the day, first thing in the morning and last thing at night, everyone is asleep' (prisoner)*

Peer work  
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Their door is unlocked for an additional hour at the end of the prison day as part of their peer work contract. Trusted by staff, they are free to engage in domestic tasks. The rest of the landing is locked away and the landing becomes a private and intimate space for both prisoners, serving as an extension of their prison cell and facilitating informal, yet private interactions with prison staff, away from the gaze of other prisoners.

### **Giving back to others through peer work**

Individuals create 'generative scripts' <sup>58</sup> which allow for negative experiences to be recast into a positive light

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52. Huggins, R. (2010) Mentoring for Progression: Prison Mentoring Project- Assessing Strengths, Outcomes and Roll-Out Potential. London: Howard League for Penal Reform (pg120)
53. Maruna, S. & LeBel, T. (2009) „Strengths-Based Approaches to Reentry: Extra Mileage toward Reintegration and Destigmatization , *Japanese Journal of Sociological Criminology*, 34: 58-80.
54. Moran, D (2015) *Carceral geography; spaces and practices of incarceration*; Ashgate Press
55. Newton, C (1994) *Gender Theory and Prison Sociology: Using Theories of Masculinities to Interpret the Sociology of Prisons for Men: The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice* Volume 33, Issue 3 August 1994 (193–202)
56. Crewe, B. (2014) 'Not looking hard enough: masculinity, emotion and prison research', *Qualitative Inquiry*, April 2014, 20(4), 426-437
57. Sloan, J (2016) *Masculinity, imprisonment and working identities: in Reeves, C (2016) research on the experience of living and working in carceral institutions: Routledge Taylor and Francis; London*
58. Maruna, S (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

when helping others. Adults are 'generative'<sup>59</sup> in different ways, sometimes through their beliefs and concerns, sometimes through their commitments and actions.<sup>60</sup> Peer workers become 'wounded healers',<sup>61</sup> demonstrating a powerful desire to give back, make amends by working with other offenders, addicts and achieve generative goals.<sup>62</sup> Motivation to become a Listener is based around an altruistic concern for others, which stems from an emerging awareness of prior selfishness and self-centeredness, created through criminal activity<sup>63</sup>

'There was somebody that I met who said that because he was first time in prison the Listeners really helped him, gave him good advice and helped him with what to do. I just thought it would be nice to give something back, for all the bad things I have done...and I thought, people who haven't been to jail before, they are really scared and it's not hard to go and talk to these people...Just to think I have done something nice, pay back....I don't like to see people weaker than me struggling, you know getting bullied and all that. I sometimes feel empathy for certain people' (prisoner)

### Negative aspects of the peer worker role

This research also identified negative aspects associated with engagement in peer work roles. Peer workers are easily identifiable through T-shirts, and whilst this allows them to counteract the assault taken on their identity<sup>64</sup> and allows prisoners to create a replacement self,<sup>65</sup> it makes them stand out to other prisoners who may lack respect for the peer worker role and identity

'Some of the prisoners are sound...however, about 2 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' (prisoner)

Not all prisoners have their peer worker identities positively endorsed by others, particularly staff. Prisoners who have a poor reputation with staff from previous sentences are treated with scepticism when they engage in peer work, and anything other than obstructive behaviour is treated with suspicion. One Shannon Trust Toe by Toe literacy mentor found himself in a difficult position with staff, because if he refused to comply with their requests, then he felt that punitive measures would be applied to him

'.....they moved him (a difficult prisoner) in my cell so I ended up babysitting him and at the same time my head was falling off and I'm thinking I've come here (cell) to do my own stuff not baby sit people. I don't mind helping people on the landing, peer mentoring and literacy and all that but then I want to come back to my pad and do whatever you know just chill out, not have to sit there and fucking baby sit someone. I don't mean that to sound horrible. I didn't even know about it. I come back from work and he was in my cell. It's a space at the end of the day but I've got my own problems as

well, my own shit going on outside' (prisoner)

Whilst peer work can enhance communication channels between staff and prisoners, the role is often abused by prison staff, who impose extra responsibilities on peer workers. Prison Service Instruction 17/2015<sup>66</sup> highlights the recognition that prisons must mobilise the ability of prisoners to help other prisoners with peer support and generativity and not simply extend to doing the role of paid staff. It would appear that this difficult prisoner was 'offloaded' onto the peer mentor, because staff wanted to test his new-found pro-social behaviour.

Peer work roles last for a finite period of time, normally 6 months, which limits opportunity of complacency and conditioning of prison staff. The legacy of being a peer worker can be short-lived for prisoners, and despite personal transformations that occur within

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59. Generativity has been described by McAdams and De St Aubin as "the concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation, manifested through parenting, teaching and mentoring" (1998:20) However, in this paper, the term 'generativity' is utilised to identify others who orientate themselves in activities that benefits others; activities that transcend self-related interests and involve giving oneself to others and giving back to society

60. McAdams, DP and de St. Aubin, E (1992) A theory of generativity and its assessment through self-report, behavioural acts and narrative themes in autobiography. *Journal of personality and social psychology* 62, pg. 1013

61. The term 'wounded healer' was created by Carl Jung to describe those people who, in seeking to help others, also help themselves, because they are also 'wounded'.

62. Maruna, S (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

63. Jaffe, M (2012) *Peer support and seeking help in a prison: a study of the Listeners scheme in four prisons in England* (unpublished PhD) Keele University

64. Berger, P; Luckmann, T (1963) *The social construction of reality*: Penguin books: London

65. Giordano PC, Cernkovich SA and Rudolph JL (2002) Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064

66. PSI 17/2015 <https://www.justice.gov.uk/downloads/offenders/psipso/psi-2015/psi-17-2015-prisoners-assisting-other-prisoners.pdf>



the role, some regress back to their old ways. There is a lack of progression and continuity within prison and also between prisons, which may account for the lack of sustainability of the pro-social self as peer worker

'I see him ducking and diving on the main wing, back to his old ways, up to no good with others. He was an excellent peer mentor whilst he was here and yet when I see him now on the landing, it's like it never happened for him, which is a shame because he has got more to offer than getting into trouble on the wing. But there's nowhere for them to go after peer mentor' (CARATS staff)

Transfer to another prison having worked as a peer mentor can be a negative transition, if there is no continuity or further opportunities available

'I applied to become a peer mentor and I got the job. I did about 6-7 months, got really strong, stopped taking drugs, stopped smoking and I was training every day. I was doing fantastic and in a really good place... I came to the end of my term and I got sent to another prison and it was a new beginning. I didn't want to go because everything was going so well for me. I only had 3 months left. The place was flooded with drugs and gang culture...it was completely manic, drugs everywhere even on the drug wing...people selling their medication...I went there and everything just crumbled.....in a matter of 5-6 weeks. Here I had everything...I was the best I had ever been, I was doing really well, to nothing' (prisoner)

Peer workers have to constantly negotiate their identity in prison to different audiences. Some prison officers are reluctant to validate peer worker identities, with many officers displaying a lack of positivity towards the notion that prisoners can change. Prisoners are often dismissed by prison officers, who perceive that they are viewed more favourably than they are.<sup>67</sup> Prison officers felt constricted by the demands of the job, stating that there was a blurring of the boundaries between discipline and the 'softer parts' of the prison regime, which led to a conflict of roles and an over-emphasis on security and operational considerations.<sup>68</sup> Prisoners expressed concerns about boundaries and knowing where they are with staff. <sup>69</sup> Peer workers often lack

visibility in the prison and are not facilitated to do their work outside of the core prison day.<sup>70</sup> One peer worker reported a verbal battle with an officer regarding his movements around the prison when called out as a Listener

Officer 'Yeah, but you are not on the rota today, don't try and bullshit me and pull the wool over my eyes'

Prisoner 'I can speak to anyone, at any time when I'm a Listener'

Officer 'No, you can't ... you can go in there now, but don't try and take the piss out of me again'

The prisoner avoided getting angry and confrontational, because it may affect his Listener status. There was no flexibility expressed from the officer, despite an explanation that the prisoner was giving up his own time, not even on the Listener rota, but aware that somebody needed to speak to him. The officer did concede however, but only after a contested negotiation around this. There is a clash between the operational cynicism of prison officers and role commitment shown by peer workers, which can create tension and conflict. Peer workers face micro power struggles in convincing prison officers to

support their peer worker identity and facilitate their movements around the prison. The Listener role in particular should be supported as a safer custody initiative, in line with prison service instructions and orders, however one prisoners states

'I seem to get it a lot from the staff. They just think it (being a Listener) is a way to stay longer or make your time easier. The screws don't get it' (prisoner)

### Liminality of the peer worker

Having trusted peer workers to assist with running the landings enables prison officers to attend to the operational regime. In the era of 'soft power'<sup>71</sup> in prisons, these relationships increase interior legitimacy and reduce social distance between staff and prisoners, as both parties share a common interest in keeping the peace in prison.<sup>72</sup> However,

The prisoner avoided getting angry and confrontational, because it may affect his Listener status.

67. Crawley, E (2004) *Doing Prison Work: The Public and Private Lives of Prison Officers* Willan publishing London

68. Braggins, J; Talbot, J (2005) *Wings of learning: The role of the prison officer in supporting education*: Centre for crime and justice studies: Esmee Fairbairn foundation

69. Hay, W. and Sparks, R. (1991) 'What is a prison officer?', *Prison Service Journal* Spring: 2-7

70. HM Inspectorate of prisons (2016) *Life in prison: peer support*: London

71. Crewe, B. (2011) 'Soft power in prison: Implications for staff-prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy', *European Journal of Criminology* 8(6) 455-468

72. Sparks, Richard, Bottoms, A. E. and Hay, Will (1996) *Prisons and the problem of order*. Oxford: Clarendon

peer workers are precariously placed in a 'liminal' position<sup>73</sup> as they are neither 'standard prisoner' nor staff. It is argued<sup>74</sup> that liminal individuals have no status, insignia, clothing, rank and nothing to demarcate themselves structurally from their fellows, yet peer workers do have an elevated status, they do have clothing to demarcate their identity and they do have a rank that is superior to 'standard prisoners'. They are often identified as 'screw boys' or 'grasses', because of the perceived favouritism that stems from their enhanced status, thus becoming 'polluting and dangerous to those who have not gone through the liminal period'.<sup>75</sup> Peer workers, however, demonstrate the capacity to rise above this negative labelling

*'The staff expect us peer mentors to be their eyes. They are in the office with things to do. Peer mentors, we are a bit of staff without the uniform. That's why they call us 'screw boys'. Well I say, 'so what, I'm not getting you right deep in the shit, all I'm doing is making sure that you can't get deeper in your own shit'. I see my role as helping people' (prisoner)*

Peer workers are comfortable in standing up to other prisoners and highlight the priority of their role over verbal threats made to their character

*'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 staff themselves, then it is our role to do that and keep people safe, so they don't self-harm or commit suicide' (prisoner)*

Peer worker narratives suggest that they find their position in the prison social hierarchy as empowering rather than limiting, as is suggested by research on liminality. A positive aspect of liminality in peer work roles is that these prisoners can bridge the gap between staff and other prisoners, which makes them an important presence in the operational efficiency of the prison

*'A lot of it (Listener work) is mental health or just problems with the prison and they want us to be the person to talk to staff, which is a good thing. Some people do find it hard to speak to officers' (prisoner)*

Liminal states through peer work are transient in nature and will always be overruled by the dominant prison culture, but the role can offer a temporary release from the 'master status' as 'prisoner', which proved both liberating and empowering for several peer workers

*'Yes it (peer mentoring) takes you out of prisoner mode, you are in between. You know you are a prisoner but you know that you are doing good. You are fulfilling something that you want to do by helping and seeing that gratification at the end of it, when that person has genuinely learnt something ...you are not in jail for that split second.....because I wasn't a teacher or authority figure, it's like they listen more....I quickly picked up that vibe....it's nice because at the end of the day I'm just the same as they are, I'm just another bum in the shower' (prisoner)*

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Through peer work, it is possible to pitch negotiation of identity at the right level, to achieve respect from both staff and other prisoners, which has a significant impact upon self-esteem and adaptation to prison, as illustrated below

*'I'm still a prisoner, still one of the lads doing my time here. It's nice that people can come and talk to me, they feel comfortable...for a long time I have been a piece of shit. When you are told constantly that you are useless, a waste of time, an alchy, a down and out, you start to believe that and me especially, I do dwell on things. I have been stood on that many times I did feel like a piece of crap, so to come here and actually have a bit of respect from staff and prisoners and CARATS, which you have to earn, you can't just get it, it's a nice feeling'*

73. Liminality is defined as the transition between identity states, as individuals are in a space of 'betwixt and between' in Turner V (1964) *Betwixt and between: The liminal period in the rites de passage*. The Proceedings of the American Ethnological Society. Symposium on New Approaches to the Study of Religion: 4–20.

74. Douglas, M (1966) chapter 3: Liminality and communities: form and attributes of rites of passage: in Turner, V (1967) *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press (pg. 98)

75. Ibid (pg. 98)

Staff and other prisoners provide a 'looking glass self', and whilst this prisoners recognises that he is 'still a prisoner', he experiences increased levels of self-worth and self-esteem through peer mentoring. The peer mentoring role reverses the negative cycle of reinforcement that he has endured throughout his substance abuse and criminality. Thus, peer work can provide both positive and negative liminal experiences, which can be simultaneously transformative and obstructive.

### Peer work and defying the inmate code

Peer work is a positive and pro-social way of signalling desistance<sup>76</sup> to others. Whilst discussion of desistance beyond the prison walls is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to consider that through peer work, prisoners engage in ways that transgress 'typical' prisoner behaviour, and signs of desistance can be identified. The 'inmate code' is a modified or intensified version of values that exist in criminal and street cultures outside of prison,<sup>77</sup> and one aspect of the inmate code that is consistent across time and space is that prisoners do not 'grass' (inform) on each other, because this is perceived as a gross violation of the 'inmate code', and prisoners organise themselves according to informal value systems.<sup>78</sup>

Two Listeners on the VPU (vulnerable prisoner unit)<sup>79</sup> raised awareness of bullying to staff members, because they had witnessed it and had interacted with prisoners who were being bullied on the landing. Both prisoners removed themselves from the company of this prisoner and his group, because they were worried about the implications of association in the eyes of the prison service, and in light of their elevated status as Listeners. The replacement self becomes a filter for future decision making<sup>80</sup> and the actions that followed suggests a transformation towards desistance and a pro-social self in prison, both of which are arguably attributable to their involvement in peer work

*'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; an example had to be made. All the 3 Listeners sat down. We needed to sort it. 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 10 people came forward and said that he was bullying them...you have still got his little followers who keep doing things for him...he is now in the 'block' (segregation)... they will 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 a part of this violence; we have to do the right thing' (prisoner)*

### Conclusion

This article has outlined the relational benefits of peer work in a prison setting. Peer work makes a difference in the prison environment on many levels. It benefits the peer worker/mentor, recipients or the peer work, prison staff and impacts positively upon the operational functioning of the prison. Prisoners respond well to positive reinforcement and trust placed in them, and peer work is one of the few roles within the prison that allow for a positive transformative experience. Peer work generates autonomy in prisoners and for some, the role offsets the 'mortification of the self'<sup>81</sup> effect of the prison experience. This exploration of peer worker supports the assertion that relationships are key to the emergence of a positive, pro-social replacement self. Through positive appraisals, belief and recognition of potential, prisoners can excel in peer work roles. Treating peer workers from a strength and asset based perspective serves to reinforce a positive self-concept. However, the peer worker identity and progress towards desistance is precarious, and continuity is marred by factors beyond the control of the individual. Peer work is a liminal role and can be both empowering and disempowering for the individual. Peer work should not be used to replace work done by staff. During times of austerity in prisons, the boundaries are blurred. Peer work job descriptions should be provided to avoid exploiting peer workers and forcing them to perform duties that are not within the remit of the role. This research also calls for greater continuity in peer work between establishments, to support transitions and sustain the positive effects of being a peer worker.

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76. See Bushway, S and Apel, R (2012) A Signalling Perspective on Employment-Based Re-entry Programming Training Completion as a Desistance Signal: *Criminology and public policy: Volume 11 (issue 1)* (21–50) and Maruna, S (2012) Elements of successful desistance signalling: *Criminology and Public Policy Vol 11 (issue 1)*
77. Irwin, J. and Cressey, D.R. (1962) Thieves, Convict, and the Inmate Culture. *Social Problems*, 10, 142-155
78. Crewe, B; Bennett, J (2012) *The Prisoner*: Routledge Oxon
79. A landing housing R45 prisoners (sex-offenders or those in debt), who are segregated for their own protection
80. Giordano PC, Cernkovich SA and Rudolph JL (2002) Gender, crime and desistance: Toward a theory of cognitive transformation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 990-1064
81. Goffman, E. (1961a). *Asylums: Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. New York: Doubleday Anchor