Avoiding 'starburst': The need to identify common metrics of evaluating strengths-based programmes in prison

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Avoiding 'starburst': The need to identify common metrics of evaluating strengths-based programmes in prison

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Abstract

There are numerous personal accounts and positive programme evaluations of the rehabilitative and transformative power of painting, poetry, football, running, educational attainment and peer mentoring – all of which can be classified as 'positive' and 'strengths-based' activities and interventions – in numerous different prisons in numerous different countries. Almost all prisons have programmes of education and programmes that can be classified as promoting a rehabilitative culture. Some of these are even evaluated externally to assess whether and to what extent they can be said to 'work'. However, little of this evaluation attempts to examine the sustainability or capacity-building of this work. Based on our discussion of three strengths-based programmes in the United Kingdom (UK) adult prison establishment, some clues emerge about what could arise as a two-tiered approach to the evaluation of strengths-based projects, based on proximal effectiveness and longitudinal impact on culture and practice. The paper concludes with an overview of common metrics of strengths-based innovations and programmes which may lead to increased credibility and investment in times of austerity.

Introduction

The notions of strengths-based working in health and justice are not new and areas as diverse as positive psychology and criminology, mental health and addictions recovery, and therapeutic jurisprudence and restorative approaches in the justice field all share a common set of principles and values that may offer some insights into questions of evaluation, effectiveness and measurement. The first part of this paper will examine the shared foundations of strengths-based approaches and this will inform a second section examining common principles in these models. Part Three will then provide three illustrative examples of strengths-based programmes in prisons in the United Kingdom (UK), before the final section, part four, outlines a two-tier model of strengths-measurement that will help to avoid 'starburst', that is, where the benefit is so short-lived that it has no lasting impact on the wellbeing of the prison or its constituents.

1. The foundations of strengths-based models in criminology and criminal justice

There are a number of 'movements' in criminology that can broadly be described as strengths-based – these include restorative justice (which is focused on repairing the harm caused by crime), therapeutic jurisprudence (which uses the legal system to seek to enhance the well-being of its participants, especially offenders), positive criminology (which focuses on individuals' encounters with positive influences which distance them from deviance and crime) and the recovery approaches in addictions and in mental health. It is important to note that these are not mutually exclusive categories and what is critical is the relational focus described by Llewellyn and colleagues[1]. The common features of such strengths-based models are that they are interpersonal, future-focused and intrinsically social in their aims, with the longer-term goals of culture change and developing sustainable community capital.

The positive psychology and criminology component of these initiatives is particularly important for their implementation in prison, as it is the generation of hope[2][3][4] and its subsequent spread across groups that is central to both their adoption and their success. As the examples cited below highlight, a key component of strengths-based projects is their impact on relationships and their

[1] Llewellyn, J., Archibald, B., Claimont, D., & Crocker, D. (2014) 'Imagining success for a restorative approach to justice: Implications for measurement and evaluation', *Dalhousie Law Journal*, 36(2), pp. 281-316.

[2] Best, D. (2019) *Pathways to Desistance and Recovery: The Role of the Social Contagion of Hope*. Bristol: Policy Press.

[3] Burnett, R., & Maruna, S. (2004) 'So "prison works", does it? The criminal careers of 130 men released from prison under Home Secretary, Michael Howard', *Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 43, pp. 390-404.

[4] LeBel, T., Burnett, R., Maruna, S., & Bushway, S. (2008) 'The "chicken and egg" of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime', *European Journal of Criminology*, 5(2), pp. 131-159.

capacity to generate a radius of trust[5] that can involve not only the building of existing relationships, but the creation of new ones. In Putnam's work[6] on social capital, he differentiated between *bonding* capital (the strength of ties within an established group) and *bridging* capital (which refers to links between different levels within groups and organisations), on the one hand, and linking capital (that is, creating ties to new groups), on the other. One potential indicator of the effectiveness of a strengths-based initiative in prisons is around its impact on the quality and number of ties, not only between prisoners (bonding capital), but between prisoners and officers (bridging capital) and between both of these groups and other potential populations, including family members and the general public (linking capital). For a strengths-based approach to succeed, there is an integral relationship component that is built on trust and the growth of relationships.

The other implication of this notion of spread or growth of impact is what has been called 'hyperdyadic contagion'[7], which refers to the spread of behaviours, beliefs and emotions through social networks and groups. Why is this important to strengths-based approaches? If the only positive impact of initiatives is a short-term gain among those participating, with no longer-term benefits on other groups or the culture of the organisation (prison), then this is a fundamental restriction on their effectiveness.

2. The principles of strengths-based working

Llewellyn, Archibald, Clairmont and Crocker (op cit) reviewed the challenges for evaluations and effectiveness studies on restorative justice and argued that doing so effectively requires programmes to be considered "in relational terms [which] goes beyond the individualistic vision of the mainstream media as it now stands" (p284). The authors identified core principles of a restorative approach that are intrinsic to its measurement and evaluation, namely, that it:

- is relationship-focused;
- is comprehensive / holistic and contextual / flexible;
- should fulfil the criteria of subsidiarity, inclusion and participation;
- should be dialogical or communicative; should be democratic / deliberative; and
- should be forward-focused, solution-focused and remedial.

Llewellyn and colleagues went on to argue that it is a weakness that few measures of restorative approaches include community dimensions, such as community empowerment, and this is part of a broader limitation, which fails to address the mechanisms of change brought about by restorative approaches. The authors concluded by arguing that "[a] relational approach to evaluation reveals that measuring the success of restorative justice will require more than the identification and

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[5] Fukuyama, F. (2001). 'Social capital, civil society and development'. *Third World Quarterly*, 22(1), pp. 7-20.

[6] Putnam, R. (2000) *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[7] Christakis, N., & Fowler, J. (2010) *Connected: The Amazing Power of Social Networks and How They Shape our Lives*. London: Harper Press.

articulation of new goals, outcomes and appropriate indicators" (p314). From this, we extrapolate a central principle that *all* strengths-based approaches start from a relational perspective and so evaluations of such approaches cannot fall back on atomistic models, which ignore the collective and examine only the individual.

A very similar set of principles has been established for addictions recovery, as articulated in an evidence review for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration by Sheedy and Whitter[8]. They concluded that recovery-oriented systems are required to fulfil the following seventeen principles:

1. Person-centred;
2. Inclusive of family and other ally involvement;
3. Individualized and comprehensive services across the lifespan;
4. Systems anchored in the community;
5. Continuity of care;
6. Partnership-consultant relationships;
7. Strength-based;
8. Culturally responsive;
9. Responsiveness to personal belief systems;
10. Commitment to peer recovery support services;
11. Integrated services;
12. System-wide education and training;
13. Inclusion of the voices and experiences of recovering individuals and their families;
14. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation;
15. Evidence-driven;
16. Research-based;
17. Adequately and flexibly funded.

Overall, these principles call for a holistic, multi-faceted, inclusive and responsive approach, that is intrinsically social and relational, and that is driven by hope and is embedded in the life of the community. However, there is also a clear commitment to an evidence base and to the principles of learning and science.

3. Three examples of strengths-based working in UK prisons

[8] Sheedy, C.K., & Whitter, M. (eds.) (2009) *Guiding Principles and Elements of Recovery-oriented Systems of Care: What Do We Know From the Research?* Rockville, MD: Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

In this section, we illustrate our conception of strengths-based work with three examples drawn from recent practice in UK prisons. These examples are chosen only as a matter of convenience, as the first author has been actively involved in all of them, albeit in different roles. There are no claims for the uniqueness or representativeness of any of these and the focus below is not on how successful or effective they are, but rather on what makes them strengths-based case studies and what lessons can accordingly be learned about sustainability.

The Kirkham Family Connectors (KFC) Programme: Best, Musgrove and Hall[9] and Hall et al[10] piloted a model to actively engage family members (in training sessions with prisoners) in strengths-based planning to assertively link prisoners into pro-social activities on release. Essentially, the programme involves three training sessions of 2-3 hours each, involving 6-8 prisoners and their family members, who were trained to develop strengths-based, future-focused plans to engage in a diverse range of prosocial activities and groups. Three waves of piloting were undertaken at HMP Kirkham, a Category D local prison, with strong qualitative endorsements from all three stakeholder groups – staff, prisoners and family members. This was supplemented by some quantitative support for the programme's impact, which showed high levels of engagement and commitment, and growing positive relationships between all of the programme participants (including prison officers who were not a part of the original design but some of whom requested to be involved), though the limitations of this evidence base is recognised in that no long-term outcome studies have been undertaken to date. In addition, there was increased demand for participation from prisoners across each wave of the pilot, which may well be indicative of a growing 'radius of trust' (Fukuyama, 2001), and clear evidence of a 'social contagion of hope' (Best, 2019), in that there were clear indications of relational changes in the interactions between the three groups, or at least those subsets of the three groups who were involved in the programme. There was also some success in terms of co-production, with both peer mentors and probation officers being actively involved in the development and delivery of the second and third waves of the programme. Although the initiative is currently being implemented in Hassalts prison in Belgium, the project was never externally funded and is not currently being implemented in any UK prison, in spite of considerable support and engagement from all the participants, thereby pointing to the 'starburst' effect in action.

Asset-based community development and peer education: Based at HMP Wymott, this is both a prison-led and a PhD student programme of research in two phases. The first of these involved undertaking an asset mapping exercise[11] to identify the strengths and resources available in the prison. This led to an audit of the skills and abilities in the prisoner cohort that resulted in peer-delivered education in the prison, with a total of 11 different peer-delivered classes in domains as diverse as conversational Chinese and knitting taking place across the prison and the establishment of a peer-based governance group to oversee this process. While there is an evaluation of the asset-

[9] Best, D., Musgrove, A., & Hall, L. (2018) 'The bridge between social identity and community capital on the path to recovery and desistance', *Probation Journal*, 65(4), pp. 394-406.

[10] Hall, L., Best, D., Ogden-Webb, C., Dixon, J., & Heslop, R. (2018) 'Building bridges to the community: The Kirkham Family Connectors (KFC) Prison Programme', *Howard Journal of Crime and Justice,* 57(4), pp. 518-536.

[11] McKnight, J., & Block, P. (2010). *The Abundant Community: Awakening the Power of Families and Neighbourhoods*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc.

based community development (ABCD) component of this work underway[12], there are two key features of the initiative that are hard to capture within a standard evaluation framework. The first is that the peer-led education activities continue to grow and evolve in ways that are difficult to measure and evaluate; and second, the alignment and dynamic interaction with the rehabilitative culture of the prison makes this particularly complex. As there are a range of partnership- and strengths-based activities ongoing in the prison (such as a homework club, visits from therapy dogs, inter alia) attributing culture change or contagion to one programme is questionable. The success of the ABCD exercise is not about the maps that are produced, but about the spirit of empowerment and the development of peer education that it both tapped into and contributed to. In addition, the programme helped to support the emergence of community connectors[13] and organise their endeavours, although we recognise that this may have happened in any case without the research team's involvement.

Drug Recovery Programme: This project involved the delivery of a diverse and well-resourced programme of activities and interventions targeting the creation of a drug recovery programme [14]. The particular aspect of the programme of relevance here is the introduction of recovery and strengths-focused outcome assessments and recovery care plans, using an established psychometric tool, the REC-CAP[15]. The analysis of the first phase of outcome data shows significant positive changes in multiple recovery domains, but the gestation and implementation phase of this study took around 18-24 months and this may well coincide with a very gradual evolution in the effective engagement of both healthcare and prison staff. While some health-care staff embraced the project from its inception, there were almost no indications of active engagement from prison officers until into the second year, suggesting that it took some time for relevant changes in the prison culture to take effect, and to overcome a perceived compartmentalisation as result of which the programme was initially perceived as a healthcare issue. There was also a process evaluation showing high levels of satisfaction with the training and instruments among both the initial cohort of peers and professionals who took part. Unfortunately, technical issues meant that implementation was delayed and the trained and highly motivated peer cohort had scattered by the time the project was actually rolled out, meaning that it was only healthcare staff who were actually involved in the delivery of the programme. Had this been a one-year programme, this pilot would have failed on two counts – the first, an implementation failure, the second associated with a very slow process of culture change by staff in the prison. This has not, however, been evidenced and is based only on anecdotal evidence.

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[12] Musgrove, A. & Best, D. (in preparation) Promoting rehabilitation and meaningful activities through peer-professional partnerships in prison, *Howard Journal*

[13] Kretzmann, J., & McKnight, J. (1993) *Building Communities From the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilising a Community's Assets*. Skokie, IL: ACTA Publications.

[14] King, D., Best, D., & Wheatley, M. (eds) (2019) Recovery in Prison (special issue), *Prison Service Journal*.

[15] Cano, I., Best, D., Edwards, M., & Lehman, J. (2017) 'Recovery capital pathways: Mapping the components of recovery wellbeing', *Drug and Alcohol Dependence*, 181(1), pp. 11-19.

4. What might a two-tier model of strengths-measurement look like?

The key point to be argued in this paper is that positive ratings of evaluations are not sufficient, although there is an inevitable strength in numbers. If we are to start to think about a metric to assess the impact and benefit of strengths-based programmes, then 'reach' must be one of the core criteria. This does not mean that large numbers of people have to receive the training or intervention, but it does mean that many (prisoners, staff, partners, stakeholders, etc) have to be influenced by it in a demonstrably positive way.

Second, that impact has to be enduring in some way. Anecdotally, we are aware of a fear of a 'starburst' effect, namely, short-lived and limited change. As will be argued below, this is in part about building and developing capacity, where the active growth of institutional capacity and what Hamilton et al[16] have referred to as *justice capital* are key to this concept. What this refers to is the set of resources and supports available to help an individual to effectively rehabilitate in a justice setting. This will include access to positive relationships with peers and professionals (and outside organisations), but will also include access to purposeful activities and opportunities for personal growth and development. The concept of justice capital rests on the idea that it would be possible to develop a metric at an institutional level that assesses its range of activities and opportunities to support change and rehabilitation. These initiatives would not only have to have some kind of enduring and wide-spread impact, they would also have to be coordinated in some way and matched against the evolving and varied needs of the prison population.

Central to this argument is that any evaluation of strengths-based interventions or programmes must balance the 'hard' outcome indicators (eg, changes in the number of prison assaults or recidivism; rates of self-harm and suicide) that are relevant to prison commissioners and policy-makers with those that support the principles and philosophies of relational and community models. As outlined above, some of these aims are consistent with the ideas of justice capital and are based on the idea that co-ordinated access to strengths-based opportunities must be scalable and sustainable to avoid the effects of 'starburst'. This can start us on principles that we would advance, including:

5a. Strengths markers

- **Co-production:** This is based on the idea that active engagement of stakeholders is an essential component of strengths-based work and also plays into the capacity-building discussed below. While this will primarily apply to prisoners, there are a range of other stakeholder groups that should be engaged, including prison officers, family members and relevant community groups and organisations. This should also be at every stage of the process.
- **Sustainability:** Far too many strengths-based interventions are short-term and delivered by external agencies for funding or research purposes, with the risk of letting down those they

[16] Hamilton, S., Maslen, S., Best, D., Freeman, J., O'Donnell, M., Reibel, T., Mutch, R., & Watkins, R (2020) 'Putting "justice" in recovery capital: Yarning about hopes and futures with young people in detention', *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy,* https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.v9i2.1256 (early online).

engage. Linked to co-production is the central principle of sustainability, with clear plans required for continuation beyond the initial scope of the project. This will necessitate some kind of capacity-building endeavour involving prisoners, families and/or prison staff in training and implementation.

- **Benefits to multiple groups:** This is part of the concern about scalability, that it is not enough to merely provide support to one small group of prisoners or staff without any mechanism for scaling up or establishing whether there are 'contagion' or ripple effects to other parts of the organisation; writing in the context of an Australian prison yoga program, Hopkins, Bartels and Oxman, noted that 'as early adopters speak to other prisoners about the benefits of the program, interest will grow among those who may initially be wary of something "weird"' (2019, 58)[17].
- **Justice capital:** This is assessing how the initiative increases the capacity of the institution to support the personal growth, wellbeing and rehabilitative potential of prisoners, and their capacity to build positive links and relationships with others both within and outside the prison walls.
- **Commitment to ongoing evaluation and research**: There needs to be a relationship between the markers identified above and broader organisational impacts, both in terms of correlations, but also in terms of a clear model for establishing mechanisms of change.

5b. Objective outcome indicators

While the above are strategic objectives that need to be built up over time, there are a series of more proximal indicators that at least need to be considered in this process as markers of the health and hygiene of the prison. These include, but are not limited to:

- self-report of wellbeing, including measures of impact on the prison climate and environment, including scales for measuring the quality of prison life[18];
- prison indicators of harm and poor outcomes – self-harm, violence (against both prisoners and staff), days added on (or reduced), adjudications, complaints;
- staff measures – retention, absenteeism; and
- external inspection – reports from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP), especially the 'healthy prison test', the Independent Monitoring Boards and the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman are all relevant here.

We suggest that, if strengths-based approaches are to be seen as more than simply froth or as a pleasant distraction from the harsh realities of prison life, then they need to have a genuine impact on the things that matter to the wellbeing of the prison. In addition, they require a clear underlying rationale for *why* they should have an impact and in what ways. For example, the Family Connectors programme at Kirkham worked through generating hope and a radius of trust that rippled to

[17] Hopkins, A., Bartels, L., & Oxman, L. (2019), 'Lessons in flexibility: Introducing a prison yoga program in Australia', *International Journal of Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*, 8(4), pp. 47-61.

[18] Liebling, A., Crewe, B., & Hulley, S. (2011) 'Conceptualising and Measuring the Quality of Prison Life' in Gadd, D., Karstedt, S. and Messner, S.F. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*. London: Sage Publishing, pp. 358-372.

populations significantly beyond the 25 prisoners who were participants in the pilot projects, but was nevertheless unable to be sustained beyond its initial flourishing. In order to prevent such stars flaming out, researchers, prison administrators and policy-makers need to commit to robust data collection against the metrics that have traditionally been used to measure prison performance, as well as adopting new modes of measurement.

Conclusion

Strengths-based initiatives are widely trumpeted in every prison in the UK, as indicative of their commitment to purposeful activity and rehabilitation, and these are two of the four 'expectations' laid down by HMIP[19] against which prisons are inspected. The current paper is not suggesting that this is not a good thing, but that we need to develop a metric for understanding both what we want from such projects and how they can be evaluated and assessed against a range of outcome indicators.

Although untested, what is laid out in this paper is a set of suggested indicators – both proximal and distal – for examining the impact of strengths-based working in prisons. This would allow governors, prisoners and others to address the question of whether it is better to have, for example, a running club or a debating society. Our tentative conclusion would be that prisons should have both, as these will bring different benefits to each other and, critically, different outcomes than, for example, an anger management or substance abuse program.

As long as these activities have a short-term and 'bonus' quality about them, their impact and effectiveness will be understated and they will remain at the periphery of priorities and planning. This means they are not only vulnerable to the starburst phenomenon outlined in this paper, but will continue to be construed as a 'nice to have' and therefore inevitably dispensable component of prison life, rather than integral to the full flourishing of its residents and providing an opportunity to return more fully actualized citizens to the community. This would be a disastrous conclusion, as we believe that strengths-based activities are central to rehabilitation, trust and relationship-building in prisons.

[19] Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (HMIP) (2017) *Expectations*. London: HMIP.