From the UK

MY STORY: LISTENING TO YOUNG PEOPLE TALKING ABOUT THE TRAUMA AND VIOLENCE IN THEIR LIVES

by Dr Roger Grimshaw [1]

Young people convicted of grave crimes as children have attracted public attention on a scale that reveals an intense fascination with the unusual. What characteristics do they possess that may single them out from the mass of children? What led them to carry out seriously damaging acts such as rape or murder? These questions have stimulated a host of newspaper sales and downloads. However, beginning their sentences, the young people are normally withdrawn from the public eye, unless they are pursued by journalists seeking to feed curiosity about their circumstances.

This article describes a project which asked a number, now adults, to recount their childhoods - not to satisfy curiosity, but instead to shed light on the trauma and violence that disfigured their early lives. [2] At a time when Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) have become a central theme of policy discussion, understanding these experiences of trauma has powerful implications for criminal justice policy and practice. From a therapeutic standpoint, it is possible to draw lessons from the project which can assist practitioners in learning more about individuals whom they work with on a daily basis. Importantly the process of storytelling can help individuals to find their own voices in an authentic sense, without the mediation of questionnaires or diagnostic instruments. However, the promotion of authentic narrative is hindered by stark and withered prison regimes. More broadly, the stories recounted by traumatised prisoners raise the question of exactly what policymakers should prioritise: punishment, or treatment and reintegration?

Childhood trauma, attachment and stories

Adverse Childhood Experiences, such as loss of a parent, domestic violence, maltreatment and parental substance misuse, combine to create toxic stress in children; nor should it be forgotten that parental imprisonment is one such ACE. Research has established a connection between a high number of Adverse Childhood Experiences and long term health problems. [3] It is apparent that multiple ACEs characterise the more serious youth offender population. [4]

The evidence that the prison population suffers from a high and disproportionate rate of ACEs is growing. In a sample of prisoners in Wales, those who had experienced four or more ACEs were three times more likely to have been convicted of violence against the person than individuals with no ACEs. [5]

A study of the general population found that adults with four or more ACEs were 20 times more likely to have been imprisoned at some point in their lives.[6]

To understand the process fully requires us to examine early relationships. A template for trauma is formed in the relationship with a parent who can be both frightened and frightening. It is a disorganised attachment pattern which creates painful emotional confusion, to which therapy must seek to respond.[7] Insecurity and pain arising within early relationships frame subsequent impulses towards violence.[8]

In therapeutic work with young people, narratives can play a significant part; [9] indeed the construction of a personal narrative may help to deal with pain positively.[10] It is acknowledged in the literature that recovery from trauma can begin when the person affected is able to share their story with someone they can trust and who believes them.[11] Yet, as Gwyneth Boswell points out, the children who are imprisoned are unlikely to receive this opportunity.[12]

How can stories of childhood be elicited sensitively?

Research projects have their own logic and purpose but they depend for their success on processes that can, with good preparation and support, be replicated in fields of practice.

It was crucial to establish a sound ethical base for a project that was designed to explore traumatic experiences. Advice from psychotherapists informed submissions to a research ethics committee which helped to clarify the obligations of the researcher especially in ensuring that young people could access support and would effectively own their stories. It was important to consider any potential risks arising from the young people revisiting their experiences, risks which were, in this context, assessed by psychotherapists to be acceptably small.

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After their consent to take part had been obtained, young people's files were examined; it was important to exclude anyone with a medical condition affecting memory. Then young people were interviewed on several occasions. Once an interview had been transcribed, the project team discussed the 'story-in progress,' focussing on its emotional significance. If there were any signs of distress the therapists were prepared to give support to young people. Afterwards another phase in the interviewing would begin. Finally, edited texts based very closely on recorded interviews were agreed with the participants. The young people are the authors, having each agreed a non-exclusive copyright licence with the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. In recognition of their contribution, the participants were offered additional services, such as educational support. The project depended on robust partnerships: with prison staff; with the Bowlby Centre as a source of therapeutic expertise; and with the funder, the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.[13] Expert advisers helped to shape process and communications. It is crucial that the listening process is not detached from the systems that can provide time and support, without the assumption that every detail is passed up a chain of command and control.

A vital aspect was the commitment to listen to the narrative: that meant, at the beginning, asking the young person to recall and tell a story about their past; and then asking for another, prompting only for clarification. The texture of the episodes was therefore knitted together by the speaker's own attempts to find their voice, rather than by the interventions of an interviewer. In this manner the speaker was guided and encouraged to access and put words to memories. Such listening

conveys positive respect and interest, allowing the speaker to trace their own path towards expression. The method adopted drew on the insights developed by the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method.[14]

Young people in prison

In general, knowledge about young people in prison takes several forms, depending on the interests of the source and on the stage of the criminal justice process at which young people are encountered.

There is ample evidence that young people convicted of grave crimes have histories of trauma. In a study of cases sentenced under S.53 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, Boswell found that most of the young people had suffered abuse and the rate of personal loss (by bereavement or loss of contact with a parent) was also high.[15] Chronic inconsistency and rejection by caregivers leads to anger and insecurity in children, raising the risk of aggression in later childhood.[16] Yet this kind of knowledge and awareness does not simply and straightforwardly percolate into the prison system.

Young people convicted of grave crimes spend several years in prison before release. While the press may focus on the events that brought them before a court, people working in prisons know them as individuals in the context of their sentence. Up close, they may appear different to the pen portraits accessible to the public. Certainly they become older in prison and maturity moves them on from the figure they may have presented to the court. They will often be sent to specialist units which recognise the length of time that they may have to spend in prison, and the units undertake planned work that begins to address the risks and needs identified by assessment. As adults, in due course, they enter the adult prison system awaiting the possibility of release.

The files held by the prison service contain information about the original cases heard by the court, making clear the seriousness of the incidents and revealing the court's predominant interest in establishing the individual's participation in the offence as defined by law. Within the files are the careful assessments of risk and need that practitioners are obliged to carry out. As the possibility of parole arrives, the assessments become more intensive. The road to release on licence is marked with the milestones of prison-based courses and achievements.

The narratives of young people can add a new dimension to the histories recorded on file, because they go back further and in more detail than a prison service file normally can, and because they show the narrators actually grappling with their memories and coming to terms with the significance of disturbing events in the past.

Talking about trauma and violence

The stories published by the project revealed a range of experiences that had shaped young people's lives in significant ways. Here it is only possible to give illustrations and point to key themes; the full accounts are accessible online.[17]

Witnessing domestic violence featured in the stories, a theme explored in a number of research studies on the intergenerational transmission of violence.

Gaps in memory were associated with difficult moments.

It's quite hard when I try and talk about [the circumstances of the offence] because I think people might think I'm lying that I'm saying I can't remember but I really can't remember. (Young woman)

(In response to questions about being sexually abused) And I don't know what I said, it was just so hard, and even to this day when it comes up, I'll deny it but I'll deny it not because I want to deny it, I'll deny because I can't remember nothing. (Young man)

The stories of people with 'disorganised attachment' styles [18] are likely to contain such painful incoherencies.

Witnessing domestic violence featured in the stories, a theme explored in a number of research studies on the intergenerational transmission of violence.[19]

(My father) started drinking, and then when he'd be drunk he'd hit my mum. It used to happen a lot and then in the end she tried to get away from him and that's when we had to move out of our house where we lived.

When I was about twelve she left him. Then she had to go in a hostel with me, my brother and my sister, to try and get away from him. (Young woman)

I'd seen them argue bad but really bad. Something had gone on a couple of weeks before that was really, really bad. And my dad smashed the fucking windscreen, and when it just ***pfffffft****, cracked and my mum shit herself and I was alone in me own little world.* (Young man)

Multigenerational abuse was described, indicating how the parents of storytellers had been maltreated in ways that formed a prototype for transmitting disturbance to the children.

'...my mum was abused by her brother when she was younger and a few family members in my family have been abused, like there's a history of sexual abuse in my family,..' (Young man)

Loss of contact with a parent was a difficult experience.

I was 13 when he went to jail because I remember I had the Christmas with him. And when he went to jail I just went completely nuts. I was in trouble a lot anyway but I was just even worse, I couldn't do nothing, I was in court all the time, police were always knocking at my door. (Young man)

Loss of a parent is known to affect some children in damaging ways which impact on their subsequent behaviour.[20]

My dad died in April — it must've been when I went back to school in September, sort of after Christmas, that I started going to my cousin's, and started staying away from my mates and not doing what my mum told me to. (Young woman)

The striking mixture of the ordinary and the unusual, the dramatic and the seemingly inconsequential, makes for a challenging reading experience. It feels very different from psychiatric textbook profiles; each story testifies to the way in which extraordinary emotions and events are intertwined with the routines of getting through the day.

Practitioners as listeners

When fully elicited, young people's stories offer a strong counterpoint to the narratives found in prison files. While the files refer to life events, the focus of the prison service assessments is on a pragmatic appreciation of evidence that will underpin plans for the next stage of the sentence. Though a file tells a story of progress in the prison system, it does not provide a personal narrative. There is a case for trauma

screening and assessment [21] but, of course, it should not be treated as a tick-box exercise which involves little acknowledgement or response. The implications of this approach have been recognised by guidance on case assessment which suggests that interviewers recording risk and needs should demonstrate positive interest and commitment when exploring life histories.[22]

When the project was discussed with prison practitioners at the outset, indeed, it became apparent that a number were fully aware of life events that had influenced young people's paths towards imprisonment. That awareness of young people's histories was an impressive starting point because it helped to establish shared aims between practitioners and the project, acknowledging the importance of helping young people to tell their stories. Practitioners can and do access personal narratives through their conversations with prisoners and their ability to listen to stories is a key skill. 'What happened?' is a simple and powerful question that, in the appropriate context of trust, can open up a vista on the inner life of people suffering the effects of childhood trauma. The same compassion is at the heart of becoming an 'empathetic witness' to prisoners in crisis.[23] Of course, we are aware too that there can be understandable resistance to 'probing' areas that a person exposed to trauma perceives as shameful or humiliating; being attentive to spontaneous narrative, on the other hand, is a form of listening that conveys implicit respect. It implies setting aside our impulses to insert questions and judgements which interrupt someone's narrative.

Story telling as a counterpart to listening

Eliciting stories becomes easier if you find your own voice. Just like prisoners, prison practitioners have stories to tell about experiences that sit deep within themselves but have not so far been told. These stories have a resonance which can inspire interest in listening. At the same time, when staff tell stories in front of prisoners, it can help to display a humanity that invites prisoners to listen and to find their own voice.

Training in eliciting stories can benefit from demonstrating the effects of story-telling by asking the trainees themselves to recount experiences of their own. Equally it becomes possible to contemplate a project which shares the stories of staff and prisoners about common

experiences such as having been in the armed services or having migrated to the UK. A recent parallel to the latter approach has been the project Diaspora Stories [24]. Another direction is to memorialise the history and social significance of a prison, as shown by Holloway Prison Stories [25]. A recent review of literature and policy has strengthened the case for sharing stories as a constructive method for enhancing health care education [26]; the ERASMUS project *StoryAidEU* associated with the review has demonstrated international interest in the subject. The COVID period with its marked and disturbing changes for all of us will present further material for such mutually supportive initiatives.

How far such stories are shared within the prison, or beyond it, will be a matter for full discussion and prior agreement, but what matters most is the platform for respectful communication and understanding that the process can create. When difficult subjects are broached, it is important to establish a procedure for giving support and access to therapy where this is required.

There must be a clear emphasis on cultural competence which enables the stories of people with diverse backgrounds to be given equal respect and attention. Through training, the listeners should be expected to review and audit their own practice so that techniques are tested and renewed in different contexts.

This is not to underestimate the challenges of finding the opportunities for authentic, interfacing personal narratives in prisons with restricted regimes unable or unwilling to stem the tide of pain, disquiet and distrust that such environments can generate. Provided there is an appropriate framework of preparation, support and planning, however, practitioners should place faith in their ability to become aware of key life events and to promote therapeutic referrals that can help rehabilitation. Unless they do, the futures of prisoners will be just that more bleak.

Imprisoning the traumatised?

Trauma is prevalent in prisoner populations across the world. Addressing trauma is a standard requirement for prison administration, not a specialist exception.[27] Stories are ways of opening conversations and coming to terms with the consequences and residues of those experiences.

My Story frames narratives which make a powerful statement about the key life experiences of young people who are punished with imprisonment. Inevitably, questions emerge about how society and its institutions recognise symptoms of trauma and respond to its manifestations; more critically, the implications of the research strongly contest regimes of denunciation, disempowerment, and isolation of the immature and traumatised. If people object by saying, 'That is imprisonment', then the point is made all the more powerfully: to answer the specific and well-attested needs of young people, there should be alternative paths and institutions. A prison is a largely standardised place of separation and individual confinement which is designed to truncate personal connections, responsibility and growth; the best of regimes can only offer limited compensations while the worst are well-worn tracks leading to deterioration. Only actual and well-evidenced requirements of public protection can justify such measures, and, against these considerations of necessity, it can be argued that the possibilities of reparative treatment and growth must not be delayed or infringed by the impacts of incarceration.

Since the research was conducted we have seen welcome reductions in youth imprisonment which speak to the themes rehearsed here. However, it is still the case that prisoners are found to have experienced a high number of ACEs. Austerity has reached deep within prison regimes, reducing the time for normal activity, never mind projects that involve story-telling. It will take strong leadership and broad commitment to make listening and story-telling a properly valued and valuable part of prison conversations.

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