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PRISONER RELATIONSHIPS WITH VOLUNTARY SECTOR PRACTITIONERS

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has indicated that the voluntary sector is becoming increasingly important in marketised penal service delivery. However, market policy reforms are thought to pose risks to distinctive voluntary sector work with prisoners. Although commentators have suggested that the voluntary sector and its staff make distinctive contributions to prisoners, these have long been poorly understood. This article uses original interview data to demonstrate that voluntary sector practitioners can offer prisoners distinctive opportunities and relational experiences. Prisoner relationships

with voluntary sector practitioners can be differentiated from those with education and custodial staff. Furthermore, these relationships may have distinctively enduring effects. **Word count**: **6797.**

Keywords: Prisoner relationships; penal voluntary sector; emotions; prisons.

Introduction

The voluntary/ charitable sector has recently gained scholarly attention in light of its prominence in the further marketisation of penal services in England and Wales (e.g. Meek et al., 2013; Maguire, 2012; Corcoran, 2011; Neilson, 2009). As part of broad packages of reform, policy developments have emphasised the role for voluntary organisations in the penal service market. For example, *Breaking the Cycle* Green Paper (Ministry of Justice [MoJ], 2010) and *Transforming Rehabilitation: A Strategy for Reform* (MoJ, 2013) stressed the role for voluntary organisations in payment-by-results contracting. The role of the sector is already considered such that "there can hardly be a prison in the country that could continue to work as it does if there was a large scale collapse" of voluntary, community and social enterprise services for people in custody (Martin, 2013: no pagination; see also Neuberger, 2009). Yet, and despite this prominence, the penal voluntary sector's contributions to prisoners (amongst its other service users) are poorly understood.

Although voluntary sector practitioners are often argued to make a "special" or distinctive contribution to prisoners, in contrast to public or private sector engagement (Maguire, 2012: 490; see also Corcoran and Hucklesby, 2013; Mills et al., 2012; Neuberger, 2009), this has not been substantiated through research (Armstrong, 2002). Indeed, there is a relative dearth of research in the area (Meek et al., 2013; Corcoran, 2011; Mills et al., 2011). The idea of bottom-up 'voluntary' and 'community' action exerts a hold over criminal justice policy reform movements and evokes a powerful and "richly positive imagery" of inclusion, but this remains under-theorised and unproven (Armstrong, 2002: 351; see also Crawford, 1999: 151).

In this paper we address this dearth of research and provide a preliminary analysis of prisoner relationships with voluntary sector practitioners. We use original data gathered through interviews with prisoners and voluntary sector practitioners in England to argue that relationships between prisoners and voluntary sector practitioners can be distinctive and valuable, for reasons which include facilitating authentic emotional expression amongst prisoners. Our analysis illustrates that prisoner relationships with voluntary sector practitioners can be distinguished from those with education and custodial staff. Our data indicate that relationships between prisoners and voluntary sector practitioners may be particularly distinctive because they can both affect the immediate experience of imprisonment (Crewe et al., 2013) and also enable enduring prisoner transformations. However, the

distinctiveness of relationships between prisoners and voluntary sector practitioners should not be assumed and is likely to be affected by the conditions of individual voluntary sector programmes and prison settings (which include: by informal arrangement, contractual marketised relationships and payment by results contracting). By including original data, this article reaches past the powerful but potentially misleading "imagery of what we think they (voluntary organisations) are and do" (Armstrong, 2002: 362) to produce empirically underpinned understandings.

Our data is situated in the penal and policy context of England and Wales. Although there are important differences between territories, the voluntary sector and its role in the marketisation of penal services are issues of international import. This discussion is therefore also relevant to Canada, the USA and Australia where there are similar criminal justice policy developments involving the voluntary sector (Ilcan and Basok, 2004; Armstrong, 2002; Wallis, 2001).

This paper is organised as follows. First, we define the voluntary sector and consider the theoretical foundation to support the idea of a distinctive 'voluntary sector' relational experience. We then examine the importance of relationships in prisons and desistance scholarship. Next, we draw on original interview data to demonstrate that prisoner relationships with voluntary sector practitioners can be

valuable and differentiated from those with education and custodial staff. We also indicate that these effects can endure in space and time, making these relationships particularly valuable.

The penal voluntary sector

Voluntary organisations[1] are formally constituted organisations outside the public sector, whose main distinguishing feature is that they do not make profits for shareholders[2] (Maguire, 2012: 493; see also Alcock and Scott, 2007). *Penal* voluntary organisations are "charitable and self-defined voluntary agencies working with prisoners and offenders in prison- and community-based programmes" (Corcoran, 2011: 33). But, the voluntary sector is not comprised of a unitary set of organisations. It has been characterised as "a loose and baggy monster" containing a "bewildering variety of organisational forms, activities, motivations and ideologies" (Kendall and Knapp, 1995: 66; see also Author citation). Understandings of this diverse sector are

1 We have adopted the labels 'voluntary sector' and 'voluntary organisations'. However, an array of terminologies are used to refer to organisations in this area, including: third sector organisations; nonprofit organisations; nongovernmental organisations; charitable organisations; civil society organisations; philanthropic organisations; and community based organisations (Goddard, 2012; Maguire, 2012; Alcock and Scott, 2007; Armstrong, 2002).

2 But, the voluntary sector overlaps with the public, private and informal sectors (Alcock and Scott, 2007: 85). There are some similarities between the activities of companies such as Serco and G4S, and voluntary organisations who deliver penal services under contract e.g. Nacro (see also Neilson, 2009). Partnerships between sectors can be seen in recent piloting and commissioning of prison services under payment by results. Some voluntary organisations also earn a proportion of their money from social enterprise. These differences may all affect relationships between prisoners and voluntary sector practitioners.

"lacking" (Mills et al., 2011: 195) and it remains "a descriptive rather than theoretically rigorous concept or empirically defined entity" (Corcoran, 2011: 33).

A widespread claim is that voluntary organisations make a distinctive contribution through operating an "alternative welfare system which has compensated for failures in market and state systems to meet the complex needs of offenders" (Corcoran, 2012: 17; see also Rothschild and Milofsky, 2006; Smith et al., 1993). But, penal voluntary organisations are considered to do more than fill gaps in state provision, having a distinctive ethics of compassion and rehabilitative approach, and focussing on the needs and socio-economic integration of individual (ex-)offenders (Hucklesby and Corcoran, 2016; Goddard, 2012). This compassionate discourse and approach is thought to underpin the apparently distinctive person-centred, non-authoritarian and non-judgemental working styles of voluntary organisations (Maguire, 2012; Mills et al., 2012; Meek et al, 2010; Brookman and Holloway, 2008; Light, 1993). Although staff attitudes and working cultures can vary substantially between prisons (Mills et al., 2012; Liebling, 2008), voluntary sector practitioners are often contrasted with statutory penal staff, who are "traditionally more focussed on punishment, controlling offenders and managing risk" (Mills et al., 2012: 394; see also Corcoran, 2011; Vennard and Hedderman, 2009). Voluntary sector staff are apparently considered more approachable and trustworthy than

statutory staff, and are thus better able to engage service users (Maguire, 2012; Mills et al., 2012; Neuberger, 2009; Lewis et al., 2007; Light, 1993).

However, there remains surprisingly little *evidence* demonstrating exactly how, or if, a penal voluntary organisation "*is* different than a for-profit business or a state agency" when dealing with prisoners (Armstrong, 2002: 346, emphasis in original). Given that voluntary sector practitioners have a long history of interaction with prisoners (Mills et al., 2011; Smith et al., 1993; McWilliams, 1983), and that the trust and engagement between voluntary sector staff and (ex-)offenders is seen as "one of the strongest features of voluntary sector involvement" in punishment (Maguire, 2012: 491; see also Lewis et al., 2007; Light, 1993), the absence of substantive supporting data is both surprising and problematic. Prisons and desistance scholars have however examined the importance of relationships in general, in work with (ex-)offenders.

Relationships

Scholars have explored the importance of relationships between prisoners and custodial officers (e.g. Stevens, 2013; Crewe et al., 2013; Crewe, 2011, 2009; Donohue and Moore, 2009; Crawley, 2004; Liebling, 2004; Liebling et al., 1999). Staff-prisoner relationships have been found to affect prison order (Bottoms, 1999; Sparks and

Bottoms, 1995). Indeed, treatment from prison officers can turn prisoners "into a different person" (Liebling, 2004: 143) and negative relationships with officers can cause psychological distress amongst prisoners (Liebling et al., 2005).

Donohue and Moore illustrate that "identities and representations (of individuals and institutions) are best understood as inherently fluid and relational" (2009: 330). They demonstrate how managerialist and consumerist discourses can frame prisoners as clients, but punitive discourses position prisoners as offenders. As such, the identity of the prisoner, and to some extent their subsequent behaviour, is dependent on the relationship under consideration: "the very same person described by therapeutically oriented authorities in one context is recognised as a client (but) becomes an offender" in another context, for example a prisoner may be a student in education programmes or a client in life skills classes, but becomes a prisoner once locked in their cell (Donohue and Moore, 2009: 331; see also Warner, 1998). Relationships with custodial officers and various prison staff (such as voluntary sector practitioners, health staff and education staff) therefore interact with varying professional discourses to frame, facilitate and constrain different identity presentations and attitudinal responses from both prisoners and probationers.

Recent work has detailed how HMP Wellingborough's visits room and classrooms allowed male prisoners to temporarily discard their toughened prisoner

identities (De Viggiani, 2012; Crewe, 2009; Jewkes, 2002; Sykes, 1958) and express emotions such as tenderness, vulnerability and generosity (Crewe et al., 2013: 12; see also Moran, 2013). These alternative emotional climates were found to require "cultivation" within prisons and were predominantly staffed by civilian education and chaplaincy staff, who "had to play with, subvert or offer alternative displays of authority from those found elsewhere in the prison" and create "spaces that were as *un*-carceral as possible" (Crewe et al., 2013: 14, emphasis in original). Non-custodial prison staff can therefore create different emotional climates within prisons, which can affect prisoner behaviour (Crewe et al., 2013).

Desistance literature has also stressed the significance of relationships between probation officers and (ex-)offenders, highlighting the role such relationships play in enabling the process of desisting from crime. Displaying "empathy (and) genuineness" and adopting "person-centred, collaborative and 'client-driven' approaches" have been proven as beneficial in offender management work (McNeill, 2006: 52). These behaviours confirm staff compassion and trustworthiness, and can form the foundation upon which probationers will co-operate with services, commit to long-term compliance and take steps towards desistance from crime (Phoenix and Kelly, 2013: 428; see also Robinson and McNeill, 2008; McNeill, 2006; Burnett and McNeill, 2005). The quality of staff-client relationships can determine the agency's legitimacy in the eyes of probationers, and

the agency's capacity to enable probationers to commit to compliance and desistance from crime (Robinson and McNeill, 2008). Relationships can therefore impact upon both experiences of punishment and its outcomes.

Background

This article combines data and thematic analysis from a range of studies. The practitioner data were collected during fieldwork aiming to conceptualise the penal voluntary sector in England and Wales. This fieldwork included 11 semi-structured interviews with voluntary sector practitioners, carried out on a one-to-one, voluntary and confidential basis between January and April 2012. The sample included both paid and volunteer staff, although all of the participants cited here were salaried. All organisations in the sample provided supplementary support services for prisoners, or prisoners and probationers, and were principally funded through grants from charitable trusts and foundations. None of the participant organisations were involved in payment-by-results contracting and only one received statutory contract funding. These elements are likely to have affected in the relationships studied here. We suggest that our preliminary analysis should not be extrapolated across the voluntary sector, and also highlight that research into the quality of relationships between prisoners and voluntary sector practitioners in core contracted work and under payment by results is required.

The prisoner data were gathered during commissioned fieldwork evaluating prisoner experiences of three creative arts projects, run by two voluntary organisations: the Writers in Prison Foundation and the Prison Radio Association. The sample consisted of group and one-to-one interviews undertaken with 30 participants in total. The interviews were conducted using opportunity sampling between 2008 and 2013. The Writers in Prison Foundation aims to inspire and engage prisoners by placing creative writers and artists in prisons. Two Writers in Prison projects were evaluated: a three year creative writing project run in the Dangerous and Severe Personality Disorders unit of a male Category A prison between 2010 and 2013, funded by the Northern Rock Foundation (11 participants[3]); and a 12 week critical reading group run in a male, Category A and B prison during 2011, funded by the Writers in Prison Foundation (six participants[4]). The Prison Radio Association uses radio to communicate with and engage prisoners. Three local male prisons with existing or new radio stations (one Category C and D, and two Category B), were visited during 2008. These projects were supported by the Prison Radio Association (13 participants[5]).

None of the research projects or tools were designed to specificially study relationships between prisoners and voluntary sector practitioners. This theme

3 For further information, see (Author citation and Other, 2012).
4 For further information, see (Other and Author citation, 2012).
5 For further information, see (Author citation and Other, 2009).

emerged during the course of the research, being raised by both sets of participants. All data was thematically analysed and coded as part of the original research projects. Our coded data under the theme of 'relationships' was then combined and reanalysed (using ethnographic content analysis[6]) for the purposes of this article, aiming to explore: i) whether voluntary sector practitioners can provide positive experiences for prisoners and ii) whether these experiences are distinctive. The data is presented below.

Positive experiences

Our data indicate that voluntary sector projects can indeed stimulate positive emotions and prisoner engagement. Although we do not suggest that the outcomes we describe here will always result from voluntary sector projects, prisoners engaging with the Creative Writing Project described feeling a range of positive emotions. The prisoners described feeling 'motivated', 'energised', 'confident' and 'happy' as a direct result of interactions with voluntary sector practitioners:

> "They motivate and inspire. After 20 minutes with them I feel energised" (Prisoner Dave, Creative Writing Project, 2013).

> "The exercises [the voluntary sector practitioner] has designed have been an eye opener and a mind opener. I have more confidence in my own ability" (Prisoner Rick, Creative Writing Project, 2011).

6 Please see Bryman, 2012.

> "I always come out of sessions with [the voluntary sector practitioner] smiling" (Prisoner Alex, Creative Writing Project, 2011).

Our data suggested that voluntary sector programmes could create distinctively positive places within prisons, and that prisoner relationships with voluntary sector practitioners could be distinctively valuable, in comparison with their relationships with education staff and custodial staff. We are certainly not implying that all voluntary sector practitioners or all custodial staff have a homogenous approach to prisoners, but our data suggest that voluntary sector practitioners have a distinctive and valuable approach, which may enable prisoners to move beyond the toughened prisoner identity (see also Donohue and Moore, 2009; Warner, 1998). There is a relative dearth of research in the area (Meek et al., 2013; Corcoran, 2011; Mills et al., 2011).

Distinctive penal places

Some of our data indicated that voluntary sector projects can create distinctive penal places, which also substantiates the idea that prisons have distinctive emotional zones (Crewe et al., 2013: 12; Moran, 2013: 346; Johnson, 1987: 66). Practitioner Kirsty[7] explained that the physical location of their project, being in its own department within the host prison, provided prisoners with physical and

7 Pseudonyms are used throughout.

psychological space to distance themselves from their 'prisoner personae' and engage with their identities as parents. Prisoner Chris stated that the Creative Writing Project provided him with a forum for creativity which was physically separate from the prison regime and disciplinary practices, and thus freed him to explore identities beyond that of being an 'offender':

> "So for the time they come to us in our department, you know, it's a bit like they can leave that prisoner persona behind on the wing for a bit and just come and concentrate on their children." (Practitioner Kirsty: national voluntary organisation, non-statutory funding).

> "I see writing as a forum for creativity away from prison regime and discipline" (Prisoner Chris, Creative Writing Project, 2011).

Similarly, prisoners participating in a Critical Reading Group reported presenting a 'prisoner identity' in the exercise yard, but felt safe to behave more authentically within the Reading Group. In this group, prisoners could be open and honest, discuss their feelings, and display vulnerability in front of other prisoners. This behaviour contrasts sharply with the male prisoner's typical "veneer of cool, hard manliness" (Johnson, 1987: 87). The following quotation came from prisoner Andy and the five other men in the group nodded appreciatively and verbalised agreement:

> "When you're in the exercise yard you have to show a different side to your character. [...] I find it difficult to express emotion, but here [in the reading group], it felt safe to do that, a place of safety. A place where we can be open about how it feels to be men, honestly and openly. We all progressed through the sessions together and expressed freely. It was very empowering to discuss things so openly and we all had to get to a place where we could be vulnerable with each other to be honest." (Critical Reading Group, group interview, 2011).

The prisoner links this open emotional expression to both the physical space where the group convened ("here") and a psychological "place" created by the people and relationships within the group. Whilst we certainly do not negate the importance of penal spaces in prisoner behaviour and relationships, the weight of our evidence indicated that relationships with voluntary sector practitioners were the crucial element in creating more positive penal experiences. The interplay between people and spaces is however a further interesting avenue for research. We now demonstrate that prisoner relationships with voluntary sector practitioners can be distinctive from those with education staff.

Distinctive from education staff

It is notable that prisoners compared their relationships with voluntary sector practitioners favourably to their relationships with education staff, whom Crewe et al. (2013) found to facilitate authentic emotional expression amongst prisoners:

> "When you work over in education, the teachers over there are not as relaxed as [radio project staff]. Do you know what I mean? Because they're a bit more stricter" (Radio Students, group interview, 2008).

> "I've done every single course available in here to keep busy. The main difference here is [the] environment. You don't feel as free in education as [you do] here. In prison any bits of freedom are a big, big thing. I come like I am going to work and don't feel looked over or under surveillance every second" (Prisoner BX01, Radio Training Course, 2008).

Voluntary sector projects were experienced as a distinctively 'free' and 'relaxed' environments where practitioners did not stimulate feelings of 'surveillance' amongst prisoners, contrasting with traditional education environments. The quotations above demonstrate the significance of the extra freedom perceived in the voluntary sector projects, created through practitioners' behaviour.

Distinctive from custodial staff

Although punitive discourses and practices can never be absent from custodial settings, our data indicate that voluntary sector practitioners have distinctive discursive and practical conceptualisations of their clients as people rather than offenders, and can also have practical separation from more coercive aspects of prison life (Corcoran and Hucklesby, 2013; Maguire, 2012; Mills et al., 2012 *inter alia*). This practical separation from coercive roles enabled prisoners to develop more trusting relationships with voluntary sector practitioners, in a way that even the most caring and approachable officer could not. One practitioner explained how the punitive role of officers directly diminished their ability to maintain supportive and trusting relationships with prisoners:

> "Lots of them [Prison Officers] are very good and provide lots of support to the women, but nonetheless [pause] in prison it's just a thing, if you kick off on the landing, the same Officer who may have been being really supportive earlier, their job is to take your privileges away

> and to lock you up and if necessary to drag you off somewhere if you're really kicking off and you won't go behind your doors. And I think the, the sort of care and control [pause], erm, aspect is very difficult to merge." (Practitioner Jane: operate in one Women's prison, non-statutory funding).

More subtly, a prisoner who participated in the Critical Reading Group explained that he felt safe, free and equal when engaging with the project, because practitioners did not write reports about the prisoners there:

> "I felt safe [in this group]. There was no report writing going on. I felt free and equal" (Critical Reading Group, group interview, 2011).

Less tangibly, prisoner Noel explained that he greatly valued the voluntary sector practitioners who ran the Creative Writing Project he attended, because they discussed the world beyond the prison walls and approached and addressed him as a person, rather than solely as a prisoner:

> "They just talk sometimes too, about stuff, you know; books they've read, films, other people, music, the world out there. That's so important in a place like this" (Prisoner Noel, Creative Writing Project, 2013).

This interaction differs from contact with officers, who rarely discuss out of work experiences (Crewe, 2009; Crawley, 2004; Liebling, 1999). In the quotation above, "the world out there" is clearly differentiated from the prison ("a place like this"). It follows that hearing about things beyond the prison walls may stimulate prisoners into a different emotional state, perhaps enabling them to transcend the custodial

environment's norms of stoicism (Sykes, 1958). Voluntary sector practitioners reported that they built qualitatively different relationships with prisoners, compared to custodial staff, who can too easily lose sight of the 'people' serving the sentences (see also Goddard, 2012). Practitioners considered that their quality interactions with prisoners could never be replicated by officers, who did not have the same practical and conceptual distance from punishment and the more coercive and risk orientated aspects of prison work[8]. As such, voluntary sector practitioners felt they were better able to focus on the person rather than their offence and offending behaviours. Practitioner Jane (below) explained that their organisation provided distinctive person-centred, rather than offence- or risk-centred, relationship opportunities for prisoners. This allowed practitioners to interact with individuals as women rather than prisoners. This distinctive approach was enabled because practitioners did not have the same focus on security that officers must 'always' maintain:

> "If you're a prison officer, your key role is *always* security, it always has to be security, so when they're [officers] working with the women they're [prisoners] primarily defined by the fact that they're offenders, and then anything else will be secondary to that. […] I think it is, all charities provide that, it is a different role, its seeing them *first as a woman* [...] rather than as an offender. [...] We approach them as a woman [...] that needs our support" (emphases in recording). (Practitioner Jane: operate in one women's prison, non-statutory funding).

8 Much is changing in the penal voluntary sector with the rise of service commissioning and payment by results contracting (Corcoran and Hucklesby, 2013; Corcoran, 2011; Fox and Albertson, 2011; Neilson, 2009 *inter alia*). Different voluntary organisations are affected by this in different ways: some are relatively unchanged, some are transformed (Author citation). However, we do not suggest that there is a unitary 'penal voluntary sector' staffed by homogeneous 'voluntary sector practitioners'.

> "In criminal justice services it can be easy to lose sight of that *woman* in the prison sentence (emphasis in recording)." (Practitioner Suzie: operate in one women's prison, statutory grant funding).

Voluntary sector practitioners created psychological distance between the prisoners and their punishment by consciously adopting a non-judgemental and person-centred approach towards prisoners (cf. McNeill, 2006; Burnett and McNeill, 2005). The language used by practitioners in the research interviews exemplifies their accepting conceptualisations of prisoners as people with potential. For example, practitioners discussed interacting not with prisoners, but with: "amazing women, who have faced *so much* and *still* keep going" (Practitioner Suzie, emphases in recording); "normal people who have made a mistake in their lives" (Practitioner Steve); and "people with goodness inside them" (Practitioner Jamie). Indeed, practitioner Carol psychologically separated their organisation's work from the work of those involved in judging offences and administering punishment:

> "You know, it's not for us to make judgement about what they've done or what the prison [...] you know, sentencing and all the rest of it" (Practitioner Carol: national organisation, non-statutory funding).

Voluntary sector practitioners could provide distinctive relational interactions for prisoners because many such practitioners had a degree of physical distance from the security and risk management aspects of punishment, and a distinctive non-judgemental conceptualisation of prisoners as people. The data we have presented here provide evidence to support the assertion of a distinctive 'voluntary sector'

ethos of compassion and rehabilitative approach focussing on the needs of the individual (Mills et al., 2012: 394). We now consider how interacting with voluntary sector practitioners can have effects upon prisoners which are distinctive because they endure in space and time.

Distinctive transformative potential

Relationships with voluntary sector practitioners also had distinctive enduring effects. Recent work within carceral geography has considered the temporal impact of relationships formed within emotionally distinctive areas of the prison (Crewe et al., 2013; Moran, 2013). For Crewe et al., emotion zones such as education departments and chaplaincies provided relief from the essential qualities of the prison environment only "for brief periods" and relationships in emotion zones "rarely endured beyond these locations" (2013: 14). Yet, Moran found that visiting areas provided a "cumulative" form of transformation for prisoners, through which experiences in visiting spaces reminded prisoners about life on the outside and motivated them to complete their sentences successfully, to be able to return to it (2013: 339).

Our analysis aligns more closely with Moran's findings and indicates that voluntary sector creative arts projects have nurtured hope, patience and motivation in participant prisoners and, according to prisoners, made enduring impacts upon their behaviours and experience of imprisonment. Having the opportunity to utilise a broader emotional register and working with voluntary sector practitioners provided lasting effects for some prisoners, in terms of cultivating enduring 'hope' and 'patience':

> "It gives me hope and has given me something more constructive to hold on to" (Prisoner Alex, Creative Writing Project, 2011).

> "I think all that has made me more patient with other people too" (Prisoner James, Creative Writing Project, 2013).

Our data suggest that the distinctive relational opportunities offered by voluntary sector practitioners may have transformative potential. Our data show that interacting with voluntary sector practitioners could have effects that accumulated, and endured in time and place. Prisoners explained how participating in voluntary sector creative arts projects had improved their relationships, communication skills and powers of expression both within and outside the project areas. Such effects were particularly significant because creating prisoner capabilities and social capital has been linked to desistance from crime (Faulkner, 2003: 291; see also Farrall and Maruna, 2004; Wolff and Draine, 2004; Hagan, 1994). After all, desistance is more

than just an absence of crime and "involves the pursuit of a positive life" (Maruna, 2007: 652):

> "I got involved with [the project] and I have all round better relationships with staff, lads and family because of it" (Prisoner Shane, Creative Writing Project, 2013).

> "I used to be the one who shouted the loudest, shout people down. Not any more - I think, listen and respond better now" (Critical Reading Group, group interview, 2011).

> "I learnt to settle disputes and defuse conflict through listening to other people, using dialogue- that's the best way to go" (Critical Reading Group, group interview, 2011).

> "It helped me explain what I wanted to say to my family. Before I just never knew what to say" (Critical Reading Group, group interview, 2011).

Some might argue that these effects resulted from the communicative focus of the writing and reading projects with which prisoners were engaging (cf. Bilby et al., 2013; Henley et al., 2012), as opposed to the occupational background and distinctive approach of the voluntary sector practitioners. However, prisoner data gathered across all three voluntary sector projects attributed the positive effects and prisoner engagement to distinctive relational interactions with voluntary sector practitioners:

> "Class is rarely cancelled and we do not have to rely on the officers. You give up and lose interest sometimes in here, but not with the [Prison Radio team] - they give us that continuity" (Radio Training Graduate, Prison 1, 2008).

> "This is a place where there are no constraints over and above being polite, not swearing or talking over anyone else" (Critical Reading Group, Group Interview, 2011).

> "You know, they push you to do things, do you know what I mean? So that they get the best out of you" (Radio Training Students, Group interview, Prison 3, 2008).

> "[The voluntary sector practitioner] never makes me feel pressured. [He/She] doesn't focus on or set deadlines, but plays to our strengths, while also bolstering our weaknesses. In this place, you can get staff, especially teachers, who think they are amateur psychologists - whereas with [voluntary sector] staff there is no hidden agenda, so we are less suspicious of them" (Creative Writing Project participant, MP13:04, 2013).

These quotations illustrate how voluntary sector practitioners built relationships characterised by trust with prisoners, approached prisoners as individuals and reflected a philosophy of self that could transcend the 'prisoner' identity. Through spending time in a place where the constraints were clear but minimal: "being polite, not swearing", spending time with people who prisoners felt had "no hidden agenda" and building confidence and trust, prisoners could engage with voluntary sector projects and express themselves more authentically, both within and beyond the voluntary sector project places. Whilst prisoners may also have benefited from the forms of the activities themselves, our data indicate that their engagement depended on relationships formed with attendant voluntary sector practitioners (see also Phoenix and Kelly, 2013). In penal settings many individuals will previously have struggled to engage with productive activities, so stimulating engagement amongst this group is a particularly distinctive and valuable quality (Bilby et al., 2013).

Discussion

In this paper, we have demonstrated that voluntary sector practitioners can offer distinctive experiences to prisoners. Voluntary sector projects offered some physical and psychological distance from penal regimes, and prisoner relationships with voluntary sector practitioners were differentiated from those with education and custodial staff. Our data also suggested that the effects of prisoner relationships with voluntary sector practitioners could bring about distinctive and valuable enduring changes amongst prisoners.

By assessing the oft-cited yet unsubstantiated assertion that relationships between voluntary sector practitioners and prisoners are distinctive and valuable (see also Author citation, 2014), this paper has made a preliminary contribution to the task of theorising the diverse penal voluntary sector. The voluntary sector projects and practitioners that we studied were found to offer a distinctive relational experience to prisoners, which had positive enduring effects upon some. However, this finding should not be generalised across all voluntary sector projects. The sector is composed of extremely diverse organisations which are differentiated in terms of size, income, function, organisational capacity and attitudes to engaging with contracted public service work (Corcoran, 2011: 40; Mills et al 2011: 204; Armstrong, 2002: 356). Voluntary sector programmes and their outcomes are also highly context dependent (Corcoran and Hucklesby, 2013; Meek et al., 2013). This finding is

therefore not intended to identify inherent qualities found throughout the voluntary sector. Indeed, the work of penal voluntary organisations can and does sometimes result in expanding social control, net-widening and increases in the numbers of people being punished (Author citation; Cox, 2013; Armstrong, 2002; Cohen, 1985; McWilliams, 1983; Foucault, 1977). Nor do we suggest that voluntary organisations provide a panacea to the many failures and problems of penal systems, nor the complex social issues of those they punish (Corcoran, 2012: 22).

Although these caveats are important, we found clear evidence of multiple distinctive voluntary sector qualities. The finding of distinctive relationships between voluntary sector practitioners and prisoners illustrates a means of improving the experience of imprisonment and reducing psychological distress amongst prisoners (cf. Liebling, 2008, 2004; Liebling et al., 2005). It also exemplifies that voluntary sector projects can provide a means of creating capabilities amongst prisoners and supporting desistance from crime (cf. Maruna, 2007; McNeill, 2006; Faulkner, 2003).

Marketisation is perhaps not affecting the penal voluntary sector as vigorously as is often claimed (see Author citation), but the varying effects of marketisation discourses and practices upon voluntary sector practitioners, and their relationships with prisoners would be most interesting to explore. In comparison

with more traditional voluntary sector projects funded by charitable grants and trusts, such analyses could illustrate the effects of marketisation upon relationships between voluntary sector practitioners and prisoners. Relevant forms of marketisation include both contracted out service delivery and emerging forms of payment by results contracting (Fox and Albertson, 2011), where the firm focus on results might affect the *inputs* of voluntary sector practitioners. At this time of significant change in the penal voluntary sector, scholars have the opportunity to finally work out exactly how it affects the prisoners and probationers with whom it has worked for hundreds of years. We hope that this article will stimulate further empirically-derived work in this area.

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