



How can staff facilitate and frustrate journeys away from criminal lifestyles?

– Research on desistance processes in resettlement work

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Introduction

Meeting society outside the prison gate is often challenging. Studies show that prison environment and imprisonment can impact negatively on health, quality of life and ties to society (Todd-Kvam, 2019; Schinkel, 2014). Many commit criminal acts immediately upon release (Dünkel et al., 2019: 3). Challenges before, during and after imprisonment indicate that released persons experience different and more complex journeys away from crime than people who served sentences in the community. Despite this, imprisonment may also have positive sides, and has shown in some cases to be a hook for change into a crime-free life (Schinkel, 2014; Giordano et al., 2002; Gjeruldsen and Jensen, 2021; Ugelvik, 2021).

According to Norwegian and European aims, preparation for release shall be a continuous focus for Correctional Service staff throughout the sentence. One of the main goals is to initiate and assist journeys towards crime-free lives (Pruin, 2019: 436; Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2021). In Norway, control of and assistance for people on conditional release is mainly provided by the Probation Services. Non-governmental organizations also take ever-greater responsibility for supporting people through the gate and into society. Because of the barriers to normal social relationships during and immediately after imprisonment, support from staff in Correctional Services and non-governmental organizations can be of major importance.

Given my Norwegian research context, I will present some of the changes the Norwegian Correctional Service has been through in recent years. More sentences are served in the community, and the prison population has changed accordingly. The Norwegian government recently stated that imprisoned persons serve longer sentences, are convicted for more serious offences, and are less often released before full time. They consider them a more demanding group than before (Justis- og Beredskapsdepartementet, 2021). Besides this, six low security prisons, known to facilitate meaningful interpersonal contact between staff and imprisoned persons (Andvig et al., 2021; Villman, 2021) were closed in 2019. Additionally, state grants to the Correctional Service have been



significantly reduced (Kriminalomsorgen, 2019). Overall, this development has challenged facilitation of journeys away from crime after imprisonment.

1. My PhD research

In my project, I study the transition from prison to society. I aim to explore and describe what promotes and inhibits early steps away from criminal lifestyles within this context. Of particular interest is how relationships between staff and imprisoned and former imprisoned persons might influence these paths. I develop this knowledge in cooperation with persons with first-hand experience of walking through the gate, and with staff experienced in assisting these walks.

1.2. Methodological approach

One of my sub-studies relates to staff's perspectives on how to assist desistance processes in the context of resettlement. Five focus group interviews with 18 participants were conducted, with volunteers in non-governmental organizations and caseworkers in probation offices. Participants were asked how they, from their perspectives, might support and hinder desistance processes within the phase of resettlement.

The second sub-study rests on a narrative, longitudinal, prospective design. I interview persons who newly experienced the transition from prison to society, and do follow-up interviews to investigate how experiences, perceptions and identities change over time (Gålnander, 2020; Farrall et al., 2014). Thirteen persons (twelve men and one woman) between 19 and 66 were interviewed face to face within the first three months after imprisonment. Interviews related to whatever they found important to motivate or hinder them in leading law-abiding lives, as well as specifically on how relationships with staff influenced this. Interviews related to experiences of preparations for release, as well as the first period after imprisonment.

I approach my research from a constructivist perspective, and understand findings as developing in an interplay between participants and myself. Based on this, as well as on my work experience from prison, probation and substance abuse rehabilitation, I will reflect on how I bring my perceptions and prejudices with me into the research. I am lucky to have persons from the non-governmental organization Wayback contributing with their first-hand experience throughout the research process.

In the introduction, I illustrated how this research will be interesting from a thematic perspective. In the following, I reflect on how it might be relevant to knowledge on assisted desistance (where desistance is broadly understood as the process of moving away from a criminal lifestyle) and to policy and practice.



2. Knowledge on assisted desistance

We have a great deal of knowledge on how Correctional Service staff in general can support processes of change. Villeneuve et al. (2021) define assisted desistance as ‘any intervention with juvenile or adult offenders aiming at, directly or indirectly, maintaining his [sic] abstention from crime and fostering changes in identity’ (2021: 77). They argue that staff can assist such processes by supporting changes in self-identity through positive feedback and encouragement. Interactions where staff emphasize the transformative powers of trust and recognize the individual’s possibilities to change have shown to be meaningful in facilitating desistance within a Norwegian context (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2021; Ugelvik, 2021). Caseworkers also emphasize the importance of constructive client relationships, based on interest, understanding, reciprocity and a balance of care and control (Todd-Kvam, 2020).

Literature also shows that desistance-facilitating experiences emphasize the importance of staff being non-judgemental, honest, authentic, trustworthy and good listeners. Staff’s unconditional support, genuine care, concern and interest can therefore be important in assisting desistance (Healy, 2012; Farrall et al., 2014; Villeneuve et al., 2021).

However, desistance research also discusses how these relationships might frustrate or ‘un-assist’ desistance processes (Villeneuve et al., 2021). Experiences of not being seen, and of being objects of penal power, can hinder attempts to change (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2021; Todd-Kvam, 2020). Similar examples are presented by Ugelvik (2021), where mistrust and lack of recognition in prison showed to frustrate possibilities for change. Desistance researchers have argued that the way people see themselves in the future can affect their efforts to refrain from offending. Future-orientation might give them meaningful goals to work towards (King, 2013; Farrall et al., 2014; Hunter and Farrall, 2018; Ugelvik, 2021). Due to this, facilitation of desistance processes can take place within meaningful interpersonal relationship between staff and convicted persons. Despite this valuable knowledge, there is still a need for research on how interactions and relationships might facilitate and frustrate desistance processes within the context of resettlement.

3. Relevance for policy and practice

In the following, I reflect on the value of my research for practice and decision-making. In line with Dünkler et al. (2019), I see resettlement as the process from preparation for release within prison, to probation and aftercare. Based on the length of this essay, I will narrow my focus down to preparations for release during imprisonment. As mentioned, The Norwegian Correctional Service has been through significant changes in recent years. These changes



affect interpersonal interaction and assisted desistance processes in several ways. To exemplify the involvement of my research interference with policy and practice, I present two recent and highly debated themes; the proposal and introduction of breath and motion sensors in prison cells, and the Ombudsman's special notice to parliament about solitary confinement and lack of human contact. I start with the latter. Norwegian authorities have for several years received international criticism for the use of solitary confinement in prisons. Findings from the Ombudsman's visit to 19 high security prisons between 2014-2018 painted a serious picture of the use of solitary confinement, and of a significant risk of inhuman or degrading treatment (Sivilombudsmannen, 2019). The Ombudsman found it disturbing that the most extensive use of solitary confinement was not due to the individual's behavior, but to financial or practical challenges within the prison. In addition, the Ombudsman found indications that the cases of self-initiated isolation (usually occurring due to insecurity, mental health challenges or fear of fellow inmates) were increasing. Their report underlined that presence of staff is crucial for creating security, and for identifying persons who are withdrawing from social interaction (Sivilombudsmannen, 2019). The other theme concerns the proposal and introduction of breath and motion sensors (Kriminalomsorgsdirektoratet, 2021). It states that the Correctional Service can install technical equipment in cells, to warn deviations in breathing and movement. The purpose was primarily to prevent suicide and overdose deaths, and the technology was not ment to replace the human factor of control and care (Kriminalomsorgsdirektoratet, 2021). According to Sivilombudsmannen (2019), the use of solitary confinement demonstrates *'inhuman or degrading treatment, with a minimum of meaningful human contact'*. Lack of positive interaction might also be a result of technical installation of breath and motion sensors. Despite the important and desired intention to save human lives, sensors might cause further reductions in meaningful human contact between staff and imprisoned persons. As presented earlier, experiences of not being seen or recognized, and of being objects of penal power, might hinder attempts to change. These examples illustrate possible hindrances to assisted desistance. On the other hand, unconditional support, genuine care, concern and interest shows to be important to support positive change. Staff's efforts to prevent and reduce self-initiated isolation, as well as to initiate meaningful interaction, can such be a way to facilitate early desistance processes.

I will demonstrate my optimism and my concern related to assisted desistance (or the lack thereof) through two stories. They are also meant to illustrate how knowledge might impact on practical work. Both stories are shaped by interviews and talks with staff, imprisoned and former imprisoned persons, and by my own experience. The second story illustrates an imagined scenario from the future Norwegian Correctional Service, inspired by McNeill (2019). The context is a restrictive unit in a high security Norwegian prison. People spend their time in their cells, except from the optional hour of fresh



air and two hours of socialization on the wing. ‘The morning round’ (where staff ensure that everyone is alive, and offer them hot water for their thermoses) is therefore one of few daily encounters between staff and imprisoned persons. The encounter demands no more than a grunt or another sign of life. 23-year-old Daniel has been in cell C-167 for almost three months. He hardly leaves his cell, and rarely goes out for fresh air. He spends most of time in bed, without any sign of interest in social interaction. Ida and Lars work at the wing, and just started their morning shift.

1:

Lars: *Have you checked on 167 this morning?*

Ida: *No. He has been quite clear, though, he has no interest in talking to us. I had an unpleasant episode yesterday, as he shouted out at me before I even opened the door.*

Lars: *OK. I’ll check on him. (Knocks, and unlocks the cell door) Morning! How are you? Want some hot water?*

Daniel: *No.*

Lars: *(Stays in the door opening for a couple of seconds, looking around) I see you have a note here. (Unfolds a paper inserted into the hatch in the door, and reads the message). You want to see the social counsellor!?!*

Daniel: *Oh Throw it. I changed my mind.*

Lars: *Well ... That’s your decision, but I liked the idea. You are soon up for release, and could benefit from preparing a bit ...*

David: *Don’t bother. I don’t give a shit. Throw it. OK?*

Lars: *I see. You’ve had your rounds ... But I was thinking ... maybe you could do me a favour? I took this course the other day, and could need some practice. Or I will soon forget most of it.*

Daniel: *Mm ...*

Lars: *I work long shifts next weekend. What about having a chat and a cup of coffee?*

David: *We’ll see ...*

Lars: *Sounds great. We have a deal!*

2:

Lars: *Have you checked on 167 this morning?*

Ida: *No. He has been quite clear, though, he has no interest in talking to us. I had an unpleasant episode yesterday, as he shouted out at me before I even opened the door. ... And there’s a sensor in there’.*

Lars: *‘Well, then ...’*

4. Discussion

Todd-Kvam (2020) highlights how probational staff worried about reduced activity and rehabilitative engagement in prisons due to budget cuts. Similar to the examples above, he draws a line between solitary confinement, budget cuts, more containment and less care. In her research, Villman (2021) finds psychological help from professional staff to be a fundamental reason for change. Not only did it assist change during imprisonment, it also facilitated initiatives



towards continued support upon release. Villman's research highlights efforts from both parties to support subjective change. Imprisoned persons should be ready for and open towards support, and they would need proximity and response from staff when they turned to them. Staff's recognition and trusting approach was considered rare, by Ugelvik's participants (Ugelvik, 2021). In light of this, a co-occurrence of motivated participants and responsive staff appears to be a lucky coincidences. Additionally, as the average imprisoned person in Norway carries heavier loads, and interaction with staff seems liminal, facilitation of change might appear utopian. All in all, this indicates that these relationships move in an undesired direction of frustrating more than facilitating positive change.

Despite this somewhat bleak outlook, resent Nordic desistance research emphasizes how staff *do* assist desistance by recognising the individual's attempts to change (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2021; Ugelvik, 2021). Ugelvik (2021) also underlines how trusting relationships in a resettlement context lead to hope of a better future, which again support ongoing desistance processes.

One participant in my study, with long experience with assisting persons through the gate, reflected on this vulnerable transition: '... when you walk through the gate and into the community ... That is when work begins ... I think living law-abiding lives is much about hope. How fair is it really, to expect that people coming straight from prison should have any hope for the future?' To me, the answer to this question depends on our efforts to expand our knowledge of assisted desistance, and the attempt to implement our findings.

Kontaktoplysninger

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