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The arts of desistance: assessing the role of arts-based programmes in reducing reoffending

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The Arts of Desistance

Assessing the Role of Arts-based Programmes in Reducing Reoffending

Over recent decades, practitioner-run programmes based on the arts have expanded within criminal justice systems across various jurisdictions in the Western world and beyond. The expressed aim of such programmes has increasingly been to promote desistance from crime. Research that is meant to evaluate the effectiveness of arts-based interventions has undergone growth as well. Yet the growth in evaluation research has largely followed, rather than predated, the expansion of programming as such. It appears, therefore, that neither the scale nor the precise scope and mechanics of arts-based initiatives to facilitate desistance from crime have been determined by findings from evaluation research, despite political and criminal justice authorities' proclaimed allegiance to evidence-based policy-making and practice. Although it would be misleading to conclude from this that arts programmes necessarily fail to promote desistance from crime, questions concerning their actual effectiveness are left open. The aim of this article is to explore two key issues in this regard: how, and the degree to which, desistance from crime can be facilitated through practitioner-run programmes that are based on the arts, the latter spanning the visual, design, performing, media, musical and literary genres.

There is growing appreciation in pertinent scholarship that arts-based programmes are unlikely to lead to desistance by themselves, and that their respective contributions to desistance take indirect forms (see, e.g., Hughes 2005; Miles and Clark 2006; Cheliotis, 2010; Cox and Gelsthorpe 2012). These indirect contributions are partly captured by the concept of 'secondary desistance', which refers to changes in self-perception that function to challenge and disrupt prior offending behavior, itself termed 'primary desistance' (see further Maruna and Farrall 2004). The concept of 'secondary desistance', however, can be extended to incorporate an array of other ways in which arts-based programmes may indirectly contribute to desistance from crime, from motivating participants to take up basic literacy education that they may lack, to equipping them with vocational skills, to helping them improve their social skills and make amends with their families and communities (see, e.g., McNeill *et al.* 2011). 'Secondary desistance', in other words, may be said to involve any 'soft' conditions whose emergence may in turn assist in the production of the 'hard' outcome of abstinence from crime.¹

The main goal of this article is to offer a critical review of the empirical research literature on the 'secondary' or 'soft' contributions arts-based programmes may make to the process of desistance from crime. Albeit not fully exhaustive,² the review reveals a substantial amount of hitherto missed evidence. We begin by focusing on evaluations of arts-based programmes run by practitioners inside prisons,

¹ It is plausible that changes in self-perception may occur and enhance the likelihood of desistance even when they are not explicitly intended as such. The point here is to extend our understanding of how 'secondary desistance' can be achieved beyond attempts that are exclusively or primarily focused on identity.

² A useful database of research evaluations of the effectiveness of arts-based programmes in the field of criminal justice, including some studies not reviewed in this article for reasons of space, has been developed in the UK by the Arts Alliance and is available online at: <http://www.artsevidence.org.uk>.

and their effects in terms of three sets of developments that, according to previous literature reviews on this topic (e.g., Hughes 2005; Johnson 2008; Djurichkovich 2011), are thought to advance ‘primary desistance’: psychological and attitudinal changes; increased learning capacity and motivations; and social skills building. Our review then proceeds to address the effects of arts-based prison programmes after participants’ release into the community; a theme that has received very limited research attention to date, and even less attention in extant literature reviews. In the next section of the article, we briefly discuss for illustrative purposes our own evaluation of an arts-based programme that is aimed at prolonging and enhancing ‘secondary desistance’ through providing ex-prisoners with opportunities to continue engaging with the arts after release. We conclude with a few short remarks as to the lessons that can be drawn from this article for the design of arts-based programmes in the field of criminal justice.

Psychological and Attitudinal Changes

It has been suggested that participation in artistic projects in general, and the process of creating artistic products in particular, can serve a transformative function for prisoners, acting as a ‘catalyst’ for positive psychological and attitudinal changes.³ This function assumes particular significance when one considers that rates of psychological conditions (e.g., depression) and associated problems (e.g., self-harm) amongst prisoners have repeatedly been found to exceed the respective rates reported for the general population (see, e.g., Fazel and Baillargeon 2010).

Research has credited positive results both to therapeutic interventions involving a professionally trained therapist using arts to generate insights for diagnostic purposes or treatment, and to programmes run by professional artists without any special training in dealing with at-risk populations. These positive results include a range of benefits for prisoners’ psychological and physical well-being whilst in custody: enhanced self-esteem, a greater sense of achievement, empowerment, higher levels of self-efficacy (i.e., a greater belief in one’s capacity to organise and execute courses of action directed at particular outcomes, increased internal locus of control (i.e., a greater feeling of control over one’s environment), reduced levels of depression, reduced levels of anger, and a lower risk of self-harm.⁴ An important yet often overlooked caveat here is that the effectiveness of arts-in-prisons programmes may well vary with their duration, longer programmes being more likely to deliver their intended outcomes (see, e.g., Ezell and Levy 2003).

³ See, e.g., Ezell and Levy (2003); Williams (2004); Hughes (2005); Smeijsters and Cleven (2006); Argue, Bennett and Gussak (2009).

⁴ Regarding self-esteem, see Brewster (1983); Kennedy (1998); Dawes (1999); The Unit for the Arts and Offenders (1999); Miles and Clark (2006); Wilson and Logan (2006); Cheliotis (2008); Cox and Gelsthorpe (2008). Regarding sense of achievement, see Dawes (1999); The Unit for the Arts and Offenders (1999); Ezell and Levy (2003); Lazzari, Amundson and Jackson (2005). Regarding empowerment, see Digard and Liebling (2012). Regarding self-efficacy, see Brewster (1983); Kennedy (1998); Lazzari, Amundson and Jackson (2005); Cox and Gelsthorpe (2008); De Viggiani, Macintosh and Lang (2010); Harkins *et al.* (2011). Regarding internal locus of control, see Gussak (2009); Cox and Gelsthorpe (2012). Regarding levels of depression, see The Unit for the Arts and Offenders (1999); Gussak (2006, 2007, 2009). Regarding levels of anger, see Reiss *et al.* (1998); Blacker, Watson and Beech (2008); Breiner *et al.* (2011). Regarding risk of self-harm, see Goddard (2004); Wilson and Logan (2006); Nugent and Loucks (2011); Digard and Liebling (2012).

As such, arts-in-prisons programmes have been further associated with ‘primary desistance’ from crime. It has been found, for example, that art therapy can support ‘primary desistance’ by inciting introspection, confrontation with one’s offending, and communication of hitherto suppressed cognitive and emotional states. This is especially the case with art therapy interventions that utilise non-verbal forms of artistic expression (e.g., painting, music). The opportunities afforded to participants for non-verbal expression can help remove the conscious and unconscious defences they might otherwise employ in relation to their past offending conduct and the harm thereby inflicted upon others.⁵ It has similarly been found that by enhancing self-efficacy, arts-in-prisons programmes help offenders explore and develop pro-social identities and positive relationships with others by exercising responsible choice (Lazzari, Amundson and Jackson 2005; see also Harkins *et al.* 2011). Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that arts-based programmes can contribute to the process of ‘primary desistance’ by enhancing prisoners’ internal locus of control and, within this context, encouraging them to take responsibility of their past criminal behaviour (Gussak 2009).

Learning Capacity and Motivation

As is well known, learning difficulties and educational deficiencies are particularly prevalent amongst prisoner populations (see, e.g., Prison Reform Trust 2012; NCES 2003). Against this background, arts-based programmes have commonly been employed to improve prisoners’ overall learning capacity and motivation.

It has been found, for instance, that participation in arts-in-prisons schemes helps to develop general skills such as listening, an ability for experiential learning with an emphasis on searching for solutions to real issues, self-confidence in terms of educational achievement, and a positive attitude towards learning as such. This, in turn, facilitates not just further engagement in arts-related activities, but also successful participation in other, more ‘traditional’ programmes that are focused on literacy and numeracy skills.⁶ Indeed, there is some evidence that participants in arts-based prison schemes perform better than non-participants on mainstream educational prison programmes (Duguid 2000).

Research suggests that the capacity of arts-based programmes to deliver these benefits inside prisons is largely due to the immediate learning environment that they cultivate and in which they operate; an environment that is democratic (Duguid 2000; Tett *et al.* 2012), supportive (Williams 2004; Miles and Clark 2006; Lazzari, Amundson and Jackson 2005) and attentive to emotions (Digard and Liebling 2012). More specifically, unlike conventional forms of prison education (and unlike the prison institution itself, for that matter), arts-based programmes promote constant dialogue between participants, create a platform for the provision of constructive criticism to each one of them, and enable self-reflection and emotional openness.

⁵ See Daveson and Edwards (2001); Gussak (2004, 2012); Smeijsters and Cleven (2006); Johnson (2008); also Gerber (1994); Williams (2004); Meekums and Daniel (2011); O’Grady (2011).

⁶ Regarding development of general skills, see Cox and Geslthorpe (2012). Regarding ability for experiential learning, see Ezell and Levy (2003). Regarding self-confidence and a positive attitude towards learning as such see McNeill *et al.* (2011); Tett *et al.* (2012). Regarding participation in programmes focused on literacy and numeracy skills, see The Unit for the Arts and Offenders (1999); Hughes (2005); Miles and Clark (2006); Wilson and Logan (2006); Johnson (2008); McNeill *et al.* (2011); Nugent and Loucks (2011).

Arts-based programmes may be said to promote ‘secondary desistance’ insofar as they enhance prisoners’ commitment to learning in contravention of previously internalised identities (McNeill *et al.* 2011; Tett *et al.* 2012). To the extent that by boosting prisoners’ learning capacity and motivation arts-based programmes also facilitate engagement in other schemes that directly address prisoners’ needs in terms of literacy and numeracy, they arguably make a further ‘secondary’ contribution to desistance from crime (Hughes 2005). This is because learning difficulties and educational deficiencies are significant predictors of reoffending (Duguid 2000). Not dissimilarly, arts-based programmes have been credited with advancing desistance by way of providing prisoners with concrete vocational skills (Ezell and Levy 2003; Harkins *et al.* 2011) and inspiring a positive outlook as to one’s vocational success upon release (Ezell and Levy 2003; ITT 2004; Goddard 2005; Lazzari, Amundson and Jackson 2005; Cox and Gelsthorpe 2008; De Viggiani, Macintosh and Lang 2010). Particularly as concerns the acquisition of vocational skills, it has repeatedly been found to constitute a crucial step towards securing and maintaining regular employment after release, itself a strong predictor of ‘primary desistance’ from crime (Uggen, Wakefield and Western 2005).

Building Social Skills

Participation in arts-in-prisons schemes can help prisoners learn or develop social skills. This is especially so when arts-based schemes entail teamwork (Gussak 2004; Argue, Bennett and Gussak 2009).

Research has shown that participation in arts-in-prisons schemes can increase individual prisoners’ capacity to communicate effectively with other participants, to socialise within the prison, to exercise empathy towards fellow participants and other prisoners, and to collaborate with others in the context of groups. It has also been demonstrated that teamwork can contribute to the development of self-regulation and a spirit of reconciliation amongst participants, even as initial stages may be fraught with disagreement and conflict.⁷

All these effects, and particularly empathy, self-regulation and reconciliatory attitude, can be said to contribute towards ‘primary desistance’ from crime, given research that associates them with lower rates of recidivism (see, e.g., Ross and Ross 1995; Day 2009). Another aspect of various arts-based programmes that may indirectly contribute to ‘primary desistance’ are prisoners’ public performances and exhibitions (Ezell and Levy 2003; Lazzari, Amundson and Jackson 2005; Johnson 2008; Tett *et al.* 2012), whether within the prison (see, e.g., Moller 2004; Goddard 2005; Tett *et al.* 2012) or in community settings (ITT 2004). On one hand, such activities have been found to encourage prisoners to reassess the way in which they view themselves, in the sense of growing to feel more confident and optimistic about

⁷ Regarding communication with other participants, see Dawes (1999); Ezell and Levy (2003). Regarding socialisation within the prison, see Dawes (1999); The Unit for the Arts and Offenders (1999); Gussak (2004); Goddard (2005); Lazzari, Amundson and Jackson (2005); De Viggiani, Macintosh and Lang (2010). Regarding empathy towards fellow participants and other prisoners, see Tett *et al.* (2012). Regarding collaboration with others in the context of groups, see Dawes (1999); The Unit for the Arts and Offenders (1999); ITT (2004); Moller (2004); Miles and Clark (2006); Wilson and Logan (2006); Digard and Liebling (2012); also Harkins *et al.* (2011). Regarding self-regulation and a spirit of reconciliation amongst participants, see Digard and Liebling (2012); also Dawes (1999); Goddard (2005); Nugent and Loucks (2011); Grant and Crossan (2012).

life after release (ITT 2004; Tett *et al.* 2012). On the other hand, public performances and exhibitions have been shown to have a positive effect on how prisoners are perceived by their families and the broader community, the latter feeling reassured that prisoner artists are undergoing ‘behavioural change’ (Dawes 1999) and preparing themselves constructively for release (Tett *et al.* 2012; see also Brewster 1983; Cheliotis 2008; Boswell, Poland and Moseley 2011). The ways in which prisoners perceive themselves and their future are crucial to the process of desistance (Laub, Nagin and Sampson 1998; Maruna 2001), as are the ways in which prisoners are perceived by their families and broader communities (Maruna and LeBel 2002).

Limitations of studies

Albeit to varying degrees, there are some important limitations to the studies reviewed so far. To begin with, evaluation studies of arts-in-prisons programmes often fail to provide sufficient and sufficiently detailed information on crucial methodological issues; for instance, the composition of samples, how data were gathered, how they were analysed, and how programme effects were established. Lack of such information makes it difficult to assess both the validity of causal inferences and the generalisability of findings.

Turning to more specific issues, although evaluations of arts-based programmes no longer merely rely on anecdotal evidence (indeed, an increasing number of studies have sought to combine qualitative and quantitative techniques), they still tend to be focused on overly small samples of participants, which precludes the generalisation of findings to broader populations. Sampling processes are also frequently plagued by selection bias (due, for example, to screening by prison staff or self-selection), which inevitably weakens causal inferences. Perhaps most notably, the use of control groups is exceedingly rare (the most notable exception being Gussak’s series of studies in the US), and quasi-experimental designs incorporating both pre- and post-test measurements remain infrequent. When post-test measurements are undertaken, moreover, attrition rates are usually high. Again, these are all significant threats to the validity of causal inferences (for pertinent discussions see Hughes 2005; Miles and Clark 2006; Daykin *et al.* forthcoming).

At any rate, post-test measurements are usually only taken upon completion of the programme under evaluation, or shortly thereafter. A comparatively small number of studies have attempted to follow-up prisoner participants and ascertain whether, and the degree to which, programme effects have been sustained over longer periods. These studies have generally concluded that participation in arts-in-prisons programmes may have lasting positive effects for prisoners, ranging from increased self-esteem and confidence, to reduced levels of anger and risk of self-harm, to enhanced learning motivation, to improved levels of tolerance of others and a greater capacity to work in teams (see further Kennedy 1998; Reiss *et al.* 1998; Dawes 1999; Goddard 2005; Cox and Gelsthorpe 2008; Anderson and Overy 2010; Boswell, Poland and Moseley 2011; compare Miles and Clark 2006; Digard and Liebling 2012). Whether or not these long-term positive effects can be attributed to the programmes evaluated is debatable, however, given that the evaluations in question either did not employ a control group, or, in any case, did not avoid other methodological pitfalls such as small sample size, selection bias and/or sample attrition.

Effects after release from prison

Even less research has been conducted on the effects of arts-in-prisons programmes beyond the period of imprisonment. Despite ever-growing scholarly interest in desistance from crime after release from custody, there is very little information on the impact, if any, that arts-in-prisons programmes may have on participants when they are discharged from prison and faced with the multifarious challenges of re-entry into the community (on which see, e.g., Travis and Visser 2005). What is more, the few available studies on the post-release effectiveness of arts-in-prisons programmes have been focused on 'primary desistance', as measured through officially recorded recidivism rates, rather than on 'secondary desistance'. Both the paucity of pertinent research and the preoccupation of what research there is with officially recorded recidivism rates may be due to limited funding, the long duration of sentences served by participants, or the difficulty of tracking them down once they are released.

Our searches identified three locatable studies on the post-release effectiveness of arts-in-prisons programmes. They all employed a control group, and concluded that participation in arts-in-prisons programmes is associated with lower rates of recidivism. The first study was conducted in California in the 1980s, and found that the rate of reconviction was notably lower amongst a randomly selected sample of 177 parolees who participated in an arts-based prison programme for at least six months, as compared to the reconviction rate for all parolees in the state of California during the same period. Measurements were taken at three different points (i.e., six, twelve and twenty-four months after release), and the discrepancy in terms of reconviction rates between the experimental and the control group was shown to have grown wider over time (California Department of Corrections 1987; see also Brewster 1983).

In the second study, conducted in the mid-1990s in Washington DC, the rate of recidivism was found to be lower six months after release amongst 24 juveniles who took part in short (e.g., two-week) arts workshops whilst in prison, as compared to the six-month recidivism rate for all juvenile prisoners released across the state of Washington in 1992 (none of whom participated in the workshops in question). In this study, recidivism was defined as commission of a criminal offence for which there was a conviction, even if conviction actually occurred after the six-month period (Ezell and Levy 2003).

The third and most thorough study was part of a major follow-up evaluation in Canada with 654 male juvenile and adult former prisoners of varying risk levels who participated in a university-operated liberal arts degree programme whilst in custody between the early 1970s and early 1990s. This study singled out for scrutiny a group of 'worst cases', comprised of 119 individuals belonging to the two highest risk categories. Of those, 29 also took part in theatre projects that run alongside the education programme. For both theatre project participants and non-participants, the study used as benchmarks predicted scores of recidivism within three years of release, recidivism having been operationalised as reincarceration for a new indictable offence. It was found that the rate at which theatre project participants had improved on their predicted reincarceration scores three years after release was nearly three times as high the rate at which the non-theatre subsample had improved on theirs.

Two factors, likely interrelated to one another, which appear to have played a crucial mediating role between participation in theatre projects and a greater degree of improvement on predicted recidivism scores are higher academic achievement on the prison education programme and increased participation in post-release education. On one hand, as concerns the group of ‘worst cases’ as a whole, those men who reached higher levels of academic achievement and were formally involved in the prison education programme at a higher rate were more likely to go on to some kind of post-release education, itself bearing a strong association with greater improvement on predicted recidivism scores. On the other hand, as concerns theatre project participants in particular, they outperformed the non-theatre subsample in terms of taking more courses, earning higher grades, and staying in the prison education programme for a longer time. But the links between academic achievement on the prison education programme, enrollment in post-release education, and improvement on predicted recidivism scores were not tested in the study with specific reference to theatre project participants (see further Duguid 2000).

Drawing again from the total study sample, the analysis also focused on a group of ‘hard cases’, consisting of 118 high school dropouts from broken homes, 30 of whom participated in theatre projects adjacent to the prison education programme. As with the ‘worst cases’, but to a lesser degree, the rate at which theatre project participants were found to have improved on their predicted reincarceration scores three years after release was higher than the rate at which the non-theatre subsample had improved on theirs (Duguid 1998). These positive effects, however, disappeared once the analysis extended beyond the ‘worst’ and ‘hard cases’, and rather drew from the total sample (i.e., from the 654 former prisoner-students of all risk levels) to reconstruct the two comparison groups of theatre project participants and non-participants, respectively. That is to say, there was no longer a notable distinction between the two groups in their improvement over predicted reincarceration scores; in fact, what little difference there was favoured non-participants (Duguid and Pawson 1998). This led to the conclusion that participation in theatre activities is particularly effective with higher-risk prisoners. But when the study reconstructed the two comparison groups from a subsample of 160 men under the age of thirty whose last conviction had been for robbery or breaking and entering, it was again non-participants, rather than participants, who were found to have achieved greater improvement on their predicted reincarceration scores (Duguid 2000).

Some notes of caution are due at this juncture. First of all, the number of the studies reviewed above is obviously too small for them to allow firm conclusions. They are also outdated, focused solely on North-American samples, and concerned with measures of recidivism that are neither fully comparable as such nor do they cover the same follow-up periods. It is therefore debatable whether, and to what extent, the reported effects of these studies would apply across different spans, populations or contexts. To varying degrees, the problem is compounded by the lack of detailed information on key background characteristics of the units surveyed (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, family status, employment history, number of prior convictions, security level). Lack of such information may also pertain to insufficient attention to programme implementation procedures, which leaves open the question of an underlying bias in the selection of participants. Any observed outcomes, in other words, may well reflect pre-existing differences between the experimental and control groups, rather than the actual effectiveness of the programme under evaluation. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of information on pertinent methodological matters

such as sample matching and statistical controls for pre-existing differences between study groups (the Canadian study tries to deal with selection bias through the use of a recidivism prediction device based on such variables as marital status, type of conviction offence, and age at first offence), or, indeed, on measures of effect size and statistical significance.

The relationship between the arts-based prison programmes in question and recidivism reduction is made no less unclear by the absence of data on the immediate contribution of these programmes to ‘secondary desistance’ as this in turn specifically relates to actual levels of reoffending. What remains ambiguous, in other words, is the degree to which, and the ways in which, the ‘hard’ prospective outcome of abstinence from crime is mediated through the ‘soft’ conditions arts-based programmes are thought to generate during imprisonment; conditions which are themselves not always explored in adequate scope or depth. To complicate things further, such research would have had to disentangle the effects of arts-based prison programmes from the effects of developments in participants’ lives after their release from prison (including, for that matter, the effects of other programmes in which they may now be participating). Indeed, even if one were to grant that the arts-based prison programmes in question succeeded in creating or promoting ‘secondary’ conditions necessary for ‘primary’ desistance from crime, one could hardly ascertain whether these effects endured after release, and if so, for how long. In light of the nature, intensity, and persistence of challenges commonly faced by ex-prisoners upon release (in terms, for example, of employment and housing), it is doubtful whether such effects can last beyond the period of imprisonment without support in the community, including sustained programme provision.

In the remainder of this article, we briefly discuss our evaluation of an arts-based programme that is precisely aimed at prolonging and enhancing ‘secondary desistance’ through providing ex-prisoners with opportunities to continue engaging with the arts after release.

The project

The scheme in question is run in England and Wales by the Koestler Trust with funding from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The aim of the scheme, which has operated on a rolling basis since 2008, is ‘to innovate a model of arts input, shaped to the needs of individual offenders, that empowers them through the transition from prison to community’ (Koestler Trust 2011, p.6).

The target group of participants in the scheme consists of fifty offenders of either gender and all ethnicities and ages, although young offenders under the age of thirty are oversampled by design. At the time of their selection onto the scheme, participants must be either approaching release from prison or have been released within the last six months. Participants must be serving or have served a sentence of at least twelve months, and may be or have been imprisoned in any of the following institutions: adult prisons, Young Offender Institutions, Secure Units, and High Security Psychiatric Hospitals. All participants need to have previously won a Koestler award or awards during their incarceration, which is taken to indicate a strong likelihood of their continued engagement in arts activities in the community. Finally, all participants must have a minimum of support in the community (e.g., from family, friends, or social services).

The Koestler Trust recruits artists as volunteer mentors and trains them in collaboration with S.O.V.A. (Supporting Others through Volunteer Action). The mentors, some of whom are ex-offenders themselves, come from a variety of artistic

fields (e.g., creative writing, visual arts, music), and are matched to mentees according to a range of criteria, including specific area of artistic expertise. Participation in the scheme entails between seven and ten mentoring sessions with a trained mentor for up to twelve months following mentees' release from prison. For several mentees, their first session takes place in prison briefly before their final discharge. In the first session, mentors support mentees in setting realistic goals for themselves within the context of the scheme, for example visiting a specified number of arts exhibitions or preparing artwork for submission to a local art competition. Post-release mentoring sessions last up to half a day each, but generally around two hours, and take place at a mutually agreed meeting place such as a community centre or an arts venue. The content of sessions is planned by mentors and mentees in collaboration with one another, and mentors are given a small budget to pay for certain joint activities such as attending an exhibition or a theatre play. Mentors also perform an array of other tasks, from giving feedback on mentees' artistic creations and working with them on given exercises, to suggesting new sources of inspiration and introducing mentees to other local artists or groups (see further Koestler Trust 2011).

The evaluation

Commissioned and supported by the Koestler Trust, our evaluation of the mentoring scheme concerns both its implementation and effectiveness as the former influences the latter. To this end, we have employed methodological triangulation; that is, the use of different yet complementary research techniques to study the same questions with the aim of strengthening the validity of the data and improving their interpretation.

The evaluation involves direct observation of mentoring sessions and face-to-face interviews with mentees and their mentors, both separately and together, after the end of individual sessions. The aim is to observe and interview each mentee-mentor couple at least twice over the course of the scheme, usually after their first and last sessions (as mentioned earlier, first sessions at times take place in prison settings), so that the effects of the scheme can be better assessed. Interviews are detailed and focused on such themes as the process of the mentoring scheme and its perceived effects, but also any problems faced by mentees in their post-release lives, which helps to control for the impact of any interfering events (e.g., unexpected illness or death of a family member). Interviews are also flexible enough to allow room for further questions in response to what may be seen as significant replies. To avoid making mentees feel defensive, but rather with a view to assessing the effects of the scheme in view of the complexities of coping with life after release, interviews incorporate what is termed 'appreciative inquiry'. This is an inductive technique which 'seeks to supplement "problem-oriented" methodology with a search for "affirming" knowledge and positive imagery', involving conversation about peak experiences (Liebling, Elliott and Price 1999, p.75). The evaluation also includes collection and analysis of any pertinent documentation (e.g., completed mentor reports) in order to enrich the data from observations and interviews.

At the end of their first mentoring session, mentees are administered a self-completion questionnaire that measures such factors as their emotional well-being (e.g., self-esteem), achievement motivation, community ties, access to employment, and expectation that future difficulties with the law can be avoided. The aim is to compare these 'baseline' measurements with post-test data gathered through the same questionnaire upon completion of the scheme, but also six to nine months thereafter,

so as to evaluate the longer-term effects of the scheme. In the case of the last wave of post-test data collection, questionnaires are sent to, and returned by, mentees through pre-paid post. Finally, official recidivism data will also be gathered and analysed to assess the impact of the mentoring scheme on ‘primary desistance’ from crime as this relates to ‘secondary’ effects.

To further facilitate causal inference, the evaluation project also involves two control groups. The first is a group of prisoners who have no engagement with the arts, and the second a group of prisoners who have some active involvement in the arts (e.g., paint in their cells, as opposed to just listening to music), but have not been placed onto the mentoring scheme run by the Koestler Trust. The aim is for both groups to consist of prisoners approaching release. Control groups are administered self-completion questionnaires at two different stages: a pre-test questionnaire whilst they are still in prison, and a post-test questionnaire six to nine months thereafter, by which time a number of control group members have been released. To reduce attrition, control group members are offered a monetary incentive (£20) upon completion and return of the post-test questionnaire. Save for a few necessary adjustments, control group questionnaires are the same as those completed by mentees. The goal is to compare pre- and post-test measurements for control groups to the respective measurements taken for the group of mentees at the beginning of the mentoring scheme and upon its completion. It is anticipated that pre-testing will uncover the possible size and direction of any prior differences amongst the three groups, so that they can be controlled for during subsequent statistical analysis of survey data. Official recidivism data will also be collected for control groups and compared to the respective data concerning the group of mentees.

Both the mentoring scheme and our evaluation of it are now approaching their last stages. Below we outline some of our preliminary findings based only on the first twenty-six face-to-face interviews conducted with mentees. Our findings based on the rest of our fieldwork are not discussed in this article for reasons of space.

Preliminary findings

Mentees view the mentoring scheme as a positive framework of intervention in their post-release lives. They often treat their very inclusion in the scheme as evidence of continuing achievement and recognition, and as a sign of trust that they need to fulfill, which helps to increase their self-esteem and motivation for further accomplishments. Indeed, several mentees identify their previous success in annual Koestler Awards as the starting point of their participation in the scheme itself.

Further gains in terms of self-esteem and achievement motivation can be found once the mentoring scheme begins. Mentees report, for example, that they are helped to recognise and pursue personal abilities they either ignored or thought they did not possess (e.g., inventiveness). Some state that their continued engagement in arts activities has given them a purpose in life – ‘rather than feeling that one is just a cog in the wheel’, as one mentee put it–, and express their determination to remain involved, including by becoming arts tutors themselves. Such developments can signify a fundamental shift in the way in which mentees come to view themselves after release from prison. ‘Now’, one mentee explains, ‘I see myself as an artist as opposed to an offender.’

Mentees find it especially uplifting –indeed, ‘humanising’– that their previous involvement in crime is not brought up by mentors during sessions. Such discreetness, mentees argue, gives them back their individuality in that, by contrast with their

period of imprisonment and even their prior expectations of life after release, they are no longer treated as belonging to an undifferentiated category of ‘criminals’. Participation in the scheme may also afford mentees a sense of ‘redeemability’ in the eyes of their significant others and, on occasion, the broader public. Although involvement in crime is explicitly the issue here, mentees at least feel that their engagement in artistic endeavours signifies that they are well on their way to a life free of crime and associated problems. The various exhibitions organised throughout the UK by the Koestler Trust are viewed as offering an exceptional opportunity in this regard, with some mentees also expressing hopes that their artwork will attract the interest of employers.

As is so often the case with former prisoners, concerns about employment loom large in mentees’ lives. Indeed, a number of mentees have found it difficult to sustain systematic engagement with the arts, including their participation in the mentoring scheme, whilst actively looking for a job. Even when unemployment and job-seeking do not affect participation in the scheme as such, they may work to undercut positive effects the scheme might have otherwise had on mentees’ post-release lives (in terms, for example, of their self-esteem). For most mentees, however, participation in the scheme supplies a significant level of support in their efforts to secure employment.

Several mentees view the mentoring scheme as a platform for developing their artistic skills and thereby managing to turn art into a living, despite recognising the difficulties they would have to overcome in so doing. Others find this prospect unrealistic, and instead view the mentoring scheme as making an indirect, though no less important, contribution to their employment prospects. The focus here is on such psychological and practical gains as an increased sense of professionalism, greater confidence in job interviews, knowledge of how to draft pertinent documentation, and better time management skills. Some mentees also report that their inclusion and successful participation in the arts mentoring scheme has served the broader function of helping them appreciate their potential to additionally pursue training in cognate or other fields, or to volunteer to work with at-risk populations, thus building up a more ‘employable’ profile.

Similarly, mentees commonly believe that the mentoring scheme has a significant role to play in helping them to stay out of trouble, and especially crime, in their post-release lives. On one hand, mentees try to be realistic about their prospects, often making reference to criminogenic conditions that they may be facing (e.g., unemployment), without, however, denying individual responsibility for desistance from crime. On the other hand, mentees attribute a variety of indirect ‘protective’ functions to the mentoring scheme, from relieving boredom and frustration, to keeping one’s attention focused on creative endeavours, to inspiring openness and collaboration with others.

To a large extent, mentees credit the positive effects of the scheme to the mix of care and professionalism that is shown by their respective mentors. Alongside performing crucial complementary functions such as providing a ‘listening ear’ to mentees’ expressions of personal concerns, mentors also lend themselves as role models, both as artists and teachers. In the inherently interactional context of mentoring sessions, mentees welcome and learn from the discreet guidance and constructive criticism offered by mentors. Indeed, for several mentees, this is the first time in their lives that they are in contact with an authority that is neither oppressive nor condescending. It is no accident that the role of mentors has been described by

mentees in contradistinction to what are seen as the law enforcement duties of probation officers.

Concluding remarks

Research on the effectiveness of arts-based programmes suggests that they cannot alone lead to desistance from crime, nor can they make direct contributions to this end. What arts-based programmes can realistically do –and this is no small feat– is to help create conditions whose emergence in turn makes abstinence from crime more likely. For such effects to be able to endure, however, programme provision needs to be sustained, both within criminal justice settings and in the community. This is because the process of desistance is typically fraught with difficult and persistent challenges that can work to undermine the positive effects of arts-based interventions.

There follow at least two important implications for the design of arts-based programmes in the field of criminal justice. First, programmes should be assigned goals they can actually fulfill, which practically means privileging the ‘soft’ effects of ‘secondary desistance’ over the ‘hard’ outcome of recidivism reduction as such. And second, programmes should be planned in ways that facilitate success, including securing financial resources for their extension as necessary. Applying these straightforward principles amidst the current climate of obsession with crime control and financial restraint is not an easy task. Doing so, however, would be in accordance with the evidence-based rationale that purports to be driving criminal justice policy-making and practice.

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