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Radical hope and processes of becoming: Examining short-term prisoners’ imagined futures in England & Wales and Norway

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Abstract
Prisoners’ hopes for a life without suffering—without causing and experiencing harm—are embedded in practices of ethical becoming and ideas of transcendence. These hopes are somehow both more banal and complex than the literature on hope generally suggests; they emerge because of lack and are signs of despair, rather than realistic prospects or opportunities. Based on longitudinal interview data (N = 452) with short-term prisoners in Norway and England & Wales, this article shows how hope functions as an orientation through different phases of a prison sentence as well as post-release regardless of whether it materializes. With inspiration from Lear’s idea of ‘radical hope’, I describe prisoners’ hopes as a mode of living with more emphasis on where hope comes from rather than what it leads to, thus following recent prompts to distinguish between hopes derived from opportunities from deeper hopes grounded in despair. I outline prisoners’ pain upon entry into custody and show how their ‘ground projects’—the things without which they would not care to go on with their lives—become clear when they are taken away. In this conceptualization, short-term prisoners’ hopes are in many ways a manifestation of despair fused with ethical deliberations on what kind of person one wishes to become and to whom one owes something.

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Introduction

There is no hope without anxiety and no anxiety without hope.

(Ernest Bloch in Garcia, 2017: 111)

Deep hope is not an outcome achieved through the process: it is the process itself, the process of making the path.

(Seeds, 2021: 14)

Prior to her imprisonment, Molly led a meaningful and full life as a mother, and a committed partner. She had a job which gave her much joy and fulfilment. However, Molly’s world unravelled when she was raped as an adult whereafter she developed serious mental health issues. I met her on the female side of a prison soon after the beginning of her sentence, where she told me that her imprisonment had ‘stripped away’ everything that ‘makes me me’ except longing to play with her son, bake and cook, walk the dog and spend time with her family. By the time of our second interview before she was due to leave prison, she shared that she would have to participate in a ‘phased return home’ upon her release, due to concerns that her mental health issues might impact on the welfare of her youngest child. The authorities repeatedly told her that she needed to be hopeful and positive about her situation, but from Molly’s point of view, the phased return home was a serious obstacle to all the things that had kept her hopeful. The third time I interviewed Molly, three months after her release, she was still not allowed to live at home, nor was she allowed to see her son without being supervised by a professional. This meant that she had ‘not settled yet’. Despite this, she continued to speak about yearning to do ‘normal things’ with the same clarity and urgency as she had done when she was confined in her prison cell:

I want to walk to the shops, I want to, you know, walk the dog, I want to go to the field with my son with a football or a bat and ball or something, I want to do these things, I’ve got to do these … […] I just want to be a family person; I just want to do the house and make dinner and do family things.

Molly’s story serves to illustrate three key themes in this article: (1) prisoners’ hopes grow out of despair rather than opportunity; (2) prisoners’ hopes are connected with search for meaning; and (3) hope flows through ideas of transcendence, relationships and normality. I draw on interview data from a large, comparative project on penal policymaking and prisoners’ experiences where we conducted 452 in-depth interviews in three different stages of a prison sentence in 13 different prisons in England & Wales and Norway, as part of a longitudinal study of men and women’s experiences of entry into and release from prison. Prisoners were interviewed on three occasions: within the
first week of their entry into prison, a week prior to release and within three months post-release. During this longitudinal sub-study of entry into and exit from custody, I became very interested in people’s striving towards the good in life amidst uncertain circumstances, the persistence of hope and the similarities in prisoners’ conventional aspirations for stable employment, housing and meaningful relationships across two otherwise very different jurisdictions. My understanding and conceptualization of hope is inextricable with despair, meaning-making and relationship-building. This understanding is tied up with my interest in the habitual activities and everyday social relations which make up ‘ordinary’ ethics (Keane, 2017). Hence, I follow recent theorizations of the ‘everyday’ experience of moral and ethical life and aim to contribute to the growing literature which describes prison life and punishment more generally through a moral lens (see Ievins, forthcoming; Williams, 2017).

Until now, it has mostly been researchers of long-term imprisonment who have shown interest in the relationship between ethical selfhood, normativity and the right to hope (see Crewe et al., 2020; Jarman, 2020; Seeds, 2021; Vannier, 2016), whereas I wish to insert the hopes of short-term prisoners into this analytical landscape. The series of disruptions and stresses of life transitions caused by short-term imprisonment wear people down and each of the sentences come to represent tiny ‘moral breakdowns’ (Zigon, 2007), in which our interviewees questioned their lives and priorities. I argue that it is precisely imprisonment’s suspension of all things normal which makes people yearn for them. Radically hoping for very ordinary things tells us something about prisons and prisoners; the tragedy about prison being a space which both produces and inhibits these normative hopes and the fact that normality becomes a very difficult aspiration when life has already been far from the conventional. For some people, prisons provide ‘a stark and vivid social context for exploring the conditions that allow for quantum personality change’ (Maruna et al., 2006: 163). Hence, imprisonment can be seen as a ‘crisis of narrative’ (Maruna et al., 2006: 168) where the assumptions you had taken for granted about your life become disrupted, rendering your values very clear. Hope in the crux between imprisonment and post-release is therefore analytically promising, because it invites us to take seriously the space in between where people are relatively unable to act upon their hopes, but remain on the cusp of imagining a different future self.

This article examines where hope comes from, how it evolves throughout a prison sentence and remains post-release even when it is not actualized. The aim of the article, then, is to show how hope functions as an orientation through different phases of a prison sentence. Here, hope is understood as guiding values on the horizon, which are vague and fragile, yet persistent. My ideas unfold through five sections. In what follows, I will introduce ideas on the nature of hope, after which I utilize the concepts of ‘radical hope’ and ‘ground projects’ throughout an analysis of people’s hope in different interview stages. I end with a discussion on hope and the fragility of becoming and I conclude by arguing that ideas of transcendence are at the heart of hoping, and, as such, they need to be taken seriously.
The nature of hope

Hope has the capacity to animate a person’s ‘moral ambitions to do better and be better; it orients and shapes [his or her] autonomy’ (Brownlee, 2021: 597). We know that most people who have committed an offence hope and yearn to ‘make good’ (Maruna, 2001), lead conventional lives and that almost everyone stops offending eventually (Halsey et al., 2017; Harris, 2011; McNeill, 2018; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016; Shapland and Bottoms, 2011; Villman, 2021). However, the sociology of imprisonment recognizes both the potential benefits and tragedy of hoping. In the context of imprisonment, ‘hope begins with the loss of the structures upon which daily life was organized and that previously gave life meaning. Here, hope’s object and the means of reaching it are obscure’ (Seeds, 2021: 8, emphasis in original). Tragically, ‘prisons make room for “the right thing” being felt, and expressed, in “the wrong place”’ (Liebling, 2021: 108). In some cases, prisons can be sites of narrative and moral reconstruction, due to the ways in which they are threaded into life-courses of addiction, abuse and other outcomes of structural disadvantage (Crewe and Ievins, 2019), but it remains unclear whether this reconstruction can endure or lead to long-term changes in prisoners’ lives after release. As found by Liebling et al. (2019: 122) even a ‘visibly hope-based’, exceptionally well-performing prison can struggle to bridge institutional change with re-settlement into society.

The ambiguity of hope is also recognized by the desistance literature. The ‘right’ amount of hope is needed at the optimal time in the desistance process (Burnett and Maruna, 2004; Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), because while an insufficient amount of hope leads to fatalism, too much becomes daydreaming and escapism. Hence, hope is both conceptualized as a positive and clear ‘action component’ with behavioural implications for agents who ‘possess it’ (Simpson, 2004 in Farrall and Calverley, 2006: 193) while other types of hopes are seen as bordering on ‘overconfidence and brimmed with optimism’ (Maruna, 2001: 149), ‘fragile and pre-formatted’ (Crewe and Ievins, 2019: 582), ‘decoupled from the future and unburdened by plans’ (O’Donnell, 2014: 272 in Seeds, 2021: 13) and ‘formless and vague’ (Gälnander, 2020: 261).

Within and outside the sociology of imprisonment and desistance literature, hope is often framed as something that people either do or do not have, which renders it in a binary—hope or hopelessness—and leaves the concept’s complexity unexamined. Christopher Seeds (2021: 2) makes a highly compelling argument which ‘has not made its way into criminology’ for understanding hope as an active response to despair. He argues that ‘deep hope’ arises despite the absence of opportunity and in fact is spurred by the very lack of clear prospects while somehow maintaining a positive orientation towards the future. Lear (2006) calls this particular mode of being ‘radical hope’, which entails a commitment to the possibility that life may one day flourish again. However, this ‘new life’ is not always positive or able to offer any comfort. Rather, radical hope refers to the stark acknowledgement that, because of terrible circumstances, life has ceased to be as it once was but may nevertheless one day start again.

In a similar vein and drawing on Ernst Bloch’s magnus opus on hope, Angela García states that a contradictory dynamic exists within his conception of darkness, in the sense...
that it is what limits and threatens our existence that makes our hopes stir and expand. In other words, the darkness of the present moment is the very condition that might generate the possibility of moving beyond it (Garcia, 2017). Deep hope is essentially about meaning-making (Coulehan, 2011), which in our data involved finding a way of looking beyond the immediate struggles of confinement and life after prison. Short-term prisoners’ commitment to a ‘bare idea that something good will happen’ (Lear, 2006: 96), represents a picture of the moral that embraces unpredictability, fragility and oscillations between different selves. When short-term prisoners develop radical hope, they open their imagination to a radically different set of future possibilities. Imprisonment, seen as a liminal space in which radical hope might develop out of despair, provides not only a fruitful and dense analytical framework, but potentially opens up considerations of a hope for the future in the face of diminishing life chances (Garcia, 2014).

Methodology

This article draws on in-depth interviews ($N = 452$) conducted in 13 different prisons in England & Wales and Norway, as part of a longitudinal study of men and women’s experiences of entry into and release from prison. Although the study was comparative in nature, I show more similarities than differences among the experiences of prisoners in the two jurisdictions. Despite the otherwise remarkable differences in penal policies, practices and outcomes (see Crewe et al., forthcoming; Mjåland et al., 2021), interviewees’ ways of narrating hope were strikingly similar across otherwise radically different penal and socio-economic contexts. Prisoners were interviewed on three occasions: within the first week of their entry into prison, a week prior to release and within three months post-release. Altogether, we interviewed 271 prisoners in England & Wales and 181 prisoners in Norway. The number of interviews across the two countries at each interview stage was as follows: Phase 1 (entry): 156, Phase 2 (pre-release): 200, Phase 3 (post-release): 96 $=$ 452 interviews in total. Some of the interviewees are linked across all three phases; that is, we followed some people throughout Phases 1, 2 and 3, which was both a wonderful methodological opportunity and an excellent way of studying hope in ‘real time’, because we witnessed first-hand the ups and downs of interviewees’ journeys. However, the three-phase longitudinal research design was ambitious, and in England & Wales our attrition rate was high, around 50%, though it was lower in Norway. We lost contact with interviewees for a variety of reasons; some were simply unable to establish contact with due to a lack of permanent address or working phone-numbers; others did not wish to commit to another interview, while some were re-imprisoned by the time we had envisioned interviewing them outside. In relation to the latter group, we chose to conduct the follow-up interview in prison and asked questions about their post-release life prior to their new conviction/re-call into custody.

The selection of research participants was based on a combination of opportunistic and purposive sampling criteria (Gobo, 2007). In most prisons, a member of staff served as our contact person. In the prisons selected for the entry-exit study, the contact person often provided us with information about newly arrived or soon-to-be-released prisoners.
In most prisons we carried keys and moved around unescorted, and we therefore introduced ourselves and asked if they wanted to be interviewed. In the few prisons in which we did not carry keys, the contact person provided prisoners with an information letter about our research project and asked them to participate. In the prisons in which we did not have a contact person, we visited the wings and asked officers on duty if any of the prisoners had recently arrived or were approaching release. Interviews, lasting between one and three hours, were conducted in private rooms within the prisons and were recorded verbatim (those that were conducted in Norwegian were subsequently translated into English). All interviews were coded by the author and other members of the research project using NVivo software. We compared coding strategies regularly in order to assess intercoder reliability and we held weekly meetings to discuss emerging themes more generally. Interviews covered details of the whole sentence and the main analytical framework revolved around concepts developed to describe and understand the experience and texture of imprisonment (see Crewe, 2015). Our opening question in the Phase 1 (‘entry’) interviews (‘Can you begin by telling me about the thing in your life that you are most proud of?’ and ‘What kind of life were you leading before you came in?’) often prompted interviewees to reflect upon themselves, their past, present and future. Likewise, questions about spending time alone in their cell (‘Have you spent much time thinking about the person you are and wish to be?’) often yielded moral and relational self-reflection. The interview schedules for Phases 2 (‘pre-release’) and 3 (‘post-release’) explicitly asked people to talk about their ‘hopes for the future’. This question was in part pragmatic—we wanted to end the interview in a somewhat optimistic manner—but it often led to detailed descriptions of what sort of life interviewees imagined for themselves and the people they held dear.

Our interviewees’ socio-demographic backgrounds matched those with shorter sentences in general in both jurisdictions (see Revold, 2015 for Norway and Prison Reform Trust, 2019 for England & Wales). Most prisoners in our sample were serving sentences of less than two years and 53% had been in prison before. Indeed, almost half our sample (42.3%) had been imprisoned between 2–5 times and a quarter of our sample (24.4%) had been in prison more than 10 times prior to their interview. With regard to their educational levels, 10.4% had not completed any formal schooling whereas 19.1% had finished secondary school with no leaving certificate and 19.1% had a General Certificate of Secondary Education. A total of 22.6% reported having a problem with drugs upon entry, 11.8% had a problem with alcohol abuse and 12.8% had a problem with both. Since having a prior history of self-harm is a strong indicator of general vulnerability (Auty and Liebling, 2019), we asked interviewees to indicate whether they had self-harmed or attempted suicide prior to entering prison, to which 28.3% responded affirmatively.

One limitation of this article is a lack of focus on how racial and gender inequalities intersect in the specific analysis of radical hope. In relation to the latter, while other scholars have found that female prisoners differ from their male counterparts because their aspirations are more relational and intimate (Halsey et al., 2017), we did not find any gender differences of this kind. Gender did not seem to play a big part in the formation of radical hope; women and men essentially longed for the same normative ideals which revolved around significant others, doing the ‘right’ thing, and being independent.
While interviewees’ narratives in our entry interviews were often filled with despair, many pre-release interviews were filled with hopeful tales about ‘making it’ and assurances that this time it was ‘for real’. Subsequently, many told us of their struggles post-release, and how they had relapsed immediately (‘I was literally smoking [drugs] in the parking lot [of the prison]’ (Ella, EE3, EW)). Our interviewees’ narratives made it clear that we needed a more complex and open-ended understanding of hope, in order to capture the longitudinal ebbs and flows of hope, as well as the rather stark circumstances hope grew out of. Ironically, hope often materialized for our interviewees when their circumstances were otherwise quite hopeless. I explore how hope can be a reaction to despair and, as such, remains intimately tied to both conditions of grave disadvantage and visions of how to live (Lear, 2006: 105). Hence, the analysis below explores where our interviewees find hope, what it does for them and where this hope comes from rather than where it leads to. In what follows, I will outline prisoners’ despair and moral self-reflection upon entry and explain how they develop radical hopes.

**Radical hope**

*But is there anyone in here who gives you hope?*

Who gives me hope?

*Mmm.*

I don’t think prison is the right place to come for hope.

(Karl, EE1, Norway)

Entering prison—whether for the first time or one out of many—can lead to overwhelming emotions of despair (Liebling, 1992: 58). This initial phase of imprisonment where prisoners were formally inside, but constantly peering out in their thoughts provided some interviewees with a ‘clear-eyed perspective on their own priorities’ (Crewe and Ievins, 2019: 571). In these early days, prisoners imagined a radically different set of future possibilities, even if they simultaneously recognized that they were very difficult to obtain. Realizing what one had lost or never had in the first place could be painful; many participants were ‘thinking, thinking, thinking’ (Jenson, EE1, EW), often about what they ‘should have done better’ (Rasmus, EE1, Norway) and going ‘through every scenario in my head at least 10 times, past, present and future’ (Carlos, EE2, EW). Generally, many described how ‘there’s no recognition or hope [in prison]; it’s just getting by day to day. That’s all it is’ (Nathan, EE1, EW).

Prisoners’ hopes seemed to be partly about projecting themselves into the future, including visions of what they might become (Maruna et al., 2006: 181) or going back to a previous and ‘better’ version of oneself. Arild (EE2, Norway), for example, stated that: ‘when I don’t take drugs, I am more myself in a way’, thus expressing a hope for a drug-free future, where he would be better able to recognize and appreciate himself. These moral reflections sometimes revolved around shame from the offence which
some found ‘repulsive’ (Finn, EE1, Norway) or taking stock on yet another entry into a local prison where staff had seen them ‘grow up’ (Kirk, EE1, EW). Visions of future personhood often evolved into considerations of how the interviewees’ life interconnected with those of others relationally. Similar to Seed’s analysis of long-term imprisonment, I found that this imaginative and ‘narrative labour’ (Warr, 2020) was ‘not a reaffirmation of who one was, or a doubling down on beliefs one held before entering prison, but a reassessment of who one will be going forward’ (Seeds, 2021: 13, emphases in original). Hjalmar, for example, longed to be a person his family would ‘miss’ when he died (Hjalmar, EE1, Norway). Likewise, Joakim’s ethical deliberations were essentially about his relational commitments: ‘you want… people that love you, you want a good relationship with your family, a good relationship with friends, you want a good network around you’ (Joakim, EE1, Norway).

Although many prisoners felt despair and fatalism during the early stages of custody, this misery could provide a ‘window of opportunity’, through which ideas about hope and change might flow (Liebling, 1992: 96). The combination of space to contemplate on your life, relationships and actions and the misery caused by the prison sentence seemed to fuel something akin to radical or deep hope, characterized by ‘the mutual shadowing of collapse and possibility’ (Garcia, 2014: 59). These narratives of loss and hope represent the moral strivings of these prisoners living outside the norms of what is generally considered a virtuous life (Garcia, 2014: 54). By the second interview, with release in sight, these radical hopes came to represent our interviewees’ deepest commitments, the things that mattered the most to them.

**Hope prior to release**

Paradoxically, because of what they [prisons] make so rare (freedom, love, and dignity), they are uniquely amenable settings for locating the fundamental.

(Liebling, 2020: 85)

Our interviewees’ hopes for a life without suffering—without causing and experiencing harm—were embedded in practices of ethical becoming and they spoke with passion and clarity about ‘things that matter’ (Liebling, 2020: 86). Their ‘moral strivings’ (Das, 2010) were often explicitly ‘normal’ or conventional. Hence, when we asked people shortly before their release what kind of person they wanted to be, their answers were full of references to (relational) responsibility, financial independence and housing stability (see Bottoms and Shapland, 2014). Many dreamt of being ‘a normal bloody every dayer’ (Tathan, EE2, EW) and wanted ‘just to become an ordinary man’ (Reidar, EE2, Norway). Kirk’s story is illustrative because he jokingly noted in the first interview that ‘every time’ he had been released, he had thought he would change. By the second interview, he was more earnest in this desire to change, and described how his values had developed to be ‘all about the family, to be honest with you. I just want a normal life. [pause] Become a productive member of society, rather than a drain on resources. Give something back’ (Kirk, EE2, EW). Kirk expressed a need for generativity (see Erikson and Erikson, 1981), a desire to make a positive mark on the world. Benedicte and Holly’s narratives were also very typical:
I only hope that my life will be normal, like everyone else’s. To have my own house, and a job and my own family for the rest of my life. I’m not hoping for more than that.

(Benedicte, EE2, Norway)

To get my own place, get married and get my children living back with me, yeah.

(Holly, EE2, EW)

These hopes centre around prisoners’ ‘ground projects’, which are ‘the kinds of commitments that people find so deep to who they are that they might not care to go on with their lives without them, or would not know themselves if they no longer had them’ (Mattingly, 2014: 32). These aspirations shed light on the types of legacies prisoners wished to leave behind, what kind of people they strove to be and what type of future life they envisioned. Ground projects often involved children and parenthood more broadly. Since there was little opportunity to ‘be a dad in prison’, Dennis imagined a future self, which would allow him to be a role model for his daughter:

The reason why I’m not coming back to jail is because of my daughter, my daughter needs a dad […] I can’t be a dad in prison, how can I be a dad in prison? But she needs someone to be there, a role model for her, to support her, to speak to her, to guide her.

(Dennis, EE2, EW)

Hjalmar wished to take up a different kind of fatherhood and ‘be a person that they want to come to. A person they can come to for advice and guidance […]. I’ve aimed to become a better man and a better dad to them’ (Hjalmar, EE2, Norway). Similarly, Austin (EE2, EW) hoped to ‘try and be there more for my children. Be a better father, better husband if you like.’ Imogen (EE2, EW) imagined herself enjoying ‘playing with my son, putting him to bed, giving him a cuddle’ and felt that she would ‘appreciate life on the outside, appreciate my mum and my family more than I ever did before’. Maarif (EE2, EW) had contemplated what sort of legacy he would leave as a father: ‘I don’t want my daughter to remember this as her only thing of her dad. When someone says, “What did your dad used to do?” or whatever, it’s like, “Oh well he was in jail for 27 years.”’

Ground projects also included significant others, such as prisoners’ parents and partners, who sometimes became a main source of hope and ethical striving. Many younger prisoners felt like they had ‘grown up’ (Comfort, 2012) during their sentence, and used imprisonment to reflect on their life possibilities, which made them realize ‘how important family are in a situation like this […] Before I came to prison I was more interested in going out with my mates and going on the piss every weekend’ (Reuben, EE2, EW). Joey (EE2, EW) believed that he ‘just need[s] to meet the right person, settle down, and not come back’. Others longed to reunite with their partners, from whom they had become separated: ‘the biggest hope is just to get back together with my wife, really, that’s all I’m hoping for’ (Arthur, EE2, EW). Similarly, Isaac (EE2, EW) explained how the
prospect of being reunited with his girlfriend gave him ‘a greater perspective on my future to come, let’s put it that way. It has given me more hope. There is something after this; there is a life after this.’ However, interviewees’ relationships with significant others had often been or became fragile and volatile, hence many spent time thinking about how to make amends and forge new bonds with family. This was the case for Tord, who had spent his sentence writing letters of appreciation to his mother:

*It might be a bit painful and hard for you, but do you feel it’s a good thing?*

I think they are grateful that I write these things to them. I think so anyway.

*You haven’t had any letters back?*

No.

(Tord, EE2, Norway)

Tord’s missing letters show the tragedy of his radical hopes, as well as ‘the fragility of the web of meaning’ (Maruna et al., 2006: 169) he had taken for granted before his imprisonment. Imprisonment further weakens vulnerable bonds with friends and family (Liebling and Maruna, 2005). This loneliness plus a sense of fatalism was like a handmaiden to radical hopes in the sense that prisoners often foresaw that their lives would be difficult upon release. There was a sort of dual consciousness, or two different stories (see Mattingly, 2014) at play in their narratives; they hoped their future aspirations would come to fruition, but they also had a real awareness that these hopes would probably not amount to very much.

For example, although some interviewees were brimming with optimism prior to their release, their narratives often oscillated between hope and fatalism. This was the case for Arfinn (EE2, Norway) who, in his pre-release interview, said ‘it’s almost certain that I’m easily going to make it this time. I’ve never been this sure before.’ At his third-stage, post-release interview, however, his narrative was fatalistic in hindsight: ‘I had different plans; not taking drugs again. Then again, I probably planned to take drugs again.’ Despite hoping for change, Dylan (EE2, EW) was equally fatalistic when we asked him where he saw himself within the next couple of months: ‘By March, you’ll see me back in jail.’ This fatalistic view of their chances of ‘making it’ post-release was sometimes exacerbated by the cynicism of prison staff, as in Maarif’s (EE2, EW) experience: ‘even the day of my release, it’s not like, “See you later, good luck, I hope you do really well.” It’s like, “We’ll see you soon.”’ Similarly, Charlotte had experienced staff saying:

‘see you in a couple of weeks’, because they know you’re going to be back. [pause] If the prison staff don’t even have faith that you’re going to stay out, how are you supposed to have faith in yourself that you’re going to stay out?

(Charlotte, EE3, EW)
Charlotte had been imprisoned numerous times and her post-release interview occurred in prison when she was back on another sentence. This time, Charlotte reported, it felt ‘different’:

I don’t want to keep coming back. And last time I knew that I was going to come back, but this time I don’t want it. My son is in secondary school now. I don’t want this life anymore. I don’t want to be on drugs anymore. [pause] And I’m hoping this time I’ve got enough time to get the help I need.

(Charlotte, EE3, EW)

Charlotte’s hopes had not been a ‘staging ground for action’ (Appadurai, 1996: 7) when she was released from her last sentence, yet she remained radically hopeful. By considering short-term prisoners’ radical hopes over time and during repeated stints of short-term imprisonment, it becomes clear that their moral strivings are shaped by the exigencies of everyday life. These pressure points—addiction, homelessness, mental illness and incarceration—are not opposed to morality; rather they hold it as well (Garcia, 2014: 52). Morality is manifest in and through these radical hopes, but the fragility and tragedy of these hopes—the fact that radically hoping for something is not enough—became painfully clear when we conducted the final interviews.

**Hope outside prison**

As the desistance literature generally suggests (Halsey et al., 2017; Nugent and Schinkel, 2016), life after release proved very difficult for many interviewees, who continued to feel like life was ‘on hold’ (Elijah, EE3, EW). Due to serious and persistent inequality and instability, as well as all the ways in which a prison sentence ‘sticks’ with people both metaphorically (Crewe, 2015) and specifically in terms of difficulties of finding housing, employment and staying sober, many interviewees did not shift from radically hoping to do normal things to actually doing them. Indeed, it was striking that people’s hopes after their release were similar in content to those they had held prior to release. This shows how deeply held they were, but also that they had not come to fruition—they had not been ‘ticked off the list’, but they remained on the horizon as radical aspirations.

Creating and sustaining change is rarely a linear, straightforward process (Liebling et al., 2019: 111), but for these individuals, radical hopes were prevented from taking shape by both the lingering effect of imprisonment and the lives they had led prior to their imprisonment, to which they had returned. Schielke (2009: 26) argues that, when we try to understand moral subjectivity and ethical striving, there is a risk of ‘favouring the complete, the consistent, and the perfect in a way that does not do justice to the complex and often contradictory nature of everyday experience’. Emergent personhood is fraught with obstacles and there is always the possibility of mistakes, unintended consequences, moral failure or moral tragedy (Mattingly, 2013: 306). Madelen’s story is an excellent example of moral tragedy, because imprisonment made her realize what she was missing from her life, but after her release she was not able to actualize this:
The last four or five months in prison I had these ambitions of making everything right and how I was going to do it. I had all these plans, but when I got out it all seemed very hard to put into action. When you are inside you kind of see everything you don’t have, but when you get out, your ambitions are not that high anymore. I mean my goal is to live a substance free life. That’s my aim, but it’s very up and down. I was really just looking forward to getting out, but it turned out a bit different to what I had imagined.

(Madelen, EE3, Norway)

Bella’s story is also a good example of the tragic fact that, while imprisonment provides space for radical hopes to develop, in reality a conviction makes those hopes harder to meet. We interviewed Bella three times; in the first interview she self-reported having 60 prior convictions and told the story of how she once ‘actually got released on a Monday, got nicked on the Tuesday and was back on the Wednesday’. She reported lingering feelings of being a prisoner of her circumstances (see Crewe and Ievins, 2019) and being ‘marked by prison, and I feel like I have to defend myself or sort of make myself equal, or I’m not as equal, always catching up on something’. She explained:

I do feel like… I suppose constantly like a prisoner, a prisoner of my head, a prisoner of my mum’s house, a prisoner of my addiction, a prisoner of this mental health, a prisoner of going to prison, I am always faced with brick walls.

(Bella, EE3, EW)

Bella longed to be reunited with her children, but in practice she found reconnecting with them very difficult, due to long periods of separation following periods of her instability and intermittent care. She said ‘in my heart I knew that I hadn’t seen [children’s names] for four years, and although I really was wanting to see them and getting involved and sending letters, you can’t just jump in and out of children’s lives’ (Bella, EE3, EW). Recognizing a feeling of being behind before she started, Bella (EE3, EW) imagined herself in a future, which was just within grasp, but which she still doubted would be on the cards for her:

I see myself living just outside of [city], or around here. […] I see myself in a little accommodation, not far from my mum, with my boys visiting me. That’s all I want out of life, and to be able to cook a meal every day.

Bella narrated a conception of happiness, of a life worth living, wherein she would be close to her sons and her mother, but this life remained on the horizon. Bella’s life situation was very difficult and blighted by mental health issues, poverty and inequality, but it was striking that interviewees who had more resources were also often unable to live as they hoped to post-release and thus they also continued to talk about their hopes of a normal life as something on the horizon. For example, Luca (EE3, EW) was in a fortunate financial and occupational position upon his release, but he still spoke of an aspiration for normality, due to his licence conditions:
All we [Luca and his wife] aspire to be is just a professional young-ish couple that can plan to go walking next weekend on the Lake District [...], or just that sort of normality, where we’re looking forward to a pizza and a glass of wine on a Friday night. You know? As simple as that, it really is. I don’t aspire to be anything more than that, really.

Similarly, Igor had a successful resettlement process, in which he had assistance in finding employment and suitable accommodation in the city he wished to live. Still, he felt lonely and asked rhetorically ‘how much help can you get to find new friends? Some things you have to sort out for yourself’ (EE3, Norway). The ‘pains of desistance’ (Nugent and Schinkel, 2016: 572) include feelings of loneliness and isolation, which easily feed into a feeling of general hopelessness. For Arild (EE3, Norway), loneliness post-release began at the prison gate, where ‘there has never been anyone there to pick me up and greet me’. He wanted to change his life, but he had realized that ‘the consequences of the life I have led will last a lot longer than the sentences I served’, implying that he could not expect his family to be there for him. Others felt like the world was alien to them:

Obviously it’s not that I miss the crime, or I miss the theft, it’s the fact that it’s a new area for me, to be a normal productive member of society, and it’s scary. Even though it’s normal, but I have to do baby steps. Do you understand what I mean by that?

Yes, but can you tell me a bit more about that? What does that mean in your everyday life?

I can feel a bit lost I know what the norm is, but because I’ve never done it before it feels strange.

(Harry, EE3, EW)

Radical hopes grow out of feelings of despair, of feeling a ‘bit lost’ in the world. In Harry’s case above, it makes sense to conceptualize his hopes as an orientation rather than a means to an end, a state of being rather than a goal. Recognizing the differences between hope as something tangible and energizing versus hope as something rooted in distress and embedded in a distant aspiration grants the opportunity to examine hope in all its complexity. Taking people’s hopes seriously allows us to consider what they mean throughout a sentence and post-release and what this may tell us about prisons and prisoners more generally. Although radical hopes may not amount to very much, they continue to shape people’s experiences of prison and life post-release and, as such, they deserve analytical attention.

**Hope and the fragility of becoming**

The hopes of short-term prisoners with many previous convictions and lives fraught with deprivation should be seen more as an orientation than an end goal, carving out space for growth to be ongoing and continuously ‘unfinished’ (Biehl and Locke, 2017: 226). What matters about hope, then, is not just whether what is hoped for materializes or not, but what the hope itself might tell us about life as it is experienced and imagined. I argue
that—although hope as an ability to imagine that life could be different is crucial—hope is not necessarily a positive ‘thing’ you have or are given, but rather a reaction to conditions of suffering where life as you knew it, or had envisioned it, has ceased to make sense (Lear, 2006). In other words, hope does not always take shape from specific opportunities, but presents itself in a search for meaning and as anchors to hold on to in a new reality. Hopes of becoming a better father, husband, wife or daughter are thus constants which feature on the horizon and seem to become clearest when they are furthest away.

Understanding hope as open-ended allows for an analysis of people’s capacities to endure and live through suffering as well as their imaginations of the open-ended ‘worlds and characters that do not—but may yet—exist’ (Biehl and Locke, 2017: 9). This perspective lends an ethnographic frame for thinking about the characteristics, complexity and stakes of being hopeful and aspiring to ‘make good’ (Maruna, 2001), especially under extremely difficult circumstances (Garcia, 2014: 53). I understand deep or radical hope as a ‘mode of living’ and a commitment to the possibility that life will someday be meaningful even without the promise of a redemptive future. This understanding provides a framework for interpreting short-term prisoners’ imaginations of possible, ‘better’ futures even when they seem very unlikely. What makes short-term prisoners’ hopes radical is their sheer normality and even banality, which grows from conditions of suffering. Our interviewees suffered from ‘cumulative disadvantage’ (Gålønder, 2020: 258), were often marginalized and led lives fraught with inequality, poverty and crime. Yet they developed radical and deep hope in prison. The depth and radicalism of their hopes emerged from, and was articulated through, the exigencies of everyday life (Garcia, 2014: 52); in other words, their misery upon entry into custody led them to hope for radially normative and conventional lives. In the anthropology of becoming, it is precisely this darkness of the present that drives visions of something else that could be, creating ‘flashes of hope’ (Garcia, 2017: 114), which matter regardless of whether they ever amount to very much.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, I would like to return to Molly’s story. Molly’s situation in prison was fairly desperate, yet her hopes seemed to grow precisely out of the darkness of her current situation. Imprisonment shone a light on all the people and things that were most important to her and hence she remained hopeful despite the fact that imprisonment had stripped away most of everything she treasured. Molly’s elaborate plans for cooking, baking and household activities such as playing board games represented the essence of ‘normality’, family life and belonging. Her hopes, which seemed far away from her reality at the time, seemed to connect her with the people and the virtues that mattered deeply to her which infused meaning into her imprisonment which otherwise felt to Molly like a circumstance of total collapse. Beginning with Molly’s story, I have argued that prisoners’ hopes should be understood and conceptualized as anchors or morning stars on the horizon rather than specific opportunities, prospects or indeed outcomes. Besides making a case for taking short-term prisoners’ hopes seriously, I have also problematized a depiction of (everyday) ethics as discrete events that require stand-alone decisions within a brief time frame and with a choice between clear options. Hence, I have followed
Keane’s (2017: 20) definition of ethics as ‘the question of how one should live and what kind of person one should be’, and shown how people contemplate exactly that upon entering, doing and moving on from a prison sentence.

Hope remained surprisingly—amazingly—constant throughout what could be characterized as fairly hopeless situations, which means that hope is not the end result of specific chances or a particular mode of thinking; hope is action and meaning-making itself. Hopes are essentially ideas of transcendence and betterment (Cave, 2021), and people imagining that what currently is does not need to be. Thus prisoners’ hopes can be understood as anchored in everyday ethics and rooted in moral self-reflection. Our interviewees’ hopes were most of all deeply relational and spurred on by reflections on ethical selfhood and imagining different becomings. As such our interviewees longed to reunite with their families or create new ones, be the version of a parent they longed to be, obtain and maintain steady employment, as well as contribute to society in general. An overarching hope was to be a good person despite all the challenges and misfortunes behind and ahead of them. Radical hopefulness therefore presents a picture of the moral that embraces its own vulnerability and unpredictability (Garcia, 2014: 59) by holding both misery and hope.

Many desistance studies report that people often want to ‘make good’ (Maruna, 2001), quit crime and lead ‘normal’ lives (Shapland and Bottoms, 2011: 262), but the way we understand and imagine our past and future—and the change in between—affects what futures seem possible and likely (Ugelvik, 2021). Since desistance requires a developing sense of what the future will hold and how this will be realized, prisons play an important part in shaping what can even be imagined. Prisons and their staff need to recognize radical hopes for something good to happen and create a climate which fosters and supports moral becoming. As argued by Alison Liebling (2021: 110), we can be made—or destroyed—by other people. There are always possibilities for transformation and growth in prisons, but these are shaped mostly by interpersonal encounters, which emphasizes the importance of being believed, and being seen as an emergent person. While transformative climates are a rarity in prison (see Auty and Liebling, 2019) a few have been identified in England & Wales and Norway (see Liebling et al., 2019; Ugelvik, 2021). These prisons have been coined as ‘reinventive’ because they ‘allow positive forms of moral reflection and change, without the normal harms of punitive sequestration’ (Crewe and Ievins, 2019: 583). Hence, prisons can create ‘exceptional moments—where hope, mutual recognition and agency are co-created’ (Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2021), but this requires a recognition of a person’s capacity for moral choice (Ashworth and Zedner, 2019) and their right to hope (Vannier, 2016) even in dire circumstances.

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**Notes**

1. All names in this article are pseudonyms and the codes that follow them (such as Michael, EE1, EW) refer to interview stage followed by country.
2. This sub-study is part of a large research-programme comparing penal policy-making and the prisoner experience in England & Wales and Norway, see [https://www.compen.crim.cam.ac.uk/](https://www.compen.crim.cam.ac.uk/). The research-programme has been through several ethics approval processes both on an international and institutional level, covering such matters as Informed Consent, Data Protection, Safe Storage of Data, Ethical Research Conduct, etc.
3. In this context, short-term imprisonment is defined as less than two years due to mainly practical reasons; we would not be able to follow interviewees longitudinally if they had long-term sentences.
4. We included more interviewees in the second phase of interviewing due to anticipated high attrition rates and because we wanted to include slightly different types of prisons and hence interviewees who had longer sentences.
5. I am grateful for this suggestion made by one of the journal editors. The knowledge of being released into a racialized world as a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) prisoner and the impact of their distinct experiences of prison as racialized individuals are obviously important issues which should be given future thought in the context of hope.

**References**


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