Narratives of Transgression: The life stories of creative writing practitioners at work in the prison

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One of the central questions posed by this panel is , How can human beings flourish through the arts in prisons?", to which I have a somewhat surprising response. Professional creative artists in prison have been represented in two conflicting ways.

Corruption v Transformation

- Narratives of corruption and distraction - art as detrimental (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008: 40–53).
- Practitioners - subversive, risky (Peaker and Vincent, 1990)
- '(N)arratives of transformation, in which the arts change lives' (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008: 4)
- Increasingly used by arts in prisons researchers and practitioners (e.g. Robertson, 2013; NCJAA, undated; Djurichkovic, 2011; ACE, 2018; Williams, 2003, p. 5, p. 236)
- Transformation and desistance (e.g. Anderson et al., 2011; Bilby et al, Hurry et al., 2014 Davey, Day and Balfour, 2015; Hill, 2015; McNeill et al., 2012)

On the one hand, the story of the arts is one of corruption. The arts are bad. This view is discernible in early research on UK prison arts conducted by Peaker and Vincent who found that creative practitioners were often seen by prison staff as subversive, a security risk or just a general nuisance to the smooth running of the regime.

This is contrasted with a narrative of the arts as 'transformative' . A position that has become somewhat ubiquitous in recent years and it is used by both creative practitioners and researchers to articulate the benefits of creative interventions in the context of evidence-based practice and the need to demonstrate successful outcomes. I am going to go on to argue, based on my research findings, that this transformative narrative, while helpful in many ways, does not fully get to grips with the complexity of the practitioners' role in arts interventions. That we may have to consider some of the negative, deviant, risky qualities of the arts and the artist in order to develop a better understanding of what's actually going on in those creative sessions.

First though, the narrative of transformation. This has often been framed in recent years using the language of desistance.

Desistance and the Arts

Most recent review by Cheliotis (2014) = Arts can contribute to desistance through:

- psychological and attitudinal changes
- learning capacity and motivation
- building social skills

Relationships have been highlighted in wider research as important to desistance (e.g. Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Leibrich, 1993; McIvor, Murray and Jamieson, Sampson and Laub, 1995;. Weaver, 2012, 2013, 2015, Weaver and McNeill, 2014, 2015; Weaver and weaver, 2016))

Reviewing the evaluation literature, Cheliotis found three key domains in which the arts may contribute to desistance; through measurable changes in psychology and attitude, learning capacity and motivation and through building social skills. However in all three of these categories there is a relational dynamic at work, which is also central to wider theories of desistance from crime.

And a number of researchers who study arts in criminal justice have picked up on this:

Relational Dimensions of Arts Interventions

- Relationships between prisoners (e.g. Anderson et al, 2011; Caulfield, 2015; De Viggiani et al., 2010)
- Prisoner/staff relationships (e.g. McKean, 2006; Nugent and Loucks, 2011; Wilson et al., 2008)
- Prisoner and family relationships (e.g. Kinsella and Woodall, 2016; Cox and Gelsthorpe, 2008; Boswell et al., 2011)
- Relationships between prisoners and practitioners (e.g. Bilby, Caulfield and Ridley. 2013; Cursley and Maruna, 2015; Albertson, 2015; Tomczak and Albertson, 2016)

Much of this work has focused on relationships between prisoners, between prisoners and staff and some other work has studied the relationships fostered between prisoners and their families in the context of creative arts interventions

More recently, a small number of studies have begun to look at the relationship between prisoners and the creative practitioner:

Practitioner/Prisoner Relationship

- Cursley and Maruna (2015) find success of long term music project is due to relationships participants form with practitioners
- Practitioners act as role models ((Van Maanen, 2010; Chelitos, 2014)
- Practitioners are seen as '"change agents" providing a catalyst for change through meaningful and empowering relationships' (O'Keefe and Albertson, 2012: 69)
- Practitioners are valued for their professional status and ability to set boundaries (Bilby et al, 2013)

Practitioners are seen as important mentors, as role models, as change agents and valued for their professional status.

However, there is tendency in these studies to concentrate on the offenders' views of the creative practitioner. Rather than consider the practitioners' perspective. Which neglects the fact that relationships are two way process. And it also reflects an increasing shift in the evaluation literature to sideline the voices of practitioners:

The 'real' stories of practitioners

- Research increasingly neglects the voice of the practitioner (Simpson, forthcoming), see especially Intermediate Outcomes Measurement Instrument (Maguire et al. 2019: 21)

- 'There is little research that describes what arts practitioners actually do in sessions and, more importantly, how they go about doing it.' (Anderson, 2015: 372) and even less on practitioners' lived experience ((O'Keefe and Albertson, 2012: 43)

- Small amount of anecdotal literature (Smith, 1989; Hopwood, 1999; Hadaway, Ward and Menhennet,1993; Flusfeder, 2004; Wade, 2008; Bidder, 2016; Thorn, 2012; Bridgeman, 2013; Gavron, 1996; WIPN, 2020a; Fulleylove, 1998)

In the UK this reaches its apotheosis in the decision not to include the views of practitioners in a government commissioned measurement tool aimed at evaluating the efficacy of arts and mentoring interventions.

Kirsten Anderson also notes the lack of knowledge on the interaction between practitioners and prisoners in creative sessions, and there's even less known, according to O'Keefe and Albertson about creative practitioners autobiographical accounts of how they end up working in prisons in the first place.

Although, there is a small amount of literature written by creative writing practitioners themselves, but this is generally dismissed as anecdotal.

Which is where my research comes in, combining the autobiographical narratives of practitioners with a rigorous narratological analysis aimed to address the requirements of evaluation. In truth, I wasn't initially concerned with the relational dimensions of practitioners' work in prisons (I was all about the art), however the stories I collected made me realise that these autobiographies had a lot to say about the the types of relationship they enabled between prisoners and practitioners, and the significance that might have for furthering our understanding of desistance.

Research Questions

- How do creative writing practitioners construct their intentions, motivations and journeys into prison through the stories they craft?

- What can these narratives tell us about the work that practitioners do with prisoners?

I wanted to understand the stories practitioners constructed about why they came to work in prison, what intentions and motivations they created? How would they tell their journeys to jail if given a chance to express themselves away from the evidence-base of evaluation research and strictures of funding bids?

And by asking this question, I wanted to better understand the significance of the work that practitioners do with prisoners. My methodology was fairly straight forward:

Methodology

- Taking story seriously on its own narrative terms

- 'Narrative criminology offers a constitutive view of narrative'' (Presser, 2009: 184)

- Moving away from oral narratives to deliberately crafted written stories

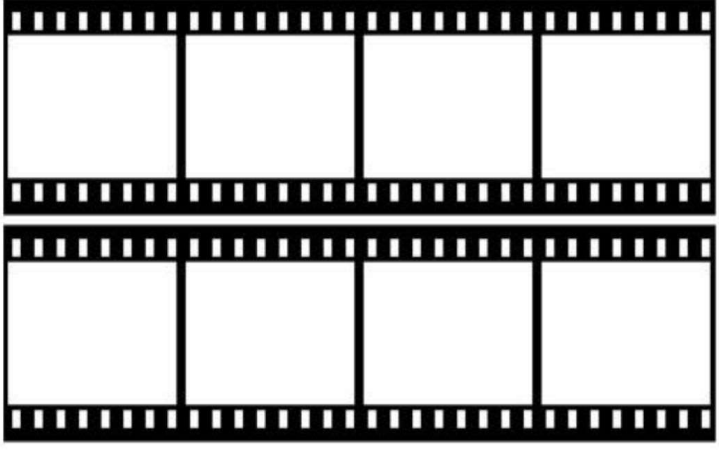- Less researcher interpretation more authentic practitioner voice

Firstly, I was determined that I would take story seriously on its own terms and for this, the work of narrative criminologists provided an excellent theoretical and epistemological resource, because in this approach stories don't just tell about things, they also 'do' things and shape or create things.

In order to privilege the stories of the practitioners over the researchers' interpretation, I wanted to move away from the interview as the most usual form of data collection and allow the practitioners the freedom to craft their own stories. This was particularly pertinent for creative writing practitioners for whom written text is a primary medium.

In order to collect the practitioner's stories I devised a creative data collection tool, which looks like this:

Data Collection Method: Eight-Frame Storyboard

- 19 creative writing practitioners with at least one year's experience in prison

- Participation in one of two creative writing workshops (9 or 10 members in each group)

It's what I've called an eight-frame storyboard technique. I gave this sheet to a total of 19 practitioners in one of two creative writing workshops and asked them to use it to write or draw their journey's into jail. The only rule was that the last frame, the eighth frame of the storyboard had to be them coming to prison for their first day. That was it, no other instructions were given in a bid to reduce the amount of influence the researcher had on the stories told

The resulting narratives were then analysed in two ways. I won't go into great detail here because this is really for the territory of narrative nerds, but:

Methods of Analysis

- **Narratology**
- Fabula analysis (Bal, 2009) - Identify the bare bones of the narrative


- **Literary Structuralism**

  Actantial Analysis (Greimas, 1966; Herbert, 2011 - Identify key narrative functions, including intention and motivation

The fabula analysis allowed me to identify the bare bones of the story - what was in it, in what sequence, involving which characters. It allowed me to map out the practitioners' journeys into jail as they had narrated them. This was followed by an actantial analysis based on a model by AJ Greimas, which allowed the identification of the key narrative functions of the stories, importantly including how the practitioners constructed their motivations and intentions,

6 Types of Alterity

Type of alterity	Art Itself	Anti-authority/ Protest	Reject status quo	Early institutional experience	Identify with/ help the other	Mental health
Number of participants	8	5	4	3	5	6

The first key finding to emerge from analysis of the fabula or bare bones of the stories was that in 16 out of 19 narratives, practitioners narrated events that demonstrated a sense of outsider status. For nine of the practitioners this involved multiple kinds of alterity.
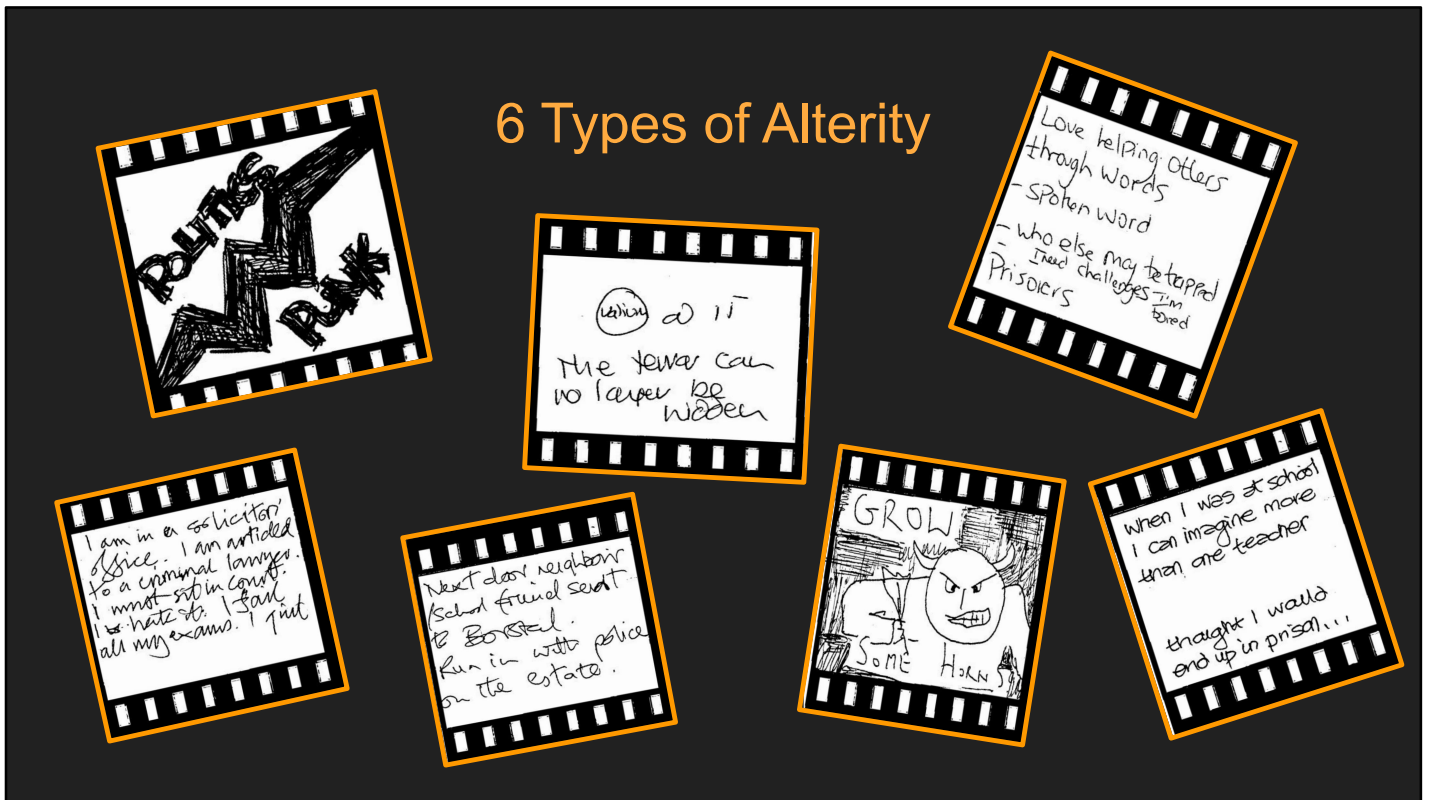
6 Types of Alterity

Art itself is the most common outsider experience constructed, represented by Ben describing how he grew horns as he battles his demonic creativity. Other practitioners construct events based on activism and protest (Punk and politics), while others rebel from inside the status quo (I am in a solicitors' office, I am articled to a criminal lawyer. I hate it. I fail all my exams. I quit). Others are made to feel their outsider status in their early experience of education or criminal justice agents. There are also incidents of mental ill health (Valium at 15. The terror can no longer be hidden) and some practitioners write about identifying with others' alterity (Love helping others through words… who else might be trapped?).

In summary, there is a sense of outsider status or alterity that runs through the majority of these narratives. But this doesn't necessarily or obviously lead to prison, certainly not to prison with a security pass and keys. This is where the actantial analysis came in because it enabled an understanding of how practitioners constructed their overarching ambition or aspiration, and the first big finding was, very few of them wanted to work in prison:

Practitioners' Ambitions

Ambition/Motivation	No. of Practitioners
Professional Creative Ambitions	3
Abstract Desire to Engage with Process and Practice of the Creative Arts	7
Non-Creative Professional Ambitions	2
Personal or Existential Aspirations	6
Not Amenable to Actantial Analysis	1
Total	19

Creative ambitions were the most common type of goal (n10 in total) however only in one case did this involve bringing creativity into the prison (counted here as a professional creative ambition). For the others, seven had an abstract desire to engage with their own creative arts practice, while just two had targeted professional writing ambitions. One to be a full time writer, the second to write a book. A further two practitioners framed career ambitions based on working in criminal justice but in capacities, which were not based on a creative role. One wanted to work in youth justice and a second as a prison tutor.

Meanwhile another six practitioners constructed more personal or existential aspirations all of which were concerned in some way with escaping from or rejecting previous states of being, personal circumstances or wider social normativity. Some of this rejection was politically focused, however in other cases the escape was more existential.

In terms of the 10 practitioners who had a creative ambition of some kind, three distinct patterns emerged in these narratives, which in turn fitted into wider cultural narratives concerning the arts.

Three Types of Narrative

Individual Narrative	Cultural Narrative (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008)
The Suffering Artist	The Arts as in Crisis and Beleaguerment
The (Inadvertent) Healer	The Arts as Therapeutic
The (Human) Revolutionary	The Arts as Transformative

The suffering artist narrative describes a narrative in which there is a passion to produce artwork in some way, despite ongoing obstacles in the form of poverty and/or emotional distress. This ties into a wider cultural narrative where the arts are presented as in crisis or beleaguerment. Four practitioners had narratives that predominantly featured the suffering artist. And in each case their entry into prison was related in some way to alleviating their own suffering with three practitioners presenting financial gain as the ultimate motivation for taking work in prisons.

A second narrative was that of the (inadvertent) healer. This emphasised the idea of the arts as therapeutic. However, the therapeutic value was primarily for themselves rather than the prisoners they worked with. In two cases their work with prisoners served to alleviate their own fairly severe mental ill health episodes.

The third narrative, which in cultural terms frames the arts as transformative is the one, as discussed at the beginning of this presentation, that is most often rehearsed by researchers and arts practitioners. Surprisingly, this is the story least narrated by these practitioners. In only two cases do practitioners fully articulate the kind of transformative process claimed by the arts. In these narratives there is a clear conviction that the arts have changed the practitioners lives, which results in a pledge to support prisoners to achieve the

same transformation.

So what does all this tell us? And in particular what might it suggest about the relationships that might form between prisoners and practitioners in the work they do in creative sessions? Firstly:

Practitioners' Significant Stories

- Practitioners are rarely interested in rehabilitating prisoners (n.16)

- Most practitioners don't want to be in prison (n.15)

- Majority of practitioners (n.11) have a desire to escape

- Over half of practitioners (n.9) resist authority

- Almost all practitioners (n.16) have a sense of an outsider status

I think it's fair to say that the transformational narrative that is so ubiquitous in the literature bears little relevance to the narratives constructed by these practitioners. As we saw, only two of the 18 practitioners were predominantly concerned with using creative practice to change or empower the prisoners they worked with. Even in cases where practitioners recognised the therapeutic benefits of creativity, they were more concerned with their own therapeutic gains. Ultimately few of these practitioners are interested in rehabilitating prisoners in the ways that the official narrative of transformation suggests.

This raises questions about the presence of creative practitioners inside the prison. And adds further question marks when we consider that most practitioners don't want to be in prison in the first place, a substantial number have a desire to escape, over half express a resistance to authority in some way and almost all of them feel like they are outsiders.

These practitioners seem to be a long way from the professional role models and changemakers described in the earlier studies we looked at. However, I want to argue it is these very attributes that make these practitioners so effective in the work they do with prisoners, and that this is built on what Gadd calls a relationship of recognition - I'll come back to this in a minute.

Just as with practitioners, most prisoners don't want to be in prison, they have a desire to escape (even if they don't actually attempt it), a proportion of them resist authority and they have a sense of outsider status.

What we begin to see here, I would suggest is that practitioners and prisoners have far more in common than is generally recognised. Not necessarily in terms of demographic backgrounds, although sometimes they do, but more in terms of sharing a sense of mutual understanding:

Shared Stories of Outsiders

- '(I)dentifcation facilitates change when people feel adequately recognized by another person whom they themselves are able to recognize as an external, sovereign other' (Gadd, 2006: 182).

- Creative practitioners (musicians) and offender (drug users) 'share the experience of being labelled as outsiders' (Becker, 1963)

- Becker (1963) notes creative practitioners' unwillingness to made force normal social conventions on others - which aligns with desistance principle of non-judgemental support in work with offenders (McNeill et al., 2012: p.4) and reciprocity as 'mutual helping' (Weaver and Weaver, 2016)

Gadd writes about this in terms of a sense of identification which facilitates change when people feel adequately recognized by another person whom they themselves are able to recognize as an external, sovereign other.

Becker (1963) has also made this link between creative practitioners (musicians) who contravene social rules and those who break the criminal law (drug users), and he observes that these two groups 'share the label and experience of being labelled as outsiders' (Becker, 1963, p. 10).

Building on this, Becker also noted that the outsider status ascribed to the musicians he wrote about and their reluctance to live by normal social conventions in turn meant they do not try to force those same conventions on others. This kind of permissive attitude, while perhaps anathema to the power hierarchies of prison regimes, aligns with key principles found in the desistance literature, which encourage non-judgemental support for offenders (McNeill et al., 2012, p. 4: HMI Probation, 2016), rather than trying to impose change upon them (Porporino 2010, p. 78 cited in Albertson, 2015, p. 277). It also aligns with Weaver and Weaver's calls for reciprocity in relationships between practitioners and those they interact with, which they describe as a kind of 'mutual helping' in which both party benefits.

So the things that appear to be the greatest weaknesses of creative practitioners, i.e. their status as outsiders, as rebels or misfits, or the fact that they're only in prison for the money, or to make themselves feel better, or for some other selfish motivation are actually their greatest strengths when it comes to supporting processes of desistance.

Because it offers a relationship based on recognition, in which work is done with prisoners rather than on them or to them, and both parties benefit from the exchange.

More research needs to be done to test the conclusions I arrive at.

Future Stories

- Need for authentic stories of practitioners to be included in research on the creative arts in prisons

- Research to include prisoners' authentic stories to better understand relationship dynamics

- Use of creative data collection methods to elicit these stories and narratological analysis as a rigour tool for anlaysis

At present, my research has only engaged with the authentic stories of practitioners (and we need more of these), however, the data on prisoners is taken from the wider literature. In order to confirm the presence of shared understanding between the two groups the same research process needs to be conducted with prisoners in order to elicit their authentic stories. I also suggest that the eight frame storyboard technique is particularly suitable to achieve this work and that narratological analysis can speak to the academic rigour required in order to get these stories, transgressive as they are, to be taken seriously on their own terms.