“The remarkable ability to find hope and meaning in even the bleakest of circumstances is one of humanity’s most astonishing gifts. In this eloquent analysis of post-traumatic growth among long-term prisoners, Kazemian explores the role of redemptive narratives in this crucial survival mechanism.”

Shadd Maruna, author of Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives

“Lila Kazemian’s fascinating book makes a crucial contribution to our fast-developing understanding of desistance and its complex relationship to imprisonment and reintegration. As she recognizes, social inequality and punishment exist in a dangerous, unjust and criminogenic symbiosis, yet Kazemian’s careful empirical work shows how and why some people in prison nonetheless find a way to develop and grow, even in the context of the profound adversities created both by long-term imprisonment and by challenging post-release environments and experiences. In so doing, this book provides an invaluable resource to students, scholars, practitioners and survivors of criminal justice.”

Fergus McNeill, Professor of Criminology and Social Work at the University of Glasgow

“Strangely, life course scholars have paid little attention to the life course of people living in prison. Now, with this brilliant volume that honors the humanity of its subjects, Lila Kazemian fills this gap in desistance literature. By showing that people can thrive and grow while living in horrific conditions, this wise and rigorous book is simultaneously a tribute to the power of the human spirit and an indictment of penal institutions. By her example, Kazemian invites scholars to bring their skills, theories and voices to join her in shining a spotlight into the black box of prisons. Advocates, researchers, journalists and anyone concerned about human rights should follow her lead.”

Jeremy Travis, Executive Vice President of Criminal Justice, Arnold Ventures; President Emeritus, John Jay College of Criminal Justice
Positive Growth and Redemption in Prison

Although the negative consequences of rising incarceration rates have been well-established, criminological research has largely neglected to document psychological, social, and behavioral changes that occur during periods of incarceration. Drawing on an original longitudinal study of long-term French prisoners, this book examines the process of desistance from crime and positive growth in prison. It offers reflections on how personal transformation can be achieved in prison, particularly among individuals serving long prison sentences.

This research investigates the barriers to achieving positive growth in prison, as well as the different ways in which transformation can occur behind bars. It also conceptualizes the process of abandoning crime in prison, and sheds light on the cognitive, social, and structural factors that may trigger, accelerate, or hamper this process. This book explores the circumstances under which individuals can thrive in prison, and identifies key features of the narratives of prisoners who have achieved positive growth. The research presented in this book also examines the intricacies of returning to society after a lengthy period of time in prison.

Written in a clear and accessible style, this book will be invaluable reading for those engaged in studies of criminology and criminal justice, sociology, criminal behavior, prisons, and penology. It is also aimed at a variety of audiences, including academics, practitioners, policy-makers, and prisoners.

Lila Kazemian is Associate Professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York. She is a graduate of Université de Montréal in Canada, and she earned her Ph.D. in criminology at the University of Cambridge. She joined the faculty of John Jay College in 2006 after completing a post-doctoral fellowship funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. She has published on the topics of desistance from crime, life-course and criminal career research, prisoner reentry, and comparative criminology. Her work has been published in Criminology & Public Policy, the Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, the Journal of Quantitative Criminology, Punishment & Society, the European Journal of Criminology, and the Journal of Interpersonal Violence.
International Series on Desistance and Rehabilitation

The International Series on Desistance and Rehabilitation aims to provide a forum for critical debate and discussion surrounding the topics of why people stop offending and how they can be more effectively reintegrated into the communities and societies from which they came. The books published in the series will be international in outlook, but tightly focused on the unique, specific contexts and processes associated with desistance, rehabilitation, and reform. Each book in the series will stand as an attempt to advance knowledge or theorizing about the topics at hand, rather than being merely an extended report of specific a research project. As such, it is anticipated that some of the books included in the series will be primarily theoretical, while others will be more tightly focused on the sorts of initiatives which could be employed to encourage desistance. It is not our intention that books published in the series be limited to the contemporary period, as good studies of desistance, rehabilitation and reform undertaken by historians of crime are also welcome. In terms of authorship, we would welcome excellent PhD work, as well as contributions from more established academics and research teams. Most books are expected to be monographs, but edited collections are also encouraged.

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Positive Growth and Redemption in Prison
Finding Light Behind Bars and Beyond

Lila Kazemian
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Series editor introduction

The *International Series on Desistance and Rehabilitation* aims to provide a forum for critical debate and discussion surrounding the topics of why people stop offending and how they can be more effectively reintegrated into the communities and societies from which they came. The books published in the series will be international in outlook, but tightly focused on the unique, specific contexts and processes associated with desistance, rehabilitation and reform. Each book in the series will stand as an attempt to advance knowledge or theorizing about the topics at hand, rather than being merely an extended report of specific a research project. As such, it is anticipated that some of the books included in the series will be primarily theoretical, while others will be more tightly focused on the sorts of initiatives which could be employed to encourage desistance. It is not our intention that books published in the series be limited to the contemporary period, as good studies of desistance, rehabilitation and reform undertaken by historians of crime are also welcome. In terms of authorship, we would welcome excellent PhD work, as well as contributions from more established academics and research teams. Most books are expected to be monographs, but edited collections are also encouraged.

Studies of desistance are still a patchy affair in many countries. While there are now studies of desistance in Spain, Germany, Sweden, Chile, Brazil, Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, the USA, and Israel (to mention just a few), researchers in some countries have yet to make contributions to the knowledge base on desistance. That picture is changing, of course, and I am delighted that this series has been able to contribute to that broadening of horizons. France, for many years, was one of those countries where little empirical work had been done on desistance until relatively recently. Suddenly, however, we have witnessed contributions from Marwan Mohammed and Valerian Benezeth (both of whom contributed to a recent collection of essays in this series titled *The Architecture of Desistance*). In addition to these studies now comes this contribution from Lila Kazemian. This study relates the experiences of almost 60 men in French prisons for crimes such as murder, rape, and terrorism. In fact, few studies of desistance chose to follow up prison samples, although there are, of course, some excellent studies by the likes of Ros Burnett. Encouragingly, Lila Kazemian finds that positive
growth can be achieved in prisons, although this is achieved in spite of the prison system rather than aided or promoted by it. Her study also contributes to our understanding of the ways in which ethnic identities shape processes of desistance in that Lila is able to explore the experiences and narratives of French people of North African origin (see studies by Martin Glynn and Adam Calverley in this series for examinations of some of England’s ethnic minorities). Lila’s careful and attentive use of her data and her presentation of it in cross-section and longitudinally make this an especially rewarding read. This is a very impressive piece of work, and, once again, I am delighted to see it published in this series.

Stephen Farrall,  
Sheffield,  
June 2019
Acknowledgments

The research presented in this book came to light as a result of the help and support of many individuals throughout my career. First, I am indebted to my mentors in the field, Professors Marc Le Blanc and David P. Farrington. Marc introduced me to the world of research, and provided me with first-hand experience and opportunities to conduct field research. David advised and supported me throughout the Ph.D. and beyond, and his intellectual curiosity has been truly contagious. For all the teachings and guidance, professional and otherwise, I am forever grateful.

The study in French prisons was made possible with the help of many individuals in France. In 2011, Professor François Dieu, former director of research at the École nationale d’administration pénitentiaire, invited me to spend two weeks at the school to visit various correctional facilities in the region. I was hospitably received by various members of the staff, including the director at the time, Mr. Philippe Astruc, and the deputy director, Mr. François Goetz. Mr. Goetz later went on to become director of a major correctional facility in the suburbs of Paris, which became the main site for the research presented in this book. He was enthusiastic and supportive throughout the project. Granting prison access to researchers requires a great deal of courage because it may, in Mr. Goetz’s words, open one up to criticism. I am very grateful to him for his open-mindedness, and his willingness to seek truths even when they may not be convenient.

I am also thankful to my colleague and friend, Dr. Marwan Mohammed, who hosted me at the Centre Maurice Halbwachs of the École normale supérieure during the first phase of data collection. Many others have provided indispensable support throughout the duration of this research project: Valérie Sagant, Julien Morel d’Arleux, Annie Kensey, Pierre-Victor Tournier, and all the prison directors who granted me access to their facilities for follow-up interviews. Thank you to Chloé Durand, who helped with the transcription of audio recordings and my research assistant, Michelle Lo. Financial support for the research was provided by the Research in Paris fellowship during the first phase of the study, and a PSC-CUNY award for the second phase of the project. This study could not have been carried out without the financial support of these agencies. Funding for this book was provided by the Faculty
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My family’s patience and understanding was crucial to the completion of this project. Thank you to my parents, siblings, and nieces for putting up with the missed or short visits, seven-day work weeks, and my preoccupied mind. A special thanks goes out to my brother Alzie for his invaluable assistance with research tasks. I have also been blessed with special friends, who have always expressed the perfect words of encouragement when I needed to hear them most: Alida, Ali G., Babiker, and Rana – thank you so much.

Writing this book has been a challenging endeavor on many levels. At times, the agonizing and heartbreaking stories that emerged from my conversations with the study participants became overwhelming even for me, the external observer. I was committed to accurately portraying their truth, but I was also inspired by the discourse of the men and did my best to follow their example by extracting the positive lessons from their painful experiences. In a sense, this reassured me that their suffering had not been in vain, and that their stories may help individuals who strive to grow in the face of adversity across the world. I have no words to express my gratitude to the 58 men who shared their intimate stories with me. I am indebted to them for their time, courage, insight, and willingness to be open and to express vulnerability. This is no small feat in an environment that is often not conducive to trust.
Introduction

“Why are you here, Lila? Is anyone in your family in prison?” Prisoners have asked me this question countless times over the years, in both American and French prisons. Why would someone willingly choose to spend time in a prison unless they had a personal stake in it? Friends and family who learned of my research interests often asked similar questions: why was I interested in the well-being of individuals who were locked up, presumably because they were too dangerous to be released?

For over 20 years, I have engaged in research with individuals involved in the criminal justice system in Canada, the UK, the United States, and France. With increased interactions with this population, it is easy to realize that any one of us could end up in prison under different life circumstances. Traumatic childhoods. Lack of access to the resources needed to cope with trauma. Exposure to persistent poverty and marginalization. These are only a few of the factors that create an uneven playing field, and that strongly influence who occupies our prisons cells. Regular exposure to prisoners has reminded me, perhaps paradoxically given our treatment of this population, of the fundamental goodness that exists within us all. Prisoners also remind us that if we can look beyond the harmful behaviors in which they/we have engaged and provide opportunities to thrive, there is potential for positive transformations within our prisons. The structure of our current prison systems does not generally promote a path to redemption, and we are not setting up our prisoners to thrive and to build a better life for themselves. Under the conditions as they stand, our prison systems are fundamentally flawed. The lessons drawn from my research aim to offer reflections on reforms and approaches that may make thriving in prison less anomalous, and more widespread. More importantly, this research offers insight for efforts to grow in the face of adversity, in prison as well as in any other challenging setting that is not inherently conducive to positive growth. The prisoners’ experiences in working to reduce (and eventually abandon) criminal behavior has relevance for anyone seeking to give up any other form of harmful behavior, towards oneself and/or others.

These are some of the core assumptions laid out in this book. This is a particularly important topic given the growing reliance on prison as a response to
Introduction

crime, and the increasing number of confined individuals across the world in the last decades. Imprisonment rates have generally been on the rise in most developed countries, though small declines have been noted in recent years (Walmsley, 2018). Although numerous studies have highlighted the negative consequences of rising incarceration rates, we know relatively little about the changes that occur during periods of incarceration. This is particularly true for individuals serving long prison sentences (i.e., ten or more consecutive years). This oversight is a result of the lack of comprehensive data on long-term prisoners. Past research has retrospectively documented various dimensions of prison life, but prospective longitudinal follow-ups of prisoners remain scarce. While we know that prison can be a highly stressful environment (Clemmer, 1958; Hassine, 2004; Johnson & Toch, 1982; National Research Council, 2014; Sykes, 1958), we still have much to learn about how prisoners change, grow or experience setbacks over the course of a prison sentence. Researchers have often assumed that crime stops during periods of incarceration and that it is irrelevant to study the process by which individuals abandon criminal behavior (otherwise known as desistance from crime) among prisoners. The fact remains that individuals undergo many changes in their lives, especially during lengthy periods of confinement, but our understanding of these changes remains limited.

The current research: the French Prison Study

The French Prison Study examines the experiences of long-term prisoners in France, during periods of incarceration and after release. The study was initiated in a prison in the suburbs of Paris in the spring of 2013. I conducted

![Figure 1.1](image_url) The black box of prison: what changes occur during periods of incarceration?
in-depth interviews with 58 long-term male prisoners. Participants were re-interviewed three years later, and interviews are ongoing upon release. Over the course of the follow-up period, some remained in the same facility, others were transferred to a different prison, some were released and remained in the community, and others were released and re-incarcerated.

Criminological research has taught us quite a bit about why individuals eventually abandon criminal behavior, but few studies have focused on studying this process among prisoners. In this book, I examine the individual, social and behavioral changes that unfold over long periods of incarceration in order to better understand the adjustment process and potential barriers to desistance from crime and to a successful eventual return to the community. I offer a conceptualization of desistance in prison, and explore the circumstances that may enable individuals to thrive in prison. Given that most research on desistance draws on samples of individuals in the community, it is unclear whether the body of knowledge on desistance from crime can be extended to prisoners. I also explore the ways in which prison prepares individuals for post-incarceration life, as well as the individual and social factors that may impact reintegration efforts after release from prison. The project ultimately aims to inform about effective practices regarding preparation for release, desistance from crime, and positive growth during periods of incarceration.

France is an interesting site for a prison study, for various reasons. As of early 2019, it had an overall incarceration rate of 104 prisoners per 100,000 population, compared with a rate of 337 per 100,000 population in Brazil, 172 in Australia, 148 in Scotland, 139 in England and Wales, 127 in Spain, 114 in Canada, 77 in Germany and Northern Ireland, 63 in Norway, 61 in the Netherlands, and 59 in Sweden (www.prisonstudies.org). While France does not have one of the highest imprisonment rates in the world, or even in Europe, this figure has been rising over the course of the past decades, like in many other nations (a 13 percent increase between 2005 and 2014; Direction de l’Administration Pénitentiaire, 2014; see also www.prisonstudies.org). France is not up to par with the progressive policies of Scandinavian prisons, which are geared towards rehabilitation and reintegration, but its incarceration rate places it at an approximate midpoint compared with its European counterparts. In addition, France has produced some of the most influential scholars in the fields of criminology and sociology, including Durkheim, Foucault, and Bourdieu, but we know relatively little about contemporary French criminology (Kazemian, 2015). Finally, like many other Western nations, France grapples with the consequences of a history of colonization and oppression, which can be extended to a wide range of developed nations.

Why should the experiences of prisoners in a cultural setting other than our own matter to us? First, the fight for the respect of basic human rights extends far beyond the geographical boundaries of our own country of residence or origin. The treatment of prisoners is a global human rights issue. Second, some comparative research has suggested that while prisoners may have
distinctive experiences in different cultural contexts, well-being outcomes tend to be similar across prison settings (Ross et al., 2008). This suggests that the pains of imprisonment converge across different prison environments. The current study illustrates that the commonalities of the prison experience transcend cultural settings. Social norms may vary across cultures, but there are many similarities in the experience of positive growth in the face of hardship. The study of prison experiences, regardless of the cultural context, provides valuable insight for our understanding of human suffering, and the possibility of thriving in adversity.

This book addresses two significant shortcomings of prior research. First, it examines the incarceration experiences of long-term prisoners, a group that has been largely overlooked in past research. The policies and programs targeting prisoners are seldom tailored to those serving long-term prison sentences and we know little about effective interventions, or even how to measure effectiveness, for this population. Second, few studies have documented the process of desistance from crime among prisoners during periods of incarceration. Most research that has examined the prison-desistance link has relied on post-release retrospective data. Given the paucity of prospective longitudinal studies of prisoners, the value of the findings drawn from this research extends far beyond France, or even Europe.

Jamieson and Grounds (2005) discussed some of the limitations of the literature on the effects of imprisonment, which are addressed in the current research. It employs a longitudinal design; part of the sample has been followed up after release from prison; efforts were invested to better capture different forms of distress; and the developmental framework was used to provide better context to broader life circumstances, before, during, and after prison. Importantly, because we know that most prisons across the world, in their current form, do not generally promote positive transformation, this research seeks to better understand the circumstances under which growth is possible in a challenging and repressive prison environment.

**Why should we care about long-term prisoners?**

In a previous publication (Kazemian & Travis, 2015), we discussed the crucial importance of paying attention to the experiences and needs of long-term prisoners. From a human rights perspective, it is simply the right thing to do. For a variety of reasons, long-term prisoners have been largely left out of conversations about effective strategies for desistance from crime and successful reintegration after prison, resulting in a form of double punishment and limited access to opportunities and incentives for positive growth. From a crime prevention standpoint, evidence suggests that long-term prisoners do not present a higher risk of reoffending (Weekes, 1995; Weisberg et al., 2011; Crayton, 2012). For instance, in a Dutch study, Snodgrass et al. (2011) found that when including relevant control variables, reoffending rates did
not differ between matched groups having served short and long sentences. When excluding controls, individuals who served longer sentences were less likely to reoffend. In addition, although limited in scope, available research has suggested that prison misconduct is less prevalent among long-term prisoners (Cunningham & Sorensen, 2006; Flanagan, 1979; Sorensen & Reidy, 2018).

Despite these findings, we continue to espouse the false myth that a violent offense equates a violent person. Being convicted of a violent crime is not necessarily indicative of a high risk of sustained violence (Gottschalk, 2014). Western (2018) reminds us to look beyond the stigma of violence. In the Boston Reentry Study, violence grew in the context of poverty:

Trying to divide the prison population into good people and bad, between violent and nonviolent, fundamentally misunderstands the nature of violence in poor family and neighborhood contexts. The division between the violent and the nonviolent is a moral distortion of a complex social environment in which victims, witnesses, participants, and offenders are often one and the same individuals who suffer harm from each part they play in episodes of violence.

(Western, 2018, p. 81)

This distorted view of violent offending may fuel the misconception that individuals who are convicted of serious crimes are irredeemable, which may explain the limited efforts invested in promoting positive growth among long-term prisoners. Because they will spend many years behind bars, long-term prisoners are important assets to the prison community and can become influential leaders in this environment. Given their prolonged presence in prison, these individuals are ideal candidates for positions of leadership and mentorship in this environment.

Can individuals thrive in prison?

The evidence on the negative and disruptive effects of incarceration is undeniable (Liebling & Maruna, 2005; Haney, 2003; National Research Council, 2014). Incarceration does little to reduce aggregate crime rates or individual-level reoffending, and exerts detrimental effects on mental health and psychological well-being, housing and employment outcomes, families, and communities (see Kazemian & Walker, 2019). Some scholars have expressed reservations about the possibility of thriving in prison. Comfort (2012) argued that in the face of extreme social disadvantage, accounts of positive change in prison do not reflect “narratives of thriving,” but rather a “forced choice” in which no viable alternatives are available:

Being in a place with uninterrupted time to think about one’s life and one’s future is a standard practice afforded to youth during their emerging
adulthood, some of whom enjoy the liberty of doing this on an island or mountaintop, and many of whom do so in the halls and on the campuses of academe. Were large batches of these high-resourced young people suddenly rerouted to the penitentiary, it is unlikely their ensuing stories would decree the correctional environment well suited to fostering personal development and growth.

(Comfort, 2012, p. 319)

Comfort accurately raises the issue of disparity in exposure to inequality and in access to resources and opportunities that may promote thriving. However, while human suffering is certainly intensified with exposure to persistent poverty and disadvantage, it cuts across social classes. In the current study, the narratives of study participants suggest that their anguish existed long before prison. In some cases, persistent poverty is the culprit; in other cases, exposure to serious trauma early in the life course results in overwhelming distress. As we work to reconceptualize our notion of the prison and reform the facilities that house those who have offended the law, it is important to better understand the conditions under which confinement can be humane and conducive to growth. Highlighting the negative dimensions of prison helps us to understand what not to do, but it does not inform our next steps in prison reform. We will never learn how to do things better if we only focus on highlighting ineffective and damaging practices.

We cannot deny the pains of long-term incarceration. Still, it is also important to identify the positive that can be extracted from otherwise difficult and painful experiences. In desistance research, we offer constant reminders that focusing solely on negative outcomes (i.e., recidivism) does not capture the full picture. The same applies to the study of the effects of imprisonment.

Definitions of key criminological terms

The research presented in this book offers insights for academic research, but also for policy, practice, and for those who are directly impacted by imprisonment. For audiences who are not familiar with criminological research, I would like to offer definitions of some of the key concepts that are most relevant to the work presented in this volume.

**Desistance from crime** is broadly defined as the process of abandoning offending (i.e., criminal) behavior.

The **desistance framework** is a theoretical paradigm that seek to explain the process leading up to the cessation of offending behavior.

A **desistance narrative** is a discourse that is associated with efforts to abandon harmful behaviors, including crime.

**Desisting individuals** are those who are engaging in a narrative of desistance.
Positive growth (or positive transformation or thriving) is defined as a series of cognitive and emotional changes that eventually result in less suffering and a reduced involvement in harmful behaviors (including crime).

Adversarial growth is a framework that highlights the positive changes that result from exposure to and recovery from trauma and hardship.

Recidivism (or reoffending) refers to an individual’s relapse into crime.

Agency refers to the idea that individuals are active participants in their life journey and in their decision-making.

The core arguments of the book

It is important to stress that even in the best of circumstances, prison causes harm. Upon release, the harmful effects of imprisonment persist. Because this study examines some of the constructive changes that may be experienced by individuals over long periods of incarceration, this should not be interpreted as a call for more people in prison, or longer prison sentences. In fact, individuals require an inordinate and unreasonable amount of drive and strength to thrive in the prison environment. Most of our current prison systems are not conducive to growth and positive change. However, some prisoners succeed in achieving beneficial transformations during long periods of confinement. Maruna (2017, p. 6) noted that “at the heart of desistance research is a very simple idea: people can change.” My interviews with the study participants have demonstrated that this is possible even in the least supportive and most harmful of environments. In this book, I lay out the following core arguments:

1. Crime, much like any other behavioral outcome, is not the problem. It is a visible symptom of a deeper issue.
2. The root cause of violence is deep internal suffering. The willful infliction of pain onto others cannot be dissociated from one’s own distress.
3. At various stages of the life course, individuals may turn harm inwards (self-harm) or outwards (violence, aggression, crime). The underlying cause is the same: deep suffering. As a society and as criminologists, we tend to be more concerned with the outward expression of pain, but both forms of harm stem from the same source.
4. Individuals who succeed in achieving transformation in prison have made the conscious decision to extract some positive outcome out of highly painful and traumatic experiences.
5. A reformed identity is important. However, the shift that matters most is not moving from a “criminal” to a “non-criminal” identity, but rather developing the belief that one is worthy of good things. We need to move away from a conceptualization of identity that relies so heavily on behavioral outcomes. Behaviors can be a poor indicator of desistance efforts, especially in the prison setting.
6. An excessive dependence on social relationships or other factors external to the individual provides a shaky foundation for stable, long-term change.
A prison environment that is too incompatible with the outside world can be detrimental in many ways. It provides justification to delay efforts to tackle the root causes of crime, and creates additional barriers to reintegration efforts after release.

Prison time can be used to promote desistance from crime but given the significant barriers inherent to this environment, positive growth is only possible with extraordinary motivation, determination, and resilience.

Ultimately, it is my view that we need fewer, and better, prisons. We need fewer prisons because we need to reduce our reliance on confinement. We need better prisons because as will be evidenced in this book, individuals who find themselves behind bars are not in need of any punishment beyond the deprivation of their liberties, but they are in desperate need of healing. Because the current study examines the individual-level processes that enable people to thrive in the face of adversity, there is always the risk of forgetting that we (“we” being academics, practitioners, policy-makers, government officials, and ordinary citizens) have a lot of work to do at the institutional and societal levels. While the burden of change is ultimately on the individual, creating social structures that enable such change is our responsibility.

This research aims to inform academics, policy-makers, practitioners and the general public about both the potential for positive growth and redemption in prison, and the enormous challenges that are associated with this process. This book is also intended for the men and women who find themselves in confinement in all parts of the world. We need drastic systemic change and ideological shifts, and we must reassess the way that we treat our prisoners. Until these changes occur on a large scale, we must do our best to provide those who find themselves behind prison bars with the tools to flourish and to create a meaningful life despite the seemingly impossible circumstances. The findings from this research extend far beyond the prison walls, and offer reflections on the human experience of thriving in the face of extreme adversity.

Variations in terminology across different cultural settings

The language employed by researchers and policy-makers varies across cultural settings. In the United States, Canada, and Australia, the terms “corrections” or “correctional” are commonly used. The term correctional (seldom used among European scholars) may be problematic in that it suggests that there is something fundamentally flawed within individuals who have offended the law, and that they require “correction.” Specifically, this terminology overlooks the structural causes of crime, and suggests that crime is a pathology that needs to be cured. In lieu of corrections, European scholars tend to refer to the “penal” or the “criminal justice” system. With regards to confinement, the terms “incarceration” and “imprisonment” appear to be
employed in a wide variety of cultural contexts, but the term “custodial” is more common among Europeans (Ruggiero & Ryan, 2013).

France has retained many features of the Pennsylvania penitentiary system of confinement, which originated at Eastern State in Philadelphia in the 1820s. This model favors isolation to promote introspection, reflection, repentance and ultimately, rehabilitation. In 1875, under the third French Republic, France adopted a law that ensured an individual cell for each prisoner. The architecture developed at the time was inspired by Bentham’s panopticon prison. It featured individual cells, and it put an end to shared meals among prisoners. Consistent with the Pennsylvania philosophy of punishment that aims to encourage penitence, French prisons continue isolate prisoners in their individual cell during mealtimes. While the individual cell model is not applied in French jails due to overcrowding issues, prisons in France only assign one prisoner to each cell. In line with these historical and philosophical features of French penal policy, France has retained the expression “penitentiary system.” This term will be used throughout this book to accurately reflect French penal philosophy.

In the French context, the process of returning to the community after a prison sentence is termed réinsertion (i.e., reinsertion). Conceptualizations of this process (and its challenges) tend to be similar across cultural settings, but the terminology varies in different parts of the world. American scholars and policy-makers employ the term “reentry,” coined by Jeremy Travis (2005), to refer to this process. The terms “reintegration” and “social reintegration” are frequently employed in North America, in Europe (e.g., United Kingdom and Spain), as well as in Australia and New Zealand. Some European scholars (e.g., Norway and Ireland) have referred to resettlement to capture the process of transitioning back to life on the outside after a period of imprisonment. Although language will inevitably vary, the findings from the current study highlight the fact that the prison and reintegration experiences share many similarities across different cultural settings.

**Outline of the book**

This chapter has laid out the rationale for the study, and described the core assumptions of this research. Chapter 2 offers a description of the French Prison Study, the research procedures, and a discussion of the cultural and historical intricacies that are relevant to the study of prisoners in France. Chapter 3 details the characteristics of the 58 study participants, with a focus on sociodemographic, social, behavioral outcomes, as well as victimization experiences. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the current state of knowledge on long-term incarceration, desistance from crime, and the process of desistance among prisoners more specifically. It also summarizes the theoretical assumptions of the desistance paradigm and its limitations. In Chapter 5, I lay out a framework to conceptualize the process of desistance and positive growth in prison. Research findings are presented in Chapters 6 through 9.
Chapter 6 examines the structural and individual barriers to desistance in the context of incarceration, and the various strategies developed to cope with long-term incarceration. The potential incompatibilities between adaptation to prison and post-release reintegration efforts are also discussed. Chapter 7 offers an overview of the different ways in which prison time can be used to achieve positive transformation. In Chapter 8, I present the distinctive features of a desistance narrative among prisoners. Chapter 9 investigates the challenges of life after prison, preparation for release, and the circumstances that are most conducive to a successful reintegration back into the community upon release. This chapter also presents a case description of three unique trajectories: a successful release, a release that has led to a return to prison, and the distinctive reintegration experience of an individual belonging to a socially marginalized group. Finally, Chapter 10 summarizes the findings of the study and offers reflections for academics, policy-makers, practitioners, and incarcerated men and women.

Note

1 Jails house individuals awaiting trial or a transfer to a correctional facility, and those serving short sentences. Prisons house people who have been convicted of custodial sentences in excess of two years.

References


The objectives of the research

This research study has four main objectives. First, it investigates the barriers to achieving positive growth in prison. Second, the study examines the adjustment process of long-term prisoners, and it seeks to better understand the changes that occur over the course of a long-term sentence. Third, the research conceptualizes the process of desistance in prison, and sheds light on the cognitive, social and structural factors that may trigger/accelerate/hamper the desistance process among long-term prisoners. Importantly, it explores the circumstances under which individuals can thrive in prison. Given that most research on desistance draws on samples of individuals in the community, it is unclear whether the body of knowledge on desistance is applicable to prisoners. Finally, drawing on detailed, prospective interview data, this study examines the ways in which prison prepares for release, and assesses individual and social factors that may impact reintegration efforts after release from prison.

Notes

1 Certain sections of this chapter were drawn from the following publication: Kazemian, L. (2015). Conducting prison research in a foreign setting. International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy, 4(1), 113–127.
2 Prisoners paid attention to the terminology used by the Justice Minister at the time, and many participants referred to “my recidivism” or “my reintegration” in the context of the interviews.
4 www.justice.gouv.fr/le-ministere-de-la-justice-10017/direction-de-ladministration-penitentiaire-10025/.
5 While there have been many efforts to integrate risk assessment tools in French probation and parole services, there is generally a great deal of apprehension among French academics and professionals about this approach.
I continue to receive letters from participants to inform me of their release date, as well as emails from recently released participants. I have not returned to France to conduct any additional interviews since 2017.

A study presenting a scale that measured “acceptance of change” was published (regrettably) after the second phase of data collection for the current study was completed (Di Fabio & Gori, 2016). This scale will certainly be considered for future studies.

**References**


(by an acquaintance) abuse prior to prison, expressed this high level of discomfort with physical contact.

I have to admit that I have … a certain need to control my everyday life. And after, yeah, what makes me uncomfortable is, bah, human contacts already, physical contacts, all that, that’s not too much my … I mean, I’m not comfortable, even with my family, hey. My aunt, she holds me in her arms, I don’t feel good, I get cold sweats. It’s … I don’t know how to say (.) it’s a bit like a guy who never had a TV since birth and at 20 years old, he meets people with a TV and people tell him, “how do you live without a TV”? Bah, it’s a bit the same principle. It’s … I learned to live without human contact, I didn’t have any. Today, when I have some, it’s not natural for me.

In summary, the high prevalence of adverse life experiences confirms that most individuals do not arrive in prison as “clean slates.” They come with distinctive life experiences and traumas, which may intensify the adversities of prison life. The suffering resulting from the exposure to trauma is an important barrier to the process of desistance from crime and positive growth.

Note

1 I should note that the figures on victimization experiences may be underestimated. There is at least one instance in which the study participant did not report an incident of sexual victimization at the time of the first interview, but divulged it to me when we met for the second interview. We had developed more trust and he felt more comfortable speaking to me about these difficult experiences.

References


a program is more likely to inhibit criminal behavior if these factors occur in tandem with the individual’s conscious decision to change. Finally, the research on prisoner adaptation reminds us that the coping mechanisms developed by prisoners have direct relevance for efforts to give up criminal and other harmful behaviors.

Notes
1 Incidentally, similar findings have also emerged from animal research. Punishment tends to result in a higher prevalence of problematic behaviors, and animals seem to respond better to positive rather than negative reinforcement (Innes & McBride, 2008; Haverbeke et al., 2008).
2 A growing body of literature has investigated the incarceration experiences and adaptation strategies of long-term female prisoners (Cobbina & Bender, 2012; Huey Dye & Aday, 2013; Aday et al., 2014; Leigey & Reed, 2010; Crewe et al., 2017; Hart, 2017b; Mackenzie et al., 1989). While some researchers have suggested that female prisoners tend to have more extensive histories of physical and sexual victimization and higher levels of psychiatric disorders when compared with male prisoners (Leigey & Reed, 2010), others have found that women adapt better to prison than men, and that they maintain better psychological health when compared with their male counterparts (Carcedo et al., 2008). Unfortunately, the current study only includes male prisoners, and thus a comparison across genders is not possible.

References
The desistance paradigm in criminology


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Positive growth from trauma is more likely to occur with extended periods of time in prison (Vanhooren et al., 2018). Adversarial growth takes time. New meanings developed in response to challenging life events require processing and reflection time (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This suggests that adversarial growth is more likely to occur among individuals serving long sentences. However, Linley and Joseph’s (2004, p. 17) review suggested that “it is unlikely that the passage of time per se influences adversarial growth, but rather intervening events and processes.” Paradoxically, Vanhooren et al. (2018) also found that the younger prisoners in their sample were more inclined to achieve posttraumatic growth when compared with older prisoners, who struggled to find new meaning to their lives. Another surprising finding that emerged from their study was the negative association between higher education and posttraumatic growth, which contrasts with findings from prior research (Salo, Qouta, & Punamäki, 2005; Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006).

In sum, adversarial growth is a useful framework for studying desistance in prison. Unlike the recidivism-focused approach, it highlights the importance of emphasizing positive outcomes and enhanced well-being. Individuals may develop new insights, enhanced self-worth, new strengths (i.e., perseverance, the ability to ask for help, etc.), a “more nuanced way of thinking” (i.e., more introspection when faced with challenging situations), a better ability to connect to others and to see things from their perspective, and a transformed meaning of life (Vanhooren et al., 2017b, pp. 172–173). Adversarial growth may reduce psychological stress (Vanhooren et al., 2017a). The desisters in Healy’s (2016, 2013) study were more likely to experience and express positive emotions, and the author highlighted the intricate link between desistance and well-being. In Healy’s research, desisters were more likely to reassess negative experiences and regard them in a more favorable light.

Although the current study focuses on individual-level indicators of change, social and structural processes play a crucial role in the explanation of desistance from crime. Desistance theories are most thorough when they integrate explanations of both structural and individual-level processes (Bottoms et al., 2004; Farrall et al., 2014). Giordano et al. (2002, 2007) and Healy (2016) regard agency as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the social context to which he/she is exposed. Exposure to marginalization and social disadvantage exerts an impact on various cognitive and emotional factors associated with the desistance process. The following chapters will demonstrate how the prison climate and broader social context can either promote or hamper desistance efforts.

Notes
1 In the current study, I borrow Maruna’s (2001) term desisting (as opposed to desister) in order to highlight the continuously evolving character of the desistance process.
The definitions presented in this section are drawn from the Oxford English and Merriam-Webster dictionaries.

References


The barriers to positive growth in prison

Me, there’s nothing that scares me. You know what I mean? That’s it, there’s nothing. Nothing really impresses me these days. You see the …
I don’t even have feelings, let’s say, you know? All these years […]

(Marwan)

The hypermasculine culture prevalent in the prison environment also creates an important barrier to the process of positive transformation. Kupers (2005, p. 714) defined toxic masculinity as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence.” These attitudes are reflected through physical prowess (Sabo, 2001), pressure to “keep quiet” and refrain from “snitching” (Ugelvik, 2014), putting on a “manly front” (Jewkes, 2005), overly boastful attitudes (Toch, 1998), and resistance to mental health assistance (Kupers, 2005). While these traits are tolerated and may even be necessary for adaptation to the prison environment, they may be highly incompatible with the values and norms promoted in the outside world.

In short, prison adaption may not be a desirable goal, and prison creates many incongruences with the outside world. If prisoners succeed in returning to the community as better, happier, and more resilient human beings, it is despite the prison environment and rather because of immense individual effort invested to tackle emotional pain, to develop more empathy, and to be kinder to themselves and to others. Self-improvement in prison requires an inordinate level of willpower, motivation and determination. McNeill and Schinkel (2016) are correct in stating that “perhaps it is only in prison regimes that minimise the need for adaptation to life inside, that adaptation for life after punishment becomes possible” (p. 618).

We need a better understanding of the emotional and cognitive work involved in any process of self-betterment in order to get to the root causes of crime, or of any behavior that causes harm. We focus on behaviors (the symptom) because they are most easily identifiable. We tackle addiction and crime as though they are the root problem. Behaviors are not the source of the problem.

In summary, this chapter highlighted the importance of addressing the intense suffering that existed, in many cases, prior to prison, and that was intensified by the incarceration experience. The interviews did not reveal any evidence of benefits gained from the punitive dimensions of prison (i.e., sanctions, strict enforcement of rules, etc.). In fact, it was quite the opposite. Retributive measures exacerbate distress, anger, hostility, and perceived injustice. Because positive change is seldom recognized and acknowledged, many prisoners find little incentive in engaging in these efforts and making progress towards desistance. This is the indication of an imbalanced system.

Notes

1 Many participants referred to the “day and night” terminology to describe the discrepancies between the arrival quarters and daily prison life.
The analysis presented in this section is imbalanced because it only offers the perspective of the prisoners. In an effort to document the perspective of prison staff, I distributed anonymous online surveys to all employees in the facility. The response rate was so low that nothing meaningful could be done with the data.

While the same exclusionary sentiment was expressed by one participant who identified as “Roma” as well as a few select participants of central African descent, this discourse was far more prevalent among individuals of North African origin.

Mohammed Merah was a young man who engaged in a series of terrorist acts in Toulouse in 2012.

References


The barriers to positive growth in prison


References


Achieving positive growth in prison


François openly admitted to routinely engaging in misconduct in order to “make life difficult” for the staff. It is also interesting to note that among those who intended to persist in offending but who did not express a commitment to persistence, the search for opportunities to offend was almost unanimously a reaction to perceived strain.

The desistance and persistence narratives also differed with regards to the perceptions of available opportunities for change. As exemplified through various examples in previous sections, desisting individuals were more inclined to perceive an availability of opportunities for change, even when such opportunities were objectively scarce. In contrast, in the persistence narrative, there was a strong sense that very little or nothing was done to help individuals in their transformation process.

In summary, the narratives of the French prisoners suggest that thriving in prison is possible, and long-term prisoners can succeed in achieving positive growth while incarcerated. The discourse of desisting individuals described in this chapter shares many common features with the conversion narrative highlighted by Maruna et al. (2006). Like the conversion narrative, the desistance narrative enabled the development of a new, positive identity and a new meaning to the experience of incarceration, and provided a framework for forgiveness and a sense of agency over uncertain circumstances. Desisting individuals tend to rely largely on themselves, engage in a process of transformation despite the inhospitable conditions of the prison setting, believe in their fundamental goodness, and invest efforts in extracting any beneficial outcome out of their incarceration experience. While this chapter focused on the cognitive processes that are associated with desistance in prison, it is important to stress again that structural and environmental conditions are central in explaining the process of desistance from crime, and positive growth more generally. While the French prisoners helped to shed light on the circumstances under which individuals can thrive in an otherwise hostile environment, it is not right that they should be required to muster up an unconscionable level of effort and drive in order to achieve positive transformation and to live to their full potential.

Notes
1 In this section, I have selected the narratives of study participants who have expressed these ideas more directly but in many cases, these themes emerged in a less straightforward manner, over extended conversations, making it difficult to summarize in a limited quote.
2 This participant felt that his crime was committed for ethical reasons and that he did not belong in prison.

References


But try to imagine, each time, when you walk by, you scare someone, just because of your appearance. But it’s disgusting. It’s disgusting because you can’t, I don’t know, I don’t want to live by (.) by spreading fear all the time, honestly. Ah. Ah, it’s (.) yeah, sometimes I wish I looked like a woman, you see, just to be more, I mean, to get a kinder look from others, you understand? And not the hard looks I get every time I step inside a place.

Yassine further described how he perceived others to view us when we met up to conduct the interview.

We walk anywhere, you’ll see. You come in, OK, they’ll see you and that’s it: “Oh she’s nice, she’s pretty but him, he’s scary.” But pff (.) but it’s … it’s, yeah, it’s disgusting. Here, it’s France, it’s loathsome. The atmosphere is loathsome. It doesn’t help to reconstruct yourself. It’s sickening because you can’t just go towards someone serenely, objectively. You are restricted and you have to be apologetic when you want to ask for information or something […]

The experience of the socially marginalized is an intense and daily struggle resulting in a great deal of anxiety and stress. As evidenced in the discourse of Yassine, reconstruction efforts are greatly hampered in this context. The double exposure to discrimination renders the process of positive growth particularly challenging.

The three case examples presented here clearly illustrate the substantial challenges of successful reintegration after a long prison sentence. Some of these barriers were preexisting to prison (e.g., exposure to marginalization), some challenges were amplified by the prison experience (e.g., emotional pain and mental health impediments), and some obstacles occurred as a direct result of incarceration (e.g., stigma, importation of prison codes of conduct to the outside world). Chapter 6 highlighted the various ways in which the prison world may be incompatible with the outside world, and how these incongruences can obstruct positive growth. Even when confronted with significant structural impediments, desisting individuals push through to create opportunities that will be conducive to desistance and reintegration; they do not wait for external support to initiate transformation. Finally, the central role of suffering emerged again as an important consideration in reintegration efforts after release. Emotional wounds need to be addressed before release, or it makes for a very challenging return to the community.

**Notes**

1 The actual age has been omitted in order to ensure confidentiality.
2 The name of the city of origin was changed to ensure confidentiality.
I should note that Jacques did not completely give up alcohol. He continued to drink beer a few times per week. On both occasions when we met after his release, he had a beer with his lunch. In his view, he had gained complete control of his addiction and he consumed alcohol in moderation. The fact that he consumed any alcohol was surprising to me at first, given his past struggles with alcohol addiction. However, daytime alcohol consumption with meals is not uncommon in French culture.

References


A. Bottoms (Eds.), Global perspectives on desistance: Reviewing what we know and looking to the future (pp. 11–27). Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.


The individuals who engaged in a desistance narrative returned to the basic truth that they were inherently worthy of dignity, respect, and mercy. We sometimes seem to forget about the fundamental goodness that exists in all of us, and it is our responsibility to give individuals an opportunity for redemption and for returning to their true core selves. It is this core foundation of compassion and tolerance that allows the lotus flower to bloom, even in the muddiest of environments.

References


