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Int J Offender Ther Comp Criminol published online 17 November 2011

DOI: 10.1177/0306624X11427664

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International Journal of
Offender Therapy and
Comparative Criminology
XX(X) 1–21
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DOI: 10.1177/0306624X11427664
<http://ijo.sagepub.com>



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Abstract

Positive criminology is a new term for a perspective associated with theories and models that relate to socially inclusive, positively experienced influences that assist individuals in desisting or refraining from criminal and deviant behavior. A qualitative phenomenological study of prisoners who were in recovery from substance dependency and who participated in a Vipassana course in a rehabilitative prison introduces features of positive criminology. A total of 22 male prisoners participated in a 10-day Vipassana course run by volunteers in prison. Deep interviews were conducted with participants before, immediately after, and 3 to 4 months after the course. The findings describe components of positive criminology that had meaningful impact on the prisoners in rehabilitation: perceived goodness, positive relationship with the prison staff, positive social atmosphere, and overcoming an ordeal. Implications for practice and further research are outlined.

Keywords

integration, positive criminology, rehabilitation, vipassana

Introduction

More often than not, criminology emphasizes the negative aspects in people's lives that are associated with or lead to deviance and criminality. In an extensive review of the literature, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) claimed that bad experiences have a greater effect on individuals than good ones do, and therefore, human relationships are affected more by destructive encounters than by constructive ones. Prominent theories exemplify the dominant role of "the bad" in criminology:

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social rejection (Becker, 1963), association with a strong criminal influence (Sutherland & Cressey, 1974), reaction to social strain (Agnew, 1997), lack of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990), and conditions of risk and criminal career (Farrington, 1995). Against this backdrop, “positive criminology” is a new and complementary concept that represents the flip side, that is, the *positive and integrating experiences* that may assist individuals in shifting away from criminality (Ronel & Elisha, 2011). In the following, we introduce features of positive criminology by describing the findings of a qualitative study of prisoners who were in recovery from substance dependency and who participated in a basic Vipassana course in a rehabilitative prison, as a supplement to their regular rehabilitation programs.

The term “positive criminology” was introduced by Gottfredson and Hirschi (1987), but they defined it as an aspect of positivist-empiric criminology and not as used here. Following Ronel and Elisha (2011), we refer to positive criminology as based on the school of positive psychology, which emphasizes the impact of positive experiences on individuals (Gable & Haidt, 2005; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and therefore, we perceive it as a newly defined concept. Positive criminology places emphasis on social inclusion and on unifying and integrating forces in the individual, group, social, and spiritual dimensions. Usually, an individual who is involved in criminal activity exhibits an increased degree of self-centeredness (Ronel, 2000, 2010). Self-centeredness entails a sense of existential separation, so that others are experienced as object like, and the individual experiences loneliness and social, existential, and spiritual alienation. Spending time with a peer group of like individuals (e.g., a gang) does not reduce the sense of existential separation from humanity at large, as it usually involves separation of that group from noncriminal society (Braithwaite, 2000). However, individuals may choose to be isolated from society without being existentially separated (e.g., spiritual hermits). Therefore, the separation–unification vector is basic to understanding criminality and rehabilitation, where overcoming separation and moving toward unification represents positive progress. It adds another meaning to the term “positive criminology,” that is, the criminology of integration, inclusion, and unification.

Positive criminology is a perspective associated with different theories and models in criminology that refer to integrated influences that share two common features: First, they are experienced by target individuals as positive, and second, they may assist these individuals in refraining from criminal or deviant behavior (Ronel & Elisha, 2011). The first feature also appears in positive psychology, which emerged in reaction to the prevailing emphasis in the social sciences on negative and destructive factors that may be associated with impaired development and behavioral disorders (Sheldon & King, 2001). A fundamental postulation of positive psychology is that positive experiences are not secondary to negative processes (Duckworth, Steen, & Seligman, 2005) but may complement them or even direct individuals beyond the negative. In her theory of positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001) claimed that positive concerns inspire individuals to interact positively with their surroundings. Positive emotions have the ability to broaden individuals’ behavioral repertoires and build their

enduring personal resources. Positive criminology takes this further by means of its second feature, that is, the impact of positive experiences on refraining from criminal conduct. We emphasize this second feature because the positive aspect of an experience in itself is always subjective and its core values are conditioned by individual meanings, which may vary across individuals, time, and cultures. For example, an individual may ascribe positive meaning to successful criminal conduct, to substance-induced euphoria, or to association with a criminal subculture. All may have no effect on criminality or even increase it. Therefore, positive criminology defines its second trait as having a value-laden basis (Day & Ward, 2010), which represents a criminological understanding of the negative formulation of the golden rule—that we are not to do to others what we do not want others to do to us (Reinikainen, 2005). Accordingly, crime desistance and refraining from criminal behavior is a desired outcome of the positive experience.

Crime desistance, correction, and rehabilitation are long-standing concepts in criminology, although their ability to fulfill their objectives has been seriously questioned (Anstiss, n.d.; Cullen & Gendreau, 2000; Lipton, Martinson, & Wilks, 1976; Midford, 2009). However, according to Robinson (2008), rehabilitation is currently enjoying a renewed legitimacy following its evolution and transformation and the inclusion of a moral dimension, which is manifested in emphasis on the moral outcomes of offending and “*responsibilization*’ of offenders” (p. 435). Correspondingly, public opinion shows some optimism concerning the effectiveness of rehabilitation (Piquero, Cullen, Unnever, Piquero, & Gordon, 2010). Moreover, current research in criminology has clearly proved the effectiveness of rehabilitative practices that take the actual needs of offenders and especially their motivation for positive future outcomes into account (Maguire & Raynor, 2006; Ross & Hilborn, 2008; Ward, Mann, & Gannon, 2007). However, not every rehabilitative practice is associated with positive criminology, which includes only those practices of rehabilitation that are experienced as positive. These are usually aimed at achieving change by exploring the individuals’ strengths rather than controlling their faults (Van Wormer & Davis, 2003; Ward & Maruna, 2007) and usually include future (desistance)-oriented rather than past (problem)-oriented components, although positively experienced faults and past-oriented practices may at times represent positive criminology as well.

Positive criminology focuses special attention on the shift from “problem-and-treatment only” paradigms to a more comprehensive recovery paradigm, where recovery is a process in which behavioral problems are gradually resolved by means of development of physical, emotional, spiritual, relational, and occupational health (Best, 2010; McNeill, 2006; White & Kurtz, 2005), and where the negative self-narrative is transformed into a positive, or at least a normative, one (Maruna, 1997, 2004). Recovery, as a positive criminology change process, includes an achievable vision with acknowledgment of the ambivalence concerning the change and possible relapses as a valid component of the overall change (DiClemente, 1993; Miller & Rollnick, 1991; Ross & Hilborn, 2008).

The current literature on rehabilitation (Andrews, Bonta, & Wormith, 2011; Ward et al., 2007; Ward & Maruna, 2007) presents a debate between two effective rehabilitation practices. The first aims mostly at targeting and reducing the risk of undesired behavior—the “Risk-Need-Responsivity” (RNR) model—whereas the second follows the “good life model” (GLM). Positive criminology is not represented by a singular approach but attempts to integrate the positive perspective of various practices. Accordingly, it does not take a side in the debate between different models of rehabilitation but agrees with T. P. O’Connor and Bogue (2010) that “to be human and effective we need both our language of instrumental reasoning [the RNR model] and our language of desistance [GLM]” (p. 310). The defined scope of positive criminology covers a wider aspect than either rehabilitation or recovery. As noted, it focuses on individuals’ encounters with forces and influences that they experience as positive, which distance them from deviance and crime, whether by means of formal and informal programs and interventions, such as self-help groups (L. F. Kurtz, 1990); emphasis of positive social elements, such as exposure to goodness (Ronel, 2006), social acceptance (Bogdan & Taylor, 1987), and reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite, 1989); or based on positive personal traits, such as resilience and coherence (Ronel & Haimoff-Ayali, 2009). Positive criminology may be implemented anywhere in the change process of individuals and groups who have demonstrated deviant and criminal behavior by emphasizing positive experiences that may potentially prevent or discourage continued criminal behavior (Openheim & Timor, 2005). The practice of meditation, described later, is an example of this.

In 1979, the Israeli government set up a research committee to study the conditions in the local prisons and recommended changes in imprisonment policy (Timor, 2009). One of the committee’s assumptions was that imprisonment “expresses the conclusion of the law enforcement process, aimed at educating towards good citizenship and values based on the basic elements of morality and justice accepted by most members of the society” (Kenneth, Libai, & Shapira, 1981, p. 8). Although the government accepted most of the conclusions and recommendations regarding rehabilitation, they were only partially implemented, and the controversy over the relative importance of punishment and security compared with that of rehabilitation continues. Nevertheless, this committee marks the starting point of a process of including a vast array of educational and rehabilitative programs in the Israeli prison service. A significant step in this process was the opening of the Hermon prison, a modern rehabilitative facility (Timor, 2009), where the Vipassana course discussed here was conducted.

A prominent recovery ideology and practice in the Israeli prison system, in general, and in Hermon prison, in particular, is an integrative 12-step approach that includes a professional adaptation of the program, which is distinct from the practice of the Anonymous (Alcoholics Anonymous [AA], Narcotics Anonymous [NA]) self-help groups (Chen, 2006; Elisha & Ankonina, in press; Ronel, 2000; Ronel, Hoffman, & Yaakov, 2003). This approach involves social, individual, and spiritual processes of change, with emphasis on the voluntary character of the change process. By virtue of

its focus on social acceptance, positive self-growth, adaptation of the recovery narrative, and moral-spiritual vision, it can be defined as a positive criminology practice. Following T. P. O'Connor, Duncan, and Quillard's (2006) distinction, the inclusion of the spiritual program of change in Hermon prison not only preserves the humanistic rights of the prisoners but also offers them a vision of spiritual transformation. It is a window of opportunity that adds to the regular, secular practices of change and rehabilitation. According to the underlying theory, the offender manifests continuous self-centeredness (Ronel, 2010), while recovery involves a shift toward consideration of fellow human beings, the world, and God (as understood by the individual; E. Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992). Although this approach is spiritual, it has no affinity to any specific religion and is based on an open individual, rather than institutional understanding of spirituality. No faith is needed at any stage, although it might develop in the process (Ronel, 2000). The emphasis on self-centeredness or egocentrism as the common root of behavioral disorders and suffering, and the recommendation for a change process that involves departure from this tendency, is also shared by Buddhism and Vipassana (e.g., Clifford, 1984). As Vipassana is considered an open, nonconditioned spiritual practice, which despite its Buddhist origin does not represent to any formal religion, the decision to conduct such a course at the Hermon prison was easily accepted by the staff and prisoners.

Vipassana is an ancient meditation technique that originated in India and is associated with the teaching of Gautama the Buddha (Fontana, 1995; Hart, 1994). Today Vipassana is conducted in a similar manner, based on the teachings of S. N. Goenka, throughout the world. Over the last two decades, it has been successfully offered within prisons in India, Israel, Mongolia, New Zealand, Taiwan, Thailand, the United Kingdom, Myanmar, and the United States (Anonymous, n.d.).

The word Vipassana means to see things as they really are, not only as they seem to be (Anonymous, n.d.; Hetu, 2006). The highest value in Vipassana is freedom, understood as freeing oneself from internal coercion and constraints that create familiar patterns of thought, feelings, and behavior (Fontana, 1995; Hart, 1994). There are three elements in Vipassana: morality, mindfulness, and experiential wisdom derived from self-observation. In Vipassana, morality is expressed in abstinence from any act that can bring suffering to any sentient being and acting to promote the well-being of others. Mindfulness refers to the effort to gain mastery over one's own mind. Experiential wisdom is based on self-observation—objectively feeling but not reacting to physical sensations. Such self-observation is especially meaningful for recovering substance-dependent individuals, as it addresses the craving for the dependency experience (Marlatt et al., 2004).

In a summary of the results of several studies (including her own) that measured the effects of Vipassana on different psychological traits of practicing prisoners in India, Hetu (2006) claimed that Vipassana is an effective means of rehabilitation for prisoners. This claim is supported to some extent by the results of Bowen et al. (2006) and Bowen, Witkiewitz, Dillworth, and Marlatt (2007), who suggested that Vipassana may be

effective in the rehabilitation of substance-dependent prisoners. Brewer, Bowen, Smith, Marlatt, and Potenza (2010) went further by analyzing which therapeutic characteristics of the practice of Vipassana might assist individuals suffering from substance addiction and depression. In a review of several studies of different meditation-based programs for incarcerated populations, including a Vipassana course, Himelstein (2011) concluded that these programs support psychological well-being. For example, his findings suggested that the Vipassana course could reduce negative feelings such as hostility, helplessness, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, and anomie. In addition, the meditation-based programs were found to support the reduction of substance use and recidivism. The author suggested that meditation-based programs provide an appropriate intervention and support rehabilitation of correctional populations.

A Vipassana course was held in Hermon prison for the first time in December 2006. Based on the request of additional prisoners, a second course was conducted a few months later (two joined for a second time). In preparation for the first course, three staff members attended a Vipassana course outside the prison and then introduced the idea to the entire prison population with the aid of a short film. Participation in the course was open to all prisoners in the addiction treatment unit of this rehabilitative prison. There was no risk or need assessment of applicants, but the prison staff (rehabilitation workers) were previously acquainted with all of them. There was no rejection of applicants. During the 10.5-day course, participants were separated as a group from all other prisoners and staff; they did not receive visitors, accept phone calls, or make any contact with people outside the group. The basic moral rules of Vipassana were a prohibition of killing any sentient being and consequently, following a vegetarian diet, no stealing, no lying, no sex, and no use of psychoactive substances (Fontana, 1995; Hart, 1994). Furthermore, participants were instructed to maintain full silence throughout the course and not speak with any other participants. The all-day teaching and meditation began as early as 4 a.m. and ended at 9 p.m.

Although the study of Vipassana courses has demonstrated its effect on a variety of rehabilitative measures of substance-dependent individuals and prisoners, to the best of our knowledge, the subjective experience of the participants during the course, including the impact of the unique setting of the course, has not yet been studied (Himelstein, 2011). Consequently, we choose here not to describe the content-dependent experience, that is, the impact of the Vipassana teaching itself, but to focus on the context, that is, the experience of the unique setting of the course and its impact on prisoners, in terms of factors that can be associated with positive criminology.

Method

We conducted qualitative, phenomenological research of the experience of inmates participating in a Vipassana course in a prison and their subjective perceptions of the change process that followed (Kockelmans, 1987; Polkinghorne, 1989). The research focused on the significance of the Vipassana experience as expressed in the narrative of the participants.

Participants

The participants were 22 male inmates in Hermon prison who joined a Vipassana course offered in the prison. They all were beginners in the course, although two of them rejoined a second course. Their ages ranged from 20 to 50. They had been incarcerated for a variety of offenses such as domestic violence, property crime, sex offences, and drug-related offences. They all had a background of substance abuse or dependence and had been clean of mind-altering substances (caffeine and nicotine not included) for at least 6 months. They all chose the course voluntarily as part of a rehabilitative process.

Research Tool

The participants were administered an in-depth, semistructured, individual interview, following three different interview guidelines that were formulated especially for the different stages of the study, as described later in this article. Each interview was conducted as an open conversation in which the guidelines provided initial direction, but the interview proceeded primarily according to the data revealed during its course. Such interviews enable research participants to deeply express their personal narratives (Patton, 1990; Shkedi, 2003).

Procedure

All the participants in both courses voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The research team interviewed them personally at three points in time: a few days before the course began, immediately after it ended, and 3 or 4 months later. The first two interviews were all conducted in the prison, in a separate room with no interruptions. Because some prisoners had already been released by the time of the third interview, it was conducted at their chosen location. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed.

The anonymity of the participants was strictly maintained, and only the research team had access to the information collected. Before the interviews, all participants signed a statement of informed consent and also agreed to participate in later stages of the research, including being located after their release. They could refuse to answer any question or leave the interview at any stage. In the following, we use pseudonyms to further protect their anonymity.

The data were analyzed according to the qualitative constructivist method (Giorgi, 1975; Polkinghorne, 1989; Shkedi, 2003). The analysis included preliminary identification of various categories of significance, which were then organized in relation to each other in a hierarchy of meanings (main- and subcategories). During this process, we moved forward and backward from the raw data to the analyzed findings, until their integration fully represented the data. For the current focus, we further analyzed the findings to identify those that represent positive criminology. The validation of the

analysis included separate reading by each of the authors, who then decided on the hierarchy in a group discussion and with the assistance of the prison staff members who had participated in the Vipassana course and observed the prisoners before, during, and after the course. The following description of the findings includes representative quotations from the participants, for further validity.

The current study has several unavoidable limitations. First, the sample size is small and not representative, as it included only a unique group of prisoners who chose to join the course. Second, we did not monitor the behavior of the prisoners nor any other visible variable before and after the course. Any impact that we described is based on the subjective narratives of the participants as shared with the researchers. Nevertheless, the in-depth inquiry into the participants' subjective experience offers significant insights, with practical and theoretical implications.

Results

The findings associated with positive criminology represent four main themes: perceived goodness, positive relations with the prison staff, a positive social atmosphere, and overcoming an ordeal.

Perceived Goodness

The course was conducted by volunteers, who stayed at the prison for the entire period. These volunteers were the course director, a Jewish Canadian citizen who made the trip to Israel for this purpose; course assistants; and administrative assistants, who served the food and helped with the logistics. The course participants were aware that these people had volunteered to serve them, and this had direct impact on them. They perceived the act of volunteering as evidence of true goodness, which in turn stimulated their own inner processes. Several participants emphasized that this was the first time they had met someone who was interested in helping them without reward or personal gain. This evoked a range of emotions that they had rarely experienced in prison: surprise, excitement, confusion, and gratitude. When referring to the Vipassana staff, the prisoners chose picturesque language, probably to emphasize the description of this rare experience. For example, they told the interviewers,

All the organizers are amazing people. They have such a gentle approach to the guys participating. You feel a positive karma, a ray of light. The fact that they volunteered . . . They quietly asked me how I felt, and just hearing their interest in me and their calm manner was amazing. (Dmitri)

I realized that they had volunteered. It made me feel good that they were working hard just so someone else could feel good and learn. It gave me such a good feeling to have another person offer to give of himself. Their giving is very

meaningful, since one doesn't see this anywhere else . . . It's proof that angels can have a human body. (Boris)

Encountering this perceived altruism of the Vipassana volunteers generated a desire among the participants to repay the kindness and perform good deeds, in other words, to transform themselves from beneficiaries to benefactors. Although this was an initial desire, not yet accomplished and not yet tested under the demands of reality, it was quite a strong exception to the everyday experience, language, and norms of the prisoners. For example,

I said that when I get out [of jail] I would also come to volunteer a few months in the Vipassana. A good experience of doing something for others. (Basem)

I was surprised that they were volunteers . . . Giving love without speaking. I want to be like them, to volunteer in a Vipassana course. (Asras)

In addition to the wish to volunteer on behalf of others, the participants also developed a sense of moral commitment to the Vipassana volunteers. Witnessing how the volunteers treated them with respect—without judging them or their past wrongdoings—and displayed a sincere, selfless wish to help inspired a moral commitment among participants. The unique encounter with perceived altruistic giving and human goodness gave rise to deep self-examination, encouraged by the Vipassana practice. During this process, the Vipassana volunteers served as role models, demonstrating correct behavior and attitudes. The participants wanted to please the volunteers by transforming their behavior.

There is no trade here, nothing. A full service, heartily given. Like, you just take whatever you need from there. Let him see that you feel good, that you are doing something . . . that you can give of yourself with such love—that is all they wanted. I felt so wonderful . . . Somehow I wanted to thank them—you feel embarrassed from within, shame with everything that they do for you with love and pleasure. It is extraordinary. I never encountered such a service given with love, without reward, nothing—it's extraordinary; there are not many people like this in the world. (Nisso)

By meeting the Vipassana volunteers, the participants were introduced to values such as the unconditional giving and goodness that the volunteers represented. According to their testimonies, most of the prisoners had rarely encountered such values, and therefore, the impact was powerful. The moral commitment that the participants developed toward the volunteers influenced a moral commitment to their own recovery. As Nisso explained (in the previous excerpt), he wanted to show the volunteers that he had benefited most from the course; therefore, he worked hard and consequently did benefit from it.

Positive Relationship With the Prison Staff

The Hermon prison, where the Vipassana course took place, is a rehabilitative prison. As such, it is characterized by an open relationship between prisoners and staff that is notably less rigid than in other prisons in Israel. For example, the ratio of rehabilitative to security staff is far higher than in any other prison, and the head wardens are members of the rehabilitation staff. As a result, the overall atmosphere of the prison life is more rehabilitative than punitive.

Hermon is a place of recovery. They teach me to follow the right path so that my mind will operate in line with recovery, not to be drawn by evil. (Boris)

During the Vipassana course, in which the participants engaged in a demanding struggle with themselves, the role of the rehabilitative atmosphere became even more important. Several staff members (not the volunteer Vipassana staff) closely supported the prisoners for the duration of the course. Afterwards, some of the participants presented strikingly positive perceptions of the staff members, especially those who had been in close contact with them during the course. They also mentioned the support they received from the staff before the course began.

The warden cared for us and I sensed it as a motherly embrace. I was surprised by her, and noticed she was more excited than we were. (Asras)

Some participants experienced a blurring of boundaries with the staff. Within the context of the Vipassana course, there was equality between prisoners and jailers. They all ate and cleaned together, and observed a different hierarchy than that of everyday prison life. At the top of the new hierarchy was the course director, who made no differentiation between staff and prisoners. On returning to prison routine, where guards have authority over prisoners, some participants chose to ignore the authoritative role of the prison staff and reworked their relationship with them in a much more prosocial manner:

The course made me trust the staff more. When I came out of the Vipassana, I felt that they wanted to help me. I have become attached to them, not just dependent. I have developed a belief in them, a love for them. They are surprised and I try to convince them that I truly love them. (Ahmed)

Positive Social Atmosphere

Vipassana is an individual, self-practiced process that takes place within a peer group that intensely surrounds the individual day and night. The participants eat, sleep, and meditate together. Although they are instructed to refrain from speaking during the course and to practice individually, the group naturally creates a social atmosphere

that can support—but may interfere with—the Vipassana process and the consequent self-transformation.

During the course, the participants created a group with a unique social atmosphere that differed from that among the prisoners outside the course. The behaviors, norms, and values of this group corresponded with those of the Vipassana. Although the prison staff gave the participants intensive support during the course to help them fulfill the course aims, afterwards, this support was reduced to a monthly meeting. As a result, peer support became crucial to the continuation of the Vipassana practices they learned during the course. Practicing together kept the unique Vipassana atmosphere alive; being part of this atmosphere empowered the participants. One of the participants took the responsibility of creating a special room, where they practiced Vipassana together. Unfortunately, when this individual was released from prison, nobody else assumed this responsibility and the room and the group were closed. Some participants stopped practicing; for them, positive leadership, responsibility, and social support had helped for a limited period. However, the significant experience had a lasting effect for some, and there were also others who continued to practice individually:

I have kept practicing Vipassana to this day. I practiced with the group until George was released and now I miss that. (Dmitry)

The power of the social atmosphere of Vipassana is illustrated by the conflict it aroused with the regular prisoners' code when the first course began. There were prisoners who wanted to practice sincerely and wholeheartedly, while others were more suspicious and attempted to carry on with familiar manipulations, such as creating conversations or getting cigarettes from prisoners who were not participating in course—both violations of the Vipassana rules.

I knew that they were all looking at each other. It is difficult to keep on, to follow all these rules when you see how your close friends are not doing so. I want to do what I have to, but on the other hand . . . you also want to be one of them. (Yossi)

As the course progressed, this conflict subsided, with the Vipassana atmosphere prevailing.

Overcoming an Ordeal

A significant effect of completing the Vipassana course was a transformation in the self-narrative of participants. The successful accomplishment of the mission of the course was a meaningful experience for the participants. Most of them had little experience of overcoming such challenges for the sake of delayed satisfaction. In their experience, even less demanding tasks that required less self-control had ended in

failure or rejection by the system. In this case, the structure of the course and the intensive, empowering support of the Vipassana staff helped them overcome moments of crisis. Participants shared the sense of a new ability to attain goals and a growing hope that this ability could be further developed.

I am glad that I finished it . . . I always began and left before the end. I am satisfied that despite the difficulty, I finished. It's a sense of a victory. (Ahmed)

The words of Ahmed represent the inner struggle that the participants faced and the satisfaction of winning this struggle. It is an especially complex challenge because the enemy is oneself. Participants had to fight their old habits and patterns and they won. This success brought about self-pride and a belief that they had control over the outcome of future similar struggles. Participants ascribed such significance to the very accomplishment of tasks that the verb "finish" became dominant in their narratives:

It is a pleasure to finish something. You feel good because you have finished something. I was proud that I finished something till its very end. (Mahmud)

The inner struggle required personal strength that the participants were unaware of and discovered only during the course:

In my unconscious I thought about quitting, but I didn't let myself to fall into deep thought and leave. My ego gave me the power to continue. It is the first time that I used the ego in a positive way. (Boris)

These words of Boris exemplify how the "ego" (used in an everyday sense) helped participants accomplish the course mission successfully. They also exemplify how the Vipassana experience and its focus on mindfulness enhances the ability to stop an impulsive reaction of low self-control and choose the most prosocial of the other possible responses. A fundamental goal of the Vipassana course and the ordeal it involves is to overcome the ego and its demands. Hence, we may conclude that participants described a paradoxical process, where they used their ego strengths to eradicate the ego. Their sense of a need to prove themselves, which they associated with their ego, helped them fulfill their commitment to the course.

I never thought of quitting. This was partly due to my ego—the thought of what people would say about me. Nobody believed that I would stay. I proved I could—showing them and myself. (Simon)

Participants experienced success not only by finishing the course but also by accomplishing various tasks within the course. As Vipassana is very different from regular learning, any participant can enjoy the experience of success, regardless of their former background. Dmitry, for example, described it well:

Whenever the teacher set a goal, for example, anapana—breathing in and out while concentrating and contemplating on the senses with no desire to achieve or reject—I would work and work and suddenly succeed. During the whole course you have to work on the senses and suddenly you succeed!

To sum up, participation in the Vipassana course is a demanding and challenging mission on one hand, but on the other hand, it can provide a growing sense of success as the participant accomplishes its tasks and experiences the meaningful success of completing it. For most participants, this was the first such experience of success in their lives.

Discussion

Rehabilitation of prisoners is a subject of ongoing controversy. In part, the debate is political and ideological, related to the objectives of incarceration and a perception of social order. However, it also revolves around the question of whether rehabilitation is possible within the prison setting. Furthermore, those who do support the option of rehabilitation in jail may have different views of what works and how. For example, supporters of deterrence claim that imprisonment may reduce recidivism by inhibiting a criminal tendency (Wilson, 1983). There is emotional and rational ground for seeking deterrence; those who argue on the basis of rational choice theories claim that the high personal cost of being imprisoned may convince individuals to refrain from criminal behavior (Windzio, 2006).

Deterrence and emphasis of the high personal cost of imprisonment represent a perspective that emphasizes negative experience and social exclusion, even though it may lead into a reduction in criminal behavior, which is usually considered a positive outcome. In comparison, the current findings regarding the impact of a Vipassana course given in prison support the rehabilitation option as a complementary perspective, that is, by focusing on several “how to” principles that are associated with positively experienced interventions. These findings describe the rehabilitative power of positive experiences within the prison, generated by participating in the Vipassana course. While Vipassana offers the prisoners a unique ideology and practice, the impact of which has been studied elsewhere and is not discussed here (see, for example, Himelstein, 2011), it also creates an exceptional setting that has not been studied yet and was the main target of the current study. Understanding the impact of this setting can broaden our understanding of how change works in prison (Maruna & LeBel, 2010), with implications for other practices. It is stressed here that we did not evaluate the rehabilitative impact of the content of the Vipassana course and practice (e.g., the impact of mindfulness) but examined meaningful factors of change in the context of the course, as perceived by the participants. The significance of this analysis lies in its representation of the prisoners’ perceptions and will to change.

First, the findings indicate the significance of the inclusion of volunteers within the intervention setting (Golden, 1991). In accordance with its Buddhist ideology of

unconditional giving (Clifford, 1984; Fontana, 1995; Hart, 1994), the Vipassana course in the prison was run by volunteers, an arrangement that was meaningful to the participants. Notably, the actual motivation of the volunteers, which may be other than altruistic (e.g., Mac Neela, 2004), was not relevant to the participants; it was the perceived, pure altruistic one that mattered (Clohesy, 2000).

The findings of the current research, which are similar to those in studies of intervention with youth at risk (Lavie, 2008; Ronel, 2006; Ronel, Haski-Leventhal, Ben-David, & York, 2009), provide an understanding of the impact of volunteers on the participating prisoners. The volunteers in the course were experienced, carefully chosen Vipassana practitioners who could provide the prisoners with a positive role model. The volunteers, whom the participants perceived as truly good and altruistic, regardless of their inner motivation, represent “perceived altruism,” the impact of which was studied by Ronel (2006). Accordingly, they served as role models and inspired a wish to follow their example as well as to please them with a sincere effort to emulate them. Although participants made a clear distinction about the role of the volunteers in the process of change, it can be assumed that the process operates as a whole, where the impact of the unique practice of Vipassana interacts with that of the perceived altruism. It might be that the sound self-awareness that grew during the meditation as an intended aspect of the process also increased the participants’ awareness of the role of the volunteers, thus enhancing the impact of the perceived altruism. At any rate, this impact was remarkably meaningful to the participants. According to Nicholas (1994), a common intention of many different therapies is to explore the ability for goodness within clients. As the current findings suggest, the inclusion of volunteers in the rehabilitative setting can facilitate achievement of this objective. An immediate implication of this finding is that other interventions might also benefit from the inclusion of carefully chosen, role-model volunteers, which may increase their rehabilitative impact (T. P. O’Connor & Bogue, 2010).

Second, the Vipassana course created a unique setting of informality and lack of distance between staff and inmates. The literature on criminology includes extensive discussion of the impact of institutionalization and prisonization (Haney, 2001) and the disadvantages of sociopsychological distance between clients and practitioners (Horwitz, 1990). The setting of the Vipassana course altered the roles of guards and prisoners and the usual norms of prison life. It created a common human thread between those participating, temporarily transforming them into a group adapted to the norms of Vipassana, with less formal distance and hierarchy among its different members. Within the boundaries of this group, the everyday labeling of prisoners was transformed into a new one with new meaning (Trice & Roman, 1970)—individuals practicing Vipassana. As might be expected, this had a significant impact on the participants.

Third, the participants formed a subgroup within the prison population that attempted to represent the values of Vipassana within those of the prison. This Vipassana-based subgroup, which lasted beyond the period of the course, helped the prisoners maintain the insights gained through Vipassana and apply them to prison

life. Within the prison culture, this group operated as a subculture that bridged a personal change, as occurs in self-help recovery groups (Ronel, 1998). As this subculture was small and contradicted the general prison culture, it aroused some tension among the general inmate population. When leading figures of the subgroup were released, it dissolved, but the positive experience remained significant.

Finally, the Vipassana course presented the participants with a challenge unlike any they had ever faced. Substance-dependent prisoners, although in recovery, are accustomed to immediate sensory satisfaction and usually considered to present a low level of self-control (Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990). However, Vipassana is a demanding ordeal with minimal satisfaction of the senses—the participants sit all day long, occupied with self-reflection and self-confrontation. During the course they ate a simple vegetarian diet with no meals after noontime, were exposed to no external stimuli, and—at least during the daytime—they also refrained from talking and smoking. In addition, because they attended the course voluntarily and could leave whenever they wanted, staying there was based on free choice. Meeting this challenge became an empowering feat that the prisoners described as highly significant. The demands of Vipassana succeeded in channeling the wish for self-respect into a positive path of overcoming weakness and gaining self-control. The positive experience of being able to exercise self-control may contain rehabilitative properties. It also corresponds to the principles of Vipassana and Buddhism regarding taking responsibility for one's life and overcoming impulsive reactions. Interestingly, the Vipassana course did not target the impulsivity of participants as a risk to be directly faced. Rather, it offered them with opportunity and encouraged them to practice their strength to overcome impulsivity, which might be seen as a step toward self-transformation. This approach is typical of the “desistance paradigm” described by various authors (Kazemian & Maruna, 2010; McNeill, 2006), and it may increase the desistance from further criminality.

The present research identifies the positive attributes of the Vipassana course setting and its impact on the prisoners. There is a clear correspondence between this setting and the Vipassana teaching and experience as a way of life, such as the emphasis on freedom and therefore on the practice of free choice and self-responsibility in everyday life decisions (Fontana, 1995; Hart, 1994), as described earlier. The practice of Vipassana probably releases natural abilities that might have been present previously but were not accessible in a clear way to the participants due to various reasons, including their chaotic lifestyles (Timor, 2001) and high level of self-centeredness (Ronel, 2000). Another example is the basic morality of Vipassana as a way of life, which leads to the exclusive employment in the course of volunteers, which the prisoners perceived as an indication of pure goodness. The significant improvement in the prisoners' relationships with prison staff and the positive social atmosphere may be seen as expressing the mindfulness and awareness that are fundamental elements of the teachings of Vipassana. Similarly, overcoming the challenge of 10 silent days without cigarettes while concentrating solely on their inner world corresponds with the self-observation of the Vipassana. Accordingly, it appears that the program, setting,

and teaching generate a twofold action, which intensifies their impact. The implication is that the integration of similar positive settings within other rehabilitative programs may be beneficial. However, the inclusion of corresponding teaching within such settings may be necessary to achieve the desired result. This last suggestion warrants further study.

The inclusion of a Vipassana course in a prison represents the application of the positive criminology perspective, as it creates a cumulative positive experience that can be presumed to have a rehabilitative impact. Based on the essential presumption of positive criminology, the beneficial experience of Vipassana practice seems to impact the separation–unification vector with some movement toward greater unification. This movement can be described as operating on three dimensions: social, individual, and spiritual. On the social dimension, several factors that have already been described increased the sense of inclusion of participants: being accepted by the normative role models (the volunteers) without a priori labeling, breaking boundaries with prison staff, and creating a supportive group with a normative set of values. On the individual dimension, the Vipassana experience of gained insights, mindfulness, and overcoming an ordeal helped the participants reduce their sense of inner chaos, at least temporarily, and thus experience some sense of self-integration. On the spiritual dimension, the whole experience targeted participants' high self-centeredness and let them experience some sense of reduced self-centeredness, which might create a sense of unification with a spiritual power greater than themselves (T. P. O'Connor et al., 2006; Ronel, 2000).

Adopting the positive perspective to understand desistance of law-breaking behavior is not new to criminology (e.g., Braithwaite, 1989; Chen, 2006; Maruna, 1997; Ronel & Tim, 2003). However, the term "positive criminology" is a new one (Ronel & Elisha, 2011), and the present study is of the firsts to emerge consciously from this perspective. As such, it indicates the possible benefit of further research in this vein, to compare the rehabilitative power of this perspective with others and explore the conditions under which its application creates significant impact.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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