

Building Continuity and a Sense of Advancement into Long Terms of Confinement

A short prison term can be conceived of as an intermission in one's ordinary day-to-day life, but a long period of confinement has to serve as a substitute for a substantial chunk of one's free-world existence. The term "normalization" has gained importance in this regard, because it is a concept invoked in sophisticated circles to describe the effort to arrange life inside institutions to achieve as much equivalence to life outside institutions as possible--to make the experience of living in confinement as close to "normal" as can be arranged under inauspicious circumstances.

There are obviously difficulties in pursuing this objective, beyond the built-in constraints and circumscriptions of confinement itself. One attribute of prison life, for example, is that of its day-in, day-out sameness and monotony, of the lack of highlights that are provided by even marginal free-world routines. More critical can be the pointlessness of simply doing time, the absence of any opportunity for progression or advancement in the dictionary definition of "career", that of "a field or pursuit of consecutive progression or achievement."

To my mind, sentence planning in Scotland could be understood as one way to attain career-equivalence for long-term prisoners. Under the system, a staff member in the prison works with the inmate to help him or her to formulate short-term and long-term plans for activities that are congruent with his or her interests. To the extent to which the prisoner comes to perfect or develop skills along the way, opportunities can then be provided for him or her to rehearse or exercise these skills. The long and the short of the scheme is that being in prison ought not to foreclose the opportunity for demonstrating competence, being creative or becoming useful, and for one's constructive contributions to be valued and rewarded.

Given in-house careers for long-term inmates, there must be choice points for the prisoner to review his or her involvements to date, and to decide whether to continue on a given path or to explore new and different options. Major reviews can occur at transitional junctures between career stages (such as early, mid-career, and pre-release), and on occasions where a prisoner is transferred from one institution to another. But linear progression and logical sequence must never be sacrificed, because they are key ingredients of a meaningful career. Career continuity can be provided in a prison system by case managers tasked to keep in touch with the inmate and staff who work with the inmate, and to make sure that the torch is passed smoothly and effectively along the way. (Toch, 1995, 1996).

A Prison System as a Career Ladder

Most systems have prison settings that range from high custody to low custody. These are usually defined by the system as sets of security arrangements designed for inmates who pose different degrees of risk. But from the long-term inmate's perspective, such custody gradations come to be

experienced as structural career stages. The incoming long-term prisoner at Stage 1 finds that he has to adjust to imprisonment itself and must simultaneously cope with a setting that offers substantial and onerous restrictions. Assuming that he retains his equilibrium, chooses his companions with discernment and settles down to a diligent routine, the prisoner can eventually verify that he will be promoted to an environment presenting fewer constraints (Stage 2,) and from there can graduate to a lower-custody milieu that offers tangible increments of freedom and transitional experiences preparatory to release from prison (Stage 3). Getting out of prison at the discretion of prison authorities (Stage 4) would then loom as the ultimate promotion in a structurally-ordained scheme.

Taking the Difficult Final Steps.

In Scotland, prison settings appropriately known as “top end” were relatively relaxed enclaves in mainline prisons, or self-contained semi-open prisons. Semi-open prisons fed inmates into open prisons, but sometimes the line between the two domains could be evanescent. A case in point at the time of my involvements was Dungavel, which after serving as an aristocratic hunting lodge became a prison categorized as “semi-open.” But Dungavel was casually transmuted into an open prison in 1994, by virtue of an arrangement which left the gates permanently open, though the prison’s fence was left in place--mainly, to keep the neighborhood’s dogs and children from trespassing.

The transition from semi-open to open was announced in a speech by the warden, John Bywalec, who “addressed the prisoners, about a third of them serving life sentences, and told them that the eyes of the community will be on you from April 1” (Freeman, 1994). The audience to this hortatory oration was comprised of “men adjudged to present no risk to the public....who have worked hard to achieve this status, displaying mature and stable behavior, who have accepted responsibility and have addressed their offending behavior” (ibid). Most of these carefully-select prisoners had already been working in the community outside the prison, and many had engaged in public service volunteer activities. The prison also had unusually generous provision for family visitations and had been granting several of the inmates unescorted home leaves.

As it happened, my transactions at Dungavel were shaped by concerns related to these excursions and reunions. In meetings with groups of prisoners and staff on the prison grounds that had been advertised as dealing with participatory governance, the discussion turned to interventions that might further family reintegration and enhance the benefits of the home leave experience. In recording this change in agenda, I explained at the time that “this issue....heavily preempts the prisoners’ attention,” and that in considering the nature of the problem as it appeared to unfold, it looked to me like

Conflicts and other interpersonal problems that manifest themselves during home leave are glossed over, both to project an image of impervious manliness and to preclude the possibility of an adverse parole decision. The latter consideration also enters into the recalcitrance of family members who might have useful information to share. With confidentiality assured, one can envisage a number of vehicles for getting the information on the table, working through

problems, and thereby making the leave a true rehearsal and test situation for reintegration, as well as a constructive prelude to it.

The prison had already experimented with support groups for wives, and efforts to engage in pre-leave counseling had been undertaken at Dungavel and elsewhere. The discussion therefore came to center on post-leave debriefings, and on the possibility of having debriefing sessions conducted by the prisoners' personal officers. It was recognized during the discussion that this idea "might encounter resistance from custody-oriented officers," but the hope was that other officers "might be attracted by the presumption that they understood the prisoner better than anyone else." Moreover, if any program of this kind were to be implemented, remunerative training would have to be provided, which the officers would predictably welcome.

It was understood that resistance from prisoners would also have to be overcome, and in this case the inmates' misgivings appeared to be more substantial than expected, despite the fact that under the personal officer scheme there are provisions for strict confidentiality. It became obvious that there might be unaccountable difficulties in extending a process that appeared to have been working effectively for sentence planning to the provision of assistance to inmates with problems encountered in the community.

Responding to Prison Survey Data

The Scottish Prison Service had a built-in data-feedback and self-study process consisting of periodic opinion surveys conducted and disseminated by Ed Wozniak and his minions. These surveys were comprehensive in coverage, with equivalent questions asked of prisoners and prison staff. Following each of the surveys, Wozniak and his troops fed back the information that had been meticulously tabulated, highlighting noteworthy or interesting comparisons and differences. One of those highlights from Wozniak's 1994 survey caught the eye of John Bywalec, the warden of Dungavel. Bywalec noted with some concern that at Dungavel "while staff perceive Sentence Planning fairly positively, the prisoners on the other hand are extremely negative in their views of this important initiative." To address this issue, Bywalec invited "each personal officer [at his prison] to discuss this matter with their group of prisoners" (Bywalec, 1994).

While the resulting deliberations were no doubt scintillating, they were unlikely to be revealing, because the venue invited the prisoners to express off-putting reservations to their officer-interlocutors, whose feelings they would have no desire to hurt. Moreover, neither the officers nor prisoners were likely to consider that the problem might be strictly chronological--the fact that sentence planning might no longer be a relevant modality when the issues of concern to the inmates originated in the community and in relations with their families.

Correction officers in the United Kingdom are called "prison officers"-- an appropriate title that connotes both the officers' jurisdiction and their arena of expertise. The scope of the officers' designated proficiency (augmented by in-service training) makes it eminently appropriate for a prisoner to talk to his personal officer about enrolling in an anger management seminar or considering a plumbing module. But even with the officer's enhanced role and expanded jurisdiction, his or her

availability as a counselor might provide no comfort, reassurance or confidence to the distressed prisoner who had just discovered that his eight-year absence from home has resoundingly estranged him from his wife and children. The inmate's reluctance would be especially understandable given the fact that intimate relatedness and exploration of feelings are routinely frowned upon in male prisons—both by prisoners and by prison staff members who are not trained social workers. The failure to bring up concerns related to marital or family problems in sentence planning sessions would thus not be unexpected. The fact that a prisoner might come back from leave with an unresolved personal crisis but with nothing in particular to report to his trusty personal officer would be no reflection on the officer or the personal officer scheme, or on sentence planning as a modality.

Concerns that are raised by difficulties that prisoners run into when they are released into the community have to be addressed in a timely fashion. But such misadventures have to be worked through in an appropriate venue, which does not happen to be the vehicle for career planning in the prison. What a wounded inmate returning from a disappointing furlough requires is the assistance of someone who has experience with the sort of problems that are presented for (and by) offenders released after protracted periods of confinement. This expertise has to do with the travails of reintegration and readjustment, and their eventual resolution.

An Ironic Post-Mortem

Dungavel was one of several pioneering and innovative prisons in Scotland that were closed in a misconceived effort to save money by abandoning quality projects. Dungavel's afterlife, however, was particularly grotesque. The plant was turned over to the English Home Office, which in 2001 reopened Dungavel as an internment facility for asylum seekers whose applications had been rejected. This outcome could not have been more at variance with the original concept of an open prison.

The refashioned Dungavel was run by the British administration. The prison's neighbors, however, took unfriendly notice when the media learned that "babies and young children [had] been held there prior to deportation, in some cases for over a year" (Wikipedia, undated). Following a series of widely-publicized demonstrations, the child-incarceration practice was discontinued, but shortly thereafter, Scottish activists charged that the Dungavel population included badly-injured victims of torture and rape, who had been scheduled for forcible repatriation to their countries of origin. (Ginn, 2012).

An Excursion to a Mid-Career Enclave

Some prisons are multi-purpose facilities. Greenock prison in Scotland had been originally intended to function as a repository for offenders sentenced by courts in the West of the country, but business was unexpectedly slow. Fortunately, the grounds of the prison contained several single-accommodation housing units that were self-contained and lent themselves to being administered as mini-prisons within the prison. One of these housing units was Durroch Hall, and this building was drafted to serve in an exciting new capacity, as a setting to offer enriched programming for long-term prisoners during the mid-career stage of their incarceration. The advertised intention was to "provide a national facility for selected prisoners serving 12 years or over, affording them an opportunity for

progression towards release" (Wikipedia, undated). My assignment was to assist in this endeavor by working with residents and staff to try to add further detail to Durroch Hall's mission statement.

The idea was congruent with prevailing practice. As I noted at the time (Toch, 1995,) "mission statements are taken seriously in Scotland, where quality management strategies are popular. The Prison Service has a mission statement, as do all prisons and autonomous special units" (p. 38). Whether Durroch Hall as a mere cell block could qualify under this precedent was a matter of definition, depending on how the enclave's autonomy was construed. In any event, we barged ahead, but my impression was that the project was starting out on a distinctly inauspicious note:

I [had] cited the Prison Service mission statement, and the prisoners questioned whether this statement guided the agency's actions....One inmate reviewed a long and checkered prison career to document his reluctance to place trust in new initiatives. Another prisoner cited societal and systemic constraints to make a case for the proposition that local reform was futile. Other prisoners opined that mission statements should be drafted after more fundamental concerns had been addressed (ibid.)

With the support of Derek Watt, Durroch Hall's principal officer (and its de facto warden) the discussion was gently refocused, and several mission-statement planks were nominated and considered. To my mind, the most impressive example of diplomatic compromise that was crafted by the group was the following (lightly edited) provision:

Staff in D Hall will enforce prison rules **with flexible consistency**, maximizing fairness and equity, while considering special needs and and mitigating circumstances of individual prisoners (I have added emphasis).

The most hotly-debated and controversial plank that emerged read somewhat as follows:

Uncontrolled use of serious drugs poses a danger to the [D Hall] community, and such usage will be discouraged by prisoners and staff.

Three draft provisos appeared to have particular application to the mid-career status of the Durroch Hall residents, and therefore worth recalling:

Staff in D Hall is mindful of the importance of family ties to the welfare of prisoners. All possible effort will be made to create a climate for visits and family contacts that will make such experiences pleasant and profitable.

Prisoners in D Hall are dedicated to the constructive use of their time, given the goal of eventually becoming contributing members of society. Staff are dedicated to fully support prisoner efforts at self-advancement.

And,

D Hall prisoners and staff are aware of the danger that sentence planning can become a meaningless exercise if the process is not taken seriously by every officer and prisoner; opting out of sentence planning will be discouraged, and every effort will be made to implement sentence planning recommendations.

The proceedings to this point had operated with textbook efficacy, until the discussion was redeployed by one of the prisoners at the meeting. The man's gambit happened to violate a particularly impressive mission-statement proviso that had been formulated earlier during the session:

D Hall intends to operate—insofar as it can—as a prison community. A community aims at free, open and honest communication—especially between prisoners and staff. A community makes decisions for the common good, in the interest of its majority but with full regard for those of its minority, especially prisoners who are disadvantaged or vulnerable.

Descending the Maslowian Escalator:

Durroch Hall had been advertised as offering "single cells and en-suite toilets," but the number of single cells (54) was usually short of the demand for accommodations, requiring some more-or-less-temporary double celling. This set of circumstances framed the ensuing digressive discussion, which was increasingly animated:

The debate next turned to issues of a housekeeping nature and focused on assignments to double and single cells. The ostensible issue was the prioritizing of single-cell assignments, but the concern revolved around a specific individual and his assignment, with pressure to exact a decision in this matter becoming quite intense (Toch, 1995, p.38).

This procedural gambit was much more consequential than it sounded, because the objective was to evict a person who was not present at the meeting, in favor of someone who prominently was. While this sleazy campaign failed, the attempt to hijack the agenda of our meeting succeeded to an unfortunate extent:

At this stage the mission statement had to be tabled, but the group expressed satisfaction at the opportunity for what it saw as an open and honest exchange. This satisfaction was somewhat tempered when the prisoner on whose behalf cell-assignment pressure had been exercised exploded in anger and left the meeting in a huff. It was subsequently resolved that the mission statement project would be resuscitated at a more convenient juncture (Ibid).

There is always the danger in efforts to orchestrate organizational change that at unexpected moments unresolved needs of individual participants relating to lower (physiological, safety, or ego) levels of the Maslowian hierarchy can be triggered, and culminate in unscheduled expressions of anxiety. Such occasions are particularly prone to arise in settings which have been heavily in the business of responding, or failing to respond, to lower-level needs. If personal and organizational development is to be achieved in such settings, a continuous effort is required to divorce the substance of reform from the extrinsic reward/punishment system. In prisons this is particularly hard because the

prisoner's progress can be equated (especially by the prisoner himself) with increased access to fringe benefits or with degrees of amelioration of sanctions. Unfortunately, progressive prison systems can add to the problem because they often proudly institute, emphasize and institutionalize the punctilious deployment of mickey-mouse incentives as an advance over their obsessive deployment of mickey-mouse punitive sanctions. Prison administrators can defend this practice as humane—which it relatively speaking, may be. But they can also invoke behavioral science as their authority—and psychology in particular. The problem probably lies in the prevailing conception of psychology as a discipline, a conception which short-changes some of our traditional concerns—those relating to singular human personality attributes and aspirations, in favor a more attractively simplistic conception of human nature and motivation.

For a number of reasons—including the obvious need to prevent wholesale stultification, deterioration and impairment, the administrators of prisons have always had to take cognizance of distinctly psychological issues, though they may not have labeled them as such. These are the sorts of concerns that have to do with the requisites for surviving under stressful conditions of incarceration, and the limitations to human resilience under stress (Toch, 1975, 1992).

As the job specification of progressive prison administrators has evolved, their “psychological” concerns have come to include the concern with providing a meaningful prison experience to long-term inmate—to offer a prison existence that transcends mere physical and emotional survival. The notion of enabling in-house careers accommodates this expanded mission, and it presupposes that opportunities can be provided to keep pace with the evolving skills and expanded horizons of inmates. These career paths would be expected to vary, depending on the interests and motivation of the prisoners, and their maturity and level of development.

In sentence planning, as a case in point, the interests and motives of the prisoner are engaged in an effort to encourage activities designed to enhance his or her personal knowledge and skills. One presumes the prisoner would be an enthusiastic participant in this process, and in the pursuit of its goals. The prisoner would therefore be expected to enjoy any achievements attained as he progresses, and as his career unfolds. These are intrinsic rewards, and they do not exclude (nor compete with) any rewards that the prison might provide to communicate its approval of the inmate's dedication. By the same token, the prison's dispensation of benefits would not materially affect the attainments to which they respond, though they might enhance the satisfaction they yield. On their own, however, the prison's “incentives” can become a diversion: The prisoner whose life revolves around the pursuit of fringe benefits is likely to be an uninspiring deadbeat.

So as not to end on a negative note, let me add the following caveat: As long as we imprison many persons for unconscionably long periods of time, our prisons have to shoulder the obligation to support, encourage and reinforce the personal development of the long-term residents of prisons. To the extent to which any incentive system can contribute to this objective (rather than detracting from it), it must be considered a constructive application of psychological knowledge.

The Lively Afterlife of Darroch Hall

Darroch Hall in the nineties had attempted to provide a stimulating environment for long-term prisoners in mid-sentence. It continued to discharge this function for a decade thereafter, until (in September 2007) the premises were requisitioned to serve a different clientele. For the following two years, the building was inhabited by young offenders serving relatively short sentences. According to a report of the period, “a major advantage of Darroch Hall is that the young offenders being held there are now closer to their homes. There are five visit sessions allocated to YO’s each week....The visit facility is bright and spacious; hot and cold refreshments are available, and there is a children’s play area....Visitors spoken to were positive about the visit experience and the individual information and support available.” On other counts, the report noted that there were many formal and informal educational opportunities available, with “very good relationships between YO’s and education staff,” and that “young offenders spend a lot of time out of their cells” and “the YO’s spoke of the ‘day going quickly.’” (HM Inspectorate, 2009).

In March 2009, before the encomium of Darroch Hall as a YO prison had been finalized, the cell block was transmogrified—on what was designated an “emergency” basis-- into an overflow repository for female prisoners. Press reports under headlines such as “Cons in Telly Catfights” talked of a crisis in the prison from which the residents were drawn. As per the succinct headline above, there were reports of proliferating conflict, and a prison’s “insider” was quoted as explaining, “When the natives are restless, it spells trouble for everyone and they decided to ship them out before it gets out of control” (Daily Record, 2009). Putting aside the unusual circumstances of this last move, the history of Durroch Hall neatly conformed to an organizational model which has been called “unit management:”

The idea of functional units was simple: take a prison and divide it into smaller groups of inmates and staff members. Each group of inmates (50-100 in 1970) would have its own staff team. The inmates would stay with their units and would be individually programmed. Each unit would become a specialized “mini-prison” within a larger prison...The arrangement is analogous to neighborhoods in a city. Each neighborhood can be intimate... [and] has its own cultural flavor (Toch, 1990, p. 15)

Each cohort of prisoners in units such as Durroch Hall comes paired with its own team of staff members who have special skills and qualifications to run programs that meet the unique need so their charges. Durroch Hall neatly met this prescription, but the rest of its checkered history may have been less than ideal: At some juncture, one would expect the staff team and prisoners of a functional unit to take up permanent residence in their new home.