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Chapter Title:

Beyond loss of liberty: how loss, bereavement and grief can affect young people's prison journeys

Chapter Summary:

Drawing on the research literature, this chapter adopts a broad conceptualisation of loss, encompassing bereavement as well as the full range of more ambiguous losses. The role that loss, bereavement and, in turn, grief can play in the journey to, through and from custody is discussed. The chapter begins by outlining how the nature and experience of loss, bereavement and grief in childhood can affect young men's behaviour and ultimately lead to involvement in offending. The chapter will then explore how institutional responses to offending, such as the use of residential care, secure care or custody often amplifies or creates additional losses, and also how the institutional context itself can significantly affect young men's ability to cope with loss and grief. The impact that these losses have on young men's self-concept and the practical and perceptual barriers that exist for personal change, social reintegration and desistance are discussed.

Introduction

Recent UK statistics suggest that reoffending rates following release from custody remain stubbornly high, at 59.3% of adults serving less than 12 months and 69.4% of young people aged under 18 (Ministry of Justice, 2017). Successful rehabilitation and reintegration from prison are the foundation for reducing offending and providing the right environment for desistance. In order to best support these processes it is essential that the needs of young people in custody are fully understood and met. Contemporary evidence-based practice in this field is frequently concentrated on identifying and managing risks through the Risk Factor Prevention Paradigm, which has developed from longitudinal studies of the antecedents of crime in young people (Kemshall, 2007). However, the reoffending rates indicate that there are limitations to the success of this approach, and it has been argued that the dominance of this model means that other pertinent factors that are deemed ‘non-criminogenic’, such as the trauma and grief caused by loss and bereavement, are often little understood and therefore overlooked by practitioners (Hester and Taylor, 2011).

In order to address this gap in knowledge and practice, this chapter will draw on the research literature to highlight the role that loss, bereavement and grief can play in shaping young men’s journeys to prison, through prison, and onwards into their reintegration back in to society.

A link between loss, bereavement, grief and offending behaviour?

Loss and bereavement are universal human experiences and are by no means confined to particular societal groups, but young people involved in offending do appear to be more vulnerable to these experiences than the general population. Draper and Hancock (2011) found that young people who had been parentally bereaved by the age of 16 were significantly more likely than those who had not been parentally bereaved to score above the cut-off for ‘delinquent’ behaviour in a teacher’s assessment. Similarly, a study of persistent young offenders aged under 16 found that, although bereavement rates were similar to the general population, the occurrence of multiple; parental; and traumatic bereavements (such as those precipitated by murder, suicide or overdose) was greater than anticipated (Vaswani, 2008). By the time the prison gates had been reached, bereavement rates had increased to more than 90% of young offenders aged under 21, with at least three-quarters also having suffered a traumatic bereavement and two-thirds finding themselves bereaved on four or more separate occasions (Vaswani, 2014).

Although the death of a significant person is the image that most often springs to mind when considering the concept of loss and grief, these emotions can also be triggered by a much broader range of losses, many of which may appear on the surface to be small, transient or even inconsequential. Such losses can be caused by: divorce and separation (Mooney et al., 2009); parental imprisonment (Bockneck et al., 2009); parental addiction or physical and mental ill-health (Darbyshire et al., 2001; Graham, 2012); moving house or school (Graham, 2012); and entering residential care or custody (Brodzinsky, 2009). Young people involved with the criminal justice system often have troubled and chaotic backgrounds characterised by these types of losses, with up to half of young people in young offender institutions previously or currently looked after (Blades et al., 2011).

While not necessarily as final as death, these losses can be difficult to deal with precisely because they are less understood or less validated by society, with little in the way of rituals to mark the loss and a lack of professional support (Boss, 2006). In addition, the uncertainty and ambiguity caused by these types of losses can mean that they are very difficult to resolve, with the resulting grief and trauma persisting indefinitely to the point that it becomes chronic (Boss, 2006). Lastly, multiple losses, and in

particular losses that are perceived as a voluntary rejection such as abandonment, can result in problematic attachment relationships, meaning that young people withdraw from or reject the relationships and connections that can provide them with much-needed social support (Samuels and Pryce, 2008; Shaffer et al., 2006).

The relationship between childhood experiences of loss and bereavement and later offending behaviour is complex and not easily unpicked from the current knowledge base. Multiple bereavements (four or more) are associated with a significantly increased risk of depression (Harrison and Harrington, 2001) and traumatic bereavements can result in a more complicated grieving response (Dowdney, 2000). Unresolved grief and trauma can lead to challenging and risk-taking behaviours in adolescence and adulthood, such as substance misuse (Vaswani, 2014); risky sexual-behaviour, suicide (Felitti et al., 1998) and a disregard for danger (Wright and Liddle, 2014). Bereaved young men in prison often link their bereavements with precipitating a downward spiral of destructive and offending behaviour, and at times directly attribute these experiences to their entry in to prison (Vaswani, 2014). With this in mind it is not difficult to see why, in their study of bereavement among young male offenders, Finlay and Jones (2000:p569) conclude that “severe emotional stressors, particularly traumatic bereavements, in childhood or adolescence are linked to offending and maladaptive behaviour”.

It is not necessarily that straightforward, however; others suggest that loss is not a criminogenic factor in itself, but that mediating factors such as reduced parental monitoring (Isherwood et al., 2007) or exclusion (Berridge et al, 2001) are implicated. Lastly there may be no causal association at all, and the relationship could simply reflect the parallels between the risk factors for offending behaviour and for premature death such as family conflict, poor housing, addiction and community violence (Childhood Bereavement Network, 2008). Whatever the mechanisms involved, the overrepresentation of substantial and challenging loss and bereavement experiences among young people involved in the criminal justice system is undeniable, to the extent that Leach et al., (2008) argue that the presence of traumatic grief should be considered in all prisoners.

The institutional context of dealing with loss and grief

The institutional context also needs to be considered in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how young people in custody are affected by loss and grief. Entry into custody marks yet another loss in the lives of already vulnerable young people, not only the obvious loss of liberty, but also separation from friends, family, social support and normative life experiences. The loss of these relationships is perceived to be one of the most painful aspects of custody (Murray, 2005). A study drawn from the narratives of 23 males aged 16-20 in a Young Offenders Institution found that the shame of entering custody was often the final straw for already strained and fragile relationships, with many of the young men feeling rejected by their parents or partners, or in turn rejecting their loved ones as a defensive mechanism (Vaswani, 2015). These disordered and problematic attachment relationships are formed over a lifetime of adversity, but are exacerbated by the separation of custody.

There are also losses that are related to the ramifications of having a criminal and custodial record. Such losses include the very real loss of education and employment opportunities, and by extension, the loss of future hopes and ambitions that are experienced by young men as a result of a prison sentence (Vaswani, 2015). The pain caused by this loss of opportunities is ultimately about the loss of a future ‘possible self’ (Markus and Nurius, 1986). This possible self represents the ‘ideal’ person that the individual had imagined that they could become, shaped by the professional and social roles that were assumed possible to attain: father: husband: teacher; a mechanic; a success, but is also shaped by the ‘feared’ self who is the person that the individual strives not to be: a drug user; a bad father; a failure.

Finding these hopes dashed by the twists and turns of the lifepath can often be “...experienced as a kind of bereavement for oneself; the loss involving lost worlds, lost futures and lost identities” (Jewkes, 2005:p370).

Another significant loss that can be linked directly to the prison environment is that of loss of ‘status’, in this context referring to the loss of position, power, or respect in the social environment. With young people already afforded a lower status in society by virtue of their age, young prisoners can be further marginalised by the shame and stigma caused by their offence (Vaswani, 2015). Furthermore, by necessity, the prison regime creates power imbalances and removes individual agency to make simple everyday decisions about when to get up, or what to eat, or how to spend each day (Sykes, 1958; Vaswani, 2015).

These sometimes intangible losses often go unrecognised, or may be viewed as the *just deserts* of a system ostensibly designed to punish as well as rehabilitate. Not recognising, acknowledging or accepting these losses can disenfranchise young people’s grief, meaning that grief can remain unresolved (Doka, 1999). Even dealing with unambiguous losses such as bereavement can be complicated by the custodial environment. Social roles and gender norms mean that young men in general are often reluctant to seek support, talk about their emotions or display signs of weakness but in the hyper-masculine environment of a male prison these pressures take on a different magnitude. Bereaved young men in prison tend to put on a front in order to maintain their status and ensure that they do not appear vulnerable among their peers (Vaswani, 2014). Separation from usual sources of social support, such as family, further reduces opportunities to seek help (Leach et al., 2008; Vaswani, 2014). Security restrictions on participation in important rituals such as funerals; grave-side attendance; and saying goodbye to the terminally ill, while understandable, also deny young men a socially acceptable occasion to express their grief (Vaswani, 2014).

The prison regime also interferes with the ability to grieve by reducing the autonomy to choose how to manage grief, which has significant consequences for successful navigation through the mourning process. Stroebe and Schut’s (1999) ‘Dual Processing Model’ depicts two different categories of activities that characterise an individual’s response to bereavement: loss-oriented activities such as reminiscing, yearning and crying that involve actively focusing on or processing aspects of the loss; and restoration-oriented activities that involve deliberately distracting oneself from aspects of the loss in order to allow time off from the pain of grief as well as restoring a sense of well-being and facilitating adjustment to new roles and circumstances. In the early stages of grief loss-orientation naturally predominates, but Stroebe and Schut’s model emphasises the dynamic oscillation between both sets of strategies that is necessary for successful coping over time. Spending too much time in one activity or the other is perceived to be detrimental to both physical and mental health. Yet the confines of the prison environment can offer too little space to privately reflect on emotions and experiences (Irwin and Owen, 2005), or conversely too much time and space for unstructured reflection, with young people unable to distract themselves from their grief (Vaswani, 2014). When understood in the context of such models of processing loss and grief, it is easy to see how the ability to deal with grief in prison is severely impaired.

Thus, loss and bereavement affects young people in custody in a multitude of ways, creating layer upon layer of both small and large traumas that must be endured, often without societal or professional support. If these losses go unacknowledged or unaddressed they can manifest as acting out or offending behaviours (Leach et al., 2008). These vulnerable individuals who have already experienced a lifetime of loss and disruption will have reduced reservoirs of resilience to deal with future losses or traumatic events (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006); the additional losses created by the justice system’s response to this

behaviour, such as the use of secure care or custody, can therefore be especially painful, if not, for some, re-traumatising. To then have this loss and grief compounded by a regime that does not allow for individual or optimal ways to process loss and grief leaves grief unresolved. The initial impact of such a perfect storm of trauma is felt immediately in the prison by causing problems with engagement, behavioural and regime management, but in the longer term can cause problems with rehabilitation and reintegration into the community. The following section considers how loss and grief can impede these crucial processes.

Loss-related barriers to successful reintegration and desistance

Unresolved trauma and loss can affect prospects for rehabilitation most obviously and directly by leading to psychiatric, emotional and behavioural disturbance (Gorski, 2006; Leach et al., 2008). Gorski's concept of 'Post Incarceration Syndrome' suggests that, in an already traumatised population, the prison environment can lead to prisoners exiting in a worse state than that in which they entered custody. However, the impact of loss and grief can also be much more subtle. Successful engagement with interventions, reintegration and desistance from crime requires a number of key cognitions, processes and behaviours to coexist within an individual and their social network. First there must be motivation to change, and the recognition that some form of external support may be required to effect that personal change. The supports and resources (internal, informal or professional) that are necessary to facilitate personal change must also be accessible to the individual (Kessler, 1981). The individual must also believe that change is possible, be able to imagine a positive future with tangible goals and to have a clear roadmap to achieving those goals (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). However, the legacy of a life characterised by multiple, traumatic and unresolved losses, as described earlier in this chapter, is that these optimum conditions for long-lasting personal change are less likely to occur due to the distinct, but interrelated, issues of problematic attachments, loss of agency and skills and self-concept.

Attachments and relationships

As described earlier, unresolved loss and grief is likely to be higher among the prison population due to a succession of adverse and traumatic life experiences, exacerbated by the ordeal of dealing with loss and grief while in care or custody. Bowlby (1980) in his work on attachment and loss, noted that unresolved loss in childhood frequently resulted in adverse psychological outcomes and attachment disturbances, most commonly over-anxious attachment (e.g. clinginess and the tendency to form inappropriate bonds) or a complete deactivation of attachment behaviour (e.g. avoidant behaviour and an inability to form bonds with an appropriate caregiver or other adult). Although variations in the classification of attachment styles have been developed since Bowlby's original work, this broad distinction, and the avoidant attachment classification in particular, remains useful when considering the role of loss and grief in supporting or hindering the reintegration and desistance process.

Studies suggest that young people have a reduced tendency to seek help for social, emotional and other problems (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005), and that this is observed even more frequently among young men (Möller-Leimkühler, 2002). However, problematic attachment behaviours only serve to reduce help-seeking further, via two main mechanisms. Firstly, individuals with avoidant attachment styles may have more negative views of others, perceiving them to be untrustworthy rather than as a source of help, with this viewpoint extending to professional as well as personal relationships and reducing both help-seeking intentions and help-seeking behaviours (Shaffer et al., 2006). Samuels and Pryce (2008) coined the term 'survivalist self-reliance' when describing this disconnection from relationships and active rejection of help among young people transitioning out of foster care. Secondly, social support networks facilitate help-seeking behaviours by providing sources of support, encouragement, advice,

role-modelling and help (Rickwood et al., 2005). Yet problematic attachments create deficits in social competencies, which in turn reduces the likelihood of help-seeking as individuals do not develop the kinds of social support networks within which sufficient help is available, or find their social relationships sources of stress rather than support (Mallinckrodt and Wei, 2005).

This latter point also has particular implications for the successful navigation of the desistance process, which crucially hinges on social relationships and the concept of social capital. Laub and Sampson (2001) argue that onset, persistence and desistance from crime occurs with shifts in the predominant source of social bonds and the social control that such bonds exert over the individual. Over the life course, this tends to shift from family to peers (often associated with the onset of offending, and, in terms of social development, with the onset of adolescence) and later to spouses, partners or employment (with a corresponding move towards desistance, and, in terms of social development, with the onset of adulthood). Thus they conclude that "...strong social bonds could explain desistance from criminal behaviour in adulthood, despite a background of delinquent behaviour" (2001:p19). However, losses and problematic attachments during childhood mean that young people often lack the *physical* presence of social bonds (for example, due to the death of a parent) or do not have the *emotional* investments in their social relationships due to a lack of a secure, stable family base whilst growing up (Samuels and Pryce, 2008). In adulthood these attachment styles can hinder the development of the social relationships necessary to exert positive social control and facilitate desistance, such as prosocial intimate relationships.

Agency and skills

It was outlined earlier in this chapter how the use of custody can result in the loss of status, most notably loss of power and autonomy to make even everyday decisions. This loss of autonomy, first outlined by Sykes in his influential depiction of the five pains of imprisonment, can reduce individuals to a state of 'childlike helplessness' that has a negative impact on functioning upon release (Sykes, 1958; Jewkes, 2005) and interferes with the process of maturation (Maruna and Toch, 2005). Successfully, and rapidly, adapting to the restrictions and routines of prison life is important for navigating and surviving the custodial journey (Souza and Dhami, 2010; Vaswani, 2015). Yet the process of adaptation to the regime can result in what Clemmer, in his 1940 book *The Prison Community*, termed 'prisonisation' which erodes social roles. Over time "...the loss of knowledge, skills and habits occurs. This leads to antipathy and loss of interest in social self-realisation. These changes create an obstacle for a later return to society." (Žukov et al., 2009:p203).

It could be argued that these obstacles are even more insurmountable when considering the use of custody with young people. Whereas adults and young people alike are deskilled while in prison, young people are less likely to have had the opportunity to establish competence in these important life or work-related skills in the first place, and therefore have little in the way of past knowledge, skills or confidence to draw on upon their return to the community. Employment can, for example, encourage increased self-esteem and engender an alternative and constructive self-concept as well as positively influencing social relationships, all of which are associated with desistance from crime (Owens, 2009); being deskilled clearly poses a practical barrier to this process. Yet the *perceptual* barrier presented by a sense of powerlessness and loss of agency can present an equally formidable barrier for desistance, with a sense of motivation, of hope and of human agency being pivotal in this process (Maruna, 2001). Without a sense of efficacy and competence, goals and ambitions may appear to be unattainable and be written off. Indeed, continued involvement in crime can provide a much needed sense of agency, autonomy and self-respect that may not be forthcoming from mainstream society (Maruna and Toch, 2005).

Self-Concept

There are two key issues identified with a sense of self that might be implicated in unsuccessful reintegration and desistance. Firstly, the loss of stability in the backgrounds of many young people in custody, with parents, siblings and friends caught in the revolving door of prison, can leave them with a sense that their own prison sentence was predetermined (Vaswani, 2015). This increases the likelihood of a self-fulfilling prophecy in which the negative view of self can lead to a detachment and disengagement from prosocial peers and activities. This negativity is then reflected back in the disapproving response of other important figures such as family or teachers and can lead to a spiral of increasingly poor behaviour. Entering custody as a young person can cement these beliefs as adolescence is a critical time in the development of a sense of identity, and prison is an environment that already provokes deep questions about self-identity (Maruna et al., 2006). Given that adopting a prosocial identity is crucial in the process of desistance (Maruna, 2001), that such a self-concept becomes ingrained in many young people in custody is likely to impede sustained reintegration and desistance, as a positive future becomes difficult to align with the individual's self-concept.

Even for those who had some hope and ambition for the future, the practical barriers posed by a criminal history and prison record mean that employment opportunities and life chances are reduced (Maruna, 2011). Less tangible barriers also exist. The loss of the future possible self not only affects self-esteem by removing the imagery and potential of a positive future self, but also removes a direct driver of behaviour (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). The discrepancy between the current conceptualisation of self and a future possible self can act as a motivator for desistance and can hint at strategies and plans for attaining this goal, instilling a belief that change is possible (Paternoster and Bushway, 2009). Without a future possible self to strive for, and without hope, long-lasting personal change becomes a more challenging goal.

Conclusions

This chapter has drawn together the research literature to demonstrate the nature of the losses that have been experienced by young people in custody, losses that extend well beyond the immediate loss of liberty. From conspicuous bereavements, to less tangible losses, and to those losses caused by the system itself, these are not isolated cases but are reflective of a widespread problem among young people in all forms of institutions including residential care and across all reaches of the justice system. As a minimum, practitioners need to be alert to these losses that can precipitate or sustain involvement in offending behaviour, even if they are not defined as a criminogenic risk per se, and should also consider the presence of issues related to unresolved loss and grief for all people in care or custody (Leach et al., 2008). Yet it should not be forgotten that loss and grief are universal human experiences and are not limited to one specific section of society. Many of these losses and traumas have occurred, and have been left to go unresolved, long before the prison gates are reached. This sad fact reiterates the importance of preventative action, especially through the provision of universal loss, grief and death education at the earliest possible stage (Ribbens McCarthy, 2005).

It is clear that loss and grief can affect every stage of a young person's journey to, through and from prison. Addressing such losses requires a multi-pronged approach from prevention, organisational and societal culture change as well as specific therapeutic interventions. The breadth of such an approach may not only help to prevent some offending behaviour in the first place, and help to reduce behavioural management and non-engagement issues while in custody, but might also facilitate the processes of reintegration and desistance back in to the community. The justice sector cannot afford to continue to ignore these childhood losses.

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