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The pains and gains of imprisonment: posttraumatic growth among incarcerated individuals

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Citation

Ginneken, E. F. J. C. van. (2023). The pains and gains of imprisonment: posttraumatic growth among incarcerated individuals. In R. Berger (Ed.), *Routledge international handbooks* (pp. 393-403). New York: Routledge. doi:10.4324/9781032208688-43

Version: Accepted Manuscript

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

**Chapter 34: THE PAINS AND GAINS OF IMPRISONMENT: POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH
AMONG INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS**

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This manuscript is the pre-print version of a chapter in *The Routledge International Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth*, edited by Roni Berger (<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032208688>)

Citation:

Van Ginneken, E. F. J. C. (2024). The pains and gains of imprisonment: Posttraumatic growth among incarcerated individuals. In R. Berger (ed.), *The Routledge International Handbook of Posttraumatic Growth* (pp. 393-403). Routledge.

Chapter 34: THE PAINS AND GAINS OF IMPRISONMENT: POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH AMONG INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS

Esther F.J.C. van Ginneken

Abstract

The potentially harmful effects of imprisonment are well documented; however, less attention has been paid to formerly incarcerated people who report experiences of growth associated with their incarceration. This chapter discusses posttraumatic growth (PTG) attributed to the experience of imprisonment. While imprisonment is associated with many possible harmful consequences, there is evidence that these can co-exist with positive experiences. It is discussed how PTG manifests, its likelihood to persist beyond imprisonment, and how it can be explained. Two main mechanisms can be distinguished: cognitive processes that lead to a re-evaluation of one's life, and socio-supportive characteristics of imprisonment that trigger and facilitate a transformation. The chapter ends with reflections on how positive change among incarcerated people may be facilitated.

At present, roughly eleven million people are incarcerated worldwide (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). The United States has the highest incarceration rate at 629 per 100,000 inhabitants, while the world prison population rate is 140 per 100,000 people (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). Imprisonment affects both the people who are incarcerated and their families, friends, and communities. The harmful effects of incarceration have been extensively researched, and include psychological distress (Crewe et al., 2017; Haney, 2012), decreased opportunities in the labor

market after release (Decker et al., 2015; Ramakers et al., 2014), ruptured relationships, and intergenerational problems, such as a heightened risk of criminal behavior among children of (formerly) incarcerated individuals (Besemer et al., 2011; Mears & Siennick, 2015). It is also well established that incarcerated people are more vulnerable than their non-incarcerated counterparts in terms of physical health, mortality after release, and mental health (Butler et al., 2006; Fazel & Baillargeon, 2011; Zlodre & Fazel, 2012). Many incarcerated people have histories of traumatic experiences and these are associated with various negative outcomes, including posttraumatic stress disorder (Bowen et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021). Incarceration may exacerbate these traumatic experiences, especially when people are victimized in prison (Wolff et al., 2007). More surprising – and not nearly as well researched and documented – is the manifestation of posttraumatic growth (PTG) among (formerly) incarcerated people. In the context of imprisonment, PTG can be understood as self-reported positive changes attributed to the experience of incarceration. These changes can occur in a variety of domains, including personal development, relationships, and opportunities for the future (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This chapter starts with a description of psychologically stressful aspects of imprisonment, followed by descriptions of growth, and the mechanisms that may contribute to such experiences.

PAINS OF IMPRISONMENT

Imprisonment is a potentially psychologically traumatic event, because it forcefully disrupts the life course, strips people of their autonomy and liberty, and incarcerates them in a possibly hostile environment. As a result, people are separated from family and friends, and may face irreparable consequences such as the loss of custody over children, and the loss of employment and housing. The first period of imprisonment demands adjustment to the new and stressful

circumstances and is often also associated with uncertainty related to trial outcomes. Studies have consistently found that entry into prison and pre-trial detention are associated with high levels of psychological distress and an increased risk of suicide and self-harm (Fazel et al., 2008; Hawton et al., 2014; Marzano et al., 2016). Thus, imprisonment is both existentially threatening and a real peril to a person's physical wellbeing. Yet, the traumatic nature of imprisonment may be 'frontloaded' leading to possible PTG during, rather than following, imprisonment (and arguably, while the trauma is still ongoing), after a period of entry shock and adjustment.

The pains of imprisonment are extensively described in the criminological literature and are universal (Crewe, 2011; Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020; McKendy & Ricciardelli, 2021; Sykes, 1958), although the effects can vary depending on prison conditions and individual vulnerabilities. Relative to *prison conditions*, even in places where prisons have been characterized as exceptionally humane, in countries such as Norway, the experience of imprisonment inevitably causes distress (Crewe et al., 2022; Shamma, 2014). Many negative consequences following imprisonment do not depend on prison conditions (e.g., loss of employment or housing), although some can be ameliorated (e.g., contact with loved ones). Thus, it is appropriate to apply the psychological framework of PTG to understand why some individuals attribute a positive transformation to the experience of imprisonment. Importantly, this does not diminish the negative consequences that these individuals and others may face, because similar to other potentially psychologically traumatic events, growth and trauma can co-exist in relation to imprisonment (Shakespeare-Finch & Lurie-Beck, 2014). Regarding *individual vulnerabilities*, it is necessary to recognize the complex interplay between the potential trauma of imprisonment and possible traumatic events prior to imprisonment. Incarcerated individuals are likely to have histories of multiple traumatic experiences, including sexual and violent

victimization, combat exposure, and adverse childhood experiences (Ford et al., 2020; Henry, 2020; Skarupski et al., 2016). Imprisonment may aggravate previous experiences of trauma as well as sometimes offer opportunities for support in dealing with trauma; in fact, higher levels of PTG are associated with more (post)traumatic stress (Hearn et al., 2021; Schubert et al., 2016).

GAINS OF IMPRISONMENT

Imprisonment can constitute a ‘turning point’ in people’s life stories; it may be simultaneously the apex of despair and an opportunity for positive change, despite its well-known harmful effects. People may literally describe their imprisonment as a turning point; for example, participants in Van Ginneken’s study (2016) stated “It sounds bad, but I am kind of glad I’ve come to prison because it’s just turned my life around really” and “Coming to prison was the best thing to happen to me. Because it turned my life around” (p. 217). The key element in these narratives is that people perceive the transformation from a bad pre-incarceration situation to a better situation during incarceration, accompanied by the hope and conviction that life will improve after release. Such positive interpretations of the prison experience can be seen as indications of PTG. However, because such experiences have received scant research attention, it is difficult to estimate how prevalent they are.

PTG among incarcerated individuals is not widely recognized or discussed in the literature. Only recently have more scholars started paying attention to positive experiences and interpretations of imprisonment, next to its better-known painful experiences (Crewe & Ievins, 2020; Frois, 2017; Liebling et al., 2019; Maier & Ricciardelli, 2021; Ugelvik, 2022). Even in the literature on extreme experiences of incarceration, specifically prolonged solitary confinement, a pattern is recognized of individuals who demonstrate an extraordinary capacity to cultivate meaning in the experience and emerge stronger (O’Donnell, 2014). Studies of PTG among

incarcerated individuals conducted in Belgium by Vanhooren and colleagues (2016, 2017, 2018) used different methods to gauge levels of PTG and their relation to the search for meaning and coping strategies. The average score on the Posttraumatic Growth-Inventory (PTG-I) in a sample of 365 incarcerated men and women was 2.52, on a 6-point scale (Vanhooren et al., 2018). There was no significant difference in scores between men and women, but levels of PTG were higher among participants who received therapy. Emotional support (e.g., 'I have been getting comfort and understanding from someone'), religious coping (e.g., 'I have been praying or meditating') and search for meaning (e.g., 'I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful') predicted PTG. Behavioral disengagement (e.g., 'I have been giving up trying to deal with it'), on the other hand, was negatively associated with PTG (Vanhooren et al., 2018).

A qualitative study of 30 therapy-involved individuals convicted of sexual offenses revealed that the difficult experience of incarceration was related to experiences of growth. In the words of a participant in Vanhooren et al.'s study (2017): "It is weird. Prison was one of the worst episodes in my life, but at the same time, it gave me the opportunity to change for the better." (p. 183). Participants in this study reported that therapy helped them find meaning in their incarceration experience, and contributed to personal growth.

A study conducted in England by Hearn et al. (2021) found that 48% of 160 surveyed men in prison experienced at least moderate levels of PTG (average scores of 3 or higher on the 6-point Posttraumatic Growth-Inventory scale). This was correlated with perceptions of the quality of relationships with staff, and with the trauma of imprisonment such that if relationships were rated more positively and imprisonment was experienced as more traumatic, levels of PTG were higher.

Other accounts of positive narratives of imprisonment resemble PTG in the sense that they attribute growth in various domains to the (simultaneously stressful) experience of incarceration. For example, Crewe and Ievins (2020) described narratives of positive transformation expressed by a minority of incarcerated men and women in different research projects in England, Wales, and Norway. The analysis of these narratives within a theoretical framework that considers the interaction between the institutional impact of the prison and the individual's biographical experiences showed that together, these individual and institutional factors explain "discourses of reinvention' among incarcerated individuals" (p. 572). The researchers identify three sub-groups among incarcerated individuals whose biographies could help account for their positive experiences. First, women who narrated positive transformation felt protected from abusive relationships, drug addictions, and damaging and degrading forms of sex work. Second, men with histories of serious drug abuse welcomed the constraints imposed by imprisonment on the use of drugs and engagement with damaging social relationships, and saw it as an opportunity to improve their health, moral identity, and prosocial relationships. Finally, men convicted of sexual offenses expressed a desire to be punished, so that they could stop offending and demonstrate a reformed identity (Crewe & Ievins, 2020). Such reinvention narratives can be understood as expressions of PTG.

Criminological scholars are critical of the idea of positive prison experiences and there is still a debate whether PTG constitute a real and lasting change rather than merely illusions of change. There is a strand of research that supports the idea that cognitive change and positive expectations are associated with successful desistance, i.e. the cessation of criminal behavior (Burnett & Maruna, 2004; Doekhie et al., 2017; Giordano et al., 2002; Kazemian, 2020; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Ugelvik, 2022). Narratives of PTG and positive transformation

have been identified among people who have successfully desisted (Comfort, 2008; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012), although Comfort (2008) argues that these individuals adopt the rhetoric of reform in the absence of true correctional support.

Conversely, experiences of PTG during imprisonment may be of a temporary nature when they are a strategy for coping with the stress and inescapability of imprisonment. Narratives of transformation and an expressed motivation to cease committing a crime may be driven by an instrumental motive to demonstrate change in order to be able to progress in the system. For example, Crewe (2009) discusses how ‘pragmatists’ in prison complied with institutional rules and sought to gain rewards through good behavior to make their time easier. Others have argued that prison sentences fail to support narratives of reform with proper rehabilitation support and thus positive intentions are unlikely to translate into sustained change after release (Hart, 2017; Liebling et al., 2019; Schinkel, 2014; Soyer, 2014). Cognitive change is different from a behavioral change, and even those who express a strong intention to live a conventional life may face such substantial hardship that they fall back on crime. Future research on PTG in relation to imprisonment should seek to further examine the interplay between previous traumatic experiences and imprisonment in relation to growth, the influence of prison conditions on growth, how different theoretical frameworks on positive narratives can be understood, and to what extent PTG is durable beyond release.

Mechanisms of PTG

Various mechanisms can explain why the experience of imprisonment can (eventually) contribute to PTG. These mechanisms fall into two broad categories: cognitive processes leading to a re-evaluation of one’s life, and socio-supportive aspects of imprisonment that trigger and facilitate personal growth.

Cognitive Processes

These processes may include reflection and searching for meaning. A recurrent theme in different studies is that a prison sentence offers space and time for reflection (Crewe & Ievins, 2020; Kazemian, 2020; Maier & Ricciardelli, 2021; O'Donnell, 2014). It confronts people with the precarious state of their lives, and the image of what life will be like if they do not change their ways. This image of an undesirable future has been termed the 'feared self' in the Identity Theory of Criminal Desistance (Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), and can trigger a deliberate process of change towards a more desirable future ('the positive possible self'). This is illustrated by Maier and Ricciardelli's (2021) discussion of narratives of change by 56 men who were formerly incarcerated in a Canadian federal prison. Imprisonment "pushed them to reflect on their past lives ... and consider how they envisioned their future selves" (p. 779). Since their past was often characterized by poor choices, substance abuse, low self-worth, and hurting loved ones, they wanted to achieve a future different from their pre-incarceration lifestyle. In the Maier and Ricciardelli (2021) study this future entailed being calmer, drug-free, and having a greater appreciation by loved ones. Positive identities and future goals in other studies similarly involved romantic relationships, fulfilling work, family life, and religion in both men and women (Hoskins & Cobbina, 2019; Kazemian, 2020).

The aforementioned attempts to construct a positive identity are closely tied to a presumed existential need for meaning. The attribution to imprisonment of positive changes can fulfill this need for meaning because it gives the prison sentence a place in a person's life story. This framing is not easy because imprisonment challenges one's assumptions about the world and about oneself, such as the supposition of self as a good person. The strict regulation of expressions of the self (e.g., in terms of clothing and possessions), activities, and contact with the

outside world can be regarded as assaults on individuals' identities and their sense of self-worth (Cohen & Taylor, 1972; Goffman, 1961). Indeed, even narratives of PTG are characterized by descriptions of the initial period of imprisonment as extremely difficult (Van Ginneken, 2016), 'shocking' and 'brutal' (Kazemian, 2020, p. 106). Vanhooren et al. (2015) who studied 365 incarcerated people in Belgium found that imprisonment was associated with a loss of meaning, which, in turn, was related to higher levels of distress, whereas searching for meaning was associated with higher levels of PTG (Vanhooren et al., 2018). There is also evidence that religion can give meaning to the experience of incarceration, for example by interpreting it as part of God's plan (Ellis, 2021). Furthermore, religion can help rebuild a person's sense of identity and self-worth, through a narrative of forgiveness and agency (Maruna et al., 2006), the need for which can be acute when people question if they are good persons and have to come to terms with their offenses and their (sometimes very long) sentences. A participant in Maruna et al., 2006, p. 171) stated:

So what happened to me was, I was desperate. I was charged with murder, first time ever in prison, my whole life had kind of exploded really. It was lying in pieces all around me, I didn't know whether I wanted to live or die. . . . I contemplated suicide, couldn't do that. . . . I was praying, praying more than I . . . had ever prayed before in my life you know, because I really needed some help, and nothing seemed to be happening you know in a really kind of, in a desperate situation you want an answer and you want it now, no answer.

This quote illustrates that the need for meaning may be attached to the need for survival. Religious and non-religious narratives of growth and purpose can help make sense of the

difficult and potentially psychological traumatic situation of incarcerated individuals. A further benefit of religion is that it provides individuals with a community, which can also support and help sustain positive change after release from prison. The impact of prosocial relationships on growth should not be underestimated.

Socio-Supportive Mechanisms

Three mechanisms that potentially contribute to PTG are contact with loved ones, protection from harm, and meaningful activities.

Contact with Loved Ones. Imprisonment can have both a positive and a negative impact on relationships. Despite the fact that imprisonment disrupts relationships with loved ones, some people may rekindle relationships with family while in prison, which can offer them support during imprisonment and assist with re-integration (Kazemian, 2020; Van Ginneken, 2015). The disruption of relationships may strengthen the appreciation of their importance as "being held away from their families appeared to increase feelings of identifying with and belonging to their loved ones on the outside" (Maier & Ricciardelli, 2021, p. 6). Another source of social support can be relationships with staff, when officers are accessible, understanding, attentive to individual strengths, and willing to listen and give counsel (Frois, 2017; Hearn et al., 2021; Liebling et al., 2019).

Protection from Harm. Another explanation for experiences of growth is that paradoxically imprisonment can sometimes protect individuals from further harm. This protection narrative is found particularly among women with histories of abuse who report that prison helped them escape from a destructive situation (Bucerius et al., 2021; Crewe & Ievins, 2020; Van Ginneken, 2016). While entering prison is often experienced as highly stressful, women may come to see it as a respite from their difficult lives, and an opportunity to set out on

a new path. This can only be understood with the knowledge that imprisonment is often one of many potentially psychological traumatic episodes in women's lives (Carlton & Segrave, 2011). Narratives of imprisonment as protection from further harm often speak to the broader abysmal context in which they arise, and can also be interpreted as evidence of the failure of the social welfare system to intervene well before criminal justice agencies became involved (Bucerius et al., 2021). While many women may have lost trust in people and institutions, positive interactions with staff and other incarcerated women in prison can help them re-build their self-worth and trust in others while they are protected from harm from the outside world.

Additionally, prison may present a lower threshold than the outside environment for access to counselling service regarding prior experiences. For example, prison may often be the first place that acknowledges and addresses women's histories of victimization (Van Ginneken, 2016).

Similarly, practical support may be more easily accessible, such as finding accommodation away from the previously harmful situation. These reports of positive experiences do not preclude the possibility that imprisonment itself is harmful and it can compound negative experiences and extend patterns of abuse and control (Carlton & Segrave, 2011; Hoskins & Cobbina, 2019).

Meaningful Activities. Growth may also result from the availability of substance abuse treatment and purposeful activities, such as helping others, training, and education. Individuals with severe substance abuse problems have been documented to report growth following imprisonment and treatment in residential settings (Crewe & Ievins, 2020; Frois, 2017; Hoskins & Cobbina, 2019; Sufrin, 2017; Van Ginneken, 2016). Prison is often seen as the last resort, because it forcibly removes people from environments where drugs and alcohol are easily available. For example, participants in Crewe and Ievins' (2020) study reported that '[they] wouldn't have got off the drugs if [they were] outside' (p. 576). Hoskins and Cobbina (2019)

found that positive changes were more commonly reported by women in a residential substance abuse treatment setting than in jail or prison. Recovery from substance abuse can then lead to new prosocial roles like becoming peer support workers, in which recovered individuals help others who have problems with substance addiction, contributing to a sense of purpose and self-worth (Hoskins & Cobbina, 2019). Helping others can be described as a generative narrative or redemption script, both of which are reported in multiple studies (Maruna et al., 2006; Van Ginneken, 2016), and help reestablish a person's sense of moral worth.

A sense of moral worth, purpose, and positive identity can also be derived from education and training in prison. These activities can give individuals the opportunity to use their time in a meaningful way and reveal possible pathways for life after release, although the availability of programs is limited (Kazemian, 2020; Van Ginneken, 2015). In Kazemian's (2020) study, 70% of the participants reported that they developed useful skills during incarceration, which could vary from specific vocational skills to passions, such as writing, art, and working with computers. In their description of a high achieving prison, Liebling et al. (2019) ascribe importance to the availability of a range of diverse meaningful and creative activities, and the opportunity and support for individual projects as these activities can contribute to a greater sense of self-worth, a sense of meaning, and a positive possible self. Indeed, a large majority of individuals incarcerated in this particular prison reported that they perceived their prison time as an opportunity to change, as illustrated by the statement of one participant:

From cooking meals for those with no cooking skills, bee keeping, taking care of an aquarium, or working with birds of prey, to becoming a barista or a gardener – prisoners were able to find their niche, and along with it, purpose and some gratification. (p. 118).

Conclusion and Implications

This chapter has documented emerging insights on PTG (or otherwise labeled positive interpretations) attributed to imprisonment. These experiences are not as prevalent and visible as the harms of imprisonment, which can explain why they have not received as much scholarly attention. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that positive transformations can be observed among incarcerated individuals in different countries including Portugal (Frois, 2017), France (Kazemian, 2020), England and Wales (Crewe & Ievins, 2020; Hearn et al., 2021; Van Ginneken, 2016), Belgium (Vanhooren et al., 2018), Israel (Vignansky et al., 2018), Canada (Maier & Ricciardelli, 2021), and the United States (Hoskins & Cobbina, 2019). The descriptions of growth against a backdrop of despair are a testament to the extraordinary capacity of human beings to overcome difficulty and find meaning in even the bleakest of places.

In summary, experiences of PTG among incarcerated individuals may derive from internal cognitive processes on one hand and socio-supportive aspects of imprisonment on the other hand. The cognitive processes can entail reflection and a search for meaning that lead to the identification of new purposes, increased self-worth, and a sense of imprisonment as a meaningful turning point. The socio-supportive aspects are related to practical support, substance abuse treatment, protection from harmful life circumstances, and emotionally supportive relationships with staff, peers, and people outside prison. Both processes likely interact with a person's individual characteristics and circumstances, their history, and the prison's climate and resources; for example, individuals with more chaotic life circumstances may be more likely to perceive imprisonment as a respite (Bucerius et al., 2021), and prisons with a greater variety of meaningful activities may encourage more experiences of growth (Liebling et al., 2019). This

offers important practical implications for supporting PTG among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people.

Akin to the dual nature of the mechanisms that contribute to growth, support should also target these two pathways. Importantly, support to sustain positive changes should aim to buffer the stressors associated with re-entry, so that material (e.g., housing and income), health, and emotional needs are met as much as possible. Another important area of support is the recovery from substance addiction, which is more difficult to maintain outside prison in the face of greater temptation (Frois, 2017). Positive identity changes can be supported by the provision of meaningful activities and contact with other people who recognize and reinforce this positive change (Maruna et al., 2004; Nugent & Schinkel, 2016). It would be helpful to connect incarcerated individuals with organizations and volunteers who can fulfil the role of a prosocial and supportive community after imprisonment (e.g., religious organizations). Positive identities can also be reaffirmed by formerly incarcerated individuals' fulfilling a meaningful role as peer support workers, drawing on their own experiences of incarceration, transformation, or recovery from substance abuse to help others (Heidemann et al., 2016; Scannell, 2021). Finally, interventions informed by positive psychology and strengths-based approaches may facilitate growth while simultaneously supporting desistance among (formerly) incarcerated individuals (Mapham & Hefferon, 2012). Overall, it is likely that effective interventions and support need to address both a person's life circumstances and their mindset in order to achieve durable positive growth.

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