

# Making Sense of Imprisonment: Narratives of Posttraumatic Growth Among Female Prisoners

International Journal of  
Offender Therapy and  
Comparative Criminology  
2016, Vol. 60(2) 208–227  
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sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0306624X14548531  
ijo.sagepub.com



Esther F. J. C. van Ginneken<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The literature on prison effects is characterised by a focus on negative outcomes. There is a need to acknowledge individual differences. The theme of posttraumatic growth emerged in a subsample of interviews from a study on psychological adjustment in prison. The narratives of this subsample (six female, first-time prisoners) were used to explore the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth during imprisonment. It is argued that the initial shock of incarceration challenged these prisoners' assumptive worlds, but they managed to overcome this crisis by finding meaning in the prison experience and using it as an opportunity for personal development. This facilitated a positive reconstruction of their identity. The potential implications of posttraumatic growth for desistance are discussed.

## Keywords

posttraumatic growth, imprisonment, female prisoners, identity, desistance

[F]ew experiences are as traumatizing as imprisonment.

—Maruna, Wilson, and Curran (2006, p. 168)

We must never forget that we may also find meaning in life even when confronted with a hopeless situation, when facing a fate that cannot be changed. For what then matters is to bear witness to the uniquely human potential at its best, which is to transform a personal tragedy into a triumph, to turn one's predicament into a human achievement. When we are no longer able to change a situation . . . we are challenged to change ourselves.

—Frankl (1959, p. 112)

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<sup>1</sup>Liverpool Hope University, UK

## Corresponding Author:

Esther F. J. C. van Ginneken, Lecturer, Department of Social Science, Liverpool Hope University, Hope Park, Liverpool L16 9JD, UK.  
Email: vangine@hope.ac.uk

## Introduction

Research on imprisonment has been mostly concerned with the potential negative effects, such as mental health problems (Fazel & Seewald, 2012; Hassan et al., 2011), recidivism (Bales & Piquero, 2012; Nagin, Cullen, & Jonson, 2009), and negative effects on families (Ewald & Uggen, 2012; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012). When researchers examine the impact of prison on people as a group, as they often do in quantitative studies, the differential effects tend to go unnoticed. The “average” effect of imprisonment appears to be a mildly criminogenic one (Bales & Piquero, 2012; Nagin et al., 2009), but there is no appreciation of individual differences, the underlying mechanism, and the interaction between the person and the environment. This article focuses on positive outcomes despite adverse circumstances: It brings attention to the possibility of posttraumatic growth during imprisonment, which has not been explored prior to this study. There is a danger that even a cautious suggestion of imprisonment as a positive experience for *some* people in *some* circumstances will be taken as an argument in favour of incarceration. This would be unwarranted and undesirable, given the well-documented harmful effects of separation, isolation, and institutionalisation. The aim of this study is not to promote imprisonment, but to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of adaptation to imprisonment.

### *Posttraumatic Growth*

Posttraumatic growth is a positive change following an adverse event. “Posttraumatic growth is not simply a return to baseline—it is an experience of improvement that for some persons is deeply profound” (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p. 4). Posttraumatic growth may encompass measurable growth and perceived growth, including positive cognitions about the impact of an event, a changed self-image, and improved psychological well-being. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) argue that posttraumatic growth results from attempts at psychological survival and does not exclude the possibility of experiencing distress. In fact, a substantive amount of initial distress may facilitate posttraumatic growth by testing the assumptive world, which refers to a collection of beliefs about the world and the self (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, 1992). For example, people hold assumptions about how people will behave, how events should unfold, and to what extent we can influence events. Traumatic events can challenge people’s assumptions about themselves and the world in general.

The traumatic experience is not usually viewed as a desirable experience in itself; instead, positive value may be derived from the struggle to overcome the trauma. Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) have identified five domains of posttraumatic growth: appreciation of life, relating to others, personal strength, new possibilities or paths for one’s life, and spiritual change. Posttraumatic growth has been observed in victims of a diverse range of traumas, such as bereavement, war, and cancer (Powell, Rosner, Butollo, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2003; Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006; Znoj, 2006). While posttraumatic growth among prisoners has not been explored to date, there have been studies with ex-prisoners of war (ex-POWs) and former political prisoners (Erbes

et al., 2005; Feder et al., 2008; Salo, Qouta, & Punamäki, 2005; Solomon & Dekel, 2007). These have commonly used Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) to measure posttraumatic growth. Quantitative approaches, such as the measurement of posttraumatic growth with a questionnaire, do not incorporate the hermeneutic dimension of experience, namely, the lived experience and the meaning people attach to it (i.e., the process of making sense). This meaning is often embedded in a person's history and environment, which makes it highly individualised and hard to capture with a standardised instrument. For a better understanding of posttraumatic growth, including its underlying mechanism, it is necessary to understand the lived experience.

### *Narrative Approach*

The narrative approach seeks to understand how people construct their life story, or identity, and how they integrate their (reconstructed) past, (perceived) present, and (anticipated) future (McAdams, 1996). This constructed life story provides a sense of coherence, meaning, and purpose; difficult life experiences, such as the loss of a job, serious illness, or divorce, can pose an identity challenge (Cohler, 1991; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Pals, 2006). Pals and McAdams (2004) contend that the occurrence of posttraumatic growth depends on the way in which people respond to the identity challenge posed by a traumatic event; this may be best assessed by analysing narratives of the traumatic event and how people make sense of its impact on the self. Meaning-making is the active process of reappraising an event, which in the case of posttraumatic growth involves a focus on finding the benefits ("silver lining") in a negative event (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002).

The experience of imprisonment can have a profound impact on self-identity. Entry into prison is associated with assaults on the self, through displacement, loss of personal possessions, and other degradation rituals (Goffman, 1961). Moreover, prisoners are anxious about deterioration and losing their sense of identity (Cohen & Taylor, 1972). Sykes (1958) described how the deprivations inherent to confinement (deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security) determined prisoners' adaptation and relationships with staff. He argued that the penal pains created solidarity among prisoners and fuelled resistance against the system. In a recent ethnography of life in an English prison, Crewe (2009) contends that staff-prisoner relationships have become more relaxed and prison officers rarely use force and coercion anymore (cf. Scraton & McCulloch, 2009). Instead, officers possess a large amount of discretionary power and prisoners have come to rely on good prisoner-staff relationships to move forward in the system. This "soft power" brings about new pains of imprisonment, related to ambiguous standards of behaviour, arbitrary application of rules, and the value attached to psychological assessments (Crewe, 2011a, 2011b). Imprisonment, thus, remains painful.

Feminist criminologists have argued that criminalisation, the impact of imprisonment, and the process of desistance are gendered in nature (Bosworth, 1990; Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Carlton & Segrave, 2013; Comack, 1996; Hannah-Moffat, 2001;

Rumgay, 2004; Worrall, 1990). It is widely recognised that women's histories of victimisation and marginalisation contribute to their offending and amplify the pains of imprisonment and resettlement. Some of the difficulties faced by women are reflected in statistics on mental health and self-harming (Fazel & Seewald, 2012; Ministry of Justice, 2014b). Moreover, female prisoners are more likely to be primary caregivers of children than male prisoners, which has serious implications for the care and custody of children. This is especially problematic given that women are often incarcerated at a considerable distance away from their homes and may lose their accommodation due to imprisonment (Gelsthorpe & Sharpe, 2007). Furthermore, prisons are male-focused, which means that women's gender-related needs are often ignored (Carlen & Worrall, 2004; Easteal, 2001). At the same time, treatment of female prisoners is underpinned by paternalistic notions about femininity and womanhood, which is expressed in discipline through medicalisation, feminisation, and domesticisation (Carlen & Worrall, 2004).

Among stories of damage and despair, one can also find expressions of hope and optimism among prisoners. Imprisonment can have the contradictory effects of harming and preventing harm (Comack, 1996; Segrave & Carlton, 2010). For some people, imprisonment provides relief from a difficult life outside, a sense of community, and symbolises a fresh start. Plugge et al. (2006) noted that the pre-prison circumstances of women are often so poor that imprisonment can have a positive impact on their health and safety. In addition, the destruction of previous worldviews and assumptions may create an opportunity for the construction of new ones; this is how trauma can be followed by growth. In an analysis of prison newspaper articles written by female prisoners, Novek (2005) identified stories not only about intense pain but also about transformation and salvation. Similarly, Maruna et al. (2006) found that the initial shock of incarceration could trigger an identity crisis and lead to existential questioning. Religion provided the prisoners with a framework that could attribute meaning to their experience and help them construct a new, positive self-identity. Maruna (2001) has previously linked these types of redemptive scripts to successful desistance.

A posttraumatic growth narrative during imprisonment may contribute to a positive self-identity and assist the process of desistance. Desistance can be understood as the process that leads to the cessation of offending; this path from criminality to conformity is quite complex (Bottoms, Shapland, Costello, Holmes, & Muir, 2004). Mapham and Hefferon (2012) found evidence of posttraumatic growth among offenders who had participated in a rehabilitation programme ("Silence to Violence" [STV]) 2 to 5 years prior to the interviews. They had participated in this programme while they were still in prison or soon after release from prison and had not since been reincarcerated. The 14 respondents described growth in their relationships, emotional intelligence, identity, and sense of agency, as a result of their participation in STV. However, the authors did not determine whether posttraumatic growth was related to childhood trauma, the prison experience or a combination of both. Therefore, research is needed to establish whether posttraumatic growth can follow from imprisonment. In this context, it is important to recognise that the experience of imprisonment does not take place in isolation from prisoners' lives outside of prison, where they often

face disadvantageous circumstances. Postrelease support programmes often do not adequately address women's needs and structural barriers to reintegration (Carlton & Baldry, 2013; Hannah-Moffat & Innocente, 2013). While there are many similarities in the desistance process of men and women (Giordano, Cernkovich, & Rudolph, 2002), research suggests that women's desistance may revolve more around family responsibilities and the identity of motherhood (Barry, 2007; Runggay, 2004). A sense of self-efficacy and agency has also been found to be particularly important (Hannah-Moffat, 2003; McIvor, Trotter, & Sheehan, 2009); these concepts represent a sense of feeling in control of one's life.

### **Present Study**

This article explores the usefulness of a new theoretical perspective on adjustment to prison by describing the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth among six (purposively selected) first-time, female prisoners in a medium-security prison in England. The focus is on how prisoners construct and make sense of their situation, which is arguably a way of coping with imprisonment. The idea of "making sense" as a way of coping, the parallel with other traumatic experiences, and the potential link with desistance are not well documented. An examination of how prisoners' construction of their environment relates to characteristics of the prison is beyond the scope of this article. However, the study of narratives is important, because they may guide future action and could therefore explain individual differences in adaptation during and after imprisonment. The benefits of imprisonment and changes in self-perceptions reported by prisoners in this study appear indicative of an identity-reconstruction process, which can possibly assist with desistance after release from prison. This study cannot draw conclusions about the extent to which narratives of change and growth in prison resulted in long-lasting change, because prisoners were not interviewed after release. Furthermore, the sample comprises a very specific group of prisoners (female first-timers), so their experiences cannot be generalised to a wider population.

### **Method**

This study originated from a larger qualitative research project on psychological adjustment of prisoners.<sup>1</sup> The sample for this "master project" comprised 15 male and 15 female prisoners serving determinate sentences between 5 months and 5.5 years, who were close to their release. The criteria for the original sample were the ability to speak and understand English, to be released within 3 months to a nearby area, a sentence of 12 months or longer, and the ability to give informed consent. A prison administrator identified the prisoners who met these criteria at the time of the fieldwork, and they were invited to participate in the study. Given the difficulty of reaching a large enough sample, a few prisoners were included with shorter sentences and who would live further away after release. They were interviewed about the following topics (in a semistructured manner): current prison experience, previous prison experiences, release expectations, well-being, personality, and support. During data analysis, a

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics.

Pseudonym	Sentence	Age
Adena	1 < 2 years	18-21
Audrey	2 < 4 years	21-29
Emily	6 < 12 months	21-29
Nicole	1 < 2 years	30-39
Rachel	2 < 4 years	21-29
Vicky	1 < 2 years	30-39

pattern of adjustment emerged among some prisoners that could be best interpreted using the framework of posttraumatic growth. For the purpose of this article, the transcripts of six interviews, in which narratives of posttraumatic growth were clearly present, were re-analysed. The interviews with the six selected participants lasted an average of 50 min. Interviews were transcribed verbatim.<sup>2</sup>

### Sample

Six female participants were selected (all from the same prison in England), on the basis of their first-time imprisonment and expressions of posttraumatic growth.<sup>3</sup> Of the 15 women in the original sample, 10 were first-time prisoners. While this is a high proportion, more women than men in the general prison population have no previous convictions (22% and 10%, respectively; Ministry of Justice, 2014a). Table 1 gives an overview of selected participants and some of their characteristics. The vast majority of women sentenced to prison receive sentences shorter than 4 years (95%; Ministry of Justice, 2014a), so this is also the group of women most likely to be released on a day-to-day basis. The provided details in Table 1 are general rather than specific to protect the anonymity of the participants. Five women were White British, one woman was Black British.<sup>4</sup>

### Analysis

This study employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) to analyse the narratives of participants. The aim of IPA is to explore in detail the individual lived experience and how participants make sense of this experience—in this case, the experience of imprisonment. The objectives are twofold: to *describe* participants' subjective experience and to *interpret* how participants make sense of their experience. Quotes are used throughout this article to describe participants' lived experiences and to illustrate the author's interpretation of the data.

The use of semistructured interviews and IPA allows participants' voices to be heard, which affirmed "the value and meaning of their lived experiences" (Westervelt & Cook, 2012, p. 16). It also gave participants control over part of the research process, as they could open up different areas of inquiry. This is especially important

given that prisoners are a vulnerable population and the interviews covered sensitive topics. One of the challenges of research in prison is to ensure *voluntary* informed consent, due to the inevitable power dynamics. Participants were made aware of their right to refuse participation and withdraw at any time; they were not offered incentives, and it was emphasised there would be no consequences if they did not participate.

The data analysis involved repeated, detailed readings of participants' verbatim accounts for a holistic perspective; this led to the development of analytic themes.<sup>5</sup> This article draws on the following themes: "the initial shock of incarceration," "a silver lining," and "personal development."

## Findings

### *The Initial Shock of Incarceration*

By definition, the experience of posttraumatic growth presupposes the occurrence of a traumatic or adverse event. "Trauma" in the context of posttraumatic growth has not been defined as narrowly as in the context of a clinical diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In the context of research on posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004, p. 1) defined trauma and related concepts as "sets of circumstances that represent significant challenges to the adaptive resources of the individual, and that represent significant challenges to individuals' ways of understanding the world and their place in it." The first period of imprisonment is often accompanied by stress and anxiety. This is reflected in high rates of mental health problems, distress, and suicides (Hassan et al., 2011; Liebling, 2007; Zamble & Porporino, 1988). First-time prisoners in particular do not know what to expect and are confronted with a completely new environment. They lose their freedom, are separated from loved ones, and are suddenly surrounded by strangers. The sudden loss of control, unpredictability, and lack of order associated with the early period of imprisonment may also contribute to a very stressful experience (Gibbs, 1987). Imprisonment is potentially an extremely adverse and traumatic event in the sense that it is unusual and highly disruptive, and has an emotional impact. The extent to which prisoners in this study suffered lasting negative damage was not investigated.

Imprisonment does not necessarily constitute a discrete traumatic event; it often is part of a cumulative history of traumatic episodes and troubled lives. Female prisoners' lives tend to be characterised by structural disadvantage and marginalisation. Carlton and Segrave (2011) argue that the prison experience "constitutes an extension rather than a focal point of the trauma that pervades the lives of imprisoned and formerly imprisoned women" (p. 554). The traumatic nature of imprisonment is thus shaped by women's lives on the outside and their past experiences. For example, the controlling prison environment and power dynamics may be perceived as replicating patterns of abusive relationships (Carlton & Segrave, 2011; Comack, 1996).

Some prisoners struggled with coming to terms with their sentence, because they felt it was an unduly harsh or unfair punishment. This challenged the assumptive world

dramatically (e.g., assumptions about benevolence of the criminal justice system, distribution of good/bad outcomes, and assumptions about themselves and their lives), which manifested itself in symptoms of depression and rebellious behaviour. Below, Rachel describes how it took her 6 months to adjust to prison.

**Interviewer:** How were those six months?

**Rachel:** They weren't good at all, I was always, like, I rebelled against being in jail, I kept getting into trouble and stuff, but obviously, if you get into trouble, then you don't get anywhere in the prison system. So I just knocked it down and started to be good, 'cause I wanna go home.

**Interviewer:** How is your time now different from the first six months?

**Rachel:** I've actually come to terms with my sentence. When I first got sentenced, I felt that I shouldn't have been in jail, because I didn't actually do anything wrong, but then, I suppose . . . you play a part in it by [describes crime—removed to protect anonymity]. But it took me a long time to come to terms with I weren't gonna be out and be able to just do normal things, like, bathe my son, put him to bed, stuff like that. But I'll be going home soon, so I got something to look forward to. A lot of people don't have things to look forward to. And I've got quite a close-knit family and I've got good qualifications, so . . .

Rebellious behaviour may be an attempt to exercise control and autonomy, but such expressions of empowerment are not tolerated by the prison; “Women who assert their power and resist are subjected to repressive, intrusive, and punitive regimes until they are willing to participate in their empowerment” (Hannah-Moffat, 2001, p. 190). Rachel explained her compliance as partly instrumental, even though she also ascribed other benefits to engaging with programmes in prison (see the sections “A Silver Lining” and “Personal Development”). This explanation may have allowed her to come to terms with being in prison, without accepting that she deserved to be in prison.

For Nicole, her prison sentence was also unexpected, because it was her first conviction, and her probation officer had reportedly told her that a prison sentence was unlikely. Being sent to prison severely challenged her assumption of a “just world”—the belief that people get what they deserve.

**Nicole:** At the beginning I felt completely betrayed by the legal system. I have always been a great believer that the justice system was put there to help people like myself and there were always reasons behind crimes and if somebody does commit a crime but then wants help as well, because of that crime, then they would give it to them, and it wasn't. . . . To not ever [have] committed a crime before, ever been in trouble with the police, to then be suddenly given a 12-month sentence and to be handcuffed, escorted, put in the back of a van and brought here . . . I couldn't understand, I'd been punished, to a certain extent, but there was nobody to help you through that.

Part of the traumatic impact of imprisonment, for Nicole and Rachel, was thus that their sentence did not fit with their assumptions and expectations.

The pain of separation from family and friends was another difficult aspect of imprisonment to deal with, especially in the beginning of the sentence—a finding that is corroborated by the literature on adjusting to imprisonment (Adams, 1992; Richards, 1978). This pain may be particularly acute for women with children, because anxiety about custody issues and their children's well-being may compound the pain of separation. There are indications that maternal imprisonment poses substantially more challenges to parenting than paternal imprisonment, because mothers are more often primary caregivers (Dallaire, 2007; Johnston & Gabel, 1995). Three out of six participants had children and the separation caused them substantial distress, especially in the beginning.

**Interviewer:** Have you struggled at all during your sentence?

**Audrey:** I struggled in the beginning because of my son. Obviously being parted from him and that . . . But you sort of learn to deal with it. Because you've got no choice, so you just deal with it. And being away from your family. When things have happened at home and that, like my sister had her baby, my granddad weren't well. Things like that, that breaks your heart. But in regards to jail itself, no, I haven't struggled.

**Interviewer:** How do you cope with things in prison?

**Audrey:** When I first come into jail . . . you don't really know how to cope with things. 'Cause your head's a mess, you think "oh my God." You're thinking about everything, your family . . . especially if you're on remand and you don't know how long you're gonna be here for, that's a horrible feeling. But I sort of . . . I phone home every day, my family are fantastic. I get letters every day, so I'm very lucky. So that's sort of how I cope.

The unfamiliarity with the prison environment is an added burden for first-time prisoners, because they do not yet know how the system works—"how you need to do things to get certain things" (Vicky). However, other challenging aspects of incarceration, such as separation from loved ones and coming to terms with the sentence, are also relevant for repeat prisoners. The traumatic effect of imprisonment is thus unlikely to be limited to first-time prisoners.

### *A Silver Lining*

This selected group of participants did not dwell on the negative impact of their sentence; they were often quick to turn the conversation to something they had learned from the experience. This tendency to emphasise the silver lining is typical of post-traumatic growth; prisoners attribute meaning to their prison experience, which helps them cope. Finding a silver lining, or otherwise called "benefit-finding," is an interpretative process. It is the forming of connections in the mind; while the benefits may not be concrete or objective, interpreting them as such can affect behaviour ("If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences"; Thomas, 1928, p. 572). People are constantly looking for meaning in their lives, for various reasons. Baumeister

and Vohs (2002) identified four “needs for meaning”: the need for purpose, the need for values (what is good or what is right), the need for a sense of efficacy (a belief that one can make a difference), and the need for a basis of self-worth. Similarly, Taylor (1983) argued that people cope with adverse events by finding a purpose in it, rebuilding a sense of mastery and bolstering their self-worth. “[S]uffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning” (Frankl, 1959, p. 113).

Most of the women had destructive lifestyles before they came to prison, characterised by drugs, alcohol abuse, and crime. They viewed the prison sentence as a break away from this lifestyle and a new start.

**Adena:** I’d say the only negative thing about coming to prison is obviously losing my place at university, but . . . It sounds bad, but I am kind of glad I’ve come to prison, because it’s just turned my life around really and if I didn’t come here, I’d still be in the same cycle now and I’d still be doing drugs and drinking and that all the time, so . . . it definitely changed me a lot, so . . . I’m glad.

**Audrey:** But then these, what I come in on this time, that was it. The only thing they could offer was custodial. But that was the best thing for me. Coming to prison was the best thing to happen to me. Because it turned my life around and outside, I think I could have continued to make 101 excuses of why not to get off the drugs. Probably the only reason I had to get off the drugs was my son. But outside, it wasn’t enough. Now, it’s all I think about, but before, it just wasn’t enough.

The support offered in prison played an important role in facilitating adjustment and growth. It gave the prisoners tools to cope with their emotional and substance abuse problems, so that they could see a different future. For Nicole, this meant that she felt able to move on from an abusive relationship: “This [prison] has given me a new life, basically.” While the women gave credit to the prison for facilitating change, this was accompanied by expressions of agency and a sense of self-efficacy, as is discussed further in the section “Personal Development” below.

Many of the women had experienced other traumatic events in their lives, including sexual abuse, abortion, and bereavement. Before they came to prison, they had not sought help in dealing with these experiences. Counselling services in prison were accessible and perceived as very helpful; they appeared to facilitate posttraumatic growth.

**Interviewer:** Do you feel like you have enough support here in prison?

**Emily:** Yes, yeah, lots of support really. The support, like, I didn’t think you would have in here, like, I’m seeing a counsellor about having an abortion; I’m seeing a counsellor here. And only I’ve had one session, but that’s . . . , Already I’m feeling a bit better, just from knowing that there’s someone there like that to talk to. And as I said, going into the job clubs and stuff, that’s help. Knowing that the support is there when I get out, to go to work and . . . so that’s good.

**Nicole:** Because I had a Relate counsellor and that, I was able to deal with the issues that had been causing the depression.

The access to therapy was perceived as a positive aspect of imprisonment. Yet, it needs to be questioned whether therapy in prison can truly empower women, due to the limitations imposed by the controlling environment. "Frequently, therapy is aligned with control and security" (Hannah-Moffat, 2001). The women in this study did not perceive the therapy as a strategy to minimise risk; ironically, prison was the first place where their histories of victimisation were acknowledged and addressed. Nonetheless, it needs to be recognised that power relations and (possibly hidden) interests of risk management do pose problems for the prison as a therapeutic environment.

Despite the lack of autonomy in a prison setting, the women played an active role in turning imprisonment into a positive experience; they made the best of a bad experience. This agency shows in the successful completion of courses and the use of resources in prison.

**Interviewer:** When you look back on the past year, is there anything on your mind that would describe your experience?

**Rachel:** I just think that you have to make the most of a bad situation. I've done quite a bit since I've been in here, like, cookery, like, got qualifications, like, I could open up my own catering business if I wanted to, 'cause I've done all the courses that you could do. I've done health and safety, I've done . . . , I've got better grades in, like, maths and English than when I went to college, stuff like that. It's been a good experience for me I think. I know it's a bad place to be, but I've just made the most of it.

The women in this study gave their prison sentence purpose, by seeing it as a turning point or a new start. They also felt in control of their lives and responsible for the changes they had made and were planning to make. In other words, they had a sense of agency. By reconstructing their identity and focusing on how they had become a better person, they also experienced increases in self-worth. The narratives of change may also be an attempt to resist the oppression and powerlessness related to imprisonment. Mahoney and Daniel (2006) have argued that the opportunity to narrate stories of survival and strength can empower incarcerated women.

### *Personal Development*

In addition to a general sense of growth and a feeling that imprisonment had turned their life around, these six women had also used their sentence as an opportunity for self-improvement in various areas (see also the section above, where Rachel refers to qualifications she had gained). An example of personal development is coming to terms with traumatic experiences from the past (described above). Another important area of improvement is coping skills; that is, the ways in which prisoners respond to setbacks. These narratives about coping consisted of two parts: reference to how the prisoners *used to* cope (usually by avoiding or reacting without thinking) and how they *now* coped better ("think things through," share more, and "keep calm").

**Interviewer:** Is there a difference with how you cope with things on the outside?

**Audrey:** Yes. Because outside, before I come to prison, I spent two-and-a-half years smoking drugs. So I didn't cope with anything. I just blocked it all out. And then . . . When you come into jail and they say, you have a sentence plan done and they're like "oh, you need to do bereavement counselling, you need to do . . . , see [name of prison officer] for domestic abuse," things like this and you think . . . 'Cause you're having to face things with a clear head. But I think that facing them things and dealing with them has made me a much stronger person. And I deal with things just genuinely better. Where I'd lose my temper over things before, I sort of think about now and think "well, look, there's nothing I can do about it, but I'm gonna deal with it this way" and I think things through, rather than just losing me head and going off on one and then thinking afterward, "well you know what, weren't really smart, was it?" So I landed up here [laughs], do you know what I mean? You just think about things a lot different.

**Rachel:** Before [coming to prison] I didn't talk to my partner at all, about problems and stuff, when I felt upset and that, but now, since I've been to jail, it's made me more open and I do share a lot more with him. So that's made us stronger I suppose, because he really knows me now.

Prisoners would often attribute their changes in coping skills to support they had received, such as counselling, an anger management course, or support with detoxification.

**Rachel:** [The anger management course] taught me how to keep myself calm, because I do flip out quite quickly and it just taught me how to keep myself calm really.

As a result, the women also felt more confident that they could tackle problems on the outside; it helped rebuild their sense of self-efficacy.

**Interviewer:** How motivated do you feel now to stay off drugs?

**Vicky:** Now I know I can do it, yeah, I'm quite motivated, I'm positive that I'm not gonna return back to drugs, definitely. No. It's in the past, I've just always thought "oh God, I can't do it, I can't put myself through that" [detox], you know. But luckily it weren't as bad as I thought it was gonna be and I've done it. And I've done all that hard work, so it'd be a bit stupid to throw it all down the drain again and come back to jail. And it's no life really, is it, in and out of jail, being on drugs, you know. I've got to start somewhere, so I kinda use this as a starting point to go forward really.

Later in this section, a quote shows that Emily asserts a similar sense of responsibility for recovering from her alcohol addiction. Such a sense of self-efficacy has been found to distinguish narratives of desisters from nondesisters (Liem & Richardson, 2014; Maruna, 2001); however, narratives of transformation while in prison do not

necessarily translate into real change after release (Soyer, 2014). Further to an increased sense of self-efficacy, the women also experienced an increased sense of self-worth. This was reflected in reports of improved confidence and pride in having learnt new skills.

**Adena:** I've become more confident since I've come into prison. Before, I was quite, like, not a very confident person. Like, really kinda shy, but I've opened up more since I've come here. Like, being around people constantly all the time, you have to talk to people. So I've become a lot more confident.

**Emily:** It [prison] is a positive experience in the sense that it's made me realize . . . it made me a . . . a more confident person.

**Interviewer:** You talked about your confidence changing while you've been . . .

**Emily:** I think, because I didn't . . . Before, I didn't think I really could deal with things without having a drink. But I've proved myself that I can, you know. I've haven't had no . . . I've seen people and that, but I haven't been on a detox or nothing like that, I've done it all myself. That's made me feel happy with myself.

These quotes are examples of positive changes in self-perception, which the prisoners attribute to their prison experience. This fulfils the need for purpose (imprisonment has become meaningful) and the need for self-worth. Whether the changes are stable and persist after release is uncertain; the discussion offers some further thoughts on the potential implications of posttraumatic growth for desistance.

## Discussion

Imprisonment disrupts people's lives, restricts their liberty, and confronts them with new obstacles; it challenges their self-identity and shakes the assumptive world. Many prisoners may experience an "existential vacuum" (Frankl, 1959, p. 106), which can be described as a feeling of inner emptiness, resulting from a lack of meaningful activities. This article has described how some prisoners are able to overcome this crisis, by interpreting imprisonment as a meaningful experience. Posttraumatic growth does not occur for everyone, however; participants in the present study were selected from a larger sample, because they expressed narratives of posttraumatic growth. This small sample allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual differences and similarities in posttraumatic growth in the prison context. The findings from this study provide a useful basis for further research, by offering a framework to understand how some prisoners survive imprisonment by transforming their suffering into growth.

The sample for this study is very homogeneous in nature, which limits the conclusions that can be drawn about prisoners more generally. The participants in this study had all been imprisoned for the first time and were all female. However, this does not mean that posttraumatic growth is limited to this specific group of prisoners. The traumatic elements of incarceration, such as separation from loved ones and being forcefully removed from one's outside life, are likely to be just as painful for men and upon repeated incarceration. The women in this sample were also serving relatively short

sentences and the adjustment process for longer term prisoners may be quite different. Narratives of personal transformation have also been identified among released lifers (Liem & Richardson, 2014), although the meaning of imprisonment in narratives from this population deserves further attention.

While the predictors of posttraumatic growth among prisoners are still unknown, participants identified good support and resources in prison as helpful (see also Blitz, Wolff, & Paap, 2006). Since these factors vary from prison to prison, they may exert a different influence with each prison sentence. Furthermore, a person's state of mind and receptiveness to support are likely to change over time. Previous research suggests that women tend to experience higher levels of posttraumatic growth than do men (Swickert & Hittner, 2009; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996; Vishnevsky, Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Demakis, 2010). Women may struggle with different obstacles and challenges than men, related to their circumstances and backgrounds. For example, a high proportion of female prisoners have been victims of violent and sexual abuse and many struggle with mental illness and drug addiction (Baroness Jean Corston, 2007). Women are often far-removed from their families and may experience high levels of distress related to separation from their children (Johnston & Gabel, 1995; Poehlmann, 2005). Further research is needed to understand the complex person-environment interaction in relation to posttraumatic growth and to what extent men use narratives of posttraumatic growth to make sense of imprisonment.

Making sense of a traumatic experience is more than just a coping strategy; it also provides direction for the future. The prisoners were optimistic about their future, but given the lack of follow-up information, it is impossible to know how they fared after release. It is also important to recognise that the analysis presented in this article disregards the institutional and penal contexts that may necessitate aspirational narratives, but may fail to translate into long-lasting changes (Soyer, 2014). Yet, it is worth exploring how prison environments can become more meaningful and assist with a process of positive and enduring identity transformation, and how positive identity transformation can be achieved without imprisonment. Imprisonment has meaning in its capacity to serve as a turning point or starting point, from which to build a better life. Moreover, prison can provide opportunities for personal development through offering support with problems and resources for learning new skills. The negative impact of imprisonment is widely recognised and this study's findings certainly do not negate this; in fact, they reinforce the traumatic impact that imprisonment can have. Similar or superior outcomes may be achieved with appropriate support in the community, while the emotional pains of separation and practical problems associated with loss of housing and employment could be avoided. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that imprisonment as a sentence is unlikely to disappear, so it is worthwhile exploring how we can best assist prisoners with preparation for release and beyond release.

It is plausible that posttraumatic growth facilitates the process of desistance, because it aids the construction of an identity as nonoffender. Others have argued that identity change does not distinguish desisters and nondesisters but that a sense of agency is more helpful for understanding desistance (Liem & Richardson, 2014). The

idea of strengths-based interventions shows promise for shaping a prison environment in which posttraumatic growth becomes more likely. Various criminologists have advocated a shift from the current risk-and-need-paradigm to a strengths-based approach to resettlement (e.g., Burnett & Maruna, 2006; McNeill, 2006; Ward & Maruna, 2007). In practice, it may be more realistic that such a strengths-based approach supplements a risk-and-need model (Birgden & Grant, 2010), which may compromise ideals about empowering prisoners (Hannah-Moffat, 2001). With regard to postrelease support, it is also important to take into account the structural disadvantages that prisoners face and to pay attention to the different needs of men and women.

While change has to come from within, the belief of others in a person's ability to change can be very powerful (Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, & Naples, 2004). A focus on strengths rather than risks communicates a belief in change and may therefore be essential in the process of desistance. Narrative therapy is also a promising approach to empower prisoners and foster a sense of agency (Mahoney & Daniel, 2006). In addition to efforts aimed at boosting offenders' confidence in their ability to change, there should also be continued support to address social-structural obstacles. In other words, individuals who are motivated to change should be offered "hooks for change" (Giordano et al., 2002). This is especially important for offenders who make the transition from prison to society. Many ex-prisoners face challenges with employment, housing, money, criminal peers, and damaged relationships. Often, prosocial relationships and legitimate employment are part of a nonoffender identity, but they may be difficult to obtain. Indeed, interventions need to work on social capital as well as human capital (Farrall, 2004; McNeill, Farrall, Lightowler, & Maruna, 2012).

In summary, this article has shown that some prisoners may be able to cope with the harmful effects of incarceration by attaching a positive meaning to the experience. This suggests that the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth is also applicable to imprisonment, which has not been previously recognised. It is worth advancing our understanding of good outcomes, such as posttraumatic growth and desistance, so that we can seek to encourage them.

### **Acknowledgment**

The author thanks Dr. Adrian Grounds, Dr. Sytse Besemer, the anonymous reviewers, and the Institute of Criminology's Writing Group at the University of Cambridge for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article.

### **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) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (Grant ES/I02333X/1), the Cambridge Home and European Scholarship Scheme, and the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds.

## Notes

1. The study was approved by the Institute of Criminology Ethics Committee (University of Cambridge) and the National Offender Management Service.
2. Before the interview, participants were given information about the purpose and procedure of the study and asked to sign an informed consent form. All participants gave permission for the interview to be recorded.
3. It is unlikely that posttraumatic growth is an exclusively female phenomenon, even though the present sample comprises only women. The original sample had more female first-time prisoners (9) than male first-time prisoners (2). The "Discussion" section offers further comments on potential gender differences in posttraumatic growth.
4. Eleven out of 15 women (73%) in the original sample were White British, compared with 79% of sentenced women in the prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2014a).
5. The thematic analysis of the transcripts was facilitated by NVivo 9.

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