

How does theater in prison manifest core values of Positive Psychology?

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Introduction

With an ever-increasing global prison population, we reached the total number of 11 million prisoners in 2020. ([Global Prison Trends 2020](#)) It implies greater release and return of prisoners in functional society by year. While the public in different countries have different levels of acceptability for judicial systems, it is necessary to reconsider the purpose and thus methods of prison beyond systematic revenge. Studies show that pure punishment and lack of help together propose a future with higher recidivism and bigger social gaps. Different rehabilitation methods for prisoners are thus valuable to be explored. Notably, the term “theater in prison” in this research includes different methodologies including re-writing play, acting, dancing, rehearsing, directing, watching and reflecting etc.

To link theater in prison with the support of scientific evidence, aspects of psychology are introduced in this research and thus helping to provide better understanding of theater in prison, its application and effect. It also narrows down the focus of the study.

Traditionally psychology treatment mainly focuses on healing the negative side of mental condition. However, in the past 20 years, psychologists developed the concept of positive psychology and proved that mental health is not only the absence of infirmity but also the presence of positive mental indicators. In Particular, Dr. Martin Sligman developed the PERMA model which indicates five core elements of well-being. This model is widely adapted into therapeutic purposes. P, E, R, M, A stands separately for Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment. Each of the factors work individually, however, together they contribute to the flourishing of individuals and communities. (Seligman, 2018, 1-11)

In this study, theater as a method of rehabilitation will be carefully examined with the concept of positive psychology. The research question is how does theater in prison manifest core values of Positive Psychology? Indirect empirical research of 10 different theater-in-prison projects will be qualitatively compared and analyzed through the lense of the PERMA model.

One disadvantage of the study is the lack of outsider perspectives and study against theater prison projects due to resource limitations, which could result in the positive bias on effectiveness and applicability of theater-in-prison projects. On the other hand, a rich amount of personal examples from second hand data and neutrality of the writer could enable a more neutral approach in this research.

The study is divided by five different perspectives of the PERMA model. Each section elaborates one specificity of the five elements and explores the correspondence between fragments in manifestation of theater-in-prison projects and PERMA elements.

Positive Emotion

As one of the most broadly discussed aspects of the traditional well-being model, positive emotions are nearly explored to its full. Eleven recognized common positive emotions include happiness, joy, gratitude, pride, serenity, interest, amusement, hope, inspiration, awe and love. (Carpenter, 2020) According to Dr. Sligman, various positive emotions can increase about different time realms in human experiences with different methodologies. Three main categories here are past, present and future, which theater in prison projects tackle by using various practices.

A. Positive emotion about the past

While every prisoner has the common past experience of breaking the law and public morality, negative emotions such as shame, regret, unforgiveness and sorrow are often accumulated throughout their life and time in prison. Traditionally, prison systems are designed to further strengthen these feelings as a punishment. However, absence of forgiveness towards the past could create more problems in introspecting meaningful and positive aspects in prisoners' new life, which contradicts the rehabilitation purpose of prison.

Different from the traditional ideal of rehabilitation, the nature of theater in prison actually creates a possibility for forgiveness towards the past by constructing a safe and critical space that allows prisoners to examine different stories and see themselves in the stories that they create.

In Wabash Valley Correctional Facility's Shakespeare program, prisoners in solitary confinement are permitted to read Shakespeare's crime tragedies- Macbeth, Othello and Hamlet. With one professional theater volunteer, six prisoners will later discuss the play. One essential discussion topic is the reason for each criminal action, which opens up the topic of prisoners' past and allows them to reflect on their criminal intentionality in the past. For example, one of the questions that has been reflected on is " why did Macbeth have second thoughts about killing Duncan?" On one hand, the question allows prisoners to have creative exploration about the play, and contemplate about the characteristics of the protagonist. On the other hand, by asking questions about the offender in the play, prisoners start to reflect on their own stories. They then talk about their experiences, if they had second thoughts about their offence and why it occurred to them at that moment.

One other way theater in prison manifests this aspect of positive emotion is by allowing prisoners using their own language to create or recreate stories and plays. In some theater projects, prisoners write their own experiences together as a play. By introspecting the past collectively, prisoners get a clearer and easier way of critical reflection on their past life. For example, a great percentage of prisoners have some kind of family issues in their childhood, which they hide by acting cruel and forgetful. However at the point when this conversation starts with real listening and

support of their surroundings, the changes to face the past will begin to follow, which later allows prisoners to better understand themselves and forgive themselves, not maybe for what crime they did, but for who they are as a person and how they came to be.

B. positive emotion about the present and future

Many practises of theater are also about having one's own voice and using that voice to speak for themselves and define who they truly are. In the practice of theater, many of the incarcerated regain mindfulness and empowerment by practise of mind-body connection and savoring of physical pleasure. Examples of these practises in different prison theater programs include: chain-tag, rolling on the floor, dramatised fighting, back massage, trust walk, physical shakeout and so forth. In the project "Somebody's Daughter theater", breathing techniques are taught as part of a fixed program for mindfulness. For many prisoners, because of their family or social background, they have never felt safe to pause and feel themselves. This program on the contrary brings possibility of sensibility and positivity about themselves.(Balfour, 2004, 104) By allowing prisoners to have physical exploration in the theater, they are enabled to reclaim their own bodies and savor their physical pleasure.

In addition, theater in prison allows the positive experience of aesthetics. Prisoners who have no experience in art and theater are newly introduced to this realm of the world. Through different forms of art in theater such as physical movement, light, music, language and literature, prisoners gradually discover their personal definition of aesthetics and their appreciation for beauty. Their imagined limitations in life are transcended, the feelings of love and hope could thus be reawakened.

Engagement

In an actively engaged activity, individuals are immersed in their moments of experience. A byproduct of such high concentration is the cast-off effects of individuals' self-awareness, and the distortion of time in retrospect.

The weekly average time for a prison theater project is 6 hours. Usually one entire production takes place for at least 4 months. In lower security cells, voluntary attendance at the open sessions gives opportunity for inmates to taste what theater is like. After the open sessions, the popularity of prison theater projects usually grows and results in a selection process for the formal production. They then are inner divided into different roles with various responsibilities, which allows prisoners to engage themselves in activities that they are interested in and passionate about. Working with theater in prison projects, directors are self-disciplined to abandon their disbelief of prisoners' abilities, characteristics and potentials. By holding the positive faith for prisoners, directors and volunteers free prisoners to explore and express their aesthetics. It empowers prisoners to be engaging in pursuing their artistic purposes in theater. In The Shakespeare program at Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, the selection of cast is taken care of by a selection committee run by prisoners. The plays are re-written by inmates in highest security cells. Later on inmates in lower security cells will work as different teams to design staging, lighting or to act. While the performances are taking place, all prisons in the region will be able to see the production on live streaming or video recording. Through this medium, the production engaged the entire prison population in a prisoner self-generated introduction to Shakespeare.

Explicit therapeutic purposes are often not proposed to the prisoners in theater in prison programs. As a result, significant proportion of participants are not the ones who are most eager for change, but rather the ones who are interested in theater. Prisoners could potentially believe in their ability and accomplishment without feeling like examined patients. The change in prisoners, although comes to most of them as a surprise, tends to have a tougher and longer lifespan because the prisoners are more engaged in the matter. Self-discovery then follows as a natural effect. According to director Brent, "participant in theatre finds that the life questions, the emotional challenges, simply present themselves and that he or she can explore new solutions and answers by themselves..." (Bates et al., 2011, 274-275)

Relationships

Positive psychology studies reveal relationships as one of the fundamentals for well-being. Healthy connections can create a sense of belonging for individuals. By getting to know each other, offering help and receiving kindness, humans create connections that are necessary for our external existential meaning as social beings. By developing strong relationships, the capacity of love will substantially increase as well as capacity of compassion and empathy, which results in a healthy human being who is capable of being part of functioning societies. The increasing possibility of collective success and accomplishment further contributes to the flourishing of individuals. (Carpenter, 2020)



(In the SingSing prison theater project, prisoner Marquitta watches as Alicia performs her story. Photo: Molly Lane.) (Bates et al., 2011, 148)

In prison theater projects, the merging of different stories makes the inmates a community with each other. Just like in real life, webs of human experiences intersect with each other and merge together disorderly yet beautifully. In practice, couples of prison theater projects manifest the idea of sharing stories and then merging them as a whole. In theater in prison projects like SingSing prison theater project and RTA, prisoners have to listen to each other while their songs are sung, their poems are read and their stories are told. While inmates are trying to be attentive to the big picture, they come to understand and recognize each other and add them into their map of life stories and relationships.

One nature of theater in prison projects is its collaborative orientation. No matter how many people are involved, groups have to learn to interact in a communal environment and manage to work cooperatively on and off stage. It opposes the traditional idea of segregation as a punishment in prison. Obligatory listening, cooperation and leadership occurs in this process either by active choices or passive acceptance. Sometimes, challenges emerge while prisoners practice to reject

humanity as black and white but rather complex and colorful. Some prison theater projects encourage prisoners to actively engage in mistakes and challenges. In guided solution based problem solving processes, prisoners are challenged to accept themselves and each other as complex and imperfect human beings, and learn teamwork with people different from their ideal. One example is “The Power of Shakespeare” program, which has a starting routine for rehearsal to check in with everybody in a circle and share news of each other’s lives. Their rehearsal session usually lasts for two hours, however, if there is any inner conflict between two or more group members, the director Jonathan Shailor would always take the whole session to make the group members help each other to resolve the problems. According to him, “we never rushed these discussions... This aspect of our process, as much as any other, was valued by the inmates, who told me they appreciated the opportunity to ‘act like human beings’.” (Bates et al., 2011, 184-185)

In the RTA project, different levels of actors are mixed together. The ability of remembering the lines caused by factors such as study disabilities challenges the group to adapt to each other. In rehearsals, some degree of physical violence emerges on the edge of security control. However, with multiple assisted active partner negotiation sessions, inmates managed to solve their problems before the premiere of the production. According to one of the inmates Andrew, “[I] learned to gain a little more trust in others as well as communicating better... We all stuck together as a team. We all did well.” The performance connected inmates as they shared the aesthetic and educational experience together. On the stage of life, the collaborative skills they learned on the little prison stage will hopefully raise them above the need to prove themselves as the only right side. Theater in prison projects encourage and teach inmates to grow together with occurring mistakes and conflicts instead of forcing the other people into submission.

Another common requirement for prisoners in theater-in-prison projects is to know about the story of characters in certain plays, and try to understand their characteristics and their drive for certain actions. The attention requires prisoners to stay away from egocentric values and be observant to their surroundings, which is one of the bases for relationship buildup. In some ways, prisoners who re-write plays or act on certain characters also have to put effort into believing the mindset of that character. By trying to understand characters’ lives, mindsets and characteristics, they are then enabled to understand other people in real life. In the program Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA), one of the prisoners Kelly Watts acts the role of a father who is returning from prison. In the article introducing the RTA project, Kelly’s reflection is recorded as below: “ I realized that I was acting the part of my own father. I was able to see his feelings from his point of view. When he came to visit I told him I was sorry for what I’d put him through. That was the first time I was ever able to say that.” (Bates et al., 2011, 60)



(Judy Dworin works with residents of York Correctional Institution. Photo: Nick Lacy.)
(Bates et al., 2011, 86)

Extending from within prisons, some theater-in-prison projects also put effort into restoring relationships among prisoners, their family and the public on the other side of the fence. The general idea is to have the prisoners' family and broader public as audience and use professional artists as a medium to retell the story of prisoners that they may or may not know. One example could be "Time in", a multi-arts performance piece created by inmates in York Correctional Institution Niantic. (Bates et al., 2011, 83-101) The project focuses on the script written by the inmates. Each week, professional poets, script writers, musicians and choreographers gather together with the inmates in different workshops. After the session, inmates will be given homework to create their own writing or physical movement of their past or present stories, which will be collected in the next workshop. All the stories are then recreated and merged together by the professionals as the piece "Time in" to the audience including former prisoners, families of prisoners, legal practitioner and general public. In order to deliver the accurate message, professionals often need to build up connections with the inmates. For inmates it then becomes a chance of building up professional relationships and a sense of understanding and belonging.

In an interview of inmate Debbie's daughter Sami, she speaks about healing the estrangement between her and Debbie and bonding with Debbie again after watching the play that has Debbie's story written in. " I could pick out exactly which parts were my mom's—chocolate chip pancakes, ironing my dress for picture day, and the piece about photographs, which made me cry the hardest..... The performer (Lisa Matias) even reminded me of my mom as she conveyed all of these emotions and feelings that I don't think Mom could have made me believe she felt before this. I couldn't stop crying." Next day after the theater performance, Sami went to visit her mother in prison and they started to build up their new relationship.

Meaning

Sense of meaning and purpose can often be derived from one's personal connections with the world. In many cases, the connection encourages one to see and serve something bigger than themselves. According to PERMA theory, various societal institutions such as beliefs, art, family, science, politics, work organizations, community, among others could create a greater sense of meaning. (Orkibi, 2019, 5)

One way theater creates meaning for prisoners is by teaching the inter-dependent social communal network through decentralization of oneself and centralization of the goal. In this learning process, participants let themselves emerge from the roles instead of other ways around. Often, they achieve in serving something bigger than themselves. One of the most touching stories I have read is of a man in the RTA project, whose grandma just passed away. He is buried in grief because he is not allowed to attend her funeral due to security concerns. Instead of continuing with rehearsal, the director and other inmates worked together to hold a memorial service for his grandmother. Everybody spoke and asked questions to know what his grandmother was like, what he had cared for her, and so on. "They spoke about how they wanted to keep encouraging those things in him and hoped to be able to provide him with some of the strength and wisdom that he had gotten from her." (Bates et al., 2011, 63-65) The spirit of men generated in the funeral gives them a feeling of meaning beyond themselves. Once again they revise in life how we believe, remember, love and be a part of a community that needs the very special existence of them.

One other method of creating a sense of meaning within communities is by having intensive interaction and socialization between inmates and volunteers. Often the volunteers have some relation with incarceration: either they are the professionals of the subject, or they have been ex-prisoners or families of ex-prisoners. In many theater in prison projects, inmates are encouraged to consider themselves as a part of a real art project and take part in the movement of promoting theater in prison. In the Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) project, prisoners are connected with the program after their release and they often help with prevention of re-entry to prison. By connecting these two parts together, prisoners could often find relatable connections and find their way of contributing to the movement. The need from the other people to be related and helped thus gave them a sense of meaning. According to Brent Buell, there are a number of visible changes for inmates through the experience of working on a "project of value" as a community: "the self-esteem that grows from their sense of accomplishment, and the trust and respect that they develop through their collaborations with others." (Bates et al., 2011, 49-66)

Addressing religion is one of the most complex topics in different theater in prison projects. While some projects like "Theater in Kansas Prisons" chose to embrace

religious values, there are quite a number of projects getting rejected by regional governments due to theater projects' lack of certain religious values that governments require. These cases, however, are often raised in conservative regions such as Texas in the US. One faith-based program "The Prison Arts Project"(OVM) "promotes witness by example... rooted in the tradition of the Mennonite faith". They manifest core values of Mennonites such as community discernment, peace, love, service and retributive justice. Often there are moments of insight and inspiration occurring through seeking meaning by manifesting these values. However, authors of faith-based projects did not elaborate on the effect of using faith as a starting point, which could be further investigated.

Accomplishment

Throughout human history, we thrive towards the finding of the better. Achievement, success, and growth are the milestones that showcase our accomplishments. According to PERMA theory, accomplishment does not have to be connected with meaning, relationships or even positive emotion. However, it does contribute to the flourishing of the human mind.

In theater, prisoners are able to play respectable roles once in their life. In real life, a lot of prisoners have relatively terrible socio-economic or family backgrounds. In a hierarchical society, the poor or people with worse family situations are usually discriminated against by other groups. However, in theater, prisoners are able to transform themselves into characters like police, lawyer, king, business person and so on, which are usually considered on the other side of the hierarchy. Through working with fictional characters, prisoners transcend themselves and find the possibility of kindness, appreciation, success, and accomplishment within themselves. In Women's Eastern Reception, Diagnostic and Correctional Center (WERDCC) in Missouri, director of the Prison Performing Arts project (PPA) works with the prisoners on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Through her observations, this production gives a special opportunity to prisoners "to become actors capable of playing a range of characters, and to become women worthy of positive public recognition". (Bates et al., 2011, 247-256)

Not every prison theater project has the opportunity to perform for a general audience. However, there are a great quantity of prison theater productions that manage to achieve that either through live streaming or performing with a high security for the audiences. The existence of a general audience provides a certain degree of public acceptability to theater in prison projects. More importantly, the success of ticket sales could reassure prisoners of the values of their aesthetic and art. Often the audience will enthusiastically congratulate and affirm the prisoners.

According to director Linda Atkinson from Rehabilitation Through the Arts (RTA) program, “the men--often for the first time in their lives-- see themselves objectively...Now they see that they have choices about how to behave if they want to approve of themselves.” She stated, “It’s an affirmation of faith that grows stronger with each story of hope and love. It’s an affirmation of the power of theatre to make a difference in the lives of incarcerated individuals. Despite what seem at times overwhelming obstacles, the actors succeed in making theatre.” (Bates et al., 2011, 270-285)

Conclusion

In this study, theater as a method of rehabilitation is examined with the concept of PERMA theory in positive psychology. The aim of the study is to detect the methods used by theater in prison to manifest core values of Positive Psychology. Bare in mind it is a theater study, which could be valuable for further collaborative study with psychology.

By broad reading on the topic, the general understanding of historical, socio-economic and humanitarian background of theater in prison is achieved. Five parts of the main body in this EE are corresponding to five aspects of PERMA theory in positive psychology. In each part, the nature of theater and specific methods used in prison theater projects are analysed with the topic. By using examples of writing on effect of certain methods, the analysis is further delivered to determine the effectiveness of mentioned methods.

On the other hand, due to the fact of using only second hand resources, I have a lack of personal experience and connection with this topic. To solve the problem, I did in-depth reading related to theater in prison. However, all the literature I read is written by the people within the prison theater movement. On top of that, the sample number of theater in prison projects are around 20 from mainly the USA, which could not be representative in a global context. Thus there might be a lack of neutral perspective in this research. There is a great value in doing first hand future research into the topic. A possibility is to combine the study with a more scientific method. There is also a potential for a comparison study between different rehabilitation methods used in different prison systems.

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