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Hoult, Elizabeth Research summary for Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service: Reading for resilience in a prison community: an investigation into the transferability of open reading techniques to the way that personal futures are imagined by offenders. Project Report. Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service. (Submitted)

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# RESEARCH SUMMARY FOR HMPPS

**Research summary title:** Reading for resilience in a prison community: an investigation into the transferability of open reading techniques to the way that personal futures are imagined by offenders.

**NRC reference number:** 2014-075

**Names of authors:**

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**Funding body (where relevant):**

The project was part of the much larger *Imagine* project, funded by the ESRC (with AHRC via the Connected Communities funding stream)

**Date of research commencement:**

08.01.2015

**Date of research completion:**

08.12.2017

**Will this research be peer-reviewed?**

No (not formally, although the written outputs have been peer-reviewed).

**If yes, what is the estimated date of peer-review completion?**

## Introduction

The aim of the research was to understand the role of the imagination in development of resilience and hope in offenders. A key concern was whether engagement with imaginative texts allows for the development of plural reading techniques. In other words, is the ability to hold multiple interpretations of meaning in play, without reducing understanding to a single answer, transferable to the way that offenders could think about their own futures? This small project took place at a Category D institution in 2015. Previous research had investigated the interplay between reading literary texts and understanding adult resilience (Hoult, 2012). A key finding of that project was that particularly resilient adult learners (those who have faced significant trauma, disadvantage and setbacks and yet who still thrive and succeed as mature students) might be characterised as being able to perform the following capabilities (among others):

- 1) They engage in open readings (of texts and of life in general), resisting closed meanings and final answers;
- 2) They are open to the unknown and to transformation.

This project set out to explore whether it is possible to teach these capabilities to learners in a prison, through the structured 'reading' of science fiction texts (including films). Science fiction was chosen because of its highly imaginative content and because of its explicit emphasis on imagined futures.

The project involved an initial group of eight prisoners and this reduced to five who were committed to the project and worked intensively on the films over a five-month period. At the end of the period each participant took part in an interview about their interpretation of the films, and the way that they imagined global and personal futures.

The outputs include several conference papers, three peer-refereed articles and one peer-refereed chapter (see details below).

## Research questions

1) The first set of research questions related to the feasibility of the intervention; *can this be done?* In other words, is it possible to help an adult who has not previously had explicit support in developing these capabilities to do so? Specifically:

- To what extent is science fiction a useful pedagogical tool in this respect?
- Is it possible to transfer plural and open reading techniques developed as a reader of texts to one's own life and as such read one's future creatively and hopefully, rather than fixed and in way that is binaried (victim/bully; loser/ winner; hopeless case/success story)?
- What is the relationship between a) imagination and hope and b) imagination, hope and resilience? And why might it help in the rehabilitation of offenders?
- To what extent can shared reading and writing activities support hope and resilience in a prison community?

2) The second question regarded an assessment of the methodology with a view to repeating it in different contexts or on a wider scale. Specifically:

- Could the intervention be improved?

- If the project were to be offered in a more extensive way, what would need to be changed?
- 3) The third set of questions relate to the utility value of the intervention. Specifically:
- What does the intervention achieve for prisoners, for the justice system and for the community? It was envisaged that this third question might open the way to the possibility of a future funding application which would examine the longer-term effects of the reading project on life choices and re-offending rates for the participants.

Finally, the project was informed by an overarching research question which underpinned the overall *Imagine* project of which this was a part:

- What role can imagining better futures play in capturing and sustaining enthusiasm for change?

## Research methods

This was a small-scale qualitative, interpretative piece of research. The methods employed are set out below.

### Sample

Following a meeting with the governor, two potential participants were identified who agreed to recruit other participants to the group via a notice placed in the prison newsletter. Potential participants responded to the newsletter item and attended an initial meeting in late 2014. The group comprised eight potential participants, but this reduced to five who were committed to attending all the sessions in the five-month project. All prospective participants received an information sheet and signed consent forms. Given the nature of the prison (Category D), flexibility about the timing of the sessions was built into the structure, to allow for the time away for work and family visits for prisoners who acquired ROTLs.

### Data Gathering

The group watched the films and took part in researcher-led discussions about them, which were transcribed. The films included *Contact*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, and *Solaris*. Each participant was also given a copy of Philip K Dick's novel *Valis* and invited to write responses to it along the same lines as the discussions. At the end of the project a follow up interview was conducted with each participant and this was also transcribed. The interview focussed on the ability to understand the films in multiple ways (in other words, to read plurally). It also explored whether participants could apply the plural reading technique to the narratives of personal and global futures. The data gathered comprised:

- transcripts of the group discussions about each film;
- transcripts of the semi-structured interviews with participants;

- supplementary written responses to the films.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of the transcriptions and the supplementary written data employed the following themes:

- plural reading techniques
- hope
- responses to the alien
- explicit philosophies about the nature of the universe (including religious ones).

In total the project lasted from 2014-2017, encompassing 11 months for the development of the project plan and acquisition of permissions and ethical clearance; five months of data gathering; 12 months of data analysis; and eighteen months of writing outputs.

The limitation of the methodology related to the category of the prison. As the participants earned ROTLs, outside visits disrupted regular group attendance. Therefore, longer sessions in a shorter time-frame would be advisable in a category D prison.

## Results

- The methodology worked in this context: it is possible to cultivate plural reading techniques in relation to fictional texts and to transfer these skills to conversations about personal futures.
- Science fiction is a useful pedagogical and research tool for encouraging the capacity to read in plural ways and to construct hopeful narratives about the future at individual, community and global levels. The science fiction film group provides a non-partisan forum for contemplative and existential conversations about the future in ways that fall outside of the domains of probational supervision or therapy.
- Sustained engagement with the trope of the alien in group discussions has the potential to safely frame philosophical conversations about the self and other. Science fiction also has the potential to support the consideration of far future and non-human futures because it is not tied to a religious discourse, or indeed a scientific discourse, but draws from both. Fiction acts as a safe and playful container for abstract and difficult philosophical and ideological concepts such as colonialism and the other.
- Participants demonstrated the ability to transfer plural ways of thinking about texts to narrative accounts of their own futures. The participants in the sample were typical of resilient adult learners in terms of their capability to read plurally and to imagine alternative futures and to resist authoritative, reductive readings of their lives.

- The most useful application of the methodology might be with prisoners who are particularly vulnerable to the reductive and nefarious effects of rigid single reading practices, for example, prisoners who are at risk of, or who have been exposed to, extremism and radicalisation.
- An emergent theme in the data relating to the development of hope about the future and resilience was not about the reading practices of the participants, but rather about the ways they were *being read*. The most pressing limitation to hopeful post-release futures identified by the participants, was the prevalence of digital reports of their crimes widely available via the world wide web. This finding suggests that the original definition of a core capability of resilience as the ability to read plurally should be modified to include the freedom to *be read* in plural ways.
- Whilst the scale of the project was too small to assert whether or not there is a relationship between the construction of hopeful imaginative accounts of the future and resilience, it is possible to state that there is a pedagogical relationship between the cultivation of plural reading techniques and the construction of plural narratives about one's future, including hopeful versions.

### Implications for HMPPS

- 1) The project represents a relatively low-cost intervention, involving a methodology which could be replicated in other settings overseen by HMPPS where the development of resilience and hope are key concerns. The practice of imagining and holding in play multiple versions of one's future, could help to prepare offenders for their return to communities.
- 2) There may be applications of the methodology for targeted work with very specific groups of offenders who are particularly at risk from pervasive single reading practices. An example might be the use of the intervention in the support of work to counter extremism and radicalisation. Science fiction may be particularly helpful in this regard because the genre deals with time at the level of epoch, alien civilisations, infinity and the unknown, but is not tied to any particular religion or geo-political framework. The genre presents alternative utopian and dystopian futures and encourages discussion about them in relation to the lived reality of here and now.
- 3) The research application process (which was then under the jurisdiction of NOMS) supported the development of a thorough and ethical project plan. If there was more flexibility allowed in the choice of texts at planning stage it would have allowed for a wider range of films to be included in the project. This would also allow for more input from the participants in the construction of the range of texts for discussion.
- 4) This iteration of the methodology could be implemented in tact in higher category prisons because of the relatively stable participant cohorts. In category D prisons a repeat of the project would benefit from a shorter, more intensive time-frame with each session lasting

longer in anticipation of the disruption to the group caused by the earning of ROTLs.

- 5) There was an original intention to develop a methodology which incorporated co-production methodologies as part of this proposal. However, this way of working was not pursued, even at application stage, and the reasons for this are explored in detail in Hoult, E.C. (2018) 'The possibilities and limitations of co-producing research with participants in a prison' in *Co-Producing Research* (Banks, S., Hart, A., Pahl, K. and Ward, P., eds.), Bristol: The Policy Press. Future research could incorporate co-production methodologies, properly modified for a prison setting, with the data gathered here. This small-scale research has found that the prevalence of widely available digital accounts of prisoners' crimes act as an inhibitor to hope and the ability to perform resilience. A key research question for a future project would be 'How can the employment of co-production methodologies support offenders to produce and disseminate alternative, hopeful accounts of their lives?' It should be noted, though, that autobiographical writing and digital publishing would present significant challenges to ethical and security frameworks.

## Dissemination of Research

### Publications

Hoult, E.C., (forthcoming for Spring 2018 edition). 'Viewing the strange stranger as alien: an account of a science fiction film group in a UK men's prison,' *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction*

Hoult, E.C. (2017, forthcoming) 'The possibilities and limitations of co-producing research with participants in a prison' in *Co-Producing Research* (Banks, S., Hart, A., Pahl, K. and Ward, P., eds.), Bristol: The Policy Press

Hoult., Mort, H. Pahl, K and Rasool, Zabin (forthcoming) 'The Uses of Poetic and Imaginative Methods in Community Based Research' (working title – work in process)

### Conference Papers and Presentations

Imagining the alien: the possibilities for hopeful understandings of the other through science fiction in a prison education project, *Society for the Study of Philosophy and Literature in Education*, British Academy, May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016, British Academy

Utopian Futures and Outer Space: an example of arts-based methodology in research in a prison at *Storming the Citadels: Changing Attitudes and Frameworks to arts practices and research in community contexts*, July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2015, Birkbeck, University of London

Reading for Resilience with adult, male prisoners, lecture *to Brighton Resilience Forum*, University of Brighton, 11<sup>th</sup> March 2015

Methodological Implications of Co-Production methods in a prison research, Hepworth Museum, Wakefield, (*launch of cultural strand of Imagine Project*, with University of Sheffield), March 2014