
Struggling with maintaining wellbeing in solitary confinement: The Power of Imagination

Exploring prison podcasts

Master thesis

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Abstract

Background and objective:

The psychological effects of solitary confinement on prisoners are harmful. Though extensive research on the effects of solitary confinement has been conducted, no qualitative research is available on how prisoners maintain their wellbeing while being in solitary confinement. The aim of this thesis was to investigate how prisoners manage to maintain their wellbeing under the dehumanizing circumstances of solitary confinement. In addition, this thesis aims to humanize prisoners by shedding a light on their experiences with solitary confinement.

Methods:

Data were collected from five different episodes of the Earhustle, 6X9, and Unjust podcast. These podcasts consist of interviews of inmates who underwent solitary confinement. The podcast interviews were transcribed and thematically analysed with both inductive and deductive methods using the following PERMA-elements: positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationship (R), meaning in life (M), and accomplishment (A). The themes were analysed and divided in subcodes.

Results:

There was a clear absence of PERMA-elements for prisoners in solitary confinement. These prisoners do not experience positive emotions (P), engagement (E), relationship (R), meaning in life (M), and sense of accomplishment (A). Prisoners, however, use their imagination to escape from negative emotions, to control their mind, and to imagine being with loved ones. To have some sense meaning in life, prisoners remind themselves the reason for being in solitary confinement, e.g., family safety. Prisoners in isolation cells used their creativity and drawing as a tool for feeling positive emotions and a sense of accomplishment.

Conclusion:

Prisoners suffer in solitary confinement and struggle to maintain their wellbeing. However, these prisoners hint at maintaining their wellbeing by using their imagination, creativity, and mind. They have found ways of staying human while being isolated.

Keywords: solitary confinement, PERMA, prison podcasts, wellbeing, psychology

In the early 19th century, solitary confinement first emerged as a tool of punishment. It began under the idea that isolation of incarcerated people would help to facilitate better behaviour (Weir, 2012). Over the years, solitary confinement shifted from silent prisons, in which inmates from the United States (US) were forced to do repetitive tasks in complete silence, to supermax prisons (Cloud, Drucker, Browne & Parsons, 2015). The term ``supermax prisons`` refers to the physical, and often, social isolation of an inmate in a single cell (Shalev, 2017). The amount of time a prisoner spends in solitary confinement varies enormously. For most of the 20th century, prisoners were put in solitary confinement for a couple of days to weeks (Weir, 2012). In the past two decades, however, prisoners are kept in solitary confinement for years in the supermax prisons specifically (Weir, 2012). Solitary confinement can affect an individual in many ways, for instance physically, emotionally, and psychologically. To humanize these prisoners and give them a voice, this study will analyse the way prisoners deal with maintaining wellbeing in solitary confinement.

Solitary confinement

Solitary confinement is commonly used in several prison systems across the world (Shalev, 2017). Different prison systems use other terms to describe solitary confinement, e.g., the Solitary Housing Unit (SHU), restrictive housing, the hole, segregation, isolation cell, and the pound. Weir (2012) distinguishes two types of solitary confinement, namely, disciplinary, and administrative segregation (Weir, 2012; Cloud et al., 2015). The first type of solitary confinement, disciplinary segregation is applied for different purposes, such as punishment for prisoners. This occurs when they involve themselves in situations, which involve breaking the rules, e.g., stealing from other inmates or smoking (Weir, 2012; Cloud et al., 2015). In disciplinary segregation, prisoners are usually given a specific duration in the isolation cell. Administrative segregation is applied when prisoners are considered a risk towards other inmates, e.g., gang members. Prisoners are usually obliged to stay in an

isolation cell for years. Metzner and Fellner (2010) illustrated how more than ten thousand inmates are sent to spend years in small sized cells for 23 to 24 hours per day. Typically, an isolation cell in the US is between 60-80 square feet, with a narrow plain bed, toilet, a narrow slit for a window and a steel door with a small slot for receiving meals (Cloud et al., 2015). Other articles on solitary confinement seem to show some differences on how the isolation cells are constructed. In the Netherlands for instance, the isolation cells are 39 square feet with grey walls, a toilet, a mattress, elements that can function as a couch, ventilation, and underfloor heating (Gerlsma, Maneschijn & Rommers, 2017). In many facilities in the US, prisoners are only taken out for one hour on weekdays for either a shower or other recreation (Cloud et al., 2015). Inmates are cuffed when moved, placed in leg irons, and shackled at their waist (Cloud et al., 2015). In the United Kingdom (UK), prisoners spend approximately 22-24 hours a day in their cells. There, solitary confinement is limited to a maximum of 21 days. Research on the differences between solitary confinement in the UK and the US showed that the UK have less harsh, more humane, and less deadly prison systems in comparison to the US (Johner, 2019).

Effects of solitary confinement

Extensive research on the effects of solitary confinement on prisoners' wellbeing has been conducted (Shalev, 2008; Guenther, 2013; Metzner & Fellner, 2010; Smith, 2006; Gerlsma, Manenschijn & Rommers, 2017; Grassian, 1983). In the past 150 years, a large body of research showed that subjection of an individual to involuntary segregation for more than ten days resulted into recognizable emotional, social, physical, and cognitive pathologies (Cloud et al., 2015). According to Shalev (2008) the psychological effects of solitary confinement include: anxiety, depression, panic attacks, hopelessness, stress, hypersensitivity, suicide, paranoia, social withdrawal, concentration and memory problems, psychosis, fear of death, self-harm, and hallucinations. In other research, solitary confinement was seen as

harmful, as it restricts social contact which individuals need for their wellbeing (Smith, 2006). The amount of human contact varies greatly in prisons. In some prisons, inmates in solitary confinement can have contact with lawyers, religious members, and family, whereas in other prisons, no human contact is allowed, and prisoners only see prison staff who silently deliver their meals (Shalev, 2017).

Both Guenther and Haney (as cited in Zum, 2015) illustrated that not only do prison units create numbers of psychological issues, but prison staff within these units also often ignore the prisoners' needs since they are not prepared and trained to deal with the prisoners in general. Inmates in solitary confinement are often only seen as purposeful rule breakers (Guenther, 2013). One of the most spoken of effects on solitary confinement is the Solitary-Housing- Unit-Syndrome (SHU-syndrome) (Grassian, 2016). The SHU-syndrome is a group of six symptoms caused by long-term solitary confinement: hallucinations, illusions, perceptual distortions, panic attacks, difficult thinking, concentrating, intrusive and obsessive thoughts, and paranoia (Grassian, as cited in Guenther, 2013). Guenther (2013) illustrated how prisoners reached a point in isolation, wherein they can no longer trust their own thoughts, memories, hearing, and visions. He described solitary confinement as dehumanizing and as the social death of prisoners. However, some research regarding psychological effects noted how inmates could possibly be mentally ill prior to confinement, making it harder to distinguish whether their often-negative wellbeing is directly related to solitary confinement (Corcoran, n.d.).

Need for wellbeing

Every human being strives for wellbeing (Thorsteinsen & Vitterso, 2018). With this, a growing body of research seems to focus on how to address wellbeing and its concepts. One of the ways to address wellbeing is by the means of the five-dimensional PERMA-framework developed by Seligman (2011). Seligman (2011) illustrated how all individuals are

intrinsically motivated to achieve wellbeing in their lives. Seligman hereby distinguishes five dimensions of wellbeing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning in life, and accomplishments. Evidence shows that individuals are internally motivated to seek each PERMA dimension, making this model a suitable fitting framework for exploring the experience of wellbeing in solitary confinement for prisoners (Wittekind, 2018; Seligman, 2011). According to Seligman (2011), each dimension contributes to wellbeing and can be defined independently. Positive emotions (P) include concepts such as hope, interest, joy, love, and gratitude. According to Seligman (2011) and Csikzentmihalyi (1990) the concept of engagement (E) or flow can be defined as the loss of self-consciousness and complete focus on a task. The dimension of relationships (R) encompasses all interactions individuals have with others and was included in the model, based on the notion that all humans are social creatures (Seligman, 2011). The relationship dimension refers to feeling loved and valued by others. Research on this dimension demonstrated that sharing positive news and responding enthusiastically to others increase wellbeing (Siedlecki et al., 2014). The sense of worth and value, having a meaningful (M) and purposeful life is included in the dimension of meaning (Seligman, 2011). Having meaning in life can vary for individuals and can be guided by personal values (Kashdan, Mishra, Breen, & Froh, 2009). Lastly, accomplishments (A) entails achieving intrinsic goals, competence, and mastery, which result into sense of pride and contribute to wellbeing (Seligman, 2011).

Dealing with solitary confinement

A recent news article discussed the way one prisoner dealt with being in solitary confinement during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mother Jones, 2020). This prisoner mentioned several ways in which he tried to stay well, such as painting, working out, yoga, meditation, and writing. In addition, the prisoner stated that he kept his mind and spirit sound by reading.

Furthermore, this inmate mentioned the distress caused by not being able to see his family for years.

Though extensive research on the effects of solitary confinement has been conducted, no scientific qualitative research seemed to be available on how prisoners deal with maintaining wellbeing. As these experiences and stories of prisoners in solitary confinement seldomly get out to the general public, their faith is largely unknown. Now that there are some prison podcast initiatives, there is a unique opportunity to find out how prisoners themselves make sense of life in solitary confinement, for the general public as for policy makers. With this, we can learn about this devastating experience first-hand, but instead of presenting them only as victims, hence contributing further to their powerlessness, this thesis focuses on how, under these dehumanizing circumstances, they find ways to stay well and maintain wellbeing. This way, this thesis contributes to giving prisoners a voice and thus humanizing them.

Methods

Prison podcast

This qualitative study was based on data derived from prison podcasts where inmates were interviewed on their experience of solitary confinement. These pre-recorded podcasts offer valuable data since prisoners' narratives are elucidated by the prisoners themselves.

Selection of podcast and podcast episodes

Prison podcasts with the following themes were selected: solitary confinement, isolation cell, or solitary housing units. Subsequently, podcasts were assessed on our study's eligibility more thoroughly. For eligibility, prison podcasts were required to have prisoners speak on their own experience of solitary confinement in retrospect and to discuss managing wellbeing aspects while being in solitary confinements. Podcasts which included more than one prisoner were also included. In this study, English podcasts were only included. Prisoners could be either female or male.

In this study, a total of five podcast episode were used, namely from Earhustle, Unjust and the 6X9 podcast. Their podcasts episodes were chosen based on the amount of information on solitary confinement and the experiences of the prisoners. Ear Hustle (2017) was the first podcast created and produced in the California's San Quentin State Prison, in which it features stories of prisoners and their daily realities of life while being incarcerated. It offered narratives from inside the prison and post-incarceration. These episodes can be found online and are freely accessible. Ear Hustle was co-founded by Nigel Poor, Bay area artist, together with Earlonne Woods, and Antwan Williams, who were incarcerated at the time, and Rahsaan Thomas, who is a co-host inside San Quentin. Ear Hustle seemed to be able to overcome barriers by offering prisoners the opportunity to share their experiences. In these episodes, the episode length varies from 45-60 minutes. Another platform is Justice: Unjust podcast. Here podcasts are aired about diverse sets of topics, in which people share

their experiences and stories of life.

The length of the Unjust podcast episodes varies between 18-30 minutes. The 6X9 podcast by The Guardian is a podcast series which offers experiences from prisoners who have been in solitary confinement. The length of the 6X9 podcast episodes varies between 8-24 minutes.

Description of the podcast episodes.

Firstly, Ear Hustle produced a podcast episode: 'The SHU' wherein five prisoners share their experiences in doing 8-28 years in solitary confinement. Interestingly, the prisoners in this podcast were speaking from their current general prison in San Quentin, as they were out of solitary confinement, but not out of prison. This podcast episode was used in this study as this episode may offer a deeper insight on how prisoners experience dealing with maintaining wellbeing. Furthermore, another podcast episode from the selection is from Justice: Unjust Podcast. This podcast included two ex-inmates who have been in solitary confinement for the majority of their prison stay. This podcast episode was made post incarceration, however, the two inmates share their experiences of their time of solitary confinement. Moreover, three podcasts' episodes were chosen from the 6X9 podcast series. Of all 6X9 podcast episodes, these three were the only ones that offered enough information on what the experience on dealing with wellbeing was for the prisoners. From one of the three podcasts, only certain parts that were relevant to the research question were used for this study. In total, the length of the podcast episodes were 96 minutes.

Data analysis

For this study, the aforementioned podcast episodes were transcribed verbatim for analyses purposes. The podcast episodes were thematically analysed. This is a method with a strength in describing, identifying, organizing, analysing, and reporting themes in data sets (Braun & Clark, 2006). The thematic analysis was used in both an inductive and deductive

manner to fully understand and analyse the data, and to indicate the elements of the PERMA model. In addition, the thematic analysis was used to explore and indicate which other codes were present that show how prisoners deal with maintaining wellbeing. Here Atlas.ti, pen and paper were used. In the first stage, all data were read several times from beginning to end. Subsequently, per transcribed podcasts, relevant fragments were highlighted, that were beneficial for the research question. These fragments were chunks of data in which explanations and the way prisoners dealt with maintaining wellbeing were shared. Then one dataset was coded once, to generate initial codes. Here fragments could be coded with more than one code/element. This procedure was repeated for all podcast datasets. Within the codes, subcodes were found and named, which indicated specific ways of the agency of prisoners. If codes seemed co-occurring with other codes in fragments, both codes were given to the fragment. Furthermore, the data was coded three times by the researcher of this study and twice by another researcher to ascertain the reliability of the codes and subcodes. Next the codes were distributed among the overarching main categories. Simultaneously, the deductive approach was used on the datasets to pinpoint and distribute which elements of the PERMA-model of wellbeing were present in the stories of the inmates. In this approach, the dataset was analysed once more. Fragments that related to the elements of the PERMA-model were highlighted, coded, and categorized with the other main codes or subcodes.

Results

In the following section the PERMA elements are presented, wherein the experience of the PERMA elements, in either absence or presence, and in what way prisoners deal wellbeing are described, in order to answer how prisoners, maintain wellbeing in solitary confinement.

Table 1 presents an overview of the ways in which prisoners deal with maintaining their wellbeing in solitary confinement for each PERMA element, namely having positive emotions, experiencing engagement, having relationships, having meaning in life, and having accomplishments. Here inmates mainly talk about experiencing the absence of each of these wellbeing aspects in solitary confinement. In some episodes, the topic of dealing with wellbeing and having wellbeing elements were discussed more thoroughly than other episodes. Other episodes tended to focus more on the dehumanizing part of solitary confinement and its struggles rather than how inmates dealt with these struggles. Thus, the descriptions of some codes might be less detailed than for others.

Table 1.

PERMA-elements of wellbeing and the way participants deal with maintaining each element in solitary confinement.

PERMA-element	Codes of dealing with	Freq
<i>(Struggling with)</i> Positive emotions and feelings (P)	[A] Crying	5
	[B] Imagination: escaping from negative emotions	4
	[C] drawing as a tool for feeling positive emotions	5
	[D] Scrubbing floors to reduce sadness	2
	[E] Writing down thoughts	4
		Total
		20
<i>(Struggling with)</i> Engagement & Accomplishment (E)/(A)	[F] Imagination by controlling the mind	5
	[G] Drawing as a means to accomplish/engage	5

	[H] Focusing on small accomplishments	7
	[I] Being dedicated in learning to read and write and developing skills	4
		<hr/> Total
		21
<i>(Struggling with)</i> having Relationships (R)	[J] Imagining being with loved ones	9
	[K] Seeking touch from others	3
	[L] Striving for physical contact	4
	[M]: Conversating and sharing stories with neighbours	7
		<hr/> Total
		23

STRUGGLING WITH WELLBEING IN SOLITARY CONFINEMENT

<i>(Struggling with)</i> having Meaning in life (M)	[N]: The mind: thinking about the purpose for being in solitary confinement	5
	[O]: Mentally connecting with others by participating in a meaningful protest	5
		<hr/> Total
		10

PERMA elements

Struggling with **Positive emotions and feelings (P)**

Prisoners expressed that they all experienced fear, anxiety, hopelessness, sadness, anger, and depression while being in solitary confinement. Notably, a lack of overall positive emotions was clearly presented in the podcast episodes. *“I was developing like anxiety as well with just being in that cell. The whole day you'd get anxious when an officer would walk past, or you'd hear the keys outside your door. Starting to suffer from depression. Yeah... it was just really, really tough.”* Prisoners mentioned to be struggling in solitary confinement. Thoughts like: *“am I ever going to get out of here”* and *“it is really tough”* seemed to be common for the majority of prisoners. Some feared the dark, while for others the cell in general gave them anxiety. Prisoners called these emotions, the *“emotional uphill.”* One of the prisoners, in particular, explained how solitary confinement gave him the feeling of wanting to *“hit the self-destruct-button”* due to the hopelessness that he experienced in solitary confinement. Another prisoner spoke on how the only way to ever leave solitary confinement for him would be in a pine box.

“Me, I accepted the fact that I was gonna get out of there in a pine box.” The following five codes focus on how prisoners deal with their emotions: crying (A), imagination: escaping from negative emotions (B), drawing as a tool for feeling positive emotions (C), scrubbing floors to reduce sadness (D), and writing down thoughts (E).

Code A: crying

One of the aspects prisoners mentioned was that they dealt with negative feelings in solitary confinement by crying. Prisoners spoke about crying a lot in solitary confinement: *“and a lot of crying... a lot of crying.”* The crying seemed to have two functions, one of them was venting. Crying helped with venting the emotions that they felt, such as anger, sadness, and hopelessness, but also because they did not have control over their situation, which made

them feel scared: “...used to cry a lot in isolation because it was a way to vent everything that I was feeling inside.” In addition, crying seemed to help with feeling alive. “With feeling the water of my tears on my cheek, I knew I was still alive.” By crying, a prisoner described that the tears showed that the emotions were real and the feeling of tears ‘burning’ on the cheek, made sure that one knew he was still present and awake. Crying was also portrayed as something they did, when they felt overwhelmed while dealing with the restrictions of solitary confinement “...the only thing you can do while being locked up, is cry.”

Code B: imagination: escaping from negative emotions

When feeling sad or overwhelmed by emotion, prisoners mentioned to use their imagination and mind. To not feel the emotions, they used their imagination to put their mind on something else to distract themselves, and therefore, to escape as a way to survive. “In the SHU it seems like the mind would just be thinking about survival, wanting to escape the situation and it almost seems like the brain would be responding to the injury of the body being confined. “ ...but the one thing is that you are constantly trying to find is to fill that time in, because it’s hard to deal with the reflections and emotions constantly.””

A prisoner mentioned how using his imagination helped him whenever he felt scared in the dark. He would try to imagine himself being outside. “As a kid I was never scared of the dark, but in the cell, I felt scared when the lights went off. I tried to imagine myself being outside the cell, together with my mom and dad or randomly play outside just like in middle school.”

Code C: drawing as a tool for feeling positive emotions

Whenever prisoners talked about feeling happy or good, it would be connected to the activity of drawing. For some prisoners, drawing made them believe that they could do something in the isolation cell, which made them feel good or distracted. The experience of positive emotions might go hand in hand with element of accomplishment, as prisoners talk

on how they could and were able to draw something new every day. Further elaboration on what specifically made them feel “*happy*” or “*excited*”, e.g., the process of drawing itself or the ability of continually drawing new things, was not provided. “*It got so exciting to draw something new every day.*”

Code D: scrubbing floors to reduce sadness

Furthermore, two prisoners spoke on how scrubbing floors helped them with dealing with feelings of sadness. One of the prisoners demonstrated how he would scrub the floor in his cell. Initially, it seemed as though that scrubbing the floor was an obligatory task for prisoners seeing as he mentioned that officers would come and check whether prison cells were clean. However, later the same prisoner elaborated on how extensively scrubbing the floors was a way for him to escape feelings of sadness. “*Scrubbing floors... scrubbing floors on your hands and knees and they come around have a look at that. If it weren't no good, you'd do it again, which happened a lot. In the end I was cleaning places that they didn't even know exist. [...] I got right into it and that's what it does, you know.. It was all about not feeling the sadness anymore.*”

Code E: writing down thoughts

Other prisoners mentioned that they had the urge to write down their thoughts, as it felt like something that they needed to do or “*get of their chest*”. Some prisoners mentioned to have access to a pen or pencil and bits paper while being in isolation. They would be creative with these tools. They would write about their feelings and thoughts as a way to deal with their state in solitary confinement. The prisoners used this method to express their feelings. “*An officer left a pencil in my cell. I used that pencil to write down all my thoughts and feelings on bits of paper. I'm not really sure where that came from, it just felt like something what I needed to do.*”

(Struggling with) **Engagement/ Accomplishment (E)/(A)**

The PERMA-elements engagement (E) and accomplishment (A) were presented together in this study due to overlap between both elements. Based on the data, the absence of experiencing engagement and accomplishments for prisoners was clear. Prisoners spoke on how they did not have a lot in their cells:

“We didn't have no books, no radios, no TV, no nothing, just basically what I carried in my mind.” Some felt useless as they could not engage in activities: *“I just felt like no use. I could not do anything in here, no activities, no nothing.”*

Others felt hopeless in their situation, *“Is this it,”* because they felt like they had no power over their own lives. *“...here we had no power on nothing. I could not even play ball with fellow inmates if I wanted to.”* In some parts of the episodes, prisoners spoke on some experiences which indicated hints of experiencing engagement and accomplishments.

The following four codes focus on how prisoners deal with maintaining feelings of engagement and accomplishment: imagination: by controlling the mind (F) and drawing as a means to engage/accomplish (G), focusing on small accomplishments (H), and learning how to read, write and developing skills (I).

Code F: imagination by controlling the mind

Prisoners voiced how the power and control of the mind contributed to their feeling of engagement and accomplishment. Some prisoners did not have tools in their cells, i.e., pen, paper, or books. Prisoners suggested how writing screenplays in their head and being in control of the outcome, was something that they were engaged in and was the only aspect they had control over. *“Like I said, when I got there, I didn't have anything. All I basically had was my imagination.”* One prisoner did a screenplay, by telling his neighbour inmate about his fantasy life. He

described how everything went smoothly, namely: making his mother happy by marrying his high school sweetheart, never going to jail, going to film school while still having roots in the hood. Subsequently, he would explain how he killed himself off in his own story, because the only thing that he had control over in solitary confinement was his own mind. *“What you learn about screenplays is you control that environment. It's like you're the god of that world. It's the only thing that you can control in the SHU. So, why not kill off my character and then resurrect him in part 2?”*

Furthermore, another prisoner mentioned how he had a small window in his cell. The window was in front of a high wall, so he could not see anything. However, in his mind, he was able to climb this wall and see the sky. *“The window was pointless; you couldn't see anything really. You'd just see a wall. A very high wall and at a distance. But in my mind, I was able to climb over that wall. I was able to see the sky and the black birds.”*

Code G: drawing as a means to accomplish/engage

To deal with the distress that solitary confinement gave prisoners, they talked on the importance of being creative. Accomplishment for prisoners meant that they had to be creative, as there was not a lot to do in their cells. Firstly, being creative by drawing with pen and paper or drawing on soap bars. If prisoners had access to bits of paper and a pencil, they reported to draw extensively in their cells. *“I am sure all we did was draw in there.”* Furthermore, it was seen as an achievement since they managed to develop skills in their cells by drawing. *“...not gonna teach you how to draw a straight line, but you wouldn't be able to get the stuff that I can draw in there. You know this is really life.”* The drawings could vary from things in the cell, e.g., exercise yard and random symbols, e.g. circles. Prisoners who did not have access to clean paper

proceeded to draw on soap bars. Prisoners call this “*soap carving*.” It seems that this could also be seen as an act of engagement in the activity by prisoners, seeing as they actively searched and found other resources, apart from paper, to draw on. *‘I started drawing, yeah... just things in the cell and the exercise yard just outside the cell. I was just using this pencil and these scraps of paper and then when I ran out of paper, I started to draw on these bars of soap [...] yeah I kept on doing that (drawing) up until towards the end of that five months I spend in that prison.’*

Code H: focusing on small accomplishments

Another aspect of accomplishments mentioned by prisoners was appreciating the little things that can be achieved in solitary confinement: *“you start noticing the little things.”* In order to accomplish, prisoners explained how they were motivated and engaged to do anything that was possible. *“...you basically do whatever to help keep your mind running,”* It also helped with keeping the brain active. For instance, being able to twist a piece from a window flapper after several attempts. The window would not open completely, but only a tiny bit. One of the prisoners explained how this little twisty thing became an important thing in his life, *“you had like a little twisty thing to open the window, you’d turn it, and the window would open. But you couldn’t actually open it wide, it would just open slightly. But that twisty thing just becomes such an important thing in your life, you know. That’s something you could do in there. You know, you’re able to open your window.”*

Another prisoner talked about how he managed to see a little bit from the hallway of the jail from his window flapper. He came across this opening after he studied all the small open spaces in the door near his window. *“...it was a bit of a treat. You could see the outside, but that was just you know... more cells on the corridor.”*

These accomplishments meant that prisoners were engaged in the activity and were intrinsically motivated to complete these little tasks. *“You know, because if you wasn’t creative, it would sink you. Never give up. [...]giving me a focus and keeping me active, I think. Keeping my brain active which is the important thing.”*

Code I: Learning how to read, write and develop skills

Dedication to develop new skills, such as learning how to read and write was found in the data as another subcode. *“I knew I never wanted to be in a circumstance where I hear people talking and not understanding a word. So, I just had that drive to learn how to read.”* Other prisoners mentioned that in solitary confinement you had to be creative and had to make use of your time, by educating yourself. *“Being locked up in that cell, you have to be creative. I learned how to write.”* Another incentive to learn how to read was to be able to understand papers used in court sittings. *“One of the reasons I was determined to learn was because I was going to trial, and I couldn’t follow the trial. I was doing pretty good.”*

Struggling with Relationships with others (R)

The lack of having relationships was clearly presented by the prisoners. Prisoners described that they were mostly 23 to 24 hours confined in their isolation cells. Some inmates described how they did not have access to medical help, books, and no writing material. In addition, they did not have no roommate or anyone to talk, contributing to the feelings of distress of not being able to see family members. *“I have daughters who I have literally had to see growing up behind a window. You know, they’re in their thirties now but, you know, I have grandkids also, who I’ve never got to hug or anything.”* In some solitary housing units, prisoners had walls that were thin enough for them to hear the next-door neighbour. Prisoners expressed how they felt like they were losing reality because of loneliness. *“There are times I think that I was*

losing my grip on reality, because I had no one there with me.” They also expressed how they barely saw others and having (physical) contact was impossible. They described that having physical contact and seeing people contributed to feeling alive and human. “...or you put your hand to your heart. They (prison systems) want to remove all this from you. So, you want to remain as human as possible.”

The following four codes focus on how prisoners deal with maintaining relationships in solitary confinement: Imagining being with loved ones (J), seeking touch from others (K), striving for physical contact (L) and conversating and sharing stories with neighbours (M).

Code J: imagining being with loved ones

Prisoners discussed how their imagination helped them to see and relive meaningful moments and how imagining loved ones was comforting. By Imagining themselves with their loved ones, prisoners were able to escape their cell. “*One of the survivor skills I learned in solitary confinement is that I had to escape that place. I often placed myself outside in the free world with my family, loved ones and friends.*” Some prisoners used their imaginations whenever they felt sad or scared. These imaginations included images of them being with or hugging their loved ones. “*When I felt scared again, I would try to see myself holding my mum and hugging her [...] sometimes it felt real.*”

One prisoner discussed how he was afraid of being alone and isolated: “*... I never liked to be alone.*” He then elaborated on how he would imagine having his friend with him in the cell, while they would be roller-skating together. “*A friend of mine’s name was Cooper. Cooper and I were really good friends. Always up to little shenanigans and stuff. So, I happen to be in my cell and all of a sudden, I see Cooper. His face appeared. So, he was standing there and I’m looking at him and he was saying:*

“Come on Viktor let’s get going!”. So, I said where are we going. And I’m seeing him as if he’s like physically getting skates on. So, I sat up on my bed and it was like... let’s go.”

Code K: seeking touch from others

Among all prisoners, solely one prisoner had a roommate, while the rest were in full solitary housing units. In addition, some prison systems did allow visits, however, a thick glass was between prisoners and their visitors. Prisoners were not permitted to touch their visitors and vice versa. Therefore, two prisoners spoke on how they would seek touch by putting their hands on the thick glass during the visits, so that the other person(s) would do the same. It seemed that in this way prisoners tried to experience the touch of others and saw this as a way of showing affection. *“So, the closest contact is you can put your hand up to the glass and the other person put their hand up and that’s a sign of affection.”* Having some sort of real physical contact seemed to be of importance for the prisoners.

Some of the ways in which prisoners dealt with not being able to have real physical contact was by trying to get touched by officers. They would accomplish this by initiating a cell-extraction through misbehaviour. *“...there’s no physical contact unless you have a doctor visit or a cell extraction where you are forcefully removed and that’s not something you want, but some people might want that interaction.”* Another example of physical contact during cell-extraction was by not cooperating with the officers during shower time. Officer(s) would then forcefully have to touch and remove the prisoners, which some prisoners experienced as a way to feel alive. *“Just to touch, to wrestle, to feel alive maybe.”*

Code L: striving for physical contact

Prisoners described how they would strive for physical contact by putting their

fingers through holes, that were found in the cell door, so that other prisoners could touch them. *‘So, you know, I didn't have someone to shake their hand or, you know, playing, or just messing around, punching on each other or, you know, just human contact, even visits. The only way you had contact with people is, the doors are like a honeycomb, bunch of little holes and your pinkie finger barely fits through the hole and just a little tip. So, when one of your friends come by and says, "What's up," he'll stick his fingers through there and just like touch his finger. So, that's the only contact you have, which is everything you want.’*

Code M: conversating and sharing stories with neighbours.

In three of the five podcasts, prisoners suggested how conversating repeatedly with neighbours helped with staying in touch with reality and passing time. *“...to fill the void.”* It also helped with not feeling alone and feeling connected with others. *“...In some way, we all felt and struggled.”* Talking excessively seemed to be a part of a mutual understanding between prisoners. This notion and desire of conversating seemed to be important for more prisoners in the podcast episodes. *“There's only so much to talk about because you run through your life stories, but after so long, you run out of things to say, where you find yourself repeating the same story over and over and over, and you don't even know it. And, out of courtesy, they don't even say, “Oh, you already told me that.” It just, it passes the time because you guys are conversating. So, even if it's the same story, you got to say it again, talk about it again, like you never heard It before.”*

Prisoners also mentioned that they connected in a more sensitive and deeper way and started to care for them. *“So, me and my cellie, we told each other stories. We went back to when we were three.”* For instance, one prisoner elaborated on a situation where his neighbour was known as a *‘devout racist,’* seeing as he had a problem with everybody *“whites, blacks, Mexicans, police.”* Even though everyone thought that this particular

neighbour was crazy, he would tell the prisoner about his kids. *“but when you talk to him, he'd tell me about his daughters and his kids and all this stuff.”* The prisoner did not think that this neighbour-inmate was a racist, because if you hate blacks, you will not share such important personal aspects of your life with a black person. *“I don't really think he was racist. I think that that's what he hid behind. He had the swastikas and all that, [...] If you hate somebody, you're not going to talk about that type of stuff with them.”*

Struggling with **having Meaning (M)**

There was not much information on what the purpose of life was for prisoners or what they did to make their situation meaningful. Prisoners described how hard it was to see the point of life in solitary confinement. They described how they felt hopeless and often wanted to hit the self-destruct button since they felt like there is no way out or anyone there willing to help them. *“You don't see the point you kind of feel like you hit the self-destruct button. And you know there's no way out and that nobody really wants to help you get out of that space. It's almost like the establishment want you to feel this way because they have nothing in place to help rehabilitate or give you any hope.”*

The following two codes focus on how prisoners dealt with maintaining a meaning in life: the mind: thinking about the purpose for being in solitary confinement (N) and mentally connecting by participating in a meaningful protest (O).

Code N: the mind: thinking about the purpose for being in solitary confinement

In trying to make solitary confinement meaningful, prisoners expressed how they were reminding themselves and were thinking about the reason and purpose of their stay in solitary confinement. All prisoners were part of a gang or committed federal crimes which meant that the only way to get out solitary confinement was either to debrief or to die. *“...and the only way they could get out was by debriefing,”* They mentioned that their long stay in

solitary confinement was the only way to protect their families. This notion seemed to help prisoners acknowledge the purpose of their stay in solitary confinement. *“It’s not just you that’s in danger. The same gang that you’re debriefing on, can retaliate against your family. These guys were unwilling to debrief and that’s why they spend so much time in the SHU.”*

Code O: mentally connecting with others by participating in a meaningful protest

Prisoners mentioned how participating in the collective protest, such as the hunger strike, was another way of having meaning in solitary confinement. One specific moment for the five prisoners was the hunger strike in 2013. Almost 10,000 prisoners, along with their family members and politicians, organized to protest the harsh conditions of life inside solitary confinement. After six days of not eating, prisoners spoke on how one could taste the inside of one’s digestive systems in their mouth. However, prisoners expressed how the intention of isolation was to demean and dehumanize them. As a result, they would not give up. The hunger strike was completed, when it was announced that the prison’s policy was going to be changed. This meant that inmates were no longer sentenced to solitary confinement on indefinite detentions and the maximum that a prisoner would spend in solitary confinement in California was limited to five years. *“If it wasn’t for the hunger strike, I’d still be sitting’ in the SHU right now.”*

To sum up, two categories, namely imagination/the mind, and creativity seemed to be prominent in the ways prisoners deal with maintaining their wellbeing in solitary confinement. Particularly, imagination/the mind seemed to be a factor that is present in all PERMA-elements, i.e., imagination: escaping from negative emotions (P), imagination: controlling the mind (E/A), imagining being with loved ones (R), and the mind: thinking about the purpose of being in solitary confinement and mentally connecting by participating in a meaningful protest (M). Creativity also seemed to be present: drawing as a tool for

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feeling positive emotions, scrubbing floors to reduce sadness, and writing down thoughts (P), drawing as a means to accomplish/engage, and learning how to read, write and develop skills (E/A).

Discussion

This current study explored how prisoners deal with maintaining wellbeing in solitary confinement. Based on the stories of the prisoners, the results show the absence of PERMA-elements, e.g., they hardly experience positive emotions, engagement/achievement, relationships and meaning in life. Moreover, the struggle of trying to maintain wellbeing in solitary confinement and the dehumanizing situation prisoners must deal with was evident. In the absence of positive emotions (P), prisoners found ways to deal with maintaining their wellbeing by crying, imagination: escaping from negative emotions, drawing as a tool for feeling positive emotions, scrubbing floors to reduce sadness, and writing down thoughts. In the struggle of experiencing engagement and accomplishment, prisoners used their imagination by controlling their mind, drawing as a means to accomplish/engage, focusing on small accomplishments, and learning how to read, write, and develop skills in this. For struggling with having relations (R), prisoners dealt with this by imagining being with loved ones, seeking touch from others, striving for physical contact and conversating and sharing stories with neighbours. For the last PERMA-element having meaning (M), prisoners dealt by using the mind: thinking about the purpose for being in solitary confinement and mentally connecting with others by participating in a meaningful protest. The PERMA-elements engagement (E) and accomplishment (A) in this study were presented together due to the overlap between both elements.

Overviewing the findings, two ways of dealing with a lack of wellbeing stand out: creativity and imagination. Being creative, expressed by drawing reoccurred in the PERMA-elements, namely by drawing as a tool for feeling positive emotions, scrubbing floors to reduce sadness, and writing down thoughts (P), drawing as a means to accomplish/engage, and learning how to read, write and develop skills (E/A). In addition, imagination and the mind seemed to reoccur in all ways in which prisoners dealt with maintain their wellbeing.

Therefore, the following sections will zoom on certain points of imagination, the mind and creativity.

Main findings

Imagination and the mind as a power

The current study showed how vital the quality of imagination is for maintaining wellbeing for prisoners. The mind and imagination are presented in this study as one aspect essential for dealing with solitary confinement. Using the mind and imagination as a way for survival, does not seem to be something unusual in the setting of solitary confinement. Research on effects of solitary confinement on prisoners emphasized how psychological adaptations occur in varying degrees, in response to extreme prison systems, wherein these adaptations are both normal and natural (Haney, 2001). The common results might explain the power of imagination in this study. However, in other studies on solitary confinement, researchers mostly highlight the deficit or impairment of the mind and its link to the SHU-syndrome (Grassian, 2016). For instance, In the research of Guenther (2013) it is noted how prisoners in isolation cells could no longer trust their own thoughts and memories and Guenther spoke of dehumanization and a social death of prisoners. This part is most definitely important, as it accurately stresses the struggle and distress that prisoners go through in solitary confinement. Nevertheless, this current study sheds light on the powerful dimension of the mind and imagination. Since this element is reoccurring in all PERMA-elements of ways to deal with maintaining wellbeing, e.g., to escape from negative emotions, by controlling the mind, imagining being with loved ones and using the mind to think about the purpose for being in solitary confinement. Though this difference might be contributed due to the difference in focus of this study, in comparison to other studies. This current study has its focus on the agency of prisoners, i.e., what do prisoners do to deal with staying well and maintaining

wellbeing, whereas previous research focuses more on the effects of solitary confinement on prisoners, which does not include the agency of prisoners (Grassian, 1983; Haney, 2001; Grassian, 2006; Smith, 2006 and Haney, 2018). This can explain why in this current study the power of imagination is more visible, in comparison to other previous research on solitary confinement.

Imagination and meaning in life

Other research on meaning in life described the importance of imagination (Alma, 2005; Alma, 2018), where meaning in life is a notable element in wellbeing of the PERMA-model. Similarly, Viktor Frankl narrated about his and other experiences in the concentration camps during the Second World War, in which they suffered tremendously (Ressem, 2020; Frankl, 1984). Frankl (1984) noticed how people seemed to give themselves in to something beyond the immediate reality, which helped them to go through, namely the act of imagination. For Frankl, the thought of his family and wife kept him alive and helped him into having a purpose in life (Frankl, 1984), which corresponds with the results of this study. Nonetheless, the experiences of Second World War cannot be stated nor can be compared to the experiences of solitary confinement, although the importance of imagination in situations in which humans suffer a great deal could (Ressem, 2020). In addition, the work of Frankl (1984) illustrates how in some cases humans may not have another choice, but to use their imagination and mind. He recognizes the importance of the power of choice and calls this the attitudinal mindset of meaning. He notes how everything can be taken from a man except from one thing, which is the last of the human freedoms and that is that an individual chooses his or her own attitude in any given set of circumstances (Frankl, 1984). He emphasizes how even though others are subjected to circumstances, they are still free to choose the way they think about those circumstances, which also seems in line with the findings of this study. Moreover, his work and this study seems to show the importance of exploring narratives and

experiences of humans. Both studies shed light into the distress and on how humans deal with maintaining their wellbeing under extreme circumstances.

Creativity with drawing and imagination

Empirical studies suggest that creativity, i.e., in art, drawing and music improves health and wellbeing among individuals (Mastandrea, Fagioli & Biasi, 2019). Earlier research stated imagination to be fundamental for human activity and is described as a tool that allows humans to see meaning in life, which is a critical component central to human becoming (Paintner, 2007). While trying to Investigate the link between isolation and imagination, isolation seems to be naturally encouraging mental imagery, as both imagination and perception occur along parallel neural pathways and are simultaneously competing for attention (Neilson, 2016; Pearson, Naselaris, Holmes & Kosslyn, 2015). Meaning that the more there is to perceive, the less intense mental imagery could be present. On the contrary, a reduced sensory stimulation can in fact allow for more graphic and stable mental imagery and that interestingly also correlates the link between imagination and creativity (Pearson et al., 2015). This correlation in which imagination and creativity were linked has been discussed in previous research, where imagination was described to be the facilitator of the mind. In addition, imagination is mentioned to have a major impact on the way we form our lives and makes this a dominant element for creativity (Connolly & Raleigh, n.d.; Pearson et al., 2015). The correlation of imagination and creativity is interesting, as this study showed both elements to be repeated in different elements of the PERMA-model. To find out if there might be other relations or ways to deal with, more research on ways of maintaining wellbeing for prisoners in solitary confinement should be conducted. Moreover, specific research on the relationship between imagination and creativity on solitary confinement should be explored on, since it seems that these two components can contribute to prisoners feeling alive. In addition, it can contribute to the humanization of these prisoners.

Strengths and limitations

Firstly, a strength of this study is that podcasts episodes of prisoners were used as data to find out how they deal with maintaining wellbeing in solitary confinement cells. However, investigating the subject of solitary confinement might raise some ethical difficulties. As solitary confinement is created as a way of punishment, it can be the case that this study contributes to more dehumanization of prisoners in solitary confinement, since there are some hints and signs of wellbeing presented. There could be a possibility that some results might be interpreted and used in a different way than that this study intends. This could possibly be a major limitation. Therefore, in this study we tried to repeatedly note and highlight the central absence of wellbeing. Moreover, showing that even if prisoners had ways, they were still struggling. Further, because of the studies' qualitative, narrative nature, wherein narratives of prisoners from podcasts were used as the core data, this study provided insights in this situation and can contribute to raising awareness on how prisoners deal in solitary confinement. In addition, it can help fill in the research gaps on this topic.

A possible limitation could be that there were not many podcasts that focused on this matter in depth, which lead to a small sample of podcasts episodes. The sample size only consisted of prisoners who were men, and as solitary confinement is not the same in every country, these aspects limit the generalizability of this studies' results. Previous research on women in solitary confinement for instance showed the extreme length in which women seek relations in solitary confinement (Hughes, Turanovic & Mears, 2020). Though research also stated that women spend less time in solitary confinement than men (Hughes, Turanovic & Mears, 2020), and therefore it could be that there are differences in ways that they both struggle and deal with maintain wellbeing.

Implications for further studies

In future research it is of importance to conduct qualitative research upon wellbeing in solitary confinement to continue to give voice and raise awareness on this serious topic. It might be valuable to focus on both the experience of solitary confinement, which illustrates the situation, and highlighting the agency of prisoners, in which possibly new ways to deal with maintaining in solitary confinement might be found. This can be gripping for fields in psychology that have interest in this scene. Furthermore, the power of imagination and the mind could also be interesting to further research, since this is one of the main findings within this study. It might also be interesting to combine several models of wellbeing to indicate whether there might be similar or other dimensions. Lastly, more research must be conducted on larger datasets to get a broader overview on how distressing solitary confinement can be, to get a broader overview on how prisoners in different solitary housing units in different countries deal with maintaining wellbeing. Consequently, policy makers could benefit from the insights and base their decision making upon the experiences, so that prisoners are given a greater chance in achieving more ways in maintaining wellbeing in solitary confinement. For instance, prisoners in solitary confinement could be offered unlimited access to pieces of paper and pencils and the possibility to spend time with neighbouring-inmates. In addition, prisoners could be provided with reading books, so that they can feed both their minds and imagination and make their stay in solitary confinement more humanizing. Though the risk of implementing these practical implications could be that the solitary confinement on itself could be perceived as justified.

Conclusion

Prisoners suffer in solitary confinement and struggle to maintain their wellbeing. The absence of all PERMA-elements is evident however, these prisoners hint at maintaining their wellbeing by using their imagination, creativity, and mind. In addition, other ways of how prisoners deal with solitary confinement were noted to the PERMA-elements of wellbeing, e.g., trying to touch others, writing down thoughts or imagining being with loved ones, where some hints of wellbeing are experienced by prisoners.

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