

Moderating Hope in the Awaiting for Release: A Practical Approach for Imprisoned Female Offenders in Malaysia

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Received: September 2, 2015

Accepted: November 11, 2015

Online Published: December 20, 2016

doi:10.5539/ass.v13n1p177

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v13n1p177>

1. Introduction

The concept “hope” has always been synonymous with a force that usually leads to imaginable and feasible good and better life (Ward & Wampler, 2010). According to Snyder (2000), hope can generate useful paths to reach desired goals and signifies one’s thoughts about his or her capacity to use the pathways. This dimension of hope is pertinent for people who are confined or constricted either mentally or physically. For imprisoned offenders, hope is perhaps the only strength that still exists and that keeps them going. However, what hope would mean to the offenders differ when they are inside the prison from when they are outside, after being released. Hope at the outside is achievable for the reason that capacities can be operated by following paths (Burnett & Maruna, 2004). However, hope for getting out from a prison can be maddening or even despairing, given that a release depends on one’s verdict. The longer the sentence, then the later would the hope be accomplished. How then prisoners cope with their high hope to be released sooner when they need to serve time undergoing their judgment?

For many years, people have deliberated about women and prison. Female offenders are very much affected as soon as they are sentenced to imprisonment. Ten years or even just a year of a sentence would subjectively disrupt their mental health especially for those with children. Thus, it requires lots of strength to endure a period of long and uncertain separation. Without a proper credence, high hope may raise significant frustration, instead. Hence, it is essential for female offenders to overcome the conflict of having high expectations behind the prison walls. This article explains how some Malaysian female offenders moderate their hope in prison to keep their sanity while waiting to be released.

1.1 Hope in the Contemporary Literature

Pieper provided a platform for “understanding of human hope” (as cited in Schumacher, 2003, p. 5). He affirmed that hope is incapable of realizing its object simply by one’s capitals alone, but it also requires gifts or inputs from other people. He even added that human would naturally destine to their final goals. These goals represent his or her aim of life and total satisfaction. It is the par excellence achievement. However, Pieper connected his statement with the notion that one also remains free not to accomplish his goal in reality. In other words, the way to be feeling happy (hope to reach the target), does not need to imply accomplishment. In fact, he mentioned that people are not obliged to choose what they may not want to gain (the good) “or even ones that lead away from it” (p. 46).

Al-Ghazali in his Book of Fear of Hope translated by Mc Kane (1965), considered hope as a moral concept for its foundation of inducement or motivation. On the other hand, despair was unacceptable and is the reverse of hope which could lead to interruptions in life. However, according to both scholars, fear is not the opposite of hope, instead, an acquaintance, which is also a source of motivation. Hope produced constant spiritual war through actions and determination in obedience, even though the journey was hard. Those who possess these two values have the ability to find wishes, likings, and desires in the uninterrupted acceptance with God, satisfaction in prayers and keenness for bowing to Him. These conditions, they stated, must be demonstrated by everyone who hopes and that this could be made only to God; for its utmost degree of rendition of behavior. If it was not manifested as said, they concluded that instead of obtaining what was hoped for and having the decency in life, one would fall into the “pit of self-delusion and wishful thinking” (p. 539).

Theories of hope have been in the literature for decades. From the perspective of this paper, Al Ghazali's view on hope is found to be relevant to the current development on issues about expecting change. His notion of hope is about preparing oneself to accept the condition should hope is not achieved, seems practical and essential for human life. Therefore, this study aims to search for some findings that could reveal the relevance of Al Ghazali's notion of hope in the life of female offenders in the Malaysian context.

1.2 Female Offenders and Hope in Prison

Female offenders are among those who would be much affected when sentenced to prison. In the Malaysian culture, women in prison are a taboo. Through the paternalistic perspective, at any scale of offense a woman does, it is always "not ladylike" to be in jail (Nagel & Johnson, 1994). Hence, at the point of judgment to imprisonment, female offenders may have experienced enough encumbrances than male.

Additionally, female offenders constantly think about the well-being of their children during their absence, and this would only add to their distress. Female offenders with a long sentence ruminate and continue counting their days to be set free. Even with high hope, knowing that the day to be released far along does give impact on their sanity. Moderating their hope for release will help to reduce the adverse effect on them. This work on hope takes place when the female offenders anticipate that they may not gain their expectation very much later in life, due to rules and regulations which are beyond their control.

2. Methodology

This study was completed using mixed method approach. The combination of multiple forms of data in this study occurred through connecting the data from the results of the first phase (quantitative) with the analysis performed in the second phase (qualitative) (Dawson, 2002-2007). Primarily, a quantitative approach was used to discover the profile of respondents. In this respect, the study utilized descriptive statistics to identify some demographic information including the respondents' level of hope. The findings were then used in the qualitative round to explain better aspects of hope that are involved which finally lead to achieving the female offender's goal.

The respondents of this case study are an inclusion of forty (40) Malaysian inmates of the Sungai Udang Prison, Malaysia who possessed certain selected criteria. Non-Malaysians were excluded in the framework because they do not represent the Malaysian community and culture.

Even though there is no particular population for this study but qualitative sampling techniques (Nastasi, 2015) were applied to work systematically on the selection of informants for to gain the appropriate ones. Utilizing qualitative sampling like snowball or chain sampling is not relevant in this case study because the method is not suitable for female offenders who are staying in a prison environment.

Patton's (1990) and Miles and Huberman's (1994) qualitative sampling strategies are the most suitable selection technique for this case study. As to Patton's way of sampling, these women offenders were singled out for this study with the collaboration of prison authorities through a non-probable purposive criterion sampling technique. This sampling is chosen because it offers richness in information where "one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (Ibid, pg. 169) or get a comprehensive view of the substance (Neergard, Olesen, Andersen & Sondergaard, 2009).

Mills and Huberman (1994) sampling technique of Purposive Maximum Variation Sampling (PMVS) were also applied. This study used purposive approach because of its pursuit of an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Finding the similarities or common strengths from a group of people who possessed different criminal background, age, religion, and offense record are also in the context of the study. According to Onwuegbuzie and Leech, (2007) and Merriam (1998), PMVS or heterogeneity technique was used to capture and describe central themes derived from a variety of participants, from a limited system.

This step begins with identifying various features (characteristics) for constructing the pool of informative respondents. Thus, at this stage, the study also considered variations in attributes, history, and backgrounds of the female offenders. In sequence to the spirit, all the research informants were those under incarceration period in the Sungai Udang Prison and had to meet with only these criteria:

- a. Malaysian women prisoners who admitted into imprisonment for the first time or more, regardless of their type of crime committed (except those who are not allowed to participate by the prison authority due to some security or health reasons)
- b. Of all kinds of race, ethnic, age and criminal background

According to Merriam (1998), this phase means that at the non-probable purposeful technique, sampling and

selecting the criteria is done at the case level before the data collection process.

In the quantitative study stage, the whole number of participants (40) who fit into the study criteria was chosen by the authority themselves according to the study need. Out of the 40 samples that had all embarked on questionnaires, thirty-four (34) of them had agreed to participate in the qualitative round. This level accomplished before the data collections begin (Merriam, 1998).

In the qualitative phase per se, from the 34 of those agreed, another “within the case” selection was performed. In fact, this time, the selection process was implemented simultaneously with the data collection (Ibid, 1998) process. Works of random selection by picking numbered cards progressed until its finale (saturation point).

The fact that the selection had to be from within the 34 samples helped to qualify this research as a case study (Patton, 1990). Only that sampling from within the case was done to pick occurrences that came from the right group (Adelman, Jenkins & Kemmis, 1993 in Merriam, 1998, p. 28). Of the 34 cards that were available, no specific number was determined for selection to gain as much and definite similarities or pattern of events, and at the same time hoping to meet into non-confirming evidence.

2.1 Saturation Point

This study applied Lincoln and Guba's (1998) popular recommendation in its qualitative section. Samples were treated as enough when the redundancy of data appeared, that was when there was no new information of worth. However, in determining the degree of saturation, working on additional samples was executed. Patterns were found as at the 8th respondent and continued to ascertain the pattern across heterogeneity until the 13th. At this juncture, the study found saturation. Mason (2010) mentioned that usually, qualitative interviews stopped when the number of examples becomes a multiple of ten. Somewhat not when saturation has existed, the researcher was confident (Ibid, 2010) with the sampling numbers in this study, which had succeeded in fulfilling what Bertaux (1981) referred to as meeting a point of “saturation of knowledge” (p. 37). Furthermore, respondents from this study are from structurally hard-to-reach-group (Brakertz, 2007).

2.2 Instrumentation

This study used two (2) sets of questionnaires during the first phase of data gathering. Questionnaire 1 was to explore the history and backgrounds, and Questionnaire 2 was to determine the level of hope. A set of interview protocol was used to examine their hope in reducing risks for recidivism.

Questionnaire 1 was a self-built instrument. It uses the Malay Language as the medium of instruction. This tool was meant to explore the basic history of crime committed by informants and their demography. The aim of Questions was to find out some basic backgrounds which provided a general understanding about the female offenders before pursuing further observation or analysis. For instance, this study set questions about age and race, type of crime, length of sentence, marital status and children.

Questionnaire 2 was an instrument adapted from Herth Hope Index (English version). This tool was used instead of Herth Hope Scale because of its aptness in measuring hope among prisoners (K. Herth, personal communication, March 22, 2011). This instrument was translated into the Malay Language to ensure that respondents understand the items and able to answer them without difficulties. Reliability and validity of the questionnaire were at .714 Cronbach's alpha.

Management of data from Questionnaire 3 with 4 items Likert Scale was by using SPSS. Score item was from 1 to 4, for Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree respectively. Except for item 3 and 6, they are the reverse score. The higher score indicates a greater level of hope in life in an individual. Results found were presented descriptively using descriptive statistic to see the overall picture of hope in life amongst female offenders.

Questionnaire 4 was a self-built instrument which was open-ended to less-structured inclined. This way was to invite the imminence of that not-so-specific information which entailed to discovering other possibilities of strengths or capitals owned by informants (Merriam, 1998). It was also suitable for the nature of this study, which was an investigation with some material where to some degree the researcher had some inputs about the subject (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Instruments were the product of critically reviewed questions so as to avoid the wrong way of inquiries. There was an execution of pilot interviews before establishing suitable arrays of questions. Thus, as much as possible this study avoids multiple, leading or yes-or-no questions. (Merriam, 1998). The researcher herself performed the in-depth interview.

3. Backgrounds and Level of Hope of Female Offenders under Study

Overall, these female offenders were at their productive age during imprisonment. Seventeen of them were still

single. Fourteen were married while divorced and separated were five and three respectively. Only one reported that she was a widow. Most of them have at least a child. The majority (21) were charged or remanded under drug offense while some (9) were under sex offense. The rest were offenders arrested for crimes like murder, blackmail, and theft.

The results showed that 4 (10%) out of the total respondents have a medium level of hope. However, more than two-thirds (80%) of the female offenders recorded a high degree of hope. Another 4 (10%) of them scored very high hope, indicating that they were at one end of the continuum of hope. None, however, scored low level of hope. In general, the women in this study are categorized as women with high hopes to live outside (Martin & Stermac, 2010). Nevertheless, during the long waiting period, high hope female offenders need to develop skills to stay mentally healthy. A qualitative study was embarked on to discover the mechanism they use to control their level of high hope to live outside prison.

4. Coping with Hope in the Prison

This study performed an in-depth interview on 15 female offenders who were from the initial group to ascertain the ways female offenders applied in dealing with their hope when in prison. While the rest of the female were on high hope level, three participants were at very high hope level.

The result showed that mostly, during moments of a feeling of hopelessness, missing the loved ones and the longing of going out of prison; female offenders will resort to performing religious activities, communicate with peers or take part actively in rehabilitation programs. According to the majority of them, these actions would soften or bumper the impact of grieves and sorrows they feel due to separation and for putting too high hope to be released sooner. They, however, did not consider their hope as shattered, but their high hopes are kept aside or in moderation to keep rationale during their long stay in prison. This is because hope to go out and meet up with loved ones like when life during outside prison is very much impossible to be achieved. Without the skill to moderate hope, they would most probably spend their time moaning, feeling down and finally leads to inactiveness. These conditions will only prevent women offenders from leading a positive life and restraining them to participate fully in the prison rehabilitation activities.

It needs strength and understanding as well as skills to accept that hope to be free could only be achieved later than expected or desired due to lengths of the sentence. This strategy of moderating “hope to be free sooner” is important to avoid situations where “high expectation raises great frustration.” As an example, in the interview with Rita, a matured middle-aged female offender tasked to make pins while in prison, she said,

“Myself, I am considering myself to be just ok, not that... not much thinking (about going out), not really”.

“Like (making) these pins... at least, it helped to release the tense which we would be bound to... (It hurts when) remembering about our children outside, (thinking whether) do they eat? Do they go to school? It was like that...”.

Rita seemed to keep herself busy with making pins work. She believed that the effort could avoid her from putting too much hope to be released, to check on her children’s daily routine.

For Koay, a Chinese woman of late thirties, in keeping aside her “hope to be free as soon as possible” she said,

“That’s why we don’t think often...my father said don’t think, if you think, read the bible, read the bible”.

Ajlina who is the most senior female offender showed similar values. When asked on her hope while being in prison waiting eagerly to be set free to perform her motherhood role, she said,

“Affected a little, no doubt, for instance, when it is the schooling season, it was always me who prepare all the needs. Hah! It was there. Hah! I will always, (doing) this and this and this... (Taking charge preparing for her children’s schooling needs) Unfortunately, we could only say it, but we cannot do it. It is ok, be patient, I said to myself”.

Asked on how she moderated her hope, she continued,

“It is ok; I leave it to God. It was that when I could not get anything, I had always left them much to God. I’ll pray... O God, please help to ease the problem of my children. That’s the most; I will continue praying”.

The female offenders who are mentally healthy appeared to have hopes to do what they usually do during life outside. However, because of constraints of being in prison, they moderated their hope by going back to faith and belief of their religion or focusing on rehabilitation activities.

5. A Case of Hope in a Distressed Female Offender

To compare hope between female offenders who can control their hope and female offenders who are not, this study went further observation on Aflida, an early twenties female offender who had set very high hope in life (as resulted in her hope index). When asked about changes she has felt during stay in prison, Aflida answered,

"I am feeling bored living in this prison. It seems to be too boring and mind-numbing. ...that is it!. It was like; the life in this prison seemed to be affectless and...does not bring any value to me. It is like that".

(She expressed her feeling of protest over the imprisonment which had upset her hope to live outside and enjoy her working life.)

The remark signifies that Aflida was bothered and felt frustrated over her very high hope to be freed from imprisonment as soon as possible. Her situation presented some relevance to what Lord and Hutchison (1993) referred as failure to think judgmentally or seeing things in a different way while in prison. She could not accept the fact that spending time in jail would cause her high hope interrupted. Furthermore, her unawareness of the inability to moderate hope had made her emotionally unstable. Her reaction or words used in explaining about her life in the prison were rather blatant and filled with hatred.

On the other hand, Ajlima, Koay, and Rita showed different emotional reactions or emotions when they failed to perform their routine; they seemed more subtle in handling their hope when in prison. They could accept the fact that hope is still in their grasp, only that it will be achieved a little later.

Hence, while hope has its role in shedding lights to female offenders to continue their life outside prison, too much reliance on it while not much can be done, would affect their emotion and well-being. Therefore, having high or very high hope to survive in prison and living the norm is adequate for female offenders to keep their well-being in the balance.

Without prejudice, this study also discovered that Aflida was a little odd. Even though she was amongst that possessed a very high level of hope, in fact with the full scoring of hope to live (Herth, 1992) her answer to a question about her success story did not reflect her accordingly. The researcher asked about her salary and what she did with the money. Her illogical answers were,

"I earned RM37, 500 a month. I kept some, and with the balance, I bought myself a car and an airplane... I purchased the airplane with a price of RM188, 000 in cash. I bought the flight with a cash price... cash, I bought it cash".

The researcher further questioned to check on her mental health. This time was about her built capitals.

Researcher: Ok, do you own a house, you do have a house of your own?

Aflida: I have a bungalow. I have a bungalow. It is a three story home.

Researcher: What a big sum of money you have?

Aflida: Of course!

Researcher: Other than the airplane and the three-story bungalow, what else do you own?

Aflida: I owned eight cars. They were MyVi, an Alza, two Pesona, a Kenari, a Swift and a Ford... black Ford. I have eight cars.

Clearly, Aflida was not really in good mental health. Her answers reflected her fantasy. (Aflida was supposed to undergo a mental health screening for the crime she had committed). However, juxtaposing Aflida's strangeness is not about shaming her, but rather to show an extreme case that could further approve this research argument. On the first observation, Aflida's data seemed to support the view of this research that only those with the high level of hope or very high level of hope in life would be able to prioritize their roles and types of expectations (not those with distressed mental health). Her response indicated her anger about being in prison.

"Of course...I feel upset. I am not able to go to work because I am in this jail".

Probing 1: How often do you think of living freely?

Aflida: Hee! It is every second that I think of it. I want to be free.

Probing 2: You mean, you are feeling disturbed when living in here?

Aflida: Definitely!. I am feeling too much in distress. I am profoundly affected.

From the conversation, Aflida, on being at a very high level of hope to live and showing a distressing symptom, has had them overshadowing her supposed existence of hope to survive in prison. In the first place, having very

high level of hope, but distraught, yet to live among other female offenders would mean live in prison would be harder. From one angle, one can say “hope to live outside” the prison without considering the need of “hope to survive in prison” would affect the well-being of female offenders. Aflida's perception has proven this.

By evident, only female offenders with a high level of hope or very high level of hope and mentally healthy would be able to accept the circumstance that they have to spend some time in prison before achieving their goals. Thus, they need to moderate their hope to live by considering their hope to survive in prison, first.

This study found that hope is one of the substances of empowerment. When one is empowered, he or she knows what is best for him or her and in this case, it is to drive hope positively in life while even living in prison. Many academicians have advocated this, for instance, Geiger and Kwon, (2010), Reading (2004), Webb (2008), and Lord and Hutchison (1997). In other words, to make hope works, one would also need to understand in which or in what context hope helps. This situation is analogous to Ullrich and Coid's (2011) finding that working on capitals to achieve targets should, therefore, consider the right timing; and similarly the right place. The same goes to Zimmerman's (1995) concern about people's belief in their ability to put forth their control that they have to go according to context.

6. Hope and Patience

For a fresher outlook, another aspect of analysis that supports findings on the importance of moderating hope was the discovery of the importance of “moderation concept” embraced by women offenders in focus. The word “sabar” (patient) to Tizai, Ajlima, Hija, Zamira, Oriyaha, Solina, Nikish and Sue Ina has always been the word for solace. In fact, even Koay, who is of different race and religion admitted that patience, is the best way to lead a life in prison. She said upon being asked about her feelings on staying in prison,

Researcher: Koay, how do you feel your life when staying in here?

Koay: Me... my...however, the one that is so ccch! (Unexplainable experience which touched her emotion) I just keep on being patient... just be patient.

The word “sabar” (patient) and other words that carry the same meaning were found prominent in their texts (44 references from 9 respondents). Directly, this indicated that it brought meaningful perceptions by the group of focus. The concept “patient” intertwines with the notion “hope.” The term is also about moderation, about not to put too high an aim and not to have no aim at all. Hope without patience would lead to impairment. Ullrich and Coid (2011) indicated in their study about how protective factors could turn into risks factors; like when there is no patience in achieving hope. It is where disaster would easily win through. Al Ghazali's strong emphasis on the importance of hope that comes along with the fear of God through its ambiance of devotion and rendition, thus, should be noted earnestly.

Others such as Hatch (2007) and Webb (2008), advocated that religion has its link with hope. In fact, the findings that insist on hope for women offenders in prison should mutually exist with the concept of “moderation” or sabar are in line with what have been specified by McDermott and Snyder (1999). They said that high hope people are those who are realistic in knowing the ups and downs of their dreams and desires. Nevertheless, they believe that with the abilities they will finally achieve their ultimate goal.

From another angle, this study also found that strong support from prison personnel, prison peers, and family through visits are essential to keep offenders' well-being during incarceration. It is through this social relationship that stories are narrated and listened. Therefore, this relationship leads them to change their minds about putting so much hope to be free. In other words, family and friends' involvement in rehabilitation programs pays. Chamberlain (1997) stated in his article that there are times when people learn to deliberate critically, unlearn the habituation, and see things in a different way. His explanation did not elucidate on this as one of the methods to survive in a close penitentiary. However, his phrase fits well with the women prisoners' experience in dealing with too high a hope or a state of wishful thinking. It is the action of expressing, and that of being paid attention to that is important for the empowerment process to happen while in prison (Chamberlain, 1997).

7. Conclusion

Malaysian female offenders in this study were found to have high levels of hope. However, because of the need to withstand particular challenges in the prison which are beyond their control, the most suitable way to achieve their goals is by adopting the moderating hope approach. This method does not interfere with the fundamental role of hope because possessing high expectations means that achieving goals requires sacrificing every possible and realistic effort. Without such facilitation, they might, instead, be in jeopardy or be at greater risk to become aggressive or mentally unhealthy while in imprisonment. Hence, the moderating hope approach is suggested to

be imparted to female offenders because it offers them awareness on the importance of living life in the prison with rationality before achieving their goals in life later.

This study recommends utilization of the Herth Hope Index in every female prison. Determining the level of hope helps the prison authority to support offender's assertiveness on keeping their sanity and participation in the rehabilitation programs. The Index can be accustomed to as a standard operation procedure (SOP) at the admission arrangement, used to test candidates before parole or to assess the efficiency of rehabilitation programs after some time.

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