

Trauma and imported vulnerability in prison suicides

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pun**David R. Goyes** 

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Abstract

Suicide rates in prison are much higher than in the community. Significant data supports an approach to understanding this phenomenon that sees suicide as the outcome of incarcerated people bringing their vulnerability with them into prison *combined* with the pain and deprivation they experience on the inside. This article uses a personality development approach to argue that part of prisoners' imported vulnerability – which puts them at a higher risk of suicide – results from a life trajectory marked by trauma. To this end, I draw on repeat qualitative interviews with 29 prisoners in Latin America who attempted suicide while incarcerated. Based on a study of their life trajectories, I argue that pre-prison trauma plays a role in suicide in prison by shaping prisoners' personalities to make them more susceptible to negative emotions and reduced tolerance to distress, adversely impacting their modes of approaching and responding to the world.

Keywords

imported vulnerability, Latin America, personality, prison, trauma, suicide

Introduction

On November 28, 2023, between 11:56 a.m. and 12:00 p.m., my phone beeped eight times. One of the messages was a picture: 'look', 'doctor', 'Ifeel', 'bad', [picture], 'Iwanto, 'die'', 'doctor'. The picture showed blood gushing from the sender's right

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arm. The messages were from a person I had interviewed in prison. It had been a near-lethal suicide attempt – the sender was bleeding to death. After I contacted prison social services, health personnel arrived at the cell within minutes, saving the person's life. Psychological support and follow-up for the prisoner were also put in place. During the following days, the prisoner sent more messages repeating the themes of the interview I had conducted with them: a life trajectory comprising trauma, feelings of alienation and loneliness during most of their life, problems with substance abuse, and family vicissitudes while in prison. The sender's childhood, marked by physical and verbal abuse by their father, engendered rage and depression that lasted into adulthood. During adolescence, the person was in several turbulent and abusive romantic relationships. In prison, the sender led a violent gang, a role that put their life on the line with various murder attempts. On the day of the suicide attempt, news arrived that the sender's mother had died. Prison hardship – materialised in murder attempts and bad news from outside – became too difficult to handle with the few coping tools the person had developed before imprisonment, and the person's emotional inner life particularly susceptible to negative sentiments made this hardship even more distressing.

Images depicting a suicide attempt are shocking to receive but not unexpected. Suicide ideation, attempts, and completion are significantly higher in prisons than in the community. The incidence of suicide in Latin American prisons, the continent where this study was conducted, is 40 per 100,000 prisoners – 3.9 times higher than that of the general population (Fritz et al., 2021). Studies about the phenomenon are emerging worldwide and focus, mostly, on data such as age, gender, clinical history of the deceased, and what triggers suicide inside prisons. Yet, an exclusive focus on suicide conditions and what has been called 'proximate causes' risks leaving under-explored how life prior to imprisonment plays a role in death by suicide.

This article explores the mechanisms through which the 'life baggage' prisoners bring into prison – 'imported vulnerability' (Liebling, 1992) – puts prisoners at a higher risk of death by suicide upon incarceration. This article studies in-depth the life trajectories of 29 people incarcerated in seven Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Honduras). All the participants made near-lethal suicide attempts in prison and had life trajectories marked by pre-prison trauma and vulnerable inner lives. The article argues that pre-prison trauma played a role in participants' suicide attempts in prison by shaping their personalities in such a way that their modes of approaching and responding to the world became susceptible to negative emotions and reduced their tolerance to distress – of which there is plenty in prisons' hostile environments.

Suicide in criminology

Criminologists and psychologists have paid sustained attention to different aspects of suicide in prison since the 1990s. Studies cover a wide range of topics such as policies and recommendations to prevent suicide in prison (Carlen, 2001; Konrad et al., 2007; Pratt, 2016), prisoners' narratives about their suicidal feelings (Borrill et al., 2005; Medlicott, 2024), death by suicide of people within the criminal justice system but outside custodial settings (Phillips et al., 2019), experiences of staff working with people

at risk of suicide (Phillips et al., 2022), institutional arrangements to investigate prison suicides (Aitken, 2022), the trauma created by suicide attempts in prison and their relevance for post-prison deaths (Carlton and Segrave, 2011), and suicides after prison release (Pratt et al., 2006). Most attention has, however, been devoted to the aetiology of suicide in prison: its causes, correlations, risk factors, and triggers (Towl et al., 2002).

Liebling (1992), with her landmark book *Suicides in Prison*, significantly pushed research on the aetiology of prison suicide forward. Liebling sought to counter criminology's medicalisation of suicide in prisons by arguing that suicide is not only an individual problem but, first and foremost, a socially produced phenomenon. In Liebling's reading, two forces explain suicides in prison: (1) a hostile environment inside prison and (2) vulnerable groups in prison, who have few resources to cope with the pains of prison. Liebling (2007), therefore, differentiated between *immediate triggers*, those inside prison, and the *imported vulnerability* of imprisoned people, which develops before incarceration. Imported vulnerability, explained Liebling, 'influences the experience of imprisonment, making certain aspects of prison life (such as relationships, safety and culture) particularly powerful' (2007: 427).

Since Liebling's book, research on the aetiology of prison suicide has followed the general lines of deprivation and importation models in the sociology of prisons (Cline and Wheeler, 1968; Thomas, 1977). The *deprivation model* is premised on prisons as total institutions and focuses on the characteristics of prison organisation and the pressures it puts on prisoners. The *importation model* developed as a critique of the former and calls attention to factors beyond the immediate prison situation, including past events such as pre-prison socialisation and life experience, and prospects for the future (Thomas and Foster, 1973). The overall current consensus is that these models are complementary in helping make sense of adaptations to and consequences of incarceration (Crewe, 2007; Slotboom et al., 2011), an insight that gave rise to the *combined model* but that also fosters efforts to develop both models independently.

In applying these models to prison suicide, the deprivation model posits that suicide is caused by prison-induced distress, the importation model that prisoners bring with them an elevated suicide risk, and the combined model that prisons expose already vulnerable populations to additional risk (Liebling and Ludlow, 2016). Of these three models, however, the deprivation model is the most developed because situational factors, or proximate suicide triggers, are easier to identify than the dynamics of imported vulnerability (Liebling and Ludlow, 2016). For instance, a series of studies have identified living in a single cell, having no social visits, extended remand, serving a life sentence, and being convicted of a violent offence as the greatest risk factors for suicide in prison (Bukten and Stavseth, 2021; Fazel et al., 2008; Larrotta-Castillo et al., 2014; Zhong et al., 2021). Further research has found that the main triggers for suicide are adverse life events, criminal justice and prison-related factors, and psychological factors (Rivlin et al., 2013).

While the deprivation model has seen the most development, most academic literature relies on the combined approach (Towl and Crighton, 2017), and even though the importance of deprivation keeps being emphasised, the literature also highlights the relevance of 'imported vulnerability' (Dye, 2010). Fazel et al. (2017: 947), for instance, drawing on a

large international sample, concluded that ‘the lack of any strong associations between prison-level factors and prison suicide rates suggests that individual-level factors or interactions between them and the prison environment might provide more explanation than solely focusing on prison-level factors’. Even though imported vulnerability factors (such as previous suicide attempts, psychiatric hospitalisation, and drug addiction) explained 15% of the variation in prisoner distress in prison while the prison environment explained 45% (Liebling et al., 2005), there is more to be learned about why some prisoners are more susceptible to dying by suicide in prison than other inmates, despite the similar environmental conditions. In other words, the study of imported vulnerability is unavoidable if we wish to understand suicides in prison even when the immediate reason for suicide can be found within prison walls.

Studying imported vulnerability is challenging because of the analytical difficulties of connecting early life phases with acts in prison while accounting for everything that happened in-between. Yet, the notion of imported vulnerability indicates that examining a person’s life trajectory is fundamental to understanding suicide in prison. A focus on pre-prison trauma and particularly on how adverse and traumatic life events prior to incarceration shape prisoners’ perceptions of life seems to be particularly relevant to understanding the increased risk of suicide in prison. Borrill and Taylor (2009), for instance, documented a correlation between comorbid trauma symptoms and suicide in prison, and Marzano et al. (2016) meta-study identified childhood trauma as a specific imported risk factor for suicide in prison. The question is how pre-prison trauma becomes an imported vulnerability.

The emphasis on pre-prison trauma as a risk factor for suicide in prison further coincides with the growing literature and policies on trauma-informed practice in prisons. Scholars and policymakers broadly acknowledge that prison populations disproportionately include individuals who had psychologically traumatic experiences during their childhood and adolescence (Crisanti and Frueh, 2011) and that pre-prison trauma is significant in the everyday life of incarcerated people for whom apparently insignificant events can trigger feelings of fear and hopelessness (Auty et al., 2023). While the implementation of prison trauma-informed initiatives has been criticised, there is broad agreement that trauma heightens the pain of incarceration and augments mental health problems (Auty et al., 2023; Jewkes et al., 2019).

This article explores the processes that might be at play through which pre-prison trauma heightens the risk of suicide in prison. It is based on 29 cases in which near-lethal suicide attempts were all preceded by traumatic experiences before incarceration and where all participants had developed vulnerable inner emotional lives. The article argues that psychologically traumatic events lead people to develop personalities that are more susceptible to negative emotions, have reduced tolerance to distress and are, therefore, more vulnerable to hostile prison environments.

Personality, trauma, and negative emotionality

Personality – a person’s ‘ways of approaching and responding to the world’ (Caspi, 1987: 1203) – shapes, in large part, people’s ability to adapt to new environments and the choices they make at transition points. Due to personality’s power to frame how

people interpret the world and act in it, the construct is fundamental in understanding prison suicides. Although the term *personality* emerged in an era of psychiatric domination that tended to be deterministic in seeing people's inner world as fixed throughout their life-course and all-encompassing in determining a person's behaviour, as well as blaming individuals for emotional distress and downplaying their social context (e.g., Allport, 1937), this understanding of the word has been critiqued. Revisions have led to its definition as a partly malleable construct shaped and re-shaped by social life experiences (Little, 2014). The current approach sees personality as significantly social in how contextual factors contribute to shaping it and in how personality translates into behaviour, albeit, constrained by social conditions (Mischel, 2013).

Personality is currently conceptualised as having three levels. (1) The first level comprises *dispositional traits*, which are tendencies to behave in certain ways in certain kinds of situations based on the mental organisational constructs through which people see life (Caspi and Shiner, 2006). Traits are longitudinally consistent but can vary in intensity and how they are manifested from situation to situation. So, to understand personality, it is necessary to also explore levels II and III of personality, which contextualise and group traits. (2) The second level, denominated *personal concerns*, comprises goals, coping styles, and motives. Personal concerns are the time, space, and role-specific leanings that counterbalance the longitudinally stable tendencies of traits. Personal concerns, in other words, are what people want during particular periods in their lives and the methods they use when trying to achieve their goals (McAdams, 1995). (3) The third level is the *inner story* that attempts to express a person's cohesiveness and purpose. Inner stories – the storied self – develop from adulthood onwards and seek to integrate people's values and skills and 'organize into a meaningful temporal pattern their reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future to provide a life with unity, purpose, and meaning' (McAdams, 1995: 382). The existence of an inner story means that personality is shaped not only by the objective events people experience but also by how they create a narrative about those episodes. Based on literary analysis, psychoanalysis, and Jungian theory, Booker (2004) proposed the existence of seven archetypical narratives that might also guide people's inner narratives. The combination of these three personality levels added to their specific social and cultural situatedness results in each person's personality being a unique variation (McAdams and Pals, 2006).

Personality, with its three levels, takes shape through an orderly sequence of developmental periods in a process of *developmental elaboration* in which cognitive and affective representations are engrained in the self through repeated reinforcements (Caspi and Shiner, 2006; Elder et al., 2003). Developmental elaboration begins in the first months of life when sensitivities towards potential rewards and threats are trained; parents and guardians are crucial at this stage. The process continues throughout life (although the formative years are fundamental) through the reinforcement of sensitivities and the construal and manipulation of lived experiences. This means that personality is continuously co-constructed over time in the interaction between the person and the situations they face (Scarr, 1987), in a dynamic that Little (2014: 5) metaphorically compares to a scientist who is 'actively testing, confirming, and revising hypotheses about people, objects, and events in their lives'.

Experiences in childhood and adolescence – mainly traumatic ones – significantly shape how people see the world, script their inner stories, and act (Caspi, 1987). Events such as rape, child abuse, physical violence, and chronic stress have been proven to have cognitive and emotional consequences for the development of personality (Bunce et al., 1995). Psychological trauma in general, but particularly during childhood and adolescence, incepts anxiety, feelings of being overwhelmed, and relational and cognitive biases that lead the person to see the world through negatively laden assumptions and create inner narratives informed by a loss of faith in humanity and life (Todd-Kvam and Goyes, 2023). Trauma affects personality traits by incepting mental organisational constructs associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioural vulnerabilities (Daud et al., 2008). Inward-biased cognitions derived from trauma include low self-esteem, feelings of rejection, shame, guilt, self-blame, and a range of psychological distresses; outward cognitions include ‘anger and anger rumination, resentment, hypervigilance to aggressive stimuli, hostile attributions, vengeful thoughts, and feelings of injustice’ (Eisner et al., 2021: 473). In sum, early trauma becomes ingrained in personality, leading to inner worlds with negative emotionality and negative inner narratives (Rademaker et al., 2008).

Examination of personality developmental elaboration processes is fundamental to understanding suicide in general – not only in prison – as significant evidence shows that certain personalities, particularly those with negative emotionality and those shaped by trauma, heighten the risk of suicidal behaviour (Brezo et al., 2006; Krysinsk and Lester, 2010). Lawson et al. (2022), for example, identified the association of personalities with negative emotionality with the onset of suicidal ideation and behaviours, and Gunnell and Lewis (2005) found that sexual abuse in childhood, which later translates into negative emotionality, is a significant risk factor for adult suicide. While research on the aetiology of suicide shows that suicides are complex, multi-causal events seldom reducible to a single ‘cause’ (Franklin et al., 2017) and that suicide has several identified determinants ranging from genetics (Brent and Mann, 2005; Voracek and Loibl, 2007) to environmental issues such as the availability of means (Sarchiapone et al., 2011), the role of personality – particularly those shaped by trauma – in framing a person’s approach and response to the world should not be ignored.

In this article, I try to make sense of the mechanisms through which personalities shaped by trauma heighten the risk of suicide in prison. The departing point is the documented frequency in which near-lethal suicide attempts in prison are preceded by pre-prison psychological trauma.

Methods

This article is based on repeat interviews with 29 Latin American prisoners who attempted suicide in prison. As part of the Crime in Latin America (CRIMLA) project, from January 2022 to August 2023, a research team, including the author of this article, interviewed 296 incarcerated persons in seven Latin American countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, and Mexico. Suicide was a topic often touched on by the participants; 104 of them made substantial mention of

suicide. This included not only mentioning their suicide attempt or suicide ideation while free or in prison, but also relatives' attempts and witnessing suicide in prison. This article focuses in-depth on the near-lethal suicide attempts in prison that 29 of the participants made. Suicidal ideation is excluded because it is common in prison contexts and further removed from suicide than near-lethal attempts. Meanwhile, the accounts of people who have made near-lethal suicide attempts – 'attempts which were very nearly fatal had it not been for rapid and effective pre-hospital care or other emergency treatment' (Marzano et al., 2009: 153) – have been identified as the closest and most reliable proxy to learning about the subjective experiences (meanings, interpretations, motives, and intentions) of those who die by suicide (Marzano et al., 2009). Each of the 29 prisoners was interviewed three times, making a total of 87 interview sessions.

Important variations existed in the 12 prisons in the seven countries where the 29 participants included in this study attempted suicide. While specific details are withheld to ensure the anonymity of the participants, four were interviewed in Argentina, six in Bolivia, two in Brazil, four in Chile, four in Colombia, six in Honduras, and three in Mexico. The prisons where they attempted suicide included one minimum-security prison with a population of 900, eight medium-security prisons with populations ranging from 200 to 5600, two high- and medium-security prisons with populations of 2000, and one high-security prison with a population of 750. The variation in how these prisons were organised makes it impossible to lump them together into a single construct of 'Latin American prisons'. The only generalisable traits are their overcrowding, underfunding, and prisoner co-governance (Darke et al., 2021; Sozzo, 2022).

Of the 29 participants, 12 were men, 16 were women, and one was a transgender woman. Ten were in prison for murder, six for drug trafficking, five for sexual offences, and four for robbery. The remaining four were imprisoned for a combination of other crimes. Their ages ranged from 22 to 64 with an average age of 36.6. Their sentences ranged from 4 to 70 years, with an average of 16 years. Sixteen participants were working in legal, formal activities at the time of imprisonment, ten were involved in illegal activities, and there is no information for the other three. Twenty-one of them had children when they were imprisoned, six did not, and information for the other two is not available. These data hint that there is no univocal type of prisoner who attempts suicide, as there is not a specific type of prison where suicides are attempted.

Each participant was interviewed several times with some days, but preferably at least one week, between sessions. Sessions lasted from 1.5 to 2.5 h. Interviews were based on an extensive interview guide emphasising life phases and life trajectories. The interview guide followed a life-course and life-story design, and it was divided into several categories: family context, childhood, youth, adulthood, deviant activities (including drug use, violence, and crime), detention and legal process, life in prison, and perceptions of victims. To understand life in prison, questions were asked about social relations with peers, officials, and visitors; everyday life activities, including hobbies and studying; work in prison, legal and illegal; the economy of the prison; and support while in prison, both internal and external. The interview guide did not contain questions about suicidal ideas and behaviours, but it did ask about the problems

(including mental health issues) prisoners faced, how they solved them, whether they had access to psychological therapy, with whom, and how much it helped. We made a point of letting participants tell their stories in their own way, and interviewers were free to probe topics of special interest not covered by the interview guide. This resulted in information about suicide in prison beyond the interview questions being gathered for the project.

The analysis began with an initial broad coding in NVivo of the entire corpus of interviews, resulting in a codebook containing 255 nodes. I then conducted a more detailed analytical coding of the nodes that dealt with participants' near-lethal suicide attempts and the life events and life stories that shaped their personalities. I coded for suicide triggers, which attend to the deprivation model, and for traumatic experiences and aspects of participants' readings of the world that reveal aspects of their personality, which attend to the importation model. The data are limited in that the accounts of suicide are retrospective rather than prospective descriptions. Often retrospective narratives do not describe objective events (in this case, suicide attempts) but reflect people's efforts to make sense of what happened. Yet, as discussed above, narratives about events and even 'lies' convey something profound about human personality because they are part of an inner narrative, including worldviews and coping mechanisms (McAdams, 1995; Sandberg, 2010).

All participants we approached received an oral and written explanation of the project and their rights, in Spanish or Portuguese. They were told about the purpose of the project (learning about their lives), the range of questions in the interview (detailed above), their freedom to decide whether to participate, the confidentiality of the conversation and the privacy measures taken by the project, and the lack of concrete benefits and drawbacks of participating. Considering that most participants had experienced significant psychological trauma, we implemented a trauma-informed approach that assumed, among other things, that obtaining informed consent from participants was a continuous process across and within the sessions rather than a one-time formality (Todd-Kvam and Goyes, 2023). While the interviews analysed in this article covered difficult topics such as suicide attempts and psychological trauma, the interview sessions were often positive experiences for participants, and they drew psychological benefits from them (Goyes and Sandberg, 2024). Furthermore, research conducted on the impact of prisoners participating in interviews for a research project on near-lethal suicide attempts found that 'self-reported mood levels improved significantly by the end of the interviews' (Rivlin et al., 2012: 54). The only reason for participants' distress was being asked too deep and insistent questions about their suicide attempt. In contrast, the research project on which this article is based was mainly interested in life-courses, and participants freely chose to disclose information related to their suicide attempts without being pushed to dig deeper than what they themselves chose to disclose.

The research project was hosted by the University of Oslo. We sought and obtained authorisation from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services to collect and store life stories. We also received authorisation from local ethics committees in the seven Latin American countries where we conducted fieldwork. The names of all participants have been pseudonymised.

Pre-prison trauma, personality's three levels, and prisons' hostile environments

All 29 participants who made near-lethal suicide attempts while in prison had experienced trauma before incarceration, starting in childhood, traversing adolescence, and extending into adulthood. Below, I present the mechanisms through which pre-prison trauma seems to have modelled the participants' three levels of personality, making them increasingly susceptible to negative emotions and thereby more vulnerable to prison's hostile environment. Seeking to 'depict social phenomena through people's stories of everyday life experiences' (Rodríguez-Dorans and Jacobs, 2020: 613), I present these mechanisms in tandem with participants' life experiences. I take one personality level at a time. I begin my discussion of each level of personality with a narrative portraiture of a participant. Following each portraiture, I illustrate diverse aspects of the personality level with the testimonies of other participants. The portraitures I draw to bridge the gap between an individual and society, thereby serving as an ideal type for widespread propensities. Portraitures also enable me to present participants as full and complex humans and not only as personality types. There follows a discussion of how a personality shaped by trauma may have played a (non-causal) role in the prisoner's suicide attempt. This exploration sheds light on why psychological trauma tends to be present in the life-courses of those who attempt suicide in prison.

Level I: Dispositional traits. Alex, 30 years old at the time of her interview and sentenced to four years for extortion, was transferred from one prison to another in Colombia because, as she explained, '[I] could no longer be in there [in the previous prison]. My depression increased, and I attempted suicide three times. I cut my veins and was under medication'. Alex was born a man. At the age of seven, Alex began feeling uncomfortable in a male body. At age eight, two cousins raped him, planting the seeds of distrust, sadness, and rage. Childhood was a traumatic period, and Alex attempted to keep all memories of it repressed. 'I don't want to remember that time', she said during the interview. At age 11, Alex became depressed, and his mother took him to a psychologist. The cause, the psychologist diagnosed, was a split in the self: Alex was being forced by his dad to live 'like a man', but Alex felt like a girl. Therapy motivated Alex to transition to a girl's body, despite the beating she received when she announced the news. As Alex started wearing skirts and make-up, an 18-year-old neighbour approached her. The man expressed romantic intentions but, in actuality, introduced Alex to prostitution. Working the streets, Alex was raped by clients, hit by homophobic gangs, and punished by her procurer. At age 18 she started doing drugs to 'calm down and confront the dangers of the street'. Alex was in successive comas for weeks following two clandestine aesthetic surgeries to increase her breasts and buttocks, and during the months-long recovery periods, neither her boyfriend nor friends visited her. Confined to the hospital during recovery, Alex had suicidal thoughts for the first time, which she acted on in prison.

Other participants also were subjected to trauma early in life, shaping their dispositional traits toward negative emotionality. Paulina, in Bolivia, was raped at an early

age, resulting in fear and anxiety as consequences of her victimisation. Alfredo, in Honduras, was forcefully recruited as a child by a criminal gang, and every time he attempted to run away, the group threatened to murder one of his relatives. Trauma created significant distress that persisted up to his imprisonment. Sam, in Honduras, set fire to his cell in an attempt to kill himself. At age nine he fled home to escape from a violent father and was immediately forcefully recruited by a drug trafficking organisation. This trauma engendered anger, hypervigilance, and hypersensitivity to triggers – which he saw everywhere. Explaining his suicide attempt, he said, ‘I set fire to my cell because of so much pressure... I was losing my mind... there are so many bad things: the food, the water, Zoom, the visits, the medicine, I mean, only bad things, man. I got desperate’. He was hypersensitive to inputs that, for others, would have been neutral or even positive.

These participants, whose vital childhood and adolescence developmental elaboration processes were marked by trauma, including rape and physical abuse, developed personality dispositional traits with negative emotionality, making their life in prison even more difficult than it would have been without. Dispositional traits reveal tendencies to behave in certain ways in certain kinds of situations (Caspi and Shiner, 2006), and for the participants this included anxiety, fear, and withdrawal. Combined, these dispositional traits comprised the constructs through which they saw life. Because early trauma and life-long victimisation significantly shaped them, these constructs were generally characterised by a tendency toward negative emotionality. Seeing life through the lenses of negative emotionality made the participants more prone to general distress and a state of ‘falling apart’ during their incarceration.

Level II: Personal concerns. María (39) was imprisoned in Honduras for murder in the first degree. Six months after her imprisonment, her daughter ran away from the place where she was living and could not be found. Not knowing how to cope with this, María bought poison and drank it together with strong medication. The prison authority who found her shortly after her suicide attempt took her to the hospital, saving her life. María was vulnerable prior to incarceration because of various traumatic events that drove her to focus entirely on survival, created an anxious attachment style, and left her with no constructive coping mechanisms. María was almost abandoned by her parents during her formative years, spending most of her time alone. With weak home ties, María ran away from home on several occasions to live on the streets – *flight* became her first coping mechanism for emotional and social difficulties. On the street, she overdosed on drugs and drank excessively as a way to manage difficult situations – escaping into drugs became her second coping mechanism. At age 14, her mother died, leaving her in charge of her two younger brothers. María married a drug lord to alleviate her economic concerns. He was murdered one year into the marriage, and she had to flee the country for her life – María’s main concern, from age 14 was her survival and of those under her wings. When María returned to Honduras, she became pregnant and later married a wealthy man involved in drug trafficking. María’s second husband abused alcohol and drugs and was often violent toward María. He repeatedly threatened to rape María’s daughter and kill both of them, increasing her concern with survival. When he molested

her daughter, María sent her to live with her biological father. Her daughter now started demanding that María should leave her violent husband. María, aware of the danger she lived with, carried a gun on her, and when her husband arrived home high one night with an axe, ready to kill her, she shot him.

Other participants also described problematic personal concerns shaped from childhood onwards by trauma. Luz, in Colombia, underwent traumatic experiences in childhood and adolescence that shaped or, at least, constrained her personal concerns. She experienced family violence as a child and had a very unstable adolescence, during which she developed a drug addiction. She went from one abusive relationship to another, which created a pattern of anxious attachment. At age 17, she met the man who later became her husband and whom she deemed very responsible. This was her first and only stable relationship, and her main goal in life became to be close to the man, which gave her a sense of meaning and ease. While in prison, Luz's mother-in-law called and said her son (Luz's husband) had died. Luz's world crumbled as her main goal evaporated; her anxious attachment style made matters worse.

Traumatic social interactions from childhood onwards partly shaped what these and other participants wanted at the time they were imprisoned and decided to attempt suicide – and the methods they used to try to achieve their goals and cope with challenges. Such *personal concerns*, that is, the time, space, and role-specific leanings that counterbalance the longitudinally stable tendencies of dispositional traits (McAdams, 1995), were, for the participants, a foundation that made adaptation to prison life more difficult. Economic hardship and life threats throughout their lives were the basis for goals and motives mostly focused on survival and satisfying fundamental needs rather than pursuing personal growth, which has been associated with developing constructive tools to face challenges (Fredrickson, 2010). Abandonment by parents and guardians led to anxious attachment styles, which made adaptation to new social contexts difficult (Lizardi et al., 2011). Violence and misguided support led them to develop harmful coping styles such as drug use, flight from stressful situations as well as violence as a tool to achieve their goals. The way trauma shaped participants' personal concerns coincides with Liebling's (1992) definition of imported vulnerability in which prisoners have few resources to cope with the pains of prison.

Level III: Inner narratives. Valeria (33) hanged herself in prison because she 'didn't want to live more in the dirt of prison'. Asked about the reasons for her suicide attempt, she explained, 'I had suffered so much in here; I was in so much pain'. She used the word *dirt* to cover all the challenging social and material circumstances she encountered in prison, ranging from physical dirt to sordid emotional experiences: 'It is shitty that nobody comes, sits with you, talks with you...you feel lonely'. These assertions are focused on circumstances in prison, but Valeria had begun to script an inner narrative of life as unending pain long before her imprisonment. Born in Argentina to a working-class family, Valeria was abandoned by her mother at age five and had an absent father who was incarcerated throughout most of her childhood (he spent a total of 28 years in prison). All of Valeria's brothers were imprisoned for a few years during her childhood, but they took turns rearing her. She was mostly neglected, except when she was needed for illegal activities. At age nine, they used Valeria to hide guns during police raids. Her adolescence was similarly traumatic. A gang of five men

raped her on the street when she was 15. At age 16, she got pregnant and had to quit school. Repeated psychological trauma – being abandoned by her mother, a father in prison, being gang raped – were at play as Valeria developed a script for her life as a path of unavoidable pain. As an adult, but before she was imprisoned, she hoped for death, which she saw as her only escape: ‘I wanted someone to kill me; I used to steal hoping that they would kill me; I used to join gangs in robberies hoping it would go wrong and kill me; I wished it was not the one by my side who got killed, I wished it would be me’.

Most other participant interviews also revealed glimpses of narratives in which suicide (or death at the hands of someone else) was the only possible end. Alfredo, in Honduras, for instance, who was forcefully recruited as a child by a criminal gang, partly inspired by this trauma, developed an inner narrative of helplessness. Describing his thoughts about his suicide attempt, he said, ‘I saw no sense in life and believed that suicide would solve all my problems’. Amalia, in Mexico, who was raped as a child and then was in a series of abusive relationships, scripted the world as a place where it was impossible to attain happiness. She attempted suicide after a man whom she regarded as a decent, responsible partner broke up with her.

For the participants, a life trajectory marked by traumatic situations became a significant force in scripting their life stories. Repeated and seemingly unavoidable victimisation at the hands of family, romantic partners, and strangers became a form of ‘learned helplessness’ (Seligman, 2011) – nothing they did to escape suffering seemed to make a difference. Inner stories attempt to unite the reconstructed past, the perceived present, and the anticipated future, seeking to create a cohesiveness to and *purpose* in life (McAdams, 1995). But for the participants, whose trajectory was framed by seemingly inescapable distress, inner stories pointed to futility rather than purpose. As elements of negative emotionality and harrowing concerns became entangled with their inner narrative, participants’ storied selves adhered to Booker’s (2004) archetypal narrative of tragedy, in which the plot entails the protagonist’s defeat and destruction as the inevitable end of the narrative arc. These inner narratives reduced participants’ tolerance to the many pains of imprisonment, arguably heightening their risk of suicide.

Conclusion

Pre-incarceration traumatic events significantly modelled the personalities of all the participants of the CRIMLA project who had attempted suicide in prison, making them more vulnerable to hostile prison environments. Childhood trauma, including sexual abuse, physical violence, and abandonment, attuned their level I dispositional traits to negative emotions, sensitive to distress, and prone to feelings of falling apart. Challenging circumstances in childhood and adolescence, such as being forced into prostitution, crime, and drugs, incepted a range of destructive level II personal concerns ranging from anxious attachment patterns, turning to drugs as a coping mechanism, and using violent methods to achieve goals, which left them with few constructive tools to face adversity in prison. The persistence of traumatic situations from childhood to adulthood instilled helplessness and shaped their inner stories in ways that expressed futility, instead of purpose. Their tragic plots anticipated perpetual suffering and death as the end of the

narrative arc. The outcome of the complex ways in which pre-prison trauma shaped the participants' personalities meant, in sum, that they approached the world with increased susceptibility to distress, importing their vulnerability into prison.

To capture the full complexity of suicides in prison, the circumstances of the act need to be connected not only with the particularities of prison environments but also with the specificities of individual life trajectories and the social contexts in which they are lived. Research on prison suicide, therefore, needs a newfound emphasis on imported vulnerability and inner emotional lives, which would account not only for 'proximate causes' in prison but also for the internal worlds that prisoners inhabit. While triggers of suicide are heightened in prison, they are not disconnected from life outside – in material and temporal senses. Pre-prison trauma, often an important piece in the life-courses of those who attempt suicide in prison, would be overlooked if only immediate prison deprivation was considered as a factor. Exploring the development of prisoners' personalities throughout their lives at all three levels (traits, personal concerns, and inner stories) and with a focus on trauma proved particularly valuable for this study as it helped uncover processes at play through which pre-prison victimisation increased the proclivity toward negative emotionality and heightened prisoners' vulnerability to hostile environments. A robust measure of imported vulnerability would, therefore, include pre-incarceration psychological trauma, whether using a phenomenological perspective (Depraz, 2018), a narrative approach (Pemberton et al., 2019), or more conventional psychological testing (Ruglass and Kendall-Tackett, 2014).

There is much more to study regarding the connection between trauma, personality, imported vulnerability, and suicide in prison. For instance, while we know that imported vulnerability is gendered (Liebling, 1994), the cases studied in this article also give reason to believe that pre-prison trauma – as a component of imported vulnerability – is, too. Abandonment was an experience shared by men and women, but men additionally experienced family violence and forced recruitment into criminal organisations, while women suffered sexual violence, domestic violence, and partner violence. Likewise, the seemingly universal pain of incarceration and the similitude of the triggers narrated by the participants with those identified in the global North (e.g., Rivlin et al., 2013) gives reason to believe that while the dataset on which this article is based comes from the global South, this article's findings are globally relevant. But while further research on trauma, personality, and prison vulnerability is needed, this article should not be interpreted as letting prisons off the hook for prisoner suicides. As Auty and Liebling (2024) show, standards of prison life are significantly connected not only with suicide but also with other forms of violence, including assaults on prisoners and staff, self-harm, and homicide. Indeed, prison managers should acknowledge that the pre-prison trauma of a significant number of the prison population exacerbates the already challenging experience of incarceration.

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