"What are you in for?"

The neglected role of the offence in prison sociology

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2025-11-13

Abstract Why have prison scholars so seldom discussed what people in prison think about their crimes? This article addresses a striking gap: the omission of the originating reason for incarceration—the offence—from sociological analyses of carceral life. We examine its past treatment in prison scholarship and argue for recentring it. Drawing on three case studies, we show how the offence actively shapes daily experience, institutional engagement, and social dynamics. Our framework explores how attention to the offence can illuminate what prisons are like, what they do through moral communication, and what they are for as sites of punishment. Our analysis suggests that attending to the offence can enrich our understanding of adaptation, compliance, and legitimacy, and more generally add to our understanding of imprisonment.

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Introduction

Prison scholarship has often implied that *why* people are incarcerated—what they have done or are deemed to have done—is irrelevant to the internal dynamics of the institutions on which it focusses. Classic sociological texts treated prisons as analogous to other organisations, not as punitive institutions. Most obviously, *Asylums* (Goffman 1961) bundled them with monasteries, boarding schools and military barracks as "total institutions". *The Society of Captives* (Sykes 1958 p. xiv) likewise saw prisons as systems for "total or almost total social control",

drawing parallels with concentration camps and gulags which were apt at the time, but which bracket off the prison's task *as a site of punishment* from the subsequent analysis. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* places punishment centre-stage, but is not really about prisons, so much as what their techniques tell us about a more extensive reorganisation of power around panoptic surveillance and the cultivation of selfhood. "Is it surprising", Foucault (1995/1977 p. 9) asks, "that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" In these studies, the prison is presented generically, and not as an institution with a distinctive purpose and culture relating to the reasons people are confined there.

The effect of relegating punishment beneath concerns about power, control and discipline is to neglect one of the prison's most fundamental characteristics. Because people are sent to them as punishment, and often seek to make sense of, or amends for, the acts or convictions that put them there (Herbert 2019; Irwin 2009; Schinkel 2014), prisons are permeated by moral concerns. Indeed, in many jurisdictions, they were designed to encourage moral reflection, an objective unifying their aims, architecture and regimes (O'Donnell 2016). In other words, offences were once central to how prisons were designed and how they functioned. In recent decades, however, discourses of penal administration have shifted, obscuring the offence's relevance. In many Anglophone jurisdictions, at least, running prisons has become a generic management practice rather than one with moral dimensions (Feeley & Simon 1992). Debates about imprisonment have often framed it as a technical or managerial task, rather than one infused with normative implications, as if prisons have "nothing to do with the intended delivery of pain" (Sparks 1994 p. 24).

Sparks's (1994) proposal to "re-moralise" our understanding of imprisonment has been fruitful. A significant branch of scholarship now addresses normative matters regarding penal legitimacy, focussing especially on prison order and "moral performance" (Liebling & Arnold 2005; Sparks *et al.* 1996). Such studies have explored the forms of power that prisons impose, the values by which they operate, and the ways prisoners are treated as moral agents. They contribute to broader debates about the extent to which, given the highly unequal distribution of power within prisons, imprisonment is morally defensible. Fewer works address the other dimension distinguishing imprisonment from "ordinary administrative activity" (Sparks 1994 p. 24)—that it is imposed upon people in response to legal and moral breaches that hold meaning for their perpetrators, and which therefore provide the animating force for the way the prison operates on them.

We aim to develop this branch of thinking. We agree with Sparks that justifications for punishment must be compelling, and should take account of what imprisonment is like empirically —that is, what prisons do and how they are experienced. But we expand the frame to place the offence alongside power and order, since all three are intertwined in the act, imposition and experience of imprisonment. This makes accounts more descriptively faithful and strengthens theorisation, enabling fuller participation in debates about imprisonment's purposes.

We begin by examining how the offence has featured in prison scholarship—initially as a blunt or latent classificatory variable, but increasingly as something of institutional, social or subjective importance. We consider why researchers have tended not to ask prisoners about the meaning of their offence, or to centre it analytically. Using three case studies, we then demonstrate how attending to the offence illuminates what prisons *are like*, what they *do*, and what they are *for*. Our aim is to explore morally-infused issues that are highly salient to

how prisoners experience imprisonment, their orientation to the authorities, their reception of forms of moral communication, and broader questions about penal legitimacy.

Literature review

Laursen and Mjåland (2025) recently described the offence as an "absent-presence" in English and Norwegian prisons: absent, in that their participants felt perplexed by the absence of meaningful communication about it, and yet present, in that a conviction was the one characteristic they shared. This characterisation largely holds true for the sociology of imprisonment. We suggest that the offence's role in theorising prisons requires reassessment.

Influential early texts acknowledged offences, but did so mainly to construct analytical groupings—Schrag (1954) found that first-time and non-violent offenders more readily resisted "prisonisation" (Clemmer 1958/1940), while Irwin and Cressey (1962 p. 141) distinguished between how professional "thieves" and state-raised "convicts" adapted to the sentence. In both examples, the goal was to theorise adaptative styles via categories derived from conviction types and criminal orientations; neither explored how members of these analytical groupings reflected upon the meanings of their convictions. A similar approach persisted in later texts concerned with prison order, where the offence continued to feature primarily as a classificatory variable. For example, Jacobs (1977 p. 159) noted that an offence-based status system at Stateville had been replaced by a "balkanized" one based on racial and gang affiliations, while Flanagan (1982 p. 83) suggested murderers were often "essentially noncriminal", and thus distinct from the broader prisoner population.

Some exceptions exist to this pattern, most prominently the moral distinctions made by prisoners and staff regarding sexual offences, including their low status within prisoner hierarchies (Cohen & Taylor 1972), the intensified staff control to which they are subjected (Sparks *et al.* 1996) and the increased isolation, guilt and shame they experience (Sapsford 1979); indeed, Mathiesen (1965) suggested that "censorious" approaches to authorities could be a way of adapting to sentiments of guilt. In *Psychological Survival*, Cohen and Taylor (1972) addressed guilt and shame only in relation to their typological 'sinners' (men convicted of sexual offences). Yet Fielding and Fielding's (2008) re-analysis of their archived materials uncovered these emotions across the sample. The Durham prisoners felt safe to surface these emotions in Cohen and Taylor's classroom "without worrying about being evaluated" by the authorities (Fielding & Fielding 2008 p. 90). Moral reflection was thus occurring, unprompted by institutional attempts to induce it, and unnoticed by sociologists more interested by authority relations.

Latterly, though, researchers have increasingly recognised the offence's influence over how prisoners experience punishment, understand themselves, and engage in ethical self-formation. This shift partly mirrors the changing character of penal power. In England & Wales, and many other jurisdictions, prisons have become "tighter" (Crewe 2011; Crewe & Ievins 2021). Prisoners' narratives—particularly those relating to their offending—have become objects of discipline. Offending behaviour programmes and risk assessments structure progression and release decisions, and construct prisoners by reference to their offences (Fox 1999; Lacombe 2008). Meanwhile, sentence inflation has intensified retributive severity for some categories of offending (Pina-Sánchez *et al.* 2025).

Perhaps not surprisingly, researchers have become more interested in responsibility and ethical status—that is, in the transmission and reception of censure. Irwin (2009 p. 43) documented an "awakening" process whereby lifers came to "fully appreciate" that something had been "fundamentally wrong with their former behaviour" (Herbert 2019; cf. Schinkel 2014). Meanwhile, narrative criminologists have shown that prisoners shape their offence stories to "recreate and reposition themselves as particular kinds of subjects" (Ugelvik 2012 pp. 261–2), to retain moral value despite discrediting convictions, asserting masculine legitimacy by denigrating peers convicted of sexual offences (Ugelvik 2015). Ievins and Crewe (2015) suggest that the targets of such exclusion overlook the convictions of others to reduce the salience of their own.

Recent research has noted that factors including gender (Crewe *et al.* 2017), age (Tynan 2019), and offence type (Jarman 2020) shape the ethical implications of a murder conviction. Men convicted of murder in different circumstances hold varying attitudes about what was wrongful in their actions, while the narrative impact of sentences varies with age at conviction, because of the different ways the sentence impacts life trajectories (Jarman 2024). These examples focus on lengthy sentences and serious offences, but repeated short sentences also prompt reflections on the futility of lives blighted by punishment (Armstrong & Weaver 2013; Schinkel & Lives Sentenced participants 2021).

Elsewhere, drawing on normative penal theory (especially Duff 2001), prisons have been conceptualised as sites of (often oblique) moral communication. Ievins (2023) demonstrates how prisons 'stain' their inhabitants, censuring not only formally via interventions and risk assessments, but also informally via spatial segregation, distinctive treatment regimes, and everyday interactions marking certain people as morally distinct. Such censure is often oblique and inconsistent, with prisoners' interpretations of it often diverging from institutional intentions. Similarly, Schinkel (2014) argues that prisoners often do not receive the censure intended by sentencers, with the medium of imprisonment distorting the message.

Increasingly, researchers have also described participants' attitudes to their (often serious) offending. Crewe, Hulley, and Wright (2020 p. 137) found that most life-sentenced prisoners experienced their offence as "unambiguously shameful", and that this shaped their institutional adaptations and social relations throughout their sentences. Research with people imprisoned for homicide in Argentina (Di Marco 2022) and England (Jarman 2020) has questioned whether moral reflection inevitably produces remorse, or expressions of responsibility have any stable meaning. Elsewhere (e.g. Crewe & Ievins 2021; Dagan & Segev 2015; Ievins & Mjåland 2021), risk management practices are treated as a vector for official communication about the offence; "lateral" forms of communication among prisoners, and unintentional messages by staff, are also analytically important (Ievins 2020; Kotova & Akerman 2022), reminding us that censure can be informal and unofficial. It also appears that meaningful reflection on the offence seldom occurs quickly (Crewe *et al.* 2020; Irwin 2009), and is often catalysed when a life after prison becomes imaginable, at which point engagement with institutional demands (e.g. for 'insight' into the offence) is more strongly incentivised (O'Donnell 2014; though see also Seeds 2022 on 'deeper' forms of hope).

Adapting Laursen and Mjåland's (2025) term, then, in much twentieth-century prison research, the offence was *latent*-present: understood to signify types of people, but seldom analysed either as a moral category forced onto individuals, or as an act holding ethical significance for the perpetrator. Recently, though, the offence is a more explicit focus. Attention

has shifted to the *subjective meanings* of legal labels—how it feels to be held responsible and how this shapes prison experience. The shift invites us to consider prisons not simply as social settings producing psychological adaptations, but sociologically: as places where the personal and cultural meanings of wrongdoing are negotiated.

An empirical focus on the moral meaning and effects of imprisonment also brings into view normative discussions about the justification and justice of punishment. Given that, in most countries, imprisonment is the archetypal form of punishment, and prisons so often treat reflection on and 'insight' into the offence as a desirable response (e.g. Dyke *et al.* 2020; Paratore 2016; Shammas 2019), a shift towards questions of purpose is an important step, since the *kinds* of insight which might be expected vary accordingly. Communicative theories of retributive punishment (Duff 2001) can help here, since they insist that punishment expresses communal values and should respect offenders' moral agency. Although moral censure may be distorted by imprisonment, or go unnoticed (Schinkel 2014), our contention is that focusing on imprisonment's morally communicative aspects adds a great deal to our understanding of penal legitimacy. This makes it all the more striking that the offence features so little in conventional prison scholarship.

Researching the offence

Within prisons, someone lacking a story about why they are there, or unduly defensive when asked, is considered by other prisoners to be rather suspect (Crewe 2009). Yet convention among prison researchers[1] holds it inappropriate to ask an incarcerated person directly about the details of their offence.[2] This norm is framed primarily as an ethical imperative. Asking people what they did to be there—it is suggested—risks pathologising or re-traumatising them, compounding their stigmatisation, or conflating the person with their conviction. Alternatively, it taints the interviewer's ability to remain non-judgmental (Stevens 2013). Thus, while populist discourses construct prisoners as *bad people*, prison researchers have tended to swerve or reject such judgments. This might reflect ideological or political commitment, as where critical scholars sympathise with prisoners (i.e. as victims or anti-heroes), and direct judgment towards the carceral institution rather than incarcerated people. More often, however, the norm seems likely to have been transmitted through methodological training and supervision, becoming embedded in disciplinary practice regardless of individual orientations.

A tendency not to inquire about the offence also reflects the longstanding disciplinary parameters of prison sociology. While normative issues play important if varied roles in penal theory, prison sociology has tended to see them as irrelevant (Schinkel 2014; though see Ievins 2023; Jarman 2024). To some degree, this position is defensible. As we note above, offence *type* has been associated with prisoner hierarchies and orientations to authority, but offence *reflections* have seemed somewhat immaterial to core topics in prison research. When researchers study prisoner social relations or penal order, it can feel digressive to discuss prisoners' thoughts

[1] There is, of course, a tradition of researchers interviewing people in prison *specifically about their offending* and the nature of crime and criminality, but we count this as research done within prisons rather than research about imprisonment.

[2] The norm is often not explicit in methodological reflections, but we have discussed it with many other prison researchers and are confident that how we have articulated it here is consistent with the messages that most junior scholars absorb.

on whether the penalty fits their crime, or their internal battles to maintain a self-image of respectability.

Relatedly, interest in prisoners' interiority has generally been subordinate to interest in their *social practices*. Canonical texts (e.g. Jacobs 1977; Mathiesen 1965) theorised social structures and institutional processes, rather than prisoners' reflexive existence. Methodologically, the semi-ethnographic emphasis on "where the 'action' is" (McDermott & King 1988)—wings, yards, workshops, and other collective areas—may miss reflections in more private spaces. Cells are where prisoners spend much of their time, affording headspace for reflection. Though the offence may be more present in such spaces, but methodologically they are fairly inaccessible, with practices of contemplation and rumination there leaving no obvious trace.

Nonetheless, our conjecture is that many prison scholars hear reflections on the implications of prisoners' offences and convictions but exclude these from their accounts. We find it hard to imagine that anyone who interviewing people convicted of serious offences has not been presented with narratives of regret, indignation, and other moral emotions. Indeed, many with more minor offences offer moral narratives about the events leading to their current circumstances: why they burgled houses, or dealt drugs, for example. If violence and other crimes are communicative, not enquiring about them means not taking seriously what they attempted to express. To deflect discussion of the offence might be as disrespectful as to probe too deeply.

How does the well-documented tendency to minimise and neutralise (Sykes & Matza 1957) affect our interpretation of these accounts? Simply to discredit them as self-serving lies is to lies misunderstand them; rather, they should be examined for what they reveal about prisons and punishment. Evaluating narratives purely by their fidelity to 'the established facts of the case' unduly privileges the conviction as a complete and authoritative record, whilst overlooking its significance for the narrator's current situation. Both desistance scholarship (Maruna & Copes 2005) and narrative criminology (Ugelvik 2012) recognise that distinguishing between narratives and 'the truth' is neither straightforward nor necessarily conducive to understanding. Rather, offence narratives can be understood as moral sense-making: preserving self-worth, making sense of the past, and navigating censure.

Our case studies come from projects which involved lengthy interviews, some over multiple sessions or after a sustained presence in the prison (see Crewe *et al.* 2020; Crewe *et al.* 2023; Jarman 2024 for methodological details). While the degree to which they focused directly on the offence varied, all these projects employed semi-structured interviews that allowed participants to narrate their experiences of imprisonment and relationship to their convictions. In all three, we deliberately asked some questions about the offence and/or conviction, and how these impacted people's sense of self, the prison's social world, and the extent to which they were a target of power. All of us felt that participants' willingness to discuss these matters required us to avoid displaying the shock or revulsion some seemed to anticipate (though for researchers to become completely dispassionate might also be unwise). Existing work on the ethical considerations involved in interviewing people convicted of serious, and particularly sexual, crimes often focuses on the converse moral threat: collusion with morally unacceptable viewpoints or factually incorrect accounts (Blagden & Pemberton 2010; Digard 2010; Waldram 2007). We have discussed these dilemmas elsewhere (Ievins 2023 pp. 33–36; Jarman 2024 pp. 66–77), but they take a specific form when the focus of the research project is not what actually happened, but how people reflect on it and its role in the prison. Researchers

should neither entangle themselves in inappropriate side-taking, nor mislead participants by implying greater sympathy than they feel (Ievins & Crewe 2015; Malcolm 1990). However, that need not stop us from recognising the continuing effect of the offence in their lives, via the sense they make from it.

The case studies were selected in line with our theoretical aim: to describe individuals for whom the offence was salient in ways that exemplify our argument. Serious offences define the severity of the sentence and subsequent progression pathways, regardless of how individuals relate to it psychologically. Across our studies more broadly, its subjective significance varied considerably. We acknowledge that someone serving a tenth short burglary sentence might not ruminate on a specific conviction exactly as our case studies did. Yet even where the offence fails to dominate mental headspace in this way, and hence (in our framework) does not shape what prison is like, it remains analytically significant for understanding how prisons communicate censure, and what purposes they serve.

The first case study derives from ethnographic research in a medium-security English prison for men convicted of sex offences, part of a larger research programme comparing imprisonment in England & Wales and Norway (see Crewe *et al.* 2023). Extended observation and 45 interviews (averaging three hours) explored how penal power shapes social relations, with attention to shame, guilt and conviction legitimacy.

The second case study comes from an interview-based study of 146 men and women serving life sentences for murder, convicted aged 25 or under (Crewe *et al.* 2020). Interviews, averaging two hours, did not seek offence details, but these were often volunteered, and interviewers engaged responsively, exploring orientations towards the offence, conviction and sentence.

The third case study is drawn from a study of 48 life-sentenced men in two English prisons: a closed, high-security long-term prison, and an open prison tasked with resettlement and release (Jarman 2024). All shared a murder conviction but varied widely in age, sentence length, time served, age at conviction, and offence and pre-prison circumstances. Interviews averaging four hours were supplemented by document analysis.

Case studies: the offence in three dimensions

As noted above, our case studies are selected for analytical clarity. They show how considering the offence helps us more fully theorise the prison, in three dimensions: what prison is *like*; what prisons attempt to *do*; and what prisons are *for*.

The first dimension—*what prison is like*—examines the phenomenological and social consequences of the offence. It attends not only to objective features of the penal setting, but also what prisoners find subjectively important. For example, the 'moral weight' (Hulley 2025) and personal significance of a particular offence might generate distinct patterns of self-understanding, adaptation, and social interaction. All of these are significant topics in orthodox prison sociology; but we believe they are mediated by reflection upon what the offence and/or conviction mean, subjectively. Indeed, our contention is that these can be *the* major mental preoccupations for some people.

The second dimension examines *what prisons do*, in communicating with people about and attempting to mould their reflections on their convictions. Here, we ask what messages prisons transmit about particular offences, and how these messages are delivered. This encompasses both explicit communications, such as those occurring via therapeutic intervention or risk

assessment, and implicit ones embedded in everyday practices and interactions. It also involves material practices of treatment and intervention, from staff conduct to direct engagement with prisoners' offending behaviour. Theoretically, this raises questions about how prisoners navigate and interpret the often oblique and inconsistent messages they receive and the various forms of institutional action to which they are subjected.

The third dimension examines what *prisons are for*. This is a question of purpose and aims, and situates moral communication within a wider context. It therefore connects to how we theorise prison legitimacy, and to broader questions about whether prisons deliver something more salutary than mere pain, and how their harms can be justified. These questions are shaped by rationales defending the use of imprisonment, and the extent to which their aims are realised. Different penal logics—whether retributive, rehabilitative, deterrent, or incapacitative—imply different messages about wrongdoing. They also co-exist within the same institutional context, producing tensions and contradictions. Still, both the content of censure, and the efficacy of prisons in delivering it, are amenable to empirical investigation, in ways that place the offence —how it is understood by both the individual and the institution—centre-stage.

Mick

Mick, held in a medium-security prison for men convicted of sex offences, was heavily involved in the informal prisoner economy, and frequently got into bitter, public arguments with prison staff.[3] When interviewed, however, it became clear that this defiant persona stemmed from his complicated relationship to his imprisonment. When Mick was a child, he was persistently abused by an adult family member, and said that this had involved coercing him (Mick) into his own acts of perpetration. Years later, he reported his abuser to the police, but was ultimately prosecuted for acts which he said he had committed under duress as a child. He was found guilty, and sentenced to a sentence of several years in prison.

Mick's anger had its "root" in "what happened when I was a kid", but since then "everything else just piled on top of it". He had flashbacks of "what happened […] every night before I go to bed", and had "really bad trouble sleeping", and would lie awake thinking about "just everything that happened, what's going on, the fact that I'm here now and it really shouldn't be me". Now, he was "still living around paedophiles again, like I did for most of my childhood". He was attuned to and disgusted by signs of inappropriate sexual behaviour from prisoners and staff, but the depth of his rage came from what his fellow prisoners represented and reminded him of: "I'm angry at all these people who haven't done nothing to me but I just see them as 1,100 of [my abuser][4] and I can't get that out of my head".

He maintained emotional distance, engaging in shallow forms of sociability for trading purposes, but had no friends on the wing, and preferred solitude:

> I can't wait for that door to close of an evening to get away from it all. […] I have to socialise to a certain degree during the day, but it isn't really socialising. It's getting what I need from these people. […] I put this fake persona on of happy, laughy, jokey, "Oh, you alright?"

[3] Each case study touches on different elements of this framework i.e. our aim is not to illustrate the same points in three different ways.

[4] All names are pseudonyms, and we have changed any potentially identifying features.

He lied to other prisoners about his conviction, telling them he had been falsely accused of sexual assault by his girlfriend, because he couldn't bear the idea of telling someone the truth and them turning out to be a "raging paedophile", and did his best to "switch off" to conversations about offences. Nevertheless, he maintained there was a moral difference between him and his apparent peers. He described himself as infuriated when he heard other prisoners claim that "we're all in the same boat here": "I think, 'We're not in the fucking same boat here.' We might have all ended up on the same desert island but fuck me; I rowed here in a completely different boat to you."

His relationship with officers was actively fractious—"[they] piss me off on a daily basis"—and he was especially censorious towards those who did not prevent inappropriate sexual behaviour, or engaged in interactions he perceived as flirtatious or unboundaried. He complied when he wanted to, but cared too little about the prison's incentives for them to work on him:

> I don't like playing the victim, but, I feel really wronged for being here, and feel like the right person hasn't been brought to justice, so therefore, give me a DVD player, it's not going to make me feel any better. It would kill some time but nothing that they can do or give me is going to make me feel, "Oh, it's okay being here, isn't it?" Are they going to put [abuser] in prison and make him suffer for what he's done? No, they're not. Well, then I don't want to comply with your shitty regime.

Nevertheless, he was open, at least in theory, to engaging in therapeutic work. He was unwilling to participate in the Sex Offender Treatment Programme, which involved discussions of the offence itself—"there's no way I'm sitting in a room listening to ten fucking paedophiles talking about what they've done"—but he wanted to do "anything that will help me deal with this". In his previous prison, he had seen a counsellor, who had helped him begin to "come to terms with the fact that maybe I'm not fully to blame here". In his current prison, he received no therapeutic or offence-related support, and could not even be properly risk assessed because of the age at which the offence was committed. This meant he had no pathway to demonstrate reduced risk and potentially ameliorate his conditions after release.

Despite his significant frustration with prisoners and prison staff, Mick insisted that what really mattered was the damage that had been done to his family. Prison might be difficult to deal with, but it was bearable. What was harder to cope with was the fact that he was unable to contact the family members he had hurt: "I can deal with being in here. I can deal with this shitty routine and the knobhead prison officers and fucking raging paedophiles and stuff that are around but the one thing I can't deal with is that." Alongside his real anger at the injustice of his situation were profound feelings of guilt about what he had been involved in. Being in prison, and the conviction that came with it, was a deeply painful because it was unfair and staining, but also because it confirmed what he feared about himself. He had always believed "that I am a horrible person and that I am a bad person because I didn't protect" people, and the conviction "just concretes what I thought of myself […] and makes it true. I think that it's broken me as a person." Overall, then, while Mick may have appeared non-compliant or a troublemaker, he was preoccupied by the felt injustice and shame of his incarceration, a sentiment which seeped into and infected how he interacted with prison powerholders.

Chris

Chris was an intimidating presence: muscular, taciturn and with an air of defensive intensity. He described relatively little about his childhood, but said he had been exposed to considerable physical and sexual violence. As a result, he had been an angry young man who had resorted to drugs to cope with and mask his emotions: "All my childhood was drugs". He had been convicted of a murder with a sexual component, and was saturated with feelings of shame: "It eats at me every day". After his arrest, he had pled guilty immediately and made no attempt to minimise his culpability. Sentiments of remorse and self-loathing dominated the interview, just as they governed his experience of imprisonment.

Chris was a "loner", with just a couple of loose associates, whom it had taken him months to first talk to. He did not need other people, he said, and struggled with social situations: "in an empty room it'll feel crowded to me, because I've got so much going on upstairs". He had no involvement in illicit activity, having given up drink and drugs because of their role in his offence: "As soon as I committed my crime my head went… gone. I never touched anything again".

His coping mechanisms were also relatively solitary, shaped by his feelings about his offence. He exercised compulsively, using a rowing machine to "take my mind off it" and ensure that, at the end of each day, he was too exhausted to ruminate on his crime. Day-to-day, he was preoccupied with obtaining sufficient sleep and protein to help him build muscle. Alongside physical activity, Chris liked to paint, which he said was a way of processing and expressing his feelings. He had converted to Christianity during his sentence, and this provided further emotional relief: "that's what I was looking for, peace and forgiveness".

Despite his psychological torment, Chris had not asked for help from staff, stating that he had no faith that they would want to support him: "It's a bad crime […] why would you want to help a convict who's committed a serious crime?" His declaration that he did not trust staff, that it was "us and them", and that he did not need any help betrayed an underlying sense that he was unworthy of support and humanity. He assumed that anyone who read details of his offence in his file would hate him, and therefore pre-empted negative responses by telling staff: "You don't even have to try with me, just leave me be".

Chris's orientation to his sentence was normative but disengaged acceptance. He experienced both the sentence and his punishment as entirely legitimate. Yet the prison was virtually irrelevant, either as a communicative institution or as a site of intervention. That is, given his profound feelings of shame, external moral censure was redundant: "I punish myself more than any of these can punish me". He harboured no feelings of resentment about his sentence length, commenting on several occasions that he "deserved what I got". This sense that he warranted punishment—and that he was morally worthless, almost a non-person—was expressed in a general fatalism about his treatment ("they're here to punish us [and] I don't mind them punishing us"), the passage of time ("every day comes, every day goes—it's all part of the punishment"), what was written about him on file, and his progression through the system. "I just go with the flow", he commented: "whatever happens, happens. I just see it as it's all part of the sentence". He declared himself unconcerned by how his time in prison might affect him - "Like I say, it is what it is"—and, due to the nature of his offence, felt he had no right to judge others.

Chris did not believe he could ever move on from what he had done. He was haunted by intrusive recollections of his offence, and, when asked about the hardest time during his sentence, said: "Maybe just the nightmares, stuff like that. […] I wouldn't say anything else has caused a problem". He had not yet undertaken any courses because he felt he would not be able to cope with having to think about his own crime or with exposure to "graphic detail" about other people's offences: "when people are talking about their crimes I'm seeing their crime in my head, and it kills me. […] I can see my own, I don't want to see theirs, you know". Emotionally, he was extremely tightly wound.

Despite feeling he could never "put it right", Chris described practices consistent with a desire to demonstrate ethicality. For example, although he generally distanced himself from prison officers, he sometimes informed them about issues and potential incidents on his wing. His justification (for what other prisoners would consider "snitching") was to avert it being on his conscience were someone to get hurt. Likewise, he reported getting involved in disputes not out of loyalty to others, but because he wanted to avert violence: "if anyone tries to attack anyone, then that's when I go in, because silliness comes of silliness". Despite this drive to compensate for his offence through everyday moral action, he described himself as having no goals and said he was living day-to-day, without contemplating the possibility of release: "I'm not really interested at the minute". The offence, and his feelings of deep shame about it, dominated his interior life, orientation to the sentence and social relations, in ways that trumped and made redundant penal censure.

Nicholas

Nicholas had recently arrived in an open prison, having spent many years in maximum-security custody. Though he had previously mistrusted staff and feared other prisoners, his attitudes now were noticeably positive. For example, he remarked that he had been "very, very, very, very lucky" in the staff who had worked with him, and described sharing jokes with officers. At the system's shallow end, he was struck by the degree to which the "bond between [prisoners in] closed conditions" had been superseded by more individualised thinking, as they turned towards resettlement goals and the post-prison future. Indeed, his own mind was increasingly doing the same:

> Am I going to have a good quality of life if I am released next year? I will be [in my forties] […] Am I going to have enough time to get married? Am I going to have enough time to have kids? […] I would never, ever treat my wife or children the way that my dad treated me.

In childhood, Nicholas had suffered physical, sexual, and emotional abuse inside and outside the home. His first attempt to talk about any of this had been in the context of a police interview: he offered a partial disclosure to the detectives who would shortly charge him with murder, but no further action resulted. Two decades on, he verbalised the emotions he had once acted out through violence:

> There was so much aggression when I finally committed those offences. But I think [it was] loneliness [that] resulted in that anger […] Not being seen, and then suppressing feelings about that, and then continuing not to be seen, just getting sort of angrier and

> angrier about it […] I was emotionally withdrawn. Lonely, confused. And still very young […] There wasn't that feeling of sadness. Or shame. Or fear […] There was no attachment to it or to the consequences of it at all.

Nicholas saw that the gravity of his actions warranted censure. But at the time, his disclosure having resulted in no further action, he reverted outwardly to detachment and denial. As a result, he had spent the first decade or more of the sentence living in two parallel realities. In one, he had learned to cope and adjust. In young offender institutions, terrified of wing life, he had stayed in his cell whenever possible. Later, in adult prisons, things "started to move upwards". Yet this outward adaptation had masked his inability to accept what he had done. There was no *inward* adjustment, still less any reconciliation, to the formal responsibility imposed by his conviction. He could only retreat into fantasy: "It was very easy to put myself […] somewhere else […] to blank out what I had done". Eventually, however, the dissonance between inner and outer life more and more resembled a problem:

> If you allow yourself to be switched off 24 hours a day from reality […] eventually it gets to an extent where you find yourself too far gone. It becomes hard to bring yourself back to reality. I don't think that that changed for me for [more than ten years].

Thus, while a process of adaptation appeared to be ongoing, something else more personal and related to the offence was *also* shaping Nicholas's engagement with the sentence:

> I wasn't in healthcare [anymore]. I was on normal location. I wasn't as medicated […] I was comfortable on the wing, around people […] [But] I still had that ongoing battle, sort of thing, with that detachment. […] I was just, you know, fighting with myself on a day-to-day basis and just going through knowing that [what was] in my mind was something else compared to what was going on for real.

The challenge he described was to find some way to account to others—not just to himself—for his conviction. Nicholas's disclosures to detectives might be seen as an early, halting attempt. He revisited the disclosures during several years in a prison unit whose therapeutic ethos, he said, meant there was "no way of hiding". It offered a framing of his story which omitted neither his offending nor the soil it had grown in:

> It enabled me to see […] how those childhood events […] shaped that person I'd become. […] It's hard to sit there, in a group, and see something being read out on a board, in front of everybody, and actually say, "Yes, that person that's on there that you're reading out is really horrible. […] That's not a nice person. […] But that person is me."

Nicholas expressed happiness at his formal progression to the verge of release. Along with his improving family relationships, he counted it as a real positive. But the deeper gain, he made clear, was a more "normal" relationship with himself:

> *Have you gained anything that matters to you since you've been in prison?*
>
> Yes. My religion. [Long pause] My family. Myself.

You've gained yourself?

> Yes. Going along those lines that… I matter as well. […] That is what I'm referring to. […] After I went to the [therapeutic] unit […] it was all about me, and about accepting me for who I was.

Although he was pointing here to subjective benefits, Nicholas's orientation was far from solipsistic, and in fact evinced a form of accountability. He believed victims should be able to demand and receive explanations, and regretted that the parole process had not afforded opportunities for such dialogue:

> I also look at it from other people's point of view. […] My victim's family […] has that involvement with the victim liaison officer. They went to my hearing when the parole [board] sent me to open conditions. So, although they don't have contact with me, and they never probably will have contact with me because they don't wish to know me […] they still don't know why I've done what I done.

For Nicholas, then, the offence was not a static fact to be managed or concealed, but a living problem requiring ongoing moral work; it shaped, but also exceeded, questions of adjustment or compliance.

Discussion

Attending to the offence clarifies what imprisonment is like, enriching accounts of adaptation, compliance, staff-prisoner relationships, and social relations. Conventional accounts (Crewe 2009; Skarbek 2020; Sykes 1958) depict social dynamics as responses to urgent needs—mitigating deprivation, securing safety, defending interests, protecting identity. In this paradigm, the solutions offered by social interaction impel prisoners' actions in almost mechanical ways. This framework is persuasive but reductive, overlooking the moral and psychic drives which also generate action.

To develop this point, the primary preoccupation for many prisoners may be psychological rather than social survival: an *internal* struggle relating to the moral implications of serious offending. Grasping *what imprisonment is like* for Mick, Chris, or Nicholas—what dominates mental headspace—requires placing the offence centre-stage. For all three, the importance of the prisoner social world is subordinate to the task of coming to terms with feelings of shame and bewilderment. Nicholas's social practices might mislead us about what it is to be imprisoned: apparent outward adjustment might conceal inward turbulence.

This contrast between outward and inward realities enriches our understanding of topics of longstanding interest to prison sociologists. For example, staff-prisoner relationships have typically been understood through criminal codes, authority orientations, and power disparities (e.g. Cohen & Taylor 1972; Drake 2012; Irwin & Cressey 1962). Yet Mick and Chris show that prisoners who distance themselves from officers (or other staff) might have in mind how those staff members represent certain feelings about their convictions, or how the criminal justice system has interpreted their acts. Prison staff do not simply represent state repression (e.g. Irwin 1980; Jacobs 1977) nor act as agents of discipline and control (Carroll 1974; Drake 2012). They also symbolise *punishment*: if prisoners perceive staff to be the deliverers of a deserved (or harsh) penalty, their orientations towards them may be altered as a result.

Compliance, including engagement with programmes, is shaped by offence-related sentiments —hence Mick's tense relationship with staff and refusal to conform to a regime he felt was undeserved, Chris's general disengagement and resistance to activity that would vivify his intrusive thoughts, and Nicholas's inability, prior to therapeutic input, to contemplate life as a free citizen who had taken responsibility for his past actions. Just as (non)compliance among prisoners can be motivated by how they feel about the legitimacy of their treatment (Liebling & Arnold 2005; Sparks *et al.* 1996), so too it is shaped by how they feel about the offence for which they have been convicted.

The topic of social relations illustrates the same point. How our examples chose to interact with their peers, involve themselves in the prisoner society, or self-isolate, cannot be attributed only to the idea of 'problem-solving'. Their choices also reflected comparative moral evaluations prompted by the offence and the conviction, as filtered through emotions like disgust (Mick), the capacity to handle ruminative turmoil (Chris), or the challenges of accounting for one's actions to others (Nicholas). Meanwhile, conventional 'coping mechanisms', such as Chris's commitment to faith, exercise and art, can be reinterpreted as 'ethical projects'—a means to grapple with emotions summoned by the offence, not just 'escape activities' (Goffman 1961) or outlets for frustration (Laws 2022).

Regarding the second dimension of our framework, considering the offence clarifies something significant about *what prisons do*. Some of their operations are directly and obviously organised around the offence, particularly when they attempt to mould how people reflect on it. This is sometimes a deliberate target of power—as when prisons seek to equip people with 'skills' which will help them to manage their risk in future—and sometimes the basis of organisational categorisation: e.g. Mick was classed as a "sex offender" and held among people who were similarly categorised, but from whom he felt morally distinct. In other words, prisons are morally communicative institutions—a role and function which has not been properly explained in previous accounts (though see Ievins 2023; Schinkel 2014).

Even when the offence is not explicitly threaded into the operations of power, the fact of being in prison, and how prisons are organised, influences how people reflect on and relate to their conviction. As our case studies illustrate, these processes differ considerably, but are key to understanding the subjective processing of moral and penal censure. Nicholas, for example, offers a rare example of a period of imprisonment facilitating what he considered a more productive relationship between himself and his offence, enabling him to "sit with" his culpability.[5] Mick, in contrast, felt imprisonment might potentially have helped him "come to terms with everything that's happened", but experiences of misrecognition and unmerited punishment blocked this process. He was left oscillating between bitter resentment and profound shame, prompted by the harms for which he did feel responsible. Chris, meanwhile, assumed that the system judged him harshly, presuming this to reflect his own self-evaluation. Such was the depth of his self-disgust, however, that external engagement was neither needed nor wanted, and he could access no route by which to digest his feelings of shame.

Our case studies also illuminate fundamental tensions in how contemporary punishment actually operates, versus how it justifies itself. This unavoidably brings into view the third dimension of our framework: questions of *what prisons are for* and whether they fulfil their

[5] An important precondition for this change was its setting: a prison unit characterised by supportive, and yet demanding, forms of intervention.

objectives. Seeing prisons as morally communicative institutions involves seeing that they contribute to a wider punitive ritual (Durkheim 1973/1899), which signals disapproval and affirms values essential to collective life. One of the paradoxes of the modern prison, however, is that it takes a hitherto public and participatory procedure like punishment, and then obscures it through enclosure, bureaucratisation and legalisation (Garland 1990). By considering the moral messages it conveys, however, we can cast light on imprisonment's punitive functions, seeing it not as an "ordinary administrative activity" (Sparks 1994 p. 24) but rather stimulating discussion about the justifications of punishment and the extent to which prisons can achieve them.

Our case studies offer evidence of problems with how individual accountability—broadly understood to mean 'taking full responsibility for oneself and one's harmful actions'—is pursued in practice. Advocates of different penal logics place differing weight on the goal of accountability. Some modern retributivists believe that holding people accountable for their wrongful acts, and giving them the chance to take full responsibility, is a justifiable goal of punishment (Duff 2001; Tasioulas 2007); critics, on the other hand, view the pursuit of accountability as a dangerous, futile, and backward-looking overuse of state power (Von Hirsch 2005/2003).

Chris's and Mick's stories illustrate some dangers of the exclusive pursuit of accountability —a goal which, with Chris, did not require punishment, and with Mick, did not tally with the moral complexity of his conviction. Nicholas, however, illustrates that, under very specific circumstances, retributive approaches might be integrated with rehabilitative ones. His therapeutic intervention allowed him to see *both* that he was culpable *and* that "I matter as well"—a form of accountability approaching what McNeill (2012 p. 15) terms "moral rehabilitation".[6] It is striking that Nicholas clearly articulated concern for his victims, and expressed the view that his obligations to them were not fully discharged. Like Mick, Nicholas was troubled that his punishment denied him the opportunity to apologise to and make amends with the people he had harmed. In other words, both men suffered because their punishment felt like an incomplete ritual—at best, bringing them to the point of desiring repair, but unable to actually achieve it. These cases thus reveal how contemporary imprisonment often initiates—without completing—the moral work of censure that punishment is claimed to perform. Seen in this way, prisons thwart the punitive ritual which is claimed to justify their use in the first place.

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that prison sociology's traditional concerns are enriched considerably by considering the offence. It illuminates what preoccupies prisoners, the moral evaluations shaping their actions, and how prisons manage them as people defined by a conviction. It is startling that so little prison research has closely studied these aspects of imprisonment, documenting how criminal offences and their moral implications infuse its lifeworld. The prison's role *as a punitive institution* should be more central to how we theorise it. Prisons deliberately impose suffering on those who are deemed to deserve it for their imputed wrongdoing. Meanwhile, in wrestling with the implications of what they have done, or are deemed to have done, those people engage in a range of ways with what it means to be punished, and—often—to punish oneself.

[6] 1,100 refers to the population of the prison where Mick was held.

This interaction between institutional and individual reckonings produces much of the prison's "moral intensity" (Liebling 2025 p. 1), yet its moral effects are often "assumed rather than empirically studied" (2025 p. 2). Some such effects—those produced by the loss of liberty and its collateral consequences—are well documented. But the existential texture produced by "darkness, power and deprivation" (2025 p. 1) is overlain by an additional layer of moral sentiment relating to 'the offence'. Bringing this layer into focus means participating in normative discussions: not to make declarations, necessarily, but to bring empirical complexity to an impoverished public discourse that swings between vindictive moralising ("bad places for bad people") and naïve fantasies of rehabilitation ("using prisons to reduce reoffending"). Such representations contribute to a seriously unhelpful politics of punishment, because they "roam free in a realm of imagination and mythmaking with only the most tenuous connection to what happens inside the system" (Sparks 1994 p. 24). Neither vindictive moralising nor rehabilitation fantasies capture the complexity of our case studies, which show ethical work that is often self-initiated, incomplete, and shaped by offence-specific meanings.

Our cases concern offences with an intense 'moral weight' (Hulley 2025). Nevertheless, the analytical framework can extend more broadly.[7] There is plentiful evidence that people serving short sentences often grapple with, and then act upon, feelings of shame, resentment and existential futility (Crewe 2009; Schinkel & Lives Sentenced participants 2021). The very meaninglessness characterising these experiences reveals something important about what prisons are *for*, in cases where accumulating penal harms vastly exceed the gravity of individual offences.

In our view, the extent to which different (and not only serious) offences shape prison experiences across our three dimensions—phenomenologically, institutionally, and purposively—is an empirical question worthy of systematic investigation. We urge scholars to theorise the prison with these issues in mind, and offer a framework to guide future research. It moves beyond the tendency to treat offences as mere classificatory variables, recognising instead that their subjective meanings shape the prison experience powerfully. Scholarship already moving in this direction requires fuller development.

[7] We thank an anonymous reviewer for prompting us to clarify this point.

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