

Risk and self-governance

Moral communication with English life-sentenced prisoners through the medium of risk management

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Abstract The ‘ruling concept’ through which English prisons communicate with prisoners about the moral obligations associated with their punishment is risk. Risk thinking and risk talk pervade the management of lifers and prisoners generally, and the management of risk is a primary conduit for the operation of power. This has been said to produce distinctively ‘tight’ prison pain, for those governed through risk. This paper, based on PhD research interviews with 48 life-sentenced prisoners in two English prisons, reviews how risk factored in the sample’s ethical lives: how they made sense of the concept, or in some cases, dismissed it as a bad-faith imposition. It summarises official documents to describe risk assessments for the sample, which broadly suggested that the participants were ordinary and ‘easy-keeping’ lifers: compliant, mostly self-governing, adapted to imprisonment, and posing few risks to others in custody. This, the paper argues, means they were subject to discontinuous, and varying, kinds of ‘grip’, with ‘tight’ conditions prevailing for some, but ‘loose’ and ‘lax’ conditions for others. It produces a typology of ethical responses to moral communication about risk, and suggests what an ethical approach adds to our understanding of risk governance and of the moral communication delivered by punishment.

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Tip

Slides from a conference paper at the 2024 ESC conference. Click the menu at bottom-left of the slide view below for options including speaker notes with the text of the paper.