

doi: 10.1177/1462474511422151

PUNISHMENT AND SOCIETY (2011) 13(5) 571–591

Narratives of self and identity in women's prisons: Stigma and the struggle for self-definition in penal regimes

Abigail Rowe

Abstract

A concern with questions of selfhood and identity has been central to penal practices in women's prisons, and to the sociology of women's imprisonment. Studies of women's prisons have remained preoccupied with women prisoners' social identities, and their apparent tendency to adapt to imprisonment through relationships. This article explores the narratives of women in two English prisons to demonstrate the importance of the self as a site of meaning for prisoners and the central place of identity in micro-level power negotiations in prisons.

Keywords: identity, imprisonment, resistance, self, women prisoners

Introduction: Penal regimes and the pains of imprisonment for women

Foucault (1977) suggests that a concern with the conscience and self of the individual criminal is a defining characteristic of modern punishment; its purpose is not retribution, but reform of the offender. In western jurisdictions, this is historically particularly apparent in the punishment of women, whose selves and identities as gendered beings have been a perennial preoccupation in policy and scholarship. Various manifestations of this appear across time and place: in 19th-century anxieties that women were insufficiently robust to withstand the rigours of the 'separate system' (Zedner, 1991); in the replacement of prison with treatment-orientated reformatories for (predominantly white) women in the early 20th-century USA (Zedner, 1991); and in the increasingly medicalized view of women prisoners in mid-20th-century Britain, where women offenders came to be seen as by definition sick or deficient (Carlen, 1983; Dobash et al., 1986; Rock, 1996; Smart, 1977). The characteristics of modern punishment highlighted by Foucault (1977) – hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and examination – are likewise arguably more visible in regimes for women than for men. In the history of women's imprisonment, reformist anxieties about women's ability to cope with prison have repeatedly combined with normative ideas of femininity to generate regimes which, although ostensibly less punitive, have been characterized by intensive surveillance and close discipline centred on norms

of 'appropriate' feminine behaviour (Carlen, 1983; Dobash et al., 1986; Howe, 1994; Rafter, 1990; Zedner, 1991). Prison regimes for men, in contrast, have more often sought simply to punish.

This preoccupation with the selves of women prisoners is reflected in sociological research into women's experiences of imprisonment. While little published research directly discusses selfhood and identity in women's imprisonment, the sociological literature is suffused with implicit assumptions about women's nature and identities. For example, the 'pains of imprisonment' for women that were deduced by early US ethnographers from the dyadic sexual relationships (Ward and Kassebaum, 1965) and 'pseudo families' (Giallombardo, 1966) believed to serve women in place of an 'inmate code' (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958) were all rooted in imported social identities. In a conclusion that has shaped the assumptions of much subsequent research, Ward and Kassebaum (1965) argued that the loss of 'meaningful social roles' was the primary source of distress for women prisoners. Although discussions of the 'pains of imprisonment' for women are somewhat diffuse in the literature, the suggestion that either women's nature or their socialization make prison a different, and usually more distressing, experience for them is common (see inter alia Fox, 1992; Giallombardo, 1966; Jones, 1993; Paulus and Dzindolet, 1993; Ward and Kassebaum, 1965). Such conclusions often rest on an ambiguous composite of empirical findings and gendered assumptions that is difficult to disentangle. Importantly, a lack of robust research comparing men's and women's experience makes reliable conclusions difficult to reach (although see Tait, 2008 for a rare recent exception).

Sociological research in women's prisons continues to be influenced by the early emphasis on social relationships. This is visible in assertions that women suffer disproportionately from the loss of social relationships implied by imprisonment (inter alia Fox, 1992; Jones, 1993; Greer, 2000), a preoccupation with social identities such as motherhood, and a focus on women prisoners' social relationships to the exclusion of other aspects of their prison experiences (see Mandaraka-Sheppard, 1986, and Zingraff and Zingraff, 1980, for expressions of frustration at this narrow research agenda). Only recently has serious consideration been given to the importance of institutional characteristics in shaping women's responses to imprisonment. Kruttschnitt and Gartner's (2005) comparison of women's adaptations to imprisonment across time and between establishments shows how coping strategies and social relationships are shaped by institutional characteristics. This is reinforced by other recent US studies showing a decline in the patterns of relationships described in the 1960s and highlighting complex social pressures, such as drugs cultures and the fear of violence,¹ that have more commonly been discussed in relation to men's prison experiences (Greer, 2000; Owen, 1998; Pogrebin and Dodge, 2001; Struckman-Johnson and Struckman-Johnson, 2002). This gradual widening of the research agenda also demonstrates levels of co-operation and support among women prisoners

(Greer, 2000; Krabill and Aday, 2005; Severance, 2005) denied by earlier researchers such as Giallombardo (1966) and Mandaraka-Sheppard (1986), who argued that patterns of social relationships in women's prisons reflected their greater 'self-orientation'.²

Due to the close logical connection between 'pains', 'adaptations' and identities in analyses of women's prisons, the contested findings of studies of women's adaptations to imprisonment (and the interpretation of their significance) call into question conclusions about the 'pains' experienced. It is likely that the more recent findings highlighted here reflect not just changes in women's prisons, but also researchers' growing recognition of women prisoners' differential experiences and identities, and that they may have concerns beyond the loss of role and relationships outside prison, and their social relationships inside. In 1994, Howe argued that the field had yet to absorb fully the insights of postmodern feminism to recognize women prisoners' diversity, and despite some significant subsequent studies, her point remains. Although Greer (2000) suggests that macro-level shifts in women's social position are likely to have increased their sense of the importance of their personal, as opposed to social, identities, women prisoners' own understandings of their identities are largely absent from the literature (Bosworth, 2003). In her 1999 study of identity, agency and resistance in women's prisons in England, Bosworth (1999: 98) suggests that identity comprises both social identities deriving from socioeconomic and cultural frameworks and 'the more diffuse and imprecise ways in which people perceive themselves'. Nevertheless, her analysis remains almost exclusively concerned with the categorical identities of ethnicity, sexuality, class and, above all, gender.

Towards a model of identity and power in prisons

This article explores representations of self and identity in the narratives of women in two English prisons, and examines how identities and self-meanings were constituted and enacted in face-to-face encounters. Goffman (1971) suggests that the ethnographic task is to derive the 'properties' of individuals from observable situated activity. Following this, accounts of the self-meanings associated with imprisonment are set in the context of institutional power relations, demonstrating the pertinence of identity in micro-level negotiations of power.

The analysis emerges inductively from the self-meanings in prisoners' narratives and draws on symbolic interactionist perspectives. Mead's (1934) interest in meaning, adaptation and the self is central, while Goffman's (1959) socially defined understanding of persons as the product of 'collaborative manufacture' illuminates the processes by which institutions can act on the self. Further, Mead's model of how the 'I' as subject acts on how the 'me' as object is perceived, accounts for both social stability and change, which in the prison context facilitates an exploration of both institutional power and individual resistance. This is illustrated, although not explicitly articulated, in Goffman's (1961) *Asylums*. Identity, then, is understood here not in

terms of categorical social identities, but as a ‘set of self meanings’ (Burke, 1991: 837). These self-meanings comprise both the stable self-concept that Mead (1934) termed the ‘complete’ or ‘unified’ self, and also the ‘transitory images’ reflected in the ‘looking glass’ (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934) of particular social situations. Put more simply, identities are imported into prison, shift in response to the experience and are negotiated – projected and defended – in social encounters.

Symbolic interactionism has been criticized for its inattention to social structure beyond situated activity. The analysis therefore draws on wider theoretical perspectives to connect individual actors to wider power structures. It has already been suggested that Foucault’s (1977) conception of knowledge/power may be particularly relevant to women’s imprisonment, and the concept is used here to highlight connections between individuals and broader structures, in line with the suggestion of Cahill (1998) and others that it dovetails closely with Goffman’s interest in institutional mechanisms of ‘person production’. The analysis of situated activity is further contextualized by Layder’s (1997) theory of social domains, which suggests that distinct forms of power are located in different social domains, which interact to create meaning in social activity. This furthers the exploration of moments of domination and resistance in face-to-face encounters in prisons, redressing both Goffman and Mead’s neglect of structural power relations, and Foucault’s denial of individual agency in his original formulation of knowledge/power.

The study

The analysis draws on ethnographic data from two women’s prisons in England.³ New Hall (NH) is a closed prison, holding at the time of the research approximately 400 remand and sentenced, short-term, long-term and life-sentenced prisoners. Askham Grange (AG) is an open prison and held approximately 100 sentenced prisoners in a resettlement regime where women progressed towards volunteering, studying or working ‘outside’. Both establishments held Young Offenders (18–21-year-olds) and adults and had Mother and Baby Units. New Hall also had a detoxification wing. Observations were made during regular (three to seven days per week) visits to the prison, including at evenings and weekends, over an eight-month period during 2007–2008. The researcher had full unaccompanied access at both prisons and carried keys at New Hall. Fieldnotes were kept throughout.

Interviews were conducted with 59 prisoners (30 at New Hall; 29 at Askham Grange) and 32 uniformed officers of all grades (17 at New Hall; 15 at Askham Grange). Participants were identified through informal initial contact with the author, or through existing contacts. In recruiting participants, care was taken to include a range of staff and prisoner perspectives. Interviews covered the same core questions, but employed a ‘reflexive interviewing’ technique (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 152), in which the content of discussions was largely shaped

by interviewees' responses. They were conducted in private, recorded and fully transcribed, and lasted between 45 minutes and three-and-a-half hours. Drawing on grounded theory, the transcripts were subjected to a process of 'open' and 'axial' coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to identify concepts and relationships in the data.⁴

Identity and meaning in women's prison narratives

Cohen and Taylor (1972) observe that the subjective meanings of imprisonment are key to understanding prisoners' responses to the experience. Sociological accounts of stress and coping support this. Thoits (1986) suggests that the management of perception, or meaning, is as important to coping with stress as problem- and emotion-focused strategies. In prison sociology, subjective meaning has generally been framed in terms of pain (Sykes, 1958). As Sykes acknowledged, however, although prisoners certainly share a certain set of deprivations, their experiences vary, contingent on both 'imported' psychobiographical attributes and institutional characteristics. While Sykes focused on the 'hard core of consensus' in prisoners' painful experiences, this discussion considers more disparate meanings. Making and managing meaning was an active process for prisoners. As Thoits (1994: 144) argues, individuals under stress are motivated 'activists on their own behalf', and the management of meaning is a coping strategy available even to individuals who lack the power to alter stressful circumstances.

Conceptions of self and identity were salient in accounts of the prison experience. Self-meanings emerged at two levels: in accounts of concrete, day-to-day experiences, and in the impact of imprisonment on broader self-relevant narratives. The latter encompassed reflections on the significance of imprisonment in relation to past experiences and future expectations, the processing of a sense of guilt or injustice, and the personal and abstract meanings of punishment and legitimacy. In everyday encounters, self-meanings were most evident in exchanges with staff, which unfolded around a clear nexus of power and were often coloured by punitive meanings deriving from the prison setting. Although the self was consistently a site of meaning, the 'content' of meanings varied, and not all were pains. Positive, negative and ambivalent meanings were all evident in prisoners' narratives.

Mortification of the person

Goffman (1961) described the effect of incarceration on the inmate's self as immediate and devastating. The 'recruit' to a total institution, he argued, undergoes a 'series of abasements, degradations, humiliations and profanations of self. His self is systematically, if unintentionally, mortified' (1961: 24). The idea that aspects of imprisonment are threatening to both the socially realized public person and the more private, internal self resonated with many prisoners at Askham Grange and New Hall.

Mortification of the person, the erosion of various forms of status held prior to imprisonment, was a common theme. ‘Abasements’ to the socially realized person were often associated with loss of control over self-presentation. Paula, a participant in this research,⁵ described her experience of entering prison as ‘identity stripping’, directly echoing Goffman’s (1961) account:

. . . you lose your identity as soon as you come into prison . . . from the minute you’re found guilty in court and you’re sent down, everything is started to be stripped from you . . . any rights that you have, anything. You lose total control . . . they literally strip you; you take your clothes off, they take everything away from you . . . And then they take away your property . . . Yes, you’re just stripped, you’re a name; you’re a number.
(Paula, prisoner, NH)

The undermining of the person also appeared in accounts of ‘status reduction’, which Jones (1993), following the early functionalist emphasis on social identity, suggests is a ‘pain of imprisonment’ for women:

. . . I went [to the gym] one day and . . . [this certain officer] said, ‘You have to give your name’, and I said, ‘Miss Thompson’s here!’ And I got battered, basically. They were like, ‘You’re not ‘Miss Thompson’, you’re ‘Prisoner Thompson’. And I felt like I’d lost everything that I came in here with. (Susy, prisoner, NH)

Loss of status was frequently framed as loss of adult status. Nada, an ‘outworker’⁶ at Askham Grange, complained that the prison’s insistence that women walking to work along country roads wear high-visibility vests was infantilizing. Individual choice, heavily circumscribed even in open conditions, has been presented by Bosworth (1999) as a key locus of identity and agency. Nada described being prevented from choosing the risks to which she was willing to expose herself as insulting, and wondered sarcastically aloud how she had survived without this level of supervision before coming to prison. Others likewise complained that little recognition was given to the fact that outside prison they managed complex adult responsibilities (see also Bosworth, 1999; Owen, 1998). This is one of the ways in which prisoners most often invoked identities of motherhood; it was difficult for women who had brought up children, and even grandchildren, to accept feeling treated like children themselves. Denise, who described herself as ‘a big old woman [with] nine grandkids’, for example, regarded Askham Grange’s requirement that she attend education as not just irrelevant to her personal circumstances outside prison, but demeaning.

Mortification of the self

Imprisonment often disrupted meanings associated with the private self, as well as the public

person. As Audrey Peckham's (1985) account of her mental breakdown and subsequent imprisonment illustrates, imprisonment was often part of a larger crisis with which prisoners also needed to come to terms. Distress, shame and disbelief at having committed an offence were common in these accounts. Some found a sense of having transgressed, or taking on a stigmatized 'prisoner' identity, difficult to reconcile with their existing sense of self. Julie, for example, on remand for offences stemming from a gambling addiction, described struggling to associate the charges made during her trial with herself: 'When I go to court and they say these things that I've done, I could almost plead "Not Guilty" to them' (Julie, prisoner, NH).

Many prisoners reflected that coming to terms with guilt and shame and taking on what Goffman (1963) terms a 'spoiled identity' were what it 'really meant' to be in prison. Many suggested that staff failed to appreciate the significance of these experiences; private crises were often occluded by the institutional imperatives of 'people processing' (Goffman, 1961). Prisoners' lack of status exacerbated this experience. One prisoner, sentenced for a second conviction of manslaughter, described her distress at her offence being joked about by officers:

Terri:...at the minute some of the officers go round calling me the Lambrini killer . . . It's like, 'Watch out for that bottle! It's coming!' . . . They are just trying to have a laugh and a joke . . . with me, but it's personal, you know? It's a little bit private and can be upsetting, like now [she is weeping slightly].

AR: So does that feel inappropriate? Or intrusive?

Terri: It can be inappropriate, yes, because even though they're trying to make me laugh because I know I can be touchy about it all, it's just – I'm not the sort of person that likes that. I know what I've done, I'm doing my time for it. I'm punishing myself enough.
(Terri, prisoner, NH)

Here, private experiences are distressingly exposed in a way that the prisoner cannot control. Prisoners are unable to regulate the release of information about themselves, and because they are under pressure to maintain pleasant and positive relationships with prison staff, defending themselves from negative self-meanings or protesting when staff appear to misuse their privileged access to private information is difficult.

Contamination

For Sykes (1958), one of the 'pains of imprisonment' was being held alongside 'other criminals'. In the context of a men's maximum-security prison, he characterized this as the 'deprivation of security'. While this 'pain' has some relevance to prisoners in the present study, the source of threat was more often the implications for the management of self-meanings than were concerns

about physical safety (see also Sibley and Van Hoven, 2009). Contamination arose in two forms: the experience of stigma in the spoiled identity reflected back by the institution, and fear of contamination through association with groups to whom prisoners attached a stigma themselves. As Goffman (1963) highlights, the categories of stigmatized and non-stigmatized are neither binary nor clearly defined.

Social hierarchies based on offence type observed in other prison contexts have little purchase among women prisoners in England, although those convicted of harming children are more-or-less universally condemned. Individuals' appraisals of different kinds of prisoner or offence were relatively idiosyncratic. While few denied responsibility for the offences of which they had been convicted, many claimed identities that established moral distance between themselves and those whose lifestyles or offences they viewed as immoral. For example, many prisoners without substance addiction problems objected to living alongside what one woman termed 'junkie bastards', partly because it seemed to imply that prisoners were all alike, and ascribed to them a moral parity with drug addicts. Others described the presence on main wings of women who had harmed children as an affront to the decency of others. These discursive positionings enabled prisoners to sustain and assert a sense of their own integrity. These processes were apparent in prisoners of all backgrounds, including drug-addicted prisoners and those who had served multiple sentences who were often constructed by staff and other prisoners as amoral, or the 'typical' prisoner against whom others sought to define themselves. For example, one woman whose conviction was related to drug addiction expressed discomfort at living alongside those convicted of killing, inverting most documented prison hierarchies. Some distinguished between acceptable and unacceptable victim groups, often on grounds of victims' supposed vulnerability; one woman with convictions for burglary, for example, asserted that she would never steal from a home that appeared to belong to an elderly person.

Institutionalization and the erosion of the self

Adapting to imprisonment could be as threatening to established self-meanings as living with dissonance between self and environment. Some described developing coping strategies that undermined their existing self-conception: accepting preferential treatment, perhaps, or ceasing to speak up on others' behalf. Prisoners also described a kind of organic corrosion to self and person. This is the form of institutionalization discussed by Cohen and Taylor (1972) in their study of long-term, maximum-security prisoners, highlighting the 'ontological insecurity' experienced by those who had served long prison terms. In the present study, prisoners serving even relatively short sentences worried about the effects of institutional living on their character and faculties, and many identified unwelcome changes after periods of months rather than years. Many worked to resist common physical effects of imprisonment such as weight gain, which was represented by some in terms that suggested a kind of bodily colonization by the institution.

The self as a site of growth

As has been suggested, not all self-meanings associated with imprisonment were negative, but related to recovery, growth or renewal. Recoveries of self were associated with having time to reflect, taking up opportunities to address personal problems, or experiencing respite from problematic personal circumstances or the attritional effects of active addiction (see also Crewe, 2006; Wacquant, 2002):

. . . now, I look in the mirror and I recognize that once upon a time I was a lovely, decent human being. When I first met [my partner], I wasn't gambling because I hadn't been out of prison long. That's the person she fell in love with. Like she says, now she can't stop loving me because I am that once-upon-a-time wonderful person, in her eyes. And I'm beginning to recognize myself in here now.

(Julie, prisoner, NH)

As Bradley and Davino (2002) highlight, for many of the disproportionate number of women who have experienced violence from an abusive partner before being sentenced, prison can be a place of relative safety; a less controlling environment than home. These women described a growth in confidence, an increased sense of being trusted and a greater freedom to express themselves and enjoy friendships with other women. The domestic circumstances of these prisoners meant they experienced growth at the site at which others felt oppressed:

. . . I feel safe [in prison] and it's the wrong place probably to feel safe, but it feels safe for me knowing I don't have to think before I speak. I can say what I've got to say, because at home I could say to him, 'Do you want a cup of tea?', and I'd be thinking, 'Have I said that right?'... And here I've found me again. I mean, because I've said to people that I feel safe and they've said, 'You've come to prison and you feel safe?!'. But they don't know what I've gone through for 10 years.... If I've got something to say, I know I can say it and not think, 'Oh have I said that right? Am I going to get a thump? Am I going to get a knife at my throat?'

(Suzanne, prisoner, NH)

The degree to which imprisonment is repressive and painful, then, is psychobiographically contingent; for some, disruptions to relationships may be welcome. Wacquant (2002: 388) comments that the prison may act 'counterintuitively and within limits, as a stabilizing and restorative force for relations already deeply frayed by the pressures of life and labor at the bottom of the social edifice'. Among his examples is the removal of violent men from domestic settings, which is mirrored – albeit still more problematically – in the respite Suzanne found in prison.

While institutionalization was a frequent theme at both prisons, for a number of prisoners approaching release from open conditions, their current experience was of deinstitutionalization, a gradual movement back towards freedom and independence, and an increasing sense of efficacy and confidence in engaging with the world beyond the prison. Counterposing the identity stripping effect of entering prison, they described a re-furnishing of the emerging person with the possessions and props of modern living: a car; a bank account; a mobile phone. Prisoners at all stages of their sentences, then, described changes to self-meanings associated with the shifts in status brought by beginning, or progressing through, a prison term. As the foregoing suggests, the management of self-meanings was active and reflexive. Burkitt (2002) brings together Foucault's (1980/1993) concept of 'technologies of the self' and Dewey's (1922/1983) suggestion that habit is key to what makes individuals into selves, and that it is when habits break down (or, in this case, are involuntarily disrupted) that the self becomes reflexive. Foucault's observation that in examining and making an account of ourselves the self is not discovered but constituted is highly pertinent here, and illustrates the importance of these technologies of the self as examples of perception-focused coping (Thoits, 1986).

Contests for definitions of the self

The constitution and management of self-meanings were also evident in accounts of face-to-face encounters. Many prisoners described seeing 'dissonant' identities reflected back to themselves as uncomfortable, and descriptions of resisting and contesting threatening meanings were common, especially in exchanges with more powerful others. The reflection of stigmatized identities such as 'prisoner' and 'criminal' by the 'looking glass' of the institution and individuals within it was particularly painful. For Goffman (1959: 20), the negotiation of social identities is 'a kind of information game', in which the flow of information is controlled in order to reach a 'working consensus' (1953: 21) of the definition of the situation that facilitates a smooth social encounter. As illustrated above, prisoners' self-presentations are disrupted by their institutional position because they are unable to control the release of information in order to manage a spoiled identity, and because in such steeply asymmetric power relationships, the contest to define the situation is unevenly weighted from the outset.

Being stereotyped by staff as 'generically criminal' was a recurrent theme, and almost emblematic of stigmatization. Goffman (1959) argues that negotiations around the definition of the situation have a moral character: in projecting particular definitions and social characteristics, individuals lay claim to certain treatment as a particular kind of person. This is important to understanding why seeing discordant 'prisoner' identities reflected back at oneself was so profoundly uncomfortable for prisoners. This experience was described by prisoners of all backgrounds, but the accounts of well-educated and middle-class women, who had enjoyed relatively high social status and been used to respectful treatment, formed a distinct thread within

this theme:

Officers believe that everybody is a scumbag, and should be treated as such. That's how I feel about them, anyway. That's how I feel they feel about me.... I've never been to prison before, right? So I've got to 30-odd years old being a normal citizen, paying taxes – probably more tax than they ever did – nice home, nice car, plenty of holidays a year. And I made a mistake in my life. I didn't murder anybody, I accidentally killed somebody . . . So it baffles me as to why they automatically presume that I would steal off them, or that I take drugs, or that I sell drugs. . . . I'm not here for being a thief – I've never been a thief. I'm not here for dealing or taking drugs – I've never done that. So just because I accidentally killed somebody – which is a terrible crime, I'm not disputing that . . . – but it doesn't make me a thief, a robber, a junkie and every other type of criminal. But they think that you are, you see? They think that because you're a prisoner, you do all these other things.

(Chloe, prisoner, NH)

As Goffman's account of stigma would suggest, this experience is painful in part because prisoner and officer largely share normative conceptions of morality and deviance. Chloe asserts an identity as a 'normal' citizen, a conforming contributor to society whose conviction has resulted more from misadventure than moral deficiency. Burke (1991) suggests that individuals are invested in sustaining stable identities. Chloe's resistance to the 'criminal' identity that is implied by her 'prisoner' status appears to bear this out.

Institutional power in intersubjective encounters

Chloe describes being positioned according to definitions of the situation that are discordant either with what Burke (1991) terms her 'internal identity standard' or with the identity she wished to project. Symbolic interactionists suggest that processes of positioning, or 'altercasting', are an intrinsic part of social interaction, and always bound up with power. The prison setting, however, confers additional dimensions of power to these ubiquitous processes. Layder (1997) attributes different forms of power to the different social domains – contextual resources, social settings, situated activity and psychobiography – that interact to generate meaning in social activity. Face-to-face interactions are shaped by 'individual' and 'intersubjective' power located in the domains of psychobiography and situated activity. Encounters between prison staff and prisoners are also structured by forms of 'systemic' power located in the domains of social settings and contextual resources. In this context, this is 'penal' or 'regime' power, but also – as will become important – forms of 'capital' available to individuals as a result of their social positions (e.g. class). The significance of systemic power in encounters between staff and prisoners is visible in the ways in which staff 'positionings' of

prisoners are tied to the power of the regime. Carlen (1983) comments on the formal power held by prison staff to define prisoners. The experience of being falsely defined by more powerful others was not only painful but, through the power held by experts such as psychologists and the discretion of officers, could have a material impact on prisoners' progression through their sentence, and on aspects of their quality of life in prison. As others have observed in men's prisons in England and Wales (Crewe, 2007, 2009; Drake, 2007), this power is apparent in the records kept on prisoners by discipline staff, and in the reports of psychologists. This is the diffuse power rooted in knowledge and administered by experts that Foucault (1977) describes, whereby control is exerted by making the subject highly visible. Practices around assessment, conditional progression and release display the characteristics of hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement and examination, discussed earlier, which are common to both male and female prisoners serving conditional sentences in England and Wales, and which resonate with the historic experiences of female prisoners. For prisoners in the present study, the files compiled on them were a shared source of anxiety, particularly for those serving indeterminate and parole sentences:

. . . what a psychologist says can have a tremendous impact on that person's life . . . If a psychologist says that they think you're manipulative or that they think you're aggressive, for a lifer that can have such an impact and that is just one person's perception of you. . . somebody could describe you as being an aggressive person when you're not necessarily aggressive, that's just the way you're expressing yourself; you're emotional about a situation.

(Lisa, prisoner, NH)

As Jose-Kampfner (1990) has also observed, prisoners' emotional responses to their circumstances – depression, frustration, anger – tended to be defined by officials as essential characteristics.⁷ These forms of self-expression were swept up into the institution's 'interpretive scheme' (Goffman, 1961) as corroborating evidence of the attributes supposed to have brought the prisoner there.

Although eroded in recent years by increasing managerialism in the England and Wales Prison Service, a degree of discretion is intrinsic to prison officers' role. The discretionary power held by prison staff meant that their subjective constructions of prisoners, relating to character or social class, perhaps, could have tangible effects even outside formalized systems of reporting and assessment. This further illustrates the pervasive nature of institutional (systemic) power, which permeates even informal face-to-face encounters between staff and prisoners. Affluent, educated, middle-class women without drug problems often struck prison staff as 'different' from other prisoners. These prisoners frequently reported receiving more support from staff than did others. Several recounted having been told during their first days in prison that they 'didn't

belong there', cautioned to stay in their rooms and avoid other prisoners and quickly moved onto more comfortable, less secure wings and into 'trusted' jobs. This often took place too soon after prisoners' arrival to have been founded in reliable personal judgements about them (see also Tait, 2008).

One officer remembered noticing Lucy, convicted of drug importation, on one of the remand wings at New Hall shortly after her arrival:

. . . somebody walking around with a £700 Burberry jacket stands out a mile, and I thought to myself, 'I'll see what she's in for; I'll have a chat with her. She's obviously not a usual prisoner; she's obviously got money.'
(Tom Wilkes, Officer, NH)

He described taking a special interest, explaining what would happen to her, reassuring her that prison would get easier, showing her around the 'Enhanced'⁸ wing and helping her into a 'good' job:

I felt for her. And it's not often I say that: kids at home, looking at 18 years in jail . . . That's when it hits home, really. I mean, I know what she did was very, very wrong at the end of the day – importation of that amount of drugs. She always maintained with me that she never knew they were there. I'll never know the truth of that.
(Tom Wilkes, Officer, NH)

Despite admitting that he was not completely sure of Lucy's innocence, Officer Wilkes commented, 'I still don't look on her as being a prisoner as such, because she's not a prisoner; she's someone that did something stupid and got caught.' Although not an addict, Lucy's long sentence for a drug-related offence might have been expected to attract disapprobation. Nevertheless, her appearance of affluence and 'decency' overrode the nature of her conviction, and attracted special sympathy for the very common circumstance of having young children at home, even though, as the officer almost certainly knew, Lucy's children were well provided-for and, unlike those of most women prisoners, still under parental care in their own homes. To this officer, the identity category of 'prisoner' evidently signified more than simply an individual's official status within the system, invoking normative discourses of female criminality. The easy translation of the officer's subjective construction of prisoners into differential treatment highlights the significance of identity in the micro-politics of prison life.

In interview, Lucy herself discussed her treatment by staff, and her perception that the self-meanings prisoners projected, and the identities imputed to them, affected the level of support staff were willing to give:

I've always been treated very fairly – I can't say I haven't. But I see girls who haven't been as lucky to have a reasonable upbringing. I've had a nice upbringing, really. . . . A lot of girls . . . might not have nice manners, or they might just say, 'Can you do this for me?' without manners, and then the officers, they're not as obliging. Whereas I will always ask them very politely and I will always say, 'Please can I?' and 'Thank you.' There is definitely, definitely a difference between the way people treat certain people and I am on the lucky side of that.

(Lucy, prisoner, NH)

Lucy's ability to express her needs and articulate requests clearly and politely, which she presented as a product of her upbringing and social class, enabled her to advocate for herself effectively and helped officers to want to help her. These capacities and positions represented a contextual resource (Layder, 1997) that directly influenced the nature and outcome of her encounters with prison staff. It is evident, then, that individuals' imported characteristics shaped not just their engagement with the institution, as prison sociologists have tended to argue, but also the way the institution dealt with them. A similar process is visible in prisoners' observation that some officers enforced rules selectively, not confronting those likely to challenge them, while disproportionately disciplining relatively compliant prisoners in order to construct an authoritative persona without being undermined.

The normative discourses on which prison staff drew to support their working practices were evident in interpretations of prisoners' responses to imprisonment, as well as judgements about their imported characteristics:

I thought that having good comments on your file . . . sticking to the rules or whatever, that's supposed to work for you, not against you. But apparently because I don't kick off and stuff, therefore it's working against me. You know, they like to see a change in somebody when they first come in from being rowdy and kicking off and stuff and then calming down and being rehabilitated. But with me, I'm not that sort of person . . . At the beginning I was very, very quiet because all I was doing was observing what is going on, who I can talk to, things like that. . . . But now, with experience and everything else, you gain confidence. But yes, . . . my behaviour doesn't count for anything, basically.

(Amelia, prisoner, NH)

For a prisoner serving an indeterminate sentence, like Amelia, managing meaning is key to progressing through a prison sentence. Her analysis of 'what they like to see' suggests that prisoners are appraised against normative conceptions of what Carlen (1983) has termed 'the good prisoner'. Amelia suggests that staff sought something more than straightforward compliance. A prisoner whose behaviour moves from 'rowdiness' to 'calm' and 'is rehabilitated'

reinforces beliefs in both the need for penal intervention, and in its efficacy.

Discursive repositioning and resistance

Identities, then, were affected by, and influential in shaping, the prison experience. They also represented a resource in managing and resisting painful meanings. Bosworth has likewise discussed the role of identity in resisting painful aspects of imprisonment. However, elements of her conceptual framework arguably limit the usefulness of her analysis. In accounts of imprisonment, the boundaries between ‘resistance’ and ‘coping’ are often blurred (see, for example, Bosworth, 1999; Ferraro and Moe, 2003). This is particularly visible in studies of women’s prisons, where there is little history of collective rebellion to form a clear reference point, and expressions of agency have tended to be over-interpreted as resistance. Bosworth (1999: 96) argues that the penal power at work in women’s prisons is ‘legitimated by, and therefore reliant on, a particular construction of (docile, feminine) subjectivity’. She argues that it is against this rather diffuse concept of (middle-class, white, heterosexual) normative femininity, as well as ‘uniform and prohibitive prison routines’ (1999: 126), that women prisoners direct their resistance. As a consequence, not just expressions of autonomy and agency, but even non-normative ways of being are treated as resistance. Crewe (2007, 2009) draws on Buntman (2003) and McEvoy (2001) to argue that although coping and resistance share commonalities, resistance must be understood as being directed at evading or overcoming the imposition of unwelcome power. On this definition, the present study suggests that resistance may also include private acts of rebellion, as Bosworth (1999) and Smith (2002) also argue. From such an understanding, it is possible to work with prisoners’ constructions of actions as either ‘coping’ or ‘resistance’ to understand their experience of power in prison. This approach resonates with Scott’s (1999) suggestion that it is the ‘hidden transcripts’ of meaning that make acts of resistance by the disempowered intelligible.

Some self-meanings associated with coping did not reference power relations. These included private projects of self-development such as giving up smoking, weight loss, study and detoxification. Personal goals offered prisoners a means of taking control of their sentence and subverting its punitive purpose to refurnish it with a more positive set of meanings. For some prisoners, the boundary between coping and resistance was as indistinct as it has been in the research literature. One woman described her resolution to lose weight in prison as ‘rebellion’, while acknowledging its function as a private coping strategy, despite knowing and that she knew that no-one wanted her to gain weight; indeed gym officers were actively supporting her weight-loss.

Unwelcome power was most often described in face-to-face encounters with staff, in which the mobilization of ‘identity capital’ (Giddens, 1991) offered a resource for resistance. Although

dominated by institutional roles, interactions between staff and prisoners are nevertheless intersected and disrupted by external statuses and meanings drawn from the wider shared culture. Because the 'society' of the prison is usually not the only social context common to both, other significant symbols may be available to redefine the situation:

When I went to court, I had a Radley handbag. . . . [and when] I came back in[to] the prison, [the officer] goes, 'How can a prisoner afford a Radley handbag?' I said, 'Because I wasn't always a prisoner'. I said, 'When it comes right down to it,' I said, 'I would buy and sell you in a minute'. His face just dropped. I was so angry about it . . . (Lorraine, prisoner, AG)

Assertions of status relating to prior affluence (as in this example), education or professional status were effective because they held shared meanings for both officer and prisoner, and institutional roles could be at least partly overwritten by the shared social context beyond the prison. Here, the recognition by both officer and prisoner of the high-status handbag brand, and common meanings around class and wealth, made it possible for Lorraine to redefine the situation as one in which her prisoner status was provisional and she was 'really' the officer's social superior. This repositioning of prison officers as of lower social status was common among middle-class prisoners, drawing on a particular form of systemic (class) power. Others drew on different identities. Louise, for example, invoked her identity as a stripper to redefine the meaning of a situation in which she was strip-searched for reasons she interpreted as punitive and non-legitimate. She described a conflict with a female officer she believed disliked her personally, which arose during a visit from her son's father as he stood up to show her a recent stab wound:

He stood up and lifted his shirt up a little bit and before you knew it, she was there . . . She said, 'I'd just like to inform you I think this visit is very suspicious'. . . . I said, 'The only thing suspicious on this visit's your fat fucking arse.' I said, 'Either terminate the visit or fuck off.' And she was like, 'Right. Wait till you come out . . . So when I went out there were like five hardcore screws there. They strip-searched me. I said, 'I don't mind taking my clothes off, I've done it for a living.' If you're one of those people that don't like being strip-searched, you can see them buzzing off it, whereas me, I'd be like, 'Get some music on! I'll do it proper!' She said, 'Top first', but because I knew I'd put on a bit of weight and my jeans were tight and I had love handles, I didn't want her to see that so I thought I'd just unbutton my jeans. So I've gone to unbutton my jeans and she's gone, 'I said top first.' . . . (Louise, prisoner, AG)

The complex dynamics between Louise and the officer illustrated here clearly illustrate Louise's

attempts to redefine the officer's assertion of power through her discursive invocations of self and status. In demonstrating that the strip-search did not humiliate her, she sought to redefine the meaning of an exchange in which the officer's systemic power gave her the upper hand and foregrounded Louise's spoiled identity. In her desire to avoid giving the other woman the opportunity to make a negative judgement about her body, she also asserted forms of personal and intersubjective power resting in identities bound up with her femininity. Louise, whose body had been her stock-in-trade since her early teens, wanted to demonstrate to the officer that as a woman, she could not compete with her. Again, statuses external to the prison interacted with the roles of 'officer' and 'prisoner', so that the flow of power 'edded' rather than ran smoothly in a single direction. In both these encounters, prisoners were able to mobilize forms of personal power in order to resist and redefine situations in which the imposition of unwelcome power by officers, which was the less tolerable because it carried the punitive weight of the prison regime.

Conclusion

Despite a perennial concern with ideas of the self in the design and delivery of penal regimes for women, and in the analysis of their prison experiences, women prisoners' subjective constructions of identity have been little discussed in the literature. The focus in this analysis on 'meaning' rather than 'pain' generated two important findings. First, not all the meanings articulated by prisoners were pains; for some, the meanings held by their sentence were at least partly of growth, recovery or even freedom. Second, ideas relating to identity and selfhood were strikingly salient in accounts both of the overarching meaning of imprisonment in prisoners' lives and of the meanings held by day-to-day encounters in prison. Imprisonment challenged, developed or confirmed identities in ways that were variously welcome or distressing. This reflexive management of self-meanings is a technology of the self, employed in response to the dislocation of imprisonment in order to cope with its painful and stigmatizing meanings.

Questions of identity were not just significant in prisoners' private experience, but were of material importance. The intersubjective negotiation of identity was drawn into the formalized systems of reporting in which the conduct, character and progress of individual prisoners were monitored and subjected, in Foucault's (1977) terms, to normalizing judgement and evaluation. Many of the conflicts and struggles for self-definition prisoners described in face-to-face encounters did not differ in their essential character from ubiquitous processes whereby individuals in any setting impute identities to others, and seek to project their own in order to define a situation. In the prison context, however, ordinary social processes are subsumed by relations of institutional power; subjective judgements of prisoners' selves by those with 'expert' or discretionary power can facilitate or hinder progression through the penal system.

Nevertheless, systemic institutional power was not absolute. Prisoners' ability to make and

manage the meanings of their imprisonment and day-to-day encounters inside prison allowed them to neutralize painful meanings and experiences, foster instrumentally beneficial identities and resist the assertion of systemic power. In micro-level power negotiations, prisoners were able to mobilize ‘identity capital’ (Giddens, 1991) in order to resist and redefine meanings that were threatening to self and status. In doing so, prisoners drew on discursive resources and forms of power located in social domains beyond the immediate situation and setting of the prison.

Notes

1. It should be noted that violence is not widely documented in women’s prisons in England and Wales.
2. For a fuller critical discussion of this literature, see Rowe (2009).
3. The research was funded by a studentship from the UK’s Economic and Social Research Council, Ref. PTA-030-2005-00058.
4. For a fuller account of the prisons and methods, see Rowe (2009).
5. All names of participants are pseudonyms.
6. ‘Outworkers’ were prisoners at an advanced stage of the resettlement regime who were in paid employment outside the prison.
7. Discussions of institutional responses to prisoners’ emotionality have tended to appear primarily in analyses of women’s prisons, but see also Crewe (2009) for indications of similar processes in men’s prisons.
8. The Enhanced privilege level is the highest of three in the Incentives and Earned Privileges system in use in the England and Wales prison service.

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