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Only one way to swim? The offence and the life course in accounts of adaptation to life imprisonment

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Abstract

Recent studies of long-term imprisonment describe a largely invariant pattern of prisoner adaptation. Using data from a qualitative study of men serving life sentences in England, I argue that adaptation may in fact vary more than these studies imply, both because of the prisoner's age when sentenced, and because of the circumstances of particular offences. Participants' engagement with the prison's rehabilitative 'offer' depended on how the sentence affected their life course, and what they understood to be the moral ramifications of the offence. These findings refine understanding of adaptation, and suggest that a renewed focus on moral reflexivity may bear fruit in future prison research.

Keywords:
long-term imprisonment, indefinite imprisonment, life imprisonment, rehabilitation, moral reflection, murder

Introduction

Globally, the UK is a leading user of indeterminate imprisonment (van Zyl Smit and Appleton 2019:355–64). This situation has resulted partly from a broad legal definition of murder (which attracts a mandatory life sentence), partly from tariff inflation,¹ and partly from ‘back-door sentencing’ (Padfield 2005) making it harder to get (and stay) out of prison. Spans of imprisonment once thought extreme are now routine: nearly a quarter of over 8,500 lifers are serving tariffs of at least twenty years (Prison Reform Trust 2018:6, 28). Thirty years ago, such sentences were rare, and perceived as outlandish and excessive.

This unprecedented situation has spurred new empirical research on long-term imprisonment (henceforth, LTI). A significant recent finding has been the identification of a consistent process of adaptation to imprisonment, apparently generated by prisoners’ reflection on the ‘existential’ questions posed by very long sentences: how can life be worth living in such circumstances? With what can previously anticipated futures be replaced? What would it mean for this situation to have been self-inflicted? Although the adaptation process described by recent research is *consistent*, it is easy to conclude too that it is *invariant*. This article uses data from a qualitative study of life-sentenced prisoners (henceforth, ‘lifers’) to argue otherwise.

The argument is threefold. First, I argue that existential reflection has different consequences depending on *how a long prison sentence alters the life course*. Here, I draw on comparisons of lifers sentenced at different ages, which do not feature in other recent analyses. Second, I argue that existential reflection has different consequences, depending on the degree of stigma and shame experienced as a result of the conviction. Here, the argument draws on empirical comparisons between offences with different moral ramifications. Woven into both arguments is a third: that both life stage and shame arising from the offence affect *compliance with rehabilitative sentence requirements*. Not all lifers shoulder moral censure (Duff 2001) or ‘take responsibility’ for the offence in the same way. They are expected to be the agents of their own rehabilitation, engaging well with the resources made available to support this; release on parole is tied to satisfactory ‘risk reduction’ along these lines. Even those who doubt the extent of their guilt comply, despite denying any moral imperative to do so. Some find this painfully ‘tight’ (Crewe 2011a). In making this third argument I draw on the insight that compliance takes many forms, not all of which signal equal legitimacy (Bottoms 2002).

My overarching aim is to refine earlier findings, by describing in greater depth the ‘moral reflection’ (Schinkel 2014) underpinning adaptation. While supporting the finding that lifers and long-term prisoners (henceforth, LTPs) undergo widespread and distinctive shifts in agency, my analysis questions whether these in fact represent ‘only one way to swim’ (participant quoted in Crewe, Hulley, and Wright 2017a:525).

In what follows, I review relevant literature, noting three key recent findings and the questions they beg. I then describe the research and outline how the lifers interviewed for it responded to the notion that they ought to change. Finally, I suggest what these findings might mean for future research on LTI.

¹ The ‘tariff’: the minimum term, the shortest possible period of imprisonment.

Tracing developmental influences on long-term prisoners

'[L]ife-course and criminal career research has largely failed to document psychological, social, and behavioural changes that occur during periods of incarceration. This oversight is particularly noteworthy in the case of individuals serving long sentences, as they spend a significant portion of the life course behind bars.' (Kazemian and Travis 2015:355)

Adaptation to imprisonment in the age of mass incarceration

Researchers in the 1970s and 1980s differed over whether and how to account for subjective experience when investigating the effects of LTI. For quantitative researchers measuring empirical variables such as reaction time and psychological constructs such as self-esteem (Banister et al. 1973; MacKenzie and Goodstein 1985; Rasch 1981; Sapsford 1979, 1983; Zamble 1992), no substantial detriments could be found among those who had served more time in prison. The replicable finding that LTI was effectively harmless marginalised less replicable qualitative research (e.g. Cohen and Taylor 1972) which saw subjective and existential reflection as a major determinant of the prison experience (Liebling and Maruna 2005).

More recently, the evaluative context has changed. Mass imprisonment, sentence inflation, and the growth of life-without-parole (LWOP) sentences have discredited the proposition that imprisonment does no harm, and revitalised scholarly interest. Recent research has followed a handful of earlier studies in using qualitative or mixed methods, describing and/or measuring the severity and meaning attributed to the 'pains of imprisonment' (Crewe et al. 2017a; Crewe, Hulley, and Wright 2017b; Flanagan 1980, 1981; Herbert 2019; Hulley, Crewe, and Wright 2016, 2019; Liem 2016; Richards 1978; Schinkel 2014; Tynan 2019; Wright, Crewe, and Hulley 2017). There is broad consensus that LTI produces a certain modal subjectivity among well-adapted lifers: highly self-controlled, instrumental and strategic, capable of not offending, but often ill-equipped for and disappointed by life after release. Noting the significance and prevalence of these changes, some have argued for a new psychiatric diagnosis, 'post-incarceration syndrome' (Liem and Kunst 2013).

Yet the processes that lead to this outcome are less well-explored. Since the longitudinal research Kazemian and Travis call for is lacking, recent cross-sectional studies offer the best available evidence base. Taken together, they suggest three significant findings.

First, patterns of agency and identity observable at different stages of long sentences are consistent with a *very widespread adaptation process* holding 'very consistently, virtually regardless of other variables' (Crewe et al. 2017a:538).² Adaptation, on this account, is fairly invariant. Early-sentence-stage prisoners suppress or deny the reality of their predicament, or channel feelings about it into other activities. Their reflexive focus is on the past, and what has been lost. Later, these adaptations shift: the 'pains' of imprisonment persist but ease somewhat, and prisoners 'begin to find purpose and meaning' (Crewe et al. 2017a:537) by focusing more on the future. This move from 'reactive' to 'productive' agency (ibid.) is well-supported in other studies. It is accompanied by the adoption of routines and practices offering 'a modicum of control' and allowing lifers 'to fashion a life at least partly on their own terms' (Johnson and Dobrzanska

²One important exception is those who do not adapt but disintegrate psychologically, either taking their own lives or passing from prison into secure psychiatric care (Crewe, Hulley, and Wright 2017a:520, 524).

2005:9). For Irwin (2009:66), shifts of this kind are moments of ‘awakening’; for Liem (2016:99–103) they are ‘epiphanies’; and for Herbert (2019:28), ‘maturation’ and the ‘recognition of interdependency’. Their timing is quite individual (Irwin 2009:66–67), but their underlying pull is near-irresistible: even those who doubt the deservedness of their predicament find that ‘sentiments of bitterness and desperation’ (Crewe et al. 2017a:538) are simply incompatible with survival.

Second, recent studies tend to agree that by the later sentence stages, most lifers become self-controlled, compliant and biddable, or ‘*easy to keep*’ (Herbert 2019). They favour solitary pursuits, avoid influences they see as ‘impulsive, disruptive, and even dangerous’ (Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005:10), and embrace strikingly ‘generative’ aims which they are nevertheless often hard-pushed to realise after release (Appleton 2010; Liem 2016; Schinkel 2014). Such outcomes are *also* manifest among prisoners serving LWOP sentences (Cunningham and Sorensen 2006; Sorensen and Reidy 2019), who like other lifers have a large stake in whether prisons are ‘liveable’ (i.e. support a meaningful, tolerable existence). Thus ‘easy-to-keepness’ is likely a result of prolonged exposure to the prison environment, and *not* simply induced by the allure of release on parole.

Third, many recent studies have foregrounded LTPs’ private and interior reflexivity, describing this variously as ‘*existential introspection*’, ‘*serious introspection*’, or ‘*solitary reflection*’ (respectively, Crewe et al. 2017a:537; Irwin 2009:77; Schinkel 2014:40–45). The emphasis here is on cognition severed from its accustomed social context (see Crewe and Ievins 2019), placing selfhood in ‘a state of fragmentation’ (Liem 2016:99), or a ‘liminal’ state comparable to chronic or terminal illness (Jewkes 2005). Imprisonment removes past sources of identity, cancels envisaged futures, and attenuates or removes such sources of meaning, esteem and worth as family, work and material consumption. Extended indefinitely, these pose an ‘adaptive imperative’, impelling reflection on one’s predicament, discernment of where one’s own responsibility might lie, acceptance of what one cannot change; accountability for what one can, and the adoption of some ‘cause, vocation or ideal’ which might lend meaning to an otherwise painful experience (Crewe et al. 2017a:537–39; Wright et al. 2017:238). Sometimes, lifers reject their past ways of life as ‘fundamentally wrong’ (Irwin 2009:66). But feelings of guilt are not a necessary precondition: even prisoners who maintain their innocence often maintain that imprisonment was ‘the best thing that ever happened’ to them (Irwin 2009:105), and find paradoxical ways to take responsibility for offences they deny (Hulley et al. 2019).

Cognition and stigma in desistance research

Kazemian and Travis (2015:363–70) suggest making greater use of desistance research to theorise these developmental currents. Here, I draw two key insights from it.

The first insight relates to the life course. Desistance is associated with transitions into adult roles, often involving responsibilities towards others: in particular, work, parenthood, and marriage (e.g. Laub and Sampson 2003). Theorists (e.g. Bottoms and Shapland 2014; Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Weaver 2016) suggest that cognitive changes in how these roles and relationships are evaluated and prioritised drive the desistance process. For example, an imprisoned parent might seek rehabilitative intervention because they hope to better live up to that role (Schinkel 2019). But a *long* prison sentence is a form of ‘suspended animation’, in which

life goals are (at best) put on hold. LTI not only disrupts existing parenting ties, but can also confine non-parents (particularly women) beyond the scope of their biological fertility (Crewe et al. 2017b) or simply their inclination to have children. This complicates the scope for parenting to be experienced as a source of meaning and hope. Likewise, any sense of worth derived from work can be disrupted by a long sentence, and not just because of lost time: advanced age, complex licence conditions, the risk of recall to prison and offence disclosure requirements can make finding work after release difficult (e.g. Liem 2016). Developing Jewkes's (2005) metaphor of chronic illness, adaptation to a long sentence can be thought of as adaptation to a life-changing injury, albeit one that may be seen to be self-inflicted. Though any resulting 'disability' is socially determined (see Burke, Collett, and McNeill 2019), its impact will differ substantially according to individual variables, such as age, which have not been considered in recent studies of adaptation, either because they were not prominent in the analysis (e.g. Appleton 2010; Liem 2016), or because participants were convicted young (and hence, conceivably, were more able to envisage a worthwhile life after prison - see Crewe, Hulley, and Wright 2020).

The second insight relates to the offence, specifically to shame and stigmatisation. Some theorisations of desistance (e.g. Paternoster and Bushway 2009) posit desistance from persistent offending as a transition, from 'anti-social' or 'criminal' identity to 'pro-social' or 'non-criminal' identity. For lifers and LTPs, 'changed identity' cannot involve such a binary opposition. Not all possess a 'criminal' identity to begin with, something more common among persistent and not necessarily serious offenders (McNeill and Weaver 2010:5). More importantly, criminal identity is *imposed* by a serious offence, through long-lasting (or lifelong) measures of formal social control, such as disclosure and supervision requirements, travel restrictions, and so on. These may be experienced as painful or stigmatising (McNeill 2019), and after release they restrict economic opportunities (Appleton 2010), and complicate personal relationships by creating dilemmas about disclosure (Aresti, Eatough, and Brooks-Gordon 2010). Adaptation to a long (especially an indeterminate) sentence therefore involves a resigned *but nonetheless agentic* acceptance of these life-changing consequences. If 'coming to terms with being a murderer [involves] the management of shame' (Crewe et al. 2017a:530), then the term 'management' is significant: shame is *controlled* or *taken charge of*, rather than *dispelled* or *ignored*. Again, the sentence can be understood as a *life-changing injury*, inflicting affective and practical burdens on individuals whose resources and capabilities to bear them nevertheless differ. There is some empirical evidence that different kinds of offence can result in different strategies to manage shame: this has been shown to structure the prison experiences of men convicted of sexual offences (Ievins 2017), and to signpost different 'desistance pathways' for those convicted of different kinds of offence (F.-Dufour and Brassard 2014).

In sum, though there may be an 'offence-time nexus' (Wright et al. 2017) centred on the offence of murder and its heavy sanction, we might guess that neither the offence itself nor imprisonment's temporal span will pose the same questions to all. Like desistance, the *process* of adaptation might be visible in the aggregate, but its individual *trajectories* might be shaped by life as lived before and anticipated after the sentence. Those who feel *less* ashamed might experience demands for rehabilitative change as 'tight' or painful (Crewe 2011b); those who feel *more* ashamed might resent them less. Likewise, desistance is a movement *away* from crime, but also *towards* something else; those who anticipate a lonely, poor, ailing and stigmatised existence after

release might harbour doubts about ‘rehabilitation’, at least in its dictionary sense: the ‘re-establishment of the reputation or merit of a person’ or the ‘restoration of a person to former privileges’ (OED n.d.).

These theoretical inferences are difficult to test using existing empirical accounts of adaptation, which offer limited insight into how aggregate patterns of agency might differ according to individual circumstance. Generating such insight is my focus in the remainder of this article.

Researching lifers’ accounts of personal change

Design and methods

Fieldwork was conducted in 2017 at HMP Gartree, a male prison exclusively housing people serving indeterminate sentences. To be eligible, participants needed:

- i. a tariff of at least ten years, of which at least two had already been served;
- ii. two or more convictions before the index offence, and
- iii. not to have been recalled to prison following release on licence

Criteria (i) and (iii) aimed to include those serving long sentences for a serious offence, but to exclude those experiencing the shock and disorientation of the very early sentence stages.

Because classic desistance studies have typically focused on how prolific (but not necessarily serious) offenders desist, criterion (ii) aimed for a sample for whom the findings of past research would be relevant.

Sampling procedures also reflected my interest in the life course, aiming for wide variation on life stage *and* sentence stage. Starting with an anonymised eligible population list provided by the prison, I calculated a modified version of O’Donnell’s ‘pain quotient’ (or ‘PQ’ - see O’Donnell, 2014, pp.201–5) for each case.⁴ Cases were ranked on PQ and divided into quartiles, then further subdivided into quartiles on age when sentenced. One individual from each of the sixteen subdivisions was randomly selected and sent an information sheet.

As is common in prison research, sampling plans went somewhat awry. It became clear while interviewing (because some interviewees had no previous convictions) that criterion (ii) had not been applied when generating the population list. Staff absence made it impractical to resolve this problem in the time available, so the eventual sample comprised eighteen men: thirteen selected randomly as above; and five more approached purposively to try and compensate. All eighteen were serving life sentences for murder, but nine had no previous convictions and only five had two or more as originally envisaged. The sample therefore varied unanticipatedly.

Interviews were semi-structured and qualitative (average length 93 minutes, minimum 42, maximum 145). Structuring themes were drawn from desistance and prison research literatures. Interviews solicited a description of life before prison (not a full life history narrative) before focusing on the notion of personal change: did change ‘matter’ (Sayer 2011) to the interviewee;

⁴ O’Donnell’s coefficient ($PQ = \frac{\text{time to be served}}{\text{life to be lived}}$) quantifies the subjective burden of prison time, and was used as a replicable basis on which to blindly select cases. I used published data (World Bank n.d.) to estimate life expectancy at birth.

what hindered or supported it; how did they evaluate rehabilitative interventions; and how did they relate the idea and the possibility of change to the dynamics of prison social life more generally?

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Coding and analysis cycled between deductive and inductive thinking, iteratively modifying an initial code list through encounters with the data. Although the sample was broadly representative of the eligible population at Gartree (see TABLE 1), and contained the intended wide variation on age and sentence stage, it contained wide and unanticipated variation on prior criminality and identity. This, in a relatively small sample, meant that theoretical saturation could not be assured, meaning that the findings below should be read as exploratory, not definitive or exhaustive. Nevertheless, there were clear patterns in the data.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

‘Truth’ and research ethics in accounts of change

Triangulating interview data was difficult. After completing the interviews, I searched online for media coverage of participants’ trials, to check details of their index offences;³ in many cases this also helped establish details about their backgrounds before prison (such as their occupation). I lacked the wherewithal to triangulate descriptions of in-prison conduct, meaning that potentially I accepted interviewees’ accounts of their motivation and their conduct, offering a platform for rationalisations and justifications.⁴ Given that parole boards determine release by assessing the risk that lifers might go on to harm others, there are clearly strong incentives to develop a *performance* of ‘changed identity’ and ‘reduced risk’, and a corresponding risk that these performances are self-serving, perhaps even self-deceiving. Encouraging or facilitating such artfulness is obviously unethical.

Doubtless, some reservations about the interview data presented below will be well-founded. But—and this was precisely why some interviewees felt misrecognised by the prison—much of the interview material referred to conduct and thinking which was unlikely ever to be officially recorded in any form, and which was therefore unfeasible, and perhaps impossible, to verify.

Two examples illustrate this point. As I detail below, many interviewees spoke of how, in prison, they had learned to ‘walk away’ from provocative situations which previously might have led to violent confrontations. Learning such lessons meant relinquishing prized beliefs about one’s proper relations with others. Desistance research theorises how such cognitive transformations are the foundations for attempts at personal change, but it has ‘largely ignored’ (Kazemian and Travis 2015:376) how they might occur during LTI. Yet in this study—not long-term ethnographic fieldwork in which I might have observed incidents and then quizzed the participants about them, but a three-week period crammed with interviews—checking such data would have been difficult. Prison records are highly unlikely to record non-fights or ignored insults, so that their potential relevance in risk assessment must be based on the *absence* of trouble involving a given individual.

³ Available for 17 of the 18 men interviewed.

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me to explore this issue more fully.

Similarly, and again as detailed below, much of the interview data described private reflection on biographical details from interviewees' pre-prison lives. Triangulating some factual details might have been possible in principle but was completely impractical; such difficulties multiplied when it came to evaluative (rather than merely factual) descriptions. For example, when John (quoted below) described a dawning realisation that he had been a worse man than his own father (whom he hated), and added 'trust me, that's a real change', he was describing his developing *character*: that is, 'the ethical value [he] place[d] on [his] own desires and on [his] relations to others'. He was also 'particularly focus[ing] upon the long-term aspect of [his] emotional experience' (Sennett 1998:10). Only by taking his first-person perspective seriously could I make sense of what he was telling me; but this does not mean I assumed everything he said was true, even if it were practical or possible to verify.

It is important to be clear, therefore, that these findings centre on interviewees' ethical lives, and on the moral perspectives generated by severe punishment for a very serious offence. This moves the analysis into contestable territory; but people's moral beliefs correlate with their propensity to commit crimes (Wikström et al. 2012), precisely what rehabilitative provision professes to target.

In fact, only one of the eighteen interviewees in this research 'maintained innocence', in the strong sense of rejecting his conviction entirely and denying any involvement whatsoever in causing another human being's death.⁵ In fact, most lingering questions over the conviction disputed the extent to which (or the ways in which) the offence was *wrong*; they did not disclaim responsibility for the grave *harms* it had inflicted.

There are good analytical reasons to separate *harms* and *wrongs* when thinking about punishment (Duff 2001, 2011). Those punished for grave harms often attempt to salvage some sense of ethical worth through moral neutralisations, meaning that rationalisations and justifications—morally dubious on most common-sense views—in fact may signal a *reduction* in the risk of future harms. They correlate with successful desistance (Maruna 2001) and should not be conflated (even in cases of heinous violence or sexual harm) with a lack of accountability for *future* risk, nor an elevated propensity to reoffend (Maruna and Mann 2006; Ware and Mann 2012).

The changes which long-term and life-sentenced prisoners typically undergo during the sentence are already quite well-documented, as the literature reviewed above makes clear. LTPs are also known to reoffend at rates far beneath those of the general prison population (Ministry of Justice 2019). This study aimed to theorise the processes behind this outcome, not to adjudicate on whether these men had *really* 'changed'.

Findings and discussion

The sentence and the life course

Because past studies sampled younger lifers/LTPs, or because age was not a central focus of their analysis, the life course might have been underplayed as a factor in adaptation. In this section, then, I compare adaptation among lifers who were younger and older when sentenced.

⁵ It is notable that he was *not* one of the five who were appealing their convictions.

Among younger lifers, accounts of adaptation resonated with earlier descriptions (e.g. Crewe et al. 2017a) of a move towards more future-oriented forms of agency:

I want to have a family, you know? That's all I want. My father was an evil fucking bastard. My mum was damaged from all the things that happened to her. But my kids will never have that [...] I know I can be an awesome dad [...] I know I can help people. I just want someone to love, you know?' (Davidas, twenties, PQ 3/46)⁶

I didn't want to [interact with prison staff]. I didn't like it. But [staff member] said: "listen, [when] you get out, what are you going to do? You're going to be working, what are you going to say to your manager? "I feel uncomfortable?" Listen, you're going to have to interact with people outside your social circle." He was right, you know.' (Regis, twenties, PQ 11/46)

These descriptions imagined the sentence as a hiatus in the normal life course. They were anchored in the possibility that prison offered preparation time for a distant, yet potentially hopeful future. Also like in earlier studies, adaptation for younger lifers meant developing emotional moderation and self-control:

Especially on the wing, when [...] someone says something, and you just have to walk off [...] It's hard, man. [A] non-criminal person will think nothing of it, whereas you feel that [...] you've been mugged off [...] You just feel like a dickhead. I'll be [on] the cooker [and someone will say] "that's my pot, take [yours] off, get it fucking off there", and you go "I don't want to know, mate" [...] I walk away from it, it's the best thing to do.' (Owen, thirties, PQ 6/42)

Such accounts suggested incremental improvements in how prison's daily temptations and provocations had been handled over time. These were predominant themes for lifers who had been younger when convicted. Self-control and moderation were a key focus for ethical 'work'; notions of 'rehabilitation' were more distant, and were associated with work and education rather than with satisfaction at the 'reduction of risk'. Sentiments of 'frustration at the limits to their development' (Tynan 2019:111) were common, and some bitterly criticised the prominence of OBPs over other forms of rehabilitative provision:

The money could be spent better on [...] bricklaying courses, motor mechanics, woodwork, electricians [...] When people get out of prison, and they go for a job, [what are they going to] say? "Well, I ain't got no qualifications, but you know, I've done Resolve, and I've got Enhanced Thinking Skills, whatever". [They're not going to get the job]' (James, forties, PQ 9/30)

Even so, most engaged pragmatically, gleaned what they could (discussed further below) but also harbouring private grievances about the expectation to redeem the past rather than improve the future.

⁶ In quotes attributed to prisoners, a pseudonym, an approximate age, and O'Donnell's PQ are given, with the latter in the format $\frac{\text{years to tariff expiry}}{\text{remaining years of life expectancy}}$.

All of this contrasted with men who had been convicted older, mostly in their late thirties and forties. Like their younger peers, many were well-adapted, and had progressed in their sentences. But they remained preoccupied by the past:

'If you've spent most of your life hating your father, because you thought he was a real bad person, and then [...] you suddenly come to the conclusion that you're worse than [him] – trust me, that's a change.' (John, fifties, PQ 9/9)

This differed from Davidas's similar reference to his father (above), because for John the comparison rebounded onto him. In middle age when sentenced, he and the other older men had come to recognise that they had harmed those whom they ought to have cared for, if they had lived up to their ideals of fatherhood. It was too late to do otherwise, and not all had been able to obtain forgiveness: John said his adult children wanted nothing to do with him. Despite this, and unlike the future-focused agency of the younger men, their narratives of change were highly retrospective. Far from 'knifing off' the past (Laub and Sampson 2003), they wanted to *integrate* it with whom they now recognised themselves to be. Their self-evaluations were holistic, and often scathing:

'For over a decade I didn't commit an offence, so to speak, [but] that doesn't mean that my life wasn't deeply immoral, in ways you can't be prosecuted for.' (Max, forties, PQ 12/29)

The actions of a past self they no longer identified with had become hard to account for; John's 'difficulty' in the following quote implies self-alienation, and lies in reconciling past and present, not present and future:

'If someone sits in front of you and wants to know why you did [the offence], they're not interested in, "I-don't-knows" or "I'm-sorrys". You've got to come up with some logical explanation. And I think that's where it can get difficult. It can really get difficult.' (John, fifties, PQ 9/9)

All three older men said that after experiences of 'difficulty' like this had overwhelmed them, their attitudes towards OBPs had changed. They had all completed long-term therapeutic interventions (not shorter cognitive-behavioural courses); how these had helped them is explored further below. They were not only compliant with the demand to reform themselves and reduce risk, but also saw it as morally legitimate, suggesting an internalisation of the notion of dangerousness:

'I don't want to be released yet [...] I will try my damndest [but if] I weren't ready, I'll refuse parole. If it comes to it, I'd rather die in prison, than commit another victim.' (Martin, forties, PQ 12/24)

So far, I have argued that adaptation varied according to where the sentence sat in the life course. Yet it was difficult to attribute this entirely to age, because the men sentenced in mature adulthood had all committed similar offences,⁷ making analytical contrasts between them difficult. I therefore now turn to discussing the effects on adaptation of the offence itself.

⁷ They had all killed a family member.

Stigma and the offence

Wright et al. (2017) describe how early-sentence-stage lifers commonly experience ‘intrusive recollections’ of the offence. Adaptation at this stage, they suggest, is *defensive*: against flashbacks of this sort and against their implication that one might be ‘a murderer’. Later-stage adaptations represent a kind of identity work, aiming to *manage* (not defend against) feelings of shame (see Crewe et al. 2017a).

While it is plausible enough that emotions such as guilt, shame and regret involve similar physiological sensations, their cognitive processing into moral sentiments is highly individual, drawing on personal experiences and histories (Keane 2016; Nussbaum 2001). Here, therefore, I extend Wright et al.’s analysis, asking how grappling with the idea that one is ‘a murderer’ might vary, and describing how men with differing experiences of shame reckoned with the expectation that they should demonstrate personal change.

At its simplest, managing shame meant denying culpability. Luke’s trial had found that his co-defendant’s blows caused the victim’s death, but both were convicted of murder. Luke saw offers of rehabilitation as being made in bad faith; he was aggrieved by participating in interventions that (in his view) misrecognised his true nature:

*They say, “oh, we think you might benefit from doing PIPE.” Really, what they’re saying is, “we want you to do PIPE. You’ve got to do PIPE [...] **I’m joint enterprise,⁸ so I didn’t actually do [the] crime, murder** [...] So how can I do a violence programme? I’ve got no previous. [Again:] “Oh, we think you’ll benefit from it.” It’s just Catch-22 [...] I sat there and done it, just because I know I have to do it.’ (Luke, twenties, PQ 15/46, emphasis added)*

Compliance with rehabilitative expectations was a form of drudgery, necessary to secure release; his ethical priorities lay elsewhere.

Six others (including all five who were pursuing legal appeals) admitted some form of responsibility, but saw the expectation to demonstrate change as illegitimate, irrelevant, morally alien, or for another time:

*I was just a very normal guy, before this all happened [...] [Someone who] doesn’t think about criminal things, basically [...] **I just don’t believe that I should be doing any courses.** [But] I think I’m probably planning on doing [Thinking Skills], because I probably didn’t think as much as I should have. But there’s no point doing all the thinking skills [early in the sentence] because you might forget. And **anyway, it doesn’t really mean anything.**’ (Pete, fifties, PQ 19/18, emphasis added)*

These men found it difficult to reconcile any form of rehabilitative compliance with resistance to blame. They acknowledged that their position might eventually have to soften, but struggled to imagine that (as Pete put it) change might ‘mean anything’. Those who had prior convictions (unlike Pete) were less bothered to be called ‘criminals’, but still rejected the label ‘murderer’. Typically, they admitted taking life, but implied provocation, described extenuating

⁸ Others with ‘joint enterprise’ convictions often express similar doubts, while paradoxically taking limited forms of responsibility (Hulley et al. 2019).

circumstances they said were ignored or dismissed at trial, or simply said little about the circumstances. They took responsibility for the offence, but disputed blame: references to recklessness, ‘things getting out of hand’ or ‘mistakes’ (James) were common, and invited me to accede to their moral worldview. They also tended to say that they had already ‘learned lessons’ from the offence, rendering continued punishment persecutory, excessive and redundant. OBPs were for another time, perhaps following the exhaustion of legal appeals. As Pete’s words (above) suggest, the sheer length of their tariffs often facilitated procrastination.

Other participants took responsibility but disputed blame, while also accepting (albeit often conditionally) the basic moral legitimacy of punishment. Their strategies for managing shame were patterned on the circumstances of the offence and the identity of the victim.

For one group, murder had been a by-product of other activity, usually connected with the drug trade. Four features of their narratives were striking. First, their ethical reflection about the offence appeared not to focus on *the act itself* but instead on their *wider involvement in crime*. Commonly, such narratives began with accounts of childhood adversity:

I knew [my father], we know each other... But obviously, he had a drinking problem. Which obviously took most of his time and attention. So we didn't really have a strong relationship.'
(Michael, twenties, PQ 18/46)

I was just lost in the world, I had no one to show me the right way [...] I grew up in care, and [...] I was just looking up to drug dealers [...] and gang bangers, and all this [...] I was just like, volatile, impulsive, and just not a good person.' (Andy, thirties, PQ 5/40)

Second, and connectedly, they described the offence not as *inherently* shameful, but instead as a by-product of misguided values, since forsworn:

My whole lifestyle and motivation was just money, money, money. But money's not everything.'
(Regis, twenties, PQ 11/46)

Third, these men used strikingly moralising language to describe prison life. The prison was ‘full of evil’ (Regis) but its *location* varied: for most, ‘evil’ was manifest in (some) other prisoners; but a few, especially those with long experience of maximum-security conditions, described prison staff and ‘the system’ as immoral and malign, rather than simply amoral or indifferent:

I was Cat-A up until [recently] They've [milked] that Cat-A status [...] It's bullshit. It's a scam [...] It's a relief to be out of there but I feel about the poor people that are [still there] There's people in Cat-A that are in wheelchairs [...] They're abusing the system, man. It's sick. It's disgusting, it's not right [...] I just don't know how it runs.' (Andy, thirties, PQ 5/40)

Lastly, change itself was described as a ‘battle’ (Regis) or a ‘struggle’ (Owen). Who- or whatever the adversary, ‘goodness’ was proved in the prison’s crucible. Personal privations were dramatised as ethical dilemmas, and used to reflect on a commitment to ‘goodness’:

[I lost my job and for months] I was struggling—I couldn't even buy toothpaste! [...] I saw people [dealing drugs], I could have easily approached them [...] I went through a whole week,

I was up all night walking around my cell, constantly disputing [...] I was THIS close! I was SO close! [But] I thought to myself, “you know what, I’m not gonna do it.” That was hard, man! That was hard!’ (Regis, twenties, PQ 11/46)

Much of this reflection was done privately, in the cell. Its outcomes seemed intensely meaningful. But to a greater extent than those who disputed blame, these men recognised that change also required an outward engagement with other moral perspectives. One ‘battle’ was against misrecognition: a common complaint was that official risk assessments concentrated on past offending behaviour to excess, ignoring or missing the ethical import of dramas unfolding on the prison’s stage. Opportunities for change to be given official credence were therefore rare, and recognition was slow to follow:

*R.⁹ When I was stabbed at [prison], I [made] a statement, [and] the assailants what done that got convicted. So [prisoners] seen me as a grass, that can’t be trusted. [But] that was for me to show them, “listen, man, I’m not involved in this no more. I’m stepping away”. And **it took a long time [for prison staff] to see that.***

BJ: What were you stepping away from?

R: The prison life of respect and the code on the wings.

Among these men, engagement with OBPs was pragmatic, but rather than being dismissed out of hand, their legitimacy was evaluated course-by-course and session-by-session:

*‘ETS, a load of shit. It’s just common sense [...] FOCUS—look, I don’t drink or do drugs anyway, I SOLD drugs [...] A complete waste of the taxpayer’s money! [...] I don’t smoke or do anything, I drink decaf coffee, I don’t even drink caffeine! [But] SCP was a good course, because it really let me look back at myself. That was a good course, I won’t disrespect that.’
(Andy, thirties, PQ 5/40)*

‘They were trying to dig at something that wasn’t there [...] every session, this woman asked me, am I part of a gang? To the point that [someone] I didn’t even know [...] a white man from Yorkshire, had to stick up for me! He said, “listen, he’s told you a hundred times, he’s not in a gang” [...] It was starting to drain me, cos it was like every session, every one-to-one [...] she’s trying to find ways to phrase it differently, like I’m retarded. And I’m like, “what’s the matter with this woman?”’ (Regis, twenties, PQ 11/46)

Both quotes show a different kind of rehabilitative compliance than Luke’s: still instrumental (because they participated no matter what), but *also* somewhat normative (because they conceded the need to demonstrate change, while still patrolling the boundaries of the self). Where courses met their *self-defined* needs, these men, as Andy suggested, would not ‘disrespect’ them but instead recognise their legitimacy.

For another group, accounting for the offence appeared more challenging. Two subgroups were apparent here: first, men convicted young of ‘disrespect’ murders involving outbursts of violence against strangers; and second, men convicted in mature adulthood who had killed partners or

⁹ Details omitted to preserve anonymity.

family members. Both subgroups spoke not of a criminal (and *external*) value system which they could simply repudiate, but instead of *interior* faults:

'You have to sort of [...] agree that you are that scumbag, in a way. I kicked the head of a guy who didn't fight back. It was a shitty thing to do. I have to realise that. I can say, "I always try to do good, I am still good, good, good..." Well, you know what? I could have been better, you know?' (Davidas, twenties, PQ 3/46)

This quotation is typical of the younger subgroup, in recognising that 'disrespect' is a feeble pretext for lethal violence. The *offence itself* was dishonourable, and persistently troubling: as Davidas suggested, they 'had to agree' that stigma was deserved.

For the older men, the victim was known, and close. The offence was not only dishonourable and troubling, but vividly traumatic, despite the intervening years.

'In my cell, at night, everything turned off, not being able to sleep [long pause] [repeats grisly details of the offence] It [was] flying around my conscience. I couldn't stop thinking about it [...] That's when I went to see Psychology [and] said [...] I need somebody to talk about all this [...] They said, "what do you mean?" I said, "let's put it this way: my head's fucked.' (Martin, forties, PQ 12/24)

Admitting to such murders generated intense feelings of loss, shame, and sometimes 'disenfranchised grief', which could not easily be 'openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported' (Doka 1999:37). As Martin suggests above, being afflicted by private anguish sometimes left no option but to seek help. Deeper experiences of shame pointed not *outwards* to bad influences and *forwards* to a better future, but *inwards* to faulty selfhood and *backwards* to regrets capable of being understood, but not reversed. The narratives of these men were highly moralising and self-judgmental, closer to the 'self-inventories' described by Irwin (2009) than to emotional moderation or maturation (e.g. Crewe et al. 2017a; Herbert 2019; Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005).

Among both subgroups, compliance with OBPs was unambiguously normative (Bottoms 2002). They participated inquiringly and even with relief. OBPs offered *social* forms of reflexivity, and new ways to make sense of a senseless past. In particular, most of these men had completed (and praised) therapeutic interventions, including Gartree's Therapeutic Community (the GTC), for facilitating not only reduced risk (though they valued this too), but an appreciation that other people were autonomous subjects in their own right. Such insights were painful yet redemptive: they salvaged meaning from the wreckage left by the offence, and realigned moral values with those that they felt should have obtained all along:

'[T]he average person outside prison, they may find this stupid, but it meant so much to me... I lacked empathy [...] And I had to make a decision, in front of [people on the GTC], to virtually just say, "I agree with you, I don't really understand empathy." And I had to go away, and for a period of two years, try and understand what empathy was [...] I never knew none of those things [...] it's not something that you can just go on a course and tick a few boxes and say, "yeah, yeah, I know what empathy is now." It [...] opened things up [...] I could start understanding my perception of other people, and theirs of me. I could

understand what damage I'd caused other people and how they were feeling, whereas before [...] my attitude was always, "oh, they'll get over it." (John, fifties, PQ 9/9, emphasis added)

As with Andy and Regis (above), interventions were invested with meaning because they met needs *the prisoner himself had defined*. But for those experiencing deep shame, such self-evaluations called for reformed personhood, and not simply the rejection of crime.

Social reflexivity—in which shame could be *owned up to*, rather than simply *contained*—seemed to generate *reconciliation* to the fact of punishment:

'People gripe on about, "yeah, I've lost my freedom, I can't be there for my family". But on the out—without the changes that I've made in jail—knowing them, internalising them—I don't think I'd have given a shit. So all the things which are important to me now, I don't think they would ever have been important. I really don't know if I've lost anything that matters [by being in prison].' (Max, forties, PQ 12/29)

Other prisoners (and even prison personnel) were described as *partners* in personal change, generating a certain sense of reciprocal obligation:

'[W]ithout [everybody in the GTC], staff, prisoners, the rest, I wouldn't have been able to do it. It's like an engine, if one little bit's not working right, the whole thing'll break down. It's all got to work together. Else it won't work.' (John, fifties, PQ 9/9)

Unlike men who reflected more privately, and who longed for their self-evaluations of change to be officially endorsed, GTC graduates found misrecognition less threatening. Instead, they chafed at the laxity of those who (as they saw it) were ducking the duty to work on themselves: in Max's words, 'you've got amends to make, just fucking get on with it'. This perhaps underestimated the fear underlying others' reluctance for this kind of self-disclosing 'work':

*'If anybody asks [...] I'm in for killing my missus. But you start mentioning kids and you're in a whole lot of trouble [...] I've been assaulted [because of that ...] When they said, "well, we'll put you on [course] now," [I said no.] There are things I will not discuss in courses, for safety reasons.'*¹⁰

Discussion

For Crewe et al.'s (2017a) young-when-sentenced sample, adaptation to LTI is learning to 'swim with the tide': to accept conditionally, rather than resisting implacably, an irresistibly forceful reality. Like grief, it involves 'letting go' aspects of the past, and 'letting in' feelings about the offence and the sentence, hopefully without becoming inundated. My argument here has been that adaptation, while consistent, is more varied than this account might suggest. In particular, the fear of inundation may relate to two further variables: *age when sentenced*, and *shame associated with the offence*.

In the first case, this is because very long sentences distort the life course. Younger men, who could envisage a worthwhile life after release, saw the sentence as an opportunity to prepare. Most, unless pushed, preferred to leave the past where it was; but they also wanted more in

¹⁰ Details omitted to preserve anonymity.

terms of preparation for the future. By contrast, older men had less (temporally and figuratively) to look forward to. Their ‘moral reflection’ (Schinkel 2014) was retrospective: they pondered, often in perplexity, what it meant to have lived lives so defined by grave and irreversible harm. It was clear nonetheless that for *nearly* all, regardless of age, the incentive of release powerfully induced rehabilitative compliance, however relevant, legitimate or useful it seemed. But this was *not* the case for the oldest man in the sample, Desmond (seventies, PQ 6/-8): frail and in failing health, he expected to die in prison and described his offence as a private matter, disputing not responsibility but blame (‘I’m not here through my own fault, but I’m not going into that’). He declined to discuss a sentence plan with prison staff, or to participate in OBPs, and this position was tenable because the unreality of release loosened the prison’s grasp on his subjectivity.

In the second case, I have argued that different offences generate different responses to social stigmatisation. Some accepted blame and consented to shame; others questioned blame and managed shame. Because compliance with the expectation to demonstrate change was widespread, this distinction could mainly be discerned in talk relating to ‘rehabilitation’, ‘change’ and related concepts, with descriptions of OBPs a rich seam (cf. Bullock and Bunce 2018:6–9; Ievins 2017:72–112). Across the entire sample, stories abounded of some prisoners going to OBPs, ‘telling them what they wanted to hear’ (James), and even paying other prisoners to ‘do the homework’ (Richard). Some described such shenanigans as evidence that the courses were useless and/or fraudulent; others implied that those who indulged in them were hypocrites of dubious character; and most, like Andy and Regis (quoted above) reserved the right to evaluate OBPs piecemeal. Such evaluative distinctions are not mere niceties, however: they offer empirical evidence that some offences are experienced as more shameful than others, and that there may be corresponding ways to manage stigma.

Conclusion

My argument should be read with caution, because of the methodological difficulties described above. Even so, the notion of an invariant adaptation process to LTI may require modification. ‘Imported’ distinctions such as life stage and offence type—which for Crewe et al. (2017a:538) are ‘more or less flattened’ by adaptation to LTI—in fact *alter* adaptation, by shaping how lifers respond to moral censure and to rehabilitative expectations.

In relation to the life course, these findings draw attention to *personal teleology*: what meaningful goals or ‘ground projects’ (Mattingly 2014) are evident among lifers, and how do these affect their attitudes to punishment? If younger lifers work towards a better *future* self (Crewe et al. 2020), this may be because they are young, not necessarily because they have adapted to imprisonment. Older lifers in this study found meaning in understanding the past; some felt they had squandered ‘generative’ opportunities such as family and career, one expected to die in prison, and others worried that life after release would be a lonely decline into infirmity. Working to ‘reduce risk’ paled somewhat against these concerns.

In relation to the offence, these findings draw attention not simply to the *fact* that lifers reflect on the moral ramifications of their offences (as argued by, among others, Crewe et al. 2017a; Irwin 2009), but to the *specific content* of these reflections, and to the individual and/or social spaces in which they occur. Penal theorists (e.g. Duff 2001) commonly hold that punishment

communicates censure, but continue to debate (see Bottoms 2019) what changes this justifiably entitles society to demand. The messages *actually* conveyed by censure are open to empirical investigation, with recent research (Schinkel 2014:13–61) suggesting that they are often garbled in transmission. Most lifers in this study engaged with the expectation to demonstrate reform. Most also took responsibility for harm. But not all accepted blame. Accordingly, only some felt that their categorisation as ‘dangerous’, ‘criminals’, ‘murderers’ or simply ‘bad people’ was unjust; if they did, this depended on how faithfully the negative judgments of others reflected their own judgments of themselves. All of this should draw our attention to the offence’s place in *autobiographical narratives*, and to the first-person moral perspectives that these express.

Recognising the import of lifers’ own moral and ethical reflexivity does not mean, in any objective sense, that some murder(er)s are ‘better’ than others; nor does it follow that lifers’ opinions about their own culpability are the only ones that matter. It *does* mean separating notions of harmfulness and wrongfulness, which are only weakly differentiated in much lay and legal discourse. The harms inflicted by lethal violence are grave, difficult to compare, and perhaps incommensurable: how are we to determine whether one life taken is ‘worth’ more punishment than another? Wrongs (and the culpability they imply) are therefore central determinants of how severely murders are punished (Crown Prosecution Service n.d.); but they are more open to dispute than harms.

Most importantly, since the harms caused by a murder cannot directly be restored, attempts to ‘make good’ usually involve attempts by the perpetrator to right wrongs in themselves or the world, for example by dedication to a ‘cause, vocation or ideal’ (Crewe et al. 2017a:537–39). These necessarily involve ethical deliberation amid the unusual moral world of the prison, and research into them has already shown that many LTPs try to reimagine what they consider to be a ‘good life’ while imprisoned. In long-term and high-security prisons, a narrow focus on risk and dangerousness can lead ethical work of this kind to go unnoticed or be misunderstood, making meaningful assessments of risk more difficult (Liebling and Williams 2017). And as Williams (2018) goes on to suggest, recent anthropological works (e.g. Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2013; Mattingly 2014) on ethics as observable phenomena offer criminologists the theoretical and conceptual wherewithal to make better sense of these attempts. Their use could enrich future research on LTI.

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Tables

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR THE SAMPLE (N=18) AND THE ELIGIBLE POPULATION (N=489)

	Sample	Population
Age		
Mean (s.d.)	38.8 (12.1)	40.8 (12.0)
Age when sentenced:		
Mean (s.d.)	31.7 (11.7)	33.9 (12.0)
O'Donnell's PQ		
Mean (s.d.)	10.8 (6.4)	10.8 (5.9)
Sentence type		
Life	18 (100%)	478 (98%)
IPP	-	11 (2%)
Ethnicity		
White British	11 (61%)	288 (59%)
BAME	7 (39%)	172 (35%)
<i>of which:</i>		
<i>White non-British</i>	4 (22%)	24 (5%)
<i>Black or Black British</i>	2 (11%)	64 (13%)
<i>Asian or Asian British</i>	-	60 (12%)
<i>Mixed</i>	1 (6%)	17 (4%)
<i>Other</i>	-	5 (1%)
<i>Not stated/missing</i>	-	29 (6%)