



Schinkel, M. (2014) *Adaptation, the meaning of imprisonment and outcomes after release: the impact of the prison regime*. Prison Service Journal . ISSN 0300-3558

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Deposited on: 11 December 2014

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## **Adaptation, the meaning of imprisonment and outcomes after release – the impact of the prison regime.**

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### **Introduction**

The prison experience varies between regimes. Studies focusing on the different experiences of people in different prisons have found that prison conditions and staff-prisoner relationships are especially important in determining the experience of the sentence<sup>1</sup>. Very strict and punitive regimes have been associated with more oppositional coping styles<sup>2</sup> and with contributing to an oppositional stance towards the justice system<sup>3</sup>. However, studies highlighting opposition<sup>4</sup> have all been conducted in the US, where gang membership and ethnic divides lead to higher levels of violence amongst prisoners and where prison regimes tend to rely more on coercion than on legitimacy in order to maintain order<sup>5</sup>. This article discusses how the experience of one regime impacted on the way long-term prisoners in HMP Glenochil in Scotland coped with their imprisonment and the effect this had on the meaning of their sentence and their prospects after release. It draws on 27 narrative

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<sup>1</sup> C. Kruttschnitt & R. Gartner (2005) *Marking Time in the Golden State: Women's Imprisonment in California* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); A. Liebling (2004) *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality, and Prison Life*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press); R. Sparks, A. Bottoms & W. Hay (1996) *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

<sup>2</sup> Kruttschnitt & Gartner, *Marking Time in the Golden State*.

<sup>3</sup> D. Franke, D. Bierie & D. L. Mackenzie (2010) Legitimacy in Corrections, *Criminology & Public Policy*, 9(1), pp. 89–117; L. Presser (2008) *Been a Heavy Life: Stories of Violent Men* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press).

<sup>4</sup> Franke, Bierie & Mackenzie (2010) Legitimacy in Corrections; Kruttschnitt & Gartner, *Marking Time in the Golden State*; Presser, *Been a Heavy Life*.

<sup>5</sup> B. Crewe (2009) *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation, and Social Life in an English Prison* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

interviews with men at the start and end of a long sentence (over 4 years) and on license that explored their views of the purpose of their sentence, its fairness, and how the sentence was given meaning in the context of their wider lives.

### **Prison conditions**

HMP Glenochil held male prisoners of all security categories at the time of the interviews. It accommodated both short-term and long-term prisoners; amongst those interviewed, one had been sentenced to life and four men were sentenced to 10 years. All the others were serving four to 10 years sentences. As in the rest of Scottish prisons (where only 4% of prisoners are recorded as from a Black and minority ethnic (BME) background<sup>6</sup>), few prisoners were non-white, and amongst the interviewees there was only one BME prisoner. HMP Glenochil was praised in its most recent HM Inspectorate of Prisons report for its positive staff-prisoner relationships and the way in which the regime maintained a safe environment<sup>7</sup>. While some of the interviewees in Glenochil commented on negative interactions they had had with staff members, in general they described most staff members as cordial, respectful and relatively helpful.

There's not so much prisoners, they have better facilities, in this [prison] they seem to take a bigger interest in you. You are not just a statistic, so to speak, they try to do stuff for you. (Colin)

The interviews also suggested that levels of fear and violence were low within Glenochil. For example, James, who had been there 5 years, said 'It's been very easy, no problems at all, I've never even seen a fight'.

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<sup>6</sup> Scottish Government (2012) *Prison Statistics and Population Projections Scotland: 2011-12* (Edinburgh: Scottish Government), Edinburgh. Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/06/6972/3>, accessed December 7, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2010) *Report on HMP Glenochil* (Edinburgh: Scottish Government), Edinburgh. Available at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/321554/0103379.pdf>, accessed June 4, 2013.

## **Adaptation to imprisonment**

In describing the best way to cope with imprisonment in Glenochil, it was striking how many of the men said that to survive you have to 'get your head down' or 'keep you head inside the walls'. These phrases vividly evoke how the men limited their horizons in order to make their imprisonment less painful. Limiting their horizons in space allowed them to ignore what they had lost.

Because I'm in the jail, I just forget about the outside world. It helps me to get on with it in here, you ken what I mean. Because if I don't have an outside, I can't bring it in. This is my world just now, you ken what I mean, I just deal with this. (James)

Limiting their horizons in time, or 'getting your head down and getting on with it' was, according to interviewees, the best way to speed up time. Not looking forward to anything, but being busy and getting immersed in the prison routine meant that the days passed more easily.

I can remember when it was June, I can remember saying to people, I was like that 'that's six months by already, it doesnae seem like two days ago it was Christmas' you know what I mean, that part flew in. See August/September, because there was a lot of rigmarole about me going to the Castle and stuff like that, the time sort of slowed down. (Doug)

This strategy of limiting their temporal horizons was made easier by the relatively busy days at Glenochil. The men said that because they spent little time locked up, with many different activities and work parties on offer, it was easier to focus on the here and now than in prisons where they spent a lot of time in their cells.

It makes the time go quicker, I find, rather than just sitting about. If you are sitting about the days go sort of dragging. Time sort of tends to stop. I also find this is a fast jail, it's a good set-up as far as jails go, it's busy all the time.

Limiting their horizons included minimizing reminders of the world outside. The men described how they distanced themselves from family and friends in order to do so, with several prisoners limiting phone contact and visits in order to make their sentence easier to bear.

Devan: I tried both ways and in the end it was the second way that worked, keep my mind in here and forget more about outside.

MS: And how have you managed to do that, how do you do that?

Devan: Eehm, cut down the amount of time that I spend on the phone. Like, I only use the phone once a week and (pause) eehm, I don't write as much. (Devan)

Remarkably, *all* the interviewees in Glenochil described limiting their horizons in order to make their sentence easier to bear. Most studies, in contrast, have found that adaptation styles vary with personal characteristics<sup>8</sup>. One possible reason for this is that studies focusing on adaptation have tended to operationalise this along several dimensions, such as engagement in educational activities, contact with the outside world and disciplinary infractions<sup>9</sup> or relationships with other prisoners and staff<sup>10</sup>. This means that the findings reported here are not directly comparable with those of such studies: the Glenochil interviewees varied on many of these dimensions, but not in their own description of their *global* adaptation to imprisonment. However, their lack of opposition to their sentence, discussed in the next section, suggests that these interviewees *are* more similar in their adaptation than found in

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<sup>8</sup> Crewe, *The Prisoner Society*; M. K. Dhami, P. Ayton & G. Loewenstein (2007) Adaptation to Imprisonment: Indigenous or Imported?, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 34(8), pp. 1085–1100; Kruttschnitt & Gartner, *Marking Time in the Golden State*.

<sup>9</sup> Dhami, Ayton & Loewenstein, Adaptation To Imprisonment.

<sup>10</sup> Kruttschnitt & Gartner, *Marking Time in the Golden State*.

other studies.

### **Fairness of sentence**

The need to impose limits on their horizons meant that the men's evaluations of the fairness of their sentence were also circumscribed. The interviewees described how they accepted the sentence imposed in order to make it easier to bear, again using the phrase 'getting your head down' as short-hand for this strategy. That surviving the sentence was a significant reason to accept it is demonstrated by nine out of the twelve men who were interviewed in Glenochil commenting on the link between acceptance and adaptation:

It's still fair, I'm here I'm doing it. *It doesn't have to be fair, that's how I'm dealing with it.* (Peter, emphasis added)

A lot of people that come in say 'oh, I shouldn't have got that, it was too big', I think that makes a sentence harder, because you just accept it, that's what you got, you broke the law and you got caught and that was it. You'll probably get on with your sentence a lot better. (James)

While some of the men commented that it was expedient to accept your sentence, or at least to mask any anger, in order to progress through the regime<sup>11</sup>, these quotes show that doing so was also part of the wider adaptation of limiting their horizons. Only by letting go of a sense of injustice about their imprisonment were these men able to live as if the prison was their whole world. That the need to accept one's sentence was powerful is illustrated by two Glenochil interviews who maintained they were innocent of their index offence. If true, these

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<sup>11</sup> see also Crewe, *The Prisoner Society*.

men had ample reason to oppose their sentence, but both accepted their sentence by referring to their ‘general guilt’<sup>12</sup> of past or future crimes.

Maybe a sentence was just waiting to happen. Maybe no/ maybe not as much or as long a sentence, but with the crowd I was running about with at the time, pretty much, see, there was maybe a sentence in the making, you know what I mean? (Gordon)

In a technical sense, it’s both a miscarriage of justice and a malicious prosecution, simply, you know? But, that said, eeh (pause) I kind of shrug my shoulders with it, because at the end of the day, I was up to a lot of no good. (Alex)

Many other prison studies have also noted that acceptance of one’s sentence is a favoured strategy among prisoners. Sykes<sup>13</sup> found that the most admired stance in the prison he researched was that of the ‘real man’, who bore his sentence with equanimity. Similarly, Crewe<sup>14</sup> found that prisoners who managed their own problems without complaining often accrued respect, while those who could not handle their sentence were disparaged. However, while these authors describe an admired stoicism involving being uncomplaining about hardship, in this research the lack of opposition was described as *reducing* the hardships of imprisonment, rather than as a product of brave forbearance.

In this, the men’s strategy of limiting their horizons is similar to the adaptation of ‘colonization’ described by Goffman<sup>15</sup>, where inmates of institutions live a relatively contented life by treating the limited bit of the world available to them as the whole world. However, while Goffman saw colonization as an individual and personal way of adapting to the demands of the environment, here *all* the men described limiting their horizons.

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<sup>12</sup> J. D. Casper (1972) *American Criminal Justice: The Defendant’s Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall).

<sup>13</sup> G. Sykes (1958) *The Society of Captives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).

<sup>14</sup> Crewe, *The Prisoner Society*.

<sup>15</sup> E. Goffman (1968) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), p. 62.

Furthermore, while for many of the men, limiting their horizons and accepting their sentence was merely a pragmatic way to get through their sentence, for several of the men, the acceptance of their sentence provided the necessary backdrop for a more ambitious story of self and future. These men, including one who maintained his innocence, told a story of *transformation through imprisonment*. Reasons for this and the possible impact of such stories are explored in greater detail elsewhere<sup>16</sup>, but it is worthwhile to focus on them briefly here. These stories were told by men who had precious little else in their lives to make their future desistance seem likely: they had little family support and no financial resources or job prospects upon release. Prison was the only experience standing between them and their offending past, and therefore the only possible fulcrum to explain a desired change. That attributing transformation through imprisonment was a strategy born out of a lack of alternatives was born out by the fact that most of these men described forms of ‘as if’ rehabilitation<sup>17</sup>: they did not ascribe their transformation to an intervention on the part of the prison regime or staff, but to ‘having time to think’, ‘going to the gym’, ‘the advice of older prisoners’ or ‘people taking an interest’. While the predictive power of telling such a story remains in doubt<sup>18</sup>, if optimism is associated with a reduced chance of reoffending<sup>19</sup>, then being in a position to tell a transformation-through-imprisonment narrative may be valuable for the desistance process. Moreover, as progressive narratives allow for a belief in positive change<sup>20</sup>, such narratives are likely to be psychologically beneficial, regardless of eventual

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<sup>16</sup> M. Schinkel (2014) *Being Imprisoned: Punishment, Adaptation and Desistance from Crime* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan).

<sup>17</sup> M. Comfort (2008) The Best Seven Years I Could’a Done: The Reconstruction of Imprisonment as Rehabilitation., in: P. Carlen (ed.) *Imaginary Penalties*, pp. 252–274 (Cullompton: Willan Publishing).

<sup>18</sup> Schinkel, *Being Imprisoned: Punishment, Adaptation and Desistance from Crime*.

<sup>19</sup> R. Burnett (2004) To Reoffend or Not to Reoffend? The Ambivalence of Convicted Property Offenders, in: S. Maruna & R. Immarigeon (eds) *After Crime and Punishment: Pathways to Offender Reintegration*, pp. 152–180 (Cullompton: Willan Publishing); S. Maruna (2001) *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association).

<sup>20</sup> K. J. Gergen & M. M. Gergen (1997) Narratives of the Self, in: L. P. Hinchman & S. K. Hinchman (eds) *Memory, Identity, Community: The Idea of Narrative in the Human Sciences*, pp. 161–184 (Albany: State University of New York Press).



reoffending outcomes. Importantly, this sort of optimistic progressive narrative is not likely to be available to those holding on to a sense of injustice.

### **Rehabilitation and outcomes after release**

Previous literature has found that prisons with better staff-prisoner relationships are perceived as more rehabilitative<sup>21</sup>. However, this was not the case in Glenochil: despite positive relationships with staff most prisoners (with the exception of those telling a transformation story) felt that the prison had failed to rehabilitate them.

That's it, you are flinging me out the door with nothing, so (pause) and it's always the same when you say (pause) they always turn around and say to you "Oh aye, you slipped through the net this time" you know what I'm talking about, *you're just like a wheel in a cog*, that's what more or less it is. (Ian, emphasis added)

Participants felt that there was too much reliance on cognitive behavioural courses, which were seen by most as being too superficial, and too caught up with their progression in the prison, to be effective. Both in and outside of the courses, there was too little individual input for the sentence to be rehabilitative, the men felt.

Interviews with nine men on license suggest that the adaptation of making the prison one's whole life might actually hinder rehabilitation, making it more difficult to readjust to life outside. These men had (mostly) not been released from Glenochil, but they described adapting in similar ways to similar regimes.

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<sup>21</sup> Liebling, *Prisons and Their Moral Performance*; S. Patrick & R. Marsh (2001) Perceptions of Punishment and Rehabilitation among Inmates in a Medium Security Prison: A Consumers' Report, *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 33(3), pp. 47–64; Sparks, Bottoms & Hay, *Prisons and the Problem of Order*.

I always went to the cooks, seven days a week and worked fae morning tae night. I always kept mysel' occupied and blanked ootside. If I ever went to prison, within the first couple of weeks oh' me being in prison, ootside will be forgot about. (Jack)

These men, too, had limited their horizons during their imprisonment. But while the Glenochil interviewees described their ability to adapt to the prison environment with something akin to pride, those on license often depicted themselves as institutionalised. Some of the dimensions of their institutionalization were unrelated to their adaptation style. For example, they described how they had become dependent on institutional structures, which they tried to recreate through imposing rigid routines on themselves outside. However, at least one element of their struggle to overcome their institutional experience was linked to their adaptation of limiting their horizons. The men on license, like the Glenochil interviewees, had cut themselves off from loved ones in order to minimise reminders of their life outside while they were in prison, and were now suffering the consequences.

Tim: But sometimes I miss some elements o' prison where I can (pause) shut my door and escape for a wee while, I enjoyed that (pause). The troubles will go away when you shut the door.

MS: So why can you do that in prison and not at home for example?

Tim: Because you've got family and you've got people depending on you and you've got to face people and you cannae bottle everything up and shut it all away, you've got to, got to go out there and face everybody so.

Having 'shut the door' literally and figuratively while in prison, Tim now struggled both with opening up to his lived ones and having them rely on him. The fact that he had been released more than five years previously illustrates that problems with relationships do not necessarily reduce over time.

## Discussion

While all the interviewed prisoners in Glenochil adapted by limiting their horizons, this is far from a universal adaptation amongst prisoners. Prisoners in other contexts take an oppositional stance towards the justice system as a whole, and their own treatment in particular<sup>22</sup>. The main argument in this article is that the relatively positive prison conditions in HMP Glenochil had a significant effect on the way the men adapted to their imprisonment. This provides a counterpoint to the finding by other studies that prisons with relatively negative conditions tend to lead to oppositional coping styles. For example, Kruttschnitt and Gartner found that in a women's prison where relationships with staff were poor, the prison design was oppressive and security checks were frequent, the dominant coping style was one of isolation, with this strategy adopted by women with very different pre-prison experiences. In another women's prison, where relationships were positive and daily experiences resembled outside life more closely, age and social class were much more important in determining how the women coped<sup>23</sup>. The findings reported here suggest that relatively positive conditions can also affect prisoners in such a way that almost all adopt the same adaptation strategy, regardless of different life experiences *and* different case characteristics, to the extent that even those who maintain they are innocent accept their sentence.

A recent UK illustration of how different regimes lead to different adaptations is provided by HMP Whitemoor, a high-security prison, where a recent study found that the overwhelming majority of prisoners served very long sentences, intrusive security measures were in place, staff-prisoner relationships were characterised by prisoners as stigmatising and there were

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<sup>22</sup> A. Liebling, H. Arnold & C. Straub (2011) *An Exploration of Staff-Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor: Twelve Years On* (London: Home Office); Franke, Bierie & Mackenzie, Legitimacy in Corrections; Presser, *Been a Heavy Life*.

<sup>23</sup> Kruttschnitt & Gartner (2000) Doing Her Own Time? Women's Responses to Prison in the Context of the Old and the New Penology, *Criminology*, 38(3), pp. 681-718.

high levels of violence between prisoners<sup>24</sup>. In Whitemoor ‘a high proportion of prisoners were appealing and/or saw themselves as victims of an unfair criminal justice system’<sup>25</sup>. Prisoners describing their best moments in prison referred to opportunities to fantasise about being free; forgetting that they were imprisoned for short periods of time.

It’s only for a couple of hours but it’s like you’ve been released. I can’t believe how much it [the Older Prisoners’ Club] means to me. <sup>26</sup>

This describes an adaptation that is almost the polar opposite of the one adopted by the Glenochil interviewees: one of mental escape rather than immersion in the prison routine. Like the Glenochil interviewees, prisoners in Whitemoor had to survive the prison environment and try to hold on to some positive sense of self, but given that their imprisonment was much ‘deeper’ ‘heavier’ and ‘tighter’<sup>27</sup> than in Glenochil, seeing themselves as victims was the best way to do both these things at once. The adaptation of limiting horizons and accepting one’s sentence only works in prisons where life inside the prison walls is positive enough to become one’s whole world.

Liebling and her colleagues have written:

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>26</sup> Liebling, Arnold & Straub, *An Exploration of Staff–Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor*, 48.

<sup>27</sup> B. Crewe (2011) Depth, Weight, Tightness: Revisiting the Pains of Imprisonment, *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), pp. 509–529.

if it were possible to construct a form of imprisonment whose basic structure and daily practices were more rather than less acceptable to those who undergo it, then the effects of this form of imprisonment might be less damaging and more socially constructive’<sup>28</sup>.

The above indeed suggests that an acceptable regime does have benefits for those who undergo it, notable making it easier to cope with imprisonment. Prisoners in Glenochil benefited from their relatively acceptable environment. For example, it made their life in prison easier to bear, which allowed them to make the prison their whole world and thereby to keep the pain of being confined and separated from loved ones to a minimum. This way of adapting meant that only very few opposed their sentence, which in turn is likely to have had consequences for their, generally positive, view of the criminal justice system. It might be, then, that a more positive regime, can facilitate a view of the sentence as legitimate (or at least as acceptable), which in turn can improve the legitimacy of the criminal justice system amongst prisoners<sup>29</sup>.

However, by looking beyond the prison walls the analysis here shows that there are limits to the positive consequences of a more liveable prison environment. Most Glenochil interviewees did not feel that they had been rehabilitated during their time in prison. They felt they needed more individual attention, rather than just cognitive behavioural programmes, to effect reform. Prisoners who had been released and who had adopted a similar adaptation-style as the Glenochil interviewees (limiting their horizons) struggled upon release to reconnect with loved ones and to find their place in society. This suggests that a more acceptable regime does not, in itself, lead to more ‘socially constructive’ outcomes. For this, far greater emphasis on personal development and preparing people for their release might be

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<sup>28</sup> A. Liebling, S. Hulley & B. Crewe (2011) Conceptualising and Measuring the Quality of Prison Life, in: D. Gadd, S. Karstedt & S. F. Messner (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Criminological Research Methods*, pp. 358–372 (London: Sage), p. 371.

<sup>29</sup> See also Franke, Bierie & Mackenzie, Legitimacy in Corrections.

necessary. It might even be the more positive regimes that need to work harder to help their prisoners to maintain an outwards focus, in order to avoid problems with reintegration upon release.