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# 'Nobody's better than you, nobody's worse than you': Moral community among prisoners convicted of sexual offences

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**Abstract**
Sex offenders constitute a significant proportion of the prison population – in England and Wales, almost one in six prisoners has been convicted of a sexual offence – and yet they barely feature in sociological studies of prison life. This article is based on research conducted in a medium security English prison which only accommodated sex offenders. It argues that if we are to understand prisoners' experiences of imprisonment and identity management, it is necessary to explore their horizontal relationships with other prisoners. Prisoners experienced their convictions as an assault on their moral character, resenting attempts to define them as 'sex offenders'. Following Sykes, we argue that prisoners attempted to form an accepting and equal moral community in order to mitigate the pain of this moral exclusion and to enable the development of a convivial atmosphere. However, these attempts were limited by imprisonment's structural limitations on trust and prisoners' imported negative feelings about sex offenders. This suggests that sex offenders may have more complex feelings towards their own moral exclusion than is suggested by their attempts to resist their own stigmatisation.

**Keywords**
moral community, prison, sex offenders

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> The prisoner is never allowed to forget that, by committing a crime, he has forgone his claim to the status of a fully-fledged, *trusted* member of society. (Sykes, 2007 [1958]: 66, emphasis in original)

Gresham Sykes argued that the exclusion of the prisoner is moral as well as physical, and that the deprivation of moral status is more painful for prisoners than the other pains and deficits of incarceration. However, since the nature of some prisoners' crimes can lead to their secondary exclusion from the society of captives itself, some prisoners – for current purposes, those convicted of sexual offences – face a more profound form of status deprivation than others (Åkerström, 1986). This article will explore how imprisoned sex offenders experience, perceive and respond as agents to their moral exclusion. In particular, it argues that, if we are to understand the experiences of prisoners convicted of sexual offences, it is not enough to describe them as excluded by mainstream prisoners, or to explore their vertical relationships with those in power over them.[1] Instead we should study and explain their horizontal relationships with other sex offenders, seeing the excluded group as forming a new society, a form of moral community, which is in itself worthy of consideration.

The experiences of prisoners convicted of sexual offences have been largely neglected by prison sociologists (O'Donnell, 2004: 252–253). This is despite the fact that they constitute a sizeable proportion of the prison population: in England and Wales, 16 per cent – almost one in six – of sentenced adult male prisoners have been convicted of a sexual offence (Ministry of Justice, 2014). In this jurisdiction, then, there are more than three times as many sex offenders in prison as there are women, and yet sex offenders barely feature in sociological studies of prison life. Very little is known about them beyond their position at the base of the prisoner hierarchy and the fact that they are often accommodated separately from mainstream prisoners in order to ensure their safety (Guy, 1992). Almost no research has been conducted into the societies they form within these separate institutions.

This article is based on research conducted in an English Category C (medium security) prison holding only sex offenders. The inhabitants, who had been excluded in their earlier institutions, were now the insiders, but they still felt an acute form of moral stigmatisation and exclusion which was experienced as an assault on their moral character. This article argues that the moral community formed by prisoners was largely an attempt to mitigate the painful consequences of this condemnation and form an accepting and supportive community. However, the attempt was frustrated by the structural lack of trust within prison and by prisoners' own imported moral judgement of the other sex offenders with whom they were accommodated. The moral community of imprisoned sex offenders, although largely safe, was therefore anxious and conflicted: prisoners were preoccupied by their attempts to construct themselves as good people and to live harmoniously with other sex offenders, and yet they struggled to do so, indicating the difficulty of the moral task which they had set themselves.

## Sex offenders, prison sociology and moral community

Prisoners convicted of sexual offences are doubly excluded from society: as prisoners, they are walled off from the outside world and held in 'a kind of moral space which tags inhabitants as unethical and immoral people' (Ugelvik, 2012: 273); as sex offenders, they are at the base of the prisoner hierarchy, facing abuse and assault from other prisoners and sometimes from staff (Hogue, 1993; O'Donnell and Edgar, 1999; Sim, 1994; Sparks et al., 1996; Thurston, 1996), and disqualified from participation in mainstream prisoner culture (Holmberg, 2001). The marginalisation of sex offenders within prison reflects the stigmatisation they experience in wider society (Hudson, 2005; Ricciardelli and Moir, 2013). They are frequently described as less than human, even as monstrous (Ackerman, 2012); and Spencer (2009: 220) has gone as far as to argue that the sex offender is a *homo sacer*, 'that is, life without form and value, stripped of political and legal rights accorded to the normal citizen'. The condemnation received by sex offenders originates in the criminal acts for which they have been convicted, but it reaches beyond these acts and applies to all aspects of their being. As Foucault (1998 [1976]: 43) argued, in the modern western world, sexuality and identity tend to be conflated: whereas in the past, deviant sexual acts were conceived as 'temporary aberration[s]', modernity's *scientia sexualis* leads to those who commit them being seen as a different 'species'. Thus committing a deviant sexual act leads to being assigned a deviant identity, and having committed a sex offence (or having been convicted of doing so) results in being labelled a sex offender, an unacceptable *being*.

Hudson (2005) argues that sex offenders are aware of the stigmatisation that they face, and resent the label that has been placed on them by the state and by wider society. They find the very label 'sex offender' demeaning as it implies that their offending is the central part of their identity, and as such that it is inevitable that they will reoffend (Digard, 2010).[2] Research from Foucauldian (Digard, 2010; Lacombe, 2008), Goffmanian (Hudson, 2005) and narrative perspectives (Waldram, 2012) has shown how treatment and probationary practices may reinforce this conflation of act and identity, ensuring that the offending behaviour of sex offenders is seen as a central part of who they are. For example, Lacombe (2008) suggests that treatment facilitators in cognitive-behavioural programmes attempt to reconstruct offenders' narratives concerning the circumstances of their offence, and identify and change cognitive distortions and deviant sexual fantasies. Facilitators mould those who undertake treatment into individuals who are 'consumed by sex', whose 'criminal identity as a sex offender constitutes the pivot around which all other aspects of their personality revolve' (Lacombe, 2008: 72).

Research shows that sex offenders often attempt to resist these officially sanctioned narratives, insisting on providing their own (Digard, 2010). These reconstructed narratives exist on a spectrum ranging from categorically denying having committed the offence ('I wasn't there') to insisting that a non-criminal act was committed ('It was consensual') or that they cannot justly be held responsible for it ('I didn't know what I was doing'). Traditionally, challenging the official narrative has been seen as an example of offence denial, and thus as indicative of the

pathological dishonesty and cognitive distortions of sexual offenders (Maruna and Mann, 2006). Increasingly, however, researchers are suggesting that even categorical denial may be contextual and understandable (Maletzky, 1996), 'a product of the offender attempting to make sense of and cope with the high stakes situation in which they find themselves' (Blagden et al., 2011: 580). In addition to improving their physical safety, these alternative narratives allow sex offenders 'to construct a moral position' (Auburn and Lea, 2003: 294; Lord and Willmot, 2004) and show they are not 'bad people'. Excuses may even be beneficial to the process of desistance as they enable their authors to create a new, non-offending identity, and thus move on from their 'sex offender' self (Maruna and Mann, 2006).[3]

The research suggests, then, that the state attempts to define the identities of those who have been convicted of sexual offences, and the convicted resist this definition. But by focusing simply on how sex offenders react to their own labels and interact with treatment providers and other criminal justice staff, we risk exaggerating the state's power over its subjects. McNeill et al. (2009) have argued that there is a 'governmentality gap' between the actions of the state as described in policy documents and the reality of penality as practised on the frontline. Academics often portray penal power as monolithic, whereas it is often renegotiated, restructured and even potentially softened in practice. In order to counter this tendency towards misrepresenting state power, McNeill et al. (2009: 422) argue that researchers should conduct ethnographies, focusing on 'every different space where penality is situated and on every different occasion where penality is enacted in the interactions and engagements between the punishers and the punished'. However, we argue that focusing on interactions between agents of the state and those who are subject to its power does not fully close the governmentality gap. In order to understand the reality of penality, we should also explore interactions between the punished themselves. Gresham Sykes (2007 [1958]: 134) made this point more than 50 years ago when he argued that 'the influence of imprisonment on the man held captive' is 'the product of the patterns of social interaction which the prisoner enters into day after day, year after year', as much, if not more, as it is the product of interactions with prison officers or experiences of treatment.

Excessive focus on sex offenders' identities within the treatment context risks overstating the extent to which they have been reconstructed in line with therapeutic demands. As Ugelvik (2012: 271) argues, it is important to understand that prisoners' attempts to 'reconstruct themselves as moral subjects' take place 'in the context of the prison' as a whole, and not simply in the context of treatment. Schwaebe (2003), for example, found that sex offenders in the non-specialist prison he studied presented different identities in treatment groups and elsewhere in the prison: in treatment, they admitted their guilt and professed to be open to self-change, while on the wings they attempted to 'pass' as non-sex offenders. On the other hand, sex offenders may have more complex attitudes to their own moral exclusion than are revealed by simply saying they resist their own label. When sex offenders are separated from mainstream prisoners, there is some suggestion that, rather than either openly discussing or collectively resisting their labels, they resort

to the 'pluralistic ignorance of each other's misdeeds' (Priestley, 1980: 67). Similarly, research indicates that vulnerable prisoners (VPs) and child sex offenders shift the terms of the prisoner hierarchy away from their offending behaviour, claiming to deserve a higher status than mainstream prisoners as a result of their more compliant in-prison behaviour (Ahmad, 1996; Liebling et al., 1997) and higher education levels (Mann, 2012).[4] This speaks to a collective desire to overlook the offences which led to their exclusion, yet this is itself complicated by the suggestion that there is a hierarchy *among* sex offenders, with those being convicted of sex offences against children receiving more stigma than others (Waldram, 2012).

These mutual attempts to ignore prisoners' convictions seem to be a functional response to the pain induced by being labelled a sex offender. Sykes (2007 [1958]), the most influential proponent of the functionalist argument, claimed that the prisoner society is formed in response to the structurally imposed pains of imprisonment. In order to mitigate these pains, prisoners pledge nominal allegiance to the inmate code, a series of moral norms advocating solidarity, emotional control and masculine toughness. If followed, this code would soften the pains of imprisonment, and enable prisoners to live together in a 'cohesive' (2007 [1958]: 107) community. Instead, many prisoners react to their pains in an 'alienative' (2007 [1958]: 106) fashion, worsening the pains of imprisonment for themselves and for others. The culture of a particular prison is, Sykes (2007 [1958]: 108) argues, determined by the interaction between these two particular responses, which exist in every prison in 'a constant state of flux'.

Waldram (2012) is, to our knowledge, the only researcher who has specifically focused on relationships and moral norms among imprisoned sex offenders, although he does not refer to Sykes. Exploring the moral community of a sex offender treatment unit within a Canadian therapeutic prison (see ch. 4, 'Moral citizenship', 76–100), he argues that prisons are 'forms of "unintentional" communities' (2012: 76) which 'consist of an involuntary citizenry, anchored to place, that rails against both its membership status and those who employ power to define their citizenship and circumscribe their rights' (2012: 76–77). In order to manage this situation, these involuntary citizens develop and maintain 'a moral code relevant to their unique social world, one that emerges within the context of, and often in reaction to, a more powerful moral code backed by the force of law' (2012: 77). The moral community described by Waldram is formed by three interwoven strands: first, the therapeutic way of life, which advocates support, synoptic observation and trust, and is maintained by the coercive power structure of the institution; second, the more aggressive and mistrustful norms encapsulated in what he calls the 'con code'; and third, the 'moral world' (2012: 100) that is developed and sustained by the interpersonal relationships between agential prisoners as they move through the system. Tensions between these strands come into play in various different interpersonal situations. For example, prisoners are encouraged by the therapeutic demands of the unit to see each other as equals, but the hierarchy of offences – which places sex offenders at the base but distinguishes between child sex

offenders, who receive additional stigma, and rapists of adult women, who have a higher status – is imported into the therapeutic community from mainstream prisons. Prisoners therefore find it difficult to listen to some people's offence narratives in groups, and are often unwilling even to share treatment with them.

Waldram's portrayal of a sex offender treatment unit as an unintentional moral community supporting contradictory normative demands is a useful corrective to studies which focus solely on power-imbued interactions between the punishers and the punished. His interest in horizontal interactions suggests that there are limits to institutional power, and that interactions among sex offenders matter. However, his distinction between the supportive therapeutic code and the isolating and hostile con code is too starkly drawn: as Sykes suggests, prisoner codes can encourage, rather than impede, the development of a community. Furthermore, Waldram does not discuss how prisoners' individual and collective attempts at identity work influence the development of their moral community.

Drawing on Sykes and Waldram, this article describes another moral community of sex offenders, arguing throughout that sex offenders' attitudes to others in a similar situation reveal complex moral feelings about themselves and their own position. After outlining the methodology of the study, we will describe the stigmatisation and moral exclusion experienced by prisoners as a consequence of their offence, conviction and treatment, and we will argue that the severity of their exclusion did not correspond with their own subjective interpretation of what they had done. We will then go on to explore how prisoners attempted to manage this situation and their identities by presenting an accepting and equal public culture in which offences did not affect judgements and interactions. As Waldram implies, this was partly a result of therapeutic demands enforced by the institution, but we argue that it also helped prisoners to adapt to the pain of their stigmatisation and their imprisonment, and that they therefore had a personal stake in some aspects of this community. We end by showing that this publicly tolerant culture masked private feelings of anxiety and moral condemnation. Prisoners were unable to avoiding judging and mistrusting each other, while resenting being judged and mistrusted themselves; their new community was constructed on uneven moral ground.

## The study

The data on which this article is based draw on research undertaken in HMP Whatton, an English Category C (medium security) training prison holding prisoners undertaking, or waiting to undertake, the Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP), the majority of whom were convicted of a sexual offence.[5] It is central to the prison's identity, and commonly stated by staff and prisoners alike, that Whatton is a 'treatment centre', and it has a reputation for being relatively safe (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2012) and having a uniquely effective rehabilitative culture (Blagden and Thorne, 2013). The prison seeks to rehabilitate prisoners through education, mental health provision and vocational training, as

well as though SOTP courses. These cognitive-behavioural courses, which take place in groups, seek to encourage prisoners to understand their offence-supportive attitudes and involve in-depth discussion of the offences themselves. As Whatton's inhabitants have to be willing to undergo treatment, they cannot categorically deny having committed their offences. At the time of the study, Whatton's population was 841, precisely its operational capacity, with a population whose mean age was 45. Built as a detention centre for boys in 1966, it became a Category C prison for adults in 1990, and increasingly specialised in the imprisonment and rehabilitation of sex offenders. The prison was selected for this study because it provided an opportunity to explore the social experiences of prisoners convicted of sex offences living solely (or almost entirely) among other prisoners convicted of sex offences. Access was sought by contacting the Governing Governor, who was known to the secondary author and was sympathetic to academic research, and we subsequently applied to the National Offender Management Service National Research Committee in order to secure access.

Twenty-two prisoners were interviewed overall, nineteen by the first author and three by the second author, who assisted primarily in negotiating access to the prison and establishing its initial terms. For practical reasons – mainly because it was felt that it would reduce the burden on the prison (an increasingly important consideration in the approval or rejection of research applications) – the researchers were based in the prison's Education department, and most interviewees were drawn from its classrooms. The sampling was primarily opportunistic, based on us introducing ourselves and the research to groups of prisoners at the start of their lessons. At the same time, we tried to shape our sample so that it loosely reflected the age and ethnic balance of the prison, and also sought to engage quieter prisoners as well as those who were immediately and volubly enthusiastic about participating. Prisoners from every lesson were included, ranging from Art to Business Studies to Literacy, meaning that there is no reason to believe that our sample group was any more or less educated than the prison's overall population. Only 36 per cent ($n = 8$) of our sample group had experienced sex offender treatment in Whatton, while the rest were waiting for spaces on groups, or to be told which groups they should attend – a source of considerable frustration. This is consistent with a recent report by HM Inspectorate of Probation and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2012) which found that, even in prisons with high sex offender populations, treatment shortages meant that many prisoners failed to do the SOTP, or had to wait a long time before they were given a place on this course.

The interviews were semi-structured, with the initial themes and questions drawn from the sociology of prison life literature (especially Crewe, 2009; Goffman, 1961; Liebling assisted by Arnold, 2004). These themes included prisoner safety, identity and stigma, friendship, hierarchy, power and trust. However, the exploratory nature of the research necessitated a flexible approach to data collection, so that some issues (for instance, 'grassing' and sexual relationships) emerged as significant during the course of the fieldwork. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then manually coded, in line with Layder's (1998) notion of

'adaptive theory', in which themes are determined both by prior theory and literature and by emergent data.

## 'I'm not a sex offender. I committed a sex offence': Stigmatisation and moral exclusion

Prisoners in Whatton experienced their conviction as a serious assault on their moral character. A conviction for a sex offence can result in a lifelong conflation between the offence committed and the individual who committed it, and this can have very concrete consequences, particularly on release. Many prisoners expressed concerns about the impact their conviction would have on them, in particular the negative public perception of sex offenders, the need to sign the Violent and Sex Offenders' Register (in some cases for life), the restrictive licence conditions they would receive and the risk of recall into prison while on licence. More than this, though, prisoners felt that their conviction would change the way they would be seen by other people, although they disagreed as to the degree to which their new social identity changed the way they saw themselves. The following prisoners were both answering the question 'Do you feel at all defined by your conviction?':

> It takes over your life because it's part of my life, it is my life. What I did has made the rest of my life, hasn't it? So, you know. Can't say any more than that, really. Defined is absolutely it. (Arthur)[6]

> I've been labelled by my conviction. And that label I shall have to carry for the rest of my life. But I've not been ... Defined is, it's saying I'm a sex offender and I'll always be a sex offender for the rest of my life. That's being defined in my view. But I don't think I'm defined as that. (Simon)[7]

Simon was unwilling to accept the 'sex offender' label which he felt had been externally imposed on him and did not reflect his personal sense of self. Arthur, on the other hand, felt that what he had done had changed how he would be seen by others, and this in turn changed the way he saw himself and his own future. He had internalised the label, and believed that he would be defined by what he had done.

Whether or not they internalised the 'sex offender' label, it came to dominate how prisoners were seen by others. Prisoners felt that it had a form of stigmatising power which extended beyond the acts it sought to describe and suggested other discrediting behaviours and attributes:

> I accept that I've committed the crime, but [...] I don't think of myself as a nonce.[8] But if, really, if you look at it, that's what people will call me. That's the category I fall into now. (Anwar)

> I'm in here because I had sex with a 15-year-old girl. Didn't know she were 15, but she was. And I'm here. So, does that make me a paedophile? No. Does that make me a

> rapist? No. Does that make me a danger to people outside? No. But I'll have to live with that for the rest of my life. (Troy)

All interviewees acknowledged and resented the stigmatising label imposed on them by society as a result of their conviction, and many argued that this label was longer-lasting and more pervasive than that imposed on mainstream prisoners: 'You don't label someone a burglar and they'll always be a burglar. [...] You're stuck in a loop, I think, as a sex offender' (Rob). More than this, the 'sex offender' label was inherently unspecific and did not – prisoners claimed – accurately represent what they had done. Being labelled a sex offender made known that they had committed an offence without revealing the details and precise nature of the offence. This situation was exacerbated by Whatton's particular circumstances. Willingness to undergo treatment was a condition of entry, and therefore prisoners could not deny having committed their index offence; it was immediately known, by prisoners and staff, that every inhabitant was a sex offender.[9] What was not immediately known, though, were the details of the offence.

As suggested by Lacombe (2008), treatment processes could contribute to prisoners' feelings that their acts had unjustly altered how they were seen by others. That said, most participants seemed relatively indifferent to SOTP courses, regarding them primarily as 'what I need to do to get out' (Mike). A few were willing participants, insisting that courses help the process of 'finding yourself' (Evan), although they maintained responsibility for these changes, claiming that 'you only get out what you put in' (Simon). A similar number, however, were resentful of psychologists and courses, accusing them of 'look[ing] for criminality where there is none' (Matthew), that is, of interpreting their every action through the discrediting lens of their conviction. These prisoners felt that they were unable to make claims about their own identities and offences and were subject to condemnation on factual as well as moral grounds:

> The biggest problem in this prison is the Psychology [department]. Everybody suffers from that. You can say whatever you like to them but unless it's exactly what they want you to say, you're a liar, and people fear that, you know. You go and you're trying to do the right thing and be honest on these courses, and they won't allow you to be honest, you've got to say 'ABCD' the way they want it. (Sam)

Prisoners' moral characters had been damaged by their offending, but their situation was more serious than this. Their convictions led to them being defined by a label which did not necessarily represent their own subjective interpretation of what they had done. Prisoners felt that they had little control over how they were seen, but they also claimed to feel that they did not deserve to be seen in this way. However, as we shall now discuss, prisoners, with institutional support, attempted to manage this situation by accepting the label given to them.

## 'You look at the person, not what they did': Equality and identity management

The public culture of Whatton was accepting and convivial. The prison was described as one of the 'comfortablest places to be and do your time, doing what you've done' (Mitchell), and prisoners repeatedly insisted that, even though they had committed a broad range of offences, there was no hierarchy within the prison: 'we're all sex offenders, no matter what we're in for, we're all exactly the same' (Dave). Although prisoners resented being called sex offenders, the norm of equality within prison was so strong that they here implicitly accepted the standardising label:

> You're all branded [the] same. As I, as I said, nobody knows what you're in for, but you're all in for a sex offence. So you're all exactly the same, nobody's done a better crime or a worse crime or anything. [...] So therefore I can't pass judgement on anyone. Judgement's been passed by a judge, and he'll do his term, same as I'll do mine. (Simon)

Rather than passing judgement on people's crimes, prisoners claimed to assess their peers based on their in-prison behaviour. As Arthur put it, 'you accept the person for what he is in prison, how he comes across to you, rather than what he's done'.

Waldram (2012) argues that the moral community of the sex offender treatment unit he studied existed in an uneasy balance between trust and acceptance on the one hand and aggression and moral judgement on the other. He attributes this tension to the contradictions between two different normative codes: the institution advocated a therapeutic morality, in which prisoners were encouraged to tolerate and respect each other, whereas the con code promoted more antagonistic and condemnatory behaviour. Whatton's therapeutic focus certainly helped to foster a sense of equality. The prison was treatment-oriented and professed to have a 'therapeutic environment' (Blagden and Thorne, 2013: 9) and to enable prisoner change. Central to its ethos was the desire to provide prisoners with the physical safety and psychological space necessary to address their offending behaviour within and beyond SOTP groups. This is much more difficult in mainstream prisons, where sex offenders risk abuse and assault. Whether they had been on mainstream wings or on a VPU, interviewees recounted frequent and frightening experiences of violence, fear and victimisation in their previous institutions. In comparison, coming to Whatton felt 'like a ton weight lifted off your shoulders' (Simon). Every prisoner in Whatton was a sex offender, and therefore they were no longer the outsiders: 'We're all in the same boat. All of us. Don't matter what you've done and what we ain't done. [...] We're friends in here, you know. You ain't got no name-calling, no nicknames or anything' (George).

The institution attempted to reinforce the conviviality established by their entry criteria by avoiding the development of a hierarchy of offences.

Research participants reported that, on their first night in Whatton, they were told by staff that 'everyone's the same' (Mitchell) and that prisoners should not judge each other based on their offences. These therapeutic demands had a clear coercive edge. Troy, a permanent resident on the Induction Wing, said that prisoners who 'don't think they should be mixing with sex offenders' were occasionally transferred to the prison, but 'either they change their attitude very quickly, or they get moved'.

While prisoners in Whatton were both morally condemned and forced to live with others who were similarly stigmatised, ignoring people's offences helped them to manage this in two main ways: 'It's just something you try to shut out. That person I'm talking to now is not a sex offender, he's just another guy. The worst thing, I suppose, is thinking, well, you're one of them' (Sam). First, in stating that they judged other people based on current identity and behaviour rather than previous acts, Whatton's prisoners sought to maintain a discourse that was important to their own personal processes of identity management: their identities were not reducible to their immoral offences. A particularly common identity management strategy was to attempt to construct their identities and offences in such a way that they could not be conflated. For example, Gordon, who was 72 when he was sentenced, having never been to prison before ('I did 72 year[s] and I never, I never even had a parking ticket'), accepted his guilt for his offence but sought to disavow his responsibility, thereby separating his pre-prison self from the crime he had committed:

> [The offence] was just a one-off, that, it wasn't particularly me, it were just a ... Well, obviously it was, but not my lifestyle at all, it were summat that occurred and ...
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. Just something that happened.
>
> Bang, you know. It's like having a car crash. You can go thousands of miles and never have a bump at all and then hit a tree, you know.

Although Gordon acknowledged having committed the offence, he portrayed his involvement as passive and unrepresentative of his true self. Other prisoners differentiated between who they were when they committed the offence and who they were now, thereby signifying that their offence was not representative of their current identity:

> At the end of the day, [... my conviction is] who I was. That's part of who I was. It's not who I am now. If people are going to judge me on my past, then I'm not going to want to know them. Because that's not who I am. (Evan)

By demarcating their identities in this way – either by claiming to have changed or by 'knifing off' (Maruna and Roy, 2007) their offence from the type of person they considered themselves to be – all interviewees presented themselves as individuals who were not intrinsically immoral. In order to uphold this moral stance, prisoners

needed to maintain it when faced with others who, like them, were judged as sex offenders.

The second way in which claims of equality helped prisoners to adapt to their situation was by enabling relationships:

> I mean, apart from the fact we're sex offenders, we're, we're almost normal people.
>
> Interviewer: Yeah. Of course.
>
> And normal people make friendships. (Arthur)

Like all prisoners (Crewe, 2009), Whatton's population craved friendships and company, perhaps all the more so since many had little contact with anyone outside and struggled with issues of loneliness and emotional intimacy (Maruna and Mann, 2006).[10] This need for some form of social life and communion required prisoners to suspend their judgements somewhat. In order to enable this, most prisoners insisted that they avoided finding out what other people had done so that they could continue to feel positively about them:

> Most of the time, it's when people come up to me and they say to me 'Oh, he's in for this', and I say I don't wanna know, so if I've ever spoke to that person before, then I'm not gonna be prejudiced about them or think any differently, especially if I've got close to somebody and then it turns out they've done something like that to a proper baby or whatever. (Darren)

If prisoners did not know what their companions were convicted of, they would be unable to let this knowledge affect their behaviour or attitudes. They therefore sought to keep themselves in a deliberate state of ignorance concerning other people's offences.

Prisoners' formation of a moral community was reflected in other aspects of their behaviour, some of which were encouraged by the prison's unusual entry criteria. The trade in illegal drugs was comparatively limited (see Crewe, 2005, on the impact of drugs on mainstream prisoner society), and prisoner interactions did not entail the 'hypermasculinity' (Jewkes, 2005: 61) found in mainstream prisons: these forms of machismo and controlled aggression – originating partly in lower-working class culture and exacerbated by feelings of powerlessness and deprivation (Newton, 1994) – barely featured among Whatton's older and more middle class population (Ievins, 2013). Most prisoners in Whatton were not 'chasing after power like in a mains prison' (Anwar), and those who did were derided as 'plastic gangsters' (Rob). Other elements of their behaviour seemed to result more from prisoners' desire to create a convivial environment. Prisoners reported developing close and supportive friendships, particularly in comparison to the more guarded associations they had with prisoners in other institutions. Rob, for example, described the 'compassionate' ways in which other prisoners looked after him when his grandfather died, going out of their way to see how he

was and offer him support. Other research participants claimed that prisoners were more willing than in other establishments to lend tobacco without demanding double repayment (known as 'double bubble'), and many felt able to leave their cell doors unlocked without worrying that others would steal from them.

Prisoners in Whatton, then, formed an unusual moral community. They were, in Waldram's (2012: 84–85) words, 'bound together by a common thread, a citizenship based on certain acts deemed criminal by the state'. In order to cope with this situation, prisoners accepted but tried to avoid discussing the very criminal and immoral acts which formed the basis of their citizenship. They claimed to have formed a new community, in which offences were irrelevant to moral judgements and what you did (or who you were) before your incarceration did not matter. Forming this community required prisoners to accept their label as sex offenders, as this equalising identity was the basis of their society. However, as shall be discussed, attempts to form an accepting moral community built on moral exclusion struggled to counteract the structural lack of trust within prisons, as well as prisoners' unavoidable moral judgements about other people's behaviour.

## 'I'd never known them before, and they're criminals': Mistrust and moral judgement

Sykes (2007 [1958]) argues that all prisons exist in an uneasy balance between solidarity and alienation. While prisoners may publicly pledge allegiance to popularly expressed behavioural ideals, they are not always followed in private. Prisoners in Whatton maintained that they lived in an accepting moral community, one situated beyond the veil of ignorance where people neither knew nor cared about their associates' offences. However, this lack of knowledge could be a source of mistrust, and these public claims of equality masked an underlying culture of judgement. Prisoners claimed that they distinguished between offences and identities and that all of Whatton's inhabitants were equal, but this attitude was difficult to maintain in practice. Many interviewees felt uncomfortable about claims made by the institution and other prisoners that all sex offenders really were the same:

> That's what makes it feel crap for me. But obviously from the title 'sex offenders' jail', you've got anything from the top shafter to the little mouse kind of thing, so. You can fit any bracket, it don't matter. [...] That's what they try and tell you when they get here, and the longer you're here, you hear certain stories, you're like, boy, ain't no-one near enough the same. Everyone's totally different scales, man. (Mitchell)

Several interviewees admitted that 'paedophiles' were considered, by the interviewees themselves and by other prisoners, to be 'a lower form of sex offender' (Rob), with others claiming that the younger the victim, the more severely a prisoner was judged. A prisoner who was convicted of an offence against a young child would be thought of as a 'real nonce' (Owen). Others distinguished between repeat offenders and those who had only offended once, or between those

who had 'made a genuine mistake' and those who were 'that way inclined' (Troy). A form of hierarchy lay hidden beneath prisoners' claims of equality. Prisoners had imported certain norms about the relative morality of various offences, and were unable to avoid judging those who had committed particularly serious crimes.

Deep down, therefore, prisoners did care about the details of other prisoners' convictions, despite their mutual attempts to ignore them or their ostensible claims not to care about them. The moral community of Whatton was more complicated than the somewhat utopian picture painted by many prisoners, and in part this was a consequence of imprisonment's structural limitations on trust. Sztompka (1999: 25) defines trust as 'a bet about the future contingent actions of others', the grounds of which 'have an epistemological nature: they come down to certain knowledge, information received by the truster about the trustee' (1999: 70). Imprisonment promotes an inherently situational form of social engagement, thereby preventing the development of sufficient knowledge to enable trust. In Whatton, the only reliable knowledge prisoners had about the prior lives of their peers was that they had been convicted of, and did not deny having committed, a sexual offence:

> I mean, if you think about it, why wouldn't you trust them? They're just people, but they've committed a sex offence. You could probably trust quite a lot of them, but you don't know them, do you? That's the thing. (Anwar)

This ignorance concerning the details of offending behaviour, which was the basis of prisoners' claims of equality, simultaneously led to anxiety about precisely who it was prisoners were associating with. Most prisoners admitted that offences initially discussed in SOTP groups were subsequently discussed on the wings, although they could not be certain that this knowledge was reliable. Other interviewees reported that prisoners who were old, bearded and had wheelchairs or walking sticks were sometimes verbally abused because they 'look the standard photo fit' (Mitchell) of a sex offender. Some prisoners therefore preferred to tell others about their index offence rather than be subject to rumour: 'Whatever they're in for, if they keep it to themselves, I'll be happy. But if they ask me what I'm in for, I would tell them, just so they know I'm not in for underage' (Edward).

At the same time, the majority of interviewees expressed scepticism concerning other people's proclamations about their offences. The belief that 'you can't trust anyone in here, because people lie about why they're here in the first place' led prisoners to listen carefully to other people's stories, looking for inconsistencies so they could 'catch people out' (Owen). If a prisoner refused to disclose, this was taken to suggest that he had a 'closet full of skeletons' (Troy). On the other hand, 'if you're always discussing your offence, it's because there's something you're trying to cover up' (Sam). Prisoners therefore walked a tightrope, needing to discuss their convictions, but not to excess, aware that a mis-step in either direction could be taken as a sign of the nature of their crime.

The anxious mistrust felt by many prisoners was particularly evident in the worries of younger prisoners concerning sexual relationships. Malik, for example, was concerned about 'what they call grooming', insisting that 'you need to watch out for them kind of things'. The difficulty was how to recognise when grooming was happening, and how to differentiate it from customary social interaction. Owen, a prisoner in his earlier 30s, felt 'uncomfortable' about the relationship between his former cellmate, a man in his early 70s, and a younger man of 27, although he was not certain it was sexual:

> It reminded me of some times when he's spoken to me, and he was looking for a reaction from me, and he, it was almost like – I hate using the term 'groom' – but it was almost like, some of the things he was doing were perhaps to, to groom me.

This anxiety partly derived from cultural myths about the sex offender as a manipulative predator, myths which, Owen realised, also applied to him. Thus at least some of the fear of grooming stemmed from the fact that prisoners expected it from sex offenders; their fears were shaped by the very stereotypes that they rejected and resented when applied to themselves. This is not to say that the fear was entirely irrational. Anwar, a young and vulnerable prisoner who used recreational drugs as a coping mechanism to deal with feeling depressed, reported personal experience of sexually motivated manipulation:

> Just a few weeks ago, someone came in my cell and he was making inappropriate comments to me. [. . .] This guy, he goes and does things for me, like if I want something, he'll pass it around, pass it around to somebody. That's why I didn't say anything, but I felt really uncomfortable. I would have liked to have reported it, but I didn't for that reason. Cos I have, I've got benefits from him, like that, but I don't like it, no. I hate it, in fact.

Some prisoners, like Anwar, clearly had something to fear; others, like Owen and Malik, felt an unease which was rooted at least in part in their knowledge of other prisoners' social identities, if not the details of their crimes.

Claims from a few prisoners that offences had no impact on the structure of social relationships were not persuasive, therefore. Even in Whatton, a community of sex offenders, offence type mattered. Several interviewees claimed that, because of their offence, those convicted of crimes against young children were much less likely to be befriended than others:

> I wouldn't be friends with them, but if they said 'Alright' to me as I was walking past, I would say hello. I'm not a person who's gonna go 'Yeah, fuck off, whatever, whatever, whatever.' (Mitchell)
>
> I talk to anybody, to be honest. If they talk to me, I'll talk to them, but [. . .] I wouldn't seek them out. (Malik)

> It all depends how bad it [the offence] is, but it's, it's keeping out of their way, not hanging around with them or going to play pool with them or things like that. [. . .] All you've got to do is just keep being polite to people. (Nathan)

Child sex offenders in Whatton did not experience the total exclusion and abuse that sex offenders do in mainstream prisons (Holmberg, 2001), but nor were they embraced. Claims that Whatton was an accepting and equal moral community were not reflected in prisoners' behaviour, therefore. Prisoners desired some degree of communion and moral recognition to counter both the isolation structurally imposed by imprisonment and the moral condemnation of being convicted of a sexual offence. This, together with the institutional encouragement of a therapeutic culture, nurtured the ideals of equality and non-judgementalism in Whatton. However, these ideals failed to overcome both prisoners' imported moral values about sex offences and sex offenders and the lack of trust within prison. The resulting moral community was anxious and unpredictable, uneasily poised between concord and contempt.

## Conclusion: Moral community in the hall of mirrors

Conviction and imprisonment for a sexual offence marked a new stage for prisoners in this study. While they may have felt private guilt and shame for their offending before it was discovered, the public nature of being labelled and punished as a sex offender had a significant and potentially lifelong impact on their position in society. No matter how they saw themselves, how they were seen by others had changed. Whatton was an unusual moral community in that, with the exception of staff, it was made up entirely of people with the same morally deleterious social identity. In response to this situation, they attempted to accept their equalising identity as sex offenders and live as though their offences did not matter to their judgements. However, unable or unwilling to divorce themselves from the moral standards of wider society and limited by the structural lack of trust within prison, they failed to live as though their pasts did not matter. As a moral community, Whatton stressed the normative value of equality, acceptance and new starts, but faced with the test of applying these values to living with those who had committed serious sexual crimes, they often struggled to live up to them.

This struggle indicates that many prisoners convicted of sexual offences may have more ambiguous attitudes to their moral exclusion than is suggested by their resistance to attempts to conflate their own identities and offences. That they define others by their offences – to some degree, at least – challenges their own claims that their offences do not affect how they define themselves. Imprisonment in a sex offender prison is like being in a hall of mirrors: prisoners are looking at themselves, looking at others, and looking at others looking at them, with these reflected images bouncing off each other *ad infinitum*. Prisoners perform complex and contradictory tasks of identity management and moral engagement. They are both labellers and labelled, and the two processes interact in a series of enforced

social interactions with morally condemned people. Symbolic interactionism, while influential in the early days of sociology, has fallen out of favour in recent years. We argue that it is a useful framework to help to develop our understanding of sex offenders' understanding of self, community and moral exclusion.

## Notes

1. The term 'mainstream prisoners' refers to those who have not been convicted of a sexual offence. A 'mainstream prison' is therefore an institution which mainly accommodates mainstream prisoners.
2. Throughout this article, we use the term 'sex offender' as an easier and shorter alternative to the phrase 'prisoner convicted of a sexual offence'. This is not intended to imply any judgement on the likelihood of reoffending, nor is it intended to essentialise.
3. It is worth noting that Maruna and Mann are talking about excuses ('It wasn't my fault' or 'I thought she wanted it') rather than offence-supportive attitudes ('I think children can enjoy sex').
4. In England and Wales, a VP is a prisoner who has been isolated for his or her own protection. They are often held together on Vulnerable Prisoners' Units (VPUs). Although many prisoners on VPUs have been convicted of sexual offences, many are vulnerable for other reasons, such as the accumulation of debt or because they have been identified as 'grasses' or 'informers'.
5. At the time of the study, 90 per cent ($n = 754$) of prisoners in Whatton had been convicted of a sex offence (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2012). As an institution intended to accommodate prisoners undertaking (or waiting to undertake) the SOTP, the remainder of its inhabitants would have been assessed as needing treatment in this area, probably because their offence had a suspected sexual element. The term 'sex offence' covers a range of different acts, from the possession of indecent images to the rape of adults or children.
6. All participants quoted in this article have been given pseudonyms.
7. The use of ellipsis indicates a pause on the part of the speaker. The use of ellipsis in square brackets indicates the removal of some (normally repetitive) words from the original transcription.
8. The term 'nonce' is a slang word for a sex offender, especially one who has offended against children.
9. One research participant was shortly to be transferred elsewhere because he had refused to participate in the SOTP as, despite pleading guilty, he now denied his offence. This interview provided an interesting example of the links between offence acceptance, treatment and coercive power at work in Whatton. Another prisoner also told the interviewer that he had not committed rape, although he had pleaded guilty.
10. Of the 22 interviewed, seven had no contact with anyone outside, generally because their families and friends had disowned them as a result of their offending. More, though not all, had lost contact with some members of their family. Others received

letters or phone calls, but their families would not visit them 'cos of the type of jail it is' (Edward).

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