Article

Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment

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Abstract

The 'pains of imprisonment' have been a longstanding concern within prison sociology. This article revisits the topic, suggesting that modern penal practices have created some new burdens and frustrations that differ from other pains in their causes, nature and effects. It notes that the pains of imprisonment can be divided up conceptually, and to some degree historically, into those deriving from the inherent features of incarceration, those resulting from deliberate abuses and derelictions of duty, and those that are consequences of systemic policies and institutional practices. Having described the latter in detail – focusing on the pains of indeterminacy, the pains of psychological assessment and the pains of self-government, the article explains the relevance of the concept of 'tightness', as well as 'depth' and 'weight', to the contemporary prison experience.

> They dangle carrots, so you're walking on eggshells. (Prisoner, HMP Wolds)

The vernacular of prison life is a guide to its qualities. It is therefore significant that prisoners regularly use phrases like the one above and are understood and endorsed by their peers when they do so. The 'carrots' refer to the prison's incentive scheme and the promise of progressing through the system in return for engaging with

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the regime. 'Walking on eggshells' requires less explanation, but it points to one of the key frustrations of confinement in England and Wales. Many of these frustrations are longstanding and well documented. Others, while not new as such, reflect the changed texture of modern imprisonment and require a different conceptual vocabulary from that which has been used previously to describe the pains of imprisonment. Drawing on empirical research, primarily in men's prisons, this article proposes the use of the term 'tightness', alongside 'depth' (Downes, 1988) and 'weight' (King and McDermott, 1995), to describe the burdens of modern imprisonment.[1]

Historicizing the pains of imprisonment

When Sykes provided his celebrated analysis of the pains of imprisonment, it marked a moment when the prison was no longer *intended* to be painful: 'severe bodily suffering has long since disappeared as a significant aspect of the custodians' regime' (Sykes, 1958: 64; Ignatieff, 1978). Yet Sykes was eager to stress that the psychological pains of confinement – including the loss of liberty, the deprivation of autonomy and the frustration of sexual desire – could be just as damaging as physical mistreatment: 'Such attacks . . . are less easily seen than a sadistic beating, a pair of shackles on the floor, or the caged man on a treadmill, but the destruction of the psyche is no less fearful than bodily affliction' (Sykes, 1958: 64). Writing two decades later, Foucault (1977) raised similar issues, questioning whether the techniques of discipline and regulation that had replaced physical punishment at the end of the 18th century were more civilized than their predecessors, or simply a more efficient and penetrative means of ensuring penal control.

Sykes argued that attacks on the prisoner's ego and sense of self-worth were intrinsic to incarceration – 'the acceptable or unavoidable implications of imprisonment' (Sykes, 1958: 64). His summary of these deprivations need not be rehearsed, but to it we might add the pains and degradations that scholars such as Cohen and Taylor (1972) and Erving Goffman (1961) identified as more or less inherent in the nature of institutional confinement. For Goffman, these were the micro-humiliations and assaults on the self that were imposed by the 'total institution'; for Cohen and Taylor, they were the existential anxieties about identity, survival and change that were provoked by long-term detention. In such accounts, the prison stood almost as a metaphor for deprivation and domination. Cohen and Taylor used narratives of extreme survival to draw parallels with the experiences of their research participants. Goffman classified the prison with the mental asylum and the military institution as places designed to mortify the self. Sykes himself noted the similarities between the maximum security prison, the concentration camp and the Soviet labour colony, describing the former as 'the new leviathan' (1958: xxxiii) – 'a social system in which an attempt is made to create and maintain total or almost total social control' (1958: xxxii).

Accounts of imprisonment in the UK in the following decades suggested that Sykes had been unduly optimistic. The forms of abuse and neglect that he assumed

represented a bygone era were no longer an intentional part of the actual sentence, but informal action by staff and failures of management meant that, beneath an official rhetoric of reform, prison life was generally squalid, brutal and degrading. Physical and material conditions were indecent and dehumanizing (Fitzgerald, 1977; McDermott and King, 1988). In many establishments, prisoners were accommodated in filthy and grossly overcrowded cells for very long hours (Stern, 1987), without in-cell sanitation. In some, they exercised in covered yards and rarely saw natural light (Jameson and Allison, 1995). Showers and clean clothing were provided at the whim of staff, often less than once a week (Caird, 1974; Stern, 1987). Medical practices were scandalous, with healthcare provision deeply inadequate and psychotropic drugs widely used as a means of control (Cohen and Taylor, 1978; Sim, 1990).

Meanwhile, violence was built into the logic of the system. Intimidation and unprovoked aggression were used to punish prisoners and ensure compliance (Jameson and Allison, 1995; King and McDermott, 1990). In their account of Strangeways in the months preceding its 1990 disturbance, Jameson and Allison (1995) describe a regime apparently designed to punish and humiliate, and an atmosphere of 'congealed fear and sometimes terror' (1995: 75). Prisoners were mistreated deliberately: given cold or adulterated food, or placed in cells with known enemies (Jameson and Allison, 1995). Some studies reported that wing staff maliciously refused to answer emergency cell bells, messed with prisoners' mail and left cell lights on throughout the night (Scraton et al., 1991). Staff saw little need to justify their behaviour or explain decisions (Cohen and Taylor, 1978; King and McDermott, 1990). Concerns about personal possessions and family ties were ignored, and there was a 'routinized lack of respect for individuals' (Stern, 1987: 250) and prisoner rights (King and McDermott, 1990; Scraton et al., 1991). Many lived in real fear of each other, particularly since, in some establishments, staff encouraged prisoners to police each other, turned a blind eye to (or encouraged) vigilante punishment and tolerated 'no-go areas' on the landings, 'thereby tacitly approving sexual exploitation, wheeling and dealing, and strong-arming of various kinds' (McDermott and King, 1988: 364).

There were undoubtedly pockets of the prison system in which treatment and conditions were more positive and progressive. But recent research – amounting to an oral history of prison work (Liebling and Crewe, in progress) – corroborates the picture painted above. With near unanimity, when asked to reflect on their time in service, senior managers recalled the dark side of staff behaviour. Uniformed staff were said to have revelled in their power, often acting outside the bounds of the law, failing to discharge their duties and actively mistreating those in their charge. In summary, the outstanding pains and abuses were the consequences of *institutional failings* and *unchecked power*.

In their 1988 article 'Mind games: Where the action is in prisons', King and McDermott provide a highly evocative account of this period, while also

illuminating the path ahead. Having described an atmosphere of mutual contempt and hostility between prisoners and staff, they end by commenting that:

> the nature of physical confrontations between staff and prisoners may be changing. Increasingly staff are trained in control and restraint techniques. Both staff and prisoners seemed to agree that things were not what they used to be. Often prisoners told us: 'They don't beat us any more – they don't have to. They can win by using bits of paper. It's all a mind game now.' (McDermott and King, 1988: 373)

Elsewhere in the article, the authors note the uncertainty borne by prisoners whose futures depend on obtaining positive reports:

> life sentence prisoners feel themselves to be peculiarly dependent upon the staff and on getting good reports. When faced with the inevitable wind ups that constitute doing time, the lifer cannot afford the luxury of ill-considered responses. Indeed he knows that whatever he does it will be open to interpretation. If he explodes, his report may say that he cannot cope with frustration. . . . If he keeps his own counsel, the reports may say that he is withdrawn and cannot come to terms with his offence. (McDermott and King, 1988: 365)

These descriptions of the prison experience seem all the more salient now. Over 13,000 prisoners in England and Wales (over one in seven) are serving indefinite sentences of some form (http://www.hmprisonservice.gov.uk/), and are thereby subject to the feelings of uncertainty, dependence and disorientation indicated above. Meanwhile, 'paperwork' of various kinds plays an increasing role in shaping all sentences, through decisions about privilege levels, re-categorization, Home Detention Curfews and so on. As I describe elsewhere (Crewe, 2007, 2009), these policies and practices have softened both the experience of imprisonment and the dynamic of control, creating a kind of 'buffer zone' between the prisoner and the hard, coercive power on which incarceration ultimately relies.

This softening of penal power does not mean that abuses have been eliminated, or that the pains identified in earlier times have disappeared. Prisoners continue to cite such things as the deprivation of liberty, the misuse of staff authority, the threatening company of other prisoners, being cut off from family and friends (Flanagan, 1980), 'unremitting loneliness' (Johnson and McGunigall-Smith, 2008: 337), the crushing of emotional existence (Jewkes, 2005) and 'institutional thoughtlessness' (Crawley, 2005) as among their primary sorrows. At the same time, the reconfiguration of penal power in prisons in England and Wales has added an additional layer of frustrations, which are neither inherent in the prison experience nor the outcome of sub-official practices and managerial failings. Instead, they are a corollary of particular kinds of institutional policies and techniques. They work alongside established pains in determining the

experience of imprisonment, but they are different in their sources, their feel and their effects.

The pains of uncertainty and indeterminacy

A substantial literature already highlights the perceived 'tyranny of the indeterminate sentence' (Mitford, 1977: 92), particularly in the United States during the post-war therapeutic era. Weiler (1978: 302) noted that: 'Perhaps no other device has received more criticism from inmates than the indeterminate sentence and the discretionary powers wielded by the Adult Authority'.[2] From the perspective of prisoners, the illegitimacy of indefinite confinement had a number of components: the stress and anxiety caused by uncertainty about the future (Rotman, 1990), the capriciousness of parole decisions and their lack of due process (Cummins, 1994; Irwin, 1980), the feeling that one's very personality was being assaulted (Mason, 1990), and the 'total arbitrariness of the bureaucracy that rules every aspect of [the prisoner's] existence' (Mitford, 1977: 92).

The uncertainty that prisoners describe nowadays relates both to the present and the future. In terms of the former, they highlight the insecurities that result from a discretionary style of governance (see also Sparks et al., 1996):[3]

> [In previous decades] You knew where you stood [but] it was a harder time than it is now. Today's prison, one day, you go and ask for something and you'll be given a reasonable answer. The next day, you'll go and ask and be told a pack of lies to confuse you. They let one man do one thing, but the next man they say no. (Tommy)

> They were stricter then, but it were easier as well, because you knew where you stood. Now you have a joke and a laugh with a screw, and he'll nick you the next fucking minute. (Charlie)

In the following quotation, a prisoner explains how the psychological consistency of imprisonment has changed:

> [In the past] The rules was tight but at the same time it was relaxed because you knew exactly how far you could go. It's like getting a piece of elastic band, pulling it, and you know if you pull it a bit further it's going to snap. [Now] you have the same elastic band and pull it and pull it and pull it and not know when it's going to snap. (Carter)

As suggested here, the prison's coercive potential is always coiled in the background, but it is now difficult to predict when it might be activated. This uncertainty about its border points and triggers expands the psychological territory that power occupies. Giddens (1991) uses the term 'ontological insecurity' to describe the existential difficulties that result when people lose faith in the reliability of the world beyond them, and can no longer trust their tacit assumptions about external realities. The terminology that prisoners employ to describe similar insecurities

highlights the ambiguous quality of penal power. As in the quotations above, 'soft', 'hard' and 'easy' are used almost interchangeably: modern imprisonment is 'easier but hard' (Pete) or 'softer but shitter' (Darren). It lacks solidity and predictability, with actions and consequences unreliably connected.

For prisoners serving indeterminate sentences, time warps as well as drags (Cohen and Taylor, 1972). These prisoners describe their sentence as the equivalent of being 'on remand' (a time associated with high levels of suicide and self-harm) (Addicott, 2011). It is impossible to plan for the future when one knows that the end of the tariff and the release date may be years apart. Likewise, the route-map to freedom is by no means clear. Officers often cannot answer questions about increasingly complex sentence conditions, leaving prisoners in a fog of uncertainty about the basic terms of their captivity – how long they have left to serve, under what conditions and how they can realistically reduce their risk given the logistical difficulties of obtaining transfers to establishments where relevant courses are offered (see Padfield, 2009). Prisoners serving indeterminate sentences, in particular, complain that the things required of them are unclear or unattainable. The sense is of mobile targets, which always slip away: 'dangling carrots' and 'moving goalposts' (Tommy). Many prisoners also feel that the prison's decision making defies consistency or logic:

> I went for the R and R course[4] and they asked me all these questions and they said, 'well, you haven't got enough defects to do the course, we don't feel that you'll benefit from it'. They said to me, 'that's as good as a pass.' [But] my parole papers come back and it says 'you haven't done enough courses'. (Carter)

For some prisoners, the unpredictable nature of penal power creates significant insecurities. In the face of uncertainty, everything is loaded with meaning, and can be perceived as a test or a threat. Prisoners talk about being 'set up to fail', either in the sense that sentence plans and release conditions are excessively demanding or that minor mistakes are taken to be far more indicative of risk than years of good behaviour. In both cases, the prison is presented as an institution that obstructs one's progress (even if it gives an ostensible impression of seeking to help). The widespread discourse of 'hurdles' and 'obstacles' differs significantly from that of 'mind games' (although this term too is frequently heard). It suggests an encounter that is one-sided, almost designed to trip you up, while also implying a degree of impersonality (whereas a game is played with *someone else*). Prisoners note that decisions about categorization and release are made at levels of the organization that they cannot reach, and that the system cannot be challenged through interpersonal negotiation or direct appeals:

> You get to a certain level within a prison that you never meet, the people that actually run the prison. If I'm dealing with an officer I'm dealing with another person, I can talk to them, I can manipulate them, or I can negotiate with them. Once you get beyond that, it's a faceless contact: security, the administration, even the governors. You can't actually get anything but superficial contact. (Nathan)

Here, Foucault's (1977) prognosis resonates: power is diffuse and decentralized, operating in a manner that is 'light' but anonymous. It is demanding without seeming coercive, everywhere but nowhere.

The pains of psychological assessment

A second set of pains relates to the forms and processes of psychological assessment which not only define prisoners' futures but also impact significantly on their present lives. These pains involve the deprivation of control over personal identity, and are related to Goffman's (1961) account of the way that the total institution assaults personal boundaries and definitions. In the current context, they apply primarily to prisoners serving indeterminate sentences, but they are relevant to a much wider population, since a large proportion of prisoners take offending behaviour programmes and all go through the offender assessment process.

While the mechanics of risk assessment are fairly opaque to most prisoners, some are aware that actuarial methods of calculating risk use information generalized from populations and apply it to individuals (Robinson and Crow, 2009). Setting aside the problem of 'false positives', and the subjective nature of assessment (see Padfield, 2002), such methods in themselves signal to prisoners their lack of individuality by placing them within aggregate risk categories (Franko Aas, 2004). Similarly, structured clinical interviewing requires prisoners to fit their life histories into the parameters of psychologically manageable categories, carving up complex identities into abstract units to meet the requirements of the 'information system' (Franko Aas, 2004; see also Thomas-Peter, 2006). These categories cannot capture subjective understandings, the ambiguities of identity, narrative progression or the social context in which personhood is enacted. A prisoner might define himself principally as a committed father or a talented painter, but these self-conceptions are over-written and rendered immaterial by psychological attributions. In the words of one prisoner, one's experiences and identity are 'formalized and institutionalized' (George), often given an enduring master-label, for example, as someone with 'impulsivity problems' or an 'anti-social personality'.[5] Feelings of de-humanization are exacerbated by the sense that one's character is set in the aspic form of static risk factors, and by the implication that the window of opportunity to change is barely open (Zedner, 2007).

For long-term prisoners in particular, for whom maintaining some control over personal integrity is a paramount concern (Cohen and Taylor, 1972), these objectifying processes can feel highly destructive. Psychological discourse forces prisoners to address, if not accept, meanings that may be at odds with their self-perceptions:

> My life doesn't go parallel with theirs. The system has forced me to draw to their level, how *they* see things and deal with things, rather than helping me deal with things in my own way, in my own personality, in my own mistakes, weaknesses, difficulties. They've taken me off that road, and forced their opinion, their understanding onto

me. ... They're only interested in their own decision making. You go through [your] sentence, and everybody's telling you to be open and honest, and when you do they don't believe you. *Their* truth they can handle. Not the prisoner's truth. (Gerry)

Although an unusually emotive description of psychological discourse, this excerpt conveys a number of its qualities: its capacity to bulldoze alternative meanings of selfhood; its rigidity; and its requirement that prisoners therefore adopt a bifocal view of themselves. Many prisoners explain that, to successfully advance through the system, they have to create a kind of penal avatar. Often, they feel that cognitive-behavioural courses are telling them to be a different kind of person – at worst, a robotic prototype of responsible citizenship that could not survive the realities of life in the environments from which they are drawn. Frequently too, they complain that reports take their comments and behaviour out of context, and that the report-writing process shows little compassion, humanity or nuance:

They pick up on certain comments, they twist everything, they ignore the constructive stuff you do. I made a joke about sedating my girlfriend to take her on holiday [as part of a course scenario] – in the report they gave no context, said that my idea of getting someone on a plane was sedating them! I got knocked back, based on the psychologists' reports. (Prisoner, fieldwork notes)

I felt nervous when I was assessed – [then] they said I had 'paranoid tendencies'! (Prisoner, fieldwork notes)

Many prisoners regard psychological discourse as a form of normative imperialism, disregarding viewpoints and values that are inconsistent with its own. It has colonized the lifeworld of the prison – 'the commonly accepted cultural knowledge within which validity claims (or action) can be coordinated' (Weaver, 2009: 11). As Lacombe (2008) argues in relation to sex offenders, the prism of offending behaviour comes to define almost all areas of thought and conduct. It teaches offenders 'that every single facet of their personality inevitably interacts and is affected by their identity as a sex offender' (2008: 72). Alternative interpretations are, in effect, almost unintelligible, encouraging some prisoners to contrive self-narratives and programme responses that satisfy the beliefs of specialist staff (Lacombe, 2008). One prisoner – Martin – argued that, to be considered 'honest', he had to play up to a record that portrayed him as 'some violent beast'. Asked in an offending behaviour course how he would react were he to bump into an ex-girlfriend with a new partner, he was disbelieved when he claimed he would simply 'say hello': 'so I just said "all right then, I'd buy him a drink and I'd glass him", and [the tutor said] "that's what I thought you'd do"'.

Few truths or lies are acceptable to the system, leaving many prisoners in performative purgatory – always concerned that the wrong step might entangle them all the more in the carceral net. Those who dispute the prevailing institutional discourse may be considered 'in denial'; those who adopt it with too much

enthusiasm may be suspected of insincerity and 'people-pleasing behaviour' (Lacombe, 2008: 65). Prisoners who are honest about not regretting their crime are less likely to obtain parole, but those who second-guess the system can be caught out by their lies: 'I said "I was put under pressure by other people to do the violence", and they said "so what makes us think that when you're on home leave, you're not going to be influenced again?"' (Pierce). This is a precarious line to tread. The sense that any comment can be used against you, and that psychological interpretations are inescapably negative, is both dizzying and suffocating.

Risk assessment processes also lack relational qualities. Reports about prisoners are sometimes written by people they have not met, or are conducted with neutral detachment. The standardization of assessment practices increases consistency at the expense of humanity. The psychologists who conduct basic risk assessments tend to be trainees, often straight out of university, supervised by more qualified seniors but holding little expertise of their own. Generally, they are young, female and middle-class – as a result, prisoners tend to be sceptical of their motives, scornful of their life experience and doubtful that they understand the power that they exercise (see Crewe, 2011). Many psychologists appear indifferent to prisoners, dispassionate at best. It is almost impossible for prisoners to develop a meaningful relationship with their assessors, nor do they seek to do so, for they are in little doubt about whose side psychologists are on, and regard them almost universally with cynicism and contempt:

> What is psychology going to do for you? Psychology are not going to do anything for you, they're here to pick your bloody brains and work out whether you're sane or whether you're intelligent or whatever yeah? That's how I see it. They're not here to help you, man. (Jacob)

> They may isolate difficulties that you're having, but they don't help you with them. They will observe how you handle those difficulties, how you come to terms with them. You are given the opportunity to speak to a counsellor or somebody if you feel you're having problems, but it will all end up in a report. (George)

As suggested here, the opportunities to explore personal issues outside the boundaries of institutional power are limited. Prisoners feel that they and their problems are fed into the institutional machinery, subsumed into its discourse and transformed into risk. Assessment is simply 'done to them' (Attrill and Liell, 2007), in the interests of public protection, and they have very limited opportunities to present alternative versions of life events and self-identity. This is closer to what Rotman (1990) labels 'authoritarian rehabilitation', where interventions seek to re-model morally the offender according to a 'predetermined constellation of behavioral patterns' (Rotman, 1990: 9; Hornqvist, 2010), than more client-centred and humanistic forms of treatment (see Robinson and Crow, 2009). Rehabilitation is conceived more as a 'privilege of the state' than 'a right of the citizen' (Rotman, 1990: 8), and the offender's interests are secondary to those of 'future victims'.

With little provision of a therapeutic kind, many prisoners absorb a stark symbolic message about their relative status.

In describing the substitution of psychological for physical power, prisoners draw attention to the distinctive grip and potency of this new regime. In terms of its potency, they note the way that one's life can be ruined 'with a stroke of a pen' (see Cummins, 1994) and highlight the sharp disparity between the ease with which files can be amended and the impact of such inscriptions on their lives:

> This is my life we're talking about; that little entry [in my file] could stop me getting my C-Cat, stop me progressing, stop me from getting my parole, but they don't realize that. ... Sometimes I just sit there and say, 'do you not really know what you're doing with our lives?' (Prisoner, fieldwork notes)

In terms of its grip, as these quotations indicate, psychological power is highly adhesive: 'Once the pen has written down something it can be there for life' (Jacob). Comments cannot be erased once committed to file, and 'there is a danger that opinions formed early in a prisoner's career are reinforced and built on as the years go by' (Padfield, 2002: 85; Attrill and Liell, 2007; Maguire et al., 1984). Its effects are both deferred and prolonged: 'You have one minor incident and they'll go write it in the file. That's gonna catch up with you in two or three years time: a silly little incident, a minor indiscretion' (Alexis). Unlike the brutal immediacy of physical coercion, which, to some extent, makes its presence felt and then re-coils, psycho-logical power suspends itself perpetually, never quite revealing when it might take effect. Prisoners cannot rely on there being any such thing as a heat of the moment exchange or a forgotten incident:

> If you say to a screw, 'fuck off, you're a dickhead', you might think that was just said in the heat of the moment, that it's forgotten the next day. [But] that officer's got your file out and he's wrote, 'confrontation with Smith, ... told me to fuck off.' If you come up for a decent job in the prison, they'll pull your file, 'Oh, we ain't giving him that job. He's disrespectful to staff.' Everything you do, and everything you say is put down on paper, in your file. (Danny)

The pains of self-government

These qualities alter the terms of governance and control, while generating a related set of frustrations: the pains of self-government. In most accounts of the loss of autonomy that prisoners experience, the emphasis is on material constraints (e.g. gates, walls, searches), staff regulation and the strictness of the regime. Sykes (1958: 73), for example, notes that it is 'the triviality of much of the officials' control which often proves to be most galling'. Cohen and Taylor (1972) describe the oppressiveness of situational security measures, such as

CCTV cameras, and the endless 'rules about rules about rules' (Cohen and Taylor, 1978: 20). Prisoners still find such curbs on their autonomy highly frustrating. But their descriptions of power are not merely about being subjected to direct regulation and restriction. Often, in fact, they remark that uniformed staff are *not* 'in your face' or 'on your back' (Olly). Yet this lack of intervention is not an absence of power. As one interviewee noted: 'You hardly ever see them, but they're running the show. When push comes to shove, they're the ones that do your reports' (Isaac).

Alongside mandatory drug testing, the incentives and earned privileges scheme, and the other forms of psychological power mentioned above, these tools mean that direct, personal oversight is not required for prisoners to be disciplined and made (relatively) compliant. The burden of control is relocated and reshaped. When behaviour was patrolled by staff, the main onus on the prisoner was to stay out of trouble. Now, the prisoner is given greater autonomy – in a limited and localized way – but is enlisted in the process of self-government and held responsible for an increasing range of decisions. This is very different both from the torpid negligence of some prisons historically, and the rigid discipline of others. For the most part, prisoners are neither left to their own devices *nor* commanded to behave in highly specific ways. Compared to British prisons in previous decades, there is less freedom to be left alone and move through the system passively, yet there is also less insistence on pure obedience. Prisoners cannot simply submit to authority, for docility is insufficient to indicate a commitment to addressing one's offending behaviour. Cognitive-behavioural courses assume the right to be highly intrusive, encouraging prisoners to expose their personal beliefs and private emotions (Day et al., 2004: 262). At the same time, in being granted some degree of choice in the interests of 'responsibilization', the prisoner is exposed to a greater degree of risk. This opening up of possibilities, however narrow, provokes feelings of anxiety and powerlessness (Giddens, 1991).

Some prisoners resent this transfer of responsibility, for it harnesses them in their own subjection (see Foucault, 1977) and makes the enemy less apparent. Rather than succumbing to external orders and demands, they are obliged to govern themselves appropriately or risk the consequences of 'irresponsible' behaviour. The following quotation illustrates this difference between being an object of discipline and an agent of one's own incarceration:

> The screws [used to] let you know: 'you step over that line, and I'll have you'. These days, they'll let you step over the line. They'll give you enough rope to hang yourself. You can just tie yourself up and then kill yourself with it. (Carter)

In this regard, prisoners are on edge less because they are fearful of staff than because they themselves might 'cock up' their situation. Being a prisoner becomes a more demanding – and more compromising – task. The disciplinary net is wide and all-encompassing. Prisoners are required to manage and monitor a broad range of

conduct, including the company they keep and the way that they comport themselves:

> You're under observation from day one.
> *So on what basis do you think you're being judged, let's say, on the wings?*
> By the way you carry yourself, and the people you hang about with. . . . I even think about who I walk round on exercise with, and what I have on the walls of my cell, things like that. (Stephen)

The need to regulate social choices is described as a kind of tightrope act:

> If you're keeping your head down, for instance, and you don't really mix with people, they'll say 'he's got a bit of an attitude problem'. If you're the opposite, and you hang around with people, you've 'got your fingers in all pies', you're up to no good. (Kieran)

With appropriate behaviour defined so narrowly, prisoners feel encircled by 'eggshells', and deemed responsible for any breakages.

Prisoners are also expected to 'constructively engage' (Attrill and Liell, 2007: 195) in an institutional project in which they have little real voice. The prison is about as far from an 'ideal speech situation' (Habermas, 1984) as one can imagine. Yet prisoners are asked to recognize the benefits of risk assessment processes, to feel empowered by sentence plans almost regardless of their input. Although prisoners do not resent genuine opportunities for growth, some amount of discomfort almost always accompanies personal development. Here though, 'empowerment' means being made to be active and enthusiastic, rather than passive and resigned, in the process of one's own penal *management*, not just one's personal growth.[6] Indeed, in establishments where staff are inexperienced and lack knowledge of the system, prisoners end up leading the process by which they are governed, clearing the mist of their own sentence conditions and guiding staff through the process on their behalf. In effect, they become consumers of their own punishment, using a public protection shopping list: compiling dossiers of information about the courses they have to attend in order to be released, writing to other prisons to find out their eligibility criteria and harassing staff to be timely in writing up the reports whose legitimacy they dispute.

Depth, weight, tightness

The pains described above have to some degree been documented before. However, previous work does not conceptualize these frustrations, nor does it differentiate them conceptually from other kinds of penal burdens. It is important to find descriptors which allow us to characterize the different components of the prison experience (see King and McDermott, 1995: 90).

In *The State of Our Prisons*, King and McDermott (1995) make a distinction between the 'depth' and 'weight' of imprisonment. The metaphor of depth was adapted from Downes' (1988) comparative analysis of British and Dutch penality, where the term had been used to describe the degree to which the prison was oppressive and psychologically invasive. Specifically, Downes defined depth in terms of relations with staff and prisoners, the quality of rights, privileges and conditions, positive activity, the severity of discipline and punishment and the overall degree to which prison life was 'an ordeal, an assault on the self' (Downes, 1988: 179). In this formulation, the axis of depth referred to the humanity and survivability of the prison experience. However, King and McDermott argued that when prisoners used the imagery of depth, they generally did so in relation to their experiences of security and control. To talk of 'deep end' custody was to be in a prison whose oppressiveness related to physical security and distance from release. The qualities that Downes encapsulated through 'depth', they argued, were better conveyed by the term 'weight'. It was this metaphor that prisoners used to describe the psychological onerousness of imprisonment – the degree to which it weighed them down or bore upon them. Such descriptions invoked a *vertical* form of oppressiveness and an almost physical sense of burden: the feeling of the sentence literally being a 'weight on the shoulders' or a millstone around one's neck (King and McDermott, 1995: 90). In contrast, depth suggests being buried far from liberty, deep below the surface of freedom.

To generalize somewhat, the prisons described in the heyday of prison sociology were *deep* and *heavy* but, in certain respects, *loose*. Most were high-security establishments, in which guards primarily acted to maintain control and prevent escapes. Within these boundaries, and a strict routine, there were few demands on prisoners to behave in specific ways (Irwin, 2004; Sykes, 1958). Johnson (1987: 44) describes this as a form of benign negligence: 'Mostly these institutions simply left prisoners more or less on their own.' In comparison, British prisons in the 1970s and 1980s were somewhat different, in that they were *heavy* and *directly overbearing*. For example, in *Prisons under Protest*, Scraton et al. (1991: 63) state that 'life in most British prisons is an unrelenting imposition of authority'. Decision making and autonomy were 'reduced to the barest minimum' (1991: 48), and the culture was malign as well as indifferent.

In general, this sense of authority as something heavy, deliberately aggravating and insistently forceful is not what prisoners now describe. The nature of both depth and weight has changed, and neither idiom can fully convey the frustrations described above. Although prison life remains highly rule-governed and physically restrictive, particularly in the high-security prison estate, to characterize it in terms of 'constraints within constraints' (Downes, 1988: 179), petty discipline (Scraton et al., 1991), endless searches and direct infringements (Caird, 1974) gives a partial impression of modern penality.

A better metaphor is 'tightness'. This noun gives a sense of the way that power is experienced as both firm and soft, oppressive yet also somehow light. It does not so much weigh down on prisoners and suppress them as wrap them up, smother them and incite them to conduct themselves in particular ways. The term 'tightness' captures the feelings of tension and anxiety generated by uncertainty (Freeman and Seymour, 2010), and the sense of not knowing which way to move, for fear of getting things wrong. It conveys the way that power operates both closely and anonymously, working like an invisible harness on the self. It is all-encompassing and invasive, in that it promotes the self-regulation of all aspects of conduct, addressing both the psyche and the body. There are few zones of autonomy, either spatial or psychological, where the reach of power can be escaped. It is demanding, in that it transforms long-term confinement from something to be endured into something to be worked at – a personal project or occupation. Yet it is not authoritarian or obtrusive, as such. The new technologies of power do not so much 'chafe and vex' (Sparks et al., 1996: 323), as snag and entangle, like a web. They are subjectifying, in that they seek to fashion a new kind of person, as well as objectifying, in that this person is a somewhat alien version of the self. Arguably, tightness is an aspect of depth and weight, in that it concerns both the psychological burden of imprisonment and its mode of control, but it certainly differs from the way that these concepts have previously been defined. The sense of *grip* is also apposite, for the forms of power I have described have considerable leverage in determining prisoner behaviour. As one prisoner explained, 'I don't care about conditions [i.e. 'weight'] too much.... Keeping me in longer is how they can hurt me' (Stephen).

Resonances with Foucault's (1982) notion of 'governmentality' and associated work on 'responsibilization' (e.g. Garland, 1997; Hannah-Moffat, 2005) should be plain, and require little elaboration here. There are multiple echoes too of the 'mesh thinning' and 'boundary blurring' that Cohen (1985) identified in *Visions of Social Control*: the assessment of behaviours that were not previously considered relevant to the operation of the control system, the possibility of being sanctioned for breaching institutionally defined norms rather than just legal violations, the impulse to classify, the intensification of interventions within and beyond the prison, and the risk that the application of relatively unchecked discretion by professionals and bureaucrats constitutes a threat to legal rights and due process. In Cohen's (1985: 6–7) rather prescient terms, social control 'has become Kafka-land, a paranoid landscape in which things are done to us, without our knowing when, why or by whom, or even that they are being done'.

However, for current purposes, a more useful symbolic framework is offered by Weber's analysis of bureaucratic rationality. Weber's critique of the rigid, dehumanizing bureaucratic machine is commonly invoked through the image of the 'iron cage'. But, as Baehr (2001) notes, the correct translation of the German is a 'shell as hard as steel'. Rather than suggesting being confined by something separate from us (something which leaves us unaltered), this term implies

something that we carry with us – indeed, something that becomes an aspect of, and reconstitutes, our being. The shell:

> is our shelter and constraint, yet it allows choices of various kinds, movement and directions that are our own . . . [It] has not just been externally imposed (as in the iron cage metaphor), but . . . has become 'part and parcel of [our] existence'. (Baehr, 2001: 164)

The symbolism is apt. Baehr (2001: 161) notes that while steel 'evokes hardness and unbending resolution', it can, in fact, be malleable as well as rigid. It cannot be broken or dispensed with, but it is sufficiently ductile to move with the body. The shell of soft power is similar. At best, the prisoner can jettison some of its psychological weight, but he or she cannot simply detach it. The shell also represents the identity that the institution assigns to the prisoner, which has to be carried for the remainder of the sentence.

Power is tight in another sense, in that the autonomy that prisoners are given is constricted, and the 'smack of firm government' is always poised in the background to ensure it is used appropriately. Hard power flexes its muscles only when softer strategies fail (Hannah-Moffat, 2005), but, beyond the core of soft power and self-regulation, the penal perimeter remains firm and coercive. Attending offending behaviour programmes is voluntary, but non-attendance or lack of commitment has significant consequences. 'You've got a choice', one prisoner summarized, 'but if you don't go on them, you don't get out' (Derek). In the terms of Day et al. (2004), this is 'pressured rehabilitation' (see also Hornqvist, 2010). The prison generally eschews the more coercive methods of the past, and provides various forms of assistance and opportunity. It offers paternalistic, almost protective support, stopping the prisoner from succumbing to inertia, steering and inducing him or her towards 'sensible options' (as defined by the authorities), and appealing to his or her 'better self'. In many respects, it offers decency, care and assistance – certainly more than in the past – which prisoners appreciate. But it is more pushy than caring, and more prescriptive than liberal. If prisoners do not want to be rehabilitated through the forms prescribed by the prison, if they choose not to conform to institutional demands, or if they cannot recognize their 'best interests', then punishment and constraint are not far away. The line between a guiding hand and a stiff, constraining grip is a fine one. In this regard, the contemporary prison operates a form of what could be called 'authoritarian governmentality' (Dean, 1999) or – perhaps more neatly – 'neo-paternalism' (Crewe, 2009). As I will explain in greater detail elsewhere, by individualizing prisoners, this mode of power shapes prisoner adaptation, culture and prisoner social life in some distinctive ways.

Conclusion

Penal power appears emblematic of the late-modern era, and – in the UK at least – closer than ever before to the Foucauldian model of disciplinary power. In its

normal state, it is light and evanescent, rather than heavy and solid (Bauman, 2000: 25). It is predominantly psychological rather than physical (Foucault, 1977), and where it works, it does so almost automatically, without the need for direct intervention on the part of the authorities. Whether – as Foucault implied – it punishes more effectively but no more humanely than its institutional predecessors is arguable (see also Cohen, 1985 on 'the soft machine'). It is important to be neither flippant nor complacent about the fact that, compared to only two decades ago, prisoners in England and Wales are less likely to live in fear of their captors, to be systematically brutalized, to share triple-bunked cells with their own excrement and to be deprived for days on end of showers, fresh air and clean clothing (see Jameson and Allison, 1995).[7] In all of the areas registered by Downes (1988), including staff–prisoner relationships, discipline, visiting rights and physical conditions, prisons in England and Wales have undoubtedly improved in recent decades.

In some respects, then, the prison experience is considerably less heavy than in the past. Power is exercised more softly, in a way that is less authoritarian. Yet in other ways, the prison experience has become 'deeper' and more burdensome. Movements are more restricted, security has been tightened, and risk has become the trump-card of the system. Prisons are materially more comfortable, but they remain psychologically damaging: in the words of one prisoner, 'it's cushier, but it hurts you in other ways'. For long-term prisoners in particular, once conditions reach a certain standard, they cause less consternation than the difficulties of progressing through the system. The carceral experience is less directly oppressive, but more gripping – *lighter but tighter*. Instead of brutalizing, destroying and denying the self, it grips, harnesses and appropriates it for its own project. It turns the self into a vehicle of power rather than a place of last refuge. In leaving prisoners in a state of ontological uncertainty, and in tying them into their own subjection, it resembles the dystopian projections of Orwell and Kafka. Arguably, tightness is an aspect of weight, yet it is clear that the shape and distribution of the penal burden have shifted, like a sack of sand remoulding itself across the body of its bearer. There are more levers of compliance and regulation, and therefore more points where the weight is felt. Perhaps the simplest conclusion is that while the pains of confinement can be reduced, pain is intrinsic to imprisonment, and it is much easier to alter its form than to eliminate it from the prison experience.

The resulting frustrations cannot be eradicated through a simple swipe of the reformist blade. They are not intentional abuses of power or derelictions of duty, so much as side-effects of deliberate policies. These strategies of compliance, risk assessment and neo-rehabilitation reflect something close to the model of 'new penology' (Feeley and Simon, 1992), in which interventions are pursued on utilitarian grounds (rather than for the direct benefit of the offender), while compliance becomes a systemic priority. In this respect, Johnson (1987) is both right and wrong to declare that the pains of imprisonment have been minimized as much as possible given the prison's core functions. Pain is no longer 'meted out' (Johnson, 1987: 45), in a calculated way. But the treatments, interventions and reforms that are seen as

positive indications of institutional intent themselves generate frustrations. These are deemed necessary components of the prison's current functions, and little attention is paid to their effects.

Finally, the vocabulary of tightness can help us think about the nature of punishment more broadly. Community sanctions beyond the prison are becoming 'tighter', in terms of increasingly restrictive licence conditions and a more enforcement-oriented probation culture. Meanwhile, it is striking that much of the recent literature on the relationship between political-economy and penal severity stops at the gates of the prison (inter alia, Cavadino and Dignan, 2006; Lacey, 2008). In such work, levels of severity or humanity are judged using measures such as imprisonment rates, sentence lengths and prison conditions. For researchers whose heads are inside prisons peering out, rather than outside them squinting in, it is difficult not to comment on the partiality of these metrics, indispensable though they are. They conflate the material and psychological dimensions of incarceration, and they do little justice to the ways that different prison systems might impose depth, weight and tightness to different degrees (Downes, 1988). Alongside depth, weight and 'breadth' – the diffusion of control measures beyond the prison (see Cohen, 1985) – tightness can help us differentiate between forms of penality and characterize the aspects of punishment that are only superficially considered in most of the literature on penal policy, but are fundamental to the experience of incarceration.

Notes

1. The primary pieces of research on which the article draws are a study of power, adaptation and social life in a medium-security training prison, and, with Alison Liebling and colleagues, a study of values, practices and outcomes in public and private corrections. Further methodological details of these studies can be found elsewhere (Crewe, 2009; Liebling et al., 2011; Crewe et al., under review). Both studies drew heavily (but not exclusively) on interviews and informal observations. In the former, in-depth interviews (lasting between around two and seven hours in total) were conducted with 72 prisoners, half of whom were selected based on relationships established during a mainly observational fieldwork phase, and the remainder of whom were chosen randomly or according to a stratified sampling technique. In the second study, prisoners were identified and approached either as a result of informal discussion during observations or according to a similar logic of loose, stratified sampling. In this study, most interviews lasted for around one hour. In both, one-to-one interviews were conducted in private offices, and all interviews were transcribed and coded using NVivo software. Extensive fieldwork notes were also taken throughout both studies, some of which are employed in this article. Where prisoner names are given, they are pseudonyms.
2. The Adult Authority: the body that decided when prisoners were released.
3. This is different from the uncertainty resulting from deliberate acts of secrecy and concealment, described by Cohen and Taylor (1978).

4. 'R and R': Reasoning and Rehabilitation, a cognitive skills course.
5. As Lacombe (2008) suggests, by requiring prisoners to internalize and police these attributions, the process might actively produce the very subjects that it seeks to transform.
6. The issue of whether it can count as a 'pain' to be deprived of the right to reject opportunities to develop oneself and one's autonomy is not at all straightforward. However, forcing 'positive liberty' upon people in the context of the prison might, in all kinds of ways, be counter-productive as well as potentially oppressive.
7. Cox's article (this volume) suggests that there are some similarities between forms of penal power in the UK and parts of the USA. Yet in some US states, such as California, it is clear that the prison system is not primarily characterized by 'soft power', but precisely the forms of abuse, neglect and degradation that have receded in importance in England and Wales. Indeed, based on research conducted in Maryland, USA, Alford (2000) argues that Foucault was wrong in everything he said about the prison: it is defined by idleness rather than work or timetabled activity, by an absence rather than an excess of supervision and categorization, by invisibility rather than hyper-visibility, and, fundamentally, by brutality and coercion – 'concrete walls and steel bars' (2000: 134) – rather than subtler forms of power. It is therefore worth reiterating that this article seeks to historicize the pains of imprisonment primarily in the context of the United Kingdom (even if much of what it describes may apply more broadly).

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