the **Howard League** for **Penal Reform**

Living among sex offenders

Identity, safety and relationships at Whatton prison

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A report for the Howard League for Penal Reform by Alice levins, based on her John Sunley Prize winning masters dissertation

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Foreword

In recent years the Howard League for Penal Reform has invested in commissioning and supporting post-graduate research to further our charitable and strategic objectives. As part of the strategy, the Howard League's John Sunley Prize celebrates excellence and the impact of post graduate research into penal issues. This annual award rewards and encourages Masters students who generate outstanding research dissertations that are both topical and original; and can also offer new insights into the penal system and further the cause of penal reform. Peer reviewed versions of the winning dissertations will be published by the Howard League throughout the year in an abridged format.

We are delighted to publish a version of one of the three 2013 winning dissertations here. In this paper, Alice levins, who completed her Masters at the University of Cambridge, describes and explains the social world of Whatton prison, a category-C training prison for men participating (or waiting to participate) in the Sex Offender Treatment Programme.

Informed by the prison sociology tradition, the research was based on 22 semi-structured interviews with 22 prisoners in Whatton prison. The research explores experiences related to safety, the management of identity, the development of hierarchies and the formation and maintenance of friendships within this institutional context. The research found that, although prisoners reported feeling much safer in Whatton than they had elsewhere, they experienced a distinctive form of anxiety as a result of the social pressures of living solely among sex offenders. The research also found that prisoners' struggles with their stigmatisation as sex offenders structured their identities and relationships in various ways.

Winning papers from the 2014 John Sunley Prize competition will be published over the next academic year.

Anita Dockley

Research Director, the Howard League for Penal Reform

Abstract

Little research has been carried out on the sociology of imprisonment for sex offenders, despite them making up 16 per cent of the sentenced adult male population in England and Wales. This report applies some of the established questions from the prison sociology tradition to the sex offender prisoner population. The research explores experiences related to safety, the management of identity, the development of hierarchies and the formation and maintenance of friendships within this institutional context. The research was based on 22 semi-structured interviews with 22 prisoners in Whatton prison. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the data was then coded using adaptive theory, with some themes drawn from the literature and others emerging from the data. The research found that, although prisoners reported feeling much safer in Whatton than they had elsewhere, they experienced a distinctive form of anxiety as a result of the social pressures of living solely among sex offenders. The research also found that prisoners struggled with their stigmatisation as sex offenders, and this structured their identities and relationships in various ways. The report argues that sex offenders have markedly different experiences in prison than 'mainstream' prisoners, thereby meriting separate study.

Some of the research in this report has been built on in an article called 'Nobody's better than you, nobody's worse than you: Moral community among prisoners convicted of sexual offences'. This article, written by Alice levins and Ben Crewe will be published in a forthcoming issue of *Punishment & Society.*

1. Introduction: Sex offenders in prison

> *Bunny rabbits, when they're out on the moors and they're living wild with foxes around them, all band together. And bunny rabbits can defend themselves quite well. When bunny rabbits are in a warren and it's just bunny rabbits, they turn on each other, and ... they provide an interesting study in society. And the bunny rabbit society can be quite severe, quite savage. Same thing for this place. Think of us as bunny rabbits. (Matthew)*

In March 2014 16 per cent – almost one in six – of the sentenced adult male prison population had been convicted of a sexual offence, yet sex offenders[1] have been excluded from the sociology of imprisonment (Ministry of Justice, 2014). Despite several studies suggesting they are uniquely victimised in prison (see, among others, Åkerström, 1986; Vaughn and Sapp, 1989; Sparks et al., 1996), almost no research has been undertaken into their distinctive prison experiences. This is particularly striking considering that there are currently almost three times as many imprisoned male sex offenders as there are women in prison, and numerous studies have been undertaken into women's prison experiences (see, among others, Carlen, 1983; Kruttschnitt and Gartner, 2005; Home Office, 2007).

This report constitutes a preliminary attempt to fill this gap. After outlining what is already known about imprisoned sex offenders, it will describe and explain the social world of Whatton prison, a category-C training prison for men participating (or waiting to participate) in the Sex Offender Treatment Programme (SOTP). It is informed by the prison sociology tradition, and will apply some of its established questions to a new prisoner population. It is particularly interested in feelings of community and solidarity among this conventionally excluded group: although they have been convicted of a diverse range of offences, prisoners in Whatton have all been categorised as sex offenders, but it is unclear how the men themselves interpret this. This report will explore experiences related to safety, the management of identity, the development of hierarchies and the formation and maintenance of friendships within this institutional context. It is hoped that doing so will deepen understanding of the experience of imprisonment itself, whilst acknowledging that imprisonment is different for different people in different prisons.

1 Throughout this report, the term 'sex offender' is used as an easier and simpler alternative to the term 'prisoner convicted of a sexual offence'. This is not meant to imply that offending behaviour is central to prisoners' identities, nor that it is inevitable that they will reoffend.

2. Sex offenders and the sociology of prison life

It is commonly noted that – regardless of jurisdiction – sex offenders are at the bottom of the prisoner hierarchy, living in near-constant fear of abuse and assault from prisoners and sometimes staff (Priestley, 1980; Åkerström, 1986; Vaughn and Sapp, 1989; Prison Reform Trust, 1990; Hogue, 1993; Sim, 1994; Genders and Player, 1995; Sparks et al., 1996; Thurston, 1996; O'Donnell and Edgar, 1999; Winfree et al., 2002; Waldram, 2007; Crewe, 2009). Vaughn and Sapp (1989) have further argued that, although sex offenders in general are at the base of the hierarchy, there is a subdivision within the group, with rapists of adult women having a higher status and paedophiles having the greatest stigma.

Research into the experiences of sex offenders in prison has barely extended beyond this focus on the hierarchy, even though it is likely that the experiences of sex offenders in prison are different to those of other prisoners. Very little is known about how they see themselves or how they experience prison. Recent years have seen growing awareness of the needs of older (Crawley and Sparks, 2005; Mann, 2012) and vulnerable prisoners (VPs; Ahmad, 1996; Sparks et al., 1996; Liebling et al., 1997; Drake, 2006), but although many of both groups were convicted of sexual offences, this interest has not been converted into reliable studies of the prison experiences of men who have been convicted of sexual offences.

This is a significant gap in the literature, especially as sex offenders are often institutionally and socially separated from the rest of the prison population. In recognition of the distinct needs of the growing population of imprisoned sex offenders, and in response to criticism from reform organisations (Prison Reform Trust, 1990) and the Woolf Report (1991), the Prison Service introduced a new strategy for sex offender imprisonment in 1991. Such prisoners were concentrated in a smaller number of prisons, in the hope that this would 'facilitate a consistency of approach in running treatment programmes, cost effective use of resources and skills, and the provision of a safe and supportive environment' (Guy, 1992: 1). While many sex offenders still live in mainstream prisons on mainstream wings, others are segregated for their own safety, generally on a Vulnerable Prisoners' Unit (VPU) under Rule 45.[2] Increasing numbers of sex offenders, however, live in the eight prisons which currently only accommodate sex offenders, some of which, including Whatton, have been designated 'treatment hubs' (Barrett, 2014). While the Ministry of Justice claims that 'holding sex offenders together makes them more likely to engage in programmes' (Ibid.), we know very little about prisoners' experiences within these separate institutions.

Prisoners convicted of sexual offences: What we know

The literature concerning the experiences of prisoners convicted of sexual offences is sporadic and underdeveloped. Tony Parker (1970) includes the voices of 'the nonces' in his record of conversations at Grendon, but he typically – and deliberately – offers very little further analysis. Priestley's (1980) *Community of*

2 Rule 45 (previously Rule 43) allows governors to isolate prisoners, either for their own protection or to ensure good order and discipline. Those prisoners who have been isolated for their own protection are known as vulnerable prisoners (VPs). A 'mainstream' prisoner is a prisoner who has not been convicted of a sexual offence. Mainstream prisons and mainstream wings primarily accommodate mainstream prisoners.

Scapegoats explores the society developed at Shepton Mallet, a prison which mainly accommodated prisoners on Rule 43, the majority of whom were sex offenders. The work is based on research conducted secretly while Priestley worked at the prison between 1966 and 1968, and is therefore out of date and ethically questionable. Nevertheless, he found that prisoners dealt with the nature of each other's offences by aiming for the ideal of the 'pluralistic ignorance of each other's misdeeds' (1980: 67), an ideal which was rarely met in practice, but which indicates some of the particular difficulties of imprisonment among sex offenders. Recently, Mann (2012: 354) has argued that child sex offenders form a supportive 'community' while in prison, inverting the terms of the conventional prisoner hierarchy by claiming to be better educated and have committed less serious crimes than mainstream prisoners. However, her research is based on the experiences of elderly prisoners who had offended against children, and may not hold true for other sex offenders.

The majority of literature relevant to this research concerns a particular feature of prisons, the VPU. However, it should be noted that sex offenders and VPs are not overlapping categories: VPUs also accommodate prisoners who need protection due to their behaviour within prison, including debtors and 'grasses'. The last 15 years have seen several studies concerned with particular theoretical issues (often related to legitimacy and order) which have considered the experiences of VPs in the high-security estate. Sparks et al. have suggested that, '[g]iven the close physical confines of a VPU, the lengths of sentences [and] the stringency of the regime' (1996: 226), the 'depth' (Downes, 1988) of imprisonment is possibly greater on a VPU than elsewhere in the dispersal system. Sparks et al. focus on the often dangerous overuse of power by staff, which in part resulted from their disgust at the crimes of the VPs, which were often sexual (see also Drake, 2006). However, they also suggest that this overuse of power could result from the perceived compliance of sex offenders, a perception which has also been noted by Liebling et al. (1997) and Drake (2006), and which seems to relate to their positive attitudes to staff (Ahmad, 1996).

Drake (2006) argues that the prison experience has generally tightened and deepened since the mid 1990s, and therefore that the experiences of VPs and mainstream prisoners are less different than was suggested by Sparks et al. (1996). That said, she argues that VPs import more vulnerability than mainstream prisoners, and therefore their greatest need is for safety. This leads her to the following argument:

> *[T]he suggestion that VPs might, in some ways, be more content in a prison environment means that an important distinction can be drawn between the way that VPs and Mains [prisoners on a mainstream wing] approached their imprisonment. This might suggest the need for consideration of a sociology of imprisonment for vulnerable offenders.*
> *(2006: 301)*

The research which has been done on VPs focuses primarily on issues of compliance, legitimacy and order within the high-security estate, and by no means constitutes a complete 'sociology of punishment for vulnerable offenders'. Despite findings which suggest that VPs have different attitudes to imprisonment – they are perceived by themselves and others as compliant and have generally positive attitudes to staff, notwithstanding the fact that they can be mistreated by them – there has been little focus on how they see themselves or on social relationships among VPs. It has been suggested that the division between those who require protection due to the nature of their offence (the sex offenders) rather than their

behaviour in prison (the debtors and 'grasses') structures the culture of VPUs, often making them more frightening than mainstream wings (Edgar et al., 2002). However, this brief discussion is focused on experiences of fear. There has been almost no exploration of the impact of people's offences on their identities, or on relationships among sex offenders and VPs. In order to gain some insight into sex offenders' experiences of prison culture and social life – in particular identity, trust and relationships – we must look beyond the sociology of imprisonment.

The treatment literature: Bringing in the perspectives of sex offenders

Most studies on the treatment of sex offenders follow a quantitative approach and focus on the effectiveness of treatment programmes, measured either by recidivism or by changes in attitude and engagement (see, for example, Lindsay et al., 1998; Polizzi et al., 1999; McGrath et al., 2003; Schweitzer and Dwyer, 2003; Eastman, 2004; Levenson and Macgowan, 2004; Seager et al., 2004; Langton et al., 2006). However, the last 15 years have seen a growing interest in sex offenders' perspectives on their treatment, and these studies have frequently stressed the importance of relationships in ensuring treatment effectiveness. Colton et al. (2009) for example, outline the views of a small number of participants in the prison-based SOTP. Half of those interviewed thought the group work approach was inappropriate for participants who were considered to be high-risk, as they did not like listening to what they perceived as worse crimes and were afraid of being corrupted by doing so (see also Houston et al., 1995; Day, 1999). Colton et al. suggested, along with Cowburn (1998; Cowburn et al., 2008), that prisoner culture and social life can have unforeseen effects on the process and results of sex offender treatment programmes. As the social dynamics within treatment groups structure their development, so do those beyond them. As Jayson Ware has argued, 'the context within which treatment is provided may actually prove to be quite important to the overall effectiveness of treatment' (2011: 300).

Hudson argues that the moral panic regarding sexual offences has become so severe that 'it is no longer the sex offenders' crimes that are unacceptable, but the sex offenders themselves' (2005: 30). Her book, based on interviews with 32 convicted sex offenders taking part in treatment in prison or in the community, explores the relationship between treatment and identity, arguing that her participants' struggle with their social construction as sex offenders hindered the effectiveness of treatment programmes. Regardless of whether they accepted, denied or justified their offences, they all constructed themselves and their offences in ways which sought to protect their self-image. Nevertheless, Hudson argues that 'irrespective of their state of denial, the men interviewed in this research were unable to separate completely their criminal act from their overall sense of self' (Ibid.: 74), because of their awareness of how they were perceived by others. This did not affect their involvement in the groups, where 'an atmosphere of unity, respect and support' (Ibid.: 104) prevailed. Relationships, identity and offences clearly feed into each other, but Hudson sees the world through the treatment lens. She does not investigate the nature of the relationships formed within the groups or the effect of those which exist beyond it, whether in prison or in the community. Furthermore, her interest lies only in relationships and identity insofar as they relate to denial and offending.

Within the treatment literature, then, sex offenders are 'consumed by sex' (Lacombe, 2008: 72). Their perspectives are considered solely with relevance to their offence

and their treatment, and social dynamics are reconstituted into symptoms of denial. Lacombe (Ibid.) and Digard (2010a) offer two more sociologically-oriented analyses of how sex offenders construct their identities, both of which stress that processes of self-work and identity management are subject to different types of power. Lacombe uses a Foucauldian lens in her ethnography of a prison-based treatment programme in British Columbia. In its focus on self-management, Lacombe argues that sex offender treatment in the age of the new penology (Simon, 1998) forces those receiving treatment to create new identities, 'to think of themselves as *beings at risk of reoffending at any moment'* (Lacombe, 2008: 72, emphasis in the original). Digard, on the other hand, relates the narrative reconstruction of sex offenders on probation to theories of legitimacy. Digard argues that 'in order to attribute legitimacy to a figure of power, one must first consider oneself to be a legitimate target of governance' (2010a: 197–98), again highlighting the relationship between power and identity.

The experiences and relationships of sex offenders in prison

There is only a patchy understanding of the experience of life as a sex offender, particularly in prison. Insights from the sociology of prison life literature are limited to their position in relation to other prisoners (they are at the base of the prisoner hierarchy and experience fear and violence) or to their relationships with staff, ignoring their sense of identity and relationships with other sex offenders. However, the treatment literature indicates that offences play a significant role in structuring how sex offenders see themselves and engage with others, and furthermore that how they engage with others is linked to how they see themselves. This study will draw and expand on these insights in order to begin to explore the experience of imprisonment for people convicted of sexual offences who live alongside other prisoners convicted of sexual offences. It will explore their sense of identity and how they manage their relationships within a particular institutional environment. The study will begin to answer two main questions: firstly, what is life like for a sex offender living among sex offenders; and secondly, how is the prisoner society different when it is made up of sex offenders? It will then offer speculative explanations for these findings. It will draw on Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963/1990), the foundational work for understanding how stigmatised people relate to themselves and others. It will also use Crewe's 'framework for analysis' (2009: 12) of the prisoner society, which takes account of structural, institutional and imported factors. By combining these two frameworks – one theoretical, one analytical – it hopes to make a tentative step towards developing a sociology of prison life for sex offenders.

3. The methods and ethics of interviewing sex offenders

Research site

Whatton prison is a category-C training prison holding adult male prisoners willing to undertake the SOTP.[3] At the time of the study, its population was 838, and its operational capacity was 841 (HMCIP, 2012). 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 throughout the 1990s. Indeed, it is central to the prison's identity, and commonly repeated by staff and prisoners alike, that Whatton is a "treatment centre". It has a reputation for safety (Ibid.) and is seen by practitioners as an example of good practice (Bennett, 2013). Whatton was selected as the research site because it provided a unique opportunity to explore the social experience of a prisoner convicted of a sexual offence living solely (or almost entirely) among other prisoners convicted of sexual offences, without the fears and stresses provoked by living alongside mainstream prisoners.

Sampling

Twenty-two prisoners were interviewed during the two-week research process, which was based in the education department. Interviews were conducted by myself and my supervisor. We were careful to interview prisoners from each of the broad range of classes, ranging from literacy to business studies; we also interviewed three prisoners who were participating in vocational training in workshops, and two who were involved in a one-on-one educational outreach programme with a member of staff. We attempted to ensure that our sample of prisoners was not more educated than the rest of the prison population, although there is some risk that they were more compliant. The sampling strategy was principally opportunistic and pragmatic, although it had theoretically-driven elements. Given the personal subject matter of the interviews and our desire not to be a burden on the prison, we relied primarily on volunteers, who we recruited by walking into classrooms, introducing ourselves and the research and seeing who seemed interested. When selecting interviewees from volunteers, we tried to represent the age and ethnic balance of the prison, as well as to engage those prisoners who were less immediately enthused by our presence.

The mean age of the sample was 42, and the mean age of the prisoner population was 45. Eighty-two per cent (n=18) of the sample identified as white British, in comparison to 84 per cent (n=705) of the population (HMCIP, 2012). 14 per cent (n=3) of participants were of Pakistani origin and 5 per cent (n=1) identified as black British, compared to 1 per cent (n=12) and 1 per cent (n=10) respectively of the population. 32 per cent (n=7) of the sample were Imprisonment for Public Protection prisoners, compared to 33 per cent (n=279) of the population. 14 per cent (n=3) of the sample had a life sentence, compared to 13 per cent (n=108) of the population. Therefore, bearing in mind the restrictions of the method chosen, the sample was relatively representative, although it overrepresented Pakistani prisoners.

3 Ninety per cent (n=754) of prisoners had been convicted of a sexual offence (HMCIP, 2012). The others would have been assessed as needing treatment in this area, possibly as their offence had a suspected sexual element.

Data collection and analysis

Twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted overall, nineteen by myself and three by my supervisor. The initial themes and questions included within the interview schedule were drawn from sociology of prison life literature. However, the exploratory nature of the research necessitated that we did not stick rigidly to the script, so we changed the order of questions (or ignored them if answers had already been given), asked follow-up questions, clarified responses and added new questions (for instance about 'grassing' and sexual relationships between prisoners) as themes emerged. The most successful interviews were conversational in tone; these allowed us to delve more deeply into the individual experiences of the person we were interviewing.

All but one of the interviews were recorded on a digital recording device, and they had a mean length of one hour and nineteen minutes. The interview data were transcribed word-for-word and then coded manually. This process was informed by adaptive theory, which 'both shapes, and is shaped by the empirical data that emerges from research. It allows the dual influence of extant theory (theoretical models) as well as those that unfold from (are unfolded in) the research' (Layder, 1998: 133). Some of the themes chosen were developed from the sociology of prison life literature whereas others emerged inductively from the data. As the process continued, the distinction between the two became less clear as theory and data interwove.

Ethics

The British Society of Criminology's Code of Ethics (2006) was consulted when considering the ethical issues of this research. The three primary concerns were emotional sensitivity, confidentiality, and informed consent.

Sensitivity was paramount given the personal nature of the questions, which were asked to a potentially vulnerable population. The interview schedule did not include any questions on the index offence: it was not the focus of the research, and we were unwilling to cause distress. When the interview was over, the participants were asked if any part of the discussion was distressing or upsetting. The two prisoners who answered affirmatively were asked if there was anyone in the prison they would like to be informed, and were reminded that Listeners[4] were available.

All information given in interviews has been and will be kept secure and anonymous. All references to participants in the report have been anonymised, and any potentially identifying features have been changed.

In order to ensure informed consent, participants were given an information sheet outlining the nature and purposes of the research. They were then invited to sign a consent form, although participants were free to withdraw their consent during the interview or refuse to answer questions at any point. If they wanted to withdraw their consent following the interview, they were told they could write to me or my supervisor. No-one withdrew consent at any stage of the process.

4 Listeners are prisoners trained by the Samaritans to offer peer support to other prisoners.

4. Findings

i) Safety

"In here, you don't even need to look back": Fear and violence in Whatton and elsewhere

> *Whatton's got quite a good reputation for ... you know, a low bullying rate and, you know, incident rate compared to a lot of other prisons. ... That's probably because we're all tarnished with the same brush, which isn't necessarily something I agree with.*
> *(Troy)*

As Troy suggested, Whatton has a good reputation for its low rate of violence (HMCIP, 2012). Staff and prisoners reported very few violent incidents, and very few prisoners could recall having seen a fight there. One education staff member claimed that an incident alarm bell went off once every six months. The atmosphere on the wings and in the education building was safe, calm, and passive. This can be attributed to a number of imported and institutional causes: the average age of prisoners in Whatton was quite high (younger prisoners are more likely to be involved in violent incidents (Ditchfield, 1990)); many prisoners were on indeterminate sentences and were unwilling to jeopardise their progression through the system, especially as they were now in a category-C prison with the outside world in sight (Crewe, 2009); and Whatton only accommodated prisoners who were willing to take part in the SOTP, who were likely to be pragmatic (at the very least) regarding their progression through the system, and wary of being moved to prisons with fewer courses. However, probably the most commonly cited cause of the relative safety of Whatton was that "you're all there for the same offence" (George).[5]

The safety experienced by prisoners in Whatton was a notable contrast to the prisons they had come from, where they had commonly experienced violence, fear, victimisation and abuse. Although some participants said they survived undetected, or even openly, on mainstream wings, others reported being assaulted, threatened and gang raped. Even those who went onto the VPU could still experience violence, as they were rarely completely separated from the rest of the prison. One prisoner said his eye was split open in the healthcare unit of a previous prison, an area accessible to both mainstream prisoners and VPs. There were common reports (and rumours) of foreign objects, including faeces, urine and broken glass, being found in food which came from the shared kitchens, as well as insults and objects being thrown at VPs when they walked down corridors. Some prisoners mocked the perpetrators of such acts as "window warriors" (Nathan), but most reported such events as being physically frightening and damaging to their self-esteem. Insults and threats also came from other prisoners on the VPU, often from those who had sought protection due to debt or involvement in the prison drugs trade, rather than because they had been convicted of a sexual offence:

> *They used to come down with bullyboy tactics, you know, 'nonce' and all that stuff. ... It weren't a nice atmosphere, so you never really felt safe there.*
> *(Gordon)*

5 This is not strictly true. For more on the common claim that all sex offenders were in prison for the same offence, see 4ii and 4iii.

While prisoners convicted of sexual offences faced a genuine risk of violence on mainstream prison wings, the VPU's physical and symbolic separation from the rest of the prison heightened certain other types of fear. Although not every VP was a sex offender, the two categories are almost identical in the minds of most prisoners (including in Whatton – hence the common assertion that Whatton was a "VP prison"). Living on a VPU therefore rendered their status as a sex offender almost visible. Many participants reported that mainstream prisoners screamed insults at the VPU at night, and although it reduced the likelihood of being assaulted, being accompanied by officers made prisoners much more vulnerable to verbal abuse, because the mainstream prisoners "know you're a sex offender" (Mike).[6]

The necessity of these measures heightened the sense that there was something to fear. These prisoners were labelled not just by their crimes, but also by their apparent defencelessness:

> *In here [prison], they call you a vulnerable prisoner. I don't feel like a vulnerable prisoner, but you've told me I'm vulnerable … . So they're almost putting this mentality into you.*
>
> *Researcher: ... Do you think they made you more afraid?*
>
> *Yeah, I think so, yeah. I mean, you're always with, you're always kind of what could happen. Especially, obviously, you get your food ... and you're thinking, you hear all the stories about what they've done to the food and that, cos obviously it's been cooked in the mains kitchen. And they [the staff] say "Oh no, it's swapped round."*
>
> *Researcher: Did, did you feel like your food had been tampered with, or was it just scare stories?*
>
> *… A lot of it's gossip and stuff. I bet it happened. I know people who have worked in kitchens and said what, the food's been docked before and stuff, but … a lot's changed now. I think it's a lot better than it was years ago. (Rob)*

The invisibility of any contaminants and the lack of control over what people were ingesting made food a potent area of anxiety (Bauman, 2006). Ugelvik (2011: 54) argues that 'food works as a metaphor for the control over the prisoner's body, as a sort of link between the experience of being a prisoner and the experience of having an imprisoned body'. For VPs and sex offenders, the risk – real or imagined – that food was contaminated added another level to this metaphor. Food came to act synecdochically for the corruption of their social relationships, as well as their wider stigmatisation and sense of anxiety. Overall, it seemed that many VPUs were dominated by a culture of fear which originated in the real danger faced by VPs, but was reinforced by their position within the prison and the mythology of victimisation which this position encouraged.

"That 'I'm in prison' mentality": Different types of safety

> *I'm safe a hundred per cent, but … you're very wary of people. Because ... you understand that people can be quite manipulative. (Owen)*

6 Mike was particularly afraid that people from his home town might have seen him on the VPU in one of his previous prisons, leaving him open to attacks if he returned when released.

Although Whatton provided respite from the danger of life in a mainstream prison, prisoners did not feel completely safe. This partly resulted from structural limitations on safety, ensuing from low levels of trust (Liebling assisted by Arnold, 2004) and lack of control over space (Edgar et al., 2002). Whatton also retained the ever-present danger of 'momentary outbreaks of violence' (Sparks et al., 1996: 245) which were often related to the inherent pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958/2007):

> *Obviously it's a bubble ain't it, so there are little things that can blow up.*
> *(Rob)*

Prisoners in Whatton often claimed to be completely safe, but when asked for more detail, it was clear that they only felt comparatively safe:

> *Since I been here, I saw one fight against some guy … there's not much violence here.*
>
> *Researcher: Less than in other prisons you've been in?*
>
> *Yeah.*
> *(Paul)*

One commonly expressed reason for Whatton's comparative safety was the rarity of illegal drugs there. Crewe (2005) argues that drugs – particularly heroin and cannabis – play a central role in prisoner life in the twenty-first century, structuring (or distorting) the prisoner hierarchy, increasing individualisation, leading to potentially violent power struggles among prisoners, and increasing levels of debt. According to the prisoners he interviewed, such changes are 'generalizable across establishments' (Ibid.: 461), but illegal drugs were notable by their absence in Whatton:

> *It is safer, because ... in other places … you've got drugs and that, they're constantly flowing, and … you haven't really got that here. So [in other prisons] it's the fine line where it's gonna be kicking off all the time because someone owes someone something or pads [are] getting robbed or whatever.*
> *(Darren)*

As there were fewer illegal drugs, there were fewer power struggles, fewer prisoners in debt and fewer occasions to enforce loyalty through violence or the threat of violence.

It seems likely that the absence of illegal drugs in Whatton reflected the fact that far fewer of its prisoners would have been involved in their use and distribution when outside. However, prisoners offered other reasons, such as the small wing sizes, the fact that many prisoners were on indeterminate sentences and risked being 'knocked back', and the apparent frequency of 'grassing' within Whatton.[7]

That said, although illegal drugs were rare, many prisoners noted that the misuse of prescription medication was common. Medication was present in the prison through legal and legitimate means: prisoners, many of whom were elderly and had health problems, received medication from healthcare. The supply was secure, so there was no need for the establishment of a trading network supported by violence. Nevertheless, the trade corrupted social relationships, eroding interpersonal trust:

> *They can pretend to be your friend to encourage you to do the things that they want. Either give them your meds or something like that. ... It's less obvious here … cos it's on a less degree as people would try and do it on the mains.*
> *(Owen)*

7 The frequency of grassing ("This is a proper snitch city" (Malik)) in Whatton arguably relates to the lack of solidarity among prisoners (see 4ii and 4iii), as well as to the imported factor that many prisoners in Whatton did not identify with criminal norms and were used to working with legal authorities (Irwin and Cressey, 1962). It is also likely that the frequency of grassing was a consequence as well as a cause of the absence of the drugs economy, as it was less necessary for prisoners to enforce the norm against grassing.

Thus although drugs constituted a less severe threat to safety than they did in mainstream prisons, they still played a significant role.

The fear that personal relationships might be manipulated was a source of much anxiety in Whatton, especially as the prisoners were all sex offenders. Younger men, such as 24-year-old Malik, were concerned about sexual manipulation:

> *I feel safe everywhere but some places … you can't feel that proper safe, because there's ... a lot of paedophiles in here. And they're dangerous, do you understand what I'm saying? Because they pick on the vulnerables. Like, what they call grooming and everything. You need to watch out for them kind of things.*

Although Malik fiercely denied being afraid, he believed that weaker prisoners might be more susceptible to being taken advantage of. This partly resulted from cultural myths about the sex offender as a manipulative predator – note his reference to 'what they call grooming'.

This anxiety was not baseless. Anwar, the youngest research participant, was a vulnerable prisoner who reported feeling depressed, and had resorted to the recreational use of medication. He had 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 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.*

Owen, another prisoner in his twenties, felt 'uncomfortable' about the relationship between his former cellmate, a man in his early seventies, and a younger man of 27, although he was not certain that it was sexual:

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

Owen's fears reveal a clear strain of self-conscious anxiety about social and sexual relationships. The rarity of overtly violent incidents in Whatton should not, therefore, obscure an undercurrent of sexual manipulation, which may be related to the nature of its population. Living in a prison solely for sex offenders might have increased feelings of safety in some respects, but it did not in others.

"Boys are boys": Masculinity and status

> *I don't like to have respect, you know. What I like is just getting on with people.*
> *(Jim)*

On the surface at least, Whatton was calm and tranquil, and everyday social interactions featured very little visible violence. This was particularly striking in comparison to mainstream prisons. Many mainstream prisoners adapt to the pains of imprisonment by developing a front of 'hyper-masculinity' (Jewkes, 2005: 61), which necessitates a degree of 'controlled aggression' (Ibid.: 52–53) and the readiness to assert oneself and gain status through violence. This version of

masculinity is partly imported from the lower working-class culture from which many prisoners originate, and is partly an adaptation to the structural powerlessness they experience in prison (Newton, 1994; Crewe, 2009).

This version of masculinity was largely absent from Whatton, contributing to the feeling of safety experienced by most interviewees. Most prisoners were not "chasing after power like in a mains prison" (Anwar); they claimed that "the only hierarchy in prison is the Governor and the officers" (Graham), and there was very little need to "front" (Darren). Those who did were derided as "plastic gangsters" (Rob).

The relative absence of this culture was related to the high average age of Whatton's population. Similarly, many prisoners in Whatton were from a middle-class background, where masculinity is expressed differently (Jewkes, 2005). However, it also related to broader feelings of resignation among prisoners. The most common reaction to questions asking whether they felt a sense of power was derisive laughter. Many were on indeterminate sentences, including large numbers who had passed their minimum tariff without the necessary courses they needed to complete in order to be considered for release becoming available. There was an easily discernible sense of fear about leaving prison, where participants would be subjected to restrictive licence conditions and afraid of vigilantes. Many had been disowned by their families as a result of their convictions. Significantly, they were aware that they were also stigmatised inside prison; they knew that they were at the bottom of the prisoner hierarchy. A few of the participants said they had sought power and status in previous prisons, but they no longer looked for it in Whatton. Prisoners felt that there was no kudos to be earned there:

> *They think they're big and hard cos they're off the main wings, but really they're not, cos they're in a sex offenders' jail.*
> *(Ed)*

This is not to say that prisoners in Whatton were unconcerned with issues of status. Rather, their battles were conducted on different territory with different weapons. Middle-class men often equate status with educational qualifications and socio-economic success (Tolson, 1977). Several participants complained about the low educational standard of other prisoners, and one participant reported that many prisoners in Whatton could be "arrogant":

> *You hear, when you walk in the yard outside … there's mocking some of the people. ... Behind their back, yeah. Very, quite bitchy, actually.*
>
> *Researcher: About their intelligence levels, kind of thing?*
>
> *About their intelligence, about … who they are. That's not their crimes … I think you get that [mocking] outside, but I think here it's what I said before about it being a bubble, it comes across more. I've heard quite a lot of backstabbing and stuff. That's the main thing … between a mains prison and a sex offenders' prison. I find there's not bullying in the sense of making people feel intimidated, but there's a level of 'We're better than you' kind of thing that can come across.*
> *(Rob)*

Sex offenders in prison are often seen as 'the location of "Otherness"' (Thurston, 1996: 144) against which, in the absence of women, hegemonic masculinity can define itself; this has been given as an explanation for the violence and abuse they receive from other prisoners (Ibid.). Prisoners in Whatton asserted their status using different methods: rather than open teasing, 'fronting' or violence, they mocked and teased people behind their backs. Rob described this behaviour as "bitchy", a word which is commonly used to describe female behaviour (or certain perceptions of female behaviour). The emasculation of prisoners in Whatton was such that, even among sex offenders, their status battles could be maligned for being un-masculine.

ii) Identity

"Most of them treat you as a human being rather than a prisoner": Relaxation and resignation

> *Everybody here is in for a sex offence. … You never get asked which sex offence you're in for. You could walk about without ... officers following you around. I've never heard anybody call anybody names here, because of what they're in for, because everybody's the same. Nobody knows.*
> *(Simon)*

Prisoners in Whatton said that the environment was noticeably different to their previous prisons, as prisoners convicted of sex offences were in less obvious danger. They referred to Whatton as one of the "comfortablest places to be and do your time, doing what you've done" (Mitchell). Simon said that coming to Whatton felt "like a ton weight lifted off your shoulders" because there were fewer restrictions on movement and prisoners were less likely to be victimised. Those prisoners who had been on VPUs in their previous prisons reported that they had been escorted by officers when walking around the rest of the prison, which meant that "there was no getting away from the fact that you were a prisoner" (Troy); this supports Sparks et al.'s (1996) argument than imprisonment is uniquely deep on VPUs in dispersal prisons. Whatton, on the other hand, was less dangerous and prisoners were subjected to less obtrusive methods of ensuring their safety. This meant that "you don't have to lie about what your crime is" and "everybody's personality is allowed to come out" (Simon).

Prisoners in Whatton recognised that this freedom was only partial, and that the prison retained its underlying coercive power:

> *There's some kind of freedom, yeah, you can be yourself a little bit, but then you've also got your prison rules and that is it. You don't break the rules, because if you break the rules, you get a warning or you go down the seg [segregation unit].*
> *(George)*

To put it simply, prisoners were given freedom, as long as they used it correctly. They were constantly observed and risk assessed, and their actions could be placed on their reports and be the basis of decisions made about them at a later date. Crewe (2011) argues that this way of using power is typical of the late-modern prison. Until the early 1990s, many 'pains and abuses [of imprisonment] were the consequences of *institutional failings* and *unchecked power*' (Ibid.: 511, emphasis in the original); the late-modern prison, however, 'is less directly oppressive, but more gripping – *lighter*

but tighter (Ibid.: 524, emphasis in the original). Whatton prison was neither abusive nor oppressive, but prisoners' behaviour and identities were 'grip[ped], harnesse[d] and appropriate[d]' (Ibid.) by the prison. As shall be discussed, this was manifested particularly in the treatment practices within the prison, but it was also reflected in day-to-day life on the wings. Many mainstream prisoners find the constant observation of their behaviour and consequent need to monitor themselves painful, but many prisoners in Whatton paradoxically found it liberating:

> *I think because you've got more freedom here, not so much restriction, but more freedom to behave or to walk around ... [and] to be able to be who you are. But also to be able to work on who you are and where you want to go.*
> *(Graham)*

Graham seemed to have absorbed the language of psychologists and cognitive-behavioural courses – "work on who you are" – exemplifying the governmental techniques on which Whatton depended, and which many of its prisoners embraced more willingly than prisoners elsewhere.

Graham, like many prisoners in Whatton, evidently felt that he needed to change his identity and become someone else. He therefore willingly embraced the prison's attempts to make him into a compliant prisoner and participant in treatment. Prisoners' willingness to accept the prison's power arguably resulted from the fact that their identities had already been damaged by their convictions. Most prisoners find that imprisonment changes their identity (Goffman, 1961/1987), and this change can be starker and more painful for prisoners convicted of sexual offences. Many participants had no contact with their families, generally because they had been disowned as a result of their offences (although a few were prevented from seeing their children by official authorities).[8] Early prison sociologists referred to prison as a 'total institution' which caused a near-complete break with the pre-prison identity (Ibid.). Although this is not generally considered to be the case in the twenty-first century (Crewe, 2007), imprisonment for a sex offence often changed people's relationships and identities beyond recognition:

> *Well, it's not a natural environment, so how can you be yourself? … Myself is being a husband and a father and a grandfather, and I can't be that.*
> *(Arthur)*

Prisoners were no longer able to be themselves, or at least who they used to be. Many (but not all) prisoners managed this situation by trying to change who they were, acting in accordance with the demands of the prison's light but tight power (Crewe, 2011).

"I'm not a sex offender. I committed a sex offence": Guilt and stigma

> *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)*

> *It takes over your life because it's part of your 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)*

8 Of the 22 interviewed, 7 participants had no contact with anyone outside. More had lost contact with some members of their family, but not everyone. Others received letters or phone calls, but their families would not visit them "cos of the type of jail it is" (Ed).

Simon and Arthur were answering the same question: "Do you feel at all defined by your conviction?" Simon was unwilling to accept the sex offender identity which he felt had been imposed on him, whereas Arthur saw a greater connection between what he had done and who he was (or who he would be in the future). Foucault (1976/1998) argues that in the modern world, sexual acts are inextricably intertwined with identities, and this conflation applies particularly to those we label sex offenders (Hudson, 2005). In order to negotiate an existence in which deviant sexual acts lead to deviant identities, the prisoners interviewed spoke about their convictions and their sense of self in ways which distinguished between their guilt (the act committed) and their stigma (the label received). However, this was easier said than done.

Goffman (1963/1990: 15) defines a stigmatised individual as one who possesses 'a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us'. A stigma cannot be controlled by the individual: '[i]t is a question of the individual's condition, not his will; it is a question of conformance, not compliance' (Ibid.: 153). Using Goffman's definition, conviction for a sexual offence cannot be classified as a stigma. However, prisoners suggested that a sex offence was a unique act of non-compliance as it became a 'condition' and resulted in the master-label of being a sex offender. Unsurprisingly, they resented this:

> *I accept that I've committed the crime, but … I don't think of myself as a nonce. 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)*

Fears about stigmatisation converged on the outside world. Prisoners were particularly concerned about the negative public perception of sex offenders, the need to sign the Sex Offenders' Register (in some cases for life), the restrictive licence conditions they would receive, and the risks of recall (see also Digard, 2010a, 2010b).

Prisoners tried to protect their positive sense of identity from the stigma's corrupting influence. In order to be transferred to Whatton, prisoners had to be willing to participate in the SOTP and therefore they could not (officially) be in denial. Unable or unwilling to repudiate their guilt, they found other ways of managing their identities. Gordon, who was 72 when he went to prison for the first time ("I did 72 year[s] and I never … even had a parking ticket"), exemplifies the tension between accepting guilt and accepting responsibility:

> *That [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…*
>
> *Researcher: 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 described it as though he was only passively involved, thus separating his pre-prison identity from the offence. Other prisoners differentiated between who they were when they committed the offence, and who they were now:

> *No, I don't look at it [the conviction] as who I am. That's who I was.*
> *(Evan)*

One prisoner, Dave, claimed to feel like a different person as a result of having committed rape, saying "now I look at myself as an animal". Passionately embracing guilt, thereby presenting oneself as someone with moral feeling, is one method of identity management (Hudson, 2005), and Dave appeared to be doing this. He referred to the offence as "one big mistake", indicating an attempt to differentiate between his true identity and the rape. By demarcating their identities in this way – either by claiming to have changed or by separating the offence from the type of person they considered themselves to be – every prisoner interviewed presented himself as someone who was not intrinsically immoral. These techniques were encouraged by SOTP courses like 'Becoming New Me', which was available in the prison.

Late-modern rehabilitative practices have been criticised for recruiting sex offenders into their own management and reconstituting them as subjects who are 'consumed by sex' (Lacombe, 2008: 72; for the psychologically painful consequences of similar practices for mainstream prisoners, see Crewe, 2011). Most of the participants seemed indifferent to the SOTP courses, seeing them simply as "what I need to do to get out" (Mike). Others, however, were willing participants, insisting that courses helped the process of "finding yourself" (Evan), although they maintained responsibility for these changes, contending that "you only get out what you put in" (Simon).

A similar number were resentful of psychologists and courses, accusing them of "look[ing] for criminality where there is none" (Matthew). These reproaches supported Lacombe's argument:

> *The biggest bullying 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 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)*

Sam believed that he was no longer permitted to make claims about his own identity. He was condemned on factual as well as moral grounds. Foucault (1976/1998: 64–65) argues that the scientia sexualis of the modern Western world relies on 'an interference between two modes of the production of truth: procedures of confession, and scientific discursivity'. Truth is produced in confession, but s/he who confesses is 'blind' (Ibid.: 66) to it; rather '[t]he one who listen[s…is] the master of truth' (Ibid.: 67). By criticising psychologists and insisting on his own individuality, Sam attempted to resist their power and retain a sense of his subjective identity.

"Nobody's better than you, nobody's worse than you": Attitudes to (other) sex offenders

> *It's something you just try to shut out. That guy 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)*

A few prisoners claimed that living in Whatton "tainted" them, making them feel like "a grouped sex offender" rather than "an individual case" (Owen).[9] Everyone in Whatton had been labelled as a sex offender, and the way people thought about themselves was unavoidably tied to how they saw other prisoners. The prisoners in Whatton had committed a range of offences, but it was frequently claimed that there was no hierarchy as "we're all sex offenders, no matter what we're in for, we're all exactly the same" (Dave). These arguments were predicated on an equality of stigma, not of guilt: they were the same because of how they were labelled, not because of what they had done. Some went as far as arguing that all sex offences were the same:

> *People aren't alike. The, the crimes that they've committed aren't alike. But what I'm trying to say is that any sex offence, particularly involving children, is … I think, all the same. Just once is as bad as another. I don't think, you know, it doesn't matter whether, well, what it is, it's still bad, and I don't think, it's not for me to judge one thing worse than another.*
> *(Arthur)*

Arthur's answer – in particular his claim that the offences committed are "the same" but not "alike" – indicates the difficulty of maintaining this position.

Prisoners claimed to judge people based on within-prison behaviour rather than on their offences. As Arthur put it, "you look at the person, not what they did". In part, this results from the structural impact of imprisonment, which functions 'as an equalizing force' (Crewe, 2009: 276) by creating a break with pre-prison identities. Institutional demands and psychological power also encouraged this attitude: prisoners reported that staff told them on their first night in Whatton that "everyone's the same" (Mitchell), probably because comparing oneself favourably to others is a common method of denial (Hudson, 2005). The most significant reason for claiming not to judge people based on their offences, however, was that people did not want to be judged on the same basis:

> *At the end of the day ... [my conviction is] ... 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)*

Prisoners in Whatton sought to protect themselves from stigmatisation by insisting that what they had done did not accurately represent their current identity, and they tried to retain this principle when evaluating other prisoners.

This is not to say that they were always successful. Goffman (1963/1990: 17) insists that '[t]he stigmatized individual tends to hold the same beliefs about identity that we do', as s/he was socialised into the same norms; therefore, s/he may feel disgust both at his own stigma and at the similarly stigmatised. Although Whatton's prisoners theoretically distinguished between offences and identities, this was difficult to maintain in practice. Several prisoners admitted that "paedophiles" were sometimes considered "a lower form of sex offender" (Rob). The research participants insisted they avoided finding out about people's offences so they could continue to think positively about them:

9 Two prisoners suggested that the label carried by Whatton's prisoners could cause problems if they were transferred.

> *When people come up to me and they say to me "Oh, he's in for this," I say I don't wanna know, so that if I've ever spoke to that person before, then I'm not gonna be prejudiced against 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)*

Most prisoners fought to live in ignorance of the nature of people's crimes. In Whatton, therefore, people's convictions were "floating" (Matthew): they were never forgotten and yet remained unacknowledged. Goffman (1963/1990) states:

> *The stigmatized individual exhibits a tendency to stratify his 'own' according to the degree to which their stigma is apparent and obtrusive. ... It is in his affiliation with, or separation from, his more evidently stigmatized fellows, that the individual's oscillation of identification is most sharply marked.*
> *(pp. 130–31).*

By avoiding discussing – or even contemplating – other people's convictions, prisoners tried to prevent their own from becoming 'apparent'.

The idea that Whatton's prisoners were judged at "face value" (Gordon) takes on a different meaning when it is considered that stigma can obtrude in different ways. A few participants reported that prisoners who were old, bearded and had wheelchairs or walking sticks were sometimes bullied because they "look the standard photo fit" (Mitchell) of a sex offender. Anwar admitted having bullied someone because "he fitted the picture of a paedophile", justifying his actions whilst acknowledging their irrational basis:

> *When I go out, I mean … you can't tell [what] a paedophile … look[s] like. You can't. Some of them look like them and they're not. You've got to be very careful. It's gonna have an effect on how I see things.*

That some prisoners grasped onto materialisations of stigmas, while accepting their irrelevance, indicates the suspicion engendered by trying to ignore people's convictions.

When looking at other sex offenders, prisoners in Whatton tried to prevent offences (what people had done) from seeping into beings (who people were). That they struggled to do so showed that, like most people, they conflated acts and identities. Arthur, who tried to judge people by their in-prison behaviour, admitted that this was sometimes difficult as "you're a human being". While this failure indicated their normality, it simultaneously endangered their positive identities by suggesting that their stigmatisation was justified.

iii) Relationships

"You meet some really good people": Friendliness and friendship

> *Apart from the fact we're sex offenders … we're almost normal people. ... And normal people make friendships.*
> *(Arthur)*

Sykes (1958/2007) argues that a prison's culture is determined by its balance between solidarity and alienation. Imprisonment promotes an inherently situational form of social engagement, while simultaneously imposing limitations on the

development of trust and therefore cohesion (Liebling assisted by Arnold, 2004; Crewe, 2009). Sztompka (1999: 25) defines trust as 'a bet about the future contingent actions of others', the grounds for which 'come down to certain knowledge, information obtained by the truster about the trustee' (Ibid.: 70). By their nature, prisons inhibit this knowledge, and the only reliable information prisoners have about people's previous lives is that they have been convicted of a criminal offence. Mitchell, for example, said he was unable to trust prisoners either in Whatton or in his previous prison "cos obviously I'd never known them before, and they're criminals". One would expect these structural impediments to exert particular pressure in Whatton, as the offences in question were all sexual. However, whereas some theorists believe that the lack of honour pertaining to particular crimes promotes atomisation (Mathieson, 1965), others suggest that stigmatisation can lead groups to coalesce (Goffman, 1963/1990). Prisoners in Whatton were united by their stigma (as it was commonly stated, "we're all in the same boat") but divided by their offences, uneasily poised between concord and contempt.

The prisoners in Whatton were unwilling to admit to forming judgements based on other people's offences. Most participants reported that "everybody speaks to everybody in here" (Simon), and so the "wing atmosphere" was "friendlier" (Owen) than in other prisons:

> *We're all in the same boat. All of us. Don't matter what we'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)*

In public at least, prisoners expressed feelings of solidarity and cohesion. When it came to personal property, Whatton was unusually trusting. Most participants left their doors unlocked, and very few reported thefts from cells – yet another marked contrast to the VPUs many prisoners had come from. This resulted partly from the absence of an illegal drugs economy, as well as from the fact that far fewer prisoners had been convicted of property offences, and it contributed to Whatton's sense of safety. Nevertheless, a significant group of prisoners, mainly fathers of young children, were concerned about letting people in their cells, fearing that they might look at or steal their family photographs. This is also the case in mainstream prisons (Crewe, 2009), and therefore it arguably reflects the paranoia engendered by imprisonment itself, and not just imprisonment alongside sex offenders.

Mainstream prisoners rarely foster meaningful friendships while they are in prison (Morris and Morris, 1963). Limitations on trust (Crewe, 2009), the break with pre-prison life (Liebling assisted by Arnold, 2004) and the risk of transfer (Cohen and Taylor, 1972) inhibit their instigation and development. Although relationships do develop in prison, mainstream prisoners stress their situational and superficial nature (Glaser, 1964), referring to people as 'associates', 'acquaintances' or 'prison friends' (Crewe, 2009). This was also the case for most of the research participants:

> *They're only associates in jail. You're not gonna see them again when you get out. … I would probably just stay near with them and that, I won't connect with them.*
> *(Ed)*

> *I don't call them friendships in here. I just call them acquaintances, because at the end of the day, there's some people in here you will never ever see again. (Nathan)*

Proper friendships are normally only possible between mainstream prisoners who know each other from previous sentences (Morris and Morris, 1963) or who recognise each other from their local area (Crewe, 2009). Similarly, two of Whatton's younger prisoners, both of whom had been on mainstream wings in their previous prisons, claimed that friendships were only possible between people from the same locality because:

> *We know what area we're from, do you understand, we know each other. (Malik)*

These situations provided more information on which to ground judgements about an individual's character, counteracting imprisonment's constraints on trust. However, very few participants thought that being from the same area enabled friendships. As it was a specialist prison, Whatton's prisoners came from all over the country and were therefore unlikely to see people they knew or recognised. Furthermore, the territorial attachment to locality, and therefore the propensity to form friendships based on sharing it, is a feature of mainstream working-class masculinity (Jewkes, 2005; Crewe, 2009). As many prisoners in Whatton came from a middle-class background, they did not import this association.

A particular restriction on the development of friendships – one which is professed by prison sociologists, mainstream prisoners (Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Crewe, 2009) and most of the participants – is the fact that prison life is almost always temporary and almost everyone will be released or transferred. Despite this, some of the participants in the study had stayed in touch with friends from previous prisons, suggesting that relationships need not always be situational. This was particularly likely if one party had been disowned by their family. However, release constituted a particular problem in Whatton, as the licence conditions for people convicted of sex offences often placed restrictions on communicating with other known sex offenders.[10] Simon had lost contact with a close friend after his release, as "writing to me could be classed as a sex offence". Apparently innocuous elements of relationships had been reconstituted as sites not simply of risk (Lacombe, 2008) but of immorality. Prisoners felt that their relationships had been corrupted by their stigma, in the eyes of the Probation Service at least. Sam described the loss of these friendships as "tragic" and "choking", and attempted to protect himself by not fully committing to relationships with other prisoners:

> *If you have a friend outside, you'll be 100 per cent friends with them. In here, you can only be about 70 per cent friends with them, because it's like every one of your friends have cancer or something, they're gonna suddenly die one day.*

Liebling (assisted by Arnold, 2004) suggests that the shallow nature of many relationships results from the protective masks worn by prisoners to help them survive their sentences. This mask was less necessary in Whatton, as the absence

10 Prisoners were possibly unfair to blame the Probation Service for every lost friendship. Although many prisoners gave examples of friends who had failed to write after their release and blamed licence restrictions for this, mainstream prisoners report similar experiences (Crewe, 2009). It is likely that, at least sometimes, relationships which had seemed significant before release seem less so afterwards, and that those left behind had been forgotten.

of a culture of masculine aggression enabled people to display frailty. Rob described how other prisoners looked after him when his grandfather died. Although at times he felt that they were "striving to get gossip", he believed that most of these actions were genuinely "compassionate":

> *It's not something that's superficial or enforced or put on. They're coming round to see how I am, and, and that's nice.*

The differences between the culture in Whatton and that which often developed in other prisons was illustrated by Darren's experiences. Darren had developed close and supportive friendships with other prisoners in Whatton. He spoke movingly of the fact that his friends always "seem to be there to pick the pieces up", for example after emotional phone calls with his family or on his children's birthdays. He could cry in front of them without worrying about looking like a "pussy". This had not been the case in his previous prisons, where he had been on mainstream wings and had felt unable to display such sensitivity:

> *If I'm in a vulnerable state [in Whatton], I know no-one's gonna try and come and test me. Where in another jail, if someone sees that you're vulnerable or you start letting someone pick on you a little bit, that's it, they'll come and bully you and bully you and bully you until you lash out, and then that's it then. So I think that's probably the reason why [I've been able to develop meaningful friendships in Whatton], you know, cos I know it don't matter what state I get in, no-one's gonna come and try and do anything.*

Experiences like Darren's challenge the conventional argument that imprisonment structurally prohibits meaningful relationships between prisoners (see, for example, Crewe, 2009). While friendships may be unavoidably situational, they are not necessarily shallow or false.

"I'm doing my time, you do yours": Trust and hierarchy

> *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 probably could trust quite a lot of them, but you don't know them, do you? That's the thing.*
> *(Anwar)*

As described above, Whatton's public culture was friendly and compassionate, but this masked the ever-present spectre of prisoners' convictions. Most prisoners interviewed insisted that offences were rarely discussed openly, but they also accepted that rumours, often originating in SOTP courses, spread quickly. Aware that this was the case, and that prisoners often made judgements based on appearances, some prisoners told others what their offences were:

> *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.*
> *(Ed)*

Most participants expressed scepticism concerning people's claims about their convictions. The belief that "you can't trust anyone here, because people lie about why they're here in the first place" led prisoners to listen carefully to 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 walked a tightrope, needing to discuss their convictions, but not too much, aware that mis-stepping in either direction could be taken as a sign of the nature of their crime.

There was therefore a clear tension between the desire to preserve a positive sense of identity and the paranoia created by knowing that prisoners were sex offenders but not knowing what sex offences they had committed (or, what kind of sex offender they were). Prisoners tried to protect themselves from stigma by claiming not to be interested in people's offences, and yet they did not "want to be associated with people that have done horrific crimes" (Owen), because they risked being further stigmatised by the company they kept. Whatton functioned as a mirror and prisoners realised that other people's guilt reflected on them. Although they claimed to judge people based on their in-prison behaviour, they were cautious of trusting prisoners without knowing the facts about their offences.

Therefore claims from a few prisoners that offences had no impact on the structure of social relationships were farfetched.[11] Prisoners tried not to let offences affect close friendships. Darren said that the "bond" he felt for his friends meant that he could "look past what [... they]'ve done" and "see them for them". Ed claimed that he would be more forgiving of a prisoner who had committed offences against children if he had already formed a relationship with him, "because I know him more". Nevertheless, those convicted of offences against young children were considered 'less likely to form the ... nice bonds that ... prisoners do have in here' (Owen), and therefore to establish relationships which could overrule their offences.

This is not to say that there was a conventional offence-based hierarchy in Whatton. Prisoners who were convicted of particularly serious offences, especially against young children, were rarely completely marginalised, but nor were they embraced:

> *I wouldn't be friends with them, but if they said "Alright" to me as I was walking by, I would say hello. I'm not a person who's gonna go "Yeah, fuck off."* *(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)*

In part, this results from the involuntary and indiscriminating social interaction imposed by imprisonment. Unlike in mainstream prisons, paedophiles were neither a minority nor obviously segregated.[12] It would be almost impossible, and certainly impractical, to avoid associating with people convicted of such offences in Whatton. At least some degree of social engagement is therefore encouraged, and in the 'volatile and compressed' (Crewe, 2009: 302) environment of the prison, life is much easier if people get along.

As well as being structurally determined, there were institutional inducements to civility and tolerance in Whatton. 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 Whatton, but "either they change their

11 Prisoners' perceptions of the hierarchy are dependent on their position within it (Crewe, 2009). It may be that those who insisted that convictions did not affect social relationships were at the bottom, and therefore had the most to lose by admitting to its existence. Without knowing what prisoners were convicted of, it is difficult to ascertain whether this was the case.

12 The Governing Governor said that 692 of Whatton's 838 prisoners had been convicted of offences against people under the age of 16.

attitude very quickly, or they get moved". The prison's therapeutic ideals also promoted courteous interactions among prisoners:

> *Everyone sort of clicks in some way, cos obviously, especially when you've gotta go on courses and you've … got to be respectful to people that, listening to whatever they've done, you know what I mean? You have to be respectful, otherwise you're just getting bad reports. What's the point? (Darren)*

Psychological reports can determine progression through the system, a fact borne in mind by pragmatic prisoners (Crewe, 2009, 2011). Comparing oneself to others is a common method of denial, and one which the prison wanted to preclude. In this context, the absence of an obvious hierarchy can be partly attributed to a combination of coercive and psychological power, and the depth and sincerity of the cordiality promoted should not be exaggerated.

Malik's experiences exemplified the ways in which coercive and institutional power structured social relationships and moral hierarchies. When he was in mainstream prisons, he "used to look at the paedophiles and that shit and [think] 'you dirty little cunts'". Although he did not report being violent towards (those he suspected of being) sex offenders, he claimed to have considered it. Malik partly attributed his change of attitude to an Enhanced Thinking Skills course, although he also thought that he changed when he was moved onto the VPU in his previous prison to do an SOTP course and discovered to his surprise that the VPs were "nice dudes". A turning point in the moral career of a stigmatised individual is, Goffman (1963/1990: 53) argues, the discovery 'that full-fledged members of the group are quite like ordinary human beings'. Malik had been through this process but was still unhappy about living with sex offenders, calling their offences "disgusting".

Goffman (Ibid.: 132) argues that the stigmatised individual aligns himself with similarly stigmatised people while retaining his instinctive opposition to the stigma: '[i]n brief, he can neither embrace his group nor let it go'. This is also the case for prisoners in Whatton, but the dilemma is greater for them. It stems from moral condemnation of offences as much as from normative distaste at stigmas. Furthermore, the group is formed not by a desire for inclusion, but, to some degree, by coercive power.

5. Conclusion

"This isn't a real prison": Whatton and the sociology of prison life

> *You don't need to worry about making this a better place. This one, this one's alright. It's just that it…it's just the way you feel in here.*
> *(Anwar)*

Whatton was marked by its dual culture. On the surface, it was calm, kind and non-judgemental, a clear contrast to many mainstream prisons and to the experiences of many of Whatton's prisoners in their previous prisons. Yet beneath this placid exterior, there was an underlying unease about social relationships, fear of sexual manipulation, of being further stigmatised by forming relationships with the wrong people, and of opening yourself up to judgement. In part, these fears resulted from the structural constraints of prison life and the resulting inhibition of trust. Yet they also resulted from the particular stresses of living as a sex offender among other sex offenders, stresses which were intensified by the difficulties of gaining knowledge about other prisoners' offences. Despite Whatton's apparent safety, prisoners faced invisible dangers. Bauman (2006: 2) argues:

> *Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free floating, with no clear address or cause; when it haunts us with no visible rhyme or reason, when the menace we should be afraid of can be glimpsed everywhere but it is nowhere to be seen.*

Mainstream prisoners face the threat (which normally remains the threat) of violence, but Whatton's prisoners were preoccupied with the symbolic dangers they faced, contributing to a culture dominated by a different kind of anxiety.

The experience of imprisonment in Whatton was remarkably different to that in a mainstream prison. The drugs economy was underdeveloped, contributing to its sense of safety. The lack of a culture of 'hypermasculinity' (Jewkes, 2005: 61) allowed prisoners to display weakness and friendships to develop. On the other hand, living alongside sex offenders created new problems and affected the ways prisoners constructed their identities. Although there was little threat of violence, status was determined in more insidious ways, in particular by talking about people behind their back. Attempts to distinguish between people's offences and their identities meant that there was not an obvious hierarchy based on index offence, and yet prisoners struggled to avoid judging those who had committed particularly serious crimes, especially those against young children.

By taking account of the experiences of sex offenders in Whatton, this report has questioned some of the assumptions made about imprisonment, almost all of which are based on the experiences of mainstream prisoners. However, its main contribution is to highlight the distinctive experiences of imprisoned sex offenders. The struggle of managing their identities against the pressure of their offences, the condemnation of the outside world and the concealed judgement of other prisoners constituted an additional pain of imprisonment for Whatton's residents. This resulted primarily from the fact that sexuality has been seen as an unchangeable core of and key to identity (Foucault, 1976/1998), but it was fostered by the decision to accommodate sex offenders together. Liebling (assisted by Arnold, 2004: 166) argues that we should not believe 'that programmes are a "holy grail", without regard to the *context* in which they are delivered' (emphasis in the orginal).

An SOTP course which seeks to promote empathy, increase responsibility and encourage prisoners to develop new identities will struggle to counteract a context in which prisoners are constantly, albeit unwillingly, judging each other. Prisons like Whatton aim to create a 'safe and supportive environment' (Guy 1992: 1), allowing prisoners to work on their offending behaviour and enabling personal development. Prisoners reported that Whatton was comparatively safe; yet, while the psychological discourse which pervaded Whatton encouraged civility among prisoners, it struggled to defeat the involuntary unease felt about sex offences and sex offenders. However, this should not be seen as a failure of Whatton, but as a consequence of the strong negative feelings most people have towards sex offenders (Ferguson and Ireland, 2006).

This study has described and offered explanations for several features of Whatton's social world. However, there are other areas which could be usefully addressed in future research. In particular, this study has not considered relationships between staff and sex offenders, an area of significance to the experiences of VPs (Ahmad, 1996; Sparks et al., 1996; Drake, 2006) and mainstream prisoners (Liebling and Price, 2001). The dominant view of research participants was that "the staff are not discriminating to prisoners because of their offence" (Evan). On the other hand, several prisoners offered examples of individual members of staff – in Whatton and elsewhere – who had insulted prisoners about their convictions. Prisoners protected their identities from the corroding influence of their offences by claiming that other prisoners judged them based on their within-prison behaviour, and it seems likely that this was also the case with staff. Future research should explore staff attitudes to and relationships with imprisoned sex offenders. Other areas of interest which emerged from this research include the apparent prevalence of 'grassing' and the alleged frequency of sexual grooming among prisoners.

The research suggests that social relationships in Whatton were structured by prisoners' attempts to manage their identities, and it is likely that the interviews were affected by similar concerns. Prisoners were unwilling to admit to developing a hierarchy or to judging people based on their offences. Future research with a greater ethnographic dimension should test whether this is the case. Witnessing day-to-day life among sex offenders would allow the researcher to observe the consequences and realities of power flows among prisoners (Crewe, 2009), and not just what they say about them.

It is hoped that this exploration of Whatton's social world has highlighted differences between life as a mainstream prisoner, as a sex offender living in a mainstream prison, and as a sex offender living among sex offenders. One cannot generalise from the social world of one establishment to the social world of all prisons. Similarly one cannot assume that the experiences of a sex offender in Whatton will be shared by a sex offender elsewhere. The next stage in the development of a sociology of prison life for sex offenders should be a comparative study, taking account of prisoners' experiences in different prisons. While increasing numbers of prisoners are held in prisons which only accommodate sex offenders, only some of these, like Whatton, are 'treatment hubs' (Barrett, 2014). Many sex offenders are still accommodated on VPUs. Comparing the experiences of prisoners in different institutions would allow greater distinctions to be drawn between the experience of life as an imprisoned sex offender and the experience of life as a sex offender in a particular prison.

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