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Turning points or dead ends? Identity, desistance and the experience of life imprisonment

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Life imprisonment in England & Wales – key facts (PRT, 2017: 28-9)

Number of lifers	2017:	7,216
As proportion of all sentenced prisoners	1993:	9%
	2017:	15%
Average tariff (i.e. minimum term)	2003:	12.5 years
	2017:	21.3 years
Proven reoffending rates (Oct-Dec 2015)	All sentenced prisoners:	48.3%
	Lifers:	4.3%



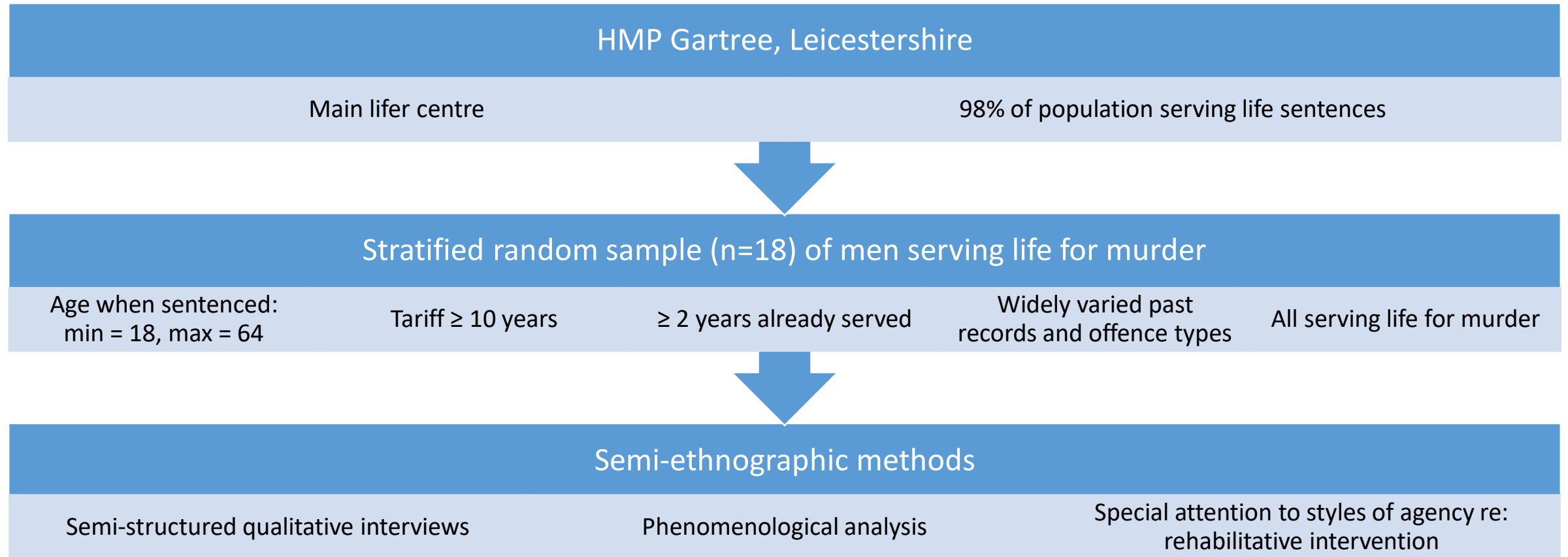
Gaps in knowledge on life imprisonment

'[L]ife-course and criminal career research has largely failed to document psychological, social, and behavioral changes that occur during periods of incarceration. This oversight is particularly noteworthy in the case of individuals serving long sentences, as they spend a significant portion of the life course behind bars. The policies and programs targeting prisoners are seldom tailored to long termers and lifers, and we know little about effective interventions, or even how to measure effectiveness, for this population [...] the desistance literature has largely ignored changes that occur during [imprisonment].'

(Kazemian & Travis, 2015: 355 and 376, emphasis added)



Research aims and methods



'Neo-paternalist' rehabilitation?

*'[Risk-reducing intervention posits] a particular version of rehabilitation. It has **authoritarian as well as humanitarian** features. It is **more paternalistic than maternalistic, more pushy than caring**, and more prescriptive than liberal [...] It is tight and intrusive, yet in some ways imperceptible; its grip is firm and enduring, yet its character is soft and light [...] **[A]ssistance and authority** are interlinked: the smack of firm government is poised in the background to make sure that opportunity [...] and self-correction are grasped and pursued appropriately.'*

(Crewe, 2009: 448)



Dimension 1: sentence stage (see also Crewe, Hulley & Wright, 2016)

Early in
the
sentence

- Disorientation, shock, 'temporal vertigo'
- Denial/minimisation re: offence
- Legal appeals?
- Reliance on past markers of identity
- 'Defensive' approach to risk-reducing intervention



The view from early in the sentence...

*There is no way I'm going to admit to this case [...] even if I lose my appeals [...] [Can] you imagine [...] they will not release me because I haven't... [makes dismissive noise] **How can you hold someone who's done their time, for not doing a course? That's the rebel in me, there.'***

Richard (39 y.o.), 22-year tariff, 3 years served

*'If I was to do [offending behaviour] courses now, when I am getting towards the end of my sentence **those courses will be obsolete.** And so I will probably have to repeat [them].'*

Joe (30 y.o.), 28-year tariff, 2 years served



The view from later in the sentence

*‘Some people will turn up with a big sentence, and they’re **in denial** what they’ve done. They **don’t want to talk about it, it’s too painful**: [adopts small, pitiful voice] “I didn’t do it.” They did do it, but really, deep down, they want to look at the appeal process. They’re **not gonna wear it**. There is that process. You can’t just say to somebody, “look, you need to change, and do this”, without that person actually going through that process.’*

John (59 y.o.). 21-year tariff, 11 years served



Dimension 2: stage of life

*'I [made] enquiries about going home [when the end comes]. And he said, 'The trouble is, I can't do nothing [...] that's the Home Office, that's [their decision] [...] See, **the Home Office don't know nothing about me, really.** They don't know I'm a decent chap in prison, they just know I'm in prison.'*

Desmond (73 y.o.), 14-year tariff, 7 years served



Dimension 2: stage of life

Convicted in later life

- 'Protecting' the self
- The offence as an irrelevance
- The sentence as a search for comfort
- Agency as a search for reconciliation to one's predicament



Dimension 2: stage of life

Convicted as a young man

- 'Correcting' the self
- The offence as a mistake
- The sentence as a 'hiatus'
- Agency as the search for a better future



The view from early in the life course – ‘corrective’ agency

*‘I want to have a family, you know? That’s all I want. My father was an evil fucking bastard. My mum was damaged from all the things that happened to her. But **my kids will never have that** [...] I know I can be an awesome dad. I know I work hard for what I believe in, I know I can help people. I just want someone to love, you know?’*

Davidas (27 y.o.), 10-year tariff, 7 years served

*‘I think [I have] completely changed the way I interact with staff [...] I didn’t want to. I didn’t like it. But [staff member] said: “listen, what’s the matter with you? When you get out, what are you going to do? You’re going to be working, what are you going to say to your manager – ‘I feel uncomfortable?’ Listen, **you’re going to have to interact with people outside your social circle.**” He was right, you know.’*

Regis (27 y.o.), 18-year tariff, 6 years served



Dimension 2: stage of life

Convicted in middle age

- 'Redeeming' the self
- The offence as a 'stain' (levins 2017)
- The sentence as a search for meaning
- Agency as a search for forms of reparation



The view from later in the life course – ‘redemptive’ agency

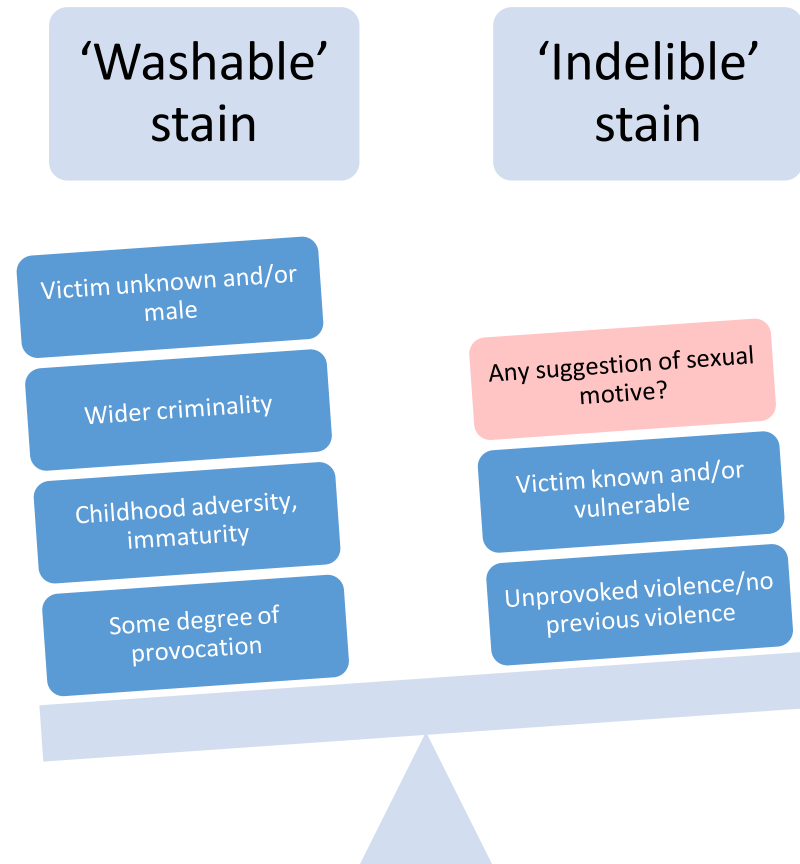
Q: How do you know when a change in you is real?

*A: It's when you don't expect it. If you've spent most of your life hating your father, because you thought he was a real bad person, and then [...] years down the road [...] **you suddenly come to the conclusion that you're worse than your father** – trust me, that's a change.'*

John (59 y.o.), 21-year tariff, 11 years served



Dimension 3: weighing up the moral 'stain' (levins 2017) of the offence



Not feeling 'stained' at all

'They say, "oh, we think you might benefit from doing PIPE." Really, what they're saying is, "WE want you to do PIPE. You've got to do PIPE [...] Because you won't be going to C-cat otherwise." [...] Or, "How can I do a violence programme? I've got no previous." Again: "oh, we think you'll benefit from it." It's just Catch-22.

Basically, I've got to do it.'

Luke (27 y.o.) 22-year tariff, 7 years served



A 'washable' stain

*'I was just lost in the world, I had no one to show me the right way [...] I grew up in care, and [...] I was just looking up to drug dealers [...] and gang bangers, and all this [...] **Because I've been so far away from it [in prison], I don't need to hold up that image any more** [...] I was just like, volatile, impulsive, and just... just not a good person [...] I didn't have any care at all. Because no one ever showed it me.'*

Andy (32 y.o.), 18-year tariff, 12 years served



A more permanent stain

*'[I was] pretty trustworthy on the surface, but under a thin veneer of respectability, I was a piece of work. For over a decade I didn't commit an offence, so to speak, [but] **that doesn't mean that my life wasn't deeply immoral, in ways you can't be prosecuted for.**'*

Max (41 y.o.), 19-year tariff, 6 years served



'Fractured' agency (see Archer 2003)

*'[B]oth of us [i.e. my victim and me], really, were heading for a deathbed from drink, and **fortune intervened** and went, "right, one of you's not, and one of you [is...]"'*

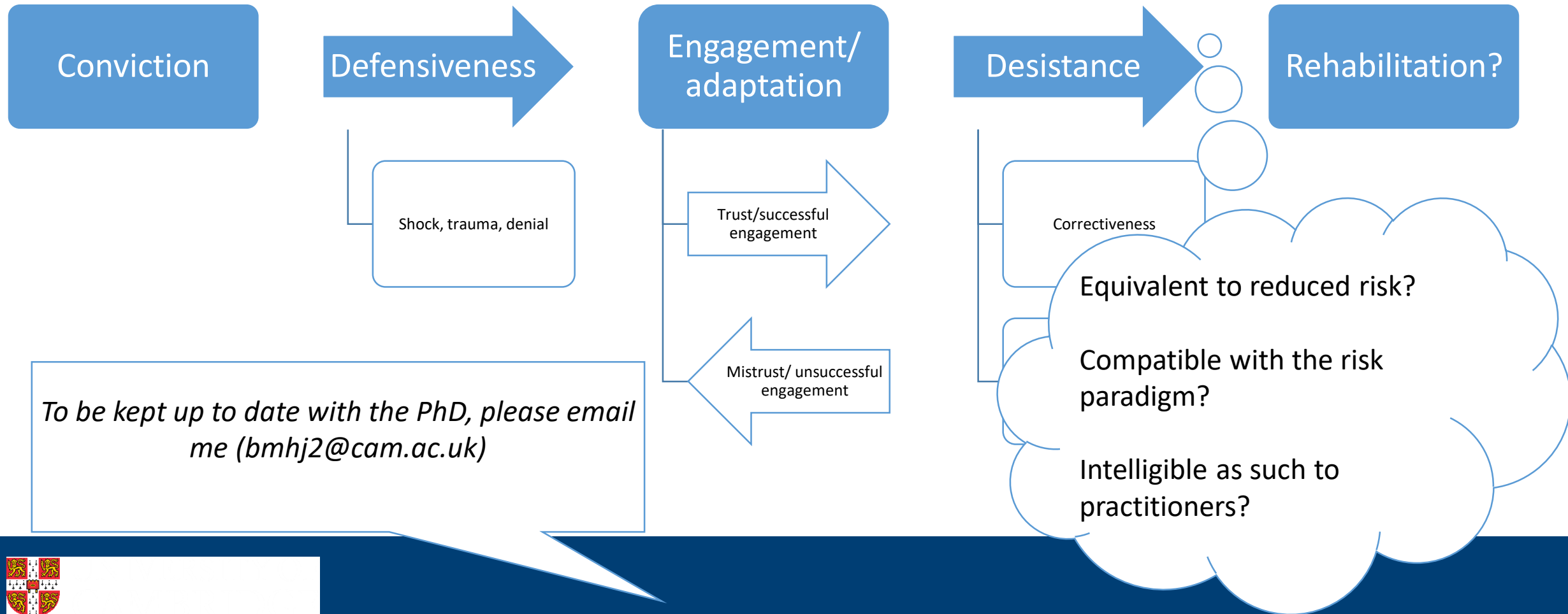
Danny (32 y.o.), 12-year tariff, 4 years served

*'[Prison's] a sweat box. It's a **storage unit for poor people**. It's purely political. There is no true, solid, real, rehabilitation.'*

Billy (42 y.o.), 13-year tariff, 8 years served



Implications and questions – a desistance pathway within prison?



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