

# Moral economy and the pursuit of desistance

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*'The desistance literature has largely ignored changes that occur during periods of incarceration [...] This research is particularly scarce with samples of long termers or lifers.'* (Kazemian and Travis 2015, 376)

*'I have to thank Gartree, in a way [...] This place has changed a lot since I came here, not all for the best, mostly it's just down, but... [long pause] This place changed ME, you know? I have emotional ties here. I will always be thankful. It is like a dysfunctional home to me.'* (Davidas)

## BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

Conventionally, the use of imprisonment is justified partly by its supposed reformatory potential (McNeill and Schinkel 2016), and rates of reoffending among life- and long-sentenced prisoners are relatively low (Ministry of Justice 2017). Yet criminological research has not generally considered the identity changes which occur among long-term prisoners *during* their sentences as potential evidence of desistance. Instead, research on desistance from crime has generally focused on what happens *after* a sentence of imprisonment, which is itself, implicitly, a purely punitive and negative experience. The sociology of imprisonment does not support such a flat, untextured view. It suggests that long-term prisoners often lose and then rediscover a sense of agency and identity (Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2016), change in their orientation towards their offences (ibid; levins 2017), and undertake a range of ethical practices whose private and public meanings can signal reformed selfhood (Williams 2017). Because the moral and social environment of a prison is so dissimilar to the outside world, it is hard to describe these practices confidently as 'desistance', despite the obvious resemblances and the changes in behaviour which sometimes go with them. This project aims to integrate these two research perspectives, to ask how prisoners' moral beliefs and ethical practices are shaped by the prison's underlying 'moral economy', and whether these adaptations constitute desistance.

## STRUCTURE AND AGENCY AMONG LONG-TERM PRISONERS

Prisoners' freedom is restricted, but they are also subject to strong incentives, provocations and temptations, making it difficult to discern the workings of human agency. For example, compliance with rehabilitative interventions cannot automatically be taken as evidence of reformed identity, because attendance is often a condition of sentence progression and eventually release. Many prisoners attend courses for instrumental reasons while simultaneously pursuing other (sometimes contradictory) ethical goals. Yet the manner of compliance (see Bottoms 2002) and the reasons given for it can be revealing. Pilot research (Jarman 2017) classified 'styles' of agency among life-sentenced prisoners at HMP Gartree, as indicated by their statements about their offences and convictions, their resulting status as moral beings, and their attitudes to rehabilitative demands. Styles of agency were strongly associated with age when sentenced and the nature of the offence.

Agency style	Account given of the offence	Prisoner's ethical priorities	Rehabilitative compliance	Post-prison expectations
'Defensive'	A private matter, someone else's fault	Vindication/self-justification	None/stalling/sullen	Remote, painful to consider
'Fractured'	Incoherent, something that 'happened'	None (self-preservation)	'Dull compulsion'	Meaningless, hopeless
'Corrective'	Immature, misguided, mistaken	Self-reform/self-correction	Instrumental	Resume life with new skills
'Redemptive'	Shameful, sinful, staining	(Self-)forgiveness	Normative	Resume life with altered sense of meaning

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

Three theoretical inferences drawn from prior research frame the study: 1) that people serving life sentences perceive moral differences between their different offences; 2) that these differences are affected by the moral discourses present in the prison; and 3) that the resulting 'moral economy' shapes the terms on which changed identity is understood to be possible. This leads to the following research questions:

1. How does desistance occur among prisoners serving life sentences for murder?
2. Under what circumstances do lifers encounter 'turning points' or 'dead ends' in the pursuit of change?
3. Do different murders attract different forms of moral censure and how does this affect expectations of desistance?
4. In what ways, and to what extent, do the different moral discourses in prison life reinforce and support desistance?

The research will be carried out using semi-ethnographic observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews, carried out in one or two prisons.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

**Funding:** a PhD studentship created collaboratively by the ESRC and Quakers in Britain

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**Progress:** Work commences in October 2018.

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