

Managing Guilt

Living as a “Sex Offender” in Prison

Being imprisoned for a sex offense is akin to being asked the questions “Who are you, and how are you going to live your life now?” Two years after completing fieldwork in Stafford, and while carrying out research for another project in another English category C prison for men convicted of sex offenses, I met and interviewed Emmett, a man who had answered these questions early in his sentence.¹ He had been arrested seven years earlier, just days after his youngest daughter had been born, and had been charged with two sexual offenses. He said that while he was held in prison awaiting his trial, he had decided to kill himself rather than “be remembered as being a sex offender”:

At that point, I can’t even begin to describe to you, Alice, I hated myself. I detested myself. I truly, truly hated myself. And because of that I didn’t want to be . . . I’m going to be honest with you, death was probably easier, because I didn’t want to be here anymore. I wanted it gone. I wanted the hatred and self-loathing I had for myself, and the guilt and shame I felt for what I’d done, and put people through, and people that I loved through, now, I wanted it to stop. I wanted it to end. And I didn’t see a way out.

Emmett was not alone when he contemplated dying by suicide. Home Office analysis of England and Wales data indicates that people arrested for sex offenses are twelve times more likely to kill themselves than people arrested for other crimes (Lindon and Roe 2017), and a recent meta-analysis and systematic review of international studies shows that people in prison for sex offenses are also at an elevated risk of suicide relative to other prisoners (Zhong et al. 2021).

Emmett said that he stopped eating for four weeks to weaken his body and increase the chances that a suicide attempt would be successful. Fearing what he might do, his family came to visit him:

We had a chat, and basically they read me the riot act [reprimanded me] and told me how selfish I was being. And going through some home truths really, that the children had a right to know and, you know, in ten years' time, the children had a right to be able to ask me why [I'd committed the offenses]. And even if they turned away from me, I've got to give them that opportunity. And also for everyone else, as well. For my family, and I guess for some of the victims. Because I felt that [my death was] what the victims and their families would want. But then people were saying, "Well actually, no, it may not be what they want."

After a night of reflection, he decided to stay alive and dedicate his life to making amends. His first step was to confess to all the crimes he had committed. He was initially arrested for two offenses against two victims and had been told by his lawyer that he was facing a two-year determinate sentence. He now confessed to dozens of other offenses against dozens of other victims, many of which had not been reported to the police, and was eventually given a life sentence with a minimum tariff of eleven years.² His attempts to cleanse himself ran into some difficulties, however. One victim, when interviewed by the police prior to the trial, accused him of an act for which he claimed innocence. In the end, Emmett pleaded not guilty to that charge, maintaining that "you can't tell a truth halfway," but he feared that continuing to maintain innocence on this charge would cause him problems when he applied for parole.

The next step was the pursuit of self-understanding and change, which he said he achieved through "a lot of self-reflection, honesty sessions with myself, my partner at the time, with my sister, with my mother, with my father and my brother, and exploring things, exploring why, why did things go wrong for me." He also participated wholeheartedly in treatment programs, believing that he deserved to be subjected to them. When I asked him if he was troubled by the fact that participating in such courses implied that he had a problematic sexuality, he was taken aback:

Who, me? Oh, you're joking, aren't you? What, with what I'm here for?

Yeah, but—

And what my past is?

Yeah, but—

No! Are you crazy?

Nevertheless, he described such programs as a secondary resource, providing him with an "affirmation" that he had changed and giving him psychological language with which he could describe himself and his thoughts.

By seeing his sentence as a chance to make amends, Emmett found a way of coping with his imprisonment which also helped him live with his guilt and his stained identity. I asked him during the interview if, seven years into his sentence, he still hated himself:

No. No I don't. I haven't for a little while. I don't like what I did. I hate what I did, and I hate the pain I've caused. But I guess to a degree I've compartmentalized it. I still have blips, do you know what I mean? I still have blips, because you know, you look at where you are, I look at the fact that I was proud of my work. I was a proud father. [pause] But, I look at where I am now, and I think, I feel happy I've done everything I can to put that part of my life behind me. I feel I've done everything I can to make good on the bad that I've done and make amends. I often check with my Offender Supervisor, or probation, and say, "Look, is there anything more I can do?"³ I can't change, I can't erase the past, and I would love to. I would happily give my life now if I could erase that past, happily. I'd do anything to erase that past. But I can't. And so I've got to accept it, accept that I don't like it, accept that I don't like my actions, I don't like what happened there, but I've done all I can to try and understand it, and prevent it happening again in future, and try to live my life well now, and I hope, when I get released, I have the opportunity to be a good person, and again, try and make amends for things that I feel I've done.

He imagined his sentence just as many moral communication theorists would: as a penitential ritual (Duff 2001) which would help him process the guilt he rightly felt, and thereby become a better person. In the concrete form which it actually took, however, this ritual was more complex than he imagined it being, and his story thus offers one illustration of what happens when an ideal of punishment comes into contact with sociological reality. First, his ritual failed to live up to its purifying promise because of differing accounts of precisely what he had done. Second, the prison didn't recognize the penance he had engaged in. Despite his attempts to align his journey of personal change with that prescribed by the prison, the prison prioritized its own institutional functioning over acknowledging the ways he was changing. As just one illustration, our interview was interrupted by Emmett's Offender Supervisor arriving to tell him that his pretariff parole hearing—a hearing which might enable him to be moved to open conditions for the last few years of his sentence—had been postponed for administrative reasons, to which he responded with equanimity.

Being arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for a sex offense imposes an inevitable break in people's identities and often shatters their personal relationships (Kotova 2016). It exposes them to a staining label, which through both shame and legal restrictions changes their social and civic identity. Faced with this reality, many people consider suicide. When people survive, they have two options. The first is to reject the "sex offender" identity and resist some of its social implications by claiming innocence. The second is to find a way of living as a "sex offender" within the conditions imposed by imprisonment. Prison sociology has a vibrant tradition of producing typologies describing how people adapt to these conditions.⁴ This literature delineates the many ways in which prisoners can orient themselves to penal power—through withdrawal, rebellion, conformity, and innovation (Crewe 2009, 149–53). However, prison sociologists' lack of interest in imprisonment's morally communicative dimensions means that these

typologies have rarely considered how prisoners' feelings of shame and guilt and their attitudes toward their convictions shape their orientations toward their sentences. In Stafford, however, there was a clear relationship between prisoners' orientations to penal power and what they thought about what they had been convicted of—or more simply, between how prisoners “did their time” and how they felt about what they were doing time for. Men who, like Emmett, felt extremely guilty about their offenses, treated their sentence as an opportunity for repentance and transformation, and often embraced the institution which they felt gave them this opportunity. Those who insisted that they had been wrongly convicted saw their sentence as fundamentally unjust, and either existed in a constant state of conflict with penal authorities or resigned themselves to their situation when they became too exhausted. And the many who existed somewhere in the middle—who acknowledged some level of legal guilt but did not experience the painful sentiments of moral guilt—regarded their sentence as an unfortunate reality which must be borne and tried to manage their imprisonment in a way which exposed them to as little pain as possible.

In this chapter and the next, I present a typology of prisoners' patterns of adaptation to their convictions and their sentences.⁵ In this chapter, I will focus on the men who thought they were guilty—although there was significant variation in how guilty they felt, and what difference this made—and in the next, I will focus on those who maintained that they were innocent. Together, these chapters argue that how prisoners “did their time” demonstrates how they reacted to the moral condemnation which was implicit in their conviction, sentence, and imprisonment: some made the condemnation their own, some challenged it, and some managed it. All, however, rubbed up against the kinks of power as it existed in Stafford, and even those who felt the most profound regret, and who therefore welcomed their punishment with the most fervor, were sometimes thrown off course by the framing of the moral conversation.

Before we start, however, it is worth acknowledging that typologies are an imperfect tool. They are inherently blunt and imprecise, and often imply that there are fixed differences between forms of adaptation, or, worse, types of people. My goal in presenting one is not to elide difference, nor to suggest that this typology is the final story, or even that it would be found in the same form in different institutions.⁶ Instead, I use it to demonstrate that there was a patterned relationship between how prisoners heard their condemnation and how they served their sentence, and to give a rough indication of what this pattern was in Stafford.

This typology emerged inductively from the data, and the groups are primarily distinguished by eight different factors: prisoners' orientation toward their sentence; the type of offense for which they were convicted; the way they thought about the legitimacy of their conviction; their attitude to their victim; the type of shame they expressed; their attitude to the condemnatory “sex offender” label; the extent of and the reasons for their compliance; and their general orientation

TABLE 1 Prisoners' adaptations to their convictions and imprisonment

| | The repentant | The redeemed | Fatalists | Negotiators | "Mainstream" prisoners | The resigned | Activists |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|---|--|--|--|------------------------------------|
| Orientation to sentence | Opportunity for change and amends | Opportunity for self-imposed change and amends | An experience to be endured | An experience to be managed | An experience to be managed | An injustice to be accepted | An injustice to be resisted |
| Type of conviction | Contact offenses against known children | Contact offenses | Noncontact offenses against children | Varied, often rape of adults | Nonsexual | Historic offenses, often against children | Rape of adults |
| Attitude to legitimacy of conviction | Totally deserved | Totally deserved | Technically guilty and morally undesirable | Technically guilty but morally irrelevant | Accepted guilt, but not for sex offenses | Totally undeserved | Totally undeserved |
| Attitude to victim | Mostly repentant | Mostly repentant | Seen as abstract | Indifferent | Absent | Angry | Angry |
| Type of shame/guilt | Guilt and self-disgust about offense | Guilt and self-disgust about offense | Lack of guilt, fear of abuse because of "sex offender" identity | Ashamed of "sex offender" identity | Ashamed of proximity to "sex offenders" | Ashamed of "sex offender" identity | Ashamed of "sex offender" identity |
| Attitude to "sex offender" label | Deserved but limiting | Deserved but limiting | Technically accurate | Inaccurate | Irrelevant, didn't apply | Unjust, to be ignored | Unjust, to be challenged |
| Extent of and reasons for compliance | Normatively motivated engagement | Prioritized personal moral instincts | Compliant due to fear and dull compulsion | Instrumental compliance, with negotiations | Instrumental compliance, with negotiations | Instinctively compliant but challenged rehabilitative regime | Instinctively resistant |
| Orientation to power | Performative regulation | Cynical, knowing | Submissive, perceive power as total | To be oriented within | To be oriented within | To be accepted, where possible with integrity | To be challenged |

toward power in the prison. The description of each group opens with the story of one man, as a way of trying to emphasize the real humans whom I do not want to obscure with schematic descriptions. In the ensuing description of the type, I name every man who fell into that group, so that this classification can be carried forward and shape how readers respond to the rest of the book.⁷ In most cases, it was easy to spot patterns in interview participants' strategies, but a few men were harder to place. Exceptions to the patterns have been discussed where appropriate, and at the end of each chapter I will discuss what can be learned from the men who showed signs of shifting between groups about the effects of penal power and the capacity of prisons to shape the behavior and attitudes of the men they hold.

THE REPENTANT

The repentant, who made up a sixth of the men I interviewed, corresponded to the ideal wrongdoers imagined by many moral communication theorists, and they described punishment working on them in a way which echoed this theoretical ideal of punishment.⁸ They felt extreme guilt and shame for their offenses, and saw their sentences as both a deserved punishment and as an opportunity to transform themselves into the responsible citizens they felt themselves truly to be.⁹ They had all pleaded guilty to their offenses, which tended to be serious and often penetrative contact offenses against single victims; these victims were often underage and known to them, and were in several cases their stepdaughters. Almost all *repentant prisoners* had sentences of at least ten years (at least five of which would be served in prison), and some were serving indeterminate sentences. For most *repentant prisoners*, their offenses had led to their first conviction, shattering a strongly held sense of themselves as a "good, kind, productive citizen" (Peter), a "perfectly normal person," "a really good stepfather," and a "really good husband" (Keith), and leading to serious impacts on their victims and on their families. They did not consider themselves to have persistent sexual interests in children or in violent sex, and they described their offending as growing out of personal unhappiness, poor self-management, and broken relationships, rather than out of faulty desire. They told stories which echoed the "redemption scripts" identified by Maruna (2001, 85–108): they were inherently good people who for complex reasons had done terrible things, but who were consciously and deliberately changing themselves for the better and unleashing their inner righteousness. In so doing, they allied themselves to the rehabilitative demands of the prison, redeeming themselves in ways which were generally compatible with, but not subordinate to, the demands of the institution. To them, imprisonment was a moral crusade, willingly undertaken and consciously embraced, rather than an unfortunate experience to be endured.

Jake was a classic example of this type. He was a White man in his late forties and described himself as "an OK guy that went off the rails." Despite being physically and sexually abused by his father when young, he said he had a "good

upbringing.” Following a short sentence for a property offense which he served as a teenager, he stabilized his life, got married, and had children. When his marriage broke down, he started to abuse his underage stepdaughter, although he said that at the time he had seen it as a relationship. When “the news got out,” he handed himself into the police because he feared for his safety at the hands of his victim’s family. He pleaded guilty to one charge of rape of a child aged under thirteen and four penetrative and two nonpenetrative counts of sexual assault against a child, and was given a fourteen-year sentence. At the time of the interview, he had been in prison for nearly six years, and felt that he had replaced the profound guilt and self-disgust he had felt at the beginning of his sentence with a self-reforming impulse:

How does your conviction make you feel about who you are?

That’s a difficult one, because I don’t feel as bad as I did when I first come in. Like originally it made me feel like I was scum. I’m the scum of the earth. Crawl back under your rock, leave society alone, sort of thing. It made me feel that I wasn’t worthy of being a human being. Made me feel that I couldn’t put the past behind me. I felt it was always going to haunt me, so I’d never move on. I felt like I didn’t deserve to be around people, I deserved to be a loner. It just . . . I don’t know. It just made me feel really bad that . . . I couldn’t believe what I had done, and how far I’d took it, allowing it to happen. I felt that I was the instigator, she was the innocent party. [. . .] I didn’t feel that I’d done a proper job as a father or stepdad. I’d let everybody down, basically, for my own stupid greed and it’s horrible. I felt horrible. But now I don’t feel as . . . I feel I’ve come on a long way, so it’s like . . . I can’t mend what I’ve done, I’ll never be able to mend that, but I can mend myself to be a better person.

This change had occurred within the prison, and he considered the Rolling SOTP (R-SOTP), which he had completed in a previous prison, to be particularly significant in this process.¹⁰ Nevertheless, he retained responsibility for the change, which he had achieved by making use of the resources provided by the prison:

I feel I’ve come a long way in such a short space of time being in prison. So, I’ve embraced everything, put myself forward for this and that and the other. I’ve not let the prison come to me. I’ve gone to them, whether it’s education or courses, things like that. [. . .] I just don’t want to sit back and fall away into prison. I want to reach out and do things.

He felt that he had “moved on” from the shame he felt at the beginning of his sentence. He would regularly think about what he had already accomplished: “I’ve got my paperwork on myself [from my time on the R-SOTP], so I can just look back at that and think. It just reminds me of where I’ve been, what I’ve done, what I’ve got through, how much I’ve learned.” The official paperwork both validated how far he had come and inspired him to continue the redemptive task he had set himself. He still occasionally thought about his offense, and he saw such thoughts as “a warning mechanism, so if I was to go wrong again, I’d have that in my head that, yeah, you don’t have to go there, it’s not right.” Rather than pulling him back

into the past, such thoughts encouraged him to fashion his future in a way which he thought was morally justifiable.

Repentant prisoners like Jake considered themselves to be responsible for their moral reconstruction; this correlated with the fact that their pain resulted not from the shame of criminalization but from the guilt associated with their actions. They often recounted long lists of victims—ranging from the actual victim herself to the victim’s family, their own family, or even people who had read about the case in the paper—and were disgusted at themselves for the hurt they had caused. In interviews, they either referred to their victims by name or by their relationship with them (“my stepdaughter” or “my neighbor”), rather than by their abstract criminal justice label “the victim” (Ievins 2019). They also showed some acknowledgment of the potential effect which the abuse might have had on their victims’ lives: William, for instance, said that he hoped that his stepdaughter was still able to become a teacher, which is what she had always wanted. In most cases, their feelings of guilt predated their formal enmeshment in the legal system, and many *repentant prisoners* described their arrest and conviction as an opportunity to rebalance the moral scales:

Before I even got arrested, I did try and commit suicide. So that’s how hard it got for me, you know, so, but to be honest with you now, I’m glad it wasn’t successful because I can now see a light at the end of the tunnel. I know it’s not nice in here and that but there’s life after prison isn’t there? [. . .] And that’s where I’ve paid my debt so I won’t feel so bad because I’ve paid for what I did, you know, and I’d always admitted from the word “Go” what I’d done. You know, I pleaded guilty to what I’d done and I think that’s helped me to cope because I did tell the truth and I pleaded guilty, and I took the punishment on the chin. [. . .] I actually wanted to be punished. I needed to because if I didn’t, I’d have killed myself by now. In fact, prison saved my life without any doubt. I’d have drunk myself to death or I’d have killed myself because of the guilt because I did feel bad about it. (Keith)

Repentant prisoners shared the widespread belief that the legal system was flawed and that its outputs were often inaccurate, but such was the magnitude of their remorse that many of them pleaded guilty to or accepted charges which they felt were technically unfair. In doing so they had many different motivations. William had hoped to protect both the victim and his daughter from having to testify, Louis could not believe the victim would lie and so that outweighed his own inability to remember the event, and Peter was reacting to members of his legal team who persuaded him that it might be unwise to accept some charges and challenge others. Despite his more pragmatic approach, he accepted the process:

I’ve had time to grow as a person in here, so I can’t really complain. I’ll be as right as I could be by the time I get out. I’ve done what I can, yeah, so with me I think it’s been fine. [. . .] I accept it because I’m guilty, so I’ve got no complaints. You get whatever you get.

Similarly, Keith accepted that he had had sexual activity with his underage step-daughter but disagreed with, and had pleaded “not guilty” to, a charge of a penetrative sexual assault. Nevertheless, like other *repentant prisoners*, he was more preoccupied by the moral significance of what he had done than the injustice of what he had not done, describing himself as “guilty as charged. Well, not as charged, but guilty anyway.”

Repentant prisoners experienced their sentence as deeply morally infused, and as their only opportunity to both honor their offense and to move on from their shame.¹¹ They were caught between past and future and were determined to change their lives while nevertheless feeling compelled to deliberately remember their offenses. In some cases, they engaged in ritualized processes of repentance which often mirrored those praised by early prison reformers and moral communication theorists (Tasioulas 2007):

So you have to be on the ball, if you like, all the time, 24/7, and that's why I said to you, that's why I think every single day when I get up, the first thing I think is—I know this sounds daft—but I'm really happy because I'm glad I'm breathing, I'm alive. That's the first thing I think when I get up in the morning. The next thing I think is, coffee and a smoke. [interviewer laughs]. I'll not lie. But when I have that, I sit there sort of like I'm repenting, remorse, sort of getting the motions going and then I think through my day and what I'm going to be doing. I also think which is the best way to do it. And that way, that protects me from doing anything or saying anything I shouldn't. (William)

Similarly, Keith had “learned a lesson” about “how easy it is to become, for want of a better word, a bad person,” and he required himself to be constantly “on guard” to prevent himself from sinning again. The moment at which *repentant prisoners* forgave themselves would be the moment they put themselves at risk of slipping back into their old ways. Louis put this simply: “I feel really bad for what I've done and I cannot take it back. I will make sure it haunts me for the rest of my life to make sure I never do it again.”

At the same time, they were trying to build a better future and feared that remembering their offenses would trap them in the past. They were involved in an ongoing process of rebirth and self-reconstruction, one in which they felt simultaneously pulled backward by remembering what they had done and propelled forward by their campaign for change:

Do you think about it a lot?

A lot, yeah.

Do you think that's good, to think about it?

I don't think it's good, because it's overtaken my life, but I've got to think about it. Because it keeps me in check, you know what I mean? (John)

As such, while *repentant prisoners* believed their punishment was deserved, and that the “sex offender” label and the resultant restrictions were inevitable, they

became frustrated when they felt that they had been blocked from moving on. They were certain that they would not reoffend, but this was ultimately because of them, rather than because of external restrictions. Peter, a popular but private man who was convicted of an offense against a child, said that his awareness of the restrictions which would be placed on him after his release dragged him back into the past:

How does your conviction make you feel about who you are? Or maybe how did it and how does it now?

Yeah, I mean, just terrible. Yeah. I wanted to be dead. [laughs] Which is just shame, you just feel shame. And especially now, when you've sorted yourself out, you look back and you just think, "What the hell?" Different person. But yeah, I mean I never felt good about myself anyway. It's one of them anyway. Not good. [laughs]

When you look back now, does it feel like . . . who was that?

It's a double-edged sword really. I feel proud of myself for how far I've come, but you're never gonna lose that, especially because they don't let you really. When you get out of jail you're watched so much, and being a VP, you put a little foot wrong and you're fucked, for want of a better word, they'll drag you back in, not that I'm ever gonna, but I mean . . .

But you can get recalled [returned to prison]?

I wish you could do your sentence and be allowed to get on!

Many *repentant prisoners* complained about being described as a "sex offender," as the term implied too strong a link between the offense and the identity, as though "that's all you're good for, that's all you can do" (Nigel). While some directly if politely challenged uses of the term, others tried to embody this challenge:

If it's a badge I've got to wear, I've got to wear it. There's nothing I can do about it. I can't, the only thing I can do is try to show people by my actions, by the way I talk, the way I treat people, I can show them I'm a little bit more than what they think, than the stereotypical sex offender. [. . .] I can only say, "Well look, yeah, alright, I did make a mistake but that's not what I'm all about, yeah? This is the real me. That was a bad time for me, it should never have happened. This is the real me." And you know, I am quite capable of walking past a fifteen-, sixteen-year-old girl without jumping on them, you know. (Keith)

Overall, *repentant prisoners* were highly conscious of their stained identities, but they believed that their authentic, reformed selves were still visible through the murk.

These men insisted that their repentance was authentic and internally motivated and sought to manifest it in their compliant and engaged behavior within the prison. They often pushed to undertake treatment courses and were in regular contact with their Offender Supervisors and Offender Managers (see chapter 3, note 20). They sought trusted and responsible positions within the jail, which they saw as a way of "repaying" (William) their moral debt, as an opportunity to "make use" (Luke) of their time, and as a symptom of their inherent goodness: "I tend to

try and do the right thing, it's just in my nature to want to help people" (Peter). Difficult experiences within the prison were reconstructed as opportunities to improve as people: one *repentant prisoner*, for instance, described his challenging relationship with his cellmate as "just another opportunity to show self-control in here." Their decision to obey the rules of the prison was normatively motivated, a consequence of their recognition of the legitimacy of their imprisonment and thus the legitimacy of the rules, although their compliance also had a fatalistic edge:¹²

Why do you do the things the prison wants you to do?

Because it's the prison rules. It's the system, it's the way it is. That's what it's all about, being in prison. You broke the law, you have to abide by the rules. And if you don't, then you're down the block [in Segregation]. You get bad reports. You can get extra days for it [. . .]. I believe in following the rules. You just do what you've got to do in the best way you can, and in the only way you can. The rules are important for when you're released as well. So, it's no good coming to prison, not learning anything, breaking the rules while you're in prison, to come out and do it again. (Jake)

The desire to conform within prison was an opportunity both to practice and to perform prisoners' newfound conformist identities, and they thought that punitive reactions to rule infractions were in the service of a greater good. While *repentant prisoners* maintained that they were agents of change—"only you can change you" (John)—they saw compliance with authority as a sign of virtue, and thus they wanted to demonstrate it:

I do whatever the prison tells me to do for the simple reason, I'm here to show them that I'm a respectful, genuine human being. I've got no problems with rules, I've got no problems with doing what I'm told to do, and the vast majority of the time I understand why these things have to be done, because they don't want chaos. [. . .] Other than that, I just do as I'm told to do, it's all part of the regime . . . Well I don't like that word "punishment," that's not the right word. I'd rather use "correction." Accept rules and regulations. Because I'll be first to admit I've always lived my life pushing up to the boundary. Unfortunately, I've overstepped the mark once in my life and that's why I'm here now. (William)

Repentant prisoners insisted that their obedience was genuine, but they nevertheless hoped that it would be rewarded by the system and reflected in risk assessments and license restrictions. While many prisoners insisted that their participation in treatment had been genuinely transformative, others were a bit more pragmatically motivated. Louis was desperate to do the SOTP "to prove that I am not going to be a risk to my kids," in the hope that he might be allowed some form of contact with them. Peter, similarly, hoped that compliance within the prison might minimize the chance of being recalled when on license: "If you go out and you've done all you can and proved you're a good person and you made a mistake, then they will let you get on a little more." Jake agreed:

I'm quite content with myself. I'm happy with what I'm doing, which is a good thing because when I'm released it shows probation that I'm a changed person. I'm not that horrible person I used to be before. And everyone's . . . Nobody's perfect, but I feel I've redeemed myself, in a way.

Compliance was thus performative without being narrowly instrumental. It was morally motivated, but a marker of its righteousness was its endorsement by official agencies. *Repentant prisoners* sought to align themselves with mainstream moral values, and thus the intention of this deliberate compliance was not to fake goodness to achieve a desired result, but to have one's goodness rubber-stamped and reinforced by the institution.¹³

Their belief in the inherent goodness of the system, and the moral value of adhering to it, led to frustration if their efforts to change themselves were not recognized. This was more than the censorious criticism of an institution for failing to live up to its stated values (Mathiesen 1965) and could represent a deviation between prisoners' processes of repentance and the forms of rehabilitation enabled by the system. Prisoners were on a journey of change, but they were also held in stasis within an institution whose orientation was toward risk management, and on a sentence which was justified by what they had done in the past. Peter indicated the frustration he felt when trying to show Offender Supervisors and Offender Managers that he had changed: "You've got to prove yourself beyond doubt and that feels weird because I'm never gonna cause a problem. I'm not naturally a nasty person but they think you are." In its most extreme forms—when institutional power worked against prisoners' efforts at repentance—this could lead to a process of detachment and separation from the institution.

The Redeemed

The redeemed were a small subsection of *the repentant* who had similar attitudes toward their moral responsibility but who related differently to the institution. They accepted their guilt, had worked hard to change, and saw their imprisonment as a moral journey, but unlike *repentant prisoners*, they had become frustrated by the system because they perceived it to be blocking their progress.¹⁴ The two men who were the clearest examples of *redeemed prisoners*—Nigel and John—were significantly over tariff on life sentences, even though they felt they had addressed their offending behavior. They claimed that the prison had not met its side of the bargain, but they nevertheless persisted in their own moral campaign and maintained that its disentanglement from institutional demands had rendered it more honest.

A few years previously, Nigel had been in a category D (open) prison and had been expecting release. A Black man in his early forties, he had spent more than half his life in prison on this and other sentences. Suddenly, and with very little warning, he and many other life-sentenced prisoners had been returned to the closed estate. A few serious offenses had been committed by men who had been

“released on temporary license” from open prisons, and as a result all prisoners on life sentences in open prisons were returned to the closed estate to be reassessed, as were all men convicted of sex offenses.¹⁵ Two years later, he was still in a closed prison, and his route to either a different institution or to release was unclear, and it was several years before men convicted of sex offenses were able to return to open prisons. He reacted to this situation with exasperation, and complained that his experience had broken the rules of retributive justice:

You know, if I'd done something wrong then you can kind of accept it, right? So to be moved back because somebody else has gone and committed crime . . . I still can't get my head around it and I still can't get my read around that. That's going to be two years now. I just don't get it.

His frustration grew in Stafford, where he felt that his sentence was purposeless and complained that he had been “left here to rot.”¹⁶ Since arriving in the prison, he had been approached by psychologists three times to be assessed for programs he had already completed. He felt that prison officers were unwilling to recognize or adapt to the pain of his situation, instead accusing him of having a “bad attitude” and giving him “daft little nickings [adjudications]”¹⁷ and really daft little IEPs and warnings.”¹⁸ He found this particularly challenging as these punitive reactions were often responses to behavior which had been encouraged on SOTP courses and which he saw as an indispensable aspect of his reformed character:

I feel like Stafford don't really want you to be yourself. If you're yourself, and yourself happens to be someone that's got a bit of personality, and someone who's quite willing to challenge certain things, if you're like that naturally, it won't work out. So you can't be yourself then. You have to kind of not be like that. And I don't like hiding who I am, because I've learned—these are things that I've learned in prison from doing certain courses—you have to show who you really are. If you have to pretend to be something else, then aren't you learning to manipulate the system then? That's not right!

Nigel expressed a common assessment of cognitive behavioral courses—that the conduct they encouraged felt irrelevant within the prison environment (Laursen and Laws 2017)—but his critique went deeper than that. He no longer believed that the processes of self-change that he felt morally required to pursue were compatible with the requirements of the prison system. Instead, he accused the prison of promoting manipulative behavior which was typical of his offending past.

Having lost faith in the value and likelihood of endorsement by the organization, Nigel's focus had shifted inward. He no longer sought validation from outside and instead tried to follow his own moral compass:

Why do you do the things the prison wants you to do?
Why do I do it? I try not to do it! [laughs] I try to do things for me now, not for the prison.

He was critical of staff, whom he censured for breaking principles of justice through their “heavy” (King and McDermott 1995) use of power and whom he frequently described as “robots.” He had repeated verbal arguments with them, and during the fieldwork period was placed on a “basic” regime as an act of discipline and was also physically restrained—both unusual occurrences in an ordered establishment like Stafford. He insisted, however, that his antagonism to the institution was a sign of his reluctance to twist his morals for personal advancement, and of his insistence on pursuing what was right rather than what benefited him: “I’m not willing to back down, because I’m not, I’m not willing to kind of like change all my moral thinking just because this is a different prison. I’m not willing to do that. If that means I might get a little bit of trouble I can accept that, that doesn’t really affect me.”

For prisoners to follow the path of redemption, then, they were required to see their moral journeys as unconstrained by the demands imposed on them by the institution. This sometimes placed them in conflict with the prison authorities, but they insisted that having broken these bonds allowed them to behave with greater honesty. Nigel said that he had once thought of himself as, and performed being, totally transformed. He now contested this simplistic narrative of repentance, penance, and change, insisting that he was still morally complex:

In the last few years I’ve reverted back to being . . . rather than showing everyone, “Oh, I’ve changed so much, look at my courses that that I’ve done, look at my record, I’m so brilliant, no nickings for ten years, fifteen years, I’m so fantastic,” it’s almost like now I’ve reverted back to . . . you know what, I’m not gonna do that no more. I’m not gonna pretend to be Mr. Nice Guy. I’m just going to show the real me, yeah. I mean I kick off every now and again—it’s not even kicking off, it’s just me being me, I don’t see that as kicking off. They [the officers] do obviously go, “Yeah, look at him kicking off.” I’m not kicking off, I might shout about because I’m angry and frustrated not because like I’m kicking off, it’s not kicking off. So I’d rather just like . . . I’d rather staff look at me and think, “You know, sometimes he’s a bit wild.” At least they’ve got the right opinion of me rather than, “Oh he’s so fantastic, you know Nigel, he’s such a fantastic guy, oh he’s so helpful and he’s so safe to be around, we really trust him.” I’d rather them think, “Not too sure about him.” And that’s the truth, that’s the real me, ain’t it.

FATALISTS

Fatalists, who made up about an eighth of the interview sample, admitted that they were guilty of their offenses, which tended to be noncontact, internet-based offenses against children.¹⁹ They did not appear morally troubled by them, however, and were instead preoccupied and in some cases overwhelmed by the consequences of their convictions. Despite receiving quite short sentences, they found imprisonment hard, were haunted by concerns about their safety within and

beyond Stafford, and were worried about their ability to find housing and employment on release. Any shame they experienced resulted from their convictions and their imprisonment rather than from what they had done. Within prison, they were vulnerable and relatively powerless in their relationships with prisoners and with staff. This powerlessness was reflected in their relationships with themselves: many *fatalists* alluded to experiencing inappropriate sexual urges, which they relied on external constraints to control. Nevertheless, unlike *repentant prisoners*, they did not see their sentence as an opportunity for personal transformation; their focus was on “getting through prison” (Greg), which for them was a largely negative experience to be endured.

Derek, a White man, had had a difficult childhood, spending much of it in foster care. When he turned eighteen, he had moved away from home and worked in the army and then in the service industry. He was now in his late forties and had limited contact with his family. He alluded to a persistent sexual interest in teenage girls, and this was his third conviction for a sex offense, and the first to result in a custodial sentence. He had been participating in a community-based SOTP when he was charged for his current offenses. At the time of the interview he had served eight months of the year he would spend in prison as part of his two-year sentence for breaching his Sexual Offenses Prevention Order and downloading sexual images of children.²⁰ He had pleaded guilty to his offenses, and considered himself “very lucky” to have received the sentence he had: his probation officer had wanted him to receive longer, but she was on holiday when he was sentenced and was therefore unable to produce a pre-sentence report.²¹ He knew that his offense was wrong, but he found it counterproductive to dwell on this, and instead focused on getting through his time in prison:

I do feel guilty, but I try not to let it ruin my life. I've just got to get on with what I'm doing.

And why and how have you done that, tried not to let it ruin your life?

I don't want to, because if I go out and it's ruined my life, I'm just going to sit and get depressed and probably do something stupid and then end up back in here. How I've managed to do that is just come out of myself, get on with life, play pool, go to work, or carpentry, education, whatever. Just get on with life.

Rather than being overwhelmed by remorse, his desire not to reoffend was based on his desire not to come back into prison. To him, his sentence had a deterrent effect, instead of a moral meaning: “The whole experience has taught me that I'm not going to be coming back here, so what I've done in the past, I'm not going to do again.”

He was a low-status prisoner who was occasionally derided, to his face and behind his back, about his offense, but he had never experienced physical violence. He had few resources to counter these insults, and instead managed them by insisting he did not let them “bother” him: “Some people on here, they call

you ‘pedo,’ and I just go ‘whatever’ and just ignore them.” His approach to his sentence was to let it affect him as little as possible: “I just want to get on, do my last four months, get out, and then forget about this place, [put it] as far back into my mind as I possibly can.” In addition to disregarding insults, he made comparable attempts to overlook his sexual attraction to young girls:

I definitely don’t want to come back, so I’m not going to be doing . . . So I’ve got to try and steer myself, because if I see a good-looking girl on the outside . . . Because I was told [. . .] if something stirs my fantasies, to tell my probation officer. I told her there was one evening I went for pizza. There was this young girl in the shop, dressed in a . . . when I saw her from the back, the skirt was so far up, you could almost see her backside. So I ordered my pizza, and I had to get out of the pizza shop. I said, “I’ll come back in five minutes for my pizza.” So I just got out of the situation. That’s part of the stuff I learned on the [SOTP] courses I was doing. If you find yourself in a particular situation, get yourself out of it. [. . .] Distract yourself. So if I feel tempted to go on the computer and download stuff, distract yourself. Go out, play PlayStation, whatever.

His approach to his own behavior was managerial rather than transformative. He wanted to use institutional mechanisms to reduce his risk—to others, but more importantly to himself. He had a bureaucratic conception of self-change, the aim of which was neither to make amends nor to reform his identity, but to block out an aspect of his sexuality to make sure that he did not come back to prison.

Other *fatalists* shared this morally neutral model of self-management, and reflected it in the ways in which they talked about their offenses, which they spoke of more as legal violations than sins. They acknowledged that what they had done was wrong, but they demonstrated very few signs of guilt. Many did not have identifiable victims as their offenses were image-based and their victims had rarely been found by the police. Those who did have identifiable victims rarely named them or spoke in any detail about the effect which the offense might have had on them, perhaps because they rarely knew or had even ever met them. *Fatalists* had mostly pleaded guilty, primarily for instrumental reasons, and they tended to see their punishment as comprehensible but excessive, indicating that the condemnation which they heard in their convictions and sentences did not adhere to how they saw themselves and their offending. Samuel, for instance, felt that his sentence did not reflect how uncharacteristic his crime was: “It was my first offense, never been in trouble with the law before. It was just an error of judgment, a mistake, so I think it was unfair what I got for it.” Others tried to excuse their offending, insisting that their underage victims had consented. Greg had numerous charges relating to downloading images of children, but he insisted he had not understood this was wrong until he was arrested:

I thought they were enjoying it, the ones in the images, because they were smiling and that. I know now that obviously they were being abused but back then I didn’t

think anything different. [. . .] I was on bail for seventeen months and I had all that time to think about it and I never went near anything while I was on bail. I had basically three years without it. I understand that they were victims and people. People shouldn't be putting that sort of stuff on there anyway.

Like many *fatalists*, Greg neutralized his offending as “just a stupid mistake” and insisted that it was not part of who he was: “I’m not a criminal, I’m just someone that has messed up.”

Some *fatalists* had prior convictions for sex offenses, but for all whom I interviewed, this was their first prison sentence. Their preoccupation before their sentencing had often been the fear of imprisonment, and they were particularly worried about their safety given their offense categories: “Being gay and also through grooming someone and they’re a boy and also having pictures, I was absolutely terrified. I was scared of being stabbed, abused, raped, I was absolutely petrified” (Samuel). Many had considered or attempted suicide while they were waiting to be sentenced, although these feelings had lessened once they entered the prison and started to feel safer:

I could have gone over the edge. When I was on bail, I was thinking suicidal thoughts and that. Luckily, touch wood, I didn't do anything about those suicidal thoughts. I just carried on. It's not happened in prison. Just waiting seventeen months for it [imprisonment], it was hell, it was. And I was in the newspaper before I went so I had to put my hood up when I was taking the dog for a walk. People were looking at me like, “Oh there's him.” And when helicopters used to go past, I used to think they were spying on me. I was paranoid and everything. [. . .] When I came to prison, that weight off my shoulders was struck off, and so there's less to carry now. (Greg)

Fatalists had a low status in Stafford and were often discussed behind their backs and ridiculed as “creepy,” and other prisoners made comments about them when they interacted with me: “Look how many nods he does when he goes past Alice! You can tell he's a creep.” As long as they were careful about who they interacted with, however, this dislike rarely led to more direct bullying, and no *fatalists* reported having experienced violence in Stafford. Nevertheless, they feared that if their convictions became known, they might “get a lot of abuse” (Samuel). They tended to have a few friends, who were often other *fatalists*, and often remained in their cells during association periods with the small number of people they trusted.

Fatalists tended to tolerate the “sex offender” label as technically accurate and denuded of emotion—“My offense was sexually related so I'm a sex offender” (Oliver)—although they felt it gave an unfair impression of their offending to those outside the prison: “It just puts you in a category with bad offenders, which are the people you see on the news” (Barry). Within the prison, they saw their label as an equalizing and neutral description of their category of offending, and they insisted that other prisoners made the same ethical judgments: “People accept it, you're all

the same, we're all in the same prison" (Barry). Derek put it simply: "We don't look at ourselves as 'sex offenders.' We've just done something that we shouldn't have, and we're all just men. We're just in here getting on with doing our time, and that's it." Their attention was focused on risks to their safety, and as long as they were protected, they were unconcerned by the more existential and emotional effects of shame.

In their interactions with powerholders, they were compliant and submissive. They struggled to identify instances where they had ever disagreed with or challenged a member of staff. Their compliance sometimes had instrumental motives, in particular the desire to get good reports and thereby ameliorate their license conditions, but it more often indicated the belief that their subordination was so inevitable that it was impossible to imagine alternatives:²²

Why do you do the things the prison wants you to do?

Because they're the rules and I abide by the rules. You go to work when they shout that route [movement to work] is on, you go down, everybody's there for the route when they call route, you just go down there.

But why? You could just not? Why bother obeying the rules?

Well, I like to, I like obeying the rules because if you obey the rules, you get a good report! Not only that, that's the way I am, I always obey the rules, because the rules are there, set, and you've got to abide by them. You know, you can't say, "No, I'm not going to work now, I'll go at half past one," you can't do it! (Barry)

It was as though *fatalists* failed to realize they had the capacity to resist, to challenge power, or even to negotiate with staff. They accepted power as inevitable, which resulted from their understanding of themselves as rule-bound people and was symptomatic of their vulnerability. They had rarely experienced direct coercion in prison, and even getting into an argument or being asked to walk to work faster would disturb *fatalists*, who went out of their way to go "under the radar" (Oliver) and avoid "hassle" (Derek). Barry acknowledged that staff sometimes shouted at him unnecessarily, but he felt there was no point in opposing them: "I just blank it, he's an officer and he can do what he likes anyway." Their vision of power was top-down and authoritarian, and *fatalists* found it easier "to accept that we're their cattle" (Greg).

This compliance extended to their attitude toward their offending behavior, both within the prison and outside. Their goal was to ensure that they did not return to prison, and their locus of control was external. They therefore allowed institutional power to intervene in all aspects of their lives, as long as this served the greater good of preventing them from being imprisoned again. Oliver had asked his Offender Supervisor for advice on who to be friends with in the prison, and hoped that taking part in the Healthy Sex Programme would help him manage his urges: "I still have thoughts and it still needs to be controlled."²³ Similarly, Barry felt that having taken part in the Thinking Skills Programme would help

him “enjoy the normal things in life instead of those things that are not appropriate.” He realized that he would never be “cured” of his problematic sexual interests, but what mattered was better management: “It’s gonna be there but it’s controlling it and putting it in the back of your mind, instead of it being in the front with everything else in the back.”

Unlike *repentant prisoners*, *fatalists* did not willingly engage in a righteous process of self-change. Their priority was getting through their sentence unscathed, and their anxieties about the external world—whether bullying from other prisoners, authoritarian behavior from staff, or the fear of being imprisoned again—concerned them more than the internal drive toward self-renewal. They therefore submitted to all forms of institutional power, in the hope that this might protect them from other prisoners and from themselves. They made use of institutional discourses about control and monitoring, but this use of officially sanctioned language did not indicate that they had bought into the aims of the prison. They were docile and malleable and rarely challenged institutional means, but they hoped to serve their own ends—not coming back to prison again—and they were much less focused on a more broadly construed idea of rehabilitation, repentance, or redemption.

NEGOTIATORS

Negotiators were the most numerous group, making up a third of the sample. Almost all of them had been to prison before, and they said their previous sentences were not for sex offenses. They were also highly likely to have served part of their current sentence on “mainstream” wings and to be familiar with and express elements of “mainstream” prison culture.²⁴ They had an ambiguous attitude to their guilt, generally admitting that they had done something technically illegal but neither morally troubling nor indicative of a problematic sexuality, and they thought their sentences were unfair and focused on making them as tolerable as possible. The offenses they had been convicted of varied, although they were rarely committed against prepubescent children.²⁵ However, they made sense of their convictions in similar ways: they did not see themselves as proper “sex offenders,” they contested the official versions of their offense narratives, and they did not see Stafford as a suitable prison for them. They were not very worried about their safety, and they retained a strong sense of agency and a belief that “prison is what you make it” (Darren). They frequently used metaphors about “playing the game”: in games, the rules are set by someone else, and regardless of whether you agree with them, you win by playing within them and turning them to your advantage.²⁶ While they contested official narratives of their convictions and found much of life in Stafford to be illegitimate, they performed some degree of submission to both, hoping that in doing so they could make the situation “livable” (Ahmed) and retain the elements of their identity that mattered most to them.

Mark, a White man in his early thirties, said that he had been “mischievous” when he was younger, selling drugs and breaking into cars from the age of twelve. He received his first prison sentence when he was fifteen—he said that the judge gave it to him because of his “attitude” after he showed up to his sentencing hearing wearing shorts, leather gloves, and a hat—and he had served five sentences by the time he was twenty-one. After a relatively long period outside prison, in which he fathered three children and started a stable and loving relationship, he entered a period of extreme stress:

Then one day I was out drinking and started sniffing [cocaine] again, to the point where I woke up the next day and I had police banging on my door. I was arrested on suspicion of rape. Next thing you know, my bird [girlfriend] was in bits, she had our baby in her arms at the time, and when I got took to the police station I was interviewed and that, and then I think the next day I got charged. I was smelling myself, see because when you’ve had sex you’ve got that smell on you, and I was smelling myself. I couldn’t smell anything.

When I interviewed him, he repeatedly stated that his memory of the evening was cloudy. At one point, he implied that he was innocent, and said that his girlfriend had been told that the victim was untrustworthy because she had accused several other men of rape and was “under the Mental Health Act.” At other times, though, he indicated that he believed that he might have done it, although he did not believe that the conviction said anything about his character:

When I got sentenced, I was coming to terms with the fact could I have actually done it while I’ve been drunk and whatever’s happened in my head has heightened it? So in that sense I do feel somewhat . . . like some empathy and sympathy towards the victim, because I know in my head that if I was sober none of this would have happened.

He was deeply frustrated at the injustice of being called a “sex offender”—or, worse, a “nonce” or a “pedo”—and said that he found it painful when people yelled abuse at the prison from the streets outside. Despite having been extremely sociable on his previous sentences, he now spent much of his time either alone in his cell or with a small number of trusted associates, as he feared hearing other prisoners talking about their offenses. He hated being away from his family and had a detailed plan of how he would tell his daughter, who was only a toddler, about his conviction. He worried that he would struggle to find work after he was released, and that he might face violence and unfair accusations:

On this sentence alone, I found it hard the first six months of my sentence, because it’s a long time away from my daughter, and that’s the only reason why I’m finding this sentence a lot harder than I have any other sentence previously, because I’ve never been convicted of anything like this before in my life. It’s not me. I don’t see myself as one of these on here. Now I’ve only got fifteen months left. The only thing I’m worried about is when I get out, because now that I’m labeled as a “sex offender,” who’s to say that when I get out whoever sees me is going to go and make false accusations again?

He said that he treated the conviction and sentence as a “wake-up call that I need to change” and had completed drug and alcohol awareness courses while in prison. His motivation for change was less fervent than it was for *repentant prisoners*, however, and he saw his sentence as something to be got through as quickly as possible, rather than a deserved punishment or an opportunity for transformation: “I think just crack on with it, keep your head down. The longer you can keep your head down for, the more time’s going to fly, and you keep yourself busy.” His family was the most important thing to him, and while he was in prison, his main priorities were, first, maintaining his enhanced status and thus his eligibility for family visits, and, second, ensuring that he did not place any “hurdles” in his path, such as restrictive license conditions, which might block him from living with his family after he was released.²⁷ As a result, he was significantly more compliant than he had been on previous sentences, and he was even willing to participate in the SOTP, although he was not looking forward to it: “I know I’m going to find it difficult to do, because what I don’t agree with, with them courses, is that . . . Alright, I’ve committed a sex offense—if I have, I have—I can’t really go in there saying, ‘Oh yes, I did this and I did that’ when there were drugs and alcohol involved.”

Like Mark, *negotiators* tended to acknowledge technical guilt, but they displayed few signs of distress at what they had done and they rarely, if ever, mentioned their victims. Instead, they spent much more time in the interview complaining about their categorization as “sex offenders.” They tried to dilute the legitimacy of this categorization with a diverse range of tactics. Some had pleaded guilty to offenses which they insisted were not sexually motivated. Harry was convicted of inciting prostitution for financial gain (“pimping”). He accepted being labeled as a “sex offender” as technically accurate but misrepresentative—“I’ve fallen through the sex offender net”—and he insisted he did not feel remorseful or guilty about what he had done, instead experiencing shame due to how he would be seen:

I’m ashamed that I’ve come to prison. I’m ashamed that my daughter’s gonna know that I’ve come to prison. I’m ashamed that my daughter’s friends in the future might learn that I’ve come to prison. I’m ashamed when I see my missus bring her mum and dad on a visit and they’ve got to look at their daughter’s partner that’s supposed to be protecting them, I’m ashamed there, but the crime itself, I’m not ashamed of that because what happened, happened. There was no victims, no force, no nothing like that, so I’ve got nothing to be ashamed of there. It was purely out of naivety. I’m ashamed that I let myself fall into that, but I haven’t got nothing else to be ashamed for. I hope that doesn’t make me sound like a bad person.

More often, *negotiators* insisted that the encounters which had led to their convictions were complex and “murky,” in the words of one man, and that the legal language which had been used on their charge sheets did not reflect the intricacies of the situations which they described. Some, like Frank, pleaded guilty to offenses like rape which they felt distorted the facts of what had happened or implied that

the offense was worse than it was. Others, like Mark and Zac, said that they were simply unable to remember the events surrounding their crime. Frequently, *negotiators* said that they had pleaded guilty in order to make their sentence as short as possible, treating the trial system as a game to be played rather than an impartial search for truth.

While all *negotiators* questioned the legitimacy of their imprisonment, they rarely appealed their conviction or their sentence, and were unlikely to think of themselves as straightforwardly maintaining innocence. One reason why *negotiators* rarely appealed was that they thought the best way of dealing with their sentence was just to “crack on” (Harry), to cope with the situation rather than try to change it. But in most cases, there was nothing absolutist in their rejection of their convictions or their labels. The ambiguity of Steven’s situation was typical:

I did something that subsequently I think looking back was illegal, not right. It was thirty years ago, twenty-nine years ago. I didn’t do what I was accused of but I certainly did something. I told the programs people exactly what I did do. I told everybody that stood up for me what I did. I’m not innocent, I just didn’t do what I was accused of.

Their attitudes lacked the purity of those who straightforwardly maintained their innocence, and they saw themselves as the victims of complexity rather than injustice.

Much of the frustration felt by *negotiators* centered on the fact that they did not feel that Stafford was a suitable prison for them, and that it reinforced the stain of their convictions: “When you are here, the fact that you are a convicted sex offender is constantly highlighted because of the fact that it’s a sex offenders’ prison, which in turn makes life a little bit harder [. . .]. There’s no getting away from it” (Darren). Their sensitivity meant that they often insisted that the label influenced the regime even when it didn’t. Vince, for example, reported feeling annoyed whenever he heard staff shouting about not leaving female staff alone on the landing, or insisting on “shooting the bolts” on cell doors so that prisoners could not shut them—both relatively standard practices in men’s prisons:

I can understand they’ve got to be professional and it’s all about risk assessments and there’s protocols and obviously they go through all the training and that, but treating everyone with the same glove, sometimes it can grate a little bit because not everyone’s in for the same offense, not everyone’s got devious intentions. Some of them, just like me, just want an easy ride and to get on with it.

This ongoing sense of stigmatization was heightened by *negotiators’* awareness that Stafford’s other prisoners were convicted of sex offenses, and *negotiators* were highly attuned to this stain. Like Mark, many *negotiators* were discriminating in their choice of friends, refusing to let other men into their cells unless they knew they were not convicted of child sex offenses.

Negotiators were broadly compliant, and this compliance was generally instrumentally motivated. They followed their sentence plans without enthusiasm and avoided disagreeing with staff unless they thought it was sufficiently important. Their focus was on making their life in prison as easy as possible, and so their strong tendency was to conform: “If you are going to consistently play up and not abide to the petty rules, then they are just going to downgrade you on the IEP system or take away privileges. The prison is run on incentive. The better behaved you are, the more you are going to get” (Darren). Their intention was neither to be symbolically obedient nor defiantly resistant, but instead to get by as well as possible within the parameters set by the institution: “You’ve got to live, haven’t you, whether you’re incarcerated or whatever, you’ve got to live your life” (Paul). *Negotiators* tended to depersonalize power, seeing it as simply “the system” or the way things were. Officers were seen as conduits for, rather than sources of, authority, which in fact resided in the rules: “It ain’t a winning or a losing game, it’s just protocol, and you’ve just got to follow it” (Harry). This compliance extended to their reluctant willingness to engage in treatment if it was placed on their sentence plans. They insisted that they did not need to be treated—as Harry said, “I don’t cause any offense with my sex”—but they were loath to resist and face the consequences.

However, there were limits to what *negotiators* were willing to do and getting by within the prison entailed maintaining some feelings of pride and autonomy. They became frustrated when they perceived officers using their power unnecessarily heavily, and verbally challenged those who spoke to them disrespectfully. Many *negotiators* walked deliberately slowly to their cells at the end of association periods as a small-scale act of resistance; others refused to call officers “boss” (a common nickname for officers in England and Wales) or made jokes which undermined officers’ professionalism:

If you were to go in my cell now and look on my wall next to my door, I’ve just drew a poster of a monkey scratching its head and a load of words next to it going, “Who knows what’s next? Bang up?²⁸ Association? Route? Work? Education?” and the monkey’s just like that [scratches his head] with a lightbulb above his head. And for me, that’s my sort of comical sort of, I know that the staff come in my cell while I’m at work to do their checks and I know that will be the last thing they see when they walk out, but rather than me directly going up to a staff member and saying, “You don’t know your arse from your elbow, you couldn’t get pissed in a brewery,” for me, I just stuck a little poster there and if they were to question it, I’d say, “That’s for me.” (Harry)

Other *negotiators* wanted to avoid the mechanics of coercion becoming too visible, and so deliberately locked their own doors or walked to their cells before they were told to: “I’m well aware what the system is, the system is 6:15 bang up. I don’t need a person to tell me that, I already know that. So I would rather just do the thing

and not have to hear it" (Tony). In its most extreme form, this insistence on retaining a sense of agency resulted in some *negotiators* maintaining that they were not compliant and that everything they did was for their own benefit:

I don't really do the things the prison wants me to do, to be honest with you, you know. I go to work and that because I wanna get out of my pad [cell], but if I don't want to go to work, I come back and I don't go. Courses I've got to do, I've asked to do them, I've not been told to do that, I've asked to do them. [. . .] But prison officers who say, "You've got to do this, and you've got to go there," I tell them, "Stick it up your . . ." If I don't want to do something, I won't do it. (Tommy)

While they were willing to play by the rules of the prison, they hoped to do so with "dignity" (Frank). Just as they reluctantly accepted their conviction as an unfair fact of life, they saw the prison as the unavoidable reality within which they existed and to which they were forced to adapt. *Negotiators* took for granted that both their stigmatization and the prison were fundamentally illegitimate, but they actively resisted neither, instead preferring to work within both to create a livable space for themselves. Ahmed summarized this approach: "It's not a pleasant place. Yeah. I don't like it. Don't like it at all. But it's just . . . You go through it, innit. [. . .] A good analogy: I'm the stream, I'm just flowing through, I come to a lot of turns and I'm just going through." *Negotiators* felt unable to challenge their overall situation—either the way Stafford functioned or their convictions and stigmatization. Nevertheless, they sought out ways to exercise their agency, and like a stream, they found a channel in the immovable rock through which they could move more freely.

"Mainstream" Prisoners

Of the forty-two prisoners interviewed, four said that they had not been convicted of a sex offense and were instead held in Stafford because they needed protection from other prisoners because of either debts or feuds or because they had been convicted of nonsexual violent offenses against children. When I looked at these men's files at the end of the fieldwork period, however, it became clear that two of them had previously served a sentence for a sex offense. One "*mainstream*" prisoner asked me not to look at his file, but a google search suggested that he had also served an earlier sentence for a sex offense.²⁹ These prisoners, and others I spoke to informally, form a subsection of *negotiators*. Their attitudes toward power and their strategies for adapting to their sentence were similar, but whereas most *negotiators* sought to undermine the "sex offender" label by showing how it had been misleadingly applied to them, "*mainstream*" prisoners rejected it outright and projected an image of themselves as "normal" (Noah) prisoners adrift in a sea of "sex offenders."

Tommy was a representative example of a "*mainstream*" prisoner. He was a Traveler in his thirties,³⁰ and a dedicated husband and father who estimated that

he had been to prison at least ten times before and was currently serving an indeterminate sentence for violent but nonsexual offenses. He claimed that he was in Stafford because he was entangled in a feud with prisoners he knew from outside and so he was treated as a VP. When he arrived at Stafford, he had publicly announced that he was not a “sex offender” and had shown his paperwork to other prisoners. He was thus able to protect himself from stigmatization within Stafford, but he was concerned that he would face judgment or even violence in future prisons: “Every prisoner in the country knows what prison this is, you know what I mean, and now I’ve got that stigma stuck with me for the rest of my sentence.” He had also decided not to tell his family where he was being held, as he felt that they would be “disgusted if they knew I was on VPs” and “if they knew what people I’m around.” He presented himself as totally different from most of the people he lived with, but this was as much to do with what they were like as prisoners as it was to do with their offenses. He subscribed to the popular view in Stafford that there was a fundamental difference between “sex offenders” and “criminals”:

To what extent do you feel like you can be yourself in here?

Not a lot, to be honest with you. I’ve gone into my shell a bit, you know. I’m trying to have a laugh with people and that, [but] because it’s a VP prison, I don’t know, they come across offended or maybe intimidated. [I’m] just trying to have a laugh and then they’re running off putting apps [applications] in behind your back and that.³¹ You know, you’re put on the TAB 2 for bullies [monitored as a bully] and you know, I’ve never been a bully in my life.³² But that’s just the mentality of the VPs in the prison, you know what I mean? And in a normal prison, a normal situation, you can have a laugh.

Tommy was accustomed to a particular style of behavior in prison—boisterous, playful, and relatively loud—but he found it difficult to behave in that way in Stafford and felt that prisoners there were likely to inform or “grass” on prisoners to staff. He thought that most prisoners came from a different, more middle-class background than he did: “They’re not my kind of people, if you know what I mean.” He had found a small group of friends, mostly other “mainstream” prisoners or those with prior prison experience, with whom he tended to socialize, and he spent a lot of time on his own, which he reluctantly admitted helped him to stay out of trouble. Nevertheless, he said that he hoped to be transferred out of Stafford to a “mainstream” prison where he would feel more at home.

“Mainstream” prisoners insisted that they were fundamentally different from those who had committed offenses against children, and they expressed frustration when they felt they were unfairly stigmatized as “sex offenders”:

When you’re in here, how do you feel when people use the term “sex offender” and fit you within that bracket?

I think that’s one of the things that does my head in, because I’m on that side [of the prison] and obviously the road’s there, and you hear people shouting up, “Fucking

nonce, fucking pedo!” and all the rest of it. In some ways it’s degrading because I’m getting tarred with the same brush as everyone else. (Owen)

Similarly, Edward was initially reluctant to be interviewed, and only relented when I persuaded him that I wasn’t just interested in “sex offenders.” These identity claims were possible because “*mainstream*” prisoners’ paperwork showed an offense which was not sexual in nature, and they had normally displayed this paperwork to their peers as soon as they arrived in Stafford. They loudly and frequently proclaimed that they and other “*mainstream*” prisoners were not “sex offenders,” often telling me so as soon as we started talking or materializing as soon as they saw me talking to another “*mainstream*” prisoner.

“*Mainstream*” prisoners claimed that they were sometimes treated differently by officers, that they were given more “leeway” (Noah), and that female officers were more comfortable around them. However, they had mixed feelings about this differential treatment. They “wouldn’t like to think they see me as a sex offender” (Tommy), but they also questioned the justice of being treated differently in the prison, claiming that all prisoners merited their punishment: “You break the law, you break the law” (Owen).³³ “*Mainstream*” prisoners were thus in a complex position. They saw themselves as simultaneously members of and apart from the wider community of prisoners. They presented themselves as fundamentally different due to their current offenses and they worried that by demonstrating sympathy for “sex offenders,” they might be placed in that category. Nevertheless, they were also incarcerated in the same institution and most of them, presumably, knew that they had served similar sentences in the past. While they constructed their identities in ways which relied on and reinforced moral distinctions—between “criminals” and “sex offenders,” “normal” and “abnormal”—they felt that the state was morally obliged to treat them all the same.

CONCLUSION: THE MEANING OF GUILT

Theories of punishment are written in libraries and university offices, but punishment is lived in places like Stafford, and it is lived by people whose diversity of attitudes, reflections, and orientations cannot be adequately represented in a typological description. Nevertheless, this chapter has attempted to sketch how prisoners who accepted their legal guilt allowed this knowledge to shape how they undertook their sentence. *Repentant* prisoners felt profound and piercing remorse, and as a result threw themselves into their sentences and grasped them as an opportunity to atone and change. When the prison did not meet them halfway, or was perceived as holding them back, they disengaged from it, forming a sub-type which I have termed *the redeemed*. *Fatalists* felt differently about their guilt: they acknowledged that what they had done was both illegal and wrong, but this knowledge did not grieve them in the same way. They did not experience their

sentences as morally meaningful, but they did hope that the power of the state would protect them from abuse from other prisoners and from their own sexual urges. *Negotiators*, finally, tended to accept that they had broken the law, but they rarely felt that what they had done was wrong, or seemed troubled by it. They frequently complained that they had been unjustly stained and expended significant effort on rescuing their reputations and managing their sentences so that their time inside was as tolerable as possible.

These descriptions add depth and nuance to our understanding of adaptation to imprisonment, showing how deeply prisoners' consciousness of their staining convictions had permeated their experience, and indicating that their orientations to power within the institution were entangled with their own processes of moral reflection. They also complicate and develop idealized understandings of punishment as a tool of moral communication or moral education. Penal theorists have suggested that punishment could send two justifiable messages to people convicted of crimes: "What you have done is wrong" and "You should feel guilty about what you have done." The stories depicted in this typology suggest that imprisonment in Stafford did not send either message, and neither provided prisoners with new moral knowledge nor deepened their remorse. The men who felt the wrongness of their crimes most deeply—*repentant* and *redeemed prisoners*—said that they felt guilty about, and aware of the injustice of, their offenses long before being imprisoned, whereas those whose attitude to their convictions was more equivocal—*negotiators* and *fatalists*—rarely described a meaningful change of attitude during their imprisonment.

Furthermore, differing experiences of punishment did not seem to be the factor which caused prisoners to think or feel differently about their offenses. A much more plausible explanation lay in the nature of the crimes committed and in the histories of the men. *Repentant* and *redeemed prisoners* were normally convicted of abusing people they knew. The harms which they had caused were therefore very visible to them, and in most cases had led to the traumatic breakdown of their families.³⁴ Furthermore, their offenses and their convictions had interrupted lives which they had previously seen as normal and respectable, and thus both what they had done, and how they had been condemned, had deeply challenged how they saw themselves. It is consistent with research on shaming (Harris 2001) that the shame they experienced as a result was largely constructive, pushing them to make amends and change their behavior.³⁵ *Negotiators* and *fatalists*, on the other hand, had often been convicted of offenses before this one, with the effect that this particular conviction did not sever their sense of self in the same way. They were less likely to know their victims, and in the case of *fatalists*, to even be able to identify them, and thus the harm was less visible to them. Finally, they often found scripts for excuse-making. *Fatalists* had normally committed internet-based offenses which did not involve direct contact with their victims. Similarly, the offenses committed by *negotiators*—the rape of partners or sex workers, or

sexual contact with people under the age of consent—may well be viewed with more leniency by the wider public, seen as tasteless and unpleasant but not necessarily beyond the pale.³⁶ They were shamed for behavior which they did not necessarily consider to be totally wrong and so they rejected their shame through excuses rather than absorbing it as guilt.

In most cases, imprisonment seemed to be unable to change the minds of those it most directly operated on, but not in all. Two men whom I classed as *negotiators*—Ahmed, whom I introduced in chapter 3, and Vince—seemed to be undergoing a process of moral change, and Vince may have been joining the group of *repentant prisoners*. Vince had pleaded guilty to raping an acquaintance while drunk and been given an indeterminate sentence, and there were many similarities between his situation and Ahmed's. He had previous convictions for violence and his offense had involved violence in addition to that which is inherent to rape. He had also focused on his own situation during the trial, and when his sentence had started, his primary focus had been on maintaining contact with his family and ensuring that he progressed as effectively as possible through his sentence plan. Unlike Ahmed, he seemed to be growing in remorse. He said that he had always accepted that he was legally and morally guilty, but said that he only started to feel the wrongness of what he had done and his responsibility for it as his sentence progressed, and as workers from treatment programs came to speak to him:

How does your conviction make you feel about who you are?

Like I said, I think I said earlier, angry. Regret. But I have to own it. It's taking ownership. It's only over the last, you know, quite recently actually, I think because of the SOTP coming over to see me, I've started thinking about it a bit, like the impact I've had, the impact I had on the victim, I should say. Because a lot of it—I know people say—there's so many emotions that go on at the time of the sentencing and then trying to deal with the sentence after, a lot of it was dealing with the loss. A lot of it was self-centered as well—I'm just being honest—you're trying to adapt to it, the effect on your family, and all these sorts of things, and although I did think of the victim, like, "Fuck, it's a shame" sort of thing, it's only recently you start thinking, you start comparing it, because I've got little nieces growing up now, I've got my mum, my sister, and if something like that happened to them, my blood goes cold sort of thing. I suppose the realization's starting to seep through now, now I'm starting to settle into my sentence, it's like, now, this is what you've done. You've got all these different courses, you know, to jump through but ultimately it's down to your decisions. You do it again, it's black and white, it's a life sentence, you know, whatever sentence and that, and also there's another victim as well. So I suppose the actual offense, it's regret.

In most cases, imprisonment in Stafford did not teach prisoners something that they didn't already know. But what it could do—and what it seemed to be doing for Vince and for *repentant prisoners*—was provide them with the mental space to reflect on the effect of their actions on other people and on themselves. Legal philosopher John Tasioulas has described repentance as a "moral discipline" (2007,

489), which, in its ideal form, involves guilt, reflection and self-blame, confession and apology, reparation, and moral growth. *Repentant prisoners*, and Emmett, the man I described at the beginning of this chapter, engaged as fully as they could in these elements of repentance. For them, imprisonment served as “both a vehicle for, and a prompt to, repentance” (Tasioulas 2007, 496).

As a vehicle though, Stafford was ineffective at taking people to their destination.³⁷ It removed people from the harms they had caused and the people who could most effectively morally communicate with them, and it denounced them in an impersonal way which tended to produce destructive shame and encourage prisoners to focus on mitigating their stain. The staining label attached to them distracted *negotiators* and *fatalists* from thinking about what they had done, and they saw the rehabilitative regime as something to bargain with or something to use rather than something which might change them. Even *repentant prisoners* were often diverted from their path. They threw themselves into their imprisonment, seeing it as a ritual which would allow them to change and to be reconciled with the community. But the system in which they were held did not recognize the significance of this ritual and continued to see them as objects of risk, prompting them to become frustrated with how punishment was applied to them, and in some cases try to disentangle themselves from the prison. Even when people insisted that they deserved punishment, there were limits to the forms of punishment they were willing to accept. In the next chapter, we will move on to discuss those who insisted that they did not deserve punishment, as they maintained that they were innocent.