

## Denying Community

### *Social Relationships and the Dangers of Acknowledgment*

One afternoon about halfway through the fieldwork, I walked onto the wing and was immediately met by George, a *resigned prisoner* I knew well. “Mr. Brown wants to see you in the office. It’s nothing you’ve done,” he said, his face stern. I thanked him and found Mr. Brown, an enthusiastic young officer, who awkwardly asked me to read an entry made in the observation book the evening before. While I had been chatting to prisoners queuing for dinner, a man standing in the queue had said to George’s best friend, Scott, “Every time I see Alice, I want to rape her.” Scott had told George, and together they had reported it to the wing staff, who had in turn reported it to the prison’s Security Department and written it in the observation book. Mr. Brown showed me a photo of the man who made the comment and I said I didn’t recognize him and had never spoken to him. “That’s what’s funny, he’s really quiet,” Mr. Brown said, and his female colleague agreed: “That’s when it scares you, when the quiet ones say things like that.” They thought I was lucky that the comment had been made to Scott: “George and Scott are decent ones, for prisoners.”

The comment made by the man in the queue could have been interpreted in several different ways—as an expression of desire, as a threat, or as a joke—but most people who lived and worked in the prison took it seriously. Officers asked me if I wanted the man who said it to be transferred to a different wing (I didn’t), and for the rest of the project they warned me if we were ever seen in the same vicinity. Most prisoners agreed that the comment crossed a moral line. “You don’t say things like that, not in here,” George told me, and Scott agreed: “You can’t even say things like that in jest, but I saw his face, he weren’t joking.” Several men went as far as suggesting that the speaker should be informally punished. Scott was straightforward: “If I hadn’t just got my Cat D [been granted permission to go to an open prison], I would have smashed his teeth in.” When Peter found out,

he was similarly incensed: "If someone said something like that on this wing, the guys would fucking batter him. So he ought to get moved off to teach him a lesson." The scale of the reaction made me uncomfortable, and at the time I feared that the disciplinary reaction was disproportionate to the wrongness of the comment.<sup>1</sup> Tony, certainly, felt that it had been interpreted through an unjustly distorting lens: "There are things in this prison that may be perfectly appropriate, but they become inappropriate because of the environment. But at the end of the day, they're only words. I hear worse daily."

This chapter offers a description of Stafford as a moral community (Waldram 2012) and considers how much prisoners' stained identities as "sex offenders" mattered to their social relationships.<sup>2</sup> Prison sociologists often describe prisoner society as clearly hierarchical, as though moral judgments about offenses straightforwardly imprint themselves onto social reality (Åkerström 1986; Vaughn and Sapp 1989). As this story and its aftermath indicate, the mark which prisoners' identities left on their social relationships was not solely determined by their convictions.<sup>3</sup> The man who made the rape comment was convicted of grooming offenses against a teenage girl, but the opprobrium was directed at his public statement of intent rather than at his earlier crime. The reaction was all the more outraged because he was a socially isolated and conventionally unattractive man, and he made the comment to two prisoners with more social capital, who better met the ideal set by heteronormative masculinity, and who neither saw themselves nor were seen as "sex offenders." George was a *resigned prisoner* whose claims of innocence for raping two young women were believed by staff and by most prisoners on his wing, and Scott was currently serving a sentence for a nonsexual offense, allowing him to place a firm moral boundary between himself and other men and present himself as a "*mainstream*" prisoner: "I'm not a sex offender, I don't think like them," he had told me when explaining his decision to report the comment.

Prisoners' convictions—or at least, prisoners' stories about their convictions—clearly mattered to life in Stafford, but their effects were compounded and distorted by factors like prisoners' appearance, behavior, and demeanour.<sup>4</sup> One reason for this indirect relationship was that prisoners simply did not know what their peers had been convicted of, and so were forced to make social judgments based on information that was more immediately discernible to them. As this chapter will argue, though, one reason for prisoners' ignorance about their peers was that they, like officers, went out of their way to avoid finding out about people's convictions. Prison researchers have argued that "mainstream" prisoners in integrated prisons respond to the fear that they might be living among "sex offenders" by demanding to see other people's paperwork, so they can find out what everyone is in prison for (Schwaebe 2005; Ugelvik 2014). In Stafford, however, prisoners knew that everyone else was a "sex offender," and so reading prisoners' paperwork would not be able to purify them of the staining connotations. They also knew that

reading prisoners' convictions would not provide the information which mattered much more to them: whether people were guilty, and what their guilt said about their moral and sexual identities. Faced with this epistemologically and morally confusing situation, they tried to dilute the relevance of each other's convictions.

This does not mean that prisoners in Stafford approved of the crimes for which their peers were in prison. John Braithwaite (1989) feared that people who are stigmatized by shaming punishment processes might form a deviant subculture, and that this subculture would reinforce an oppositional moral worldview and allow people to live as though their exclusion were unjust. In our case, that would involve stigmatized men in Stafford coming together and stating that sexual violence (or at least some forms of sexual violence) is morally acceptable, and thus that their punishment was illegitimate. As the widespread disapproval of the comment made about me suggested, though, the fundamental moral framework underpinning social life in Stafford was very similar to that which existed outside the prison, and most prisoners thought that sexual violence was wrong. During the fieldwork, I never heard anyone openly articulate their support for nonconsensual sex with adults, and I only spoke to one person who implied that sex with prepubescent children was ever acceptable (he had dementia, which may have made him less able or likely to control what he disclosed).<sup>5</sup> Most prisoners, however, did believe that many sexual offenses were more nuanced than denunciatory public and legal discourse implied, and their belief in this moral gray zone made it easier for people to tell stories about their offending which challenged or neutralized the narratives which had been crystallized into their criminal convictions.

Prisoners in Stafford did not live in a different moral universe to those living outside the prison, although as this chapter will argue, they did live in a distinct moral microclimate. Prisoners had been sent to Stafford because of their convictions, but in the prison these convictions were impossible to see. Prisoners' victims—the recipients of the real harm which many prisoners had caused—were absent from the prison, veiling the social world from the harm on which it was built (Ievins 2019). The prison was spatially and temporally bounded, a fact which allowed people to live their lives inside differently from how they would outside, knowing that the people they met in prison were unlikely to meet and endanger their families.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the environment became somehow unreal, and prisoners in Stafford were able to make moral and social judgments on different grounds than would have applied outside: "A lot of the people that you meet in here, would you trust them to babysit your kids? Maybe not. Would you trust them to do a lot of things that you would trust your average friend to do? The answer is probably not, in a lot of cases" (Tony).

Immoral offenses were still considered immoral, but information was controlled and managed in such a way that their social consequences were reduced. Prisoners in Stafford had been sent there because of their convictions, but imprisoning them both drew attention to and obscured what they had done, and all that

remained visible was the indistinct stain left by the “sex offender” identity. Prisoners responded to this situation by deliberately trying to ignore their stain and avoid finding out about the details of their peers’ convictions. They engaged in forms of “tactical collusion” (Cohen 2001, 146), working together to resist the “sex offender” label. Overlooking their stigmatization in this way could be read as a rejection of the seriousness of their offenses, but it could also be read as an attempt to move on from their staining pasts and to try to control what shaped their current reality. Wiping the slate clean of their convictions allowed them to be judged not just on what they had done, but on who they were—or at least, who they were able to present themselves as being. What was formed was a new moral community, and this community was built on a foundation of denial.

#### EATING RAT AND MOSQUITOES: DENIAL AND ITS LIMITS

Harry’s approach to other prisoners’ offenses was typical of men in Stafford. He was deeply interested in psychology and anthropology and was curious about his peers, and he had a list of people he wanted to google when he was released so that he could find out what they had been convicted of. However, he had decided against asking his girlfriend to look them up while he was in prison, explaining this with the following analogy:

You’re in China, you’re having a meal. “That’s lovely, what’s that?” The Chinese man says, “It’s rat and mosquitoes.” “Fucking hell, I’m not having that again!” But you’ve still got to live there for another week and there’s not a McDonald’s in sight. But when you get home, you’re like, “Christ, what was that meal I was eating? Rat and mosquito? Fucking hell! I wouldn’t start to eat it tomorrow!” It’s one of them for me. I don’t wanna know now because I’ve got to live with them and if I find out something really gruesome, I’m gonna find it really hard to walk away from my clan. There might be five people in here that I really get on with, but I’ve just found out that the sex assaulting person that’s accidentally just touched someone in the club, it turns out he’s not, he’s actually raped his niece. I’m gonna struggle then.

Harry, like other men in Stafford, was not indifferent to his peers’ convictions. He said that he would not want to be close friends with someone he knew was convicted of what he called a “grisly” offense—a crime against a ten-year-old, for instance, or multiple stranger rapes. He was also protective of female staff and said that he intervened when he heard people talking about them in a sexualized way: “I don’t know what you’re in for, you could be in for rape or stalking or something, and you’re sitting there going, ‘She’s fit.’” Nevertheless, the requirements of the situation he found himself in had prompted him to restrain his naturally inquiring mind and keep his knowledge of other people’s offenses as abstract as possible. By avoiding firm and verified information, Harry engaged in a deliberate act of denial.

In his influential work *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, Stan Cohen (2001) describes the many ways in which different societies either hold at bay, overlook, or neutralize knowledge about injustice which is either too disturbing or too anomalous to be taken in. Cohen's focus is knowledge about mass suffering and political atrocities, and he draws on the work of psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas to argue that the impulse to denial is often driven by the "need to be innocent of a troubling recognition" (25). The denial he describes can be maintained through many different strategies. In some cases, denial involves a deliberate desire to avoid knowledge; in others, it involves a reluctance to change one's life in the light of this knowledge. It can involve saying and believing something that is not factually true, and it can also involve accepting that something is true but thinking that it is not important or that its implications are different from what they seem. Central to the state of denial, though, is the individual or collective effort to control both the flow of information and the ability of that information to penetrate the social world and change the way it is lived.

Prisoners in Stafford had many motivations for engaging in acts of collective denial, and they followed diverse strategies in doing so. Many men said that they avoided hearing or thinking about each other's convictions because they found them too upsetting.<sup>7</sup> Many said that they had overheard distressing and sometimes detailed sexual conversations in Stafford, whether about people's own offenses or about their ongoing sexual interest in children; others had overheard people having conversations imagining deviant sexual acts with women they saw on television or in the prison. Some men told stories about being locked up overnight with cellmates who refused to stop talking about what they had done. They had strong emotional reactions to these conversations, using physical language which was indicative of disgust (Miller 1997): they described feeling "physically sick" (Tony), and hearing stories that "make my skin crawl" (Phil) or make "your head fall off" (Owen). The mental images produced were intrusive and shocking, with many prisoners saying that they shook their view of the world—"things you can't believe can physically be true" (Ricky)—although their taboo nature meant that they sometimes struggled to articulate precisely what they had heard:

I was affected when I was a Listener, with the stories I got told.<sup>8</sup> But I wouldn't even tell you now, Alice, because they were that bad. They were horrific. I had nightmares. I didn't realize things like that happened in the world, I just didn't, especially as I'd just come into prison. (George)

When I was cleaning down in the SOTP room the other week, on the board there was a little box like that on there that said, "My preference is three- to four-year-olds." That was on the board. [ . . . ] There was all the boxes from each different person, and that was one of the things that I seen. And after that, when I read that . . . I just went and mopped up somewhere. Now, I ain't gonna forget that. I can remember how the board was set up, how it was cut up into different divisions. So that's only one thing I've read, and I ain't forgot that. (Frank)

Prisoners only needed to have had these experiences once to be disturbed by them, and so they avoided exposing themselves to this corruption. They rarely asked people questions about their convictions, and either walked away or tried to change the topic when such conversations started. Similarly, many prisoners said that their unwillingness to hear these stories meant that they were unwilling to participate in the SOTP, where they would have to listen to detailed accounts of other people's offending.

Prisoners had other motivations to avoid learning about offenses. As Harry suggested, and as other prisoners confirmed, people in Stafford required a degree of human contact, whether for recreation, trading, or emotional intimacy, and they had very little choice of whom to talk to. The environment in which they lived also provided them with a very specific form of information: prisoners knew that almost all their peers had been convicted of a sex offense, but they did not know which one, nor did they know if they had done it, or if what they had done said anything about their current characters. Prisoners' own experiences told them that criminal convictions did not accurately describe what happened, and that not everybody who was stained as a "sex offender" met the stereotypes implied by that term. On the other hand, prisoners also did not know if the stories their peers told them were true, and if they were as innocent as they sometimes claimed to be. In such a context, it made sense to live as though convictions did not matter:

People generally tend to ignore a lot of stuff for harmony. They can't be bothered. To be honest most people don't care. They don't care. They don't care about each other. One or two people bond, and it's surprising how caring some people can be, but no matter how far that goes, I think they're very selective in that. But I think people ignore a lot of what we're in for, because it's in our face constantly, isn't it? The guy you could be talking to or having a game of chess or cards or having a chat with or being friendly with, he could be in for something that on the outside you'd be prepared to kill him for. [ . . . ] You can't live under those stresses, no. So a lot is forgiven or ignored. (Steven)

One way of ignoring offenses was by limiting the flow of information so that people only knew what needed to be known. Conversations about offending were described as simultaneously invasively unpleasant—"I don't wanna know too much about it because you can't get it out of your head then" (Vince)—and "boring to listen to" (Tommy). It was better to avoid such topics in favor of the relevant and entertaining:

I think if everyone in here, if they could just say, like, "Hello, how are you?" "Good, fine, how are you?" Walk away. "Oh, I need this, do you know anything about this?" "Oh yeah, good, good." And then he tells me a story about what happened once in his past and I say, "Oh really?" and I find it really interesting. OK, he's telling me about an experience, that's interesting. "So how did you get to there? Oh really, OK." And then, "OK, I'll see you later, alright, bye." That's it. If everyone could carry themselves like that on a day-to-day basis, that's fine. Without bringing any of them horrors in, you know. (Ahmed)

Such a community might only involve shallow and pragmatic interactions, but the lack of intimacy was worth it as it would protect people against facing unnecessary or unwanted stories. The goal was to construct a community which engaged in deliberate and knowing acts of denial, and this aspiration was underpinned by the normative claim that people should be assessed on their characters rather than their offenses. According to this moral norm, people's pasts should become irrelevant as soon as they pass through the prison's gates and are reborn as prisoners. "I want to judge a person in here as I see them," Kevin said, and most of his peers agreed: "The way I see it is, everybody's committed a crime, that's fair enough. They've done something wrong in their life. People deserve a chance. I'm not one of those people that see the person for the crime, I see the person for the person" (James).

In practice, prisoners found this norm difficult to live up to, and they tended to assume that what their peers were like as people said something about their offenses. Initial social bonds were formed based on who seemed like a good person to have in your life and to be "on your wavelength" (George), and prisoners frequently said that they were a "good judge of character" (Darren) who would not become friends with a truly problematic person. In practice, these decisions were often made based on physical appearance, and people who resembled the stereotypical image of a pedophile—who were White, old, disabled, wore glasses, had evident learning difficulties, or had bad hair—were more rarely befriended. Kieran told me that he made judgments on the basis of "stereotypes," but he was nevertheless confident about their accuracy: "I could stand down at the servery and I could practically tell you what everybody is in for and I could, hand on my heart, say if I were wrong on more than twenty people on this wing, I'll give you everything in my cell."

Such judgments relied on ignorance and were therefore vulnerable to the stains of knowledge. Even those who most wanted not to let offenses matter to them said that condemnatory impulses were instinctive and thoughts about offending were invasive. John, a *redeemed prisoner* who carried deep feelings of guilt about his own crime, said, "I couldn't judge them, they've been judged. It's difficult. I can't judge them. You can like the person and not like the crime, you know what I mean? But the crime keeps coming back into my head." Phil, a *resigned prisoner*, also found it extremely difficult not to be affected by "the thought that they can do things like that." In order to avoid being placed in this situation, people in Stafford went out of their way to sidestep talking or thinking about convictions, to the extent that they complained more often about those who talked about their offenses than they did about the severity of said offenses. Ian described the protective qualities of the veil of ignorance, and the damaging effects which unwanted information could have on friendships:

I don't think anyone really talks about it. I think everyone just wants to . . . Because . . . See, if . . . This sounds wrong, this, but say if I start talking to some lad, a decent

lad, but then he was like, "Oh yeah, my sentence is, it's with a five-year-old, and I did do it. I got my jollies off on it." Then I'd be thinking, "You were a great lad till you tell us that."

Despite prisoners' best efforts, it was not possible to prevent all information about offending from entering Stafford. In some cases, the details of people's convictions were unexpectedly revealed by stories in the newspaper or on television; in others, people were forced to tell their stories in treatment and then to live alongside each other on the wing. Some men resisted the normative pressure not to talk about their convictions on the wing, and others—like the man whose inappropriate comment opened this chapter—spoke and acted in ways which drew attention to the stained nature of the environment. In this context of semi-ignorance, many men, particularly *negotiators* and "*mainstream*" prisoners, struggled to resist the voyeuristic pull which objects of disgust can exert (Miller 1997). Many admitted to speculating about other people's offenses—George said, "You instantly see a creepy old man and you're like, 'I wonder what he's in for?' but you shouldn't be"—and some said they enjoyed testing people's stories and gossiping about what people were in prison for, with Ahmed saying, "You've got to have a hobby in here" and Noah comparing it to "fishing."

The inevitability of knowledge meant that men in Stafford had to find other ways of absorbing their peers' convictions without allowing them to threaten the prison's equilibrium or their social relationships, and they followed five key strategies in doing so. First, they distinguished between mistakes, which they saw as foolish one-off acts which could be discounted in the social and moral reckoning, and actions which they thought reflected people's true characters. The difference between these two categories was partly determined by the offenses themselves, and acts which prisoners believed were symptomatic of pedophilia were taken particularly seriously as a sign of having a faulty sexuality and a stained character. Terry, for instance, said that sexual acts against children were categorically different from those committed against adults: "Everybody's entitled to make a mistake, but when they start to go with kids and things, that's not a mistake, that's an illness." Tony agreed:

There's definitely a buffer. If you know someone who's twenty, twenty-one, twenty-four, whatever, who's slept with a girl who was fifteen, in honesty, fifteen-year-old girls can look significantly older than that, and I can see why it would be a genuine mistake. Or if someone did it honestly and said, "You know, she was fucking fit [attractive], I knew she was fifteen, I shouldn't have done it," yeah, there is a sort of acceptance of that.

Prisoners also interpreted the way their peers told their stories as a sign of their character. Remorse indicated that the offense was an error of judgment:<sup>9</sup>

I'm not interested in other people[s offenses] because that's their private life, their personal life. It doesn't affect me, unless a person is proud of it and laughing about



it. [ . . . ] If somebody has done it and is feeling bad about it, they don't want to do it, that person's alright, I'm alright to talk to you. (Shezad)

As character was what truly mattered, prisoners used the idea of “mistakes” to justify continuing to be friends with people who had done bad things but whom they knew to be good people.

Second, when people learned things about their peers which were harder to neutralize as a mistake, they interpreted this information in line with their preexisting assumptions about their characters in ways which made it possible for relationships to continue. These interpretations were facilitated by prisoners' established doubts about the legal system, their instincts about which offenses were more serious, and their awareness that the prison's rehabilitative regime incentivized the false admission of guilt. Ian, for instance, told me that he had assumed that a friend of his—a man with significant prison experience serving an indeterminate sentence—was not guilty. When his friend told him that he was about to start the SOTP, a requirement of which was the admission of guilt, Ian concluded that his motivations were instrumental and that the admission was misleading: “He's opened up saying, ‘I'm doing the SOTP course.’ I don't think any the worse of him for doing it. The guy's on a parole sentence, he wants to get out as fast as he can by doing this.” However, his friend told me that he was guilty of his offense, and that while his motivations for participating in the SOTP were partly pragmatic, they were also indicative of his growing feelings of regret and shame about his offending.

Third, prisoners' offenses and stained identities were often discussed and defused as jokes. Humor about offenses and offenders was frequent and took different forms, including comments about people's appearances, exaggerated stories about other people's offenses and sexual predilections, and referring to the SOTP course as “Stay Out the Park” and the wing band as the Pedophonics. In many cases, prisoners said that they tried to find the humor in situations as a way of redirecting their attention from the horror (Morreall 1987; Palmer 1994; Sanders 2004; Zijderfeld 1968). Tony recounted a story he had heard about someone in the prison who had raped his brother and put him in the washing machine to destroy the evidence, and had killed him in the process:

That's pretty bad, innit. But it's like, what were you thinking? Do you know what I mean? Get over the bit where a rape and a murder have gone on—

*Just ignore that! [laughs]*

Just move past that bit! Let that bit go! What were you thinking with the washing machine, you fucking idiot? That's another level that, isn't it! There's a part of you that thinks, “Fucking hell, I wish I'd never had to know stuff like this!” but I think there's a morbid sort of humor attached to it where you think, “What were you thinking? What was it, when that was going on? How did you get to the bit where you thought, ‘Yeah, I'll put him in the washing machine, that'll solve all my problems!’”

Jokes also allowed people to demonstrate that they did not approve of their friends' offenses without threatening the relationship. Owen was a "*mainstream*" prisoner who insisted that "you're not going to want to be friends with someone who's a fucking pedo," but he was also "close to," in his words, a man who was convicted of multiple counts of grooming teenage girls. Owen frequently teased his friend about his convictions, and his friend, perhaps reluctantly, joined in:

I think sometimes it does get to him, but he knows it's all in jest, and he knows he's done wrong. He's put his hands up and said, "I fucked up." Maybe two or three times, but he fucked up and he put his hands up, so you have a laugh with him to let him know that he's done wrong.

At times, Owen's teasing of his friend seemed to creep beyond the boundaries of friendship. On one occasion, Owen tried to persuade his friend to tell me a funny story about his unusual masturbation technique, but his friend, embarrassed, stormed off. On such occasions, jokes seemed to function more as a way of establishing a barrier between Owen and his friend than as a way of absorbing the shock posed by their differences.

The fourth strategy was to ignore what people were told. This strategy was primarily deployed in cases where people repeatedly insisted on their innocence, as people who accepted that they were guilty discussed their offenses less frequently. Many men, even *activists* and *resigned prisoners*, were suspicious of some claims of innocence, but they rarely challenged them, as Ahmed explained: "Ain't polite, is it. You don't want to. Nah. That's what he believed. But to me it's like, 'Oh bloody hell!' You know? Probably in the back of my mind I'm saying, like, 'Yeah, sure, right.'" In such cases, prisoners tried not to let their suspicions and incredulities affect their actions. Tommy said you just "blank them out" if they keep talking about their case; James said it was easy to "switch off to it," and Paul said, "Someone could tell me summat [something] and it could go in one ear and out the other."

The fifth strategy involved ignoring people, rather than ignoring information. If people were believed to be convicted of offenses against younger children and if they had few social and economic ties to other prisoners, they were sometimes avoided and ignored by their peers. Darren said, "I'm not saying I'm better than anyone in here, not for a minute, but I just don't want to associate with them," and Zac took this one step further: "I don't look down on anyone, I just blank them out of my head." The judgment implied by this avoidance was rarely made explicit, and it was expressed as discernment rather than condemnation. Its targets would sometimes be discussed by other prisoners but rarely to their face:

Nothing happens in here, nothing. I mean, prisoners have come in here before now and people like Noah and that, they'll go, "There's that one that was in the newspaper for raping them kids." That's it. But if it was on the mains wing, it would have been slice slice slice, stab stab stab. On here it's just sort of like, "There's Joe Bloggs, the pedophile of the town. You alright? Pot of sugar?" Acceptance. (Harry)

Such judgment was expressed so discreetly that those who were subjected to it were often oblivious. *Fatalists* often expressed anxiety that if their offenses became public knowledge, they would be at risk from other prisoners. In reality, their offenses were often widely known—because a friend had broken their trust or through someone who knew them in a previous prison—without this having much effect on their daily experience.

Through these mechanisms of denial, prisoners in Stafford managed to maintain their friendships, trading relationships, and psychological equilibrium against the pressure of their peers' convictions. In doing so, they produced a moral order which tried and partially succeeded to stop people's convictions from mattering and to mitigate the stain that marred the prison. Precisely how people lived within this moral order varied greatly, however. Prisoners were not just corrupted by Stafford, they were contaminants themselves, and how they thought about and interacted with other people was inextricably linked to their understanding of why and how their own criminal convictions mattered. Closer examination of the social relationships of the different "types" reveals how prisoners' social relationships, their inclination to condemn other prisoners, their willingness to discuss offenses, and their precise concerns about contamination were knitted together with their adaptations to their own convictions and sentences. How people made sense of their position as imprisoned "sex offenders," and how they thought about living with other imprisoned "sex offenders," were two sides of the same ethical coin.

#### THE HALL OF MIRRORS: JUDGING AND BEING JUDGED

Imprisonment in Stafford was like being in a hall of mirrors: prisoners were "looking at themselves, looking at others, and looking at others looking at them, with these reflected images bouncing off each other *ad infinitum*" (Ievins and Crewe 2015, 497). People in Stafford felt differently about their guilt, but almost everyone felt that they had been unjustly labeled "sex offenders" and resented the assumption that their convictions said everything about who they were and who they could be. They also lived in a confined space with hundreds of other people who shared the same label, and despite their best efforts, their social interactions with and judgments of these people were certainly marked by their awareness of it. Prisoners' attempts at maintaining collective denial were not enough to stop their peers' convictions and labels from mattering to their social world, albeit in a reduced and distorted way. But precisely *how* these convictions and labels mattered—what they said to people and how they shaped social relationships—varied depending on prisoners' ways of thinking about their own responsibility for their crime and approaches to their sentence. Everyone in Stafford saw other prisoners as potential sources of contamination, but the nature of their concern

about contamination said something about the type of project they believed they were engaged in.

*Repentant* and *redeemed prisoners* were fixated on their individual moral journeys, and this intense preoccupation meant that they rarely judged other prisoners for the specific acts which had brought them into custody. Through their own experiences, they had learned “that everybody’s got the capability to do a bad thing” (Keith), and they were reluctant to reproach anyone else for what they had done, or even to talk about offenses: “In a place like this, you’re in here for something and it’s gonna be a topic of conversation at some point I suppose, but again, it’s something I’ve learned, you deal with your own stuff, it’s personal to you, and you just get on” (Peter). They were generally sociable and had often developed close friendships with a small number of fellow prisoners, particularly if they had participated in treatment together. Jake had two close friends on his wing, whom he had known in a previous prison and who had completed treatment courses at a similar time to him. These were the only people in the prison who knew about Jake’s offense:

I’ve told them openly, yeah.  
*Did they ask or did you . . . ?*

I think one of them asked me. He says, “I’ve known you so long now. I’ve known you three years. I don’t even know why you’re here.” But I knew him so long that I could trust him, you know what I mean? We were like that, sort of thing.

*He’s a good guy.*

Same with the other one, we’re really good friends. So, yeah, he knows what I’m in for. I know what he’s in for. So, the first one is in for the same thing as me. Stepdaughter, so, yeah. Actually, the other one’s the same. He’s in for his stepdaughter. But we’ve talked about how it came about, what was going on, where your head was at, sort of thing. The only difference is that I was abused as a child, where they weren’t.

In Jake’s case, at least, the similarity of the offenses made them easier to talk about, and talking about them solidified the relationship: “I think it brought us closer together because the offenses were similar. But it gave us a talking point to build up trust and a good friendship. [ . . . ] We have a sort of understanding of what we’re about and where we’re from.” *Repentant* and *redeemed prisoners* did not need to have committed the same offenses as their friends to understand them, though; what mattered more was that they responded to them in the same way and had a similar approach to their sentence. William, for example, took a great deal of comfort from his relationship with a man on his wing whom he described as “on the same sort of path as me.” Despite the closeness of these friendships, prisoners were highly aware that they were temporary, not least because they were unwilling to break license restrictions preventing them from remaining in contact on release.

These close friendships were the only context outside SOTP courses in which *repentant* and *redeemed prisoners* discussed offending. They normally considered

such conversations to be gratuitous and unpleasant and were particularly condemnatory of those who spoke about women, children, or sex in explicit or aggressive ways. As moral crusaders, they responded to stain by demanding purity from those who surrounded them, and their forgiveness of other prisoners' pasts did not extend into exoneration of their current behavior:

I hear people saying, like, "I could crack her spine." It's like I just can't believe . . . It's like, wow. I get angry, but it makes me feel physically sick as well at the same time. Because I've bettered myself now, it's making . . . I can understand why I've done what I've done to better myself, but [ . . . ] what people say can make me feel bad. And it's like, wow, you need to sort yourself out. It's just wrong. It's not right. It's not right anymore. It's like, it makes me think about my victim, like I should never have made her do these things. I should never have made her feel that way. I should have been more in control of my own self to stop doing this shit. But people are quite happy to talk about their offenses, in quite graphic detail sometimes as well. I just walk away, like I can't be bothered with this. But I walk away because one, I could say something, two, I could blow my top, and three, it could send me back into that pattern of thoughts. And I just don't want to know. (Jake)

In part, these feelings were straightforward moral judgments, an understandable reaction to hearing conversations which were troubling and objectionable. Identity work was also at play: positively comparing oneself to others helped *repentant* and *redeemed prisoners* reinforce their sense of themselves as moral actors and reminded them of how far they had come. William had come to Stafford with a friend from a more rehabilitatively minded prison. He described them as being like "two goldfish and we've been dropped in a piranha's pond," but he saw some advantages in seeing how "manipulative and controlling" other prisoners could be:

I know it might sound a bit distasteful, but it made me feel happy knowing that I've never been in that kind of role, to be overselfish or overcontrolling and all these things, and it helped me to see, thinking, well, if I don't correct myself, that's what I'm going to be like. I'm thinking, woah, no, I don't want to even go near that.

These processes of identity work were complex and in some respects contradictory. On the one hand, *repentant* and *redeemed prisoners* saw themselves as good people who had repaid their moral debts, in stark contrast to many of those they lived with; on the other hand, their atonement would never be complete and they were required to continually monitor themselves and other people. Their purity put them at risk of contamination, and they worried about being dragged back, both in terms of being forced to remember an offense which disgusted them and of being influenced and corrupted by the "horrible thought patterns" (Louis) which other prisoners demonstrated and which they had worked so hard to move on from.

*Fatalists* were vulnerable, ashamed, and aware that their convictions were the most disdained in Stafford. They primarily focused on getting through

their sentence with the minimum of damage. Of all the groups, they were the most steadfast in their insistence on the norm of equality, strategically limiting conversations around offending and claiming that everyone in Stafford was the same:<sup>10</sup>

*How do you feel about living with people convicted of sex offenses?*

Well, it's not really a problem in here. I don't know what their sex offense is. I don't want to ask them. They don't ask me, I don't ask them. It doesn't really bother me. To me, I don't think of them as sex offenders. I think they're just people who've made a mistake, simple as that.

*Why don't you want to know?*

Well, for one thing, it might be something really nasty, and I don't want to know because if they tell me theirs, I'll feel obligated to tell them what I'm in for, and they'll make me feel like I'm a nasty person. So I know I'm not a nasty person, and hopefully they're not nasty. [ . . . ] I try to forget what I'm in here for. It makes my life easier, and it makes me talk to people more. (Samuel)

These claims of equality had two aims, the first of which was common among all prisoners in Stafford: to allow prisoners to continue to interact with people who had committed troubling crimes. The second was more specific to *fatalists*. They hoped to protect themselves from judgment on similar grounds and were thus reluctant to condemn other prisoners.

They had small and relatively distant groups of friends, mostly other *fatalists* and sometimes *resigned prisoners*, with whom they were unlikely to discuss their offenses. They were unwilling to remain in contact on release, aware that to do so would be a breach of license restrictions, might put them at risk of reoffending, and would extend an experience which had been profoundly unpleasant:

Some people might not want to be friends with me [if they knew about my offense]. I wouldn't say [they'd be] violent because they know they shouldn't do that or they might get shipped out [transferred], but they might discard you as a friend. But I don't class this lot as my friends. It's like my sister and my probation officer said, "They're associates in here, they're not friends."<sup>11</sup> You're not going to meet all these on the outside and have a laugh together because you've got to start afresh. Associates." While you're in here you're friendly, people are nice, but then you go "Ta-ra." (Barry)

In some cases, *fatalists* circumvented conversations about offending to avoid their sexual desires being awakened. Several *fatalists* either admitted or alluded to being sexually attracted to children, and they said that their main strategy for managing this attraction was to avoid thinking about it. Conversations about offending could stir bad thoughts, as Oliver said:

I don't like those kind of people, because they're never going to get out, because if they get off on that, they'll get off on it when they get out. And I want to move on from that. I know I've got an illness. I don't need to be triggered.

As the medical language used by Oliver implies, *fatalists'* concerns about contamination were different from those expressed by *repentant* and *redeemed prisoners*, but in a way which was consistent with their approaches to their sentences. *Redeemed* and *repentant prisoners* were engaged in a project of ethical self-construction and feared sexually explicit conversations might morally debase them. *Fatalists*, on the other hand, genuinely feared that they might be unable to control other people's impact on their sexuality, and that this might disrupt their goal of practical self-management.

*Negotiators* and "*mainstream*" *prisoners* were less vulnerable and more pragmatic in their approach to both their sentences and their peers. They acknowledged that they were forced to live in prison with people convicted of sexual offenses and that some degree of association was practically, emotionally, and economically necessary, and they were the men who most consciously limited their knowledge about their peers to allow these relationships to continue. Their friendships were often quite strategic, based on shared interests and backgrounds, and they were generally emotionally distant from their associates. While they were often quite open about their own offenses, they generally eschewed asking too directly about other people's, avoiding only those whose convictions were generally known (or more accurately, those whose reputations were generally known) and those whose appearances implied that they might be convicted of particularly serious offenses. They justified this avoidance on practical grounds: "It's better not to know, and just carry on not seeing what we've done" (Ahmed). While they rarely openly abused them, they disapproved of those they knew were convicted of offenses against young children (and those whose appearances, in their eyes, indicated that they were), and they were reluctant to associate with them more than was necessary: "I'm very choosy with who my friends are, and I don't see that because we're all in the same boat in here that we're all the same people" (Frank).

These distinctions were largely a consequence of identity work. *Negotiators* and "*mainstream*" *prisoners* were frustrated with their imprisonment and sensitive to the stigma of the "sex offender" label, and they managed this situation by suggesting that those they lived with deserved this situation more than they did:

That was probably the lowest I've ever been in my entire life, when I was waiting for that trial, waiting for that to all come through. That was probably the lowest, scummiest I've ever felt, and that's the truth. I've got used to it a bit more now. I've come to this place, like I say, we're all classed as sex offenders, but I've labeled it, and you've got this, you've got that. And I class myself—whether I'm right, whether I'm wrong—but I class myself as up here [in the moral hierarchy]. I'm not down there. (Frank)

This differentiation was also socially reinforced. Younger *negotiators* and "*mainstream*" *prisoners* were aware that their prison friends might find them guilty by association if they spent time with someone known to have offended against a child: "If you make a friendship with one of the bacons [someone in for a child sex offense], then you're an outcast" (Noah). Their concern with contamination



was thus symbolic. Their priority was protecting their reputation, and they were aware that they might further damage it by spending time with the wrong people, and this preoccupied them more than any fear that they might be sexually or morally infected by them. As long as the reputational impact of their relationships was managed, and they did not overhear graphic descriptions of offenses, they were willing to socially engage with other prisoners.

*Resigned prisoners* were less concerned with stigmatization and reputational damage within the prison. They coped with their imprisonment by ignoring its illegitimacy and focusing on dealing with their daily life within the institution. Their interactions with other prisoners employed a complementary style, and they preferred neither to discuss their own offenses, nor to talk about other peoples':

It's not interesting to me. There are so many more interesting things to talk about. Prisoners come and go in these places. I don't want to spend the rest of my time enlightening the next one that comes in, enlightening the next one that comes in. No thanks. Because that way, I'm missing out on something. I've got to make the best of what it is in here. That, to me, is off the radar unless I've really got to talk about it. (Kevin)

*Resigned prisoners* tried to cope with their imprisonment by simply not seeing their conviction as part of the interior world of the prison. This was not always easy. Other prisoners sometimes talked about their offenses, and judgmental instincts were able to pierce through protective exteriors:

When you hear what some of them are convicted of . . . Some of them are very open about it, they'll tell you themselves. As a parent and a husband, some of them absolutely disgust me. I have to be careful, I have to try and balance things because I'm in their club now, but I think some of them should be locked away forever and I don't want to engage with them on any level. You know, I'd be the same on the outside, but like I say, in here you have to make allowances. (Phil)

They saw themselves as fundamentally different from those who were guilty of the most serious offenses, and yet they were forced by unjust circumstance to spend time with them. Balancing these two competing needs—for protection from unfairly imposed stain and for social engagement to make imprisonment easier—was central to how *resigned prisoners* adapted to their sentences. They often formed quite close friendships within the prison, primarily with other *resigned prisoners*, and they talked mainly about their shared experiences of employment, family, and “normal life” (Shezad), rather than a mutual feeling of injustice.

*Activists*, on the other hand, powered themselves with discussions of injustice, although like other prisoners they avoided directly discussing offenses in order to maintain social relationships. They considered the legal system to be corrupt, and this belief made them open to the idea that other people had also been the victims of a miscarriage of justice. Cain, for instance, said, “If I can come in here on an innocent thing, then how many people can come in on an innocent thing?” He, like other *activists*, preferred to socialize with people he believed to be innocent, but



he felt forced by circumstance to lower his moral standards: “I only stick around not guilty people. Don’t get me wrong, there are a few what are guilty, I’ll probably talk to one or two, and I’ll probably think, ‘Bloody hell man, what am I doing?’ [ . . . ] But look at the jail I’m in, what can I do?” Nevertheless, *activists* came closest to replicating the “mainstream” offense hierarchy in Stafford. They regularly and openly discussed their distaste for many of those they lived among, and they distinguished between those who were guilty and those who were innocent, and between those convicted of offenses against adults and those convicted of offenses against children. Like other prisoners, they preferred to minimize contact with those they condemned and rarely confronted them directly, but they assigned responsibility for this to those they sought to avoid: “As long as they keep out of my way, I keep out of their way” (Cain). This moral hierarchy served a symbolic function, just as it did for *negotiators*:

Some of these people are child molesters, gays, who knows what they are. No. Pedophiles, whatever. They put all of us in the same category, but there’s pedophilia and there’s rape, but the worst of the worst is the pedophiles. I cannot—urgh. I can’t understand how a man can get off on a child. I can’t relate to it, put it that way. I cannot relate to it. I can’t see where they’re getting off on a child. (Terry)

*Activists* disparaged the masculinity of those convicted of offenses against children as much as they criticized them morally: they were not just bad people, but also bad men who were sexually aroused by unacceptable stimuli, and *activists’* voluble disgust illustrated their dissimilarity from pedophiles. The revulsion they felt also fed into their general cynicism about the justice system, with several *activists* complaining that they had received longer sentences for (allegedly unfair) convictions relating to adults than other prisoners had received for offenses against children. They considered the formal system to be as corrupt as the informal social world.

#### CONCLUSION: MAKING SEXUAL VIOLENCE MATTER

One way, though, that communities bring themselves into existence, sustain themselves, and define and refine their identities is by the progressive articulation and the enforcement of their norms and of their membership. When individuals take up the role of judges, invoking norms and affirming membership, they make use of something that is common property, the moral authority of a community. (Walker 2006, 33)

Philosopher Margaret Urban Walker argues that communities have three responsibilities when moral norms have been breached: to reiterate the broken standards, to make the wrongdoer accept responsibility, and to validate victims and their needs. Punishing the wrongdoer is one way of achieving all three of these goals, Walker argues, as punishment can show that the standards are so significant that we are willing to change our world in response to a breach of them, that the

wrongdoer is part of the community who should obey them, and that the victims are members of the community who should be protected by them (30–32). However, Walker suggests that such punishment should not simply be contracted out to formal legal systems. Instead, all members of a community should “take up the role of judges” and show that wrongdoing matters by choosing not to ignore it, but instead allowing it to change our relationships.

Increasingly, imprisonment is the method we use to show that sexual violence matters, but in so doing we professionalize and bureaucratize the delivery of punishment, making it the job of the state and not of the moral community. When we do this, we forget that prisons create communities as well as exclude people from them. These communities inevitably engage in their own forms of moral communication which do not always align with those intended by the state, and which demonstrate the different ways in which sexual offenses can matter to people. In Stafford, other people’s offenses mattered to prisoners in a way which was determined more by how prisoners approached their own sentences than it was by the moral seriousness of the offense in question. Imprisonment removed people from the harm they had caused and from their communities, and subjected them to a painful experience, pushing them to focus their attention on themselves. As a result, for most prisoners in Stafford, other people’s offenses represented a threat to themselves more than it did a harm to others: for *repentant* and *redeemed prisoners*, the threat was to their moral integrity; for *fatalists*, it was to their futures; for *negotiators*, their reputation; for *resigned prisoners*, their coping strategies; and for *activists*, their masculine morality.

The primary goal of most prisoners in Stafford was to guard themselves against the threats these offenses represented rather than to make these offenses matter. As a result, they, like prison officers, were reluctant to “take up the role of judges” and allow prisoners’ convictions to become the primary factor shaping their relationships. Rather than amplifying the messages of denunciation which they knew their peers’ sentences represented, they closed their ears to them. They had been marked as “sex offenders” and were surrounded by people sharing the same stain, and their response to this pressure was to try to ignore it as much as possible. They therefore engaged in complex acts of collective denial to stop themselves from finding out what their peers had been convicted of and to absorb the knowledge which they gained so that it did not become the dominant factor governing their lives inside.

Just as there is no evidence that individual offense denial makes reoffending more likely (Ware and Blagden 2020), there is no reason to believe that these forms of collective denial would increase participants’ chances of offending again. Indeed, one way of thinking about Stafford’s moral community is as a model of reintegration. It may be the case that the only way for society to accept people who have committed acts of sexual violence, or other serious wrongs, is by deliberately limiting our awareness of their offenses, and thereby choosing to stop thinking

about them as “sex offenders” or “criminals.”<sup>12</sup> However, Stafford’s moral community did not control this knowledge in a way that made it a tempting model. Prisoners’ attempts to suppress knowledge about other people’s worst acts were more an attempt to ignore knowledge which would be distressing than a meaningful ethical claim about the relevance of these acts to future social interactions. Mechanisms of denial also had the effect of promoting troubling ways of thinking about sexual offending. Prisoners’ reluctance to challenge and question their peers’ stories of innocence encouraged the belief that miscarriages of justice were common and reinforced rape myths. Most prisoners estimated that between a third and a quarter of their peers were not guilty, and others questioned the seriousness of other people’s offenses by drawing on victim-blaming tropes. Also, the decision to avoid knowledge about offending meant that prisoners made judgments about their peers on the basis of people’s appearances and demeanors, and never challenged the common stereotyped assumption that sexually violent acts are only enacted by sexually inadequate men (Temkin, Gray, and Barrett 2018).

Feminists have long argued that we should pay more societal attention to sexually violent acts and actors that do not fit our stereotypes. Stafford, however, encouraged its prisoners to simultaneously pay too much and too little attention to sexually inappropriate behaviors. Its stain was so absolute and so all-encompassing that it was difficult to see through it clearly, and so only that which was immediately visible was acknowledged. The comment which opened this chapter provides a clear illustration of this. The statement, while deeply unpleasant, was not qualitatively dissimilar to sexually explicit comments made in other contexts, and the man who made it was far from the first to make graphic sexual comments to or about me. What differentiated this remark, as Tony recognized, was its phrasing: “It’s the ‘rape’ thing. If he’d said, ‘She’s pretty’ or ‘I’d fuck her,’ that’d be OK.” By using a criminal label, this man made clear that what he desired was wrong. Had he used a less condemned term to express the same wish, the message would have been heard differently.