

Book Reviews

The Stains of Imprisonment: Moral Communication and Men Convicted of Sex Offenses
By Alice levins
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Reviewers: *Special feature extended book review by prisoners and staff at HMP Rye Hill in collaboration with Building Futures Network, Prison Reform Trust.*

The Stains of Imprisonment — Moral communication and men convicted of sex offences, written by criminologist Alice levins,¹ is reviewed in this special feature for the *Prison Service Journal* by Building Futures Network Group (HMP Rye Hill). Building Futures is a five-year project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund to explore experiences of people who will spend 10 or more years in custody, with the aim of making a positive difference to the lives of very long-sentenced prisoners, their families and the wider community.²

Uniquely, this report compiles the thoughts and views from members of the Building Futures Network Group (BFNG) at Rye Hill and a number of staff working in a variety of areas throughout the prison. Data were collected through consultation work with all members and one to one sessions with staff. Some of the views recorded by current staff members were personal and may not represent those of HMPPS and/or G4S, as such we maintained their confidentiality so they could speak freely and openly to the group. This project was signed off by the

current Director of HMP Rye Hill, Lee Davies.

The Stains of Imprisonment focuses on how in recent decades there has been a widespread effort to imprison more people for sexual violence. It offers a scientific description of the people and cultures of men convicted of sex offences. This book explores how prisons are morally communicative institutions, enforcing ideas about the offences the prisoners have committed, ideas that carry implication for prisoners' moral character. It investigates these moral messages, with levins finding that the prison she studied communicated a pervasive sense of disgust and shame, marking men as permanently stained. Rather than promoting accountability, the message portrayed discouraged prisoners from engaging in serious moral reflection on the harms they have caused. Analysing these effects, the book explores the role that imprisonment plays as a response to sexual harm, and the extent to which it takes us closer to and further from justice (p. 16).

This review will explore the prisoners' and staffs' views on a chapter by chapter basis, these are; Punishing Rape: Feminisms and the Carceral Conversation; Communicating Badly: Prisons as Morally Communicative Institutions; Distorting Institutions: Structuring the Moral Dialogue; Managing Guilt: Living as a 'Sex Offender' in Prison; Maintaining Innocence: Contesting Guilt and Challenging Imprisonment; Moralising Boundaries: Staff-Prisoner Relationships and the Communication of Difference;

Denying Community: Social Relationships and the Dangers of Acknowledgment; Judging Prisons: The Limitations and Excesses of Denunciatory Punishment.

Punishing Rape: Feminisms and the Carceral Conversation

Many of the prisoner contributors felt that the vast majority of people who have not been through the legal system with a rape charge are unaware of how wide a scope the term rape covers. The points raised in chapter one revolve around the public's understanding, or lack thereof, of the complexity of the term rape. The chapter covers how political points can also be scored by the government and the opposition when commenting on convictions of rape. Such as when Victoria Derbyshire uses the public to light a fuse under 'Clarkes' plans for reform which is desperately needed, as sexual offence convictions are the fastest growing in England and Wales. Both staff and prisoner respondents had strong emotions ranging from anger to despair as the justice sector was once again being shaped by public opinion.

'...uses the public to light a fuse under 'Clarkes' plans for reform I was angered'.³

'The media clearly have more influence than the government who appear to buckle under public pressure'.⁴

1. levins, A. (2023). *The Stains of Imprisonment: Moral Communication and Men Convicted of Sex offences*. University of California Press.
2. Prison Reform Trust (2022). Building Futures Promotional Leaflet.
3. BFNG prisoner comment.
4. BFNG prisoner comment.

However, there was contrast between staff and prisoner feedback.

'I was pleasantly surprised at the balance Dr levins achieved'.⁵

Comparing that to the staff opinion of:

'The author paints a bit of a bad picture of the prison system, and she is playing up to the public demand, and the shame and guilt a prisoner faces are repetitive throughout the book let alone this chapter'.⁶

Referring to the moral message as a 'stain' suggests something permanent. This impacts the social identity of the person(s) convicted, who are constantly marginalised and live in fear of the legal effects from their licence conditions or the sex offender register.

The overall feeling from this chapter is that the feedback regarding the mentality of the current prison system is a problem in successfully rehabilitating people convicted of sex offences.

Communicating Badly: Prisons as Morally Communicative Institutions

The raw honesty of this chapter was hard hitting for some. levins talks about punishment that has been removed from public view, hidden behind closed walls and the moral dialogue in which punishment has become an 'oblique communication carried out in institutions which give little expression of the public voice'. This

rang true with many members of Rye Hill's Building Futures Network Group.

'The point made is essential to how justice is done and seen to be done'.⁷

This clearly points to the lack of understanding by the public and the way that the government chooses to exclude the public with their 'we know best' approach. This leads to a system where all that is left to symbolise justice to victims and the community, is the number of years to which people are sentenced. Hulley et al discuss several ways in which long-term prison sentences can be damaging and counterproductive.⁸ Long-term imprisonment necessitates coping strategies that fundamentally transform the individual, making them more emotionally detached, self-isolating, and socially withdrawn. These changes, although essential for survival in prison, make reintegration into society after release significantly harder. Prisoners often experience emotional numbing and become distant and hardened, which are maladaptive in the outside world and lead to difficulties in social and family life post-release. The cumulative negative effects of these adaptations include hypervigilance, estrangement, and a lack of trust, deeply internalised patterns that remain counterproductive in normal social contexts.

One respondent highlighted the extract; 'Punishment has become hidden behind closed walls' (p. 14). This prisoner expressed surprise that even as far back as 1830, prison reformers like John Howard were advocating for a new way to reform prisoners, noting that 'gentle discipline was commonly more efficient than the severity of sentences'. levins points

out that losing one's connections to society and family only compounds a prisoner's feeling of shame; a very disruptive and negative emotion, as opposed to that of a feeling of guilt.

Prisoners and staff found it interesting that the author refers to 'denying, excusing or justifying one's own past offending does not seem to increase the likelihood of reoffending and may in some circumstances make it less likely'. This challenges the HMPPS approach to programmes. levins goes on to discuss how looking to the future is of importance in contrast to Offender Management Units' (OMU) perceived approach of referring to the past and being reluctant to talk about the future.

Distorting Institutions: Structuring the Moral Dialogue

Many of the prisoners commented on the first paragraph that discusses the distortions of how men convicted of sexual offending viewed their offences. This summarises the reading that levins completed before starting out on her fieldwork, however, the book mentions that she expected to meet many prisoners who would be falsely maintaining their innocence and downplaying their offences. She then goes on to say:

'I have an instinctive desire to probe official narratives ... I was uncomfortable with assuming that any distance between the prisoners' stories of their offences and that officially validated by their own conviction was a product of the prisoners' dishonesty' (p. 34).

This intrigued many of the prisoners and made them feel levins was being honest that she was not 'judging a book by its cover'. Some of the staff reviewing this book also

5. BFNG prisoner comment.
6. Staff comment.
7. BFNG prisoner comment.
8. Hulley, S., Crewe, B., & Wright, S. (2016). Re-examining the Problems of Long-term Imprisonment. British Journal of Criminology, 56(4), 769–792.

commented, that in their opinion, prisoners deal with their stains of imprisonment in different ways and that there is a lot of 'un-said's' in the official version of accounts. However, prisoners convicted of sexual offences are rarely completely honest about their crimes with those seen to be in authority.

The chapter then gives views of some prisoners from levins' fieldwork. Some prisoners noted that this chapter resonated with their own experiences of the justice system:

'I can relate to [a lot] of the comments made by men in HMP Stafford, especially when they spoke about being stained. It's a powerful word; it describes how disruptive it is for men convicted of a sexual offence to continue with the lives constructively post release'.⁹

The group felt that levins makes a valid reference to the potential for violence towards men convicted of sexual offences from fellow prisoners. It is not the only risk whilst in custody; it is widely known that officers across the prison estate have been abusive towards sex offenders both verbally and in the extreme physically.

'The accuracy of the chapter is excellent and revealing; levins describes how counterproductive the term 'sex offender' is' (p. 34).

Managing Guilt: Living as a 'Sex Offender' in Prison

A number of prisoners in the group mentioned that this chapter was difficult to align with as they were 'maintaining innocence'.

However, table 1 (p. 62) was seen by the whole group as eye opening, as many of the prisoners could recognise elements of themselves within this table, however multiple prisoners did mention that they do not fall into just one group but split over multiple groups which led to confusion and a feeling of the table not being as useful as first thought.

'It makes it both interesting to see how people can be grouped, while confusing because I don't fall into just one particular section'.¹⁰

This chapter stirred a multitude of emotions within the group both positive and negative, because of how men describe their convictions and how they deal with the shame, stigma and guilt attached. It can take a huge amount of mental strength to cope with the consequences of opening up.

One particular concern raised by the group was the chapter's acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of suicide in the lives of 'men convicted of a sexual offence'.

'It took me back to the time of my arrest, where I was repeatedly asked if I felt suicidal; this now makes sense to me because I was unaware at the time of the risks of suicide attached to being accused of a 'sexual offence'.¹¹

The group concluded that levins captures a wholly accurate picture of the comments and topics discussed, based on their own experiences talking with fellow prisoners, both in 'mains' and 'VP' locations. They shared multiple accounts of hearing first hand some of the comments levins records from speaking with men in HMP Stafford.

Maintaining Innocence: Contesting Guilt and Challenging Imprisonment

One member of the group who maintains their innocence highlighted:

'The chapter clearly shines a bright light on how prisoners maintaining innocence are treated by prisons... An undercurrent runs within departments including OMU which suggests that prisoners who are innocent or 'maintain innocence' are in denial' (p. 62).

This sentiment resonated within the group, with many expressing concerns that those who might be innocent could be unfairly labelled as liars, hindering their progress within the system and ignoring the possibility of miscarriages of justice occurring.

Staff members offered an alternative perspective, noting:

'I feel that many prisoners wear a mask to hide their true feelings. I can see how hard it must be for those who are truly innocent'.¹²

9. BFNG prisoner comment.

10. BFNG prisoner comment.

11. BFNG Prisoner comment.

12. Staff comment.

Again, this underscores how difficult it is for those who are maintaining their innocence, especially with the stigma attached of being convicted of a sexual offence.

The group debated the term ‘denial’ and concluded that the term itself causes many disagreements. They questioned how a person can deny something that did not happen, emphasising that an act must have taken place for a person to deny it. The term ‘maintaining innocence’ also has its own troubles due to the fact people who are innocent are not maintaining they are innocent; they are stating they are innocent.

One member who admits guilt stated:

‘I am guilty and find prison difficult with the loss of liberty and being away from the people I love, maintaining relationships is difficult just with the distance involved as well as the lack of time to maintain relationships and the price [telephone system] of continued family contact. I can’t imagine how difficult it must be for both the accused and their loved ones if they are truly innocent’ (p. 62).

The group thought that levins portrays these difficulties in progressing through the system within her book and gets the message across well, especially accepting that there must be a percentage of those convicted who are innocent of their charges.

Moralising Boundaries: Staff-Prisoner Relationships and the Communication of Difference

With the focus of this chapter being on staff relationships we focused on a professional staff-prisoner working relationship, as it is understood that prison officers cannot share too much of their personal lives due to security concerns.

A prison officer expressed the opinion that they do not agree with the findings of the book and concluded that if the field research had been carried out across multiple establishments including private prisons that a different opinion of trust between staff and prisoners would be reached, as in some prisons this working relationship is strong and real. The following comment was also agreed on by the group:

‘I can see how she reached this opinion as my own experience of a black and white prison [non-private prison] officers are trained to be tough ‘old school’ no matter the type of offender’.¹³

Members of the group concluded that the chapter points to the conclusion that prisoner-officer relationships are rarely real. There is a strong theme of distrust from both sides.

‘I have witnessed officers treating prisoners harshly because they are deemed ‘a sex offender’ this is not uncommon in Public Sector establishments regardless of the prisoner’s behaviour’.¹⁴

The overall opinion of the group was that due to officers’ mistrust and fear of manipulation, it is then difficult to encourage prisoners to share parts of their lives whilst interacting with them.

It was felt that the book portrayed the opinion that relationships in a custodial environment result in division, how this division is managed will shape how those in custody behave once released into the community. The punishment is prison, however the consequences of the treatment by those who provide custody is wholly harmful to the rehabilitation of those who they aim to help.

Denying Community: Social Relationships and the Dangers of Acknowledgement

There is a theme of collective denial that rings true throughout this chapter. levins describes how prisoners, irrespective of which category they fall into, choose to avoid discussing their offences with their peers.

The group could relate to this:

‘...prison is an extremely hard environment to survive in and it is all about survival’.¹⁵

‘As prisoners we are only passing through, at some point [the majority of] prisoners will go back to the community and self-preservation is the most important tool to make this achievable’.¹⁶

However, the group did state that it would be virtually impossible to navigate a sentence without having some form of social

13. Staff comment.
14. BFNG prisoner comment.
15. Staff comment.
16. Staff comment.

interaction with fellow prisoners. However, many prisoners are struggling to come to terms with their own offence(s) and it would be overwhelming to take on board the details of the offences of your peers as well. Some prisoners also stated that although guilty themselves of offending, sometimes it is easier to make friends without knowing what the other person is guilty of.

One respondent shared:

'I have shared the full details of my offending with one fellow prisoner as we have grown to be good friends'.

However other members shared the fear that if they were seen talking about their offending with other prisoners it could be held against them as prison staff could see it as glorifying the crimes or worse 'getting off' on each other's memories.

levins describes the lack of conversation/discussion around offences as denial. Whilst she may have a point, many of the group members disagreed, suggesting that self-preservation, such as avoiding violence or the stigma of certain crimes, was the real reason.

A final comment was the acknowledgement that not sharing thoughts and feelings around convictions can be detrimental and lead to a risk of increased harm, both mentally and physically.

Judging Prisons: The Limitations and Excesses of Denunciatory Punishment

How do we judge prisons? This is not a simple question, as levins describes throughout the book, the prison environment is extremely complex. The book draws on the perspective shared by both

prisoners and staff that the complexity arises from decades of politicians meddling in crime and justice, using it as a political weapon to appeal to the public in times of general elections.

'I personally find it hard to understand how prisons should morally communicate with prisoners when simple terms of communication are near impossible to identify within the prison environment. The prison environment is so controlling, every minute within your day is controlled by the State'.¹⁷

The consensus among the group was that denunciatory punishment has more limitations than benefits. They believed that by demonstrating remorse on the landings peers could be exploited by peers as it is a sign of weakness. Similarly, if shown with facilitators during offender behaviour programmes then the system may use it against you. Sometimes prisoners do not even know about this until they read their parole dossier. It is impossible to talk with family or friends as calls and visits are monitored, so how can prisoners deal with this? How can they talk, without fear?

levins makes a great suggestion:

'Benefiting from more creative endeavours by means of opportunity for longer, more private and more meaningful conversations with family members and loved ones'.

The group felt this would be a fantastic starting point for real, meaningful change.

The group also felt, if imprisonment is to both punish and rehabilitate people so they may re-enter the community as better versions of themselves, then levins makes a key point that should be at the forefront of change.

'There might be good reason to be parsimonious with the pain we inflict, and to speak more loudly about the harm we do by lengthening prison sentences, hardening conditions and permanently staining people'.¹⁸

Conclusion

The first-hand experiences, and the honesty with which levins approaches the book are genuinely powerful. The mix of lived experience and professional assessment illustrate the murkiness of prison institutions. The majority of the group feel that this book is a valuable tool for both officers and those writing policy. It sheds light on the reality of the stains of imprisonment prisoners convicted of a sexual offences face, and the harms that this imposes on the rehabilitation and progression within the prison system.

The group's conclusion was well summed up in the final comment:

'This has been one of the most important books I have read during my sentence and the only work that has had the balance and courage to address an ever-growing worsening issue'.¹⁹

17. BFNG prisoner comment.

18. BFNG prisoner Comment.

19. BFNG prisoner Comment.