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Mapping the Landscape of Trust: Towards a Typology in the Context of the Prison

Dr Sarah Waite is a Researcher and Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Criminal Justice at Leeds Beckett University.

Trust is certainly perceived as a contentious term within prison environments. When sent to prison people have their trusted status removed and are subject to risk management policies and procedures, underpinned by assessments of trust.¹ Historically, relationships between staff and prisoners have been divisive, with outward expressions of trust made by either side considered to be cultural betrayal.² In addition to this, the prioritisation of security heightens and shapes conceptions of trust, which can then also differ significantly between institutions.³ More generally, people in prison often have adverse experiences of trust, particularly relating to state criminal justice institutions and broader social structures, meaning prisons are broadly distrusting environments.⁴ Despite these hurdles, there are multiple research studies that evidence the existence of trust in prisons, drawing attention to its benefits,⁵ its challenges,⁶ and the ways in which it can operate.⁷

Crucially, trust has been cited as a central quality in assessments of 'good' prisons,⁸ meaning that at the level of policy and practice, interest and use of the term and its positive associations have grown in recent years. Despite this, very little is known about trust from an operational perspective, including how staff and people serving sentences understand the term, its relational characteristics, and the impact of the complexities of the concept and the interests of the prison.⁹ In 'everyday' communication we regularly discuss trust in a binary way, we trust, or we do not, and we rarely

deliberate its variable forms, shades, and shifts. The aim of this article is to examine the concept and operation of trust in prison by drawing upon theory, policy, and practice. The article will firstly analyse the operationalisation of trust in prisons, considering its importance for staff, people serving sentences and the institution more broadly. Secondly, the article will critically assess conceptualisations of trust, including the ways in which the term can be shaped and experienced. Finally, the article uses theories of trust and reflections from research to outline a typology which proposes a loose framework through which to consider trust and its associations with power, performance, and person-centred practice in prison. In mapping the literature through a practice-focused lens and reflecting upon findings from doctoral research, this article outlines a typology of trust to consolidate and inform our individual and institutional understanding of the concept in prison.

What's Trust got to do with it?

A simplistic search of HMPPS Policy Frameworks reveals the importance of the term trust to a wide range of documents that underpin crucial decisions and processes at operational level. The term trust can be found in Prison Service Instructions involving prisoner complaints, security categorisation, prisoners' property, body worn video cameras, procedures for searching people, and escape and abscond policies, to name but a few.¹⁰ Trust plays a key role in the concept of procedural justice which prison policy has placed a

1. Sparks, R., Bottoms, A., & Hay, W. (1996). *Prisons and the Problem of Order*. Oxford University Press.
2. Liebling, A., & Arnold, H. (2004). *Prisons and Their Moral Performance: A Study of Values, Quality and Prison Life*. Oxford University Press.
3. Williams, R., & Liebling, A. (2023). Do prisons cause radicalisation? Order, leadership, political charge and violence in two maximum security prisons. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 63(1), 97-114.
4. HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2022). *The Experiences of Adult Black Male Prisoners and Black Prison Staff*. Thematic Review. HMIP; Liebling, A., and Maruna, S. (2005). The Effects of Imprisonment. Willan.
5. Ugelvik, T. (2022). The transformative power of trust: Exploring tertiary desistance in reinventive prisons. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 62(3), 623-638.
6. Waite, S. (2022). Imprisoned Women's Experiences of Trust in Staff-Prisoner Relationships in an English Open Prison. In I. Masson & N. Booth (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Women's Experiences of Criminal Justice* (pp. 511-522). Routledge.
7. Liebling, A., Arnold, H., & Straub, C. (2011). *An Exploration of Staff-Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor: 12 Years On*. NOMS.
8. Liebling, A. (2018). Social Science Bites: *Alison Liebling on Successful Prisons* [podcast]. Tues, 18th May. Available at: <https://socialsciencebites.libsyn.com/alison-liebling-on-successful-prisons>
9. For exceptions, see: footnote 2 - Liebling, A., & Arnold, H. (2004); Brierley, A. (2023). *The Good Prison Officer*. Routledge.
10. Ministry of Justice. (2022). *Prison and Probation Policy Frameworks*. London

process-driven emphasis on to promote compliance, perceptions of fairness and legitimacy.¹¹ It is now a well-recognised and accepted expression that staff-prisoner relationships are integral to operational order and the smooth running of prison life, of which trust is said to be an integral feature.¹² Alongside this, over time there have been various iterations of relational initiatives advocating for the importance of building trust, including the concept of the personal officer, custody support plans (CuSP), and key worker schemes, and there are calls for a better understanding of trust and its relational development in prisons.¹³ Shifts in the promotion of trust as a value can be seen in pockets of training across estates, including therapeutic provision and trauma-informed practice.¹⁴ Additionally, some estate-specific recruitment and training is premised on the acknowledgment that working with people that do not trust prison officers is a significant characteristic of the day-to-day role.¹⁵ Perhaps amplifying this subtle organisational deviation, the term trust appears as an explicit feature in the Measuring Quality of Prison Life+ survey which informs institutional decency audits. Considering this, it is safe to conclude that the institutional promotion of trust in prison is becoming high on the prison agenda.

In assessments of trust, it is important to remember that this intangible concept functions as a two-way process and so given this operational direction, understanding the importance of notions of trust to all parties involved is paramount. A look at the research involving people in prison and their experiences of trust begins to expose some of the ways constructs and systems shape the complexities involved in the concept. Much research has been done to shine a light on the role of broader

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social issues within people's experiences of trust and distrust and it is particularly important to appreciate the weight of distrust, as it is not just the absence of trust, but an active stance towards harm. Distrust features significantly in the experiences of black men and women because of systemic disadvantage and racism in the Criminal Justice System,¹⁶ and people in prison with care experience are likely to distrust the state because of its multiple failures.¹⁷ Social constructs such as gender and age also shape people's experiences of trust and distrust. This is sometimes due to perceptions of relatability and a lack of shared cultural experiences, but it can also be because of trauma and the nature of the environments in which people are imprisoned.¹⁸ There are elevated levels of trauma within the prison

population and with strong links between trauma and trust, it is unsurprising that people with adverse life experiences are more likely to be distrusting.¹⁹ Taking all this into consideration, we begin to see that trust is not solely grounded in the individual, but instead tied up in the ways structural and institutional positions interact, shape, and constrain experiences. To this end then, we can also see the complicated web that surrounds people's experiences of trust, which leaves the question; why should people trust a system or structure that has harmed them?

Concepts of trust and distrust are significant to many aspects of prison officer work. The prioritisation of security alongside heightened perceptions of risk mean distrust is a centralised characteristic of the role. Relationally, a general distrust of prisoners is said to be embedded through training and enculturation.²⁰ Yet many aspects of prison officer work rely implicitly on trusting people in prison,²¹ particularly within a climate of low staffing.

11. Fitzalan Howard, F., & Wakeling, H. (2020). People in prisons' perceptions of procedural justice in England and Wales. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 47(12), 1654-1676.
12. Crewe, B. (2011). Soft power in prison: implications for staff-prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy, *European Journal of Criminology*, 8(6), 455-68.
13. Ministry of Justice. (2020). *Areas of Research Interest. December 2020*. London.
14. Bradley, A. (2021). Viewing Her Majesty's Prison Service through a Trauma-informed Lens. *Prison Service Journal*, 255, 4-11.
15. HMPPS (2023). *Women's Estate. Why work in a Women's Prison?* London.
16. See footnote 4: HM Inspectorate of Prisons. (2022); Charles, A. (2022). At the intersection of disadvantage, disillusionment, and resilience: Black Women's Experiences in Prison. In I. Masson & N. Booth (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Women's Experiences of Criminal Justice* (chapter 19). Routledge.
17. Fitzpatrick, C., Hunter, K., Shaw, J., & Staines, J. (2023). Confronting intergenerational harm: Care experience, motherhood and criminal justice involvement. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 64, 257-274.
18. See footnote 6: Waite, S. (2022); Kelman, J., Gribble, R., Harvey, J., Palmer, L., & MacManus, D. (2022). How Does a History of Trauma Affect the Experience of Imprisonment for Individuals in Women's Prisons: A Qualitative Exploration. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 1-21.
19. Herman, J. (2001). *Trauma and Recovery*. Basic Books.
20. Arnold, H. (2016). The prison officer. In Y. Jewkes, B. Crewe, & J. Bennett (Eds.), *Handbook on Prisons* (2nd ed, chapter 19). Routledge.
21. See footnote 2: Liebling, A., & Arnold, H. (2004).

Interactions within prison are governed by complex institutional norms, with staff-prisoner relationships providing the most explicit example of this. Ideas around jail craft, maintaining boundaries, and dynamic security are just some of the features of staff-prisoner interactions that both drive and shape what trust and distrust looks like in prison. These principles are crucial to the prison officer role and underpin the forms of order, compliance, and co-operation the prison aims to achieve.

For officers and prison environments that weight their focus towards rehabilitative ideals, gaining relational trust becomes a significant part of their work. Here, rather than trust providing a route to order and compliance, it is built with the intention to 'change mindset' under the assumption that people in prison will then 'open up' to interventions, support, and ultimately, 'correction'.²² However, prison officers work within the constraints of prison life and there are aspects of the job that mean they are not always in control of how they navigate trust and distrust or perceptions of their trustworthiness. The concept of soft power provides a good example of this, as people in prison can be distrustful of the managerial context staff work in and in the power they have to closely regulate their social behaviour.²³ Other examples can be seen in issues around perceptions of inconsistency between themselves and other prison officers,²⁴ and sometimes management.²⁵ Competing regime demands and interruptions and staff shortages mean that because it is often a challenge to deliver the day-to-day basics, staff do not have the resources to be able to focus on the relational aspects of the role, and so policy mechanisms such as key work become impossible to deliver. Additionally, it is important to recognise that perceptions of officers' vulnerability to assaults and broader threats means that they can experience significant costs associated with trusting.²⁶

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The prison setting is therefore an environment in which trust and distrust seep into and through a complex mosaic of cultural norms, metaphors, and often conflicting institutional priorities. Having discussed these features at an operational level, the following section will assess our understanding of trust as a concept, focusing particularly on the meaning of the term and how it can be shaped and experienced by people in prison.

Unravelling the Tapestry of Trust

Whilst we have seen that great emphasis is placed on the value and purpose of trust in prison, there is little guidance on its meaning and characteristics. Large demands are placed on trust as a concept at policy and operational level, yet it is rarely acknowledged that there is no general agreement on how the term is defined. For example, trust has been described as many things, including a feeling, an attitude, and characteristic of a relationship.²⁷ The literature on trust is often abstract and philosophical which makes it difficult to translate its complexities into the applied and actionable world. However, there is a general agreement that trust is of crucial importance to our social lives. Some go so far as to state that without the routine trust-based assumptions we make in our day-to-day lives, we would not get out of bed on a morning.²⁸ As a result of this, trust is something intangible and embedded unconsciously and it is only when we have misplaced trust, that we become aware that it is something we have assumed or taken for granted and we become more conscious and cautious of who, what and when to trust.²⁹

Whilst trust is often associated with value and positive meanings and outcomes, some research shows that it can operate coercively and control our freedoms.³⁰ Here it is argued that it is mistrust that can

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22. Warr, J. (2008). Personal reflections on prison staff. In J. Bennett, B. Crewe, & A. Wahidin (Eds.), *Understanding Prison Staff* (chapter 2). Willan.
 23. Crewe, B. (2011). Soft power in prison: implications for staff-prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy, *European Journal of Criminology*, 8(6), 455–68.
 24. Crewe, B., Schliehe, A., & Przybylska, D. A. (2023). 'It causes a lot of problems': Relational ambiguities and dynamics between prisoners and staff in a women's prison. *European Journal of Criminology*, 20(3), 925-946.
 25. Lambert, E. G., Hogan, N. L., Barton-Bellessa, S. M., & Jiang, S. (2012). Examining the relationship between supervisor and management trust and job burnout among correctional staff. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 39(7), 938-957.
 26. Schultz, W. J. (2023). "Hesitation Gets You Killed:" Perceived Vulnerability as an Axiomatic Feature of Correctional Officer Working Personalities. *Justice Quarterly*, 1-21.
 27. Hosking, G. (2014). *Trust: A History*. Oxford University Press.
 28. Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and Power*. Wiley.
 29. See footnote 27: Hosking, G. (2014).
 30. Carey, M. (2017). *Mistrust: An Ethnographic Theory*. Hau Books.

create constructive social interactions and relationships. Indeed, by drawing upon some of the earlier operational points, we can see that not placing trust in a system, situation or individual, can provide an effective way of protecting from potential harm and it is wise not to trust indiscriminately. Crucially, trust is also a term that is pliable and easily shaped so its meaning can differ and change. This is particularly the case when institutions are involved and there is historical evidence to suggest that institutions use the term trust artificially to express and mitigate power and interest.³¹ Consequently, the characteristics of the term mean that if we are to understand trust, its operation, and its meaning across prisons, we need to pay attention to its variations and to the role of the prison itself. There is the potential that if we focus on trust as a solely individualistic and enriching concept, we miss the subtleties and shades of grey.

By focusing more particularly on the research that has been done on trust in prisons, we begin to gain an understanding of what it might look like in particular prison contexts. Most notably, trust has been recognised as an individualised concept and ‘intelligent trust’ has been applied to explain the way that people make judgements of trust and place trust in the trustworthy.³² This notion of trust places emphasis on a person’s trustworthiness and shows that these judgements are based on a person’s perceptions of the reliability, honesty, and role-based competencies of the other. Put simply, this means that in prison, if someone performs their role in a reliable and honest way, they are more likely to present as trustworthy and therefore be trusted.³³ We have seen that in a prison context, trust is often strongly associated with security and so underpinned by notions of risk, particularly within the high security estate. The experience of feeling trusted is shaped significantly by the type of prison and whilst this is not to suggest a simplistic binary related to security categorisation, though categorisation is in theory

decreased via trust, there is evidence to show that trust is shaped according to prison culture.

Using the concept of a ‘reinventive prison’, it has been argued that despite the nature of prison and the relational imbalances of power that make trust difficult, people in prison experience feelings of value and hope if they are trusted by a state agent.³⁴ This is seen as particularly important because of the messages this can communicate to a person in prison and its links to desistance journeys. As well as this, there is also evidence to suggest that trust in prison can be associated with care and prison officers that structure their work through a caring approach are more likely to be trusted to provide support to prisoners.³⁵ Most notably, this has been associated with the belief that staff care about the person on a humanistic level, going beyond job-based competencies.³⁶

Towards a Typology of Trust

Having assessed the operational relevance of trust and discussed the evidence base and its current complexities, this section moves to map the literature and draw upon reflections from doctoral research,³⁷ considering the literature on trust and its associations with power,

performance, and person-centred practice. In doing so, this section proposes a loose hierarchical framework through which to consolidate and move forward our understanding. Primarily, this framework offers three broad and intersecting categories through which trust can present in prison.

Trust as power

Within this category, trust is created and shaped by the power dimensions that characterise imprisonment. The broader literature terms this ‘forced trust’ and uses the concept to describe how trust is generated by institutions in spaces and cultures of distrust.³⁸ This process involves an institution defining the meaning of

Trust is also a term that is pliable and easily shaped so its meaning can differ and change.

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31. Frevert, U. (2009). *Does Trust have a History?* EUI MWP LS, 2009/01. Retrieved from Cadmus, European University Research Institute Research Repository.
 32. Liebling, A. (2016). The Dalai Lama, prisons, and prisons research: A call for trust, a ‘proper sense of fear’, dialogue, curiosity and love, *Prison Service Journal*, 255, 58-63.
 33. See footnote 3: Williams, R., & Liebling, A. (2023).
 34. See footnote 5: Ugelvik, T. (2022).
 35. Tait, S. (2011). A Typology of Prison Officer Approaches to Care. *European Journal of Criminology*, 8(6), 440-454.
 36. See footnote 6: Waite, S. (2022).
 37. Waite, S. (2023). *“Their ethos is all about building trust”: an exploration of staff-prisoner relationships at a women’s open prison.* (Doctoral Thesis, Leeds Beckett University)
 38. Tikhomirov, A. (2013). The regime of forced trust: making and breaking emotional bonds between people and state in Soviet Russia, 1917–1941 *Slavonic & East European Review*, 91(1), 78-11.

trust, identifying who can and cannot be trusted, and then distributing trust and distrust through various mechanisms. Central to this idea, is the individual's dependency on the institution alongside our need for a basic level of trust to function day-to-day. Consequently, a form of forced trust is generated which then builds compliance as people have little choice but to rely on a central power.

In prison trust is a scarce resource and extensive assessments of risk set the terms and conditions under which trust can be granted. This is often based on notions of compliance and behaviour and trust can be swiftly withdrawn if conditions are not met. To be trusted means following rules with consequences for the withdrawal of trust if rules are not followed. People in prison consistently talk of having little choice but to rely on systems and staff to get things done and there are policy mechanisms that aim to promote trust in the prison. Whilst trust has typically positive associations in Western societies, it is important to acknowledge this form of trust in a prison context. There is an unspoken acceptance of the power the term holds in relation to order and compliance. Indeed, the rationale behind embedding trust within prison policy is littered with phrases such as order and legitimacy, in a way that allows state decisions to be trusted. Yet this asks people to trust with little questioning that this might not be the correct thing to do, and we rarely consider the ethics of requiring people to trust the state.

Trust as performative

This category of trust is arguably the most common and openly discussed within prison. We start to see trust as performance when people begin to comply with and perform their determined roles. Here a level of trust is established that, though thin, goes beyond the forced when people start to identify others that they trust to complete defined tasks or roles. The key feature here is that whilst there is some trust, it is defined to narrow role-based circumstances and performative as it operates to achieve an instrumental goal, meaning it helps someone to achieve a specific aim and is a means to an end. This concept of trust is

seen in accounts that suggest we trust as a continuation of our own self-interest, and we trust a person because we believe they will benefit from our interests.³⁹

In the prison context we see this in several examples. People may comply to gain the trust that will enable them to progress in their sentence and gain favour with staff. People work in trusted positions, move to lower security categories, and comply with ROTL requirements to gain trust because it gives social capital and can make prison life more manageable. People identify staff they trust based on notions of reliability, honesty, and job-based competencies as they demonstrate the ability to support with the completion of non-instrumental goals.⁴⁰ Notably, whilst this is distinctive from forced trust, it is associated with a need

and reliance on staff to get things done. Arguably, the distinguishing feature is that a thin and defined form of trust develops in response to the performance of role-based competencies and people can trust that these competencies will be performed.

Trust as person-centred

Finally, there is evidence that pockets of thicker, interpersonal trust are present in some prison spaces when interactions and relationships are humanising and person-centred.⁴¹ This category is associated with a deeper level of trust that stems from our need to belong and matter to others in a non-instrumental way.⁴² These explanations take into account the ethics of involuntary relationships of dependency and distinguish between trust and reliance. They argue that when we trust, we are vulnerable to the deeper emotions that are associated with betrayal, rather than the frustration we feel when someone lets us down.⁴³ This deeper level of harm is experienced because the actions of others in dealings of trust, communicate whether we matter. In this sense, offering trust can be challenging because of the vulnerability to harm that comes with it.

Though not often associated with prison, this type of trust can exist. There is trust between friends and colleagues, and there can be trust between staff and prisoners. We have seen that there are higher levels of

Pockets of thicker, interpersonal trust are present in some prison spaces when interactions and relationships are humanising and person-centred.

39. Hardin, R. (2002). *Trust and trustworthiness*. Russell Sage Foundation.

40. See footnote 32: Liebling, A. (2016).

41. See footnote 6: Waite, S. (2022).

42. Kirton, A. (2020). Matters of Trust as Matters of Attachment Security. *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 28(5), 583-602.

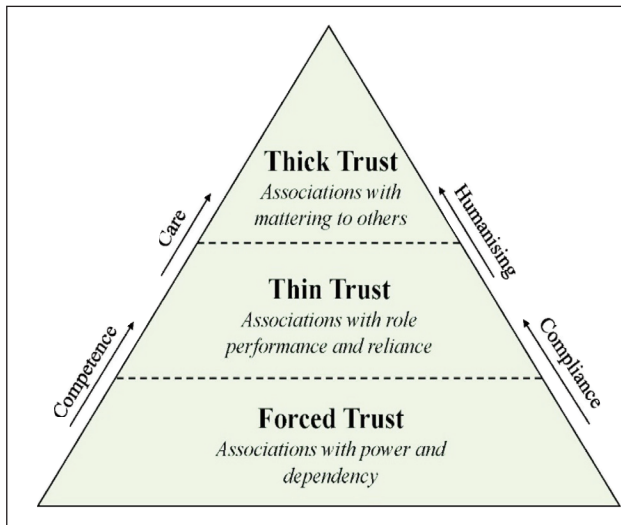
43. Hawley, K. (2012). *Trust: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.

trust in relationships where people experience care, and there is trust in relationships where this is experienced alongside a separation from the prison itself. In relationships where people believe they matter as human beings, have time to know each other, and see staff going beyond the regime for them, trust is distinguished from competence and can reassure people of their value.⁴⁴ Interestingly, when this form exists it

survives being damaged by regime-based frustrations, such as not been able to carry out a promised task. When people feel they matter, reliance-based instrumental competencies are not at the heart of trust.

Conclusion

The term trust can be used indiscriminately with an assumption towards its meaning as a valuable and enriching concept. Whilst this can often be true, it means we pay little attention to its subtle features and distinctions, including its links to institutions and its links to power. This can leave important ethical questions unaddressed. This article has considered the concept of trust and its operation within prison environments. Importantly, the article has highlighted a hierarchical operational framework through which we can begin to view trust within the Prison Service, raising crucial issues of power, role performance, and person-centred practice. Whilst each domain of trust serves a purpose within the context of the prison, a deeper sense of the term can go some way to ensuring that a more mindful and ethical understanding of its variations and complexities is applied.



44. See footnote 6: Waite, S. (2022).