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Encouragement, Discouragement and Connection:

The Role of Relationships in Prison Education Experiences

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Introduction

Existing literature in the field of prison education often focuses on rates of reoffending, conceptions and understandings of personal change and the correlation between increased educational attainment and employability. More recently, with the publication of 'What is prison education for? A theory of change exploring the value of learning in prison',1 it has become more widely recognised that we cannot focus on education in prisons purely as a means to employment. Instead, prison education is beginning to be seen a vehicle for continuous personal, social and cultural development. A broad interpretation of the value of prison education has been central to my own research on prison education² and this article focuses on one theme arising from this research by examining the role and importance of relationships for men experiencing education within a custodial setting.

Until relatively recently, the existing academic literature on prison education has been relatively small and narrow in its focus.³ The aims of this article are two-fold; to contribute more broadly to the gap in research on prison education, but specifically to focus on how educational engagement feeds into the development and nurturing of relationships inside and outside of prison. In particular, I will discuss the importance of shared experience, reparation and communication in relationships and overall it will be argued that the so called 'soft skills' developed through education participation are key to the maintenance and improvement in prisoners' personal and social relationships.

Background

This study was conducted as part of a doctoral research scholarship at the University of Hull. The central concern of the research was to explore what motivates prisoners to undergo education, what they hope to

achieve from it and how they experienced education in prison. The research used a qualitative approach combining one to one interviews and the use of documentary evidence. In total, 30 interviews were conducted (13 serving category C prisoners, 13 prison staff [operational and non-operational], three exprisoners, one prison governor). In addition, 80 letters written to the Prisoners' Education Trust by serving prisoners pursuing funding for education courses, were analysed to further draw out some of the core themes of the study.

It emerged that educational experiences can result in a fundamental shift in prisoners' thinking about who they are, their lives to date and how their lives might be different (or indeed better) in the future. Understanding educational experiences in the prison setting was enhanced by accounts of how those who deliver and shape education (those who constitute the prisoners' 'ecology') understand what they are doing and its significance, which often differs from official policy on offender learning. The research also considered how the experiences of education can, in part, be formed by prior educational and broader life experiences. By understanding how prisoners interpret and give meaning to their experiences of education in the prison environment, this research evidenced the ways prisoners perceive the personal outcomes achieved.

Reviewing existing research on prison education revealed a gap for the study to contribute further, particularly in providing more exploration into prisoners' experiences to uncover and illuminate how motivations to become educated manifest into different forms of personal change and transformation. Speaking with staff as well as serving and ex-prisoners and considering more closely prisoners' relationships with their families set the research findings in the biographical context of prisoners' lives as well as in the organisational context. It has therefore focused on how prisoners themselves interpret the experience of education and importantly contextualised this experience within the contemporary penal climate.

^{1.} Champion, N. and Noble, J. (2016). What is Prison Education for? A theory of change exploring the value of learning in prison. Prisoners' Education Trust.

^{2.} Nichols, H. (2016) An Inquiry into Adult Male Prisoners' Experiences of Education (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hull).

^{3.} Pawson, R. (2000) 'The Evaluator's Tale'. In Wilson, D and Reuss, A. (Eds.). *Prison(er). Education: Stories of change and transformation.* Winchester: Waterside Press.

The wider research project from which this article is drawn, revisited some of the key themes in existing work, namely identity, self-esteem, employment and passing time.⁴ Additional themes were also generated to build a more in depth picture of prisoners' experiences by locating them in the wider context of their lives. Incorporating participants' backgrounds also meant exploring past experiences of education at school as well as relationships with parents, families and authority figures in general.

This article explores the importance and role of relationships in the educational experiences of prisoners. It considers how relationships have the power to encourage or discourage educational engagement and the means by which it can provide a greater sense of

connection between prisoners and other individuals during a prison sentence. First, this article will examine the theme of social capital in relation to prison education and personal change.

Relationships and Educational Experiences

The theory of change framework developed by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) in partnership with the Prisoners'

Education Trust (PET) sets out five broad themes around the benefits of education. Alongside Prison Culture, Wellbeing, Human Capital and Knowledge, Skills and Employability, Social Capital poses a potential strand through which to further consider how relationships can be a distinct value emerging from educational engagement. In this context, Social Capital has been referred to as 'Belonging and Community and Active Engagement to reflect the role education can play in: a) improving people's ability to relate to others and b) empowering them to actively participate in and positively contribute to society and their family'.5

Within the Social Capital strand of the framework, the core themes discuss prisoners' feelings of exclusion and shutting the world out. It is suggested that the short and long term outcomes of education in relation to this are 'belonging', 'community' and feeling 'part of society'.⁶ These senses of the need to reintegrate in both the micro and macro sense relate significantly to control theories⁷ which consider social bonds as a key element in refraining from engaging in deviant behaviours. Weak family bonds, structures and support in particular have been heavily cited in explaining the causes of criminal actions and lifestyles. As such, identifying factors that help to maintain these bonds during custodial sentences are crucial in the effort to halt the revolving door of reoffending.

Theories of desistance differ and range from the

natural 'aging out of crime'⁸ to having a steady job and a good relationship. However, as the offender ages, they may simply become better at avoiding detection by the police or they may move towards less risky types of criminal activity.⁹ In reality, desistance is a likely outcome for most offenders as criminality is not a permanent state of being. From this viewpoint, perpetrators in fact drift in and out of criminal

of being.

criminality is not a permanent state of being. From this viewpoint, perpetrators in fact drift in and out of criminal round activity over time. The desistance process is argued to be an unlikely outcome of imprisonment itself as the prison experience disrupts normative processes by cutting off opportunities for achieving success in employment and other key life events such as marriage. Maruna argues in fact that no institution been is better than the prison at separating individuals from their social responsibilities and civic duties. Thus, education as an arguably normative process,

may be a vehicle through which to achieve, maintain

and/or nurture the 'good relationship' that forms part

of the desistance journey.

4. Costelloe, A, Warner, K. (2014). Prison education across Europe: policy, practice, politics. London Review of Education Volume 12, Number 2, July 2014; Duguid, S. (2000). Can Prisons Work?: The Prisoner As Object and Subject in Modern Corrections. Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated; Duguid, S. and Pawson, R. (1998). 'Education, Change and Transformation: The Prison Experience'. Evaluation Review, 22(4).: 470–495; Hughes, E. (2012). Education in Prison: Studying Through Distance Learning. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company; Reuss, A. (1997). Higher Education and Personal Change in Prisoners. Unpublished thesis, University of Leeds; Warner, K. (2007). Against the Narrowing of Perspectives: How Do We See Learning, Prisons and Prisoners? Journal of Correctional Education, 58(2)., pp.170–183.

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- 5. Champion, N. and Noble, J. (2016). What is Prison Education for? A theory of change exploring the value of learning in prison. Prisoners' Education Trust.
- 6. Ibid.
- 7. Hirschi, T. (1969). Causes of delinquency. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 8. Glueck, S. and Glueck, E. (1940). Juvenile Delinquents grown up. 1st ed. New York, N.Y.: Kraus.
- 9. Maruna, S. (2001). *Making Good: How Ex-convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington D.C., American Psychological Association.
- 10. Matza, D. (1964). *Delinquency and drift*. 1st ed. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
- 11. Maruna, S. (2007). After prison, what? The ex-prisoner's struggle to desist from crime. In Jewkes, Y. (Ed.). Handbook on Prisons, Cullompton: Willan.
- 12. ibid.

This research found that relationships had a distinct power over when, how and why prisoners made choices about their education opportunities, both as young people and adults. Relationships, whilst relatively hidden in the current literature, have a significant role to play in understanding the outcomes of prison education. Whilst prisoners' life histories or narratives are often used in prison education research, ¹³ this research has provided a more nuanced understanding of how the differing nature of family involvement can both encourage and discourage education in early life as well as the experience of education on either side of the prison walls.

i. Empathy and Encouragement from the Inside
One source of encouragement for prisoners to
engage in education, aside from family, came from
educators within the prison. Educational spaces can be

one of few 'alternative emotional zones'14 providing respite from the realities of prison life. Applying Goffman's15 'frontstage' 'backstage' concept theoretical framework, Crewe et al.16 discussed the process of prisoners lifting their masks during a philosophy class, and exposing their vulnerabilities. Participants in this study were also able to 'lift the mask' and opened up to different kinds of relationships to be formed with education staff. Prisoners' perceptions of teachers in prison

varied distinctly from that of officers and other operational staff. Although teachers in prison carry keys, which are a significant symbol of power, authority and discipline,¹⁷ their presence as an educator allowed them to overcome this power dynamic and they were often seen as non-threatening. In the present study, a teacher commented: 'They have a different relationship with tutors than with officers. Officers are there to make them do certain things but we're there to educate them so they see us as helping them.' Similarly, Liebling et al.¹⁸ found that education was facilitated by staff who were trustworthy in the eyes of many prisoners because they were not commissioned to gather security information on prisoners and only viewed them as learners.

One teacher in particular felt a certain empathy with her students following her own experience of poor educational attainment. Having left school not being able to spell, she associated this with feeling 'thick'. She described how her one wish was to be intelligent because 'it empowers you and broadens your horizons'. Her previous lack of confidence enabled her to feel empathy for her learners. It was evident that her passion for education had become a key characteristic of the teaching environment she had created and the relationships she developed with her students. Our discussion revealed that her role in the classroom was that of a matriarch and she saw this as something very positive. She said: 'We see their human side in education. If you've got any compassion in your heart you have to have a kind word sometimes ... I tell the lads in here I want the best for them. I do sort them out when I need to.' Replicating a matriarchal family

structure there was also the presence of rule-abiding 'older siblings' in the classroom. It was evident through our discussion that those who had studied on the course for a longer period reinforced the ground rules and reaffirmed the consequences of rule breaking to those new to the course. Rule breaking had consequences for all members of the classroom 'family' and thus the learning environment was characterised by self-governance and respect.

Teachers openly talked about the nature of their relationships with prisoners. Although the kinds of relationships differed between participants, it was clear that creating a stable environment of trust and respect was viewed as essential by all. A teacher commented: 'There's no question you form relationships with these guys and you like some of them and to see them in that environment is quite a shock. Unless you've worked in prison you don't really get it.' Having recently experienced the partial transition from prison researcher to prison teacher myself, I have come to understand more fully the need to form some kind of relationship with learners in prison; a relationship that sees offences committed as entirely irrelevant information within that

Educational spaces

^{13.} Prison Reform Trust (2003). *Time to Learn*. London: Prison Reform Trust; Hughes, E. (2012). *Education in Prison: Studying Through Distance Learning*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Company.

^{14.} Crewe, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P. and Smith, A. (2014). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology*, 18(1), pp.56–74.

^{15.} Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

^{16.} Crewe, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P. and Smith, A. (2014). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology*, 18(1), pp.56–74.

^{17.} Jewkes, Y. (2012). 'Autoethnography and Emotion as Intellectual Resources: Doing Prison Research Differently'. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18(1).: 63–75; Sim, J. (2003). 'Book Review' [Review of the book Captive Audience by Jewkes, Y]. *Theoretical Criminology*, 7(2).: 239–242

^{18.} Liebling, A., Arnold, H., and Straub, C. (2011). *An Exploration of Staff-Prisoner Relationships at HMP Whitemoor: 12 years on.* London: Ministry of Justice.

context. In doing so, one then enters the complex realm of personal moral negotiation whereby, as identified by the previous teacher, seeing the pains of imprisonment first hand amongst those you view as your students becomes difficult. Many teachers in the study did not know and did not wish to know the offences committed by their students, not only to avoid engaging with any of their own preconceptions regarding offences, but also because knowing had no beneficial outcomes in enhancing educational provision. It must be acknowledged however that this is not unique to the prison. In other learning environments, such as universities, where declarations of offence records are only required on application for courses, students are not then asked by individual lecturers about any offending history. Therefore, from

the prison teacher's perspective, department the education becomes an educational 'island' where achieving senses environmental normality paramount.

The 'unwritten policy' of non-disclosure in the classroom facilitates a continued process of humanisation through development of a relationship with a student rather than a specific type of offender. An exprisoner participant reinforced the importance of being seen as human in the prison education department when describing how well he was treated by the

teaching staff. In his case, a prison officer had encouraged the beginning of his learning journey. Having previously been proud to be called 'a fullyfledged criminal' by 'one of the screws' when he became 21 (and thus able to mix with older prisoners), this sense changed when his learning began. Becoming frustrated with sewing mail bags, 'one of the nicer screws' helped him to find a place on an education course which he found surprisingly enjoyable given how much he had disliked school.

Removed from the 'prison-like' features of other areas of the prison establishment, the learning environment in prison provides a consciousness of normality; something that educators consciously try to reinforce. However, this is a challenge in an institution which by its very nature is abnormal, and destructive of the personality in a number of ways. 19 Teachers agreed that this 'normality' provided an opportunity for

prisoners to temporarily escape the struggles of prison life, alleviating, if only in small part, the damage done through imprisonment.20 For officers in this study, education was viewed as a way to prevent negative behaviour in the wider prison environment; in particular, on the wings. It was however identified that not all operational staff shared the same enthusiasm for prisoners undertaking education and this contributed to 'us and them' attitudes (between operational and non-operational staff). In considering relationship dynamics, for the most part, prisoners viewed teachers as civilians and the lack of black and white uniform was an important factor in this. One teacher commented: 'If someone is wearing black and white, their role is discipline. If I'm in as a civilian, I'm an enabler for something. The relationship we have

> with prisoners is different and we often see a different person to those seen on the wings and we're often told that by officers ... I know if I was to wear black and white that the initial interaction would be different—

> there'd be far less trust.'

ii. Discouragement

While the primary focus of the research was to understand what motivates prisoners to engage with education and their experiences of a range of different programmes, I was also interested to explore whether had experienced prisoners

negative attitudes toward or even been actively discouraged from engaging with education. While there is a broad consensus that education ultimately is something 'good', some perceptions of education are negatively shaped by socio-economic factors, lack of opportunity and distain for figures of authority. In the case of the participants in this study, some such views had been developed via their own first hand experiences whereas others had come from the influence of others for whom education had little or no value.

During the interviews, a number of prisoner participants described participation in education classes in negative functional terms, as the prison's need 'to fill courses and tick boxes'. Such respondents claimed that education was not being provided because it could genuinely help prisoners to reform but instead as a method for making the government and indeed prison

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Council of Europe (1990). PRISON EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN EUROPE CURRENT STATE-OF-PLAY AND CHALLENGES. European Commission

²⁰ ibid.

establishments look better to the outside world—to be seen to be more humane and proactive in rehabilitating the prison population. This was a view expressed by 'Darren' who had engaged in a number of education courses during his numerous terms of imprisonment because there was 'nowt else to do'. He described himself as having been rebellious and unwilling to engage with education in prison until he was 21. When he arrived at the current establishment he was not given a skills assessment and was assigned to a 'bricks' course. He felt that he was 'just filling a place on a course' so the prison would be seen to be operating as expected. During a prison sentence that Darren had served 17 years earlier, he learnt to read and write in order to write letters to family and friends. Now

Darren's perception of education in prison was only as a timefilling activity and not something that changed the overall prison experience drastically or indeed the prisoners who engaged in such initiatives.

From Darren's perspective and indeed other respondents with similar views, prison education was delivered to uphold the image of the prison. It was suggested by some prisoners that courses such as 'victim awareness', which at this time was done via paperwork in prisoners' cells, are delivered in a way that contradicts undermines the purposeful image being projected by policy

makers. What I understood from Darren's perspective in particular was that prisoners who were not motivated to engage with education were not necessarily opposed to the delivery of education programmes entirely. However, a point of frustration for some was the delivery of education courses, that for them, did not seem to have a meaningful purpose. In the case of the victim awareness course, another respondent, 'Andrew', found neither the process nor the outcome of the course of any real value due to a lack of opportunity to discuss the topics in a meaningful context. He said: 'this doesn't give prisoners incentive to change, even when they do courses.'

Despite the negative views expressed by Darren above, his experience of various educational courses had in fact made him more aware of the importance of education in a broader sense. This was particularly notable when he discussed the education of his 10-

year-old daughter. He had become consciously supportive of her education to the extent that he would reward her educational achievements with 'books rather than sweets' to encourage her to continue to make an effort at school. So whilst on the surface it may have appeared that Darren did not value education this was separated from aspirations and guidance of his daughter and his commitment to seeing her succeed educationally.

In other cases, where discouragement was identified, wider social implications (particularly financial) were found to be the origin of barriers to educational encouragement. 'Dave's', father's infrequent presence and repeated criminal activity had a significant impact on his life. His early years had been

spent replicating his father's criminal behaviour rather than seeking education and he expressed this in terms of filling a paternal gap. Although Dave later reconnected with his father, this didn't impact favourably on academic achievements. Frequently in and out of his life, Dave described his father's comings and goings as a regular feeling of abandonment. Furthermore, when his father returned, Dave was actively discouraged from going to college as his father did not want continue to pay maintenance costs.

While there was evidence of active discouragement to engage

in education, this tended to be overshadowed by the more prominent theme of disillusionment. Rather than identifying examples of disillusionment with education specifically, participants tended to show a sense of disillusionment with the criminal justice system more broadly. In many cases, interviews with prisoners highlighted a sense of disillusionment with the law. A 2011 report in the Guardian discussed the story of Malcolm Sang, a serving prisoner studying for a law degree during his sentence. The report told of Sang's motivation through disillusionment with the law having been convicted of murder rather than manslaughter, as his co-defendant was. It also noted that prison officers told Sang it was not suitable for prisoners to study law and actively tried to dissuade him from pursuing this educational route.²¹ Due to such difficulties and in some cases active dissuasion experienced by prisoners, The Longford Trust introduced the Patrick Pakenham

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Moorhead, J. (2011). Prisoners sign up for law degrees. The Guardian. [online] Available at: http://www.theguardian.com/education/2011/apr/25/prisoners-law-degrees [Accessed 31 Jul. 2015].

Awards as part of their scholarship programme. The aim of the annual scholarship is to offer support to young serving and ex-prisoners who wish to continue their rehabilitation by going to a UK university or equivalent institution to read Law.

iii. Connection

Education was found amongst some participants to be a way to establish, maintain and nurture connection between prisoners and their families. This was notable when it came to the 'products' or outcomes of education such as the award certificates or the completion of artwork. It has been suggested that the emotions experienced by the families of prisoners are similar to that experienced during bereavement. In the case of imprisonment however, families have constant reminders of how their situation differs as they

support convicted relatives through the criminal justice process, prison sentence and beyond which²² terms as 'living death'. In such situations, 'products' of education act as a token of reminder of the presence of the prisoner despite their physical absence.

An interview with 'Richard' highlighted this issue. The neighbours and friends of Richard's parents had responded to his imprisonment by visiting to offer their condolences, no doubt well meaning, this was felt as a

bereavement-like experience. Neighbours regularly took flowers to Richard's mother as if she were grieving a loss, reinforcing the 'living death' concept. Richard enjoyed 'showing off' his education certificates to his mother during her visits and made a point of giving them to her to take home. This provided a symbolic way of maintaining a presence in the family home and in part acted as a form of attempting redemption.

In a letter written by a prisoner to the Prisoners' Education Trust, another prisoner spoke of a connection he was able to establish through the pursuit of his own education. In comparison to other letters analysed, this letter was short, yet powerful in explaining how education had created an opportunity to maintain a good relationship with his youngest son. He wrote: 'I am extremely excited to be doing this course as I believe education is 'a gift'... My youngest son is studying for a marketing degree [at university] and during a recent phone call he reminded me that we should both

graduate at the same time if I get my head down and study hard! So you see education not only offers opportunities for the future but it also brings families together.' It is evident that the relationship was good between the writer and his son because of the exchange of humour between them. In telling his imprisoned father that they could graduate together if he 'got his head down', the son jovially took on the role of the parent giving his father advice and setting him an educational goal. The bond between the writer and his son had clearly been strengthened by the fact that he was doing a degree during his prison sentence because it gave them common ground on which to communicate. They had a shared experience and a common goal, which they could work towards together. During this time they were able to provide each other with encouragement and support.

> It became evident during the documentary analysis that doing an education course in prison can improve family help to relationships, however, the reasons behind this need further clarity and exploration. In letters seeking support for educational courses, prisoners often cited improved family relationships as a motivation. Often this was also relating to gaining employment on release and the ability to financially support their families. Yet the improvement of family relationships more broadly, for

example, improving and maintaining relationships with children through reading, or shared understanding or experience as in the above example, although less tangible, is highly significant. Interestingly, research has shown that parental education may have an impact on children's aspirations²³ and arguably, despite the barriers between prisoners and their children, written communication can still allow for the transmission of ability and aspiration from parent to child.

For other prisoners in this study, their experiences of connection to, or with education, came from relationships with a partner on the outside. One exprisoner spoke about 'getting the bug' for using his mind when studying for an access course prior to being sentenced. It was whilst studying on this course that the participant met his partner and together the 'two extremes' of their backgrounds came together and connected within this educational setting. Despite receiving a custodial sentence the relationship with his

It has been suggested that the emotions experienced by the families of prisoners are similar to that experienced during bereavement.

^{22.} Condry, R. (2007). Families Shamed. Cullompton: Willan.

^{23.} Ermisch, J, Pronzato, C. (2010). 'Causal Effects of Parents' Education on Childrens' Education'. *Institute for Social and Economic Research Working Paper Series*, No. 2010–16.

partner continued and centred on the continuation of his studies. She organised tutors and learning materials in order that he could study throughout his sentence before being released and enrolling at university. It was clear that one of the fundamental factors in surviving prison life for this respondent was the continuation of educational engagement. This was made possible due to the strength of the relationship between the participant and his partner. While it is recognised that imprisonment can put significant pressure on the partners and families of prisoners, ²⁴ it has been identified that a mutual push towards an educational goal can also serve to maintain and strengthen relational bonds.

Conclusion

This article has explored the role of relationships in prisoners' engagement with and participation in prison education. Examining prisoners' relationships past and present provides some insight into the role of relationships in both motivating and discouraging prisoners to engage in education.

It has been argued that there is a disconnect in the relationships between prisoner learners and teachers and those between prisoner learners and operational staff. This can cause different types of prison staff to ascribe a variety of characteristics to individual prisoners and may be part of the cause of 'them and us' attitudes to emerge between prison staff (educational and operational). There is evidently some ambiguity in the 'self' the prisoner presents to those who work in prisons. Given the difference in the nature of prison work (between educational and operational staff), those working in prisons are identifying prisoners in different ways depending on their location at a given time and how prisoners

respond to particular environments. The prisoner on the wing may present a different 'self' to the prisoner in the classroom suggesting there needs to be a more joined up approach to prison work whereby the positive behaviours and engagements seen in prison education departments continue into other locations within the prison.

This article has also highlighted the wider familial impact of attitudes towards education. Negative engagement with education in the prison setting does not automatically equate to such attitudes being transferred to prisoners' children. The value, or lack thereof, that prisoners ascribe to prison education can still positively manifest into a broader appreciation of education more widely. Despite some feelings of 'box ticking', prisoners can develop a sense of value of education on the whole by evaluating how it could be better delivered in a more meaningful way. Consequently, prisoners who are disillusioned with prison education may provide more encouragement for their children to engage with education in the community outside.

It is clear that education in the prison setting has the capacity to develop, maintain and nurture relationships both on the inside and the outside of prison walls by providing a means of communication through which connectedness can be experienced. Whether via a shared learning experience, the ability to share 'products' of education, or the establishment of a common goal, the outcomes of education in prison reach far beyond employability offering mechanisms of personal development, coping and a sense of belonging. Good relationships are a fundamental part of the process of rehabilitation and reintegration and consequently, prison education must be recognised as a way that such relationships can be formed.

^{24.} Codd, H. (2007). Prisoners' Families and Resettlement: A Critical Analysis. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46(3), pp.255–263; Condry, R. (2009). *Families shamed: the consequences of crime for relatives of serious offenders: crime ethnography series*. 1st ed. Taylor & Francis; Condry, R. (2011). Prisoners and their Families. In: B. Crewe and J. Bennett, ed., The Prisoner, 1st ed. London: Routledge; Mills, A. and Codd, H. (2008). Prisoners' families and offender management: Mobilizing social capital. *Probation Journal*, 55(1), pp.9–24.