**The prison as a space of non-life: How does a typical prison sentence intervene in what really matters to people?**

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**Abstract**

This article argues that imprisonment creates time that does not matter. It is based on longitudinal interviews conducted with 35 men and women sentenced to typical prison sentences in England. It argues that some responded to this situation by trying to treat the institution as a space of temporary removal and return to their unblemished lives after release. Others tried to use the prison as a space for reinvention, but it was too disconnected from their biographies for this change to endure. It then calls for a new understanding of the prison as an institution. The prison is a space of non-life, and as such it can only be understood in the context of that which surrounds it.

**Keywords:** prison, release, anthropology of ethics, reinvention

Nathan had a difficult childhood, growing up in what he called the ‘gutter’ and experiencing physical and emotional abuse from members of his family. He got in trouble with the police several times in his youth, and was imprisoned for the first time in his early thirties, and spent two months in custody. After his arrest, he was kicked out of his home, spent time in a psychiatric hospital, and then moved into a shared house, which he lost during his sentence. Nevertheless, when he was interviewed about three months after his release, he described his imprisonment provoking a moment of insight:

I didn’t want kids, but prison made me think about things that I’ve never thought about before. Most of the time your cell mate’s asleep, I’m on my own, there’s nothing on TV I’m watching, and your mind’s all messed up anyway, you haven’t been out, spending 23 hours in this crappy little cell, it definitely made me think about things I’d never thought about before.

*Did that surprise you?*

Yes, definitely. It was as simple as, I don't know if I mentioned it before but what started it was the Fairy Liquid advert. The kid calls the guy ‘dad’, and I’m sitting there in a shitty place and it just hit me. ‘Why am I doing this when somebody could be calling me dad?’ (Phase 3)

One way of interpreting this story is as the origin point of a process of reinvention. In it, Nathan describes turning towards a new identity, fatherhood, which has been described as a potential ‘turning point’ on the path to desistance (Schinkel 2019).

However, Nathan’s description of this moment of insight indicates a more complex relationship between his imprisonment and what mattered to him. His incarceration offered him an image of what a good life could be built around, but it also forced him to undergo an experience which he repeatedly described as a ‘waste of time’ and ‘not a part of my life’. On the one hand, it could be that the emptiness of Nathan’s custodial time forced him to see the difference between his non-life in prison and the good life he desired. But the empty time still existed, and Nathan had to live through a period which delayed his desired fatherhood. This period of time may also have made it harder for him to become a father in the future: after his release, Nathan lost his home and struggled to find work. He said that he was nervous to start a relationship because he didn’t want to reveal his status as an ex-prisoner, and that he was pleased that he didn’t have children because he would have to ‘mess around with mainstream society’ (phase 3).

Nathan’s story demonstrates two different ways of understanding how the prison intervenes in a life: as an institution which *removes* us from our lives, and which also *reinvents* us and our lives. Both of these effects occur because, as Reed (2003) argues, the prison is ‘shaped by what is missing’ (3) – by what it separates us from and what it separates from us. In this article, I build on Reed’s argument and align it with anthropological scholarship which has encouraged the empirical study of ethical life (Fassin 2012).[[1]](#footnote-1) The empirical study of ethics is underpinned by the recognition that we are ‘beings for whom things matter’ (Sayer 2011: 5). Because of our evaluative relationship with the world and with ourselves, most of us, most of the time, try to live a good life. This is rarely easy. Our values often contradict each other, and our ability to pursue the good life is always shaped and thwarted by local factors like power, culture and history, and by conflict between the things to which we are committed and those which we cannot control.

There are numerous intellectual traditions within the anthropology of ethics, but this article builds on Mattingly’s (2014) concept of the ground project. Mattingly defines ground projects as ‘the kinds of commitments that people find so deep to who they are that they might not care to go on with their lives without them, or would not know themselves if they no longer had them. They include deeply cherished and self-defining ideals, activities, and personal associations’ (2014: 12).[[2]](#footnote-2) Her empirical work involves the ethnographic study of African-American families looking after children with chronic and often terminal medical conditions and so many of the ground projects she describes are projects of care, but other ground projects could include political activism, forms of creativity, or religious devotion We can experiment with our ground projects, but they also impose limits on us, and they are vulnerable to life’s contingencies. They guide people’s actions and moral attention, they change and grow as our life circumstances change, and when they are destroyed, we can shatter.

In this article, I demonstrate how imprisonment intervenes in people’s ground projects by both removing us from them and reinventing them, allowing a rich and person-centred understanding of the relationship between prisons and individual trajectories. I focus in particular on the experience of ‘typical’ prison sentences, by which I mean sentences of up to a handful of years. As Kristian Mjåland (pers. comm.) has pointed out, the more frequently used term ‘short sentences’ understates how painful these sentences are, overstates their exceptionality, and takes as their benchmark sentences which have swollen in size over recent decades.[[3]](#footnote-3) Most people who go to prison spend no more than a handful of years there consecutively, and while these sentences may not be as destructive as longer sentences, they ‘*are* an experience, and not an easily forgotten blip in the lives of those serving them’ (Armstrong and Weaver 2013: 290, emphasis in original). In order to fully describe this experience, I use short-longitudinal data, following people through prison sentences, and advocate for a way of thinking about the prison as an institution which intersects with and interrupts peoples’ lives outside. This approach allows me to consider the effects of imprisonment with nuance, demonstrating the impact which even a period of weeks or months in prison can have in a life. Through this description, I conceptualise the prison as a moral space defined by absence – by the fact that it disconnects people from what matters to them – and argue that typical sentences of imprisonment impose a self-contradictory moral task: that people change their lives by being taken away from them.

**What sort of intervention in a life is imprisonment?**

The primary material with which the prison intervenes in a life is time. The time which imprisonment imposes is frequently described using language which echoes Nathan, as time which is ‘empty’ (Medlicott 1999), ‘wasted or destroyed or taken from one’s life’ (Goffman 1961/1987: 66), or as ‘an interruption of life, not part of it’ (Sapsford 1983: 76). Time in prison is repetitive, even cyclical, and it lacks ‘temporal synchronicity’ (Carr and Robinson 2022: 10) with the outside world. It is also disconnected from the future: prisoners experience time as ‘meaningless, empty and boring’ (Meisenhelder 1985: 45), ‘the temporal equivalent of running on a treadmill’ (Carceral and Flaherty 2022: 152). At its most extreme, such as in solitary confinement, prison time is experienced as ‘overabundant’ (O’Donnell 2014: 196), an excess ‘of valueless time, a disorienting amount of nothingness’ (Gormley, Reilly and Casey 2022: 109).

Much research has explored how long-term, indeterminate and/or life-sentenced prisoners adapt to this imposed emptiness, focusing on the strategies with which they mark and manage time (Carceral and Flaherty 2022; O’Donnell 2014). Facing decades in prison, particularly when young, can induce ‘temporal vertigo’ (Wright, Crewe and Hulley 2017) with which prisoners must learn to cope by dragging ‘their temporal focus to the present’ (O’Donnell 2014: 177), coming ‘to grudgingly to accept the prison as their involuntary home for life’ (Johnson and Dobrzanska 2005: 8), and eventually experiencing time as ‘less of a burden to be fought or managed, and more a resource to be harnessed’ (Crewe, Hulley and Wright 2017, 529). In so doing they accept the ‘totally unacceptable’ (Cohen and Taylor 1972: 103) idea that a ‘long prison sentence is not…a short intermission in the real business of life, it is the real business of life’ (100).

Lori Sexton (2012) found that prisoners serving shorter sentences (by which she seems to mean several years) were more likely than lifers to see punishment as ‘a separate life that will exist only for a short time, and only within the confines of the prison’ (95), or as a suspension of life, ‘rather than a space where life can be lived’ (100). It certainly makes sense that the extent to which a prison sentence is experienced as a part of someone’s life will vary depending on its length.[[4]](#footnote-4) Schmid and Jones (1990; 1991; 1993), for instance, conducted research on the experience of first-time short-term prisoners, whom they described as having an ‘outsider’ perspective on prison society. These men sought to negate their time inside, suspending their identity throughout their sentence and seeking only to achieve a ‘*transient* niche in prison’ (1993: 447, emphasis in original).

Complicating this picture, a significant body of research suggests that some people who live through shorter sentences sometimes experience them not as dead time, but as an intervention which might lead to positive change and the discovery of a true self. Such research often stresses the poverty and traumatic histories of people who are given typical sentences, sometimes making the point that people are effectively imprisoned by their circumstances even when they are not in custody (Carlton and Segrave 2011). More specifically, scholars have shown that some people seek imprisonment (Schneider 2023), and that shorter sentences can promote narratives of reinvention (Crewe and Ievins 2020) or radical hopes (Laursen 2023), and create the conditions for post-traumatic growth (van Ginneken 2016).

However, these scholars doubt the extent to which ‘reinvented personas endure following release from the institutions in which they are formed’ (Crewe and Ievins 2020: 582). Schinkel (2014: 114) argues that incarceration does not provide a good ‘hook for change’, as it is temporary and does not provide ‘a blueprint for life after imprisonment’ (see also Halsey 2007). Soyer (2014) demonstrates this in her longitudinal work conducted with young men imprisoned (mostly) for a short time in juvenile-justice facilities in Boston and Chicago. She argues that imprisonment functions as a ‘truncated turning point’ by prompting the desire for change and imposing new routines in a way that facilitates a cognitive shift but does not stimulate ‘visions of a future self that could sustain desistance permanently’ (92). Short prison sentences are simply too disjointed from the post-prison future, and thus they do not provide a solid foundation (or ground project) on which to build a new life. Similarly, retrospective research on repeated exposure to short-term imprisonment argues that they are ‘complicit in “wasting life” and contributing to the longevity rather than curtailment of lengthy penal careers’ (Schinkel and Lives Sentenced Participants 2021: 15).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Taken together, existing research suggests that the relative shortness of typical prison sentences, at least in comparison to the grotesque excesses of long and life sentences, means that they can sometimes feel like living in suspended animation and can sometimes be treated as a springboard for personal change, although this change might not last. However, with rare exceptions (eg Soyer 2014), this research is not longitudinal, and therefore pays insufficient attention to how these dynamics are experienced in the moment, and the intersections between life in prison and life outside – how the nature of life outside shapes how people see life inside, and whether the way people see life inside endures after release. That is the goal of this article, which collects data at ‘hinge points’ between life inside and outside the prison. It argues that many people hoped that a temporary removal from their real life outside and immersion into the unreal world of the prison would benefit them in a way which would improve or even transform their conditions. Longitudinal data, however, suggests that such hopes rarely materialise on release, and when they do, it is for reasons not directly related to imprisonment. There are many reasons for this failure, but one is the fact that a prison sentence is also a time out of people’s lives, and one which threatens either their existing ground projects or those which they hope to develop. As a moral space defined by absence, the prison provides poor material for lasting change.

**Methods**

This article is based on a secondary analysis of interview data collected as part of a large longitudinal study of entry into and exit from prison in England.[[6]](#footnote-6) Prisoners were interviewed on three occasions – normally within the first week of their entry into prison, around a week before release, and within three months after release – and 271 people were interviewed in total in England. The attrition rate was high, because some people were given sentences which were too long to be included in the project, some did not want to recommit to another interview, and many were impossible to contact as their phone numbers or addresses changed repeatedly after release.[[7]](#footnote-7) Because of my explicit interest in change over time, this article is based on interviews which were conducted at all three stages, and in total it draws on 88 interviews conducted with 35 people (18 men and 17 women).[[8]](#footnote-8) Because the sample only contains people with whom we were able to remain in contact, on average they almost certainly lived in more materially stable circumstances than the majority of people serving typical sentences. Prisoners’ periods in custody varied in length, but the majority were in prison for a continuous period of less than a year, and many for significantly under a year. Ages varied from 20 to 63, but the modal age was in the 30s. All but four were White British; the remaining prisoners were White Irish, White Gypsy/Roma/Traveller and White European.[[9]](#footnote-9) Seventeen participants had never been to prison before, but most had previous convictions. At least three male participants reported histories of self-harm or suicide attempts, whereas eight female participants did. Following a similar pattern, five male participants reported having had problems with drug or alcohol use, whereas seven eight female participants did. In ten cases, the post-release interview was conducted back in prison, because the participant had either been recalled into custody or resentenced.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Initial interviews were conducted between 2016 and 2018 in three prisons: two men’s ‘local’ prisons (which hold remand prisoners and post-conviction prisoners who have not been allocated to longer-term facilities) and one women’s prison which held a lot of prisoners serving typical sentences. Participants were selected both opportunistically and purposively. In each prison, a member of staff served as a contact person and provided the research team with information about newly-arrived prisoners. The team, who carried keys and walked around unescorted, then introduced themselves and the research to potential participants. At all three stages, interviews tended to last between one and three hours. Interviews conducted in prison took place in private rooms, and those conducted outside prison happened in a variety of spaces: homes, approved premises, libraries, cafes, or on walks. Different questions were asked at different stages, many relating to the specific transition which was then of interest, but the interviews shared a conceptual framework which was developed to describe the experience and texture of imprisonment (see Crewe 2015). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and then coded by members of the research team.

For the purposes of this article, I read raw data, as I was using the interviews for purposes for which they were not initially coded. Because of my interest in how individuals changed over time, I read the interviews in a temporal sequence, following each individual as they entered prison, spent time in custody, and were released. I looked through the surface level of interview, which focused on the texture and experience of imprisonment, and tried to understand the effect of imprisonment on people’s ground projects (Mattingly 2014). What was visible in these interviews about what really mattered to people? To what preoccupations did they return? On which priorities did they base their decisions? What did they describe imprisonment as depriving them of or facilitating? If incarceration made ground projects harder to fulfil in their original form, did people develop new ones, change how they pursued them, or redefine their meaning? Transcripts were read carefully, sometimes repeatedly, and detailed notes were taken. I made non-diagnostic judgements of people’s ground projects, jotting down things such as ‘return to family’ or ‘hope for a normal life’ or ‘search for some sort of purpose’, or (less frequently) things like ‘the pursuit of self-knowledge’, and noted how their prison time related to them. I was unable to check with participants that they agreed with my judgement of their ground projects; however, as most interviews centred around consistent priorities, I am relatively confident that I identified them with some accuracy. My notes were then annotated to mark the repetition of core themes related to my interests. As the analysis developed, I returned both to the notes and to key interviews which were central to the analysis. As part of this process, I noted that many prisoners described their time in prison as worthless– a period in which there were no ground projects to be found – and it is from this finding that my argument emerged.

**The prison as a space of non-life**

Throughout the interviews, prisoners used language which echoed Nathan’s, describing their sentence as an example of waste and nothingness. Joey said that what was hard about his sentence was ‘missing my life’ (phase 2), Luca said that his time in prison was ‘not my life’ (phase 2), and Molly said that her sentence was ‘not a life’ (phase 2). By naming their time in prison as not a part of their real life, the prisoners interviewed for this study were saying something profound about the nature of their time there, how it related to life it had been inserted into, and the future life that they hoped or feared it would make possible. In other words, they were offering insights into how imprisonment intervenes in a life by creating a period of non-life.

While people were in custody, their biological lives continued, but their ground projects were threatened, and it was this that made their time feel unreal. They were unable to live the lives that mattered to them before their imprisonment or that they hoped they would build after release. Imprisonment excised people from the world outside, and with it the projects that gave their life meaning and the material with which they hoped to build new projects. As Luca (phase 1) identified, ‘you’ve been taken away from your life, everything has stopped’, and people particularly complained about being taken away from family members and friends, as well as from the ability to develop financial security and independence. In addition to removing people from what mattered to them, imprisonment also placed them in a shaming and staining environment in which they felt they did not belong (Ievins 2023). Some people, particularly those who were middle class and had not been to prison before, insisted that they were ‘not your typical prisoner’ (Isabelle, phase 1). Many complained that they had no control over anything of any importance: they had ‘choices in a box’ (Aliya, phase 2) while outside ‘life is escaping’ (Isabelle, phase 2). Many prisoners complained that they could not make meaningful plans for the future and anticipated leaving prison without having had the opportunity to secure a home, a job or a social network – problems which were enhanced by the fact that most were held in chaotic local prisons with poor opportunities for release planning. Having ‘projects of action in the future’ matters in part because it gives ‘meaning to the stream of time’ (Meisenhelder 1986: 41). Prisoners in this sample were forced to experience a period of existence in which they struggled to build for the future and which lacked the meaningful events which give time its texture. As a result, often all they experienced was ‘same shit, different day’ (Ava, phase 2).

In conceptualising the prison as a space of non-life, I have drawn on Scott’s (2019) work on the sociology of nothing.[[11]](#footnote-11) Scott argues that naming something as nothing can be used as an ‘attribution of irrelevance’, a way of describing things ‘that currently *don’t* matter and consequently *aren’t* matter’ (8, emphases in original) – such as a period of time in prison. Over our lifetimes, Scott argues that we experience different types of nothing, but the meaningsthat these nothings have vary hugely depending on whether we have deliberately created them or whether they have happened to us, and whether we recognise them as absences or not. The same objects, identities and experiences shift between somethings and nothings, and shift into and out of our awareness. Furthermore, nothing can be creative. Being exposed to and recognising something as nothing can make us realise what we are missing, as Nathan’s story demonstrates. He described the prison as an empty space in which he became consciously aware of something he had not previously registered as an absence: his own identity as a father. However, having made him aware of this absence, his imprisonment also extended the period during which he was unable to become a father.

In the remaining empirical sections of this article, I describe how some prisoners tried to live through this period of non-life – the meanings they attributed to it, how they adapted to it in custody, and the effects this period of existence had on their lives after release – and show how these meanings shifted over time and varied depending on the trajectories with which they were intersecting. Between a quarter and a third of prisoners – often those who had materially secure lives and meaningful ground projects outside – saw the prison as an empty space to which they were temporarily removed. They prioritised returning as quickly as possible to their real lives outside prison, and aimed to leave the un-realness of prison life behind them. On the other hand, prisoners who had been repeatedly incarcerated for short periods, who struggled with drug and alcohol abuse, who had very little material or ontological security outside prison, who were homeless or insecurely housed, and who sometimes struggled to articulate or access a clear ground project outside, often described desperately wanting to use their period of imprisonment as a blank slate on which they could reinvent themselves and their lives.

However, the longitudinal nature of this research demonstrated that neither attempt to control the role that imprisonment played in people’s lives worked. Even though most people who tried to treat the prison as a space of removal had not returned to prison before the third interview, they nevertheless described being unavoidably changed by their experience. They had therefore been unable to contain the unreal nature of imprisonment behind its walls. On the other hand, in the rare cases in which people who sought reinvention managed to change their lives in ways they found beneficial, this change generally resulted from the stable provision of housing or drug rehabilitation services, or from improved interactions with social services, rather than from imprisonment itself. More often, their attempts at change in prison were too disconnected from their real lives outside for them to have a real impact on their future.

**The prison as a space of temporary removal**

When you’re on the outside three months doesn’t feel very long, but being here three months is a really long time to be shut away from just life in general. […] All you want to do is go home and just...almost just breathe, you want to live, you don’t want to exist like you have...That’s how I feel, I feel like I’m existing in here, I’m just a number, you know, I’m not living at all, I’m just existing day by day, just till I get out. So I just feel like I want to go home and I just want to relax, and I want to be me again, you know, I want to be mum to my children, I want to be Lucy, I want to be...I don’t want to be a prisoner, I don’t want to be a number, you know, I want to be me. (Lucy, phase 2)

Lucy was in her late thirties and six months pregnant with her fourth child when she was sent to prison for the first time. She received a 20-month sentence, although she only served three before being released early with an electronic ankle tag. She was first interviewed five days into her sentence and was distraught. Her ground project was the flourishing of her family, and she suffered from being separated from her young daughter, and grieved that her imprisonment meant that her family and partner would struggle to bond with her unborn baby. Her priority during her imprisonment was therefore to return to what really mattered to her as quickly as possible, ideally before her baby was born, and to keep the corrupting influence of the prison from having any effect on her life outside: ‘I’m hoping I can get out of here and just go “Bang, that’s all put behind me”’ (phase 1). She was able to maintain this hope because of her material circumstances. She had a large, close family who paid her bills and rent while she was in prison, which meant that she was released without debt and to a familiar home. Her young daughter was able to live with a family member while she was in prison, so there was no risk of her being taken into care. It was therefore imaginable that her life would be waiting for her when she was released.

Lucy put a lot of work into treating her prison time as dead time, and focused her attention on her life outside. She frequently reread and held printouts of emails from family members. She tried to undo the ‘desynchrony’ (McNeill et al. 2022) which her imprisonment imposed on her, and woke up early in the morning to lie in bed imagining her daughter getting ready for school and cuddling her. She acknowledged that thinking so much about what she was missing could make life more painful, but she was unwilling to accept that ‘this is how life should be’ (phase 1). She was friendly with some women inside but was nevertheless disengaged from her prison time. She said that she wished she could sleep through her sentence, and she distracted herself from its length by counting it down by canteen days rather than calendar days. She felt that none of the prison staff really cared about her but she didn’t mind because prison didn’t matter to her: ‘my thoughts are just so directed to going home. I’m not really bothered any more. I’ve lost everything I want so yeah, my focus is just home home home’ (phase 1).

Many other people in the sample, particularly those who also had stable lives outside, pursued the same goal as Lucy: getting through their time in prison as quickly as possible, and returning to what really mattered to them. Like her, they tried to achieve this by managing their time, their attention and their relationships. Many people manipulated their perception of time so it did not feel as long and shapeless. Evelyn kept herself busy, working hard in the prison salon: ‘I am building my life like it used to be outside. Because of this, my time has been flying’ (phase 2). Anton, on the other hand, smoked spice hoping that the psychoactive effects would make his time feel faster. Similarly, many participants avoided paying much attention to prison, and like Lucy they also often drew on their felt biographical dissimilarity to those they believed to be ‘typical prisoners’. Michael didn’t consider himself to be ‘of prison’ (phase 1) and therefore tried hard not to be noticed by other prisoners, spending his time watching TV alone in his cell. Others used their time to work on smaller projects which would benefit them outside. Archie used his sentence to give up smoking. Finally, Lucy was far from alone in centring her ground project around her family, and it was therefore common for people in the sample to put a lot of effort into managing their relational ties. However, whereas Lucy tried to keep her connection to her family as strong as possible, many others cut off their links to the outside world because they found them too painful. Kai avoided thinking about his daughter wherever possible: ‘I try to block it out as much as I can, just so I can get through every day easier’ (phase 2).

Many people in this sample therefore experienced their life in prison as an obstacle blocking them from what mattered to them rather than the material with which their life was built. In prison, you are just ‘waiting for your date’ (Kai, phase 2), and there was little point in engaging with the institution’s moral community. In men’s prisons in particular, where violence was a frequent occurrence, this way of thinking affected how people interacted with the social world and sometimes led them to act against their own moral standards. Archie said that he saw prisoners beat up an old man whom they believed to be a paedophile but he did not intervene as he feared getting in trouble and having his sentence lengthened. Similarly, Harry, who converted to Christianity after being convicted of child sexual offences, said he had to start telling lies ‘to survive in prison life’ (phase 2), which troubled him. Many other participants, including people in women’s prisons, said that they were unwilling to form lasting relationships inside. Their aim was to glide through prison as quickly and smoothly as possible, and they resisted anything which might introduce greater friction.

When people were interviewed after their release, however, it was clear that their imprisonment had affected their lives more than they had hoped, for two key reasons.[[12]](#footnote-12) First, their life outside had been affected by their absence. Treating imprisonment as a temporary period of removal from what really matters to you only works if what really matters to you is unaffected by your absence. As many people in this sample found out, this was not the case. Lucy’s experiences offer a clear example. After her release, she realised that her fundamentally communal ground project – the flourishing of her family – had been negatively impacted by her time away. Her partner had been disturbed by being unable to spend time with her during her pregnancy, one of her children had dropped out of university, and her youngest daughter had been so upset that she now had frequent panic attacks and often did not want to go to school in case her mother was not there when she got home.

The second reason imprisonment continued to matter after release was that it was simply not possible for people to excise it from their biographies. Participants often worried that their old prison sentences could become relevant to their present identities at any time; their sentence might not have mattered to them but it could matter to other people. When they were interviewed after their release, several people reported negative psychological effects, such as depression, anxiety or PTSD, which they attributed to their imprisonment. It was also common for the prison to have a greater hold on people’s attention than they had expected: ‘Upon release I’ve thought – in fact I think probably most days – about the experience. I hate going to bed because I lie down, I shut my eyes and that’s all I can think about’ (Luca, phase 3). Several participants said that at specific times of day, they would imagine what was happening in their old establishment; despite their best efforts, the prison’s routine had woven itself into the fabric of their daily life. Furthermore, it was common even for people who were committed to negating their prison experience to stay in touch with people they had met inside. Lucy frequently messaged her former cellmate and hoped to meet up with her soon. Imprisonment did not simply have negative effects on people’s lives, then, and a small number of participants described themselves as being enriched by the knowledge, perspective and new relationships they had gained through their imprisonment. In multiple different ways, the prison’s effects had not been confined within its walls, and it continued to bleed into their real lives after release.

**The prison as a space for reinvention**

Once I got involved in the criminal justice system I was on a rollercoaster, I haven’t come off it I don’t feel. I feel like I’ve come off it now when I’m here, but I’ve said these sorts of things before, and that’s what scares me. It is scary, really scary. (Bella, phase 1)

Whereas many participants experienced their imprisonment as something which removed them from a grounded life, many others described the emptiness of their imprisonment spilling over into rest of their existence. Bella’s experiences offer a clear example. After a childhood in which she was abused and raped, she became homeless and then addicted to heroin and crack cocaine. She estimated that she had been incarcerated around three times a year for the last 15 years. Her ground project was centred around her two children, who were in care and whom she adored: ‘I was put on this earth to be a mum, that was my purpose, if I could go back and say what have I achieved I would just say everyday life at being a mum’ (phase 1). Her current period of imprisonment had started when she was recalled to custody, and she described herself as ‘relieved’ when she got to prison. She desperately wanted to manage her addiction, and although she was not optimistic, she hoped this this sentence might prompt her to change her life: ‘I really can’t, I’ve got to stop. I can’t… I just want so much more out of life. I really do’ (phase 1). Although she was not subjected to any explicit rehabilitative interventions during her sentence, she engaged in many mundane ethical practices (R.J. Williams 2018), such as studying the Bible and writing poems, through which she hoped both to cope with her imprisonment and work on herself.

Interviewed shortly before her release, she said that she had changed positively and reoriented her attention to what really mattered to her. Her account was similar to the reinventive narratives discussed by Crewe and Ievins (2020), and she was particularly proud that she had stayed away from the hard drugs which were traded on her wing:

I’ve identified that even them being next door to me, I can say no, and not bother about them, I can do it. If I can do that in jail, I can do that outside. Because my mentality used to be, well, I’m in jail, fuck it, I might as well get as high as I can. And that was my mentality. Now, I don’t want that, I really don’t. The fear of losing my boys, losing my health, losing my family, hurting people, hurting myself. I believe that I was put here for something a bit better than that. I’ve had enough, I really have. But I’ve been down that road so many times, and it’s like hitting your head on a hard wall, but hopefully this time. (Phase 2)

Her fragile hope was that she would use the material provided by her imprisonment to change herself and her life. Like Nathan, and like the tellers of reinventive narratives discussed in Crewe and Ievins (2020), she took advantage of the fact that she had been separated from a life with which she was unhappy, and hoped that this disconnection would allow her to build a new one. Prison, for her, was not something which took her away from what mattered, but something which she hoped might return her to it, even though it had not before.

More than half of the sample, like Bella, described themselves as experiencing some sort of positive change during their imprisonment. These narratives were especially common among the significant numbers of people in the sample, particularly the women, who had shifted between the insecurity of imprisonment and the ‘enduring temporariness’ (McNeill et al 2022: 193) of life at the extremes of poverty and addiction. In such cases, they often used metaphors which implied a lack of control over and direction in their lives. Teddy, a man in his sixties who had experienced homelessness for decades, said he was ‘floating at the top of society’ (phase 2) and ‘in quicksand’, unable to ‘move forward’ (phase 3). Similarly, Ariana, who felt that ‘prison has tried to take over my life’ (phase 2), described herself after yet another return to prison as ‘stuck there in that cell on that wing, not getting anywhere, just going round and round in circles’ (phase 3). In such a context, many participants sought to harness the temporary stability provided by their imprisonment and use it as part of a targeted project of reinvention. They often used metaphors which implied that they had gained direction: Harry said that he had started to ‘walk straight’ (phase 1), and Isabelle said that the support of her family meant that ‘I’ve got through that, I’ve come out far more knowledgeable, and it’s going to allow me to go forward in my life’ (phase 3). The change which they experienced was meaningful and often embodied, and could involve putting on weight, getting ‘a break away from drugs’ (Rosie, phase 2), and having health problems checked by doctors. Other people said that being removed from the pains of violent relationships or poverty and entering a place of relative ‘normality’ (Dexter, phase 1) meant that they found it easier to feel in control of themselves. Chloe used her sentence to get distance from her abusive former partner, and was held on an open wing and given a good prison job: ‘I felt like I had a purpose again. I had something to do and I was really good at what I was doing and I felt really good doing it’ (phase 3).

The lives people desired for themselves could only truly come to fruition outside the prison, but in some cases their greater investment in their future also manifested in greater attentiveness to life inside – a stronger a sense that life in prison mattered. Unlike those who experienced their sentence as a period of removal and hoped to get through it as quickly as possible, these prisoners often described themselves as deliberately investing in the prison’s moral community. Florence said that the routine and stability of the prison had helped her to stop drinking and learn to ‘love yourself and appreciate yourself’ (phase 2). She described growing feelings of optimism for the future: ‘I sit here and I think I can’t wait, I just want to get a job, you know, I want to start contact with my children, everything...I don’t know why, but it just seems like I’ve grown up the second time around’ (phase 2). She had also become much more involved in the social life of her wing: ‘this time I care about the wing, I care about if people are upset, you know, I’m a lot more caring this time and...you know, I’ve got two jobs that...yeah, I only get paid for one of them, but I wanted to do the other one because I care’ (phase 2).

Through the forms of personal change which people engaged in inside, they hoped to contribute either to the recovery, maintenance or discovery of their ground projects after their release. In some cases, the personal change which they engaged in lasted after their return to the community, normally because people either received additional state support like residential drug rehabilitation or material support from family members. Florence was interviewed three months after her release, when she was living in her mother’s house and said that she was still not drinking and felt that she was on the ‘right path’ (phase 3). She now had access to photos of her young children, and hoped to be able to have supervised contact with them soon.

Often, though, the form of personal investment in the ground project which was most feasible in prison – working on yourself and trying to change your patterns of behaviour – was too disconnected from people’s real lives to last in the community. The only material with which they had been able to reinvent their lives was their selves, and as a result they often expressed ‘radical hopes’ about their post-release futures (Laursen 2023) which were either shapeless or articulated as a negative. Elsie got clean in prison and felt that she would be stable when she was released, but was unable to imagine a tangible future: ‘I just want to change my life’ (phase 2). Interviewed shortly before her release, Mia’s main hope was ‘don’t come back’ (phase 2).[[13]](#footnote-13) These hopes were desperately desired but thin, and often didn’t last. Around half of the people who in their phase one and two interviews described being positively changed by their time in custody no longer showed signs of reinventive narratives after their release. In five of these cases, the participant had returned to prison before being interviewed at phase three. Elsie, for example, was back in prison at phase three, and still expressed a formless hope for a different future: to ‘stop drugs and find something else to do’.

Even when people had clearer hopes for the future, the grip which they established in prison was unable to have an effect on what happened to them afterwards. While Bella, with whom we opened this section, was inside, she had made a significant effort to get clean, but she was nevertheless released to a hostel for eight weeks and then forced to live with her mother, who still lived with the man who had physically abused her when she was a child. Her partner of 15 years continued to use drugs, and he returned to custody shortly before her third interview. She was able to have a supervised visit with her children, which she described as ‘amazing. It has made my life. It has made my year’ (phase 3). Nevertheless, she had started to use drugs again, and thought it was likely that she would return to prison before too long. She described herself as feeling incarcerated not solely by the prison but by the broader circumstances of her life:

I do feel like…I suppose constantly like a prisoner, a prisoner of my head, a prisoner of my mum’s house, a prisoner of my addiction, a prisoner of this mental health, a prisoner of going to prison, I am always faced with brick walls. Everyday things that I should be able to achieve, or deal with, to me is like it’s quite a hard task. So I do feel like a prisoner, and I do feel like I’m sort of in a prison of my life as such. It has had a massive impact on me, going to jail. I talk about it a lot. If I’m encouraged to. It can be in my mind quite a bit.

*Is it?*

Yes. The fear going back to jail and the fear of starting all again and going back a step, that’s a worry. Keeping myself safe is a worry. Addiction. Everything. It is really hard.

Unlike a handful of participants interviewed at phase three, Bella did not want to return to custody, but the fact that even after her release she saw ‘prisoner’ as her defining identity suggests that her tie to the prison was too tightly knotted for her to escape it easily.

The longitudinal nature of the data presented in this article allows us to see the reinventive narratives told by people like Bella as fantasies of change which can be temporarily enacted in custody but which are very difficult to sustain following the disconnection of release. Wanting to change your life is simply not enough, which Bella recognised and blamed herself for: ‘It’s only me that can make the effort to change. You can want to change all you like, you can really want to, but every day is 24 hours in a day, 60 minutes in an hour, those hours are long, when you’ve got nothing going for you’ (phase 3). This latest sentence, which Bella estimated to be her forty-fifth, did not change her life. Instead, the unreal and shapeless nature of prison time, the non-lifeness which is one of its defining characteristics, had seeped outside the prison and infected her life outside.

**Conclusion**

This article opened with a description of Nathan’s moment of insight, a moment which mirrored the historically influential image of the prison as an artificial space within which you can be confined, and from which you gain the perspective to reflect on your life, discover new desires, and resolve to pursue them once you are released. According to this imaginary, the prison morally reinvents people by removing them from their lives. This ‘liberal optimist’ (Carlen and Tombs 2006: 340) view of the prison has continued to be influential, and there are signs within this data and in other projects of work (Crewe and Ievins 2020) that prisons can stimulate narratives of transformation, at least while people are incarcerated. What this data also suggests, however, is that this moral reinvention is too removed from the real world outside the prison for it to endure. Imprisonment creates a space of non-life and disconnects people from what really matters to them, whether that particular project exists outside the prison’s walls or in an imagined future. Being temporarily placed in a space of non-life might give a new perspective, but it is very difficult to translate this perspective into a concrete and lasting ground project. Other people, however, respond to being placed in a space of non-life by attempting to contain its danger within the prison’s walls, seeing the prison as a place to which they are temporarily removed and which they, ultimately vainly, hope will not infect their lives outside.

As Sarah Armstrong argues, a frequent response to the prison’s failure is to call for it to be more ‘active and goal focused. Time must be *done* and not merely passed’ (2018: 137, emphasis in original). She argues that this response results from our primary way of thinking about the prison, which is as a cell, a space of waiting. Instead she suggests that we think about prisons as corridors – spaces which ‘are not themselves destinations’ (144), and which most people are simply ‘*passing through*’ (148, emphasis in original; see also Augé 2008). This article suggests, with Armstrong, that it might be valuable for prison scholars to think differently about what the prison *is*. The prison is a space of non-life, and both an intervention in and an absence from the real life which surrounds it. It exists, but it is also a pause, and its effects can only properly be understood in the context of the biographical trajectory of the imprisoned person. Some will use this pause as an opportunity to reflect on and perhaps change lives with which they are dissatisfied, and others see the pause as a threat to lives which are meaningful to them. To argue for the value of understanding the prison as a space of non-life is not to argue that the prison does not matter. Instead, it is to call for prison scholars to broaden their attention in a way which mirrors Brekhus’ (1998) call for sociologists to focus not just on marked phenomena, that which is ‘extraordinary’ or ‘ontologically unusual’ (34), and to pay more attention to the unmarked. As prison sociologists, we need to analyse not just the marked phenomenon which is the prison, but also how it intersects with the unmarked life which surrounds it and gives it its meaning.

Such an approach pushes us towards new methods and new analytical frameworks. It encourages longitudinal work, ideally with longer follow-ups than were possible in this study.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thinking about the intersection between individual trajectories and the prison could also be productive for comparative penal research, as it encourages us to think about imprisonment in the context of a wider social context which varies by country (Jefferson 2016).[[15]](#footnote-15) It also provides useful ways for thinking about the different meanings of different prison sentences. This article has described how people serving typical sentences respond to the non-life space of the prison, but the literature reviewed earlier indicates that the role which prison plays in the lives of people serving long and life sentences is different, and that the location of such prisoners’ ‘real lives’ might shift over time.

Studying imprisonment in the context of the life which surrounds it complements our attempts to think about the prison’s effects morally. What sort of moral life does prison make possible, inside and outside its walls? How does it shape what *matters* to us? Asking these questions could refresh our ways of thinking about how individual trajectories intersect with imprisonment. Rather than solely detailing different strategies of adaptation to imprisonment, we can think more seriously about what people are adapting *to*, how they think about the time they are experiencing, and what quality this time has in relation to the rest of their lives. For example, cutting off relationships with family and fixatedly maintaining them appear to be very different adaptive strategies, but they both result from the same moral evaluation of prison life: that it doesn’t matter, and that the real project exists outside the prison and needs to be protected.

Applying the moral lens to the study of imprisonment allows us one additional way of seeing the tragedy of a prison sentence, which is as an intervention which imposes an impossible moral task. Sentencing someone to prison means sentencing them to time that does not matter, and hoping that this experience changes their life. In the data analysed for this article, some prisoners responded by treating their sentence as something that removed them from their life. This attempt almost always failed. Their sentences could not be negated, because they biographically were a part of their life, and because they inevitably affected the things that mattered to them. Others tried to treat their sentences as opportunities to reinvent themselves. They also struggled, because the only material with which they could work was the version of themselves which existed in the artificial carceral space. Those who serve one or two sentences will find this situation painful, but for those who are recurrently imprisoned, whose attempts at reinvention are repeatedly crushed, ‘it’s like I’ve vanished, like my life has slowly been taken away, bit by bit’ (Ariana, phase 3)

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1. This scholarship has contributed to an emerging ethical turn in prison studies and criminology (Bottoms and Jacobs 2023; Laursen 2023; Liebling 2021; R.J. Williams 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The idea of ground projects originates in the work of philosopher Bernard Williams (1981). For more examples of the impact of imprisonment on our ground projects, see Laursen, Mjåland and Crewe (2020) and Laursen (2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 2022, almost two in five of all people sent to prison in England were sentenced to under six months (Prison Reform Trust 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is not to say that longer sentences are more meaningful, but that it is a common adaptive strategy to make meaning out of a longer sentence by seeing it as part of ones’ life. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. They also literally waste life: repeated exposure to typical sentences of imprisonment increases mortality rates (Graham et at 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The study was conducted as part of a large-scale project comparing penal policymaking and the prisoner experience in England & Wales and Norway, although this article only draws on data collected in England (in the end, no data was collected in Wales). For more details of the wider project, see [www.compen.crim.ac.uk](http://www.compen.crim.ac.uk) The author was employed as part of the research team, but she did not primarily work on the sub-study on which the article is based. All of the interviews which contribute to this article were conducted by Julie Laursen and Anna Schliehe. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Because of the anticipated attrition rate, and because the study design meant that we could only follow people who were given short sentences, we also went to two other prisons and conducted interviews with people coming to the end of longer sentences and, where possible, when they were in the community. None of these interviews have been discussed in this article. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. On a few occasions, prisoners’ sentences were so short that it did not make sense to conduct separate interviews at phase one and phase two. In these cases, only two interviews were conducted. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This is an unusually White sample. In part, this reflects the demographics of two of the cities in which the prisons were based, but it perhaps also suggests that the research team found it easier to stay in touch with White prisoners. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. One further participant had been briefly re-imprisoned between the phase 2 and 3 interviews. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Gormley, Reilly and Casey (2022) drew my attention to Scott’s work. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. To be criminalised and subjected to licence restrictions had concrete impacts on people’s lives, but I here focus on the impact of the period of imprisonment itself. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Interviewed at phase three, she had not returned to custody. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. How we understand Nathan’s imprisonment will vary greatly depending on if he eventually has children. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. With thanks to Peter Scharff Smith. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)