

## International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy



# Semiotic Practices: A Conceptual Window on the Post-prison Experience

**Diana Johns**

RMIT University, Australia

### Abstract

Most prisoners get out of prison. Staying out, for some, can be challenging. Understanding these challenges can help ex-prisoners and those supporting them to interrupt cycles of offending and imprisonment. This paper argues that 'culture' provides an important analytical tool for uncovering aspects of the post-imprisonment experience that contribute to imprisonment cycles. Findings from in-depth interviews with released prisoners and post-release support workers in Victoria, Australia, are used to illustrate how culture, interpreted as 'semiotic practices', illuminates processes underpinning and constituting the cycle of reimprisonment. A semiotic-practical lens reveals how such processes can counteract efforts towards reintegration and reduced reoffending, on the part of ex-prisoners themselves and society more broadly.

### Keywords

Ex-prisoners; prison culture; post-release; effects of imprisonment; semiotic practices.

### Introduction

Prisoners often emerge from prison marked by the very qualities the correctional system is meant to 'correct', qualities that can make life in the community unsustainable and reimprisonment inevitable. As Miller (2000) observes, '[o]ffenders emerge from prison afraid to trust, fearful of the unknown, and with a vision of the world shaped by the meaning that behaviours had in the prison context', as the penal system 'nurture[s] those very qualities it claims to deter' (in Liebling and Maruna 2005: 1). Prisoners, therefore, need help to adjust to life on the outside since, as long-term prisoner 'James' makes plain: 'You want people to go out better, not worse' (Smith 2013). Getting out 'worse' has implications for released prisoners' capacity to stay out of prison, and for so-called 'reintegration'. A striking indication of this phenomenon is that, since the birth of the modern prison, ex-prisoners still return to prison at alarming rates despite two hundred years of penal advancement in knowledge and practice. Parallels emerge across time and place: in France, in 1831, for instance, 38 per cent of prisoners were reimprisoned following their release (Foucault 1979); in Australia, in 2012, despite vastly improved socio-economic and penal conditions, the national figure was almost identical (SCRGSP 2012). What is it about imprisonment and release that makes it difficult for so many

ex-prisoners to stay out of prison? The premise of this paper is that 'culture' conceived as 'semiotic practices' offers a lens through which the experience of release may be examined and return to prison understood.

The hardening, damaging effects of imprisonment and its endemic cultural codes are well-established. That the culture of the prison leaks out into the post-prison sphere is axiomatic. Yet analyses of the factors associated with recidivism and cyclic imprisonment leave culture, and the cultural components of prisoners' experience, frequently unexamined. This paper critically engages with the idea of culture as a useful tool for understanding men's post-release experience and how and why so many become ensnared in cycles of reimprisonment. The focus is on men<sup>1</sup> in particular since they comprise the majority of prisoners and hence the bulk of the 'post-release problem'. It begins with the concept of 'culture' which, as an analytic device, has been embraced in anthropological circles yet remains underdeveloped in criminology. A distinction is drawn between 'culture' as a socially bounded frame and 'culture' as a meaning-making 'toolkit' shaping action/interaction. The ensuing section explains the culture-in-action semiotic practical lens applied in the research on which this paper draws, and then briefly outlines the study. Finally, research findings are used to illustrate the analytic possibilities of culture as 'semiotic practices' offering a conceptual window on the post-prison experience.

### **Conceptualising culture**

The 'cultural turn' in the social sciences has seen the anthropological concept of culture – a way of life peculiar to a social group; the collected ideas and habits learned, shared and transmitted; its material and symbolic aspects – seep into other disciplines as a nascent theoretical concept and burgeoning analytical approach. Criminology, however, has been slow on the uptake. Until very recently, penological research conceived cultural forms narrowly, if at all (Cunneen et al. 2013; Garland 2006). The growth of 'cultural criminology' (for example, Ferrell 1999; Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2008; Hayward and Young 2004) embodies a resurgent interest in ethnography, lived experience, and the phenomenological. It foregrounds 'cultural' aspects of crime and its control: 'the subjective, affective, embodied, aesthetic, material, performative, textual, symbolic and visual relations of space, ... recognising that the settings of crime are ... relational, improvised, contingent, constructed and contested' (Campbell 2012: 2). Yet O'Brien (2005) argues cultural criminology undertheorises its concept of culture and thus lacks explanatory or analytical power; indeed that it is political rather than analytical in orientation. Nevertheless, 'culture' as a concept contains analytic possibilities. These are explored below.

Critics argue that 'culture is essentialized, reified, and overhomogenized' (Brumann 2004: 199). It is either conceptualised so broadly as to render it meaningless, or so narrowly as to limit its theoretical validity; it appears 'torn between an empty universalism and a blind particularism' (Eagleton 2000: 44). Rational choice theorists have rejected cultural accounts as 'tautological, untestable, or beside the point' (Wedeen 2002: 714). Sewell (1999, 2004), however, draws an important distinction between the use of the plural form ('cultures'), describing 'concrete and bounded worlds of beliefs and practices', and the singular concept denoting a 'semiotics of social life' (2004: 202). Sewell argues that it is the elision of these two distinct meanings of culture that causes confusion and gives rise to criticism of the latter concept based on the shortcomings inhering in the former. For instance, Larmour (2007: 228) refers to three common misuses of culture as a concept: as an 'uncaused cause', as an 'explanation of last resort', and as a 'veto on comparison'. Certainly culture used in this way appears 'outmoded and unhelpful' (Wedeen 2002: 714). Sewell's distinction is therefore useful to differentiate culture as an analytic concept from its use as a 'totalising term', as Garland (2006: 423) describes Sewell's plural form.

Male prison culture<sup>2</sup> epitomises this 'totalising' form: the closed setting where hegemonic masculine norms are exaggerated into extreme models of hypermasculinity; where violence and

intimidation become normalised, legitimised. The ways of being that Miller (2000) describes – ‘afraid to trust, fearful of the unknown’ – are entrenched in prison culture. This conception of culture, as located within a particular bounded set of social relations, provides rich descriptive insight. It is limited, however, in its capacity to explain how culture functions. Miller’s ‘world shaped by the meaning that behaviours had in the prison context’ gives an important clue as to how culture might take on an analytic function; how we might think about culture in terms of *meaning* and *behaviour*.

### **A culture-in-action, semiotic-practical lens**

Building on Sewell’s (1999) ‘semiotics of social life’ definition, Wedeen (2002) argues for a conceptualisation of culture as ‘the practices of meaning-making through which social actors attempt to make their world coherent’ (p. 720). Cultural analysis from this perspective involves studying the relations between people’s practices and their signifying systems of language and other symbols, an approach characterised as ‘semiotic practices’ (p. 714). Culture in these terms refers to what people do, how those things are invested with meaning, and how those meanings produce effects. Thus culture refers not to essential values or particular traits isolating one group from another; rather, a cultural view obliges ‘an account of how symbols operate in practice, why meanings generate action, and why actions produce meanings, when they do’ (Wedeen 2002: 720). This approach builds on Swidler’s (1986) ‘culture-in-action’ model.

Swidler (1986) views culture as a ‘toolkit’ – a ‘repertoire’ of habits, skills, and styles which shape people’s problem-solving and decision-making, and from which they construct ‘strategies of action’ (p. 273). ‘Strategy’ here means ‘a general way of organising action’ rather than a conscious plan (p. 277). Culture is causative in that it ‘shapes the capacities from which such strategies of action are constructed’ (p. 277). Importantly in the context of post-prison experience, Swidler (1986: 278) distinguishes between how culture affects action in ‘settled lives’ and ‘unsettled lives’ in terms of sustaining continuities and constructing new patterns. In ‘unsettled lives’, she explains, ‘[p]eople developing new strategies of action depend on cultural models to learn styles of self, relationship, cooperation [and] authority’, and that these models ‘make explicit demands in a contested cultural arena’ (p. 279). It is this contested space that emerges so palpably in sociological accounts of the prison world. The initial experience of imprisonment and adaptation to prison life may be viewed in this way, as a period during which competing ways of organising behaviours contend for dominance (the prison regime, officers’ culture, prisoners’ social hierarchies, individual histories and identity), and new strategies of action are constructed from an available repertoire of ‘symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action’ (p. 277).

In contrast, settled cultures claim ‘authority of habit [and] normality’ yet ‘constrain action by providing a limited set of resources out of which individuals and groups construct strategies of action’ (Swidler 1986: 281). In prison, for instance, ‘masculinity resources are severely limited’ (Karp 2010: 66), meaning the behavioural models on which men draw are few and inflexible. The process of settling into prison life or into a ‘prisoner’ identity can be seen as constraining future action due to what Swidler calls the ‘high costs of cultural retooling’ (1986: 284) involved in crafting new ways of being, particularly when post-release cultural resources are limited; if an ex-prisoner’s friends and family share habits, skills and styles oriented towards violence and drug abuse, for example. Thus Swidler’s culture-in-action model can help explain how culture influences behavioural choices in prison, as well as ways of being upon release and return to community.

Wedeen’s (2002) semiotic-practical approach draws on Swidler’s (1986) formulation of the relations between meaning and action. From this relational perspective, culture is seen as:

... an inter-subjective *organizing mechanism* [original emphasis] that shapes unfolding social processes and that is constitutive of social structure. ... [C]ulture is simultaneously an emergent product and producer of social organization, interaction, and hence structure. (Sampson and Bean 2006: 27)

In this model, meanings shape action and interaction which reproduces meaning; behaviour associated with that meaning-making, through repetition, becomes habitual and thus serves to cement structural relations based on social interaction and expectations of possible/future action. To focus on meanings (via language and symbols) and how they relate to behaviour (practices) is useful because it emphasises the observable. Further, it enables analysis of the relationship between 'narratives of identification and everyday activities' (Wedeen 2002: 724) which, if left uninterrogated, serve to perpetuate themselves. This works on a micro (prisoner) and macro (societal) level, in what Arrigo and Milovanovic (2009) describe as 'the coproduction of penological reality' (p. 101). In this way culture is seen as cause (producer) and effect (product) of the carceral assemblage, constituting barriers to social integration. Halsey's (2007) conception of the 'reincarceration assemblage' reveals the implications for men caught in this web of connections of meaning and practice and the associated structural impediments to freedom. Taking up Garland's (2006) challenge to 'show how culture relates to conduct' (p. 438), by examining how meanings relate to actions, allows insight into how this process unfolds.

### **The phenomenographic methodology and methods used in the study**

The cultural approach outlined above forms a key theoretical component of the research on which this paper draws.<sup>3</sup> The study sought to qualitatively map men's subjective experience of release from prison in Victoria by interviewing released prisoners and post-release support workers. The Victorian Department of Justice funds 'Link Out', and its Indigenous equivalent, 'Konnect', which offer up to three months pre-release and twelve months intensive post-release support to prisoners deemed at high risk of reoffending and reincarceration. The agencies delivering these programs were the starting point for the snowball sampling strategy employed. Link Out and Konnect workers were briefed about the study and invited to recruit voluntary participants. Other services identified during the research process included WISE Employment's Ex-offender Program and Five8, a community-based restorative approach to building 'micro-communities' of support around individual prisoners. Workers in these programs were included in the sample. Released prisoners were recruited through the workers, word of mouth, and flyers in local employment agencies. The ex-prisoner participants (only) were offered a twenty dollar supermarket voucher to acknowledge their participation. Altogether, twelve released prisoners<sup>4</sup> and fourteen workers were interviewed. In the quotes that follow, speakers are designated 'RP' ('released prisoner') or 'SW' ('support worker') with a numeric tag.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted individually, face-to-face, in settings that were familiar and convenient to participants. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed phenomenographically<sup>5</sup> (Marton 1981). This involved careful reading and re-reading of the interviews to gather the range of qualitatively different ways of understanding and experiencing the phenomenon of release from prison. The conceptions and ways of experiencing were organised, through subsequent aggregation of the data, into categories of description which encapsulated the various ways of experiencing across the sample. The aim of this methodological approach is to capture variation in the collective, rather than individual, experience of a phenomenon (Trigwell 2006), and to portray relationships between conceptions and experience. Illustrative quotes from the data attest to the categories and themes being rooted in participants' own words and understandings.<sup>6</sup> The focus is firmly on the subjective and the relational, a logic connecting phenomenography to the study's cultural lens. The study's theoretical framework comprised three concepts: culture, assemblage and liminality;<sup>7</sup> however, discussion of the latter two concepts is beyond the scope of this paper. The findings discussed

below are considered specifically in terms of the culture-in-action model of semiotic practices, outlined above, and are used to illustrate the analytic possibilities of this conceptual lens.

## Findings

So what can semiotic-practices reveal about the effects of imprisonment on post-release experience? Four themes emerging from the research findings are illustrative. These are explored under the following headings: smoking 'Ox'; prison 'ingrained in me'; the paradox of freedom; and 'stuck in prison world'. The first theme centres on smoking prison tobacco as an example of the physical embodiment of prison ways of being; the second explores deeper cultural imprints on a prisoner's psyche, manifest in prison behavioural norms persisting in the community. The third highlights prisoners' dependency on prison structures and routines which amplifies the perceived difficulties of everyday life and makes prison seem a haven from life in the community. The fourth theme conceives men's sense of connection with/to other prisoners, and their alienation from the wider community, as being 'stuck in prison world' (RP19). These themes describe social processes arising from the experience of imprisonment which, from the perspective of ex-prisoners and post-release workers, makes life in the community difficult and, for some, unsustainable.

### *Smoking 'Ox'*

The interview data reveal that there is an embodied way of being an ex-prisoner. A set of habits and acculturations which manifest in physicality: a man's walk, his posture; his way of observing those around him without looking at them; the rolling of a cigarette:

They'll roll cigarettes like they are still in prison, like pencil thin. They will smoke a particular brand of tobacco called White Ox that everyone smokes that has ever been in jail ... they all smoke the one type of tobacco. (SW08)

The men interviewed attest to the universality of 'Ox' as prison tobacco, and how it identifies people as having been inside. As well as its strength – 'it'd be milder smoking tree bark ... and gum leaves, God it nearly knocked me out!' (RP21) – and hence its addictive quality, cigarette smoking represents a punctuating rhythm in the daily routine of prison life, a physical and psychological habit which – through frequent repetition – becomes entrenched. As RP21 recounts:

I tried to stop smoking when I was in there and I gave that up for a month, and that was just torture, because that's all you've got in there is coffee and cigarettes ... [*Are you still smoking?*] Yes, guess what, I'm smoking this stupid pouch [of] White Ox, yeah, that's what I did when I got paid, I bought two pouches of that, and I bought a couple of papers and four train tickets...

Implying it is one of his daily necessities – along with newspapers and train tickets – RP21 links smoking Ox to prisoner ways of being which, despite 'trying to move away from that' and admitting 'cringing', is a hard habit to break:

I'm on the outside and I'm smoking whatever it is mild or something, all these people smoking Super Mild, Ultra Mild, and they go to prison and everyone's making these [thin 'roll-your-owns' with Ox] ... you can get [other brands] ... [but people] say if you have this it's stronger, and you get used to it, and you don't even want another cigarette as quickly. I said Christ I don't need a cigarette for six hours after that one! I said I'd be in an iron lung before I have one of these again! ... But yeah that's about the only thing that I've got a prison culture on me,

as much as I cringe ... yeah I don't have to buy Ox, I don't know why I keep buying it, I think just out of habit ...

Smoking 'Ox' signifies a habit ingrained in prison bodies and prison thinking. The function of this habit emerges through Sampson and Bean's (2006) characterisation of Swidler's (1986) 'culture in action': it is *intersubjective*, in that it is created through social interaction; *performative* in that it is a ritual performed, which expresses and reiterates its social function with every performance, and in that it punctuates the daily routine and thus structures the passing of time; *affective-cognitive* in that it arises out of impulse, association and habit rather than rational decision-making. It is *relational* in terms of being a tool men use to position themselves in relation to other prisoners, to cement alliances and avert conflict; and *world-making* in that it locates the individual prisoner within the social network of the prison and reproduces this position each time tobacco is bought or exchanged, a cigarette is rolled or smoked. The rules and codes around tobacco can be seen to reflect broader prison norms and values, such as borrowing something and not paying it back: 'in prison, that's the big no-no' (RP21).

The subtle imprint of a tobacco habit can be seen to carry within it the deeper lines of ways of being in prison that remain etched in a man's psyche. Just as prison tattoos inscribe the skin, ways of being in prison can thus permeate thinking and inhabit prisoners' bodies. As SW08 describes:

... when the guys come out of prison and they meet up here for instance they will often pace up and down in their little basketball yard at the back, have you ever seen men in a prison walking up and down just doing laps? They will go this way, and then they turn right, and then go back and then turn left and go that way, and you see them pacing like that, and they won't even know they're doing it. They are conditioned to that sort of way of communicating with one another. They'll pace up and down; they'll dress like they are still in prison. They'll carry themselves like they're still in prison.

Evoked is a robotic return to the way physical space is navigated and traversed in prison, as though its spatial patterns are – like a tobacco habit – ingrained through repetition. Though these physical cultural imprints are subtle, minor, they nevertheless signify the degree to which prison ways of being leak out into the post-prison world. Other ways are more extreme in their intensity of experience and destructive potential. The second theme centres on the deeper cultural imprints on a prisoner's psyche.

#### *Prison 'ingrained in me'*

Years spent in and out of prison are shown to limit men's cultural resources to those available within the prison setting. Violence is normalised, indeed honed as a skill. 'Friends' are prison 'associates', 'jailbirds' and 'druggies'. Adapting to prison life clearly involves the forging of a prison identity – 'you're a prisoner and you're one of the boys' (SW12) – and the destabilising of men's pre-prison identity, their social place. While different prison-selves manifest – arising from individual circumstances, causes and conditions – a common thread links their emergence into post-prison light: 'when they get out they don't have a [social] place ... and they lose whatever sense of self they had' (SW09). For some, this leads to an 'out-of-control spiral' (SW09), illustrating the effects of men's 'settling' into prison culture as limiting the cultural resources available to enable them to fit in to post-prison life; resources to guide their responses to perceived threat or conflict, for instance, or the challenge of making everyday decisions. Miller (2000: 3) provides an example:

For a recently released prisoner, experiences like being jostled on the subway, having someone reach across him in the bathroom to take a paper towel, or making eye contact can be taken as a precursor to a physical attack. In relationships with loved ones, this warped kind of socialization means that problems will not easily be talked through.

Post-release support workers interviewed relate this acculturation process to the length of time spent in prison: 'up to twelve months is not so bad, but when it gets into two, three years, it becomes a little more freaky for them' (SW13); implied is that men's 'socialization' becomes increasingly 'warped'. Importantly too, though, the men's pre-prison sense of self appears to shape the degree to which their prison identity becomes 'ingrained' (RP07). RP07's 'old life', for example – dealing heroin, making 'thousands' – was characterised by deceit, betrayal, mistrust and violence: 'people have tried to overdose me to steal money off me, and they have' (RP07). It also resulted in multiple convictions and repeat imprisonment over fifteen years, during which a clearly demarcated prison identity was forged; tempered through recurrent encounters, hardened through repetition, and apparently consonant with his pre-prison self, his 'old life' self. He describes, for example, the choosing and crafting of implements that the performance of his prison role entails:

I prefer ... [to] snap open a razor blade and melt the blades into a toothbrush, shave the toothbrush bit off and melt the blades into it, melt about three or four blades in, all different ways, so no matter which way you get them ... it will open up in two spots so it's harder for 'em to sew back together, and leaves a bigger scar, and you get 'em straight down the face and that way everyday they look in the mirror they know that it was you who done it.

RP07 conveys a sense of asserting his prison identity through his attack strategy, as though by leaving his mark on his victim – so 'they know that it was you who done it' – his reputation of being 'a bit fucked in the head', and hence not to be messed with, is underscored.

Notwithstanding the matter-of-fact way RP07 relates this experience, implying its normality, he also recognises that – while functional in prison – such behaviour is dysfunctional and unacceptable outside: 'that's the type of thing that I bring outside with me, and then I've gotta try and not be like that out here, you know?' He describes how being 'like that' is 'just ingrained in me now', implying that violence is an automatic response:

... it's like ... over twenty bucks the other day I was gonna go to my mate's place and kick his front door in, with three other people, and ... just *wreck* him over twenty bucks, man, you know?

His sense of dismay at being 'like that' is palpable. Yet the costs of 'cultural retooling' (Swidler 1986) for RP07 are high, possibly too high to contemplate. Without any 'straight friends', with limited family support, and only a case worker to rely on, his social and cultural resources are limited. And in his 'unsettled' post-release life where cultural models compete in a 'contested cultural arena', despite his desire to be otherwise, the familiarity of his 'old life' and his 'druggie mates' vie for 'authority of habit [and] normality' (Swidler 1986: 279). A battle is evoked for 'crims', like RP07:

... [who]'ve been trained into 'this is what your life will be' more or less and then having to battle every time they turn around, battle and battle and battle... (RP18)

How else may this battle be conceived and understood? RP07's account of his adoption of prison norms of violence and retribution shows how the repertoire of skills and habits learnt through his imprisonment constrains the capacities from which he constructs his strategies of action in a post-prison setting (Swidler 1986). At the other extreme, first-time prisoner RP21 does not identify as a 'crim' and his repertoire of cultural resources extends well beyond prison models of masculinity and behaviour. Nevertheless a subtle aspect of prison culture is embedded in his continued smoking of 'White Ox' tobacco since his release. Certainly, these extremes illustrate variations in ex-prisoner ways of being, yet what do they show about the persistence of prison culture norms and the conflict between and ascendancy of different cultural models?

A useful way of thinking about how dominant models of behaviour available to men in prison are permitted and sustained is via 'cultural consent, discursive centrality, institutionalisation, and the marginalisation of ... alternatives' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 846). Within the prison, cultural consent is granted by inmate codes, buttressed by the physical isolation of prisoners from the community, and reinforced by the norms and practices of correctional officers and prison authorities focussed on managing and controlling the behaviour of large numbers of prisoners. Upon release from that environment, however, cultural consent for prison norms is withdrawn, challenged/overridden by behavioural norms and expectations in the wider community. To the extent that their prison way of thinking persists, however, negotiating a path between conflicting normative systems can present uncertainty and confusion for released prisoners, as RP07 suggests. This experience represents the rupture of cultural continuity and the demands of constructing new strategies of action, or 'cultural retooling' (Swidler 1986: 284). This is the cultural 'battle' that, to varying degrees, released prisoners face. Conceived as part of the process of individual reform/rehabilitation in correctional terms and according to sentencing aims – to manifest the desired societal subject (Halsey 2007) – the emerging ex-prisoner is thus engaged in a struggle between being what he is and becoming who he might be in a way that is attainable and sustainable.

Release from prison may be seen as a period of unsettling (Swidler 1986) whereby cultural norms are challenged and the ones that assume authority of habit and normality become the cultural tools at hand. For men who have experienced recurrent imprisonment, whose extra-prison resources are thus whittled away, the tools at hand are well-honed prison habits, skills, strategies and ways of being. Crime may involve gendered social practices which 'can provide an alternative resource for accomplishing gender and, therefore, affirming a distinct type of masculinity' (Messerschmidt 2001: 68). The violent behaviour that RP07 describes, and which he evokes as his normal reaction to conflict or threat, is an example. Cultural consent (recalling Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) for prison norms in the post-prison domain is conferred by a continuing culture of criminality – the 'friends', 'druggies' and 'associates' he knows and 'hangs with' – the sustaining continuity that permits prison culture and cultural norms to endure. As well as illustrating variations in ex-prisoner ways of being, the extremes above show how meanings that certain behaviours have in the prison setting may persist in a post-prison context, notwithstanding broader cultural consent for those meanings has been withdrawn.

Men's acculturation to prison norms, structures, routines and regulations, combined with the perceived pressures of everyday living (having to pay bills, keep appointments, travel distances on public transport), make outside life seem far more challenging than life in prison. This is the paradox of freedom which post-release support worker interviewees so clearly articulate, and the ex-prisoners interviewed variously convey. This means, for many, prison is a safe, predictable, familiar environment which thus feels more like home than their outside home. Post-release life assumes a sense of precariousness in contrast to the relative stability and security of prison life.



*The paradox of freedom*

The paradox of freedom emerges in the notion of prison as 'a haven' (SW12), a refuge from an outside life 'of constant stress' (SW12). As SW04 sums up:

... it is easier in prison than in the community. You don't have to pay bills ... and you do have friends that you see every day ... they may be associates ... but they're still there. You're getting a meal, you have a gym you can work out at, you don't have any of those things like I'm going to have to get to Centrelink, I've got to go to parole, I've got to pay my bills, I've got to pay my rent, I've got to deal with my partner or my ex-partner, then I've got my children, then I'm battling anxiety, depression, whether I want to use drugs or not, I've got no licence, catching public transport, so there's a whole heap of issues for them to get through the day.

This conception recognises that 'the community is a very difficult place to live. It's very demanding, and you have to be very highly functioning to be able to work in it' (SW12); 'it's a lot harder being out in the community, and you've got to work a lot harder at it' (SW04). The paradox arises in that imprisonment diminishes men's capacity to 'work harder' at post-prison reintegration.

Some workers interviewed argue that prison provides an escape or respite from 'the big challenges [that] are in the community' (SW12). Spaces are contained, routines are enforced, necessities are provided; prisoners 'know how prison works' (SW09). Prison is experienced as predictable and familiar, a meaning which contrasts with and accentuates the perceived unpredictability and unfamiliarity of the outside world and lives to which men return. SW13 even ascribes familial connotations to prison life, emphasising the security its 'rules and instructions' prescribe at a domestic level:

'All right, Time to get up, Time to have breakfast, Time to go to exercise, Time to do this' ... So the prison is almost like a parent, a parent they never had, and they say they hate it ... But at the same time, ... [for some] it would be a fantastic place to live.

This conception of prison as 'a fantastic place to live' not only accentuates the anxiety of prisoners being released from this haven, but also illuminates key ingredients in the process of institutionalisation and 'prison acculturation' (SW12): an environment marked by control, security, routine, and familiarity. Living in an institution means that 'invariably you become dependent' (SW22); 'decision-making has been taken away from you for so long [that] it affects your psyche profoundly' (SW23). Prisoners 'learn not to be able to do anything for themselves' (SW01), as prison ways of organising behaviours (the prison regime, rules and hierarchies) become habitual and thus dominant, limiting the resources from which prisoners construct their 'strategies of action' (Swidler 1986). This means, particularly for 'long-termers', that 'everything they know ... just comes unstuck when they get out' (SW09). 'Everything they know' evokes the repertoire of habits, skills, ways of being – the cultural toolkit – which shapes and constrains how men think, act and react. For example, as SW01 observes, 'it's really hard for them to have to direct themselves ... to get up in the morning, to just function in everyday life.' Living in this 'haven' has the dual effect of weakening prisoners' connections to outside resources – housing, relationships, employment and community ties – and diminishing their inner personal resources, confidence, decision-making capacity and social skills.

Prisoners are cocooned from the realities of life outside, an experience that gives rise to and underscores men's sense of alienation, estrangement from and not belonging in the wider community. RP07 reveals the sort of hopes men nurture while in prison: 'I had a diary and I

wrote down things ... like buy my nephew a go-cart ... [and] take him to [an amusement park] ... things I wanted to do with my family'. Yet these things, upon release, emerge as impracticable and naïve: 'I get out and no one wants to do those things'. This example evokes the unrealistic expectations that post-release workers commonly observe, the imaginings by which prisoners remain caught in familiar cycles, as RP07 relates:

I sort of imagined it to be a lot better than it really is ... like the first day you get out it's like, 'oh man, it's grouse!' But then the second day it's like, 'well, what are we gonna do man?' ... you know, same old shit.

Not being able to realise the hopes and aspirations nurtured in prison underscores men's experience of 'not quite fitting in, not quite being accepted, not quite belonging' (SW22) upon release. 'Not quite' hints at an ostensible acceptance – the promise of redemption, of having 'done your time' – which is belied by the lived experience of release. As SW22 explains, there is a tension between an abstract notion of prisoners being 'rehabilitated' and their experience of 'being stigmatised by society, told you are a prisoner, knowing you are a prisoner'; not wanting anyone to know you were imprisoned, yet 'getting out and never feeling that you are one of them' (SW22). The workers interviewed attest to this sense: 'in prison, you are a prisoner, you know who you are. It's reinforced every day ... your identity is set clear. Then you step out of prison into the free world and honestly you don't know who you are' (SW22); 'you're nothing in a world of nothing' (SW12); you 'don't have a place' (SW09). Evoked is the distress and disorientation associated with release into a society where the only certainty is that 'you know that you are not accepted' (SW22).

The paradox of freedom comprises the convergence of two sets of impediments: those imposed by societal constraints and demands – having to 'work a lot harder' at living in the community; and internal factors – the way prison thinking seeps into and permeates post-prison life and prison habits constrain men's capacities for constructing new patterns of thinking and behaviour. The problem that emerges is that the resources necessary to dislodge and override the cultural tools acquired in prison depend upon a degree of social acceptance, without which men's opportunities for 'cultural retooling' remained limited.

#### *'Stuck in prison world'*

The paradox of freedom also manifests in the sense of isolation and alienation that released prisoners reportedly perceive in relation to 'normal' society. Being 'stuck in prison world' evokes SW22's sense of 'not quite fitting in, not quite being accepted, not quite belonging', which is a strong theme underlying the men's experience of being out, and one which – the data suggest – they had not anticipated. As RP17 concedes, 'one of the biggest things about getting out is the loneliness'. Notwithstanding RP17 was 'fortunate' to maintain a strong support network, he nevertheless describes a feeling of social isolation, in contrast to the constant activity of prison life:

... in prison it's like this [at a city café] ... every day and things are going on. There's a confounding sort of loneliness in that that's not there anymore, and that becomes really difficult. You've lost your network of friends in that sense.

RP20 hints at the abruptness of the transition: 'it changes when you get out, all those lives and you separate ... You used to sit there 24/7 together and then all of a sudden – yeah.' Implied is the contrast between the constant activity in prison and the social isolation experienced post-release. This is one aspect of 'prison world' that the data reveal: the paradox of identifying and being identified with other ex-prisoners, yet wanting to escape this world; and not feeling part of the prison world, yet struggling to fit in with the wider community. The proximity and constancy of contact between prisoners, and the familiarity to which RP17 and RP20 allude, can

explain men's sense of connection to other prisoners. For some, the shrinking of outside resources and access to alternative cultural models intensifies the perception of being an outsider, a 'nobody', and of not belonging in 'normal' society.

This is another aspect of being 'stuck in prison world': the sense of identity associated with being a prisoner, and being 'somebody' in prison. Prison life is marked by a limited range of prescribed cultural models – ways of being in prison – which prisoners come to rely upon to learn 'styles of self, relationship, cooperation [and] authority' (Swidler 1986: 279). Men's struggle to fit in with the non-imprisoned community can arise through being equipped with the wrong cultural tools, as it were, to perform the hard work of fitting in. Prison life is characterised by its social dimension. Having 'so-called friends' (RP15, SW12) is a significant part of the sense of belonging in prison, of having an identity, knowing where you fit in. As RP17 observes, 'a lot of people go back to prison because they are something there – even though they're *not* – they can be something in there, and they have their little crews'. This understanding is set against being a 'nobody' on the outside: 'when they get out, they've got nothing ... and they'll do something to get back in' (RP17). This is the experience of the dispossessed outsider, such as a man RP18 describes:

... jail ... was where he lived. He [told me] ... 'this is where my friends are, I don't know anybody outside, I don't trust anybody outside. I come to jail and people know me, I can integrate, I can be myself'.

The social aspect of imprisonment also reflects the extent to which prison life is incorporated into some men's regular experience, as RP26 suggests: 'I have me crew inside, and I got me crew outside', admitting, 'I know more people inside than I do outside nowadays'. Similarly, RP20 'know[s] a hundred more people in jail than what I know outside'. RP07, too, is at home in prison: 'I know nearly everyone', yet he confesses:

... you have to turn into a different person out here ... if I want to go fit in with normal people I have to change everything ... It's like trying to become a different person, and it ... feels like it's not who I am.

RP07's association of being a prisoner with 'who I am' illustrates how men's 'styles of self, relationship [and] cooperation' (Swidler 1986: 279) become deeply inscribed with prison ways of being. When prison culture is seen as thus shaping 'the capacities from which [men's] strategies of action are constructed' (p. 277) – influencing their perception of meaning, their reactions and behaviour – it may be understood as a causal factor in men's isolation and alienation from 'normal' society.

A third aspect of being 'stuck in prison world' is the difficulty avoiding other ex-prisoners in the outside world. For many men, 'running into' people from jail can make it difficult to escape that world; as RP15 admits, 'I don't catch public transport anymore ... because I'm guaranteed to run into someone'. Even though 'nobody really wants to be hanging out with them sort of people, unless you're a career criminal' (RP19), it can be difficult to avoid other ex-prisoners. As RP19 describes:

... you see them outside jail, they recognise you straight away. If you don't acknowledge it and say 'hey, how're you going' they can either get shitty, or think you've got a grudge against them, [or] you just befriended them in jail so you could get looked after. ... I don't want to hang with them, but everywhere I go they are. And ... most people coming out of jail are on methadone ... so just lining up to get my methadone there could be ten people in the line that I know from jail.

RP19 thus portrays the way prison dynamics can inflect social relations on the outside, cementing ties through the common experience of imprisonment and drugs, and reinforcing ex-prisoners' sense of not fitting in with the wider world.

The image of being 'stuck in prison world', unable to free oneself, is one way men conceive of their post-release freedom: being shackled to an ineluctable past, an unshakable shadow; 'no matter how hard I try you can't get away from it' (RP19). As RP20 describes, deciding 'I don't want to do this no more', yet finding 'you're stuck in certain circumstances, you just fall straight back into it.' Evoked is the inexorability of cycles of reimprisonment. Implied, too, is men's lack of control over their fate, reinforced by their reliance on prison structures and routines, and which gradually and increasingly diminish their decision-making capacity. An aspect of being 'stuck in prison world' related to men's prisoner identity is having 'a jail head', meaning 'you have to be harder ... stronger ... more secure, more tight than the rest of the population; ... everything is shielded off' (RP18). This obduracy – the rigid thinking observed by workers – serves to solidify the experience of being 'stuck'. It is 'driven' into prisoners (RP18), implying a process of habituation through pressure and coercion; its indelibility ensured by virtue of its emphasis on closing and hardening, as RP07's acknowledgment – 'it's just ingrained in me now' – suggests. Through a similar process, access to resources other than prison cultural resources is closed, blocked, 'shielded off'. Thus, while social integration is a 'two-way street' (Maruna 2011: 106), requiring community acceptance, it also 'depends on the prisoner being able to integrate ... [and] leaving the criminal mindset behind is probably the hardest thing' (RP19).

## **Conclusion**

The themes explored in this paper show how meanings and behaviours which function in a prison context can shape and inflect men's post-prison experience and interactions. This semiotic practices perspective explains how prison shadows the post-prison experience and seeps into men's identity, and why prisoners can become enmeshed in cycles of imprisonment. The findings are illustrative: smoking 'Ox' gives insight into habituated patterns of behaviour persisting beyond prison walls. Prison 'ingrained in me' shows the deeper, more lasting, potentially toxic effects of the normalisation of prison cultural models of violence and domination. The paradox of freedom reveals the disjuncture between men's desire to get out and their capacity to stay out of prison, arising from the de-responsibilising effects of institutionalisation. Lastly, the three aspects of being 'stuck in prison world' – connection to other prisoners, forging a prisoner identity, and the unavoidability of prison associations – highlight the isolation and alienation from wider society that universally beleaguers ex-prisoners, albeit to varying degrees.

As the findings show, men's post-prison thinking and behaviour is shaped by the meanings, habits and ways of being that they adopt and absorb while imprisoned, from subtle behavioural patterns to deeper cultural imprints. From the embodied ways of being in prison to their sense of being 'stuck' in a perpetual zone of social, cultural and economic exclusion. The varying degrees of prison acculturation manifest in men's practices reflect different personal styles, histories and experiences. Similarly the capacity of men to transcend or replace those habits and behaviours, to 'culturally retool', depends upon the nature and extent of their social support network and the resources available to them. Seeing culture as the well of resources upon which men draw in constructing their 'strategies of action' – their ways of being – provides insight into how men might be enabled or resourced to construct different strategies of action, to find ways of being other than 'prisoner'.

The most significant challenge lies in alleviating the prison's cultural hangover, dethroning its legacy. To supplant entrenched habits, beliefs and patterns of behaviour, a process of cultural retooling (Swidler 1986) is required for the ex-prisoner to emerge. This is not an individual

journey. It is a social process contingent upon community investment and reciprocity, Maruna's (2011) 'two-way street'. This process hinges on mutual acceptance, which can only arise through understanding. A lack of understanding and acceptance functions to block men's reintegrative possibility and perpetuate the very cycles of offending and reimprisonment that the prison simultaneously creates and aspires to break. A culture-in-action, semiotic practices lens provides a way of understanding how ways of being in prison leak out into the community, how prison shadows men upon their release, and how its cultural shadow becomes part of their identity and constrains their possibilities for social integration.

*Correspondence:* Dr Diana Johns, Justice and Legal Studies, School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, 411 Swanston Street, Melbourne, 3000, Australia. Email: diana.johns@rmit.edu.au

---

<sup>1</sup> The particular issues facing women post-release are beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Twentieth century prison sociologists debated whether prison culture was endemic (Clemmer 1940; Sykes 1958) or imported (Irwin and Cressey 1962).

<sup>3</sup> This research was undertaken as part of the Australian Prisons Project which was supported by an Australian Research Council Discovery Program grant DP0877331.

<sup>4</sup> A significant limitation, which arguably served to enhance the research, involved ethical constraints on interviewing Link Out/Konnect clients who were on parole (that is, ethics approval was not sought and hence not granted to interview anyone under sentence and therefore under Department of Justice jurisdiction). This limited the pool of research participants but ultimately meant that the research captured the hard-to-reach voices of men on straight release or release from remand.

<sup>5</sup> Phenomenography is a methodology used to qualitatively map the different ways social phenomena may be experienced; it focuses on subjects' conceptions, which are drawn together into 'categories of description' (Marton 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Further limitations are nevertheless acknowledged in terms of the researcher's interpretation of meanings and construction of themes, and particularly in relation to issues of gender difference between the researcher and the men interviewed. This interpretive project involves representation which might be construed as betrayal of the subject in Visweswaran's terms (see Kemala Visweswaran (1994) *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press). I have attempted to represent participants' voices truthfully and faithfully.

<sup>7</sup> The assemblage concept is used to capture and convey multiplicity, and connection and collision between meanings and experience. Liminality as a rites-of-passage theory is applied in a post-prison context to evoke the state of in-betweenness men experience in being no longer locked up but not yet free. Articles about each of these concepts in the context of the research are forthcoming.

*Please cite this article as:*

Johns D (2014) Semiotic practices: A conceptual window on the post-prison experience.  
*International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy* 3(3): 98-112. doi:  
10.5204/ijcjsd.v3i2.149

## References

- Arrigo BA and Milovanovic D (2009) *Revolution in Penology: Rethinking the Society of Captives*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Brumann C (2004) Comment on James P. Boggs 'The culture concept as theory, in context'. *Current Anthropology* 45(2): 199.

- Campbell E (2012) Landscapes of performance: Stalking as choreography. *Environment & Planning D: Society and Space* 30: 400-417.
- Clemmer D (1940) *The Prison Community*. Boston: Christopher Publishing House.
- Connell RW and Messerschmidt JW (2005) Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society* 19(6): 829-859.
- Cunneen C, Baldry E, Brown D, Brown M, Schwartz M and Steel A (2013) *Penal Culture and Hyperincarceration: The Revival of the Prison*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Eagleton T (2000) *The Idea of Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Ferrell J (1999) Cultural criminology. *Annual Review of Sociology* 25: 395-418.
- Ferrell J, Hayward K and Young J (2008) *Cultural Criminology*. London: Sage.
- Foucault M (1979) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books.
- Garland D (2006) Concepts of culture in the sociology of punishment. *Theoretical Criminology* 10(4): 419-447.
- Halsey M (2007) Assembling recidivism: The promise and contingencies of post-release life. *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology* 97(4): 1209-1260.
- Hayward KJ and Young J (2004) Cultural criminology: Some notes on the script. *Theoretical Criminology* 8(3): 259-273.
- Irwin J and Cressey DR (1962). Thieves, Convicts and the Inmate Culture. *Social Problems* 10(1): 142-155.
- Karp DR (2010) Unlocking men, unmasking masculinities: Doing men's work in prison. *Journal of Men's Studies* 18(1): 63-83.
- Larmour P (2008) Corruption and the concept of 'Culture': Evidence from the Pacific Islands. *Crime, Law, and Social Change* 49: 225-239.
- Liebling A and Maruna S (2005) Introduction: The effects of imprisonment revisited. In Liebling A and Maruna S (eds) *The Effects of Imprisonment*: 1-32. Cullompton, UK: Willan Publishing.
- Marton F (1981) Phenomenography – Describing conceptions of the world around us. *Instructional Science* 10: 177-200.
- Maruna S (2011) Judicial rehabilitation and the 'Clean Bill of Health' in criminal justice. *European Journal of Probation* 3(1): 97-117.
- Messerschmidt JW (2001) Masculinities, crime and prison. In Sabo DF, Kupers TA and London WA (eds) *Prison Masculinities*: 67-72. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Miller J (2000) American Gulag, *Yes Magazine*, Fall. Available at <http://www.yesmagazine.org/issues/is-it-time-to-close-the-prisons> (accessed 29 April 2013).
- O'Brien M (2005) What is cultural about cultural criminology? *British Journal of Criminology* 45(5): 599-612.
- Sampson RJ and Bean L (2006) Cultural mechanisms and killing fields. In Peterson R, Krivo L and Hagan J (eds) *Race, Ethnicity, and Crime in America*: 8-36. New York: New York University Press.
- SCRGSP (Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision) (2012) *Report on Government Services 2012*. Canberra: Productivity Commission.
- Sewell WH Jr (1999) The concept(s) of culture. In Bonnell VE and Hunt L(eds) *Beyond the Cultural Turn*: 35-61. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Sewell WH (2004) Comment on James P. Boggs 'The culture concept as theory, in context'. *Current Anthropology* 45(2): 202-203.

- Smith M (2013) Taste of life beyond the bars, *The Mercury*, April 23. Available at [http://www.themercury.com.au/article/2013/04/23/377638\\_tasmania-news.html](http://www.themercury.com.au/article/2013/04/23/377638_tasmania-news.html) (accessed 30 April 2013).
- Swidler A (1986) Culture in action: Symbols and strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51(2): 273-286.
- Sykes G (1958) *The Society of Captives: A Study of a Maximum Security Prison*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Trigwell K (2006) Phenomenography: An approach to research in geography education. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 30(2): 367-372.
- Wedeen L (2002) Conceptualizing culture: Possibilities for political science. *American Political Science Review* 96(4): 713-728.