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Purposes Perceived in the Sentence

Introduction

This chapter examines to what extent justifications of punishment find expression in prisoners’ accounts of their sentence. Consequently, the starting point for analysis is ‘etic’ (Silverman, 2001) – it largely draws on concepts originating from sources external to the research. In the next two chapters, these views will be put into context, drawing on the participants’ overall narrative of their sentence, within which perceptions of purpose did not always sit easily. For example, criticisms about prison failing in its aim to rehabilitate did not translate into critical accounts of imprisonment. Such tensions between purposes perceived and overall narratives will also be examined in the subsequent chapters.

The concepts around which the material here is organised originate from the philosophical literature and policy documents on the purposes of punishment in general and imprisonment in particular; they include rehabilitation, deterrence and incapacitation (consequentialist justifications of punishment) and retribution. Perhaps because (a mix of) these are most often cited as the purpose of punishment in the public domain and have currency in our cultural discourse (Miller and Glassner, 1997), these aims could all be detected in the interviewees’ statements about the purpose of their imprisonment. In order to reflect which purposes were most (spontaneously) represented in the men’s accounts, the discussion in this chapter starts with the most salient purposes of rehabilitation and reform and moves towards less well-developed themes, ending with incapacitation.

To explore the links between justifications of punishment and the lived experience of those who are punished, it is necessary to recognise instances of the former in the talk of men who only rarely used terms
such as ‘rehabilitation’ or ‘incapacitation’. In doing so, I draw upon the work of Rex (2005). She expressed each justification of punishment in a simple statement for her survey of different groups of criminal justice actors about their views and preferences. Her definitions are used as a starting point in each section, as they tend to capture the way in which the purposes were expressed in the interviews quite well. When the way the men spoke about their sentence differed significantly from her definitions, this is discussed.

**Rehabilitation and reform**

Rehabilitation has many different, sometimes contradictory, meanings (McNeill, 2013). These include effecting change (or reintegration) for the offender’s own good, motivated by concern for his or her welfare; managerialist approaches focusing on risk management and harm reduction, motivated by consequentialist considerations (Robinson, 2008); and restoring offenders to full citizenship (McNeill, 2012). Besides differences in motivation and ultimate purpose, many writers (Carlen and Worrall, 2004; Duff, 2001; Rex, 2005) make a distinction between reform, which focuses on the offenders’ moral dispositions, and rehabilitation, which changes the likelihood of further offending in other ways. For example, Duff defines reform as changing ‘people’s dispositions and motives’ (2001, p. 5), while he describes rehabilitation as ‘improv[ing] people’s skills, capacities and opportunities’ (2001, p. 5). In Rex’s research, reform and rehabilitation were expressed as ‘get them to change their ways’ and ‘help them with problems behind their offending’ (2005, p. 86) respectively. Other relevant texts (Comfort, 2008; Crewe, 2009; Scottish Prison Service, 2011) do not make this distinction, instead referring to both aims as rehabilitation. In the interviews, the men also tended to use the term ‘rehabilitation’ to capture both concepts (no one mentioned reform) or more descriptive phrases, such as ‘change me as a person’ (David) or ‘anything to benefit myself’ (Gordon). However, a distinction was apparent: the men described attempts to make reoffending less likely that focused on internal problems, such as problem solving skills or anger management, but also felt they needed help with more practical problems, like accommodation and employment, in order to be able to move away from offending. To capture this, the term ‘rehabilitation’ is used below to describe help with practical problems external to the offender, but including substance misuse.

Rehabilitation, in any of its guises, played a part in almost all the interviewees’ accounts and was brought up spontaneously as one of the