

Education and identity in prisons

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Given the very low levels of achievement of most of those in prison, can identities be transformed through prison education? What does this tell us about the importance of labelling and identity in the criminal justice system?

EXAM LINKS

- Crime and deviance
- Education
- Sociological theory

Prison education is not merely a rehabilitative measure – it is an essential mechanism for transforming lives and reshaping identities. Education is a powerful force that can dismantle entrenched criminal identities and foster positive, prosocial lives. This article argues that higher education in prisons can serve as a catalyst for identity transformation, underpinning the analysis with symbolic interactionist theory and the concept of narrative identity.

Symbolic interactionism is a perspective which argues that human behaviour results from meaningful interaction with others. We will also examine the systemic challenges within UK prison education, emphasising the urgent need for policy reform and strategic investment.

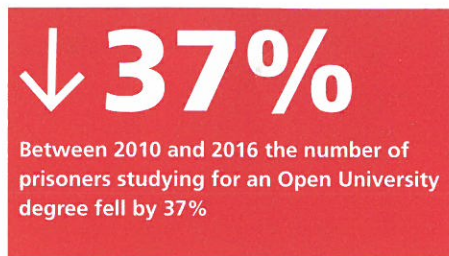
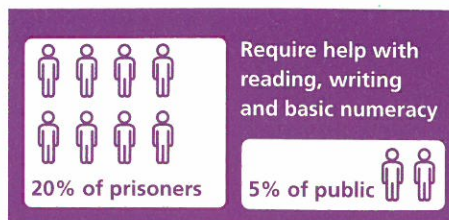
Educational inequality in prisons

The stark reality is that educational attainment among the UK prison population is alarmingly low compared to the general population. Many inmates enter prison already disadvantaged by school experiences that have failed them. Coates (2016) reveals a troubling statistic that 'in 2014, 42% of adult prisoners in England and Wales had been permanently

excluded from school prior to their arrival in custody'. What does this reveal about our education system? For many, early negative school experiences involve labelling, exclusion and marginalisation that contribute not merely towards failing academically, but also may create a path towards criminality.

This sort of labelling creates a disturbing cycle. When children are marginalised in educational settings, they are deprived of essential skills and support. This void

Educational attainment among the UK prison population is alarmingly low



Source: The Whitehouse Consultancy (2016)

Figure 1 Education and prisoners

continues into adulthood, severely limiting their ability to engage with rehabilitative educational programmes in prison. The implications are dire: low educational levels among prisoners exacerbate the already limited success of such provision, leading to a concerning decline in GCSE and Open University registrations in recent years (see Figure 1). Understanding this educational inequality is crucial for recognising the challenges and opportunities for reform via prison education.

Consequently, compulsory basic skills provision has been introduced to support vocational education and boost employment opportunities. Many see basic skills training as a way to focus on essential areas like literacy and numeracy. In contrast, pursuing higher education is often seen as more challenging, with both prisoners and staff perceiving it as something for the 'elite' – viewed more as a privilege than a fundamental right.

The socially constructed self

To understand the difficulties of achieving rehabilitation through education in prisons, it is important to understand the social construction of the self. The process of criminal socialisation is a key factor in the formation of deviant identities. Engaging in criminal activity is often the result of influences from parents, peers and gang membership, through which the values of a criminal subculture are internalised. Identity emerges in the context of a person's interactions, relationships and meanings.

Consequently, the self becomes socially constructed out of such influential

meaningful interactions throughout one's life. Symbols are representative of an idea which signifies special importance to an individual – for example, a successful student, a hard worker, a loyal gang member, etc. Symbolic interactionism offers a valuable perspective for understanding how these identities are formed, maintained and deconstructed.

The 'looking glass' self

One of the central concepts within symbolic interactionism is the *looking glass self*, developed by Charles Cooley in 1902. Cooley argued that our self-concept is shaped by how we believe others perceive us. As individuals interact with others, they come to see themselves as others see them, and these reflections can become internalised as part of their self-identity.

For those labelled early on as criminals, this can lead to a reinforcement of deviant behaviour as a self-fulfilling prophecy, perpetuating a cycle of offending. Figure 2 illustrates the idea of the looking glass self – it is purposefully blurred as meanings are

often negotiated through interaction and they may change to reflect different aspects of a socially constructed identity.

Labelling theory

Building on Cooley's work, Howard Becker's *labelling theory* further explored how deviant identities are constructed. In *Outsiders* (1963), he argues that deviance is not an inherent quality of an act, but is instead the result of society's reaction to it. When individuals are labelled as 'deviant', this label can become a dominant aspect of their identity, influencing how they see themselves and how others see them.

In the context of the criminal justice system, Becker suggest that this labelling can lead to a process of secondary deviance, where the individual identifies with the deviant label and continues to engage in criminal behaviour. The impact of these labels can be profound, particularly within the context of total institutions (institutions which exercise strong control over the everyday lives of individuals such as boarding schools, religious sects and prisons).

Erving Goffman's work on *spoiled identity* in his 1961 book *Asylums* explores how the stigma of being labelled as a criminal can lead to a process of the 'mortification of the self' in prison. This involves a stripping away of a former identity to be replaced with a new one. In the prison context, this can result in

Labelling can lead to a process of secondary deviance, where the individual identifies with the deviant label and continues to engage in criminal behaviour

*I am not what I think I am
I am not what you think I am
I am what I think
you think I am*

Figure 2 The 'looking glass' self (after Charles Cooley)



The concept of the 'looking glass' self refers to the way self-identity is built on how others see us

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a civic death, where the individual is deprived of their former identity as a free individual and is subjected to a process of de-individuation by becoming just another offender and prison inmate.

Resisting labelling

Despite the powerful impact of labelling, it is possible for individuals to resist these labels and deconstruct their deviant identities, thus opening up the possibility of a new, non-deviant identity. Education can play a crucial role in this process. It offers a pathway to reclaim a positive label and identity and resist negative societal stereotypes. By engaging with education, prisoners can begin to see themselves in a new light: as students and scholars rather than criminals. This shift in self-perception can be a powerful catalyst for change, leading to effective rehabilitation.

Narrative identity

The concept of 'narrative identity' offers another valuable framework for understanding identity transformation. Narrative identity demonstrates how individuals make sense of their lives and identities through the stories they tell about themselves. These personal narratives are not just a reflection of past experiences but are active constructions of identity and a meaningful sense of self.

In the context of criminal behaviour, narrative criminology suggests that the stories individuals tell about their involvement in crime provide valuable insights into their identities. Shadd Maruna's research in his 2001 book *Making Good: how ex-convicts reform and rebuild their lives* demonstrates how narrative storytelling can be a powerful tool for identity transformation. Maruna

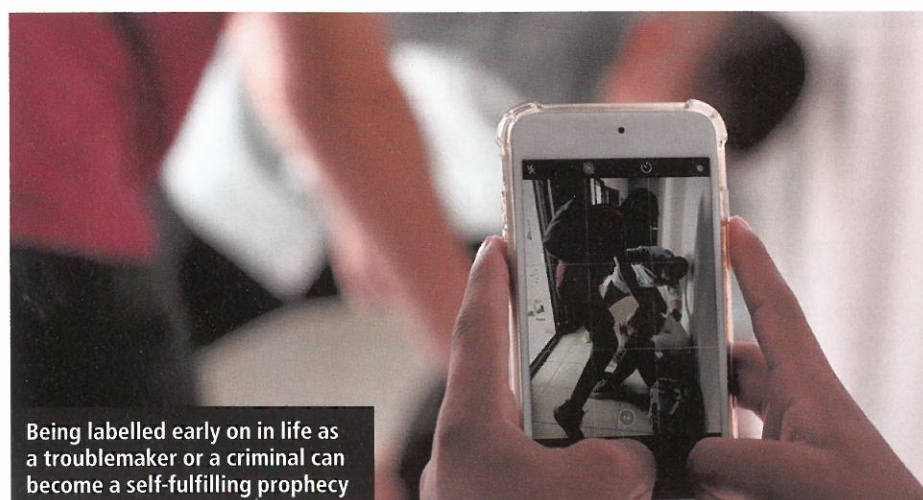
found that ex-convicts who successfully moved away from crime often constructed narratives that emphasised redemption and personal growth, which helped them to rebuild their lives and form new, positive identities.

Education within the prison system can play a crucial role in narrative identity reconstruction. By engaging with educational programmes, prisoners are encouraged to reflect on their past experiences and to construct new narratives that emphasise their potential for growth and change.

The Open University

The Open University's approach to prison education, which refers to inmates as *Students in Secure Environments (SiSE)* rather than prison students, is a powerful example of how education can facilitate identity transformation. This shift in terminology reflects a broader effort to help prisoners construct new, positive identities that are centred on their roles as students, rather than their prison identification.

The impact of this narrative shift can be profound. It allows prisoners to envision a future beyond their current circumstances, one that is not defined by their past and current situation but by their future potential. This forward-facing approach



Being labelled early on in life as a troublemaker or a criminal can become a self-fulfilling prophecy

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Education within the prison system can play a crucial role in narrative identity reconstruction

Major life events, such as marriage or career change, are 'hooks for change' in our lives



to identity reconstruction is essential for successful reintegration into society.

Education as a hook for change In prison

For many prisoners, education can serve as a powerful catalyst for identity transformation, acting as a *hook for change* that helps to dismantle a criminal master status and foster a new identity as a scholar. The concept of 'hooks for change', as developed by the US criminologists Giordano, Cernkovich and Rudolph (2002), underscores how the importance of significant life events, such as education, can serve as turning points in altering life trajectories.

Earle and Mehigan's 2019 book *Degrees of Freedom: prison education at The Open University* provides compelling evidence of how higher education can serve as a hook for change. The authors present case studies of prisoners who have successfully transformed their identities through engagement with higher education. These case studies illustrate how the process of *becoming* a student can be a powerful catalyst for personal growth and development, helping prisoners to shed their criminal identities and embrace new, positive roles as learners and academics.

One particularly poignant example from the book is the vignette 'Becoming me with The Open University' by Schreeche-Powell, which describes how one prisoner's identity was transformed from that of a criminal, to that of an academic, through engagement with higher education. The process of 'becoming a student', with its associated challenges and achievements, provided a new purpose and

direction in his life, helping the individual to break free from the negative labels and stereotypes of the past and to construct a new, positively labelled self-identity.

Other life events

This concept of hooks for change is not limited to education. Other significant life events, such as marriage, career changes or taking up a new hobby, can also serve as catalysts for identity transformation. Nonetheless, education is particularly powerful because it provides a structured and purposeful activity that encourages self-reflection and personal growth. Education's role as a catalyst for change is not limited to individual transformation – it has broader societal implications.

By reducing re-offending rates and facilitating successful reintegration, education contributes to safer communities and reduces the economic burden on the criminal justice system. It is not merely a rehabilitative tool but a critical component of a just and effective criminal justice system.

Evidence and policy implications

The positive impact of higher education on reducing recidivism among prisoners is well documented. Research from the UK Ministry of Justice in 2021 found that prisoners who engaged in higher education were significantly less likely to re-offend after release than those who did not. This finding underscores the importance of education in supporting successful reintegration into society and reducing the social and economic costs of re-offending.

Education has been shown to enhance self-confidence, mental health and

Prison is seen as only a site for punishment, not a place to rehabilitate

pro-social behaviour among prisoners, making it a crucial factor in successful rehabilitation. The House of Commons Education Committee's 2022 report, *Not Just Another Brick in the Wall: why prisoners need an education to climb the ladder of opportunity*, emphasised the intrinsic importance of education in promoting self-development and reducing recidivism. The report called for the establishment of the role of Deputy Governor of Learning in prisons, who would be responsible for ensuring that all prisoners have access to high-quality educational opportunities.

Barriers to change

Despite this compelling evidence, access to education beyond GCSE level remains inadequate in many prisons. Structural barriers, such as funding limitations, staffing shortages and the challenges of managing the prison estate, continue to hinder educational development in prisons. Prison is seen as only a site for punishment, not a place to rehabilitate. Addressing these barriers will require a concerted effort from policy-makers, educators and prison administrators to ensure that all prisoners have access to the educational opportunities they need to successfully reintegrate into society.

Policy-makers must prioritise the expansion and improvement of educational opportunities within prisons. This includes a culture change which promotes and endorses the significance of education to ensure consistent access to a broad and balanced curriculum. By doing so, the cycle of disadvantage that so often leads to re-offending can be addressed, to create a system that genuinely supports rehabilitation and reintegration.

Conclusion

Education in the prison system can be a powerful force for change. It offers prisoners the opportunity to rewrite their narratives, to deconstruct negative identities and to build more positive, pro-social lives. However, educational inequality remains a significant challenge, with many prisoners entering the system already very disadvantaged and



Education is a powerful force for changing the lives of prisoners

marginalised. Systemic barriers that currently limit access to educational opportunities must be addressed.

Through the lenses of symbolic interactionism and narrative identity theory, we can see how education can deconstruct deviant identities and foster positive, constructive ones. By engaging with education, prisoners have a chance to rewrite their personal narratives, constructing a new identity as successful students and imagining a future beyond the prison walls.

Education reduces re-offending and supports successful reintegration into society. It is a cost saver. By investing in prison education and providing meaningful educational opportunities, the cycle of disadvantage can be disrupted to offer a pathway to a more positive and productive future. By prioritising education within the prison system, prisoners can be supported in their journeys of transformation and help to create a safer and more just society for all.

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EXAM-STYLE QUESTION

Item

Evidence shows that gaining educational qualifications while in prison can play a major role in reducing re-offending rates among prisoners. However, barriers still remain, both practical and cultural, and many prisoners are unable to benefit from appropriate levels of educational provision.

Applying material from the Item, analyse two difficulties that prisoners might face in accessing appropriate levels of educational provision.

(AQA-style question, 10 marks)

The article provides many useful examples. Remember that you have to 'analyse' the difficulties you identify, which means more than just stating what they are – you will need to show in what way these act to form a barrier. Things you might mention are the negative experiences some offenders faced during their schooling (remember the high exclusion rate), the feeling that 'education is not for me', the effects of an identity as 'a criminal', a possible lack of understanding of the importance of education among some prison staff, and practical considerations such as the very low base from which some prisoners start, lack of funding, lack of suitable teachers, prison overcrowding, and so on. Remember that only 5 marks are available for each factor, so keep your answer concise and relevant.

KEY POINTS

- Educational attainment in the UK prison population is very low and more than 40% of prisoners have been excluded from school.
- Education is therefore seen as a potentially important part of rehabilitation, but it can go further than this and help to transform a prisoner's identity.
- While much education in prison focuses on basic skills, the author has researched the role of higher education in transforming identity.
- Those labelled early in life as criminals tend to develop spoiled, deviant identities which are not conducive to rehabilitation or educational achievement.
- However, through narrative identity reconstruction it is possible for students pursuing Open University degrees in secure environments such as prisons to develop a positive identity as a scholar, using education as a 'hook for change'.
- Ministry of Justice research confirms that re-offending rates are low among released prisoners who have engaged in higher education, and that this helps to facilitate successful reintegration into society.

Mark Madigan is an associate lecturer at the Open University. He is undertaking research on the significance of students studying Open University access modules in deconstructing deviant identities.