

Beyond Redemption: A Critical Analysis of The Sun's Construction of Prisons and Prisoners Through the Lens of Social Representations Theory

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Abstract

Whilst there is some research into the media's coverage of the British penal system, little is conducted through the lens of social psychology. This study employs social representations theory in order to examine British tabloid newspaper The Sun's contribution to the public understanding of prisons and prisoners from a psychological perspective. The data consists of 34 articles published within the month of March 2017 which were analysed using a modified version of Foucauldian discourse analysis. It was found that The Sun's coverage of the penal system contributed to a construction of prisons as both out of control and as providing prisoners with an easy life, and a construction of prisoners as both inherently dangerous and undeserving. These constructions contribute to a social representation of prisoners as 'beyond redemption'. The implications of these findings are considered in light of the subject positions offered and the opportunities for action provided.

Keywords

prison, prisoners, social representations, Foucauldian discourse analysis, media analysis, ideology, power

In the UK, despite a decline in levels of crime, imprisonment rates have steadily risen over the past 20 years, with England, Wales, and Scotland having the highest prison population per capita in western Europe (Fair & Walmsley, 2021). Furthermore, in the decade preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, the average length of prison sentences increased by 37% (Roberts et al., 2022). This rise in punitive measures can in part be attributed to the influence of public beliefs about crime, which have shifted towards a stronger emphasis on punishment and retribution (Jennings et al., 2017). For instance, despite rising sentence lengths and imprisonment rates, over two-thirds of the British public still support stricter sentencing practices (Roberts et al., 2022).

Interrogating the origins of public perceptions concerning penal policy holds significant importance. Insights can help bridge the gap between public sentiment and actual correctional practices. Moreover, understanding the factors influencing public perceptions allows for a critical examination of potential biases, misconceptions, and stereotypes that may shape attitudes towards prisons and prisoners. One significant source of public opinion stems from exposure to media representations of the penal system.

Media Influence on Public Opinion

The mechanism by which the media influences and shapes public opinion has long been a central focus of psychological research. Historically, much of the research has been driven by concerns regarding the extent to which media exposure could directly affect behaviour, with a particular focus on media accounts of crime and violence (Doyle, 2006). Such



studies have now fallen out of favour; research has consistently shown that the evidence does not support the existence of a relationship between media violence and aggressive behaviour (Savage & Yancey, 2008). Recent research in this domain, however, has shifted its focus; social psychologists are increasingly interested in how the media's use of discourse may shape broader social understanding of particular topics through purposeful story selection and choice of language (Foos & Bischof, 2022; Yar, 2012). Such an approach is underpinned by notions of "audience reception", which suggests that an individual's recollection and interpretation of life events and experiences is influenced by their exposure to media, and impacts how they view themselves and their position in society (Elridge et al., 1997, p. 179), potentially even exercising a powerful influence on individual decision making (Ladd & Lenz, 2009).

However, there is a noticeable absence of this approach to newspaper representations of prisons and prisoners, despite survey evidence showing that significant portions of the British population cite print news as a key source of information regarding the criminal justice system (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2023; Marsh, 2009). Of research which has been done in this area, much of it falls within the fields of criminology, sociology and media theory and neglects a consideration of psychological mechanisms by which such newspaper representations impact on public understanding (Boda & Szabó, 2011). For instance, Mason (2007) employed discourse analysis in order to investigate media representations of imprisonment through the lens of critical media theory. Specifically, he looked at four news stories and compared the content with the original sources of the information contained within those stories. He concluded that, in the case of the stories analysed, newspapers draw on a discourse which legitimises the use of prison as the only option for dealing with crime. Mason's principal focus was the link between media coverage of prisons and prisoners and government policy regarding the penal system. As such, Mason's study is primarily driven by a commentary on press responsibility and pays relatively little attention to the impact of the stories analysed on public responses to prisons and prisoners. Cheliotis (2010), on the other hand, argues that the mass media's representation of prisons and prisoners "contribute decisively" (p. 169) to the formation of public opinion, but once again focuses largely on press responsibility and the operations of power which drive media values and practices, and omits any consideration of the social psychological mechanisms which underpin his analysis. Berry et al. (2012) conducted research which explicitly addresses the link between press coverage of the criminal justice system and public understanding. However, their research focused specifically on the reporting of sentencing in relation to crimes against children and public understanding of the sentencing procedure. Whilst arguing that the media's selective and misrepresentational coverage of sentencing for crimes against children reflects public misconceptions, they too are reluctant to consider the psychological mechanisms by which the two may be linked, arguing that "the media *may* be a contributory factor" (p. 588, my emphasis). This present research seeks to build on and add to this limited existing body of research by critically examining the content and associated implications of newspaper discourse regarding prisons and prisoners through the lens of social representations theory (SRT).

Social Representations Theory

SRT provides a set of social psychological tools with which to capture the everyday representations through which individuals orient themselves to the world (Moscovici, 1988). It rejects the methodological individualism indicative of much social psychological research, whilst maintaining a commitment to the theorisation of social representations as a partly cognitive phenomenon (Jovchelovitch, 1996). Broadly speaking, social representations underpin our common sense understanding of the world and are a product of the dissemination of social discourse (Wagner et al., 1999). They form a bridge between the individual and society; they are "a space in-between, a medium linking objects, subjects and activities" (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999, p. 167), with the function of "making the unfamiliar familiar" (Moscovici, 2007, p. 42).

Representations of phenomena are not newly created but develop socially by building on existing stocks of shared knowledge; they provide individuals with a way of understanding the complexities of the world around them which constitute an inter-subjectively agreed account of reality (Flick & Foster, 2011). There are two stages involved in this process: anchoring and objectification (Moscovici, 2007). Anchoring describes the embedding of a novel or unknown subject or object within familiar frames of reference, thereby facilitating communication regarding the subject or object. Objectification involves concretizing an otherwise abstract new idea by grounding it in something more tangible, thereby making it easier to grasp. The substance of an anchor or objectification is determined by the social group's

particular experiential world (Wagner et al., 1999) and, as such, the social representation of a subject or object is socially and culturally unique – each individual, group or culture may have a qualitatively distinct account of a single phenomenon (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005).

This concern with the way in which unfamiliar phenomena are socially understood clearly lends itself to an examination of the public's understanding of the penal system. Prisons are closed environments, resulting in a system which very few members of the public have any direct experience. This limited direct exposure renders prisons and prisoners an unknown phenomenon necessitating accounts which are socially reproduced through the dual processes of anchoring and objectification. Furthermore, the inaccessibility of penal institutions fuels public fascination, resulting in a proliferation of mediatized accounts of prison life – news broadcasts, films, TV documentaries, radio shows, newspapers and internet sites are just a few of an array of media sources which portray the otherwise insular microcosm of the prison world (Cheliotis, 2010). This study's specific focus on newspaper discourse regarding prisons and prisoners reflects SRT's concern with the process by which representations are constructed, disseminated, and transformed within the public sphere – a process in which the media is recognised as playing a significant role (Flick & Foster, 2011).

SRT's capacity to develop a critical account of social phenomena lends itself to an in-depth examination of broader social concerns regarding the penal system which underpin the process of social representation (Howarth, 2006). The construction, dissemination and transformation of social representations is not a value neutral process; their socially mediated development permanently infuses representations with relations of power and ideology (Jovchelovitch, 1996). The status of representations can be maintained through the adoption of deliberate communicative strategies which limit possibilities for engagement with competing representations (Gillespie, 2008). Individual representations differ therefore in the extent to which they are consensually shared. Hegemonic representations are stable, widely shared across a society or culture and are tacitly manifested in everyday practices, leaving little room for challenge. Emancipated representations, while garnering general support, exhibit variations defended by different groups. Polemic representations emerge amidst social conflict, portraying polarized and antagonistic stances, often preceding social change (Batel & Castro, 2018). Social representations thus contribute to the establishment and maintenance of a hierarchy among different forms of knowledge, with certain representational systems enjoying a more significant influence and possessing greater power, influencing the field of possible actions that can be pursued (Jovchelovitch, 2007; Negura et al., 2020).

In light of this, the adoption of a social representations approach offers an opportunity to examine the way in which the public acquire and contest existing ideologies and maintain or challenge systems of exclusion and inequality (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). The utility of such an approach has been demonstrated by Negura et al. (2020) in their examination of mechanisms of power in the social representation of depression. They highlight the normative status of medicalised accounts, which place mental health professionals in a position of power, consequently limiting the potential field of action for depressive individuals. However, competing representations of depression in which specific life events are centred, or which highlight the conditions of modern life, challenge the hegemonic representation, and empower alternative responses. Understanding this dynamic is important, they argue, as it enables the interrogation and challenge of asymmetrical power relations which underpin our common sense understanding of such issues.

Concern for the operations of power on prisoners implicitly underpinned the earlier highlighted studies into newspaper representations of the penal system. This concern has been made more explicit by Drake and Henley (2014) who conducted research looking at sources of discourse, including media coverage, of the debate regarding prisoners' voting rights. They found that, through the discursive construction of a dichotomy between 'victim' and 'offender', politicians and the media serve to 'other' prisoners and ex-prisoners, thereby "[contributing] significantly to their continued social exclusion and feelings of stigmatisation" (p. 154). Utilizing SRT as a framework for this research, there is an opportunity to further explore the media's 'othering' of prisoners within a social and political structure entrenched with asymmetrical power relations.

The current study employs SRT in order to build on and deepen prior research regarding newspaper representations of prisons and prisoners. It explores a single newspaper's contribution to the social representation of the penal system, and critically analyses the newspaper's contribution to the maintenance (and/or challenge) of existing power relations through the dual processes of anchoring and objectification. Specifically, this research aims to address the following questions:

1. How are prisoners discursively constructed in *The Sun*?
2. What wider discourses are used in support of this construction?
3. What is the potential impact of these discourses in light of SRT?

Method

Sample

For the purpose of this study, the tabloid newspaper ‘*The Sun*’ was examined as a source of discourse contributing to the social representation of prisons and prisoners. With the increasing prominence of online platforms in news dissemination, there has been a discernible downward trend in the readership and sales of print-based media. However, when considering both print and online readership, *The Sun* maintains a relatively large audience. At the time of data collection in 2017, *The Sun* was the UK’s most widely read daily news outlet with an average circulation of 1.6 million print copies per issue and 4.5 million unique daily browsers on its online version (Audit Bureau of Circulations, 2017). Demographic data suggests that, at this time, *The Sun*’s readership was largely made up of males from the three lower social and economic groups within the UK (Ofcom, 2018).

The decision to focus on a single newspaper reflects the recognition that the social representation of a phenomenon is not universally shared but is reframed and reconstituted by individuals according to personal experience and social group membership (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). Given that different newspapers are divergent in their ideological positioning as manifested through story selection and use of language (Kareem Ali et al., 2017), the focus on *The Sun* provides an insight into one source of the development of the social representation of prisons and prisoners within a specific ideologically and demographically positioned sample of society. In light of this, an analysis of *The Sun* through the lens of SRT presents an opportunity to deepen the exploration of ideology and power relations indicative of the studies highlighted earlier, but through the lens of a critical social psychology.

In this regard, *The Sun* has been chosen as it is a traditionally right-leaning newspaper and therefore more likely to endorse punitive measures for those who commit crimes (Gromet & Darley, 2011). Furthermore, *The Sun* has been shown to perpetuate an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ ideology (Branum & Charteris-Black, 2015), which has the potential to reinforce this punitive stance toward prisoners through a process of ‘Othering’ (Carvalho & Chamberlen, 2018). Additionally, the focus on the print-based version rather than the online version enables a more targeted examination of *The Sun*’s contribution to the social representation of prisons and prisoners, as consumers of print media tend to engage with the publication as a cohesive editorial entity. While online versions may share a similar editorial perspective, and often reproduce articles published in print version (Burggraaff & Trilling, 2020), the distinct ways in which users interact with online content can dilute the representational process (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2015). Thus, directing attention to the print edition allows for a more persuasive analysis of *The Sun*’s specific editorial position on prisons and prisoners.

As social representations are embedded within the societal context in which they are manifest (Jovchelovitch, 2007), it is important to acknowledge the state of public discussion around prisons and prisoners at the time of data collection. In 2016 – the year prior to data collection – the Government published a White Paper titled ‘Prison Safety and Reform’ (Ministry of Justice, 2016). Within this report, the then Secretary of State for Justice highlighted the need for ‘huge cultural and structural change’ within the prison system in order to address high rates of recidivism. The publication of this White Paper was widely reported in the news media, with different outlets responding both supportively and critically to the planned changes, and partisan commentators drawing on the issue in support of wider political claims (e.g., Burgon, 2016).

Data Collection

Data collection was driven by the aim to generate a sample of articles broadly representative of *The Sun*’s coverage of issues relating to prisons and prisoners in line with their editorial stance. Relevant articles were retrieved using the LexisLibrary; an online newspaper database which facilitates the search of electronic versions of paper-based news articles through the use of key words. Drawing on the approach adopted by Hedderman and Murphy (2015) in their

analysis of newspaper coverage of the Transforming Rehabilitation strategy, search terms were continually refined in light of prior search results in order to produce a representative corpus of relevant articles. Preliminary searches focused on issues of *The Sun* published within a single month (March 2017). A one-month period was selected on the grounds that it would provide a sufficiently representative sample of reporting in this area (Berry et al., 2012). Whilst the selection of March was somewhat arbitrary, it was ensured prior to data collection that no politically pertinent events occurred which may have skewed coverage in order to promote an ideological agenda outside of the ‘business-as-usual’ editorial decision making (Billig, 1995).

The terms ‘prison’, ‘prisoner’, ‘offender’, ‘inmate’, ‘criminal’, ‘convict’, ‘incarceration’, ‘imprisonment’ and ‘jail’ were initially employed in order to draw out relevant articles. This search produced a total of 618 results, many of which were unrelated to this study’s focus on prisons and prisoners. Pertinent articles were scanned and coded in order to draw out commonly used terms to identify those currently serving time in prisons. It was found that the terms ‘offender’, ‘criminal’ and ‘convict’ were largely used in order to denote people historically convicted of a crime or those that have committed a crime but not yet been caught and as such were omitted. ‘Prisoner’, ‘inmate’, ‘lag’, ‘con’ and ‘jailbird’ designated those that are currently serving time in prison. The terms ‘prison’ and ‘jail’ were used to refer to prisons. The search was re-run using these search terms. This produced a total of 62 articles. Following Berry et al. (2012), these 62 were further filtered so that only hard news and editorials remained, thereby ensuring that the articles were representative of the broader editorial line of the newspaper. Once duplicate articles and articles with a non-UK focus were removed, a total of 34 articles were left for analysis.

Prior to the analysis, it is worth noting a limitation with the outlined data collection method. The LexisLibrary newspaper database retrieves text alone and does not incorporate design features or images associated with the news stories. Wagner et al. (1999) highlight the capacity of social representation theory to account for visual representations of phenomena and stress the role of images in the media’s representation of different phenomena. As noted by Hedderman and Murphy (2015), the exclusion of images from this analysis places a minor limitation on the attempt to build up a contextually thorough account of *The Sun*’s contribution to the social representation of prisons and prisoners. However, LexisLibrary does state if an image accompanied the news stories retrieved; of the 34 articles analysed, 15 had images associated with their paper-based publication.

Data Analysis

Articles were analysed using techniques derived from Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). Epistemologically, FDA is positioned within the social constructivist framework. Social constructivism rejects positivist conceptions of reality as something verifiably ‘out there’, and instead advances a conception of knowledge which is historically, culturally and linguistically mediated (Willig, 2008). SRT provides an account of phenomena as socially constituted and therefore sits firmly within the social constructivist framework (Wagner, 1996). Furthermore, in line with its rejection of a strictly cognitive approach to the study of knowledge, SRT emphasises the role of discourse as a manifestation of social representations. As such, discursive approaches to data analysis are a key feature of SRT’s broader programme of studying social knowledge (Flick & Foster, 2011).

Foucauldian discourse analysis is concerned with the way in which “discourses facilitate and limit, enable and constrain what can be said, by whom, where and when” (Willig, 2008, p. 112). Discourse is shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts, reflecting dominant ideology. This permeation of discourse with ideology can entail a specific ordering of reality to the potential exclusion of alternative, albeit equally valid, understandings of that reality and can thus reflect and propagate existing power relations and inequalities in society (Wooffitt, 2005). FDA’s focus on the way in which discourse can reproduce and maintain power relations clearly mirrors SRT’s concern with the way in which social representations are infused with these power relations. As such, FDA is an appropriate methodological framework with which to analyse *The Sun*’s contribution to the social representation of prisons and prisoners in line with the research questions identified.

FDA is not a unitary prescriptive approach to data analysis but is informed by the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis (Cheek, 2012). In order to draw out the discursive constructions employed in the social representation of prisons and prisoners in *The Sun*, a modified version of Willig’s (2008) stages for the analysis of discourse was

used. First, the articles were read repeatedly with a focus on the construction of prisons and prisoners as discursive objects. Ideas and themes related to the research questions were noted. Second, these discursive objects were located within wider discourses. This process also considered textual silences to be relevant, as “what is *absent* from a text is as important as what is present” (Wagner et al., 1999, p. 107, their emphasis). Individuals occupy various “subject positions” as they engage with different discourses, and these positions influence their understanding of themselves and their roles in relation to others (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2013, p. 481). The third stage of the analysis explored the way in which the discourse employed might influence these subject positions. Fourth, these subject positions were considered in relation to the dominant ideologies and opportunities for action. In order to ensure a comprehensive account of the data, findings from earlier stages of the analysis were continually reevaluated in light of findings from the latter stages.

Since FDA is primarily an interpretive process, the researcher’s positionality assumes a significant role in the selection, interpretation and presentation of data (Sam, 2019). Human experience is historically, culturally, and discursively situated, and this entails the possibility of multiple, equally valid, accounts of a single phenomenon. Research within a social constructivist framework, such as in this study, cannot lay claim to establishing the ‘truth’ as an external ‘out there’ entity. The analysis and conclusions herein should be viewed in light of this epistemological position – the analysis stems from a reading which has been conducted within the framework the researcher’s subjectivity.

In this regard, it is important to acknowledge that this researcher consider themselves left of the political spectrum and is privately an advocate for penal reform. They do not read *The Sun* and are generally critical of its journalistic integrity. However, it should also be acknowledged that the analysis presented below is concordant with *The Sun*’s ideological positioning as outlined earlier.

Presentation of Extracts

Except for where obvious typographical errors have been made that obscure meaning, all extracts included below are verbatim. For reasons of brevity, some extracts are presented with contents removed. This is indicated through the use of a single ellipsis (...) in place of the missing content. Each extract contains an article reference number and the article headline. Table 1 shows the article reference number, headline, and date of publication.

Table 1

The Sun Source Articles Used in Analysis

Article #	Date published	Headline
1	2 March 2017	Kid rapist jail death
2	4 March 2017	CELLFIE HOARD IN JAIL Cache of £3k iPads
3	5 March 2017	Jail term cut after move to perv cell
4	5 March 2017	LAGS INCENSED
5	6 March 2017	Lag hit killer Rose
6	6 March 2017	ROLEX KILLER'S SEX IN PRISON LIFER'S ROMP WITH VISITOR; Victim's family blast soft jail
7	7 March 2017	HAMMER THUG: I'M NOT VIOLENT
8	11 March 2017	THUG CAGED AGAIN
9	11 March 2017	Inmates win fight for lower carb diet
10	12 March 2017	Jail drug bust high
11	12 March 2017	Blaze on jail's roof
12	13 March 2017	JAIL BLAZE ARREST
13	13 March 2017	Jail dope smuggle is busted
14	13 March 2017	Jail nails boost at 'relaxed' new nick
15	13 March 2017	Mother's fury at jail selfies of son killer
16	13 March 2017	Jailhouse rockers
17	14 March 2017	JAIL HOSTAGE FREED
18	15 March 2017	SICKENED BY SICKOS EXCLUSIVE: FIENDS' PRISON PLOT; Horrified lag's tip-off over warder kidnap
19	18 March 2017	CAKES SNUB SLASH LAG CAGED FOR 7YRS
20	18 March 2017	What's Rolf didgeridoing out of jail? SHAMED STAR PICTURE EXCLUSIVE

Article #	Date published	Headline
21	19 March 2017	Jail book ban gripe
22	19 March 2017	SEX FIEND JOHNSON FANTASY FOOTIE STORM FURY OVER PAEDO PLAYER He runs team from jail
23	19 March 2017	'BLIND' RIPPER JAIL PERKS JOY
24	20 March 2017	Dragons' Den lags
25	21 March 2017	It's diabolical.. a kick in the teeth FURY AT SEX-CHANGE LAG; - RAPIST'S VICTIM YESTERDAY
26	22 March 2017	Four new jails built
27	22 March 2017	Party vid in prison
28	23 March 2017	Jail drug so cheap
29	26 March 2017	Self-harm cons alert
30	28 March 2017	Jail crime read fury
31	29 March 2017	19k tellies for lags
32	29 March 2017	KILLER CONS FACE OFF IN CELL BITE HORROR Chunk of flesh torn out of lifer's cheek
33	20 March 2017	HOSPITAL TELLY £70 A WEEK... PRISON £1
34	19 March 2017	Guard, 21 fights for life after assault

Analysis and Results

Discursive Constructions

The first stage of analysis focused on drawing out relevant data through the identification of the discursive object being investigated. In part, this stage led the data collection process, whereby the search terms were continually refined in light of a survey of search results. Thus, throughout the corpus prisons are referred to as 'prison' or 'jail' and prisoners as 'prisoners', 'inmates', 'lags', 'cons' and on one occasion 'jailbirds' – collective nouns which serve a heuristic purpose in that they facilitate the anchoring of novel story content within a familiar frame of reference. Where individual prisoners were identified, it was generally in the first instance by the offence they had committed:

“child killers...” (Article 30 – ‘Jail crime read fury’)

“double rapist...” (Article 25 – ‘Fury at sex-change lag’)

“one-eyed serial killer...” (Article 19 – ‘Blind ripper jail perks joy’)

“A sword killer...” (Article 32 – ‘Killer cons face off in cell bite horror’)

“Jailed child rapist...” (Article 1 – ‘Kid rapist jail death’)

Along with the use of collective nouns, which are suggestive of homogeneity of experience (Cox et al., 2008), the identification of specific prisoners with reference to the offence committed contributes to a reductive account of prisoners in which their defining characteristic is their criminality. The characterisation of prisoners is thus situated within a narrow discourse in which the subjects' past actions are centred, and any wider account of the prison system must cohere with this.

Wider Discourses

The second stage of the analysis examined how the construction of prisoners as discursive subjects was tied to the wider discourses in which they were located. These wider discourses can be seen as a product of the editorial decisions made in terms of story selection, and what was consequently left out. Throughout the corpus of texts analysed, stories relating to events in prison fell into one of two broad themes; prison as providing an easy life and prison as out-of-control. These themes provided a context within which to build on the reductive account of prisoners as fundamentally criminal to construct an account of prisoners as inherently dangerous and undeserving. These constructions emerged through analysis of both the broader contexts in which stories were situated, as well as the language employed within the articles.

Prison as an Easy Life and Prisoners as Undeserving

Several of the articles focused on seemingly mundane events which had occurred within the prison system, often within a narrative of prisoner access to entertainment. In doing so, The Sun contributes to a construction of prisons as providing an easy life and prisoners as undeserving. Some of these stories focused on specific prisoners, others on events in prisons more generally; two focused on restrictions to prisoner access to books (Articles 21 – ‘Jail book ban gripe’ and Article 30 – ‘Jail crime read fury’), two on the provision of televisions for prisoners (Article 31 – ‘19k tellys for lags’ and Article 33 – ‘Hospital telly £70 a week... prison £1’), one on prisoner singing lessons (Article 16 – ‘Jailhouse rockers’), one on a ‘Dragon’s Den style contest’ (Article 24 – ‘Dragons’ Den lags’) and one on the removal of prisoners’ access to incense sticks (Article 4 – ‘Lags incensed’). Take the following article, for instance, which reports on the provision of singing lessons to prisoners:

“a RIOT-hit jail is offering lags singing lessons to help them beat stress.

Inmates get to belt out Bob Marley’s One Love, Bill Withers’ Lean On Me and even songs from Disney’s Frozen in two-hour singalongs every week at HMP Birmingham.

The Choirs Beating Time charity said: “We have discovered some very fine voices.”

Prisoners caused £2million of damage during a 12-hour riot in December.” (Article 16 – ‘Jailhouse rockers’)

Here, the substantive content of the article is framed with an account of the prison in question as “riot-hit” and the prisoners as having “caused £2million of damage during a 12-hour riot”. This contextualisation enables the author to convey a sense of situational irony (Glasser & Ettema, 1993) which informs the reading of the second paragraph: criminals are taking part in “two-hour singalongs” where they “get to belt out” songs, which “even” include songs from a well-known children’s film. The author thus draws on a discourse of disbelief to direct the reader towards an understanding of the singing lessons as contrary to common-sense understandings regarding what prison should be. The prison is therefore represented as offering prisoners opportunities which run counter to expectations – expectations derived from an essentialist account of prisoners as defined by their criminality as discussed above. Prisoners are thus positioned as undeserving recipients of a prison system which is providing an easy life.

Interestingly, whilst the article mentions the Choirs Beating Time charity, there is a textual silence around the purpose of this charity, the numbers involved in the project, and its effectiveness. A preliminary evaluation conducted by Goldsmiths University suggests there were only 8 participants from this particular prison, who report having benefitted from an improvement in mental and physical well-being as a result of their participation in the programme (Sanfilippo & Bashir, 2016). This highlights how, through purposeful story selection and editorial decision making, The Sun shapes a perception of the prison system and those within which extends beyond the specific context of the story being reported on.

Whilst many of the articles in the corpus draw on similar strategies, some are more explicit in their reference to prisoners as undeserving and prisons as providing an easy life. In an article titled ‘Rolex Killer’s sex in prison’ (Article 6), the story of a prisoner having been caught whilst engaged in intercourse during a prison visit is contextualised with reference to the “soft jail” and the prisoner’s “cushy life inside”. (‘Cushy’ is an informal adjective meaning devoid of hardship). Similarly, in an article titled ‘Fury at sex-change lag’ (Article 25) – a story about a prisoner’s move to a female prison following a sex change – a source from a victim support charity is quoted as saying “support charities are struggling to make ends meet... but prisoners get all the luxuries they could possibly ask for”. Whilst there is strong evidence that victim support charities lack the required funding to operate effectively (see e.g., Mawby, 2016), the discursive invocation of a zero-sum narrative in which there is no money for victims, but prisoners are recipients of ‘luxury’, clearly serves to situate prisoners as undeserving within a prison system which provides an easy life.

Prison as Out-of-Control and Prisoners as Inherently Dangerous

In contrast to the representation of prison as providing an easy life, several of the articles analysed represent prison as out-of-control. These representations principally emerged in articles focusing on examples of rule-breaking in prison

or acts of violence, such as ‘Party vid in prison’ (Article 27), ‘Mother’s fury at jail selfies of son killer’ (Article 15) and ‘Cellfie hoard in jail’ (Article 2). Elsewhere, multiple stories focus on the apparent failure of prisons to keep drugs from circulating within the system, with one article quoting a former political figure as stating that “our prisons are awash with drugs” (Article 10 – ‘Jail drug bust high’), with no account of the reason for drug use in prisons (see e.g., Cope, 2003).

Again, the representations do not always emerge through explicit reference, but through contextualisation and language usage. Take the following article, for instance, which describes a fire started by an inmate at HMP Guys Marsh:

“A LAG set fire to a prison by stripping then torching his clothes.

He scaled walls in a protest at changes to the jail’s regime.

...

A 2014 inspection found staff has “all but lost control” at the jail, which was overcrowded with 543 male inmates” (Article 11 – ‘Blaze on jail’s roof’)

In this article there is little information relating to the specifics of the prisoner involved. Instead, the article opens with a focus on the unusual method by which the prisoner started the fire – by “stripping then torching his clothes” – situating the event in a discursive framework of counter-normative behaviour. This counter-normativity is contextualised with reference to an inspection report which found “staff had ‘all but lost control’ at the jail”, suggesting a prison system defined by chaos. Similarly, in an article titled ‘Guard, 21, fights for life after assault’ (Article 34), the principal story is framed with reference to reports showing that “over 200 assaults were recorded in the second half of 2016” and that Ofsted “found makeshift weapons in rooms”.

When considered alongside the discursive construction of prisoners as defined by their prior criminality, the representation of prisons as out-of-control can be seen to anchor an account of prisoners as inherently dangerous. This representation is objectified through The Sun’s focus on the most violent offenders serving the longest sentences, and a notable silence on stories relating to specific prisoners convicted of non-violent crimes, despite the fact that they constitute around half of the prison population (Ministry of Justice, 2023). It is also achieved through the use of vivid detail in reports on prisoner-on-prisoner violence. For instance, a story titled ‘Killer Cons Face Off in Cell Bite Horror’ (Article 32) graphically describes a fight in which “a sword killer bit a chunk of flesh from a murderer’s face”. Similarly, an article about a “lag who slashed another inmate” describes how the target of the article “ripped open [the other inmate’s] face with a razor, leaving his teeth exposed through the wound” (Article 19 – ‘Cakes Snub Slash Lag Caged for 7yrs’). In both stories, these violent acts are situated in a narrative of the relatively mundane day-to-day occurrence of prison life. The first suggests the fight was a result of “a bust-up over their jail sentences”, the second was a result of a prisoner “missing out on a cream cake”, thus suggesting an environment of hyper-volatility and contributing to a representation of prisons as out-of-control. Graphic accounts of violence have been argued to have a more persuasive effect on mediated accounts of phenomena (Riddle, 2014). The Sun’s use of graphic visual descriptions within these reports thus provide colour to the representation of prisoners as not just defined by their criminality, but also as inherently dangerous individuals.

Subject Positions and Power Relations

As highlighted earlier, social representations are not value neutral, but are inextricably bound up with dominant ideology and relations of power (Jovchelovitch, 1996). The third and fourth stages of the analysis considered the way in which the discourse employed in The Sun positions prisons and prisoners, and how this might impact on opportunities for action.

‘Us’ vs ‘Them’ – The Othering of Prisoners

Throughout the articles analysed, stories focusing on specific prisoners were framed with reference to the crimes those prisoners had committed. By exclusively focusing on the most sensational crimes, The Sun discursively constructs an essentialist account of prisoners as inherently dangerous as described in the previous section. Within social psychology,

essentialism describes the tendency to attribute a shared essence to all members of an identified social group thereby contributing to the ‘othering’ of that group (Morton et al., 2009) – a process often linked to the deployment of negative stereotypes (Fiske, 2015).

The positioning of prisoners as an Other is further reinforced in the articles analysed through the placing of prisoners in opposition to non-prisoners, thereby situating accounts of prisoners within an ‘us’ vs ‘them’ dynamic. This is apparent in many of the articles analysed, notably in relation to hospital patients (e.g., Article 33 – ‘Hospital telly £70 a week, prison £1’), victims of crime (e.g., Article 15 – ‘Mother’s fury as jail selfies of son killer’) and in the following example, the taxpaying public:

“JAIL bosses bought 19,000 televisions for inmates last year.

...

The Prison Service in 2013 revealed taxpayers had picked up a £7.2 million bill for letting inmates watch the box in the previous four years.

Taxpayers had to cover the shortfall because prisoners only paid £1 a week for their sets.” (Article 31 – ‘19k tellies for lags’).

In this extract, the status of prisoners as an Other is manifest through a representation of the taxpayer as carrying the financial burden of prisoner access to television. The article objectifies this representation through a comparison of the costs absorbed by each group, with prisoners reported as ‘only’ paying ‘£1 a week for their sets’ whilst taxpayers ‘picked up a £7.2million bill’. This comparison serves to highlight how prisoners are draining the financial resources of taxpayers for the provision of unnecessary entertainment, thereby implicitly drawing on the shared representation of prisoners as underserving as described earlier, whilst also positioning prisoners in opposition to the deserving taxpayer. Once again there are important textual silences in play. For instance, there is no information regarding prisoners’ limited access to money, limited capacity to earn and imposition of £15 weekly spending limits (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2016) – contextual detail which suggests that £1-a-week is actually a notable portion of their weekly outgoings.

Interestingly, in the above extract, the ‘us’ vs ‘them’ dynamic is reinforced through the invocation of a relational discourse, with taxpayers ‘letting’ prisoners watch television. This highlights how the process of othering occurs in a context in which the reader is empowered as having the capability to initiate alternatives. Within the representational framework of prisons as out-of-control and providing an easy life, and prisoners as underserving and inherently violent, there is an implicit suggestion that these alternatives should be communicative rather than reformative, and that in this regard, the prison system is failing.

Beyond Redemption – A Prison System Failing in its Function

There is a notable textual silence around the proper function of prisons within The Sun’s reporting. However, a consideration of the earlier discussed wider discourses in which the prisons and prisoners are situated suggests an account of prisons as designed to serve a communicative function, whereby prison should “communicate to the offender in a symbolically appropriate way the seriousness of their offence” (Cochrane, 2017, p. 301). However, by representing prisoners as inherently dangerous and underserving, housed within a prison system which both provides an easy life and is out-of-control, The Sun’s reporting suggests that the prison system is failing in its communicative potential. Take the following extract, for instance, which reports on a specific prisoner’s complaints regarding access to puzzle books:

“A murder plotter jailed for 26 years is moaning about being denied puzzle books in prison.

Colin Deferia said his family was stopped from bringing him a supply in Norwich jail.

Writing in a prisoners’ mag, he said daytime TV was rotting his mind, adding: “There is no room for brain-work in this rule-bound system.”

Wealthy Deferia, 60, of Barking, Suffolk, was jailed last year for hiring hitmen to shoot his daughter’s ex-boyfriend.” (Article 21 – ‘Jail Book Ban Gripe’)

Here, the subject of the article is defined at the outset by the crime they have committed and the associated sentence duration. In the first sentence, the subject is pejoratively described as “moaning” about withdrawal of their access to “puzzle books”, thus creating a sense of perceived entitlement on behalf of the subject. Similar constructions are found elsewhere in the corpus in relation to life in prison, with prisoners described as “whinging” (Article 7 – ‘Hammer Thug: I’m not violent’), “demanding” (Article 9 – ‘Inmates win fight for lower carb diet’) and “complaining” (Article 30 – ‘Jail crime read fury’). The immediate framing of this sense of entitlement with reference to their status as a “murder plotter” implicitly positions the subject as undeserving, and thus draws on a consensual understanding of the communicative function of prison. The final two paragraphs reinforce this discursive construction. The third paragraph draws on a selective quote from the prisoner, which highlights a lack of opportunities for mental stimulation, contextualised with reference to their apparent dissatisfaction with “daytime TV”, thus invoking a representation of entitlement within a framework of access to entertainment. The final paragraph provides additional detail on the reason for incarceration and serves as a reminder of the severity of the crimes. The article is thus structured to create a sense of an entitled prisoner who is undeservingly enjoying an easy life and shows no sign of repentance, which runs counter to reader expectations of the proper function of prisons.

Interestingly, the article centres the prisoner’s complaint whilst ignoring any contextual information regarding the reason for the withdrawal of the prisoner’s access to these puzzle books. This highlights how the representation of prisons as failing in their function is enhanced through the operation of textual silences within *The Sun*’s reporting. The substantive point being made by the prisoner – that they are lacking mental stimulation – is overlooked in favour of a pejorative narrative which advances a representation of prisoners as having a sense of unwarranted entitlement. Such centring serves to silence questions surrounding alternative functions of the prison system, and instead draws on and reinforces a representation of a prison system which should primarily serve to communicate to prisoners through punishment – a function in which it is failing.

The communicative potential of prisons is also alluded to more directly, such as in one article about a celebrity prisoner seen whilst being escorted to a hospital appointment (Article 20 – ‘Shamed star picture exclusive’). In the article, a member of the public is quoted as saying that prison “hadn’t changed [the prisoner’s] features at all”, suggesting that this is an expectation of prison life which has not been fulfilled. Elsewhere, the communicative function of prisons is made apparent through accounts of public ‘fury’ at incidents involving prisoners engaging in relatively mundane behaviours, such as taking selfies and posting them online (e.g., Article 15 – ‘Mother’s fury at jail selfies of son killer’). Such stories suggest an understanding of prisons as places designed, but failing, to communicate to the prisoner the seriousness of their crimes.

The *Sun* thus employs a purposeful silence with regard to the rehabilitative capacity of prisons, and instead utilises rhetorical strategies to construct an account of a prison system as designed but failing in its capacity to cultivate appropriate remorse. Alongside the representation of prisoners as an underserving and inherently dangerous Other, situated within an out-of-control system providing prisoners with an easy life, the construction of prisons as failing in their communicative function thus ultimately positions prisoners as beyond redemption.

Discussion

The analysis above demonstrates how *The Sun*’s representation of the penal system is anchored to a construction of prisoners as undeserving and inherently dangerous, placed within a prison system which is both out-of-control and providing an easy life. It shows how these constructions position prisoners within a system failing in its communicative function, thereby contributing to a social representation of prisoners as beyond redemption. The press’ construction of prisons as both out-of-control and as providing an easy life for undeserving and inherently dangerous prisoners is reported in previous studies looking at the media representations of prisons and prisoners and, as such, the analysis herein accords with prior research (e.g., Cheliotis, 2010; Drake & Henley, 2014; Marsh, 2009; Mason, 2007; Yar, 2012).

As noted by Howarth (2006, p. 66), social representations are “alive and dynamic”, meaning that they can be both reinforced and contested in light of competing sources of knowledge. The *Sun* is one of many representational outlets for its reader, and therefore the constructions identified may be subject to contestation and revision through exposure

to other sources. Flick and Foster (2011) suggest triangulating research in order to account for this representational diversity, and future research into the social representation of prisons and prisoners would benefit from such an approach, perhaps, for instance, through the incorporation of focus groups with the population of interest. Future research could also benefit from taking demographic variation into account in the analysis. For instance, it has been noted elsewhere that media representations of criminality differ along racial and ethnic lines (Colburn & Melander, 2018), but such an approach has not been applied to the prison context. It is also noteworthy that, out of the 34 articles analysed, 3 focused on stories relating to female prisoners (Article 9 – ‘Inmates win fight for lower carb diet’; Article 25 – ‘Fury at sex-change lag’; Article 14 – ‘Jail nails boost at ‘relaxed’ new nick’). During analysis, it was observed that the language and contextualisation employed within these articles stood in contrast to the rest of the articles in the corpus, adopting a generally more supportive tone towards female prisoners than those about male prisoners. A focus on articles relating to female prisoners would provide the opportunity to investigate the extent to which The Sun’s contribution to the social representation of prisons and prisoners is gendered.

However, despite these limitations, extensive public opinion research shows that the findings herein are reflected in public sentiment (Roberts & Hough, 2005; Roberts et al., 2022); two thirds of the British public agree that prisoners have an “easy time” (Roberts & Hough, 2005, p. 291) and a significant majority view prisoners as “dangerous people who need to be contained” (p. 295). Furthermore, it has been found that the majority of the public disagreed with the statement “prison works” (p. 297) and only a quarter of surveyed public believed prison had the capacity to rehabilitate – findings which hold true regardless of demographic, and are only moderately affected by a direct experience of crime (Hough et al., 2013).

This analysis thus highlights The Sun’s potential influence in shaping societal perceptions of prisons and prisoners. Through the dual processes of anchoring and objectification, the newspaper contextualizes unfamiliar events within familiar shared frameworks of understanding, thereby impacting public perceptions of a complex system which to most is inaccessible (O’Connor, 2012). In doing so, The Sun employs “selective semiotic aestheticization” (Cheliotis, 2010), whereby editorial decisions are governed by a drive to capture the public interest fuelled by the otherwise unknowability of the prison system. The result is coverage which is not reflective of the general conditions of prison life, as reflected in Marsh’s (2009) observation that prison life is “dominated by routine... perhaps the major feature of day-to-day prison life is the monotony of it” (p. 371).

From a social psychological approach, this study’s adoption of a Social Representations approach facilitates a critical examination of The Sun’s news reporting. The Sun’s selective editorial decision making, textual silences and deliberate language usage, restricts exposure to potential competing representations. Along with the essentialist account of prisoners as an underserving and inherently violent Other, The Sun’s silence regarding the rehabilitative potential of prisons limits possibilities for an emancipatory representation which centres a humanised construction of prisoners, their history, and their experience. Poverty, lack of access to quality education and employment opportunities, systemic inequality, and inadequate social services are some among many structural factors that lead to participation in criminal activity (Sampson & Groves, 1989). By remaining silent on the root causes of imprisonment and by perpetuating a discourse that places the onus on individual actions over structural issues, The Sun contributes to a denial of opportunities for reintegration to those who are, in the main, already socially disadvantaged (Prisoners’ Education Trust, 2020). Thus, this analysis reveals how The Sun’s representation of prisons and prisoners not only reflects, but also actively perpetuates a skewed understanding of responsibility, favouring a hostile narrative which dehumanises prisoners as an irredeemable other.

The Sun’s reporting on prisons and prisoners also has more immediate practical implications. Research which has shown that successful community reintegration following time in prison is in part dependent upon the attitudes and reactions of the community (Hirschfield & Piquero, 2010). The representation of prisoners as beyond redemption could negatively impact the reintegration process – a process which is an essential component of successful desistance (see e.g., Bell et al., 2021). Furthermore, data collected from interviews with reformed offenders suggests that the process of desistance involves a shift to a pro-social identity (Aresti, Eatough, & Brooks-Gordon, 2010). The construction of prisoners as an inherently dangerous Other which is beyond redemption suggests an identity which is carried through life, thereby denying the possibility that such a shift could occur. This analysis is therefore suggestive of a critical reading of The Sun’s coverage of the penal system, whereby the construction of prisons and prisoners has the potential

to contribute to the continued exclusion of offenders after release as well as negatively impact on successful desistance from crime.

Finally, The Sun's editorial decision-making serves multiple ideological roles that align with and target specific audiences, whilst simultaneously serving the political and financial interests of the newspaper's owners (Arsenault & Castells, 2008; Billig, 1990). In their coverage of the prison system, The Sun reflects this ideological positioning in the centring of the irredeemable prisoner and their silence around the structural factors which can contribute to criminality. Such coverage is aligned with a neoliberal conception of individual responsibility linked to free market economic practices that prioritise economic freedom over government interventionism (Harvey, 2007). The critical analysis contained herein should thus be seen as part of a broader critical approach to understanding The Sun's coverage of news events more generally, and the way in which this coverage, through social psychological processes, has the capacity to shape individual representations of the world in service of the political and ideological aims of powerful interests.

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