“Thank you for having me”: The experiences and meanings of release from prison in Norway and England & Wales

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Abstract

The day of release from prison can be one of the most highly anticipated events for prisoners, and one which holds a place in the public imagination as a significant and transformative moment. Yet in scholarly literature, although there is much on prisoner resettlement and reintegration, the moment of release itself is seldom mentioned. Drawing on interviews (N:455) from a comparative research project in Norway and England & Wales, this paper will zoom in on the micro-processes that shape exit, capturing how prisoners prepare for release, the procedures and practices of the release day, and their first encounter with the outside world. In both countries, there was a juxtaposition of personal significance and institutional banality around exit, which contrast sharply with the highly ritualistic processes of sentencing and entry and which frequently led prisoners to reflect on the nature of their punishment and the meaning of their time in prison. By highlighting the details of release, the paper will explore these ideas, probing the boundaries that exist between the inside and outside worlds and connecting the experiences of exit with conceptual ideas of how punishment is experienced and how prisoners create meaning.
1 | Introduction

...how many films have you seen starting with some guy leaving prison and walking out of the gate? (Phil, E&W)

The day of release is one of the most significant and highly anticipated events for many prisoners and their families, and, as this quote from Phil suggests, one that holds a place in the public imagination. Surprisingly, though, release itself is rarely described in scholarly prisons literature. While there is an array of literature on resettlement and reintegration (Maruna and Immarigeon, 2004; Todd-Kvam and Ugelvik, 2019; Western 2018), the actual moment of release is seldom mentioned. Travis et al. (2001: 18) reference the ‘small but significant details’ which shape the day of release (such as the time of day one is allowed to walk out the gate, or the point at which one is reunited with family and how this happens) but acknowledge that there has been very little empirical research into the release event specifically. Notable exceptions more recently are Johns (2018), who devotes a chapter to the experience of release in Australia, and Durnescu (2018, 2019), who follows the re-entry journeys of prisoners in Romania; even these, though, move quickly to life post-release and the challenges of desistance rather than lingering on the moment itself. In this article we want to explore release as a significant point in prisoners’ journeys through the criminal justice system, filling the gap that exists between studies focusing on experiences in prison and post prison and probing the boundaries between the two worlds.

In particular, and drawing on the ideas of Maruna (2011), we want to highlight the juxtaposition of personal significance and institutional banality with regards to exit, demonstrated for example in the discrepancies between variously described rituals of entry and strong messages of penal significance at the beginning of the sentence and in court, and the procedural mundanity of exit. We found that for individuals leaving prison, exit could be an emotionally charged and confusing event that came with high expectations, and the institutional indifference frequently led prisoners to reflect on the nature, purpose, and conclusion of their punishment. Shedding light on this particular moment in a prison sentence contributes to wider theories of how justice is understood and how transitions affect the journey through the criminal justice system.

The article begins by discussing how release features in the literature on imprisonment, and positions release as a crucial part of prison life which has not yet been accurately captured by previous literature. Drawing on data from a study of everyday prisoner experiences in England & Wales and Norway, the first substantive section of the article focuses on release preparation, taking into account the experiences of the last few days in prison. The second part of the article explores the ‘event’ of exit, looking closely at the final moments of being in prison and standing on the threshold between prison and the outside world. The third follows ex-prisoners as they begin their journey home, highlighting the aspects of immediate release that were of particular significance to individuals. The point of this article is not to trace how prisoners reintegrate or re-establish their place in society, but instead to explore in detail how prisoners evaluate their experiences of release. By magnifying this particular moment, we hope to provide a backdrop for further thinking about the meaning of imprisonment, the ambiguities over when punishment ends, and the liminal experience around being or ceasing to be a prisoner.

2 | Literature
While there is a lack of literature specifically on the moment of release, there is plentiful literature showing that preparing for release, reintegrating into the community and desistance can be a lengthy process, fraught with difficulty and confusion (Durnescu, 2018, 2019; Fredriksson and Gålånder, 2020; Johns, 2018; Todd-Kvam and Todd-Kvam, 2021; Uggens et al., 2004; Visher and Travis, 2003, 2011; Western, 2018, among others). This can be the case even when coming from relatively nonpunitive and open prison conditions (Mjåland et al., 2021; Shammas 2014). The struggles of life immediately post-release include finding accommodation and employment, acquiring necessary documentation, psychologically leaving the routines of the institution behind and coping with continued supervision (Crewe, 2015; McNeill, 2019a; Schinkel 2014a). In many countries, prisoners feel that the institution does little to support their preparations, suggesting a gap between the intentions of resettlement programmes and reality (Crawley and Sparks, 2006; Western, 2018). While this paper does not intend to further document these struggles, we found that prisoners’ awareness of the upcoming challenges meant that exit was often contemplated and could cause emotional turmoil throughout their sentence.

Indeed, as will be evident in the discussion below, there is a highly emotional facet to release. Prisoners use very evocative language to describe their thoughts and experiences towards release, both as an imagined future event and to recount and reflect on the experience afterwards. Even where repetition and familiarity dull the process, the lack of emotion itself becomes significant. While there is a growing body of literature using emotion as a lens for understanding prison life (Crewe et al, 2014; Moran, 2015; Laws & Crewe, 2016), this has yet to focus on release specifically. Crewe et al (2014: 57) present a ‘challenge to the common depictions of prisons as environments that are unwaveringly sterile, unfailingly aggressive or emotionally undifferentiated,’ arguing instead that prisons have an ‘emotional geography’ whereby certain spaces or ‘zones’ around the prison enable more emotional displays than elsewhere in the prison. Applying this idea to release suggests that there is a temporal aspect to emotions as well: it is not just particular spaces in the prison, but also particular moments in a sentence, which shape the emotional experience of prison life. Here, the concern is specifically release, but we imagine that entry or a transfer to a more open prison might be other points (see, for example, Mickelthwaite and Earle, 2021). The emotions connected to release, however, shaped the whole experience of prison; anticipating release brought about a range of emotional responses throughout the sentence, and the emotional experience of release shaped how the sentence as a whole was remembered and understood.

The experiences and meanings of leaving prison are clearly different depending on both what one is returning to and whether imprisonment is a regularity or a rarity. Johns (2018: 119-123) distinguishes between those with ‘somewhere to go’ and ‘nowhere to go,’ situations which can often correspond with being either first-time or regular prisoners respectively. Durnescu (2018, 2203-2204) identifies three categories of prison leavers: ‘heroes’, those welcomed back with extravagant celebrations into large communities; ‘family men’, those who are quietly met by one or two family members; and ‘lone crusaders’, those who are socially isolated and unsupported. Some individuals find prison preferable to the outside world because it is where they have access to shelter and services that they usually lack in outside life (Carlen, 2013; Crewe and leivins, 2019; Durnescu, 2018; Schinkel, 2021), and for these prisoners, release is not a relief but rather the start of a ‘holiday’ before returning back to ‘where one belongs’ (Schinkel 2021: 11). Maidment (2006: 102) portrays leaving prison and adjusting to life outside as a ‘very difficult and anxious time’ for people who are being released, and this is particularly the case for groups that face extensive structural barriers and systemic inequalities in society. In a North American context Western (2018) shows the particular role that older women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts or older sisters – play in assisting individuals after leaving prison. This highlights the way in which the effects of imprisonment are far
from limited to those incarcerated, and simultaneously raises important concerns about the prospects of those who do not have family able to support them (see also Schliehe et al., 2021).

This ambiguity around what people are leaving into raises questions as to where punishment starts and ends. While the inside and outside of prison have been conceptualised as quite firmly distinguished by classic prison studies (Goffman 1961; Sykes 1958), more recent scholarship, particularly in carceral geography, has questioned this boundary and highlighted the complex and numerous inter-linkages between prison and society (Baer and Ravneberg, 2008; Moran, 2015; Turner, 2016). Just as the outside world permeates the prison boundary and can be carried into the carceral space (Turner, 2016), so the experience of imprisonment can follow and affect prisoners after they have left (Johns, 2018; Moran, 2014). In many ways, the divide becomes particularly visible and pronounced when release is concerned as prisoners step over the threshold of the prisons’ physical boundary. Yet, exit is also characterised by liminality shown in the way release is managed by staff, the uncertainty that awaits many people once they step outside the gate, and the way time seems to speed up in advance of release only to slow down on the day itself. The way time is experienced in prison has been discussed by Moran (2015: 49), who has argued that the ‘embodied experience of time is inextricably bound up with the embodied experience of space, and vice versa’ (Moran 2015: 49). These elements are especially noticeable at release, which has a particularly transitional nature: being moved off a residential wing in order to undergo a form of institutional processing, being kept in transitional cells (often in the reception area of the prison), being reunited with belongings and valuables, being taken to the gate – and experiencing waiting at these different points – before being thrust into a world that seems to be moving fast, and feeling out of kilter with it. Release from prison puts people into a liminal, ‘betwixt and between’ state (Foster, 2017; Turner, 1967), a social space in which ‘many seem to linger, neither locked up nor wholly free’ (Johns, 2018: 3).

These emotional and liminal factors raise questions as to the nature and meaning of punishment (see Schinkel 2014a). In this context, Sexton’s (2015) ideas around penal consciousness are helpful for understanding how prisoners evaluate their experience of punishment. Using a framework of severity and salience, she found (2015: 126) that the most punishing aspects of imprisonment were those that ‘were representative of larger losses or injustices’ – prison conditions such as poor healthcare or food provision ‘were far more severe for their symbolism of prison staff’s refusal to acknowledge prisoners’ humanity.’ It is not just what happens that is experienced as punishing, but what is communicated through action or neglect. Schinkel (2014b) has examined the extent to which a prison sentence acts as moral communication, from being sentenced in a courtroom to the experience of prison itself (see also Duff, 2001). Drawing on the experiences of men serving long sentences, she found that while individuals being sentenced experienced different levels of censure from the judge, ‘almost all of the men described the moment of sentencing with a sense of real drama’ (Schinkel, 2014b: 587). Once imprisoned, however, there was a ‘general absence of an intentional and meaningful dialogue about crime and punishment’ (Schinkel, 2014b: 590). We argue that this is particularly salient at exit, where the institutional banality contradicts the personal meaning attached to the moment and leads to individuals questioning the purpose of their confinement. Maruna (2011: 4) has highlighted the notable lack of meaning attached to exiting prison, particularly comparing the beginnings and ends of a sentence:

As a society, we make an impressive ritual of punishment – from the drama of the courtroom to the elaborate de-individuation processes involved in institutionalization. Yet, when it comes to reintegration – turning prisoners back into citizens – we typically forgo all
such ritual and try to make the process as stealthy and private as possible, if we make any effort at all.

Currently, those with supportive family members may receive welcome home parties (Durnescu, 2018; Western, 2018) and people leaving prison choose their own small ways of ritualising or marking their release from prison. But very little is communicated from the state in a comparative way to the manner in which a judge passes a sentence.

Of course, in many countries, for most prisoners, the end of imprisonment is not the end of state sanction; licence conditions and community supervision are usually imposed post-release, meaning that freedom is not total (McNeill, 2019a, 2019b; Todd-Kvam and Ugelvik, 2019). Nevertheless, for decades scholars have suggested that more should be done to mark the exit from prison, and indeed the end of punishment (Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994; Maruna 2011; Travis, 2000). An increasing body of literature shows that desistance from crime is a social-relational process as well as an individual one and can be assisted by state actors (such as probation officers) and individual community members (McNeill, 2006; Villeneuve et al, 2021). Reintegrative rituals could contribute to desistance by commending rehabilitative efforts made by the individual whilst incarcerated, ‘reinforcing desistance efforts by pointing these out to the desister and others’ (Villeneuve et al, 2021: 96), and giving prison leavers much-needed ‘opportunities to show to themselves and others that they really have changed’ (Ugelvik, 2021: 11). Maruna (2011) highlights that reintegrative rituals would be a two-way process, arguing that there should be a point – or points – at which the returning prisoner is formally accepted and welcomed by the community to which they return. Crucially, here, Maruna (2011: 13) points out that reintegrative rituals would involve and benefit the prison leaver and society; done well, they could signify apology on the part of the former prisoner and forgiveness and welcome by a section of society in a way that could ‘generate feelings of solidarity and community.’

Despite calls for such events to be a part of a criminal justice journey, however, state-initiated reintegrative rituals remain uncommon. Braithwaite and Mugford (1994) argue that ‘transformation ceremonies’ are missing from legal and penal processes generally, but particularly when communicating the end of a sentence and release into freedom. As such, prison leavers ‘lose powerful opportunities for transformations of self and context’ (Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994: 154), which would allow space for agency and voice (Christie, 1977). In much more recent work, leivins and Mjåland (2021) found that the absence of rituals inclusion can therefore also mean that ex-prisoners continue to be excluded from aspects of community life outside prison. They argue (2021: 472) that even in Norway, which imposes far fewer post-release restrictions than England & Wales, ex-prisoners’ reintegration and inclusion in society were highly dependent on families and social networks, and the lack of active reintegrative rituals from the state led at best to a ‘fragile inclusion.’ By exploring release from prison as an important moment of transition, we will discover below that the lack of productive communication and reaffirmation shapes the experience of exit and expectations for the future.

3 | Methods

The relative scarcity of empirical data on the exact point of exit is no doubt a reflection of the methodological difficulties of accessing and observing the spaces that span between inside and outside. In order to contribute to this area of research, we draw on qualitative data from a sub-study
on prison entry, exit and post-release from a larger ERC-funded project on Penal Policy and the Prisoner Experience in England & Wales and Norway (see (see Crewe et al, under review; Schliehe and Crewe, 2021; Schliehe et al., 2021). Data used here come from observations of prison receptions, in which prisoners were processed for entry and exit, and interviews with prisoners and ex-prisoners.

Three prisons in each country were initially selected as ‘core’ sites to conduct particular ethnographic observations of entry and exit. In England & Wales, these were local (Category B) prisons, two for men and one for women, all located in inner-city areas. In Norway, the prisons were also located near large cities and comprised one open prison for men, and two high-security establishments, of which one was a women’s prison and the other a men’s prison with 12 places reserved for women. Following the whole process of release (with prisoners’ consent) through observations enabled us to understand the non-verbal intricacies, rituals and affective atmosphere of release processes.

We had a sample of 455 interviews overall, taking into account three population groups: ‘mainstream’ male prisoners, female prisoners and men convicted of sexual offences. Interviewees were initially invited to participate upon entry to any of the three ‘core’ fieldwork sites. Participants were interviewed at up to three time points: entry (within two weeks or less of being processed into the prison), two weeks or less before release, and up to six months post-release in the community. Some pre-release interviews took place in other prisons than the initial ‘core’ sites, as prisoners had been transferred elsewhere during their sentence. The length of time between each interview depended on sentence length; most were serving sentences of less than two years. However, in order to include prisoners on longer sentences, additional prisons were added to the original sample where we interviewed prisoners just pre-release, with the aim of interviewing them again post-release. In England & Wales, these additional sites were a closed training prison (Category C) and an open prison (Category D); in Norway, these were two high security prisons designed to hold men on longer sentences and one smaller prison in a rural area with both high- and low-security units. The data in this article come predominantly from the pre-release and post-release interviews, during which all interviewees were asked about their expectations in advance and their experiences of exit, including their final conversations with or parting words from staff, their plans for possessions and travel, and what they did first upon release.

Interviews were generally conducted in offices on prison wings, lasting between one and three hours, and were recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim (the Norwegian ones were translated into English). Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, chosen by native speakers in each language to reflect relevant details such as age, nationality and ethnic or regional background. Data were coded using NVivo software, drawing on a conceptual framework derived from established work on the nature and experience of confinement (Crewe, 2011, 2015) and on themes emerging from the study. The extensive use of interview data meant delving into individual narratives. We found people often used wide-ranging metaphors to describe their experiences, a phenomenon worthy of some reflection (Kearns, 1997). We draw on the wide array of metaphors, including those associated with speed, light, weight, and the body, as a way of making sense of the diverse experiences of exit and to ‘feel’ what our participants experienced in the moments of exit. The significance of transition moments through a sentence was a primary focus of the study and it was relevant to a range of matters that related to our core research questions, including the experience of leaving itself but also the ways in which the sentence continues to impact people beyond the point of custody, and the ways in which people understand and make sense of their sentence overall.
4 | Preparing for release: ‘bubbles of happiness’ and ‘heavy rocks’

For many prisoners, thoughts about release were present in their life long before the release date. Jensen (E&W) described the way his release date was in his thoughts throughout his sentence:

So, at the beginning of my sentence, it was like a tiny hole at the end of a tunnel, but now, it’s… (long pause)

*Is it like a tiny ray of light, almost?*

Yes.

*And then it gets bigger?*

Yes, that type of thing. So, my home is just huge now. I do feel really close to home now.

Jeff (E&W) had more concrete expectations of release from the very start of his time in prison: ‘I know I’m rushing it, but I’m looking forward to the day I get out of here and go for a fucking pint! That’s the first thing I’m going to do, I’ll have a pint with my dad.’

For many prisoners, contemplating exit elicited diverging feelings, reflecting Johns’ (2018: 116) description of ‘gate fever’: ‘intense anticipation, ranging from dread to euphoria.’ The euphoria was evident in some people approaching exit; interviewees described feeling ‘total euphoria’ (Archie, E&W), ‘very, very happy’ (Beam, N), or ‘bubbly and excited’ (Jacob, E&W). Isaac (E&W) talked about how release stands for ‘excitement, I have a lot of aspirations and I can see my dreams being fulfilled, becoming a reality. That is what I am looking forward to right now. I am champing at the bit.’ Aagot (N) used gentler language but with a similarly embodied metaphor: ‘I can start my life after I get out of here (…) now I can finally breathe again.’ However, many prisoners expressed more emotional ambivalence about release, with the feelings of elation being accompanied by apprehension, akin to what Johns (2018: 116) describes as ‘dread’ and ‘euphoria’. For Carlos (E&W), anticipating release was a ‘rollercoaster of emotions’ including excitement and nervousness. Echoing the idea of temporal malleability in prison (Moran, 2015), he found that time seemed to slow down as he approached release, describing his final two weeks as ‘the longest ever’. Petter (N) described the range of emotions using vivid imagery suggestive of the way notions of release are felt corporeally, saying that it felt like ‘a bubble of happiness at the top of my chest, and then there is a heavy rock in the middle region.’

The types of worry that Petter described as ‘heavy rocks’ could be any number of practical and relational factors that need to be managed. Ruben (N), for example, found he was worried about ‘everything all at once. I was thinking about finances, my grandmother, cancer, friends, family and having to say good-bye to friends in prison.’ As Johns (2018) also found, accommodation and fear of being released homeless was a frequent concern, particularly for those in England & Wales where this is more common than in Norway. Bella (E&W) described housing as being ‘at the forefront of my mind’ due to the lack of clarity over whether she would have somewhere to stay. For some, contemplating exit was the source of extreme anxiety or even suicidal thoughts; some prisoners intimated that they were anxious about leaving because life inside was preferable to their distressed or abusive circumstances outside (Crewe and levins, 2019; Schinkel, 2021). Ellinor (N), for example,  

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1 Throughout this article, participants are referred to by a pseudonym and their country identifier.
described exit as ‘a little scary (...) because it’s so safe and sound here’. But some who were used to the revolving door expressed more emotional confusion about their situation:

All sorts of certain feelings, because I’ve been doing this for so long now, in and out with my addiction and that. You get excited because you are going to be released and you are going to be seeing everybody but then you get this feeling of dread again, like, oh, here we go again sort of thing. It’s like that vicious cycle and then get anxious as well because you want to try and do it and you don’t want to let people down (Ella, E&W).

Many of the fears around practicalities were seen as things that the institution could be helping with but were not. This lack of support was often experienced not just as a systemic issue but as an existential failure to provide help (Schliehe et al., 2021). Elsie (E&W) for example, said that, ‘it feels like a holiday camp in here, it doesn’t feel like a prison. They just don’t help you. They say they have got help in place, they’ve let me go out five times homeless.’ Dag (N) complained that ‘now when I’ll get released, it’ll be exactly the same (...) I’ll be without any money, no job to go to, no house to go to. So, then you’re forced to become a criminal.’ The sense of being ‘forced’ back into a certain lifestyle or being set up to fail was a powerful narrative from prisoners approaching their release date. The failure to prepare people well for release was seen as the prison neglecting its purpose.

For many prisoners, this failure also had relational dimensions. Prisoners often spend considerable amounts of time on a wing and build connections with members of staff, and therefore find staff being absent or ‘useless’ (Isabelle, E&W) to be indicative of the meaninglessness of the relationship. Schinkel (2021) found that those who have experienced repeat short-term sentences may feel that the only community they belong to is in prison; but the indifference from staff as prisoners approach release highlights the limits of this community. For some prisoners, this was also experienced as undermining their dignity or worth:

This system was created to help people to move on. But it seems like it’s just putting you back in an even worse position when you started. It makes you angry. They make you feel like you’re not worth anything. They make you feel like you’re not a human being. (Ali, E&W)

Ali’s words represent Sexton’s (2015) finding that staff treatment or inaction are found to be particularly painful and punishing when it communicates something deeper about their worth or humanity.

Release therefore takes up emotional and practical headspace for a long time before the day itself. While there is much that prisoners cannot control with regards to their release, we found that many prisoners attempted to regain some measure of control by making meticulous plans for what they would do with their body and their appearance before or as soon as possible after release. Idar (N), for example, had put everything in place to start dental treatment the week he got released, while Bob (E&W) had specifically planned to have his hair cut in prison just before release as a way to get ready for the outside. Some people’s plans were quite comprehensive: Imogen (E&W), for example, planned to go straight to the sunbed and get a spray tan before ‘get[ting] my nails done because I’m not very happy with my nails. And then I want to get my eyebrows done, get my hair done’. Jenna (E&W) similarly wanted to get her nails done: ‘nails, and then my hair. My hair’s a mess. I need to do my nails first. I’m going to go to the nail bar, treat myself. Have my toes done, white tips’. Roman (E&W) had a proper shopping plan ready weeks before his release:

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2 It is unclear why Idar wanted to do this outside prison, where dental treatment is expensive, rather than using the free services inside prison; it is perhaps reflective of the desire to revitalise his appearance on his own terms, rather than it being still somewhat under the control of the state.
When I get out, my brother said he is going to give me £1000 to go home with. I will go straight to the shop, buy a pair of Prada’s, a pair of jeans and a nice top, go get my hair cut, full shave.

These intricate attentions to their appearance may seem superficial when compared to anxiety around housing, jobs and relationships. However, as well as probably going some way to counteracting the impact imprisonment has had on their health and physical appearance (Moran, 2014), there was perhaps a more symbolic meaning to their beautification plans. Goffman (1991, 130) has described entering a closed institution such as a prison as a ‘stripping’ process, whereby the rights, liberties and satisfactions of a free person are removed. Life inside can lead to multiple forms of mortification that have a major implication for the detainee’s sense of self – leading to what Goffman describes as a form of de-individualisation. According to Sexton (2015: 124), this ‘deindividuation effect,’ whereby prisoners are stripped of their self-identity, continues to be one of the more painful aspects of imprisonment. We found that for those approaching their release date, leaving prison meant a new start or a fresh phase of life, and therefore prisoners engaged in what might be termed re-individuation processes. They wanted to prepare for and signify the anticipated change in state and status by transforming themselves into their prior or even new ‘selves’ (Moran, 2012) including by giving themselves a new and improved bodily appearance. Their efforts reflected a sense that they were approaching release as an event which signified something would change for them, despite the institutional indifference they experienced. This juxtaposition of institutional carelessness and personal meaning continued to feature as the release day itself arrived.

5 | The process of exiting – ‘you leave by the backdoor’

Having spent much of the sentence contemplating, preparing for or trying to ignore the approaching release date, the day itself could be practically and emotionally confusing. Of course, for many people leaving prison was a joyful experience. Interviewees recounted shouting for joy as they left, describing the sensation as ‘glorious’ (Svein-Atle, N), or ‘brilliant’ (Dexter, E&W). Several used the metaphor of feeling like a weight was being lifted off their shoulders as they left or compared the feeling of leaving to being high or ‘drunk on happiness’ (Theodor, N). And yet, as with preparation for release, feelings of unmitigated joy were uncommon, and interviewees also revealed the struggles they faced leaving prison.

The process of leaving prison was largely described the same across all estates. Prisoners were normally released on weekday mornings, although there were occasional instances in Norway of individuals leaving at the weekend, and in both countries the process could take a long time, leading to later releases.3 Prison leavers usually packed their belongings the day before at the latest and tidied their cells (this was emphasised much more in Norway where prisoners rarely shared cells and generally felt much more ownership over their living space). In the morning, they were collected from their cells by staff, taken to reception and placed in a holding cell to wait to be processed. Exit and entry happened in the same space, and, in England & Wales especially, there was often a continuous flow of people coming in or out of the prison. From a staff perspective, exit can be organised rather like a production line, with possessions and paperwork being prepared and laid out in advance, but the experience for prisoners is less streamlined. Indeed, there was often a stark lack

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3 The time and day of release is an area of concern for many people and organisations, as there are regular accounts of people not having access to support services because agencies are closed by the time they have been released.
of individualised care, such as jokes around not being able to correctly identify the prisoner, or prisoners being released into extreme weather conditions without suitable attire.

Many interviewees described waiting long periods to be collected from their cell or to be processed and actually let out. This was more the case in England & Wales, which was dealing with far higher numbers of people. But in both countries, interviewees portrayed the difficulty of waiting to leave and the frustration of not knowing when it might actually happen. Waiting in a holding cell with others sometimes caused ‘aggro’ and ‘tension’ (Anton, E&W). The often unknown wait time (Armstrong, 2018) could be exhausting and deflating. Archie (E&W) explained that ‘You can taste freedom, but it’s being dangled in front of you like a carrot [...] When I eventually got out [...] I was so fed up by then I didn’t enjoy it as much.’ Rather than heightening the anticipation and therefore sense of relief at exit, waiting for release tainted the experience.

Practically speaking, the moment of release itself was not a simple event. Having entered in the prison van, many prison leavers had never set foot in the area from which they were released, and simply did not know their way out. Several interviewees depicted their confusion and distress of locating the right gate to leave from or avoiding the vehicles coming in and out. Mason (E&W) described having to be directed by the postman, because staff did not tell him where to go. Margit (N) shared her fear of being released without knowing the directions: ‘I’m so scared, to be honest, so I was terrified. I was just like, ‘where am I going when I get out of here?’’ Once the other side of the gate, ex-prisoners said they often did not know where the bus stop was, or could not find their family in the overwhelmingly large car park. Glenn (E&W) summed it up: ‘It wasn’t easy, getting out.’

The experience of leaving prison was different for those who had been in and out of prison before. Those who had been on home leave from open prisons in advance of their final exit generally found the last day less emotionally charged. Many veterans of prison reflected that the joy of leaving got dulled over time. Joey (E&W) reminisced about how leaving used to feel, comparing it to ‘winning the lottery’ or taking ecstasy. Now, he acknowledged that times had changed, and being used to it meant he was still ‘really glad to be out’ but that release did not feel as meaningful or joyful anymore. Kurt (N) likewise said that leaving prison had become ‘routine’ such that it no longer carried much emotion. For some, though, the repetition made the experience a little bit worse every time. Ludwig (N), for example, said:

I’ve been through it many times, you know, the first times being released feels very grand and that sort of thing but now I know that being released isn’t so – there’s a lot of anxiety. [...] I’m not trying to make a big deal out of it because it’s happened so many times before and I think it’s more and more and more embarrassing every time.

Even though the process of exit becomes familiar for some, there could still be an incremental build-up of shame, since each time was a further reminder of the way life had not worked out the way he had hoped (Laursen, 2022).

Regardless of the number of previous sentences though, there was a marked juxtaposition of meaning and mundanity in accounts of exit. Jax (E&W), for example, described leaving prison as going ‘from one world to the next,’ highlighting the significance of this threshold moment, but later gave a less inspiring account, saying that, that ‘it wasn’t like an excitement feeling, it was just normal.’ Johns (2018: 118) found some participants described exit as ‘just another day’, and our interviewees likewise often discussed their release in very bland terms, characterising it as ‘nothing special’ (Dagfinn, N). Glenn (E&W) alluded to the insignificance of leaving: ‘A lot of people have asked me that. “Oh, you must have felt amazing when you came out, you know, you were exhilarated” or whatever. Not really. I was just on the other side of the wall.’ Jesper (N) found exit
similarly unemotional: ‘It wasn’t that much of a feeling. You imagine that when you leave a prison you get an enormous feeling of freedom, but it’s not like that.’ The dullness contrasted sharply with the emotional turbulence with which many approached their release date. For some, this was desirable; people wanted to leave quickly and forget about prison. Indeed, for many the ability to have a ‘normal’ day outside was in itself a cause for celebration.

For others, however, it felt like something was missing; there was an institutional banality that lacked anything to ‘absorb the impact of release from one environment to another’ (Johns, 2018: 119). Exit was sometimes depicted as a hidden part of the prison journey: ‘you leave by the back door’ (Arnfinn, N), like ‘slipping out of the door and disappearing’ (Allen, E&W). For some, the banality bordered on being abrupt or even violent, rather than a sign that ‘normal’ life could start. Lots of interviewees used the idea of being ‘chucked out’ or ‘thrown out the door’ to describe the experience, pointing again to way that staff who had previously seemed to care did not do so at exit. This was particularly noteworthy when compared to the ritual of the beginnings of a sentence. Echoing Maruna (2011), Glenn (E&W) noted the asymmetry between entrance to prison, where court and transport feels ‘like a theatre production […] very much like a stage show and well-rehearsed and so on’ compared to the blandness of exit, where ‘there actually isn’t anything like that when you come out.’ For Glenn, this was another example of existential failure on the part of the prison:

It is just warehousing. They get you in, they know they have to do certain things while you are there to look after you in prison, and when it comes to kick you out the gate, that is done, because there is somebody else coming in the other end; being processed, coming in. So it’s just a cyclical thing.

The lack of meaning and ritual was perhaps most evident in the final words spoken to prisoners as they left. Almost unanimously, across all establishments, interviewees’ accounts of the final communications from prison personnel could be put into one of two ritualised tropes: ‘see you soon’ or ‘don’t come back’. Whichever phrase was used, this was often received as a reminder of the challenges facing people leaving prison, and a lack of interest about how they would cope outside. These words can seem callous; Ava (E&W), for example, suggested that staff saying ‘don’t come back’ is a meaningless statement because it is so unrealistic:

That’s what they tell you. But half of the people in there, they know they’re going to come back anyway because you know you are releasing them to where they have got nowhere. That’s just the way it is.

Others found the cavalier attitude of staff to be more hurtful, and were demoralised by being reminded of the likelihood of their return. Charlotte (E&W) for example, found the statement reinforced a sense of hopelessness:

They said, ‘see you in a couple of weeks’ because they know they’re going to be back. [pause] If the prison staff don’t even have faith that you’re going to stay out, how are you supposed to have faith in yourself that you’re going to stay out?

This stands in stark contrast to Ugelvik’s (2021) finding that words of trust can be empowering and transformative. These stock phrases as people left prison communicated a lack of faith at precisely the moment when encouragement and hope might have been the most valuable.

There were occasional instances of meaningful conversations with staff on exit. Men in Norway were the most likely to receive active encouragement that felt meaningful and marked a transition to freedom. Asle (N), for example, described a conversation with his contact officer, who thanked Asle
for the way he had behaved whilst in prison, expressed interest in his future plans, and told him to get in touch if he needed anything. However, more often, the final interactions served as a ritual reminder of their offender status. Ruben said that through the final conversation with staff, ‘they stuck the last few thorns in my side.’ One Norwegian prison also took the final interview as an opportunity to ask people leaving prison to report on their fellow prisoners – were there drugs on the wing, who should staff be looking out for and similar questions. Being asked to inform on other prisoners suggests that power continues to operate right until the gate. There were occasions were prisoners were kept handcuffed until they were released out of the gate, and instances of ‘banterous’ comments from staff that were not considered funny by the prisoner. Some prisoners offered simple but meaningful farewells to staff – Aagot (N), for example, said ‘Thank you for having me’ as she left – but these goodbyes were often ignored. The final interactions often served to mar what might have the potential to be a meaningful moment. Many people left prison in bewilderment and entered the free world in a state of confusion rather than elation.

6 | Journeys towards freedom – ‘a chapter I left behind’

While there was a threshold moment, where people felt themselves to be one side or other of the prison boundary, this did not correspond with a clear moment of feeling free. The immediate encounters with the outside world could be overwhelming, with a general feeling of being in a liminal state without proper permission to move. Some interviewees had to brace themselves for taking the first step into freedom, such as Joel (E&W) who had do ‘three takes to physically make that first step’. Ex-prisoners often felt bewildered after being released, and somewhat overpowered by the sensory aspects of outside life compared to being inside, as Claus (N) described:

It [imprisonment] does something to you. [...] You're inside a bubble, simply. [...] the world stands still these weeks. [...] And then all of a sudden: "bam!" You’re back out. There’s full traffic. Your senses. If you have been in there for a year or something like that; your senses very much go into high gear. I was completely out of it when I came into town.

Bjarne (N) shared similarly that he felt ‘muddleheaded’ upon release, and thought the best response to the sensory overload was ‘sitting on a bench and let people rush past you.’ On entering the outside world, ex-prisoners often felt out of kilter with the sights and speed of the environment they found themselves in.

The liminal state of being neither still in prison nor truly free was symbolised in particular by luggage. Using the term figuratively, Johns (2018: 143) writes that ‘experiences of being out were marked by a sense of being “other” than “normal” society and carrying prison baggage that persisted to varying degrees.’ Yet literal baggage carried out of prison could also be a source of shame, a scarlet letter that made stigma hyper-visible (McNeill, 2019b). Those collected by family or friends had an easier time with luggage because they were able to take their things directly to the car; indeed, one man in Norway even had permission for the car to drive to his wing in the prison for ease of packing. However, those with lots of luggage but without anyone coming to collect them upon release described feelings of powerlessness and embarrassment. This was particularly the case for those without suitable bags of their own, who would be given prison-issue bags. Prisoners often expressed disdain about having to carry their belongings in a bin bag, which made them easily recognisable as prison leavers; one man refused a plastic bag because he was, in his words, ‘not a freak’ (fieldnotes, local prison, E&W). Clarita (E&W) found it ‘a bit embarrassing’ when she had ‘one of the black prison bags’ on her shoulder and heard ‘some bloke saying to his mate, “She’s just come out of prison”.’
Sigve (N) likewise found that his luggage made him visible: ‘When you get on [the bus] with a backpack, a plastic bag and a garbage bag with stuff in it, people look at you. They do.’ Unsurprisingly, then, some interviewees had carefully planned how to transport their belongings to avoid stigma, such as asking officers for permission to repurpose their ‘Tesco carrier bag’ (Carlos, E&W) – a brand that is commonly seen carried in everyday life outside. Those who had previous experience of imprisonment sometimes brought a large holdall bag upon entry to the prison with the idea of using it upon release, reflecting again the way that preparing for exit could shape the beginning of a sentence. Luggage, therefore, was a practicality that needed to be managed, but one that had a symbolic weight as well, representing the liminal state people leaving prison found themselves in.

Nevertheless, it was clear that ex-prisoners did feel a difference being the other side of the boundary, and many individuals found small but meaningful ways of marking their newfound freedom. For some, this was done by turning almost immediately to their substance of choice ‘I was literally smoking [drugs] in the car park’ (Ella, E&W). Margit (N) exclaimed that ‘the first thing you want when you come back out is a cold beer,’ while Adam (E&W) initially felt ‘a bit numb’ but being able ‘to go and have a cigarette’ upon his release made him feel like ‘a free man’. Others rushed outside to enjoy nature and open space such as Birte (N) who went ‘for a swim’ first thing upon her release. While some found the sights and sounds of the outside world overwhelming, others revelled in the full sensory experience. Carlos (E&W), for example, shared:

Yeah, you go out and the air instantly feels different, you just look up and, I know you can be in prison and look up at the sky, but it’s different the other side. I can look up wherever I want. I remember the evening, it was raining, and everyone’s like, “Ah, it’s raining.” And I was just stood there going, “It’s just nice to feel it.”

For others, the moment of having their possessions returned to them provided an opportunity to mark the transition. Some prison leavers immediately changed their prison clothes for their own or put watches and necklaces back on as soon as they had an opportunity. For Petter (N), being in control of his personal hygiene functioned of something as a ritual: he showed ‘as soon as I cam home. And washed all of my clothes, as soon as I came home. To get rid of that prison smell. […] You shower until you are clean. While these personal rituals were not, perhaps, the meticulously planned moments of beautification described above, they did provide a meaningful way of re-establishing selfhood, and perhaps metaphorically unshackling themselves from the institution to a degree.

The most potent transition moments tended to come when they involved reconnection with loved ones. There were several accounts of prison leavers being met joyfully by family or friends, having parties in the car park, or enjoying hugs and physical affection. Dexter (E&W), for example, said, ‘I just gave my mum a big cuddle, gave my stepdad a big cuddle, and then sat in the back of the car, watching the world go by, looking at all the roads that I couldn’t go down before. It was good.’ Egil (N) was met by his family, who had planned a joyful celebration:

So, when I came out of the gate they stood there with small Norwegian flags, blasting ‘Olsenbanden’ [film] in the car [Laughter]. And my mother-in-law had knitted three ribbons in the form of Norwegian flags, so they stood there wearing two of them and fastened one on me when I came out of the gate.

Like Dexter, Egil was struck by being joyfully received by his family before leaving in the car and realising that they ‘could drive everywhere’ they wanted. He left prison feeling like his sentence was ‘was a chapter that I left behind.’
These emotions were amplified by the welcome home party his family had thrown him with ‘all of the uncles and the children,’ an experience similar to Durnescu’s (2018: 2203) description of the ‘hero’s’ welcome. In our sample, extravagant greetings at the gate or welcome home parties could affirm bonds of kinship, signal moral inclusion and ease the challenge of ‘reentering the world as a stranger’ (Irwin, 1970: 115). These parties, however, were less common for interviewees who had served many prior prison sentences (see Western, 2018). A welcome home party presupposed that going to prison was a ‘spectacular’ and one-off event while ‘persistent short prison sentences’ (Schinkel, 2021) meant that short-term imprisonment was a regular and expected event which end did not warrant celebration. Social integration (see Western, 2018: 26-27) was pivotal to interviewees’ feelings of being able to ease into life outside prison again, but the different chances of re-integration often became clear already at the point of leaving the prison. Being collected by family or friends often gave powerful message about reconciliation and community membership, whereas having to make their own way outside the institution amplified feelings of disconnection and isolation (Schliehe et al., 2021). While some were met with touching displays of welcome from loved ones, others recounted moments of awkwardness and discomfort upon being reunited with family, and others felt a profound sense of loneliness from being released without anyone to greet them or mark the transition back into the community.

7 | Discussion

Through this article we have tried to put a magnifying lens on the micro-level aspects of prison release, the ‘small but significant details’ (Travis et al., 2001: 18) that hold meaning for the individuals involved. Appearance, luggage and transportation were not mere practicalities; they carried larger symbolic and emotional weight. Prisoners’ preparations and emotional turbulence in advance suggested that they were approaching exit as if something was changing for them, but this was generally not matched by the institutional response. In this context, the disinterested final words from staff in prison were not just the absent-minded goodbyes at the door; they communicated something deeper. Prisoners’ words of thanks and goodbye as they left suggest that there was a desire for a sense of closure as a prison sentence came to an end. ‘Thank you for having me’ (Aagot, N), though perhaps a somewhat formulaic farewell, are words that indicate that a meaningful experience and time has come to an end. It suggests a desire for reciprocity on the part of the staff, and therefore makes their lack of response particularly salient.

Given the comparative context of the research, it is striking that these findings are similar across two very different systems. Norway and England & Wales have quite different approaches to justice and punishment (Crewe et al., 2022). Yet when looking at prison release, while there were occasional particularities of the experience in each country, it was the parallels between the two countries that stood out most clearly. Of equal importance is that these findings apply to both men and women in prison and to prisoners coming from different security categories. From the formal procedures to the micro-level aspects of preparations and final communications, the details of release were noticeably alike and held similar meaning for those leaving prison. Release is something of a forgotten part of a criminal justice journey, and our findings suggest that the lack of attention given to this moment by the state is not predicted by the punitiveness of the system or limited to particular countries. Regardless of how punishing or otherwise the experience of prison had been, exit was often a missed opportunity for moments of symbolism from the institution or the state which might correspond to state rituals at the beginnings of a sentence.
The juxtaposition of personal meaning and institutional banality often led people to question the meaning and purpose of their time in prison. The start of a sentence is characterised by the drama and censure of the courtroom (Maruna, 2011; Schinkel, 2014b), featuring a clear sign from state actors that someone has erred for which the punishment should be a time of exclusion from society. However, once sentenced few prisoners are actively encouraged to consider their crime but are instead ‘left to create their own meanings’ to explain why their actions necessitated imprisonment (Schinkel, 2014b: 592). The hidden and indifferent processes from the state at the end of a prison sentence likewise suggest that it is unimportant to ensure a clear ending. Indeed, for many in our study the immediate encounters with the outside world served more as a ritual reminder that they were not truly free – luggage or sensory overload could function as symbols that they have not left the institution behind, and licence conditions meant that their freedom is not total. Yet, it remained unclear to many why it was necessary for them to be excluded from society for a time, when they were released with nothing to mark that they have ‘done their time’ and can now be included again (Ievins and Mjåland, 2021). The lack of effort and ceremony from state actors communicated to those leaving prison that their carceral experience is of little meaning and their future of little importance.

Throughout this article, we have highlighted the many times where people did mark the transition from prison to freedom, in small or sometimes quite extravagant ways. These, however, were always informal and dependent on individuals and circumstances, rather than formal markers of a transition from offender back into citizen (Maruna, 2011). While there were occasional instances of meaningful final interactions with staff which perhaps operated as some form of ‘transformation ceremony’ (Braithwaite and Mugford, 1994) that could celebrate the progress made and signal the change in status taking place (Villeneuve et al, 2021), these were contingent on particular staff members rather than operating as a formal state ritual. Being welcomed back into outside society was likewise dependent on existing community ties, and rarely reflected any official reception or status change. This may be one point of difference between the two nations: while on the whole the experience of exit was remarkably similar in both jurisdictions, there were several accounts of Norwegian prison leavers being met in the car park by family members waving national flags and playing a culturally iconic song, a scenario connecting the individual, family and state which was never mentioned by prison leavers in England & Wales.

It is worth speculating what a more meaningful and constructive release process might be. Maruna (2011) has imagined what reintegration rituals might look like as part of a criminal justice journey, suggesting they would be symbolic and emotive, be repeated as necessary, involve community, focus on challenge and achievement, and would in some way negate the original degradation ceremony at the start of a sentence. Much of this would happen in the community post-release, but the moment of release from prison presents an opportunity for some of these aspects to be fulfilled. Certainly, the final conversations with staff could be more productive: even taking into account the limitations of time and personnel, it seems possible that prison staff could be more interested in the prison leavers’ next steps and express more (and genuine) encouragement. Simple steps such as acknowledging courses completed or celebrating qualifications achieved could be significant. It might be that having a more individualised approach would involve having personal officers more involved in the process. Indeed, if we were to reimagine the system more extensively, having someone with a parallel role to a judge at the beginning of a sentence to acknowledge the end of incarceration and formally recognise any achievements made in prison would fulfil several of Maruna’s suggestions, would provide the bookend that some people seek, and would ‘reinforce’ desistance processes that might prove to be fruitful in the longer term (Villeneuve et al, 2021). Doing so in a way that engages with communities, and where necessary utilises ‘artificial groupings of
volunteers’ (Maruna, 2011: 18) to welcome those without existing community ties, might go some way to aiding reintegration and community for membership for all those leaving prison, including those currently more isolated at exit.

Ultimately, such measures only make sense if they mark a transition point in a criminal justice journey where desistance from crime and (re)integration into community life is a continual focus. As Maruna (2011) points out, rituals can easily become meaningless; there is little point therefore in celebrating progress that has not actually occurred or enacting a welcome ceremony with a community that will not welcome the ex-prisoner ongoingly. Yet where these things are in place, and where those leaving prison feel they have made progress through their incarceration, reintegrative rituals might function as ‘both an indication of and a contribution to’ (Ugelvik, 2021:2) desistance and inclusion.

8 | Conclusion

We have traced prisoners’ experiences of release from contemplation and preparation, through the event itself and into the first moments of life outside. We have highlighted the emotional ambivalence attached to exit from prison, and recommended that more be done on a formalised and state level, where appropriate, to mark the transition from prison to the outside world. This would not serve to replace more practical reintegration efforts – clearly, people having accommodation and access to necessary services is crucial. Where these are in place, however, developing rituals or markers that recognise the transitional nature of leaving prison might help ease fears, re-establish selfhood and engender community membership, all of which could help prison leavers move forward with their lives.

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