

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# ‘Mind your language’: What people in prison think about the language used to describe them

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**Abstract**

This study investigated how people in prison feel about the language used to describe them and how it affected them. Previous research shows that terminology used to describe people in prison affects their self-identity, namely through its shame-inducing effects. A thematic analysis of qualitative data gathered through interviews demonstrated that language impacts how an individual in prison engages with the community and how they view themselves. Positive and progressive language in prisons has the potential to remove the shame and stigma attached to the prisoner identity.

**KEYWORDS**

dehumanising language, identity, language in prisons, shame, stigmatisation

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Many researchers have demonstrated that the language employed to describe people in prison can greatly influence how they are considered by wider society (see Campbell & Deacon, 2006; Chiricos et al., 2007; Lowe & Willis, 2020; Tran et al., 2018). If ‘criminals are regarded as non-reforming savages, then public attitudes are likely to be negative and result in highly punitive approaches to criminal justice’ (Kury & Ferdinand, 1999, in Vasiljevic & Viki, 2013, p.130). It is not only in academic literature that the use of language in prisons has been explored; indeed there has been a recent shift in HM Prison and Probation Service’s (HMPPS) policy towards a more progressive use of language. The 2021 *The Target Operating Model for probation services in England*

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and Wales uses 'language intended to resonate with stakeholders and best reflect the intentions behind the new model and the benefits that we are seeking to achieve' (HM Prison and Probation Service, 2021, p.4). This progression demonstrates emerging considerations of the relationship between language and both perceived and internalised identities and makes this article's research all the more relevant. The article explores prisoners' perceptions of the language used in prisons and the effects this has on prisoners' self-identity.

The seminal works of Howard Becker (1997) illuminated the negative impact of labelling individuals. Such labelling can impact self-identity, as well as future behaviour. Literature tends to agree that labelling an individual as a 'criminal' leads to stigmatisation (Brownlee, 2017; Hadjimatheou, 2016; Link & Phelan, 2001; Moore, Stuewig & Tangney, 2016). Brownlee (2017) argues that generic terms such as 'perpetrator', 'offender' and 'criminal' carry misleading connotations. It is believed that these terms imply that the person has a disposition to offend, and a tendency to commit crime, which is often an unfair conclusion to draw (Brownlee, 2017). Link & Phelan (2001) further this argument, stating that stigmatisation results in status loss, discrimination and disadvantage, since the stigmatised person is alienated and excluded from opportunities available to their non-stigmatised counterparts. This stigmatisation not only has an impact on how an individual might be treated by others, but also impacts how the stigmatised individual feels about themselves (Crocker, Major & Steele, 1998; Link et al., 1989).

Stigmatisation has been found to have a significant impact on an individual, to the point where it influences their social interactions, and research suggests a direct relationship between stigma and social exclusion (Mfofo-M'Carthy & Sossou, 2017). It has been found that being formally labelled as an offender causes one to internalise stigmatising attitudes, withdraw from conventional society and conform to a deviant identity (Lemert, 1974). In addition, stigmatisation has been found to cause shame responses in stigmatised people (Benson et al., 2011; Braithwaite, 1989). Duff (1986) has argued that the negative impact of this feeling of shame due to public labelling is a considerable punishment. Conspicuous criminal labelling can be so destructive that it effectively fulfils the communicative function of punishment (Duff, 1986). The very suggestion that labelling people as criminals could punish an individual enough to render a custodial sentence superfluous highlights the potential power of words to have a profound impact on an individual's self-worth, further isolating them from the community. Braithwaite (1989) proposes that stigmatic shaming labels an offender as a bad person entirely, thus language which degrades or humiliates offenders has the potential to negatively impact not only their self-identity, but future crime rates (Braithwaite, 1989). However, Braithwaite (1989) also argues that shaming labels have the potential to have alternative effects. Although stigmatic shaming is wholly negative and at times, unforgiving, some degree of shame has positive functions in terms of prevention and deterrence, as well as allowing offenders to acknowledge their deviancy. The works of Braithwaite (1989) offer a nuanced extension of the underlying assumptions of Becker's (1997) labelling theory. An awareness of the potential for labels to cause shame and stigma is recognised. However, considering that some level of shame may have positive outcomes for offenders creates the need to acknowledge the nuances which language and its relationship with identity portrays.

Moreover, language has the potential to impact an individual's self-identity both positively and negatively. If language towards prisoners is positive and progressive, there is potential for individuals' self-identity to, in turn, become more positive. In this context, 'progressive language' is 'humane and constructive language that promotes respect, dignity, understanding, and positive outlooks' (Tran et al., 2018, p.4). By using language that is respectful and stigma-free an individual feels accepted and supported. Conversely, if language is wholly negative, there is potential for this to have shame-inducing outcomes for individuals. Given that the language used to describe people in prison shapes society's views of this population, it is arguable that the use of language has

an implicit impact on an individual's capability to reintegrate into society and become a prosocial member of the community (Erikson, 1966).

A breadth of research has demonstrated that an individual's capacity to change their identity and envisage a 'future self' is impacted by the language used to talk to them and about them (Giordano, Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Vaughan, 2007). In a therapeutic community, the use of first names was found to privilege the 'singularity of the individual over the stigmatized homogeneity of "the offender", and so powerfully conveyed to residents that they too were unique "human beings" and not "just cons"' (Stevens, 2012, p.67). Moreover, the use of 'the preferred language of "residents" not prisoners' enabled people 'to become, someone "different" to their former offender/prisoner self' (Stevens, 2012, p.68). This aligns with Maruna's (2001) theory that 'to desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, pro-social identity for themselves' (p.7). It thus seems possible that altering the language used to talk to and about people in prison could aid them to rebuild a life for themselves as a non-offending member of the community. Braithwaite (1989) contends that how shame surrounding crime is communicated within societies shapes how crime, and those responsible for committing wrongdoings are responded to by the wider community. As such, language, and the shame that it encapsulates may have the potential to affect reintegrative processes upon release from custody. Negative language has the potential to induce shame upon an individual, as well as lead to stigmatisation from the community. Reintegrative shaming communicates a condemnation for the wrongdoing committed, while encouraging offenders to desist from this behaviour (Braithwaite, 1989). As such, if language, a powerful tool for communication, can convey condemnation progressively and respectfully, such may serve better outcomes for prisons and those who inhabit them.

This research explored the impact of the use of language in prisons, specifically aiming to understand if people in prison perceive the language used in prison to be important and how the language used impacts an individual's relationship with the community and their self-identity. Additionally, the research intended to understand how people in prison feel about the use of more progressive language, participant perspectives were analysed alongside existing literature to better understand the use of language in prisons.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, exploratory approach was adopted within this study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve participants who were serving a custodial sentence in a male, Category B establishment in England. This cross-sectional study was conducted within a single research site, including participants serving a range of sentence lengths for various index offences, to explore a breadth of experiences.

The interview process began with a word association exercise, whereby participants were asked to reflect on commonly used terms in prisons, to determine how such made them feel about their environment and their self-identity. The interviews which followed used an open style of questioning; a method by which interviews are more likely to produce richer data (Ogden & Cornwell, 2010). Interviews focused on how participants felt about the language used in prisons and participants were asked to reflect on how the words used to talk to them and about them affect how they view themselves. The study explored the extent to which people currently in prison feel their identity is defined by the labels assigned to them and the stigma that ensues.

All interviews were recorded with prior consent from participants and were coded before thematic analysis was conducted. 'In all likelihood, crime and other complicated social phenomena

have multiple causes' (Withrow, 2016, p.128), so research analysis focused on exploring the impact of language on people in prison. When identifying themes in the dataset, the researcher was guided by Braun & Clarke's (2006) approach. Once identified, overarching themes were examined in relation to the existing body of research on the use of language in prisons. Care was taken to ensure themes were identified 'horizontally', that is, across all interviews, in order to capture findings that hold true for multiple individuals. All access, data collection and subsequent analysis was approved by the National Research Committee and the University of Suffolk Ethics Committee.

### 3 | FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overall, it was found that language can impact individuals in prison, with several participants expressing dislike for certain terminology. Participants demonstrated an awareness of the power of stigmatising language and felt this impacted their relationship with the community, particularly potential employers. Evidence to support the use of progressive language was mixed as opinions on this issue varied.

#### 3.1 | The power of language

Prior to the semi-structured interview commencing, participants took part in a word association exercise once all relevant participant forms had been discussed and informed consent given. They were asked to say the first thing that came to mind when each word was said. Words included resident, prisoner, room, cell, ex-offender and reformed-offender. Responses indicated a clear difference between the terms 'ex-offender' and 'reformed-offender'. While the most common word associated with 'ex-offender' was 'dodgy', for 'reformed-offender' it was 'change'. This idea of change correlates with the theory that long-term desistance involves changes at the level of personal identity or 'me' of the individual (Giordano Cernkovich & Rudolph, 2002; Maruna, 2001; Maruna & Farrall, 2004; Shover, 1996). When looking at all the words associated with the terms 'ex-offender' and 'reformed-offender', there was an even split between words generally considered negative and positive for the term 'ex-offender', while only two participants associated the term 'reformed-offender' with words typically considered negative. It can thus be concluded that participants felt the term 'ex-offender' carried more negative connotations than 'reformed-offender', the latter term reminding participants of progression, rehabilitation and improvement.

After the word association exercise, the interviews commenced, asking participants various open-style questions with the aim of eliciting how prisoners felt about commonly used terms in prison. Prisoners were invited to discuss how they felt about specific words, as well as any other discussions they felt were relevant to the words, or the environment or identity which the word describes.

Interviews prompted participants to reflect on the power that language holds. One participant stated:

using different words could definitely make people maybe feel a bit better about themselves and their environment.

Another participant described the effects of changing a word:

the difference it can make, the impact, it's fascinating the power of language.

Participants recognised that terminology can be powerful, with one participant saying that different words could help people become less institutionalised. Indeed, another participant spoke about the way in which ‘negative words can create negative cycles’, citing his own personal experience of being told that he was a disappointment and allegedly fulfilling this label. This notion of a negative cycle and the suggestion that negative labels predetermined this individual’s future supports Erikson’s (1966) conclusions concerning the self-fulfilling prophecy causing deviant behaviour.

While many of the participants commented on the power of language, a significant minority of participants felt that altering language and terminology was not always effective and at times they did not think it would provoke change. Participants expressed apathy when asked to choose between different terminology: ‘it doesn’t bother me if I’m a prisoner or a resident’. In certain situations, participants did not feel that a change in terminology would change how they felt about themselves or the person with whom they were interacting.

### 3.2 | Participant opinions about the words ‘cell’ and ‘room’?

This theme of indifference was particularly pronounced when participants were asked about the terms ‘cell’ and ‘room’. Participants were generally much more sceptical about the importance of these words compared with the more personal labels ‘prisoner’ and ‘offender’. These results are interesting when considered alongside Høidal’s (2018) principle of normality, and the notion that language can be used to make life inside prison mimic life in the community. According to the principle of normality, swapping prison-specific terms (in this example ‘cell’) for words that are used in the community (‘room’) bridges the gap between life inside and outside prison, facilitating a prison-leaver’s reintegration into society. That participants did not distinguish between ‘room’ and ‘cell’ could suggest that people in prison do not see an advantage in language that promotes Høidal’s principle of normality. This may be explained by the fact that Høidal’s principle of normality relates to prisons in Norway, in which the rooms are much larger and nicer than cells in prisons in England and Wales. It seems it is not enough to call a ‘cell’ a ‘room’ to make it into a nicer, more homely space. The words we choose to describe a physical reality cannot alter perceptions of this reality in the same way that different terminology can change how one views a concept or idea.

### 3.3 | The stigmatising effect of a label

One participant spoke about how the label ‘offender’ has impacted his family life. He stated:

[my partner] had to tell the school that I was here because my son said something about me being in the centre, I call it the centre, so in those situations you could then get stereotyped.

This quotation highlights the stigma faced by people who are in prison, and the participant in question cited the term ‘offender’ as a label that embodied the stigma he experienced. This participant’s experience shows that being identified as a prisoner has the potential to adversely impact family life, a key tenet of rehabilitation and desistance for those in prison (Maruna, 2001).

A significant theme that emerged was the stigma surrounding the terms ‘offender’ and ‘criminal’. Participants felt that calling someone a ‘criminal’ is ‘just trying to stereotype someone yet again’, and that the label ‘criminal’ is often inescapable: ‘convictions over four years six months are never spent, so what am I? A criminal for the rest of my life?’. This inescapable nature of the stigma associated with being in prison was echoed by a number of participants, with one participant stating that he does not ‘want to be judged on the past’. This theme supports the theory that language, specifically stereotyping labels, can impact how individuals view themselves and how society views them (Tran et al., 2018). Furthermore, this perception that stigma is a real difficulty in the community confirms the theory that a stigmatised individual is discriminated and alienated (Link & Phelan, 2001).

### 3.4 | Dehumanising language

One clear example of stigma was the dehumanising language identified by participants when they were asked what they thought about the word ‘feeding’. The word ‘feeding’ is commonly used by prison staff to refer to the process of serving the meal to people in prison. This was known to the researcher prior to the beginning of the study due to their operational experience working as a prison officer. Often staff shout ‘time to feed’ or ‘feeding time’ across the landings, to alert colleagues and prisoners that it is time for the meal to be served. The term ‘feeding’ is so engrained in prison culture that it is used by prison officers and governors alike to speak about lunch and dinner. However, widespread as the term may be, it is exclusively employed to discuss prisoner mealtimes, never staff meals. During interviews participants expressed that they felt the word ‘feeding’ was infantilising, terrible, belittling and derogatory, with some individuals stating that the word ‘feeding’ is designed to make them feel ashamed and embarrassed so that they do not reoffend. This seems to be an example of stigmatic shaming as outlined by Morris (2001) rather than reintegrative shaming, since the offender is being condemned and there is no separation between offence and offender. It is perhaps particularly poignant that the participants believed that this language was purposefully selected to make them feel ashamed. That participants felt language was purposefully chosen by prison staff to make them feel shame indicates a lack of trust and confidence in the prison system, and the stark divide between prisoners and prison staff. This distrust in prisons was echoed by two participants who felt that the criminal justice system views them as ‘a bad person’ or as ‘too dangerous’ to be released.

Participants also highlighted the fact that the use of the word ‘feeding’ makes them feel child-like, like ‘people who are not capable of feeding themselves’. This infantilisation bothered several participants, who spoke about how the word makes them feel ‘belittled or put down a bit’, ‘boxed off’ or ‘less than’. The notion that people in prison are not considered capable of looking after themselves denies them agency, and this lack of independence was felt particularly by one participant who explained: ‘to use the word feeding it’s like going back to the times when you were a child’. This forced return to the childlike state indicates the lack of autonomy afforded to people in prison and demonstrates how prisons breed dependency. The way in which people in prison must become entirely dependent on others is certainly not conducive to reintegration into a community that demands independence.

Almost every participant made a connection between the word ‘feeding’ and farm animals, saying that they felt the word ‘makes you feel like you’re an animal’ or ‘like we’re animals on a farm’. This suggestion that people in prison are animalistic links to Vasiljevic & Viki’s (2013) theory that the portrayal of people in prison as less than human has a significant impact on public

attitudes towards crime and punishment. Indeed, this idea of people convicted of crimes being less than human was debated by early criminologists.

Lombroso (1876) believed that there were certain physical (often animalistic) features that made people innately criminal, believing there were anatomical similarities between criminals, savages and apes. Although Lombroso's theories did become more refined over time, with increasingly fewer references to animalistic tenancies, and despite the fact that these early theories have since been heavily challenged, his views do suggest a deep-rooted belief that people in prison are animalistic. From the perspective of people in prison, the word 'feeding' undoubtedly contributes to them feeling dehumanised. Indeed, one participant said that he did not blame officers for talking to people in prison like they are an animal because, according to them, most of the people in prison 'act like animals'. Interestingly, this participant seems to have aligned with the public perception of people in prison, justifying the dehumanisation of these individuals. This view also indicates a divide among the prison population, with one group judging another to be inferior. The seminal works of Goffman (1961) assist with unpicking this prison divide. People in prison react differently to being institutionalised, which leads to groups forming in prison according to behaviour. Goffman (1961) draws on the earlier works of Merton (1938) to posit that people in prison use various adaptations to cope with the pains of imprisonment. Most relevant here is the adaptation of the 'rebel' (Merton, 1938), who outwardly resists prison practices and conditions. Opposing this group are the 'conformers' (Merton, 1938), who exist relatively compliantly within carceral settings. That one person in prison stated that others 'act like animals' exemplifies how these different adaptations manifest within prison culture (Goffman, 1961). This judgment of other people in prison as animalistic, and by extension, inferior could be an example of a hierarchy in prison. Sykes (1958) contends that hierarchies exist within prisons by extension of the hierarchies in place across society. As such, people in prison behave differently and conform to different codes depending on their position in this hierarchy. Perhaps by labelling others as 'animals', this individual seeks to reinforce his hierarchical status.

### 3.5 | The impact of labels on an individual's identity

When asked their opinion on terms such as 'offender', 'prisoner' and 'resident' this prompted almost every participant to reflect on their identity. There were nine comments expressing the view that the labels 'offender' and 'prisoner' have a negative impact on an individual; participants felt the term 'offender' was 'hurtful' and that it made them feel 'different, boxed off, subnormal'. It was also highlighted that the label 'offender' denies people in prison individuality, as one participant phrased it: 'it makes you feel like you're lumped in'.

Participants were similarly affected by the term 'prisoner', stating that the label 'prisoner' makes them feel 'oppressed' and 'persecuted'. Another participant described how he felt that the term makes you feel like 'a second-class citizen' and 'the scum of society'. Furthering this, one participant stated that being labelled a prisoner can have a 'lasting impression on that person's being, their confidence, empowerment or lack of empowerment'. This certainly supports Daniels's (2015) theory that the way words are used can lead to the oppression of a group of people.

Although the majority of participants expressed dislike for the labels 'offender' and 'prisoner', there was an even split between those who themselves identified as an 'offender' or 'prisoner' and those who did not. Six of the twelve participants reported that they felt the label 'offender' or 'prisoner' was justified because it accurately described them:

I guess I deserve it for doing a crime in the first place if someone wants to label me as a prisoner or offender.

Indeed, it was common for participants to associate themselves with these terms, despite the consensus that these labels made them feel inferior. To some extent this supports Cheung's (2018) idea that the same words can have a very different impact depending on the individual; the same word might empower one person but hurt another. Certainly, the data show that while some participants rejected the term 'offender', others were willing to identify with the term. However, unlike Cheung's suggestion that a term can be both hurtful and empowering, participants who accepted the label 'offender' maintained that the term was hurtful and only accepted the label because they felt it was fair, not because they felt it empowered them. This resonates with Braithwaite's (1989) work in that although the language could be construed as shame-inducing, some element of shaming can be reintegrative. As a social process, shame can induce an acknowledgment of the wrongdoing or the offence, while instilling consciousness and morality in the offender. In this instance, the participants are acknowledging their labelled identity as an 'offender', which in turn acknowledges some degree of harm of wrongdoing. This may serve participants positively in the future due to the general preventative effect of shame-inducing language.

The group of participants who did not identify with the labels 'offender' or 'prisoner' explained that they did not feel that these words described them, stating: 'I don't feel like a criminal' and 'I'm not a real offender'. One of these participants viewed himself as separate from other 'offenders' or 'prisoners' because it was his first time in prison. Another explained that although he knew he 'acted criminally' he behaved this way out of necessity, in order to 'get by'. For this reason, he did not feel his actions were truly criminal and consequently he did not identify with the label 'criminal'.

The labels assigned to participants both inside and outside prison had a significant impact on their self-identity. Indeed, one participant said he was: 'tarnished for the rest of my life on one stupid mistake'. This long-lasting impact of certain terminology aligns with the theory that labels lead to stigma with detrimental impacts (Benson et al., 2011; Bernburg, Krohn & Rivera, 2006; Braithwaite, 1989). Furthermore, this participant had internalised their experiences of stigmatisation, in turn, impacting how they identified themselves.

Five participants felt misrepresented by the term 'ex-offender', feeling that the term was 'the first thing that they [the public] see without the context' and explaining that 'they don't know the truth they don't know what happened'. Generally, participants felt it was unfair to be given the same label as people who have committed very different crimes from them. Participants also stated that they would like to have the opportunity to explain the context of why they committed their crime before being tarnished with a stigmatising label. Participants were not specifically concerned about being judged or labelled as a serial offender, instead they wanted the community to understand why they had committed a crime and be given the opportunity to explain themselves.

### 3.6 | Participant perspectives on language's influence on future behaviour

Interviews investigated the extent to which positive or progressive language might impact an individual's behaviour. Several participants expressed the view that being referred to as 'men' instead of 'prisoners' encourages prosocial behaviour. Participants stated that being called a man can 'compel you to get better and do better'. This idea of forging a new, non-criminal, identity is



supported by the study that found referring to 'prisoners' as 'residents' helped individuals to view themselves as different from their previously criminal selves (Stevens, 2012). These participant responses suggest that prosocial language facilitates a change in identity.

Additionally, participants tended to consider it necessary to assume responsibility for one's actions in order to move on from past criminal behaviour. For this reason, two participants cited the word 'offender' as productive because it 'can help people realise there's consequences to committing offences'. This disputes Becker's (1997) labelling theory, which predicts that the stigmatising label 'offender' is detrimental to an individual's rehabilitation because it complicates their integration into the community. Participant responses were mixed, both supporting and opposing Becker's labelling theory. While some were in favour of the label 'offender', others were staunchly against it as they believe the term makes it difficult for an individual to escape their criminal past.

When discussing the future, all twelve participants interviewed mentioned employment prospects, and almost everyone recognised the negative impact that having been in prison would have on their employability. One participant shared that they felt the label of being an ex-offender would impact their future as they would 'be limited to the job I can get'. Other participants voiced similar concerns, with one explaining that the label 'ex-offender' would 'mess up any future shop work' and another felt that as soon as he is asked about his recent history in a job interview 'the job's out the window'. This supports the theory that stigmatising labels can exclude individuals from certain opportunities (Link & Phelan, 2001), however it must also be recognised that it is not only the label 'ex-offender' that limits employment opportunities, but also the general stigma surrounding people who have been in prison and the requirement to disclose prior convictions.

The question as to whether being labelled a 'criminal' would make an individual more likely to commit crime prompted quite a divisive set of responses. According to Erikson (1966), if the community labels an individual as a criminal, this individual will behave in a criminal way, because it is what society expects of them. While participant responses both agreed and disagreed with this theory, twice as many participants believed that the label 'criminal' would prompt reoffending than did not.

The predominant reason participants thought the label 'criminal' prohibits an individual's attempt to desist from crime was because they felt that once an individual is considered a criminal, they have nothing to lose from committing crime:

If you are already called that [criminal] then it doesn't really make a difference.

You are already labelled and treated like a criminal, it affects your actions and your thoughts and motivations.

Participants also alluded to the deterministic power of the label 'criminal', stating that once labelled as such: 'you are a criminal forever'. These views support the theory that the stigma of a criminal status makes an individual more likely to commit crime (Bernburg, Krohn & Rivera, 2006).

Although more participants believed that the label 'criminal' can lead to reoffending, one-third of participants did not believe this to be the case. Indeed, even those participants who thought the label 'criminal' does lead to further crime tended only to think that this label would affect other people and not themselves. Participants also felt that there was an onus on them to take

responsibility for their actions, and that it would not be right to put 'the responsibility on whoever is calling you a criminal'.

Participants also recognised the nuance in certain situations and appreciated that the impact a negative label has 'depends on the person', for example: 'if they are borderline, it can push somebody'. In this context, the participant meant the word 'borderline' to describe somebody on the edge of committing crime. They explained that if an individual is on the cusp of offending, a negative label could make them more likely to reoffend. Another participant gave the example of an individual being more affected by the label 'criminal' if they have 'got a previous [conviction]'. In general, participants tended to agree with theorists that the label 'criminal' has the potential to impact an individual's future likelihood of reoffending, but that the extent to which this label will affect them depends on their personal situation. Overall, there was strong evidence to suggest the detrimental impact of negative language on an individual's view of themselves and participants raised valid concerns about the damage of stigmatising language. However, when participants reflected on the impact of progressive language, results were mixed. Some participants felt that progressive language would empower them and motivate them to do better, but others felt that the responsibility to desist from crime lies with the individual and that stigmatising labels serve as an important reminder of past mistakes. Participant responses suggest that individuals are likely to be affected differently by a switch to progressive language.

#### 4 | CONCLUSION

Participant interviews support the established view that language is powerful and indicate the impact of certain terminology in a prison environment. It was also found that language was not uniformly significant; language more directly related to an individual's identity was found to be most meaningful. Almost every participant reflected on the stigmatising effect of certain language and it was felt that this led members of the community to negatively judge people in prison. Participants also raised concerns about the lack of context provided by labels such as 'offender' and called for a more nuanced approach to talking about people in prison. The data therefore suggest that the language used to talk about people in prison can negatively impact an individual's interaction with the community. Participant responses argued that this language is so detrimental because it generalises people and does not allow an individual to explain their personal circumstances.

The data also suggested that language does impact an individual's identity, and in the case of labels such as 'offender' and 'criminal', this impact was predominantly negative. Interestingly, around half the participants still identified with these labels despite feeling that these labels were hurtful and oppressive. These individuals felt that it was fair they were assigned these labels because of their criminal convictions. This indicates that an individual's self-identity is not only impacted by the language used to talk about them, but also by their actions. Maan (2009) discusses how disruption and exclusion can impact an individual's self-identity, although it is also noted that any problematic area of life experience has the potential to do so. Maan (2009) contends that experiences of conflict have the capacity to trigger self-creation within an individual's identity. In this case, imprisonment could be seen as a disruptive and excluding life experience. It would seem that there are multiple factors that contribute to an individual's self-identity. Nevertheless, even if language is not the only factor affecting how an individual views themselves, it undoubtedly features in the construction of one's self-identity.

Participants also debated the necessity of labels in the administration of punishment. While some participants felt it necessary to be labelled an 'offender' or 'prisoner' in order to remind

themselves of previous wrongdoing, others found these terms oppressive. It is interesting to consider this in light of the changes to HM Prison and Probation Service recommended language in April 2021, which simultaneously favour person-first terminology such as 'people in prison' and 'people resettling into the community' and more traditional language such as 'offender' and 'ex-offender'. Interestingly the HM Prison and Probation Service (2021) recommendations include a real range of terminology, reflecting the range of participant perspectives on words like 'offender'. For those participants who found certain labels oppressive, this can be related to criminological debates around ensuring that punishment is proportionate to the crime, and the idea that collective labelling may unduly punish those convicted of less serious crimes. Questions were also raised about language aiding individuals to neutralise their criminal behaviour.

Overall, this study has led to findings that both support and challenge existing academic theories and previous research. Language is undoubtedly important, impacting how an individual in prison engages with the community, and how they view themselves. More research remains to be done in this field, but this study's results show that it would be wise to reflect on the words used to describe people in prison.

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