



The proliferating pains of imprisonment

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Abstract

The “pains of imprisonment” is one of the most prominent concepts in the social study of incarceration. First introduced by Gresham Sykes in 1958, it has subsequently been taken up by generations of authors and applied to an increasingly diverse range of contexts, populations, and activities. This article details how the “pains of imprisonment” concept has evolved and expanded. It is based on an analysis of 50 academic works (books, articles, and chapters) that used some variation of the “pains of . . .” formulation. We identified four main trajectories in the literature that have contributed to this expansion, which we document in the first section through the use of illustrative examples. This is followed by a more critical series of reflections that seek to appreciate some of the organizational and political factors that might account for the appeal of this concept. Finally, we conclude by questioning whether the “pains” framing might paradoxically be a victim of its own success, with its analytical and political purchase potentially blunted through overuse and overextension.

Keywords

Pains of imprisonment, social concepts, penality, sociology of punishment, incarceration

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All academic disciplines contain key concepts that help focus research and debate. Such concepts provide a shared vocabulary and demarcate disciplinary boundaries. Criminology is no exception. Criminologists routinely reference a series of prominent concepts such as “the dark figure of crime,” “net widening,” and “master status,” among many others. In the study of punishment, one concept stands out above the rest: “The pains of imprisonment.”

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Originally introduced by Gresham Sykes in his book *The Society of Captives* (1958), the “pains of imprisonment” is a central analytical contribution from what is one of the most influential scholarly monographs ever written on prisons. In Chapter 4, Sykes identifies five key deprivations characteristic of prison life, consisting of (1) deprivation of liberty, (2) deprivation of goods and services, (3) deprivation of heterosexual relationships, (4) deprivation of autonomy, and (5) deprivation of security. Sykes presents these as “pains of imprisonment,” although beyond the examples he provides he does not elaborate on what might and might not constitute “pains.” He only notes that they consist of “deprivations or frustrations of prison life” that could be conceived alternatively as punishments that are deliberately inflicted on inmates or as unplanned or even unavoidable aspects of incarcerating large groups of criminals (p. 64). In part, his definitional ambiguity left the door open for ensuing scholars to expand the “pains” framing to a considerably larger set of populations and domains.

Indeed, Sykes’ list appears quite parsimonious. Prisons constrain men and women against their will. The stark realities of that situation make prisons notoriously distressing places, where matters both monumental and mundane are overwritten by the occasional outburst of violence and endless variations in the operation of power. It is therefore curious that Sykes *only* singled out five pains. Having spent long hours conducting research in the New Jersey State Prison, he would have undoubtedly heard about, or personally witnessed, any number of additional pains. He left it unclear, however, whether his listing of pains was meant to be comprehensive. Far from limiting the utility of his formulation, these ambiguities have helped to account for its remarkable success, given that “such incompleteness can motivate researchers to try and amplify and extend the concept” (Davis, 1986: 297).

In the ensuing years, researchers have returned repeatedly to the “pains of imprisonment” theme, producing a large body of work on the topic. Eager to develop a more thorough understanding of this phenomenon, we undertook a rigorous investigation that asked: “How has the ‘pains of imprisonment’ concept evolved since Sykes’ original formulation?” To answer this question we conducted a literature review, identifying works that had used the “pains” framing. This involved using Google Scholar to locate works (articles, chapters, or books) published between 1960 and 2019 that used some combination of the “pains of . . .” expression. We then eliminated any pieces that did not make *explicit* reference to Sykes’ formulation. From the remaining works, we randomly selected 50 pieces, comprised of both conceptual and empirical works. We read and coded each one and in the process identified four key trajectories in the literature related to pains of imprisonment. These are (a) additional pains, (b) disaggregated pains, (c) pains beyond prison walls, and (d) distinctively modern pains. For the purpose of this article, we have chosen representative examples from each of these four different domains to demonstrate how these four different approaches to “pains” operate. At the same time, it should be noted that our typology is a pedagogical heuristic, as the boundaries separating these logics are often fluid, evolving, and occasionally overlapping.

In what follows, our first task is to detail the expanding inventory of “pains,” identifying the main logics contributing to this growth. Such a demonstration is necessary before we can turn to a more critical consideration of how this expansion may have been fostered by organizational and political dynamics particular to the contemporary academy. In doing so, we take inspiration from Davis’ (1971) early phenomenological analysis of social theory, where he stresses that the appeal of any theory or concept is not determined by it being “true” or “accurate”—quite the opposite. Instead, he points to a series of additional reasons why authors and readers might find a particular theory or concept appealing. We focus here in particular on some of the organizational and

political appeals of the “pains” framing and ask whether the concept has become a victim of its own success, thereby limiting its political or analytical utility. As such, we approach the “pains of imprisonment” as one of the foundational concepts in the contemporary study of penality, taking a step back from the particulars in order to identify the breadth of what this framing now encompasses, how it is deployed, and what implications might follow from how the concept is now conceived and operationalized.

Four logics of expansion

As noted, our analysis of the literature demonstrated that the academic understanding of the pains of imprisonment has evolved through one of four somewhat different orientations to these “pains”: (1) a straightforward additive logic whereby new pains in the mold of Sykes’ original formulation are identified; (2) a logic of division and distinction, with pains being identified in relation to different inmate populations; (3) a logic of extension, which focuses on pains manifest outside of the prison walls or as experienced by non-incarcerated individuals; and (4) a logic focused on “recent developments,” which is based on the suggestion that current changes in the dynamics of incarceration have produced distinctively new pains of imprisonment. It would be a daunting and tedious task to try and comprehensively detail all of the instances that fall into each of these four different trajectories. Consequently, in what follows, we provide illustrative examples and remind readers that each “pains” example explicitly refers to Sykes’ original formulation, although often deploying the concept in quite unique ways.

Additional pains

Starting with Sykes’ reference group of adult male prisoners,¹ subsequent researchers have recognized that these men experience a number of pains Sykes did not specifically identify. Commentators have consequently fleshed out and expanded his original list. Sometimes that has entailed identifying entirely new pains that could conceivably take Sykes’ list beyond its original five items. At other times, new manifestations of pains are presented as being subsumed under one of Sykes’ original headings.

This additive logic occasionally involves attempts to identify pains documented in earlier research that did not originally employ the “pains” formulation. Crewe (2011: 510), for example, does so in relation to Goffman’s famous work on asylums (1961), suggesting that the assorted ritual humiliations Goffman painstakingly detailed as routine “mortifications of the self” in prison (and in other total institutions) should be understood as additional pains of imprisonment (see also Warr, 2016). Crewe also points to the research conducted by Cohen and Taylor (2003) on long-term prisoners to suggest that the existential challenges these men face pertaining to identity and survival should also be conceived of as pains of imprisonment in the tradition of Sykes.

Warr, by contrast, accentuates “pains” related to a lack of physical security in prison but expands the analytical focus to accentuate some psychological consequences of this situation. In particular, he highlights how inmates must be constantly wary, as

every interaction, conversation, bodily movement, glance, laugh, smile, and even yawn must be monitored by the individual to ensure it is not causing offence, being taken out of context or rendering the prisoner vulnerable in the eyes of peers (Warr, 2016: 590).

For Warr, these are psychological “pains,” and extend to the fact that in a potentially violent environment prisoners must manage and repress their displays of empathy, to the point that sympathy toward others can become burdensome, something that amounts to a “deep” pain (p. 591).

Shammas (2017) has recently pointed to a more quotidian example, suggesting that restrictions on prisoners’ telephone use amount to a Sykes-esque “deprivation of liberty,” given that phone restrictions can curtail inmates’ abilities to maintain family bonds.

Disaggregated pains

One curiosity of Sykes’ original formulation is the uniformity with which he treats the prisoners in his study. He presents his participants as an undifferentiated group of “male prisoners,” each ostensibly facing the same pains of imprisonment and experiencing them in roughly an equivalent manner. This assumption of uniformity is striking, given that he is aware of differences among prisoners and even observed how the inmate population in the New Jersey State Prison where he did his research was “shot through with a variety of ethnic and social cleavages” (p. 81). However, he never explores how these differences might have had a bearing on how the pains of imprisonment are differentially experienced.

That situation has changed in the ensuing years. Perhaps, the most notable advance in the study of the lived experience of incarceration has been a recognition of the many important ways prisoners differ in terms of their biography and life conditions. Researchers have disaggregated the prison population, exploring how assorted groups experience the challenges of prison life.

Greater attention has been paid, in particular, to the gendered dynamics of incarceration. A now vibrant literature accentuates assorted aspects of the lives of women prisoners and the unique challenges they face (Bosworth, 2017; Comack, 1999; Lempert, 2016; McCorkel, 2003; Solinger et al., 2010). A significant component of that work also draws attention to the pains of imprisonment distinctive to—or particularly heightened for—female prisoners (Carlen and Tombs, 2006; Crewe et al., 2017).

One consistently identified cluster of pains female prisoners experience pertains to how prison disrupts their relationships with their children. Foster (2012), for example, in her study of women incarcerated in an American minimum security prison, documents how the loss of liberty entails acute sorrows resulting from women not having contact with their children, including feeling they are missing out on their children’s lives, and a poignant sense of loss derived from not being present for many of their children’s “firsts.” Being pregnant in prison produces additional pains, most egregiously apparent in some American jurisdictions where women are shackled during childbirth (Ocen, 2012), and the trauma associated with having to surrender one’s child to the authorities immediately after birth (Rowe, 2012).

The gendered “pains of imprisonment” for women, however, are not confined to their parenting. Other examples include women’s vulnerability to sexual abuse while incarcerated, something that can extend to sexual assaults by correctional officers. Women can experience strip searches as a form of sexual coercion that accentuates their powerlessness and any prior sexual victimization (George and McCulloch, 2008) and can face day-to-day humiliations relating to the regulation of basic health-care needs, such as sanitary products (Smith, 2009).

Male prisoners also experience gendered pains of imprisonment (Jewkes, 2005). In his study of ethnic minority fathers in a remand prison in Norway, Ugelvik (2014), for example, identified how prison challenges the expectation that men will display agency, and be the ones who “get things done” on behalf of their family. However, this agential-based component of their masculinity is

forestalled by the prison's infantilizing routine, which provides them few opportunities to structure their lives or to meaningfully participate in family affairs. An additional pain Ugelvik identifies relates to the dynamics of hegemonic masculinity in Norway, where fathers are expected to be significantly involved in the lives of their children, something that again is profoundly challenged by the constraints of prison life.

As the American prison population has expanded, a larger number of both male and female prisoners have found themselves serving extended period of incarceration (Urban Institute, 2017). Such long-term prisoners have themselves been identified as suffering distinctive pains of imprisonment. Flanagan (1980) delineates several such pains, including loneliness, thoughts of suicide, missing out on social life, worries about how to deal with being released, and feeling that life is being wasted (see also Walker and Worrall, 2000). More recent research by Crewe et al. (2017) suggests that the pains of long-term incarceration include having to follow other people's rules and orders; missing somebody; not being able to completely trust anyone in prison; longing for more privacy; and many other concerns.

The trend toward lengthy prison terms has translated directly into an increasingly aging inmate population, something that has led to consideration of the pains of imprisonment as experienced by elderly prisoners. Crawley (2005), for example, conducted research on male prisoners over the age of 65. She concludes that their advanced age makes their subjective experiences of the pains of imprisonment particularly plaintive, as they more acutely feel the loss of status and challenges to identity that come with being incarcerated late in life. Elderly prisoners also experience a number of physical pains of imprisonment attendant on them being older and more infirm than other prisoners. Crawley suggests these pains are the consequence of a form of "institutional thoughtlessness" about the physical needs and challenges of the elderly and ailing, some of which include:

- (a) not being allowed sufficient time to complete activities or to get to and from specific locations; (b) being expected to watch a communal television in the corridor while sitting on hard, unupholstered chairs (such as those used by schoolchildren); (c) being denied additional clothing or bedding in cold weather; (d) having to queue for long periods (sometimes for up to an hour) to obtain their medication; (e) having to climb stairs while carrying food trays; (e) having to shower in slippery, tiled cubicles that were not equipped with grab-rails or antislip mats; and (f) feeling abandoned and simply dumped because they had so little access to wing staff (elderly prisoners were often located on the ground floor, whereas the wing office was located on the first or second). (Crawley, 2005: 356)

Younger prisoners have also been identified as suffering pains distinctive to their age. For example, Cox (2011) examines how young incarcerated men and women navigate the demands of "incentive based programming" designed to encourage forms of self-discipline. She identifies pains associated with how such programming establishes a disjuncture between new behavioral expectations and how such change and growth were actually experienced. Some young people, for example, experienced pains related to their "submission to the behavioural regime, their confusion about where their agency was located . . . and their struggles in confronting their programmed disposition" (p. 598). Many were challenged by having to navigate treatment options that sought to stimulate their agency but which could instead "result in their domination by the behavioural change practices which are said to liberate them" (p. 604).

In all of these instances, Sykes' formulation of pains has expanded to encompass different prison-based populations, producing an inventory of qualitatively different "pains" including

loneliness, missing one's children, assault, and physical discomfort. This trend has been further amplified through efforts to apply the concept of "pains" outside of the prison itself.

Pains beyond the prison walls

While Sykes' original formulation was focused on the experiences of prisoners, in recent years greater attention has been given to identifying the pains of imprisonment manifest outside of prison and as experienced by a broader range of non-incarcerated individuals (Chui, 2010). Warr (2016), for example, suggests that for inmates these pains "may be generated before entrance to the institution" and "may pertain beyond the physical boundaries of the walls" (p. 586). For Warr, the pains of imprisonment commence at the point of arrest, a process which foreshadows how the prison strips a person of their prior moral identity.

Warr (2016) also treats the challenges prisoners face upon release as pains of imprisonment, as "getting out" can often be just as painful as being "in" (p. 599). These pains encompass the interpersonal and organizational difficulties associated with managing the stigma of having been incarcerated. Other post-release pains he identifies concern difficulties in reestablishing relationships, coping with new technologies, and learning (or relearning) to use goods and services unavailable in prison. Nugent and Schinkel (2016) accentuate how people eager to extricate themselves from a prior criminal lifestyle can experience "pains of desistance." The authors break these down into a series of subsidiary "pains," including a "pain of isolation" apparent when people remove themselves from social networks in order to avoid criminal temptations and also "pains of hopelessness" that can arise when desisters feel they will not be able to fully achieve their life goals.

In her analysis of the visitation practices in San Quentin, Comfort (2003) identifies a subset of "pains" operating in this liminal prison space. She details how groups of predominately female visitors undergo a type of "secondary prisonization," which entails some of Sykes' classic "pains." Visitors, for example, are subjected to long waits that devalue their time and must negotiate vague and highly discretionary visitation rules. Visitors are consequently regularly uncertain as to how the visitation process works in practice, which amounts to a form of "deprivation of autonomy." They are also deprived of goods and services in that they do not have access to basic physical and hygienic needs and must deal with officers who regulate and censure their attire.

Sykes' "pains" formulation has also been expanded to other organizations and institutions. Harkin (2015), for example, suggests that we contemplate the "pains of policing," where these pains are produced by the police and experienced by citizens or the wider society. In essence, she argues for treating as "pains" a long list of behaviors and outcomes that others have characterized as problems, failings, injuries, or injustices of policing. This includes deprivations of liberty that arise when the police arrest suspects, deprivations of goods and services related to the police's role in preserving an unequal class society, deprivations of security apparent when the police antagonize particular groups, and additional pains derived from how the police can stigmatize, intimidate, or even kill.

The "pains" framing has also been applied to institutions that are not traditionally conceived of as part of the criminal justice system. Hutchinson and Pullman (2007) argue that schools in the United States increasingly perform a social control function, operating as a form of total institution. Modeling their analysis on Sykes' original prison-based formulation, they accentuate how students, like inmates, experience deprivations of liberty, autonomy, and goods and services.

Distinctively modern pains

Some of the above practices and experiences are pains Sykes arguably overlooked but a number relate to changes in the dynamics of incarceration that have occurred since he was writing. Several scholars have focused on this point, suggesting that to understand the contemporary pains of imprisonment we must appreciate what is distinctively new about current penal practices.

Fleury-Steiner and Longazel (2013) dedicate their entire book *The Pains of Mass Imprisonment* to identifying characteristic pains of the contemporary penal regime in the United States. It is a situation they depict as combining a remarkable growth in the use of confinement, tough on crime policies, greater punitiveness, a decline in rehabilitative goals, a focus on retribution, and a greater targeting of poor Black people. In this context, the authors add five new pains to those identified by Sykes. These are pains of (1) Containment, whereby prisoners are treated as objects in a warehouse; (2) Exploitation, which involves prisoners being used for the financial benefit of their captors; (3) Coercion, which they single out as involving female prisoners being pressured to engage in sexual acts with male guards; (4) Isolation, whereby arbitrary decisions result in prisoners being placed into situations where they are deprived of human contact and sensory stimuli; and (5) Brutality, which involves prisoners facing possible assault by their captors and risking retaliation for exposing prison-based violence (p. 9). The authors organize their book around analyzing different aspects of these modern pains.

Crewe (2011), by contrast, suggests that new pains of imprisonment have emerged as the prison's ordering practices have evolved from often brutal forms of physical coercion to structures more attendant on rehabilitation, or the risk-based programming characteristic of the new penology (Feeley and Simon, 1992). As Crewe (2009: 449) puts it,

The carceral experience is less directly oppressive, but more gripping. It demands more and risks less. It is described by prisoners less in terms of weight than 'lightness'. Instead of brutalizing, destroying and denying the self, it grips, harnesses, and appropriates it for its own project. It turns the self into a vehicle of power rather than a place of last refuge.

In jurisdictions where rehabilitation has reemerged as an explicit policy objective, a cadre of counselors and psychologists have been incorporated into the prison regime. These individuals assess prisoners to determine both the risks they might pose, their treatment and programming needs, and to also determine whether it might be appropriate to grant them greater freedoms or possible release (Hannah-Moffat, 2005). It has been suggested that such therapeutic initiatives produce in prisoners a "pain of uncertainty and indeterminacy" (Crewe, 2011: 514), as they cannot anticipate or plan for their futures. Warr makes a similar point in his discussion of the "deprivation of certainty" related to indeterminate sentences—a practice that is making a prominent return in some jurisdictions, particularly the United Kingdom. The pains Warr identifies for prisoners held under such open-ended conditions include

feelings of being lost within the system, unknown (and potentially unknowable) barriers to release; not being able to settle into the sentence and feeling constantly 'on remand': an absence of accurate and usable information regarding the sentence and securing release; and the interminability of the sentence—not being able to see or predict an end (Warr, 2016: 596).

As psychiatric practices and knowledges have become more prominent in some prisons, Crewe identifies a related "pain of psychological assessment" associated with how identities forged

through psychological testing and evaluation can overwrite a prisoners' existing sense of self. As inmates are given more autonomy and become recruited into responsabilized projects of self-governance, they are subjected to ongoing professional assessments of how successful and enthusiastic they are in such efforts. Crewe characterizes these as entailing "pains of self-governance."

The physical architecture of ostensibly "progressive" modern prisons has likewise been identified as presenting their own distinctive pains. As classic cellblock formations have fallen out of favor, some jurisdictions have embraced more humane buildings and aesthetics. Hancock and Jewkes (2011) have studied, for example, prisons that now incorporate "generative buildings" designed to increase cooperation, creativity, and innovative productivity. The hope is that such facilities will foster personal change, and lead to a less brutal lifestyle. This is manifest in campus-style building arrangements with discrete housing units and prison interiors that are more open, flexible, and even playful in their spatial planning and design. This can include removing hard fixtures and furnishings, incorporating psychologically effective color schemes, natural lighting, and the use of differing visual horizons as a way to ward off monotony. While such developments are encouraging, Hancock and Jewkes point out that inmates know that remaining on such "desirable" units is always conditional on their good behavior—a situation the authors characterize as another distinctive pain of modern prisons.

Other ostensibly progressive contemporary developments in penalty have been singled out for producing their own distinctive pains. Shamma comments on a Norwegian prison where inmates can "migrate with some degree of frequency between the prison and the outside world" (p. 4). As Shamma presents it, such freedom also results in "pains," as the inmates who gravitate between the prison and free society can become confused about what norms apply in which situations and come to yearn for ever-more freedoms. In this paradoxical situation, "greater autonomy is itself a source of deprivation and frustration" (Shamma, 2017: 4).

In summary, we are a long way from Sykes' original formulation. His focus on "pains" has been expanded through four distinctive logics to encompass a much broader and more idiosyncratic set of peoples and practices. If one were to randomly peruse the hundreds of works written on prison since Sykes' book was published, one could easily compile a much longer list, nuanced by a larger still number of distinctions in how such pains are experienced by different populations. Our catalog above is therefore illustrative, not exhaustive. Presenting these illustrative examples was, however, a necessary first step toward contemplating larger questions about how and why this expansion has occurred, and the continued analytical and political utility of the "pains" framing.

The appeals of pains

How might we understand this ever-expanding list of pains? In some respects, it can be approached as the result of standard academic practice. A foundational role for all academic research is to document the empirical world. The men and women ensnared in far-reaching corners of the prison industrial complex recount for us aspects of their suffering, and the swelling catalog of pains could represent nothing more than the outcome of positivist social science seeking to understand the totality of the realities we encounter.

At the same time, there appears to be more at play here than simple empiricism. As Davis (1971) has accentuated, a broad range of personal, political, and organizational factors often contribute to making a particular theory or concept appealing to both analysts and audiences. As this pertains to the "pains" framing, it seems that part of the appeal of this analytical category

relates to how it meshes seamlessly with the reformist, progressive, or radical political sensibilities that now obviously informs—to varying degrees and in different guises—many of the authors who write about prisons. There is widespread academic recognition that prisoners tend to be drawn disproportionately from marginalized populations, and a deep cynicism pervades many academic quarters about the prospect for rehabilitation or progressive prison reform. In such a context, foregrounding “pains” itself has political overtones. At the most basic, it appears to involve a latent faith that identifying pains marks a step toward meaningful reform and aligns the analyst with some of the most marginalized members of society—leaving little doubt as to whose side we are on (Becker, 1967).

The “pains” framing also seems to be appealing to analysts in part because it easily lends itself to one of the key demands of social scientific scholarship: the need to produce “interesting” propositions. As Davis (1971) points out, scholars work in a professional informational economy, where academic claims compete for attention—a situation that has only intensified since he was writing (Billig, 2013). Davis suggests that a familiar strategy used by academics to attract such attention to their work involves producing propositions that are seen as “interesting” by pertinent audiences—a characteristic which is not necessarily tied to the validity of the claim itself:

A theorist is considered great, not because his [sic] theories are true, but because they are *interesting* . . . In fact, the truth of a theory has very little to do with its impact, for a theory can continue to be found interesting even through its truth is disputed—even *refuted!* (Davis, 1971: 309; emphasis in original)

To become “interesting,” authors employ a time-tested strategy of challenging their audience members’ assumptions about the social world or situation being described. But not all propositions are suitably “interesting.” Propositions that generally confirm already accepted beliefs will likely be brushed off as obvious. Alternatively, claims that challenge foundational assumptions will be dismissed as “insane.” Consequently, academic propositions are best primed to capture the attention of an audience if they challenge their weakly held assumptions about the world: “All *interesting* theories, at least all *interesting* social theories, then, constitute an attack on the taken-for-granted world of their audience” (Davis, 1971: 311).

For our purposes, the most relevant example Davis provides of “interesting” propositions involves authors who claim that something that has long been seen as good, is in fact bad. He uses as an example Nietzsche’s assertion that Christian morality—which was seen as a good thing when he was writing—is in fact a bad thing. A more familiar criminological example would be Foucault’s (1977) famous (interesting) claim that the ostensibly humanitarian (good) punishment reforms initiated in 18th-century Europe were in fact bad (or dangerous) initiatives because they fostered an insidious and widespread form of disciplinary power.

A comparable strategy can be found in segments of the contemporary pains of imprisonment literature, where an author’s claims can become “interesting” by virtue of suggesting that ostensibly “good” prison-related developments or initiatives actually amount to (or mask) a darker “painful” dimension. This includes, for example, suggestions that therapeutic initiatives actually produce psychological pains; that schools are akin to penal institutions; that the seemingly joyous experience of being released from prison produces pains; and that prisoners who are permitted to work in the community face new pains relating to this ambiguous situation.

Irrespective of how we conceive of the forces that have contributed to this conceptual augmentation, the expansion itself appears to mimic a familiar tendency in the social sciences, where it

is often the case that as a concept “is applied to a wider range of phenomena, its domain stretches, and it becomes a more familiar term, even as its analytic usefulness is thereby diminished” (Best, 2013: 67). Such expansion and dilution has been identified in relation to several key sociological and criminological concepts, including “social construction” (Hacking, 1999), “hate groups” (Tetrault, 2019), “the panopticon” (Haggerty, 2006), “moral panic” (Best, 2013), and “intersectionality” (Davis, 2008). The fact that “pains of imprisonment” can be added to that list raises some distinctive conceptual and political challenges.

Problems with pains?

Attending to the play of political and professional factors can help us to understand the remarkable success of the “pains” framing. At the same time, the legacy of this success is a literature that is now so prodigious that questions arise about the continuing political or analytical utility of the concept.

The blunt weight of undifferentiated pains

Is the “pains” framing well positioned to lead to reform that might rectify or alleviate the many distressing situations identified in those works? More pointedly: might the cumulative impact of the sprawling pains literature—despite the best intentions of individual authors—be to blunt or dissipate the prospect of parlaying these insights into meaningful reform?

As it stands, the contemporary “pains of imprisonment” literature is not so much an integrated body of scholarship, but more of an uncoordinated aggregation of pains, each borne in different ways and to varying degrees by disparate groups—with each new generation of scholars adding more items to the register. The problem with this situation is that when prisons are identified as producing literally hundreds of pains, the literature on the topic risks becoming a dull chorus that cumulatively stresses that prison is a consistently wretched place, both for inmates and a coterie of other individuals. Such a claim is certainly true, but is it particularly surprising? Or, following Davis’ formulation, is it particularly interesting? Moreover, when an analyst enters the field with the “pains of imprisonment” as their core analytical framing they risk overlooking situations where inmates might see incarceration as providing a series of contextually specific benefits that they can lack on the street, including physical protection, medical attention, accommodation, and the opportunity to step away from extreme patterns of drug use (Bradley and Davino, 2002; Jones et al., 2019). And while the impulse to specify the details of such suffering undoubtedly arises from a laudable humanitarian instinct, when each newly identified pain is layered atop a mass of potentially hundreds of other pains identified in the literature which also need to be addressed, does the political imperative to address any single pain become dissipated?

A related difficulty that becomes apparent upon immersing oneself in the “pains” literature is that cumulatively these pains are an unranked mass. While researchers occasionally ask inmates to prioritize the pains they experience, most academic authors appear loathe to explicitly identify with a particular hierarchy of pains, which would entail suggesting that some pains are worse than the many others identified in the literature. Such reluctance is undoubtedly attributable to a desire to avoid the unsightly prospect of ranking other people’s suffering. It could also be informed by the now standard insight that pain is subjective (Coghill et al., 2003; Melzack and Katz, 2001). The effect, however, is that the pains associated with guards sexually assaulting inmates sit astride the pains of prison labor, which are intermixed with the qualitatively different psychological pains of

therapeutic counseling, or behavioral modification programs, or a lack of information about release dates.

Pain, in Sykes' formulation, had a certain degree of timeless gravitas. In the decades since he published his book, however, we have gone from understanding the "pains of imprisonment" as being universal and perhaps immutable, to using the "pains" formulation to subtly equate behaviors that fall somewhere on a continuum of excruciating, traumatic, uncomfortable, unwelcome, embarrassing, and inconvenient. As the accumulation of "pains" becomes more all-encompassing, pains risk being transformed from something grave into something that—at least for a subset of these phenomena—intimate the more colloquial meaning of "pains," understood as "nuisances," or "hassles," or "headaches." How are we to make normative sense or strategic political use of an analytical category whose boundaries are so pliable as to encompass behaviors running the gamut from drastic physical abuses, to debilitating psychological trauma, all the way to things that are closer to discomfort, inconvenience, or annoyance?

Looked at from a slightly different angle, part of the appeal of classifying some of these activities as "pains," rather than using less emotionally loaded terms, is that the "pains" language elevates the political purchase of any particular problem. In a culture where reducing pain and suffering is—at least in the abstract—generally seen as desirable, situations that could otherwise be ignored or discounted as lesser "problems" might thereby acquire greater political purchase when typified as "pains." The downside of such a rhetorical strategy, however, is that it risks diminishing more acute forms of suffering.

Finally, it is worth accentuating that the individual contributions to the study of "pains" tend to focus on identification and typification, rather than outlining a pragmatic program for how these situations might be alleviated. As such, the "pains" literature can display what Bourdieu characterizes as a common intellectualist bias, whereby we "construe the world as a *spectacle*, as a set of significations to be interpreted rather than as concrete problems to be solved practically . . ." (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 39). The upshot is that many analyses seem to entail a form of "pain spotting," focused on identifying ever-more pains, with the task of developing pragmatic policy reforms being left to others.

The political purchase of pains

Does the "pains" framing represent an effective political strategy for addressing the situations it identifies? We just suggested that we live in a culture where diminishing pain and suffering is seen as a social good, but that requires immediate and important caveats as it applies to prisoners. It is perhaps more accurate to say that certain segments of the public (and the academy) see it as self-evident that simply identifying that suffering occurs (in various forms) in prison should suffice to motivate political and organizational actions to alleviate those pains. The problem, however, is that it is not clear how far that assumption generalizes to the entire citizenry or is supported by politicians empowered to implement effective change.

For example, the United States is not unique among Western democracies for having a low level of public sympathy for the plight of prisoners. This is apparent in research on public attitudes toward crime and punishment (Beckett, 1997; Gottschalk, 2006; Roberts et al., 2002; Zimring and Johnson, 2006) and also in the public politics relating to any number of symbolically important punishment-related developments (Pratt, 2000). Indeed, since the Nixon era, politicians in the United States have consistently seen it as a vote-winning strategy to vilify prisoners and criminals (and increasingly immigrants and refugees—populations that are often framed as being

criminogenic). The large numbers of citizens who appear receptive to such “tough on crime” posturing (Frost, 2010) are unlikely to be particularly concerned about the suggestion that prisons produce multiple pains. Indeed, it is possible that a considerable subset of citizens is unfazed by the fact that prisoners are deprived of their autonomy and liberty—two of the key elements of Sykes’ original list—and might conclude that such deprivations are close to the point of incarceration (Cullen et al., 2000; Frost, 2010).

The concern here is ultimately a political one. There seems to be a taken-for-granted assumption in the academic literature that foregrounding such pains might serve as a step toward rectifying suffering. It might also be, however, that such accounts preach to the liberal choir and as such are unlikely to disturb the key constituencies required to initiate meaningful prison reform.

Conclusion

In the decades since Sykes first presented his five pains of imprisonment, the inventory of “pains” identified in the extant literature has proliferated. We are now at the point where the “pains” framing encompasses atrocious prison-based abuses as well as a litany of “lesser” harms and indignities, manifest both inside and outside of prison walls and experienced by inmates and non-inmates alike. Our analysis above has identified four routes through which this conceptual enlargement has occurred, as well as some of the organizational and political factors that have helped to foster this trend. And while it is right, proper, and occasionally urgent to document these pains, it is also clear that the pains framing has become a victim of its own success; both dulled and diluted by virtue of having been applied to ever-more disparate domains, groups, and practices. There does not appear to be easy way past this tension between the imperative to bear witness, and a degree of cynicism about the continuing value of the concept, given the unfettered way in which it is now applied.

While scholars need not necessarily abandon the “pains” framing, we suggest that four things are now required. First, authors should show greater restraint and analytical precision when identifying “pains.” This will likely require the development of a conceptual hierarchy whereby the worst prison-related behaviors or situations are treated as “atrocities,” whereas we use other terms to identify “lesser” forms of suffering, such as “abuses,” “indignities,” “inconveniences,” “discomforts,” and “hassles.” Such an effort might necessitate returning to Sykes’ original formulation to contemplate whether all five of his “pains” speak to the same level of suffering.

The prospect of developing such a ranked conceptual scheme might appear controversial at first, given that it could be seen as judging or diminishing the seriousness of certain types of prison-related hardships. However, unless we develop such a scheme—the boundaries of which would always be politically and conceptually fraught—we appear destined to continue the perhaps more unpalatable practice of using a single catch-all conceptual category to align behaviors and situations that appear markedly different in terms of their distressing qualities. Pain may be subjective—and at a humanitarian level it is important to attend to all forms of suffering—but it also seems to be a serious error to continue to treat the miscellany of things currently aligned together under the “pains” heading as being somehow equivalent.

Second, we need more conscious and *explicit* reflection on our motivations for using the “pains” framing and the analytical value of this approach. As it stands now, the scholarly aim of most “pains” analyses seems to be purely diagnostic. This can entail what we have characterized as “pain spotting,” where authors see it as a sufficient contribution to the academic literature to demonstrate how some situations constitute a “pain.” When studying prisons, however, this seems

to be a comparatively low threshold, given that almost any situation involving constraint, regulation, therapy, or governance now seems capable of being characterized as a “pain.” If, as Davis (1971) suggests, what makes a theory or concept interesting is that it challenges an audience’s assumptions, it appears that the “pains” formulation has ceased to be interesting, as it often simply affirms what most scholars already recognize about the realities of incarceration. At an analytical level, researchers would therefore do well to forego or augment the readily available “pains” formulation in order to ask what else needs to be said about the empirical situations they are studying.

Third, we need an unflinching assessment of the politics of using the pains framing for addressing the concerns raised by authors and inmates. Given the tendency of authors to adopt a diagnostic approach to the study of pains, most of the works in this tradition do not address in concrete detail how those pains might be alleviated—or if that is even possible. Hence, the focus on “pains” needs to also direct attention to the policy realm. This might entail engaging in forms of public sociology or criminology. Ideally, it would also involve moving beyond broad forms of public condemnation in order to engage more concretely in the often-alien world of governmental policy and practice in order to try and pragmatically address and hopefully alleviate some of the many “pains” itemized in the literature. Such efforts will undoubtedly be exasperating at times for researchers unaccustomed to the world of governmental policy and practice, but it appears to be the next logical step required to take us beyond simply identifying and itemizing prison-based pains.

Finally, there is also a need for more attention to the possible political and pragmatic implications of having produced a now voluminous and disparate list of such pains. Criminology’s relationship to the “pains” framing now resembles Kuhn’s (1970) famous description of “normal science,” where practitioners become unreflexively habituated into doing familiar things in familiar ways. That is not an ideal situation for a discipline that often prides itself on critical self-reflection. Hopefully this essay prompts efforts toward a more vigorous debate on the value and utility of this foundational—and now inescapable—criminological concept.

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Note

1. We use the terms “prisoner” and “inmate” interchangeably, as the incarcerated men and women we have interviewed in our empirical research often saw the term “inmate” as less stigmatizing, but ultimately there was no consensus on this issue among our participants.

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