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**Title:** 'Commensality' as a theatre for witnessing change for criminalised individuals working at a resettlement scheme.

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**Abstract:** This article draws on analysis of interview data from an exploratory case study at an independent 'offender' resettlement scheme in England, investigating the benefits or otherwise of commensality for criminalised individuals and the wider community who share a communal lunchtime meal. For prisoners released on temporary licence and others referred through probation, caught in the liminal space between criminal and civilian life, commensality enables social interaction with non-criminalised individuals in a social environment *outside* of the prison estate. It becomes an arena for the display of non-criminalised identities in preparation for release into the community after punishment. It is a useful tool for social integration that challenges stereotypical beliefs about criminalised individuals amongst the wider community. Moreover, commensality works as a theatre for the performance of non-criminalised identities, by promoting social inclusion and generativity, it is part of a process of desistance geared towards improving self-worth.

### **Introduction:**

This article considers commensality from the Latin *cum mensa*; in the company of a meal/table, defined as eating and drinking together in a common physical or social setting (Fischler 1980, 1988, 2011, Sobal and Nelson 2003, Kerner et al 2015: 1), for promoting social integration and generativity or 'engagement in practices and behaviours that make a contribution to the well-being of others' (Maruna, 2001), which have been identified as significant in the process of desistance (the cessation from offending) (Maruna 2001, Weaver and Weaver 2013, Weaver 2016). Moreover, commensality as practiced at the resettlement scheme (RS) where the research took place is pure sociability or 'association for its own sake' (Simmel and Hughes 1949:254), that arguably 'enhances human growth

and social wellbeing by generating a sense of cooperation, commonality and belonging' (Anderson 2015: 103). Commensality in this instance, brings together what might be considered disparate social groups; prisoners, offenders and the wider community in an effort to challenge widely held negative stereotypes of prisoners/offenders and to give them the opportunity to perform non-prisoner/offender identities in a non-prison setting, crucially *outside* of the prison estate. It draws on notions of sociability (Simmel 1997 [1910]), social capital (Bourdieu 1984) and social interactionism (Goffman 1959) in which a sense of self is built up through social interaction, with front and backstage processes at work. This is considered in the context of desistance and processes of 'making good' (Mauna 2001).

Commensality, therefore, is a useful means of symbolising social acceptance for those on the margins and in a nod to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, I argue that it provides a theatre for the performance of imaginary future selves for criminalised individuals (Hunter and Farrall 2018). This is not to assume that selves are fixed or stable, but that they emerge through processes of social interaction in a 'social space that is not occupied but made' (Ivana 2018:57). Moreover, as Hunter and Farrell (2018:292) point out, following Butler (2004:44) 'individuals embarking on change request recognition of their ability to change, it is a recognition of their ability to change, which they seek'. This is especially pertinent when working with criminalised individuals, as they remain one of the 'the most vilified, marginalised and excluded social groups' (McNeill and Weaver 2010:28). This 'master status' (Goffman 1963) can mitigate against successful resettlement into the community after punishment. Commensality therefore becomes a theatre for the possibilities of performing and re-forming non-prisoner/offender identities, with imaginary future selves co-produced through social and symbolic connections made between prisoners/offenders and non-offenders. Hence, the operationalising and legitimising of social capital both real and imagined is co-produced, with connections working both ways.

Prior to discussing the findings, the context of the study will be explored in terms of commensality and how it is currently practiced (or not) in prisons in England and Wales, as well as processes of desistance. The overriding premise is that commensality or the social act of sharing a lunchtime meal can engender social acceptance, influence social attitudes, and work as a witness for change. The core argument is that commensality aids in the

development of pro-social identities, in a non-prison (institutional) environment, as part of a process of desistance geared towards improving self-worth and gaining a 'stake in conformity' (McNeill and Weaver 2010:54).

### **Context and background:**

#### *Commensality and prison*

It is argued that commensality, brings people together in an 'act of table fellowship' (Coveney 2006), that fosters a sense of solidarity (Fischler 2011, Grignon 2001), creates/re-creates social bonds (Sutton 2001) and reifies cultural norms and values (Bourdieu 1984). As Fiddes (1991) argues we eat nothing in isolation, but as part of a culture, so that we feed not only our appetites but also our social values and desire to belong. Hence, commensality is 'one of the most popular means to promote internal social cohesion and forge external alliances' (Wright 2010:212). Moreover, Fischler (2011:529) suggests that commensality is one of the most important articulations of human society, as it creates and reinforces social relations (Bourdieu 1984). Hence, the sharing of a meal together around a table symbolises inclusion and belonging, what Fischler (2011) refers to as 'the fraternal agape of a communal meal [...] a token of Christian fellowship, as held by early Christians in commemoration of the last supper' (2011:532). Further, Simmel (1997 [1910]) suggests that eating together demonstrates a profound intersection of the individual with the social, as well as 'the immeasurable sociological significance of the meal' (Simmel, 1997 [1910]:130).

Grignon (2001) identifies a typology of commensality that includes 'domestic' commensality linked to private and family life as opposed to the 'institutional' commensality of the public sphere, an 'everyday' commensality related to the nuclear family and/or the usual circle of colleagues as opposed to an 'exceptional' commensality, which is evident at stressful times in the annual calendar or life cycle. There is also a 'segretive' or the 'we and not we' and a 'transgressive' or ambivalent commensality (Grignon 2001: 23-36). In the context of everyday commensality, it is considered an 'habitual form of being gathered together [that] forms the base for trust and a routine that allows the minimization of conflicts in daily life' (Kerner *et al* 2015:4). It is notable that commensality has been highlighted as significant by Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Prisons. In their recent report on 'food', part of the '*Life in Prison*' series (July 2016), one of their four recommendations, is that new prisons should be

configured to enable eating together. Currently the majority of prisoners across the prison estate in England and Wales eat meals with plastic cutlery, alone in their prison cells, which is considered detrimental to prisoner-prisoner and prisoner-staff relations (HMI, 2016:11).

### *Processes of desistance*

Desistance is conceptualised as the study of change in criminality (defined as a propensity to offend) (Weaver 2016:9), rather than a complete cessation of criminal activity that can only be conferred upon an individual posthumously (Maruna 2001:26). Maruna (2001:27-8) contends that successful desistance needs to work on three levels; ontogenic (maturation), sociogenic (social bonding) and narrative (pro-social identity, developing a normal or reformed life story). When making good, offenders need to 'develop a coherent pro-social identity for themselves' (Maruna 2001:7). Moreover, Maruna (2001) argues that narratives of successful desisters and/or their redemption scripts tend to be 'care-oriented', other centred and focused on promoting the next generation, they are generative, and a generative environment is more effective at reducing offending (Maruna 2001:99). Halsey and Deegan (2015: 6) following Maruna (2001) define generativity as 'the desire and/or capacity to care for self, other and future in meaningful, non-violent and enduring fashion within prison and/or beyond'. Hence, McNeill (2006) argues that interventions should provide generative activities to enable criminalised individuals to 'make good'. Furthermore, it is important for the criminalised individual to believe in their own abilities to reform, 'even prisoners need to be useful to others, to discover their own hidden uses' (Barlow and Maruna 2012: 138). In this conceptualisation, following Maruna (2001) desistance is not an event but a process (McNeill et al 2005), and part of this desistance process includes 'changes in narrative identities (or self-stories)' alongside 'realising purpose through generative activities' (McNeill et al 2005:30-31).

Desistance is also a normalising process for offenders, who 'need to develop social links with people in different social hierarchies, with access to wider social resources' (Healy 2010:79). Indeed, contemporary theories of desistance move away from more traditional, highly individualised psycho-social approaches and highlight sociogenic circumstances, social bonds and social control, alongside the significance of social context or the interconnections between the individual and the social. Hence, desistance is considered social as well as

individual, it is not just a 'private' business (McNeill 2012, Weaver 2016). This includes a renewed focus on strengths-based approaches that consider reparation, reconciliation and community partnership as significant, with a focus on the benefits or 'good deeds' the reformed offender can offer the community (Hucklesby and Wincup 2007).

Desistance is therefore not just about why or how people stop offending, but also considers how criminalised individuals can be more effectively reintegrated into the community after punishment. 'Offenders', therefore 'need the community on their side in order to build and create a master status that breaks free from the offender/ ex-offender dyad' (Halsey and Deegan 2015:21). Indeed, 'a crucial element in successful resettlement is the willingness for the community to accept the releasee's return' (Hucklesby and Wincup 2007:84). Moreover, when moving from 'offender' to 'non-offender' identities, social reaction is important, and crucially change needs to be recognised by others and reflected back (McNeill and Weaver 2010).

### *Methodology*

The fieldwork for this study was conducted as part of a Sociology of Health and Illness Mildred Blaxter Post-Doctoral fellowship. It was carried out at an independent, part community funded charitable incorporated organisation (CIO) between October 2015 and July 2016. The CIO is a strengths-based resettlement scheme (RS) that takes men from the local prison released on temporary licence (ROTL) every day on enhanced work/training placements prior to their release, as well as others on community orders referred through probation (collectively referred to as trainees). It was an exploratory case study entitled: 'commensality as a tool for health, well-being, social inclusion and community resilience'. The main aim of the study was to consider the benefits or otherwise of commensality for *all* participants involved in a shared lunchtime meal at the RS, located within a rural community and significantly *outside* of the prison estate. At the start of the research, lunch was a meal of soup, cheese, bread and cakes/biscuits made and supplied by people working at a local college, as there were no cooking facilities on site. This situation changed as the research progressed, with staff, volunteers and trainees becoming involved in cooking and preparing a much wider variety of meals (Parsons 2017). Lunch is shared with guests who are booked in to visit, specifically to encourage social inclusion and to build links between trainees and

the wider community. The rationale for the study arose as a result of previous research, which highlighted the divisive ways in which every day foodways can be used to form barriers between social groups, culturally and symbolically (Parsons, 2015, 2016). I also had experience of commensality at the RS and wanted to examine how more inclusive foodways such as commensality might be an opportunity for trainees to 'make good' (Maruna 2001).

The methodological focus was iterative and was concerned with understanding the meanings associated with commensality from the participants' perspective and exploring the 'common vocabularies' (Mills 1959) used across the different social groups when reflecting on eating together. It was developed to be as faithful as possible to all participants' accounts and to raise issues of concern to them (Liamputtong 2007). The methodological approach incorporated three inter-related aspects, a focus group with trainees and staff, following a 'photo elicitation' format using photographs of food to encourage discussion around likes/dislikes. This was less about gathering data and more about getting to know the trainees, especially in terms of what they might like/not like to eat for lunch. Indeed, it proved to be an extremely useful method of developing trust between researcher and trainees, who tend to mistrust figures in authority (Copes et al 2012; Liebling, 1999; Szczepanik and Siebert 2016). The main method of data collection was through semi-structured qualitative interviews, with questions on the number of lunchtime visits, perceptions of change in attitudes at lunch times, as well as any specific issues of interest to them. I kept detailed fieldnotes, as this is considered good research practice (Patton 2002, Tjora 2006).

The University Ethics Committee granted full ethical approval for the study in October 2015 and fieldwork was carried out over nine months, ending in June 2016. All participants gave written consent for all aspects of the project, including interviews, focus groups and fieldwork. None of those approached to participate refused to do so. Participants were given (or chose) pseudonyms and a total of 23 interviews were conducted, see table below:

Table 1: Research methods table

Focus Group	
Photo-elicitation focus group on food likes/dislikes	Trainees: Frank, John, Nolan, Paul and Ryan (5) Staff: Neil, Gary (2)
Individual Semi-structured Interviews	
Staff (4)	Flis (arts co-ordinator), Gary (market gardener), Jenna (project co-ordinator), Neil (woodwork)
Weekly Volunteers (4)	Carole – lunchtime cook (Tuesday) Donald – bread/pizza/ chutney/jam (Wednesday) Phoebe and Sophia – art students (Thursday)
Stakeholders (2) – referral organisations + regular lunchtime visitors	Carly - Prison Officer Olivia – Detective Sargent, integrated offender management
Supporters (6) – regular lunch time visitors, local employers, fundraisers	Barbara, Eleanor, Harry, Imogen, Leonard, Marcia
Trainees (7)	Alex (age 28), Bradley (age 22) Frank (age 52), John (age 49), Nolan (age 36), Paul (age 28) and Ryan (age 25)
Field Notes	
Field notes	56 lunches (including cooking 1-to1 on 27 occasions)

Most interviews were conducted on site after lunch (two were conducted in the interviewee’s home and one in their place of work). All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and lasted from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Most of the interviewees were white-British, apart from Nolan who was black-British. Bradley had been in the care system for most of his life. Frank was a prolific offender who had spent over half of his adult life in prison, all other trainees were serving sentences for a first offence. For those trainees coming out on ROTL, this was their first opportunity for engaging in social interactions with non-family/friends, non-prison staff/inmates, and crucially outside of a prison setting.

The aim was to collect rich, thick descriptions (Geertz 1973), following a constructivist grounded theory approach, with themes coded and re-coded as the research progressed (Charmaz 2006). Broad themes or ‘common vocabularies’ (Mills 1959) were identified within the data, with threads running through these reflecting public health policies around the importance of ‘good’ home cooked/home grown food and commensality (eating together) as markers of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). An iterative and reflexive approach to the



research aims (Denscombe 2010) was adopted and the analysis therefore evolved as the research progressed over time. Thematic analysis has been conducted on the interview transcripts. This involves a search for themes that might be considered relevant to the description of the phenomenon (Daly et al, 1997) through 'careful reading and re-reading of the data' (Rice and Ezzy, 1999: 258). These open themes (codes) (Strauss and Corbin 1990) capture key aspects of the thematic content and are a form of pattern recognition within the data, where themes become categories for analysis. When considering commensality, the benefits of exposure to a range of social and cultural norms and values are significant, not least for enabling the development of a non-prisoner/offender identities and enhancing social relations.

## **Findings and discussion**

### *Commensality as a tool for social acceptance (changing social attitudes)*

Through analysis of the interview transcripts it is evident that commensality provides a theatre, from Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model, for trainees to rebuild a 'spoiled' identity (Goffman 1963). It enables trainees to shed their prison masks and the 'inauthentic prison self' and practice doing normal (Jewkes 2002:134, 2012). Further, it challenges widely held stereotypes of criminalised individuals for example, both Bradley (trainee) and Donald (volunteer) independently of each other said they believed that offenders were generally considered to be "scum". Indeed, commensality is, as Alex (trainee) says an "eye-opener" for visitors, as it challenges preconceptions and stereotypes, he says:

*People have this sort of terrible perception of prisoners, don't they? So I suppose for some people it's quite an eye opener... oh no they're just sort of normal people really... so they sort of think oh well that's not, I suppose it's a stereotyping really, I guess they think they're just like huge blokes, always violent... and they turn up [here] and they see an angry little hobbit bloke, like [name] and funny haircut [name] and a lanky gangly person [me] and a hunchbacked bald bloke that's [name], they sort of go, well that's not exactly what I'd pictured, I suppose when they talk to them as well, I suppose we all sort of spoke quite well, it wasn't that sort of American Black, you know 'Yes Bro' and stuff like that, you did have quite a civil conversation, it's more of an eye-opener for them really...*

Alex clearly identifies how trainees at the RS differ from widely held stereotypes and how important it is, for this to be observed, notably this occurs through commensality. It is by engaging in everyday commensal activities that visitors witness a criminalised individual 'doing good' (Maruna 2001). Moreover, commensality enables social recognition, the development of self-worth and an ability to respond to changing social contexts. Similarly, Barbara (supporter) comments on the trainees and says:

*Some of the guys... had faces that looked like they'd been in an accident; with tattoos and maybe a little bit rough... and reinforcing that stereotype... [yet] there were other guys who seemed a bit different...*

So, whilst offender stereotypes are clearly easy to draw upon, Barbara acknowledges that not all trainees are the same, some are a "bit different". Indeed, there is often a level of ambiguity around trainee identities when people first visit the site for lunch, as the "RS team" shirt is worn by all staff, volunteers and trainees. Often, this means it is not immediately obvious who is a volunteer, a member of staff or a trainee, so the "RS team" shirt deliberately confuses visitors, as Leonard (supporter) says, "one is never quite sure". This ensures that trainees have a group identity, and this further reinforces a form of social integration and a distancing from the 'offender' label.

Trainees also work to make the visitors feel welcome, as Phoebe (art student) comments:

*I think as we've been getting to know them more they're more comfortable around us and I think they've been chatting to us a lot more about kind of deeper issues... like it was when John was telling us about his daughters and asking like, I didn't think he would have mentioned that near the start, because I think it's that trust, I think you've got have a good level of trust and things like that, but that was nice and, well they were quite open at the beginning though, just telling us weird jokes and stuff... yes I think they were trying to make us feel comfortable and welcome because they wanted us to come back, didn't they so that's...it's a sort of reciprocal thing isn't it?*

This she notes is one of the benefits of commensality, “there was a lot of conversation over dinner because it goes, it flows, in the way we sit as well, it's nice, we're all passing things, and it's like all that conversing sort of to and fro”. Carole (volunteer) also comments on lunchtimes, she says “the fact that everybody is just chatting together and whole thing is very easy and relaxed - and everybody does their bit, and everybody knows what to do and is obviously part of this group”. Commensality therefore reinforces belonging, that incorporates elements of generativity. There is also a reciprocity at work during these shared lunchtime experiences as well, as Donald says:

*I think I've learned about life a bit more, yes, but certainly learned from the guys who come here quite a bit, I don't know if I could put my finger on it and say precisely what that is.... Well, you can never really understand somebody else's life but you can be invited to share in part of it, and I think when people do share things in their life that are very personal, you feel a sense of privilege because, especially with the guys here because they probably - some but not all - probably don't get many opportunities to talk about their deeper inner feelings and I think when people do, I think as another human being it's a very precious thing because it's so near to the core of who we are.*

Ryan also explains in his interview:

*I didn't realise that there was [going to be] so much more effort [put] in to getting you to socialise, and you know open yourself up a bit, which is you know, exactly what I needed... I didn't realise how much, how strange I'd become, basically with the barriers I'd built up while I was in prison, so yeah, I'd say that was the unexpected bit, how strange I'd become and how much I needed, you know, to do things differently...*

Here, Ryan is identifying the ‘mortification of the self’ (Goffman 1961) and has become “strange” because of the barriers he has built up in an order to protect himself and this has become normalised. Being at the RS and commensality has a direct impact of his sense of self, it enables him to peel off the criminal label (McNeil and Weaver 2010) prior to his release from prison. Commensality is thus a theatre for the performance of a non-prisoner

self. Further, when 'ex-offenders share their stories they are leading the effort to transform public discourse regarding crime and criminality' (Maruna 2001:148). *In this context commensality is important for changing opinions as Donald says:*

*I think I've become more educated about what happens to people in prison, that's certainly changed my view. I think my attitude, my outlook, my view of the prison system has changed rather a lot, I think the prison system is fairly appalling whereas before I didn't know much about it, whereas now I think it's not doing anything to help, it's doing a lot of bad things and it's also reinforcing this idea in the general community that you can't trust any prisoner... whereas here what I think is pretty obvious to me, is that all the guys who come here feel they're trusted, which is probably rather different from what happens – in the prison...*

Commensality at the RS therefore enables trainees to become more like their non-offender selves, as commensality dissolves some of the barriers between staff/volunteers and trainees. There is a kind of segregative commensality at work (Grignon 2001) that reinforces a group identity and sense of belonging to a non-offender community, as Donald notes:

*the lunches are all about being together and being kind of equal you know, there's a levelling which I think is great and you know, everybody's got something to contribute, nobody's more important than anybody else, people who have got particular skills, that's a separate issue, but at mealtimes in particular there's an equality about things, which I think makes for a very positive experience for the guys who come here.*

Further, trainees benefit from being responsible and caring about others well-being when preparing and cooking lunch, attributes associated with pro-social identities (Barry 2007, Healy 2010, Hucklesby and Wincup 2007, Parsons 2017). Indeed, preparing and cooking lunch for everyone reifies a responsabilisation strategy at the heart of strengths-based models of resettlement (Maruna and LeBel 2003), as 'even prisoners need to be useful to others, to discover their own hidden uses' (Barlow and Maruna 2012:138).

Further, there is an understanding amongst trainees, staff and volunteers, that visitors are necessary to challenge some of the negative stereotypes, labelling and stigma associated with offender identities, as well as to enable social integration, inclusion and feelings of self-worth. Also, as John (trainee) says:

*I suppose it's the people as well isn't it? That's a big part of it. The people that are about, everybody, the different walks of life, that make it interesting, that makes it very interesting actually. Yesterday for instance, I don't know a lot about Imogen but I think she comes from quite a wealthy family, so you've got that sort of walk of life down to Rory [young, local homeless man], which is quite a big, big spectrum and I think it's quite nice as well...*

Hence, the wide cross-section of visitors for lunch ensures trainees perceptions of 'others' are equally challenged. Although, some visitors are not as welcome, as Alex notes:

*...it did sometimes feel a bit awkward especially when you're sort of sat next to police officers and stuff like that and I'm thinking well we've sort of been enemies for the last 10 years, not in the sense like we meant any general harm to each other, but in the same sense you were on one side of the fence and I was on the other...*

Police officers, police commissioners and circuit judges do not visit for lunch every week, and most trainees enjoy the sense of belonging they get from sitting down for lunch with everyone, as John says:

*I must admit lunchtimes are like the highlight of my day really. Not just for the food as such but I like... I think Nolan sort of struck it on the nose yesterday when we got back, and he said it was like sitting there with a big family and he really liked it. He'd missed that...*

Although, commensality is not always easy, especially when trainees first come out to the RS on day release from the prison, as Frank says:

*I felt a bit shy, a bit embarrassed, took me about a week to get used to it, eating around the table and that... Don't eat around tables... Never have done not when I was younger or nothing, no, eat where you wanted really, not around a table, yes, it was all weird, seriously, thought where am I? To start with I thought this was mad... what's going on, so I got to find out what's it all about [name]... Helping others isn't it, helping each other, yes that's what I thought... Yes, embarrassed... I were new, and I weren't used to it... I'm used to it now... I find it hard to chat to new people [name] and they're different like I can't say how... Sat around the table is a good laugh sometimes.*

Frank clearly identifies his discomfort at the experience of commensality. This was not part of his cultural habitus (Bourdieu 1984). Yet he is keen to learn the social rules of engagement, to conform and become integrated into the social norms of the group. John on the other hand has a different cultural habitus and clearly identifies the social and cultural capital associated with commensality (Bourdieu 1984), when asked what he likes about the lunches, he says:

*I think [the project manager] makes it like that. I think the fact he lays the table out nicely, which is nice, you miss that when you're in prison... My mother was always one for eating at the table and all laid out and I think we tended to, at home really as well... when you're in prison you don't get any of the... you don't eat with metal knives and forks to start with. Everything's plastic. You don't sit down together to eat your dinner, everybody's back to their cells, eating on their own off their lap or whatever, or sat in the corner, in your chair, which is pretty crap really...*

Here, John is making a direct comparison between his family life and the prison regime. These are social, cultural and classed references that reify his belonging to a more civilised past. He is highlighting a non-prisoner identity, he is a family man and enjoys the 'family' references at the RS and flowers in the table, which remind him of home, both the home of his childhood and the one he had with his daughters. Indeed, setting the table is all part of the commensal experience, part of the civilising process and the ritual of lunchtimes, as Flis (arts co-ordinator) says:

*I think the [visitors] are always quite surprised actually what our lunches are, healthy... okay cake isn't so healthy, not always, but it's very wholesome food and cooking. I think when they come out, they're always quite shocked at how civil it all is, we lay a table up and everyone sort of muddles together to get everything ready and we clear up together. Yeah, I think that's quite surprising it certainly actually surprised me, that it was quite formal you come from a building site to a formal lunch... but an informal atmosphere. So, it's saying it's important without putting any pressure on behaviour and certain constraints... it's usually quite easy conversation. It's not often that there's silence, or if there is silence it's because everyone is eating and enjoying their food.*

Indeed, accommodating individual tastes and preference when deciding what to cook, is an important aspect of rebuilding a non-prisoner identity at the RS, which was why it was important to conduct the 'photo-elicitation' focus group to establish trainees' likes/dislikes.

#### *Commensality as a witness for change*

The emphasis on 'normal' of being and doing 'normal' was a recurrent theme for trainees. Commensality affords the opportunity to engage in "normal" (non-prison) activities, conversations and to "mix with normal people" (Nolan, trainee). It becomes part of a normalising process, of "not feeling like a prisoner" (Nolan) and "learning to be with people" (Ryan, trainee). It is 'civilising' as well, as Alex says, "I was trying to be polite and civil and stuff like that" and John (trainee) "It always makes you mind your p's and q's". At lunchtimes, most of the trainees like Bradley say "it's just nice to talk to people" and "conversations just fly about, that's what I like about it, you get to speak to everyone", whilst Frank (trainee) notes that lunchtimes are all about "just eating, everyone just talks, interacts, has general chitchat really". Further, as Nolan says, "you don't feel like a prisoner out here... coming out here makes me normal, I am mixing with normal people again." Indeed, Paul (trainee) mentions that he prefers it when there are more "normal" people around at lunchtimes, he says "I like it when it's spread out, yes, normal people not prison people." Paul continues:

*It's the jail, it saps you're life out of you, and you can tell, I could instantly tell you if someone was in jail or not, I think you can, it's a deadened [look] around the eyes, like part of their personality has just been chipped off, hardened, yes, you're not as kind as you were when you were outside, unfortunately, everybody's a user inside, there are obviously nice people, yes, horrible, nasty, yes, full of them 95% of people in there not very nice and it's all hidden as well, it's all like a smoke screen everybody put's on a nice face, but the nicer they are generally the nastier they are...*

These comments from Paul are notable as it is well documented how offenders can be reluctant to discuss prison life, especially with 'non-prisoners' (Copes et al 2012; Leibling 1999; Szczepanik and Siebert 2016). This serves to demonstrate a good level of trust from John and Ryan, made possible through commensality. Moreover, as Donald comments:

*what struck me was there was a kind of peacefulness about sitting down together, there was only about 6 people in total, maybe 7 and what I thought was really good was everybody was very engaged like even one or two of the guys who were quite reticent about speaking, somehow at mealtimes they would chat because, I don't know why, maybe they just felt that it was a safe place to talk – and it wasn't so much they were talking about great, deep, sensitive thoughts but they were talking more than they would normally have done, and expressing themselves in a way that certainly one of them in particular hadn't done before.*

Indeed, for many trainees' trust is a major issue and it takes time for them to readjust to some of the very ordinary, everyday aspects of life outside. Again, commensality enables trainees to engage in ordinary social activities and conversations. Time spent at the RS is crucial in this regard and stakeholders, as well as key staff/volunteers all comment on how trainees change over time. This was especially pertinent for Carly, a prison officer working in the resettlement wing of the local prison says:

*I mean Alex was a perfect example... he was very anti-authority, he'd got [to the resettlement wing], slipped through, he'd not got any warnings and adjudications, but he was anti-authority, he didn't... certainly wouldn't have chatted to officers he*



*was... he had a chip on his shoulder, he sort of hated the world I think, that's when I met him, before he came out here, and that's how he was to start with...*

She continues, explaining some of the noticeable changes she witnessed in Alex, she says:

*...within a couple of months he was a different person, yes such a nice young man, you know a completely different person, he would you know, he would chat to... he would chat to anyone who would chat to him, you know he would have a good laugh, he wasn't just trying to impress you, like some people talk to officers to try and impress, he was just talking as a normal human being, and his confidence was just through the roof, you could tell that he knew he wouldn't be back, he knew he would get a job, he knew he would be paying for himself, looking after himself, securing his own accommodation... you knew you would never see him again, you knew whatever had been the situation before, yes it was such a marked improvement, yes I thought he turned out to be a really nice young man, which he obviously was underneath, before but he'd been kind of damaged by the lifestyle he'd been involved in, and then the real him came through in the end...*

The interview with Carly is littered with references to 'normal' and not just in relation to Alex. There is a constant sense that the prison environment is not normal. This reinforces the need for resettlement processes that enable offenders to regain a sense of normal and alternative models of social integration.

Similarly, from the perspective of regular lunchtime visitors, commensality provides an opportunity to witness change in the trainees as they "re-establish themselves from within" (Donald, volunteer), when "lunch is relaxing, and they can be themselves" (Donald). Rather than the prison "approach of head down and no eye contact" (Imogen, supporter), at lunchtimes "you don't have to be very guarded with what you say, you can talk quite openly about anything" (Ryan, trainee). Those sharing regular lunchtimes also get to know the prisoners, as Phoebe (art student/volunteer) says "they're just normal people". Indeed, seeing prisoners as 'normal' and witnessing change are important aspects of successful resettlement, alongside the social recognition and acceptance of the reformed ex-offender

by the community (McNeill 2012:18). Further, for regular visitors the visual spectacle of trainees changing over time is striking, as Marcia (supporter) says:

*Actually just seeing how people change that's the miracle... that's been the real joy of meeting people to start with, and then they won't do eye contact, like [name] or someone like that you know, I thought, this is judgemental, I think in my head, I'd kind of written him off a bit, thinking oh [project manager] is not going to be able to do the magic here, and he did, and that for me was a real miracle watching that... and watching them change it's really interesting.*

Imogen, another regular visitor also notices change over time and comments on the benefits of commensality, she says:

*Do you want some water, or do you want to have some more soup? That's the sort of really basic life skills and sharing life with people generally, and if that has been drilled out of somebody, what hope is there...? I notice the changes in them over [time], behavioural things, you were talking about food, I think, I'm sure that they appreciate the food that's on the table, I'm sure that they all understand that it is also a tool, that it does break down barriers, that if you're saying 'would you like another piece of bread' that's a much easier way to engage with someone than my name is Fred what do you do?*

Of course, when measuring change for the trainees themselves, it is often not so obvious, as Ryan points out:

*You don't have to be very guarded with what you say [here], you can talk quite openly about anything – well I suppose at home I'm just used to sitting in front of the TV and eating my tea so yes, so I'm not used to, you know, eating my dinner and chatting... so that's quite nice and not having to watch what you say is even, even better...*

Alex though notes that it is not always possible to notice change in yourself, he says:

*A few other people said I seemed more confident which was the people in er, a couple of officers in the prison said that, and [the RS manager] said that one day, and so perhaps, sort of noticeably there has been... I s'pose if you're sort of doin' it yourself you don't really notice perhaps so much as anybody, around other people, you know if you haven't seen somebody for ages and he's been a fat fella before and then you sort of see them all of a sudden and they've lost loads of weight and you're like Christ what sort of weight you've lost, but if you're with them every day you see 'em losin' the weight but you don't really notice, so I s'pose it's something like that really, I didn't really notice it myself.*

It is noteworthy, that Jenna (staff) also commented on change in Alex, during her interview, she says:

*Specific memories actually would be when my parents came to lunch – so there were two reasons, a) because everyone was so lovely with my parents and they just loved it – but also because I'd, been training Alex, on his sort of first week and he just said, I hate the lunches, can't even - you know, I can't even look at people or talk too much, so I stay silent, get through each lunch, and this was like, a few months later, when my parents came, and then there was just this moment - well I was like, talking to somebody else, and I just caught - Alex like - he looked up to my parents and asked them a question and it was like, it was just something, like completely simple, but it just felt like, see this is where - this is where it's changing, it's these little small things...*

This perfectly encapsulates the benefits of commensality, it simultaneously exposes visitors and trainees to the 'normality' of social interaction over lunch. Over time it enables trainees to engage in a level of sociability that they have not experienced in the prison environment.

#### **Concluding comments:**

Commensality is beneficial for both trainees and visitors; it serves as a theatre for the performance of a non-prisoner/offender identities and sociability; it helps to rebuild a

spoiled-identity, whilst challenging widely held stereotypes of 'typical' prisoners/offenders. The practice of everyday commensality at the RS can be empowering for trainees as it acknowledges the positive things prisoners/offenders can achieve, not least in spending time engaged in conversation around a table. Although it arguably draws upon an idealised version of the 'family meal', which persists as an aspirational middle-class cultural norm (Parsons 2015, 2016), it is useful for trainees as it reinforces a sense of belonging to a 'normal', 'non-prison' group. Moreover, typologies of commensality include other social group formations beyond the family (Grignon 2001). Time is significant as well, not only is the meal served at the same time every day, at a time of day in keeping with what is 'considered the norm in the community', but there is time to 'be yourself'. The benefits of eating communally and at the 'right' time, have both been highlighted as significant for prisoner health and well-being in the UK (Her Majesty's Chief Inspector for Prisons, 2016:13).

Commensality is especially pertinent for trainees in terms of enabling change to their master status (Goffman 1963) to be witnessed by the wider community (Halsey and Deegan 2015:21). This can be considered part of a strengths-based model of resettlement, which focuses on what the prisoner/offender can bring to the community rather than what they 'lack'. In deficits-based models of resettlement, there is an emphasis on what the offender needs (accommodation, skills, training) or what they 'lack' in terms of responsible attitudes, beliefs and responses (Hucklesby and Wincup 2007). A strengths-based or generative model on the other hand, emphasises 'the desire and/or capacity to care for self, others and future in meaningful, non-violent and enduring fashion, within prison and beyond' (Halsey and Deegan, 2015:6).

Commensality therefore enables trainees to show others how they have changed, whilst simultaneously giving visitors insight into their lives, notably those they would never ordinarily interact with. Visitors are only invited onto the RS for lunch three times a week, however this makes for a unique experience for both trainees and guests. Not many people sit down for lunch with prisoners/offenders on a day-to-day basis and it is only through this type of social interaction that some of the negative stereotypes can be challenged. This is not to suggest that the wider project is not beneficial, just that the purpose of having

additional visitors at lunchtime has been specifically developed for these purposes. Overall commensality emphasises the significance of foodways (ways of doing food) in drawing people together and creating social bonds (Parsons 2015), it is about social connections and the sociology of sociability (Simmel 1997 [1910]). Commensality therefore provides an arena for the manifestation of change, it enables trainees to practice being/doing normal and for visitors to witness these transformations and reflect them back.

Overall, the study highlights some of the benefits of commensality, in encouraging social inclusion, sociability (Simmel 1997 [1910]), social capital (Bourdieu 1984), and changes in narrative identities, which are significant elements within processes of desistance. Following Maruna (2001) commensality has the potential to be sociogenic, in that it encourages social bonding, helps in developing pro-social identities and encourages generativity. Moreover, commensality is reciprocal and works by enabling visitors to the RS to challenge their own preconceptions and stereotypes of prisoners/offenders and to demonstrate that the community is willing to accept the reformed prisoner/offender.

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