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To cite this article: Lamia Irfan, Muzammil Quraishi, Mallory Schneuwly Purdie & Matthew Wilkinson (2021): The primacy of ontology: a philosophical basis for research on religion in prison, Journal of Critical Realism, DOI: [10.1080/14767430.2021.2007463](https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2021.2007463)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767430.2021.2007463>



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Published online: 27 Dec 2021.



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The primacy of ontology: a philosophical basis for research on religion in prison

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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests philosophical foundations for mixed methods research based on the philosophy of critical realism. In particular, it suggests that the critical realist idea of the primacy of ontology helps bridge the apparent paradigmatic gap between qualitative and quantitative research. It illustrates this foundational idea by showing why and how a multi-disciplinary team used a mixed methods approach to understand the significance of religion in prison through a multi-site study of religious conversion to Islam in prison and how this gives a better account than a single method approach. The mixed method research design used in the project sets out a new way of mapping and understanding religious conversion and differences within a faith group that draws on the emancipatory potential of critical realist thought.



KEYWORDS

Ontology; mixed methods; religious change; prisons; Muslim prisoners

Introduction

As part of an emerging critical realist criminology, this paper discusses how the critical realist idea of the primacy of ontology informed the research design, methodology and data analysis of a pioneering Research Programme – **Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison (UCIP)**. UCIP undertook a detailed mixed-methods criminological mapping of the characteristics, experiences and theology of converts to Islam in prisons in England and, comparatively, France and Switzerland.

UCIP used a robust mixed-methods criminological research plan to generate a detailed and extensive dataset about the nature of Muslim converts, the types of Islam (-ism) that they follow in prisons and the effects of their practice of Islam on prison life. Along with this, the project was also interested in understanding how religious conversion was managed by prison authorities and the chaplaincy. The research was undertaken between 2018 and 2020 and was carried out by a diverse, multi-disciplinary team of researchers in five English prisons, four Swiss prisons and one French prison (Table 1).

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Table 1. Sample.

| Country | Prisons | Security Category of the prison ^a | Surveys | Interviews with prisoners | Interview with chaplains | Interview with officers | Interview with governors | Observations: RE Classes + Friday Prayers |
|--------------------|--------------|--|------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|---|
| England | 5 | | 191 | 122 | 13 | 25 | 12 | 21 |
| | HMP Coquet | C | 57 | 33 | 2 | 8 | 4 | 5 |
| | HMP Forth | A | 24 | 19 | 3 | 5 | 2 | 4 |
| | HMP Parrett | B | 52 | 36 | 6 | 8 | 2 | 5 |
| | HMP Stour | D | 19 | 12 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| | HMP Severn | B | 39 | 22 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| Switzerland | 4 | | 54 | 25 | 5 | 12 | 1 | 10 |
| | Miteithlen | A | 20 | 14 | 1 | | | 2 |
| | Fontgrise | B | 15 | 5 | 2 | 11 | 1 | 5 |
| | Doriath | A | 11 | 1 | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| | La Citadelle | A | 8 | 5 | 1 | | | 1 |
| France | 1 | | 34 | 11 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| | Hauterive | B | 34 | 11 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 |
| Total | 10 | 4 x A 4 x B 1 x C 1 x D | 279 | 158 | 19 | 41 | 15 | 32 |

^aFor details of security categories see: <https://prisonjobs.blog.gov.uk/your-a-d-guide-on-prison-categories/>.

Working from a critical realist theoretical perspective and in a dialectic with a qualitative pilot, the research tools were designed to measure different dimensions of the experiences of Muslim prisoners. The research aims of the project were to investigate **who** converts to Islam are in terms of their socio-demographic properties and religious identities and world views. We were also interested in comparing **why** prisoners were converting to Islam across England, Switzerland and France. A core interest was in **what** types of Islam were embraced in prison and the impact of this upon experiences of prison life and rehabilitation. Finally, the study examined **how** the process of conversion was managed by the prison authorities and prison chaplains. This paper outlines the mixed methods approach adopted for this project and discusses the advantages of such an approach along with outlining some limitations.

This research makes an original contribution to critical realist theory as it concretizes abstract and theoretical concepts, such as generative mechanisms, through a real-life example to show how a critical realist framework can underlabour to develop a sophisticated understanding of a critical social issue, such as religious change in prison. Although the mixed-methods approach developed here is suitable to address any number of universal dilemmas, this article applies it to a particular branch of social science – criminology – thus adding a dimension to critical realist work in social science (Price and Martin 2018). The article is meant for a critical realist as well as a criminology audience. Its aim is to develop a critical realist approach within criminology and to extend critical realist understanding by using the rich theoretical concepts of critical realism and applying these with a concrete research study.

Quantitative/Qualitative divide in social science

Most social science research is structured around distinct research strategies which either employ quantitative or qualitative research methods (Bryman 1988). These differing strategies are often perceived as being derived from conflicting and mutually exclusive ontological and epistemological assumptions (Lincoln and Guba 2000).

The quantitative research paradigm with its emphasis on the collection and analysis of data which can be quantified (Bryman 1988) usually entails a deductive approach in which research is used as a means to test existing theories or hypotheses. It is based on an ontological position of objectivism in which social reality is regarded as existing factually and externally and separate from the values and positionality of researchers (Kelley and De Graaf 1997). This ontological position is usually coupled with a positivist epistemology that advocates a natural scientific approach to study social reality which posits the independence of the researcher from the researched (Comte 1856).

In contrast qualitative research usually focuses on language and subjective meanings rather than the analysis of quantifiable data and tends to emphasize an inductive approach in which theories are believed to emerge from the ground-up through the research process (Creswell 2003; Silverman 2000; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Qualitative research is usually located within an interpretivist epistemology which places emphasis on the ways in which social actors interpret the world they inhabit (Taylor and Bogdan 1984; Taylor 2005). This epistemological position is associated with an interpretivist ontological orientation in which social reality is regarded as shifting and constructed through the activity of social actors (Maxwell 2012; Schwandt 1997).

Within the critical realist paradigm, Sayer (1992) developed the concept of intensive and extensive research design to explain the different philosophical basis and advantages of qualitative and quantitative research methodology. For Sayer (1992) intensive research provides specific explanations of individualized cases and allows for detailed descriptions of research settings through verbal and other non-numerical forms of data. The primary disadvantage of this approach lies in a lack of generalizability as the results obtained from one research setting may not be representative of other situations (Sayer 1992).

By contrast, extensive research, which is often associated with quantitative methods, is designed to uncover characteristics or patterns that exist across a wide array of individuals (Sayer 1992). This approach allows researchers to identify simple relationships that exist between different variables. However, the main disadvantage of this approach is that it is unable to cover the complex, contextual, non-observable mechanisms that are at play in creating the empirically observable effects (Sayer 1992).

These approaches rather than being competing methodologies are in fact complementary in nature and combining the strengths of each philosophy tends to lead a better understanding of the topic being investigated (Trochim and Donnelly 2007).

Quantitative/Qualitative divide in criminology

The divisions between qualitative and quantitative research in social science more generally are also present within criminological research which represents a diverse set of assumptions and agendas with differing ontological, epistemological approaches which in turn influence the choice of research method (Ellis, Hartley, and Walsh 2009; Yeboah 2009). These diverse approaches have often also been the expression of political divisions (Carrington and Larkin 2017).

Positivist ontology in criminology

Quantitative research in criminology is often associated with classical or positivist studies of crime and Right Realist Criminology (Herrnstein and Murray 1994). Classical criminological research is derived from an understanding of crime as rational action; the focus of such research is to make crime a less attractive option through punitive crime control measures (Young and Matthews 1992).

In contemporary research what is broadly described as 'administrative criminology' refers to research, which is rooted in the classical criminological research paradigm, and focuses on making crime control more effective through policies that limit the opportunities to commit crime and increasing the risks of detection. Such studies employ quantitative research methods to study the effects of different social control mechanisms (such as community sentences, rehabilitative sentences or imprisonment) in controlling different types of crime (such as violent crimes or crimes of property). Such studies usually focus on official crime statistics, large scale experiments and quantifiable data to derive causal relationships between the use of different types of crime control mechanisms and deterrence or desistance from crime.

Administrative criminological approaches which focus on scientifically studying crime control mechanisms exist in parallel to positivist studies that are centered on the offender. These actuarial criminological approaches focus on risk factors present in the personal life

history of offenders that make them susceptible to involvement in crime (Farrington 2000, 2013; Loeber and Farrington 2000). Actuarial criminology falls within positivist criminology as these studies are interested in developing causal explanations of crime that seek to explain crime through a biological, or psycho-social approach. The studies also employ a quantitative research methodology; however, the focus is on collecting longitudinal data on the psycho-social characteristics of persistent offenders.

Constructivist ontology in criminology

In contrast to this, qualitative research in criminology, is usually associated with constructivist approaches to understanding crime (Becker 1973; Shaw 2015). Labelling theory for example also focuses on criminal justice policies; however, this approach is more interested in understanding the ways in which the criminal justice system constructs crimes by labelling some actions and individuals as criminal and the effects such labelling has on the individual (Becker 1973). This perspective draws from and adopts ethnographic and qualitative research methodologies, which stress the role of the criminogenic context in creating the conditions of crime by radically constraining the options of individual agents and groups.

Mixed methods research approach

Going beyond seeing qualitative and quantitative research as incompatible and representing different research paradigms, which in the criminological context have often taken on a politicized polarity, mixed methods approaches to social research have tended to focus pragmatically on the technical advantages of different research methods and to recommend combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to gather more comprehensive and convincing data (Brewer and Hunter 2005; Bryman 2016; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner 2007; Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). Adopting a pragmatic view of social research, mixed methods researchers emphasize the advantages of using a multiplicity of methods, that include the benefits of both qualitative and quantitative methods, to confirm research outcomes (Morgan 2007). Within a mixed methods research paradigm, combining methods is seen by its advocates to have several distinct pragmatic advantages which include: greater confidence in research results; innovation in data collection methods; richer, thicker, more comprehensive data; syncretic development of theoretical perspectives; as well as uncovering contradictions in data through the use of multiple methods and sources (Bryman 2016).

What has been less available to mixed-methods researchers are strong philosophical foundations in which to root these pragmatic and common-sense research strategies (Coates 2020). A philosophical framework is important as it provides direction and reduces bias. It also helps in developing a stronger conceptualization of the social issue being studied. Along with this, having both the epistemological and ontological approach of a study clearly outlined allows for better alignment between theory and methodology, as well as providing a way of assessing the validity of the claims of the study.

A number of philosophical propositions informed by the philosophy of critical realism enabled us in our study of Muslim prisoners to bridge this apparent binary between qualitative and quantitative research.

Critical realism- the primacy of ontology

Our research project was grounded in the philosophy of critical realism (Archer 1998; Bhaskar 1975, 1979, 2008; Norrie 2009; Wilkinson 2015). Critical realism is a meta perspective not a methodological approach. However, adopting a critical realist approach has an influence on the way research is conducted as it is premised on the primacy of ontology (Bhaskar 1975). The primacy of ontology is the notion that Being is ontologically prior to Knowing and, therefore, understanding the nature of an object of research – ontology-precedes a consideration of how the researcher is going to get to know it (more deeply) – epistemology.

This means that from a critical realist perspective the nature of the object of research determines the research tools used to understand it rather than a prior epistemological or political proclivity to a certain research methodology. This premise, in turn, rests on further assumptions that social reality can be understood both in terms of the relationships between people, objects, factors and trends that are counted and in terms of the inter-relationship of qualities and values that people and, indeed, objects possess. Thus, the critical realist perspective moves beyond the distinctions of qualitative and quantitative methodologies in its claims that all social reality is *sui generis* inscribed with both quantity and quality. This fact mandates a realism in picking research methods that are best suited to address the research questions and to develop a multi-dimensional understanding of the social phenomenon under study.

This approach mediates between a constructivist or an objectivist social ontology and regards social reality as both reproduced and altered through agency and to exist in relative independence of agents in social structures. In critical realism the social world is understood to exist in relative independence from what is understood or known about it in that the act of knowing inevitably has some effect on what is known. Social science is meaningful as it seeks to explain the nature of social phenomena that exist out there in the real world; and the object of social research is to seek to explain this social reality as fully as possible, bearing in mind that there may be mutual influence between the values of researchers and of those being studied.

The 'Holy Trinity' of critical realism

This research understanding is also rooted in a critical realist understanding of the relationship between three principles: ontological realism, epistemological relativism and judgmental rationalism.

The critical realist conception of Ontological Realism argues for ontological independence; the world out there exists independent of our knowledge or understanding of it (Bhaskar 1989). This has important implications for social research, as a critical realist approach suggests that the object that is being investigated has an influence on the way it can be known and the methods that are adopted to know social reality, have to be tailor-made for the object of research (Scott 2010). This also implies that different objects should be investigated in different ways; therefore, a universality of method is rejected, and a plurality of methods is suggested.

This links in with the second important concept within the 'Holy Trinity' of critical realism (Hartwig 2007), that of epistemological relativism. Epistemic relativism is typically

defined as the view that knowledge is valid only relative to a specific context, society, culture or individual and that there is more than one set of standards of epistemic justification. Social research and theoretical perspectives can be overlapping, differentiated, uneven, and as a result can be mutually compatible, mapping the same place in different ways to highlight different features.

Although in critical realism, all knowledge is bound by context and is fallible, this does not, however, imply that all knowledge is equally fallible. The critical realist concept of Judgmental Rationalism provides criteria for judging the adequacy of social research and suggests that theories and methods should be assessed in terms of their adequacy in explaining the phenomenon under study.

The stratified and 'emergent' social world

As well as advocating the primacy of ontology in research, for critical realists following Bhaskar (1979) the social world is seen as structured, differentiated, stratified and changing. Thus, rather than focusing merely on the observable, for critical realism the emphasis of social research is on the mechanisms that generate observable events. For critical realism these mechanisms are multidimensional and include, for example, micro, meso and macro factors that need to be discovered to develop a holistic understanding of social reality (Irfan and Wilkinson 2020; Wilkinson 2015).

In critical realism, generative mechanisms are regarded as potential or tendential (Blom and Moren 2011). This suggests that they are not always realized in empirical, observable events, rather, generative mechanisms are contextually conditioned tendencies and potentials. This means that different mechanisms can act against each other. Thus, although mechanisms can be active, but under certain contextual circumstances counteractions can mean that the observable effects of the generative mechanism do not take place. In conventional empirical correlation research, this would lead to the conclusion that the studied intervention does not have any effect; there is no correlation. However, according to critical realism, there is the possibility of drawing conclusions about how existing mechanisms under certain circumstances can prevent effects from emerging. In critical realism research needs to move beyond the Empirical in order to understand the mechanisms that are at play at the levels of the Actual and the Real beneath/beyond the surface of observed events (Joseph and Roberts 2004).

Irfan and Wilkinson (2020), for example, have described the ontology of the Muslim offender in terms of a laminated system of seven 'emergent', 'knock-on' dimensions:

- I. Biological Dimension, including sex-gender;
- II. Psychological/identity-related Dimension, including the desire of validation in the peer-group and different types of hegemonic gender identities;
- III. Educational Dimension, including the effects of upbringing, formal and semi-formal schooling, and/or the absence of these things;
- IV. Socio-economic Dimension, including the determining factors of poverty and (un-)employment;
- V. Socio-cultural (including moral and political) Dimension, including language and cultural habits and related social belongings;

- VI. Spiritual-religious Dimension, including the influence of belief systems (religious or otherwise) or the absence of them;
- VII. Geo-political Dimension, including the global geo-political environment and the engagement of national and local government with an offender's community.

The critical realist idea of 'emergence' means that generative mechanisms in one dimension interact with those in a lower dimension but are causally or taxonomically irreducible to them. For example, water is emergent from hydrogen and oxygen but has properties and effects in the world that are not reducible to these elements. Mind at the psychological level is dependent on the chemistry of the brain, but it is not reducible either as cause or taxonomy to this chemistry. In understanding the increased prevalence of crime within a particular group, in this case Muslim offenders, analysis needs to draw on structural influences such as unequal access to resources, as well as cultural learning through socialization processes at home, in school, and through participation within a religious community, as well as the individual agency of the offender in becoming involved in crime (Irfan and Wilkinson 2020). Crime cannot be reduced to any one mechanism or dimension, and a comprehensive account needs to separate and outline the influence of mechanisms in each dimension.

The ontological disambiguation of these dimensions allows for the most appropriate research tools to be developed to understand distinct but related facets of crime.

Dialectical critical realism – avoiding ontological monovalence and the importance of absence

Bhaskar's later dialectical critical realist work (2008) is also important in influencing the choice of methods as he develops a strong *critique of* ontological monovalence in purely positive conceptions of reality that ignore its underlying uncertainty and contradictions as well as the power of absences as real and determinate causes of natural and social change. Thus, critical realist research rather than merely explaining phenomena in terms of what exists in *positive* terms needs to be critically aware of elements that are *missing* in or absent from the social situations that are being explored as potentially generative of empirically observable outcomes.

This significance attached by critical realism to the influences of absences within any social situation is important in a prison context as prison is an environment which is characterized by the loss and absence of key freedoms and rights such as, the loss of liberty, desirable goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and security (Sykes 1958). Our critical reading of the literature and subsequent development of research tools also involved looking for gaps or absences that were present in research on religious change in prison which we could address through our work.

Meta-reality: the social effects of spirituality

The critical realist concept of meta-reality is also important for this project, as it captures the importance attached to the spiritual in Bhaskar's (2002) later work. For Bhaskar religious values and beliefs are important as these can have a profound effect and can lead to changes and transformations at a personal, as well as social level. This importance

attached to the spiritual as a tool for personal as well as social change is significant for this research. This idea that the spiritual dimension is important *inter alia* because, as well as containing emancipatory potential, it generates effects in the social world (Bhaskar 2002).

Building on Bhaskar's work for the purposes of understanding and transforming the situation of contemporary Muslims, Wilkinson (2015) has shown that Islam as religious praxis is particularly well-suited to the 'underlabouring' work of the philosophy of critical realism as both, for example, advocate the need for 'serious' consistency between knowledge and lived behaviour and both are underscored by an understanding of the universe as characterized by duality that ultimately tends towards unity. Importantly, Wilkinson's understanding shows that both mainstream Islam premised on unity-in-diversity and skewed Manichean Us V Them Islamist offshoots are likely to have real effects in the world. This is related to the critical realist idea of demi-reality which refers to spiritual or ideological phenomena which are not necessarily real in an *alethic* sense, and indeed may be abjectly false, but which have real effects in the social world: the caste system in India or class system in England being two social examples of demi-realities; Nazism being an example of an ideological demi-reality (Wilkinson 2015).

The laminated system of Islam in prison

In terms of our research on the practice and meanings of Islam in prison, from a critical realist perspective social reality in prison was understood to be multi-dimensional and influenced by **macro**, **meso** and **micro** mechanisms.

- (1) The micro-level is the level of individual experiences and interpersonal relationships which exist in close relation to ...
- (2) The meso-level which is the level of institutional management of and engagement with individual prisoners such as through the prison chaplaincy and education. They were considered an important mechanism in the understanding of the micro-level;
- (3) The macro-level is the jurisdictional prison policy-context and the legal status of religion more generally within a given jurisdiction. They were considered as the contextual basis for understanding the meso-level of chaplaincy and the micro-level of individual experience.

An abductive approach

Adopting an abductive critical realist theoretical framework which incorporated micro, meso and macro factors, was the foundation for our research mixed-methods methodology. Contrary to the inductive-deductive binary, for example, our critical realist framework suggested an *abductive* approach which moved between induction and deduction at all levels by moving back and forth between theory and data throughout the research in a process of iterative mutual refinement. This was based on the prior assumption that even the most grounded approach to data collection and analysis assumes some prior theory and all theory needs to be consistent with empirical testing if it is to offer enough explanatory power to be convincing.

This multi-dimensional approach to understanding social reality required drawing on a diverse toolbox of research methods in order to access the complex social and personal reality of religious change in prison in a non-reductive way. This mandated a mixed methods research approach which was more able to unpick the dynamic interconnection between the different levels that traditional research approaches have not adequately captured.

Our research strategy entailed the following sequence of research methods:

- Pilot Semi-Structured Interviews and Attitudinal Surveys
- Attitudinal Survey.
- Semi-Structured Interviews.
- Prisoner Observations

This identification of different dimensions of experience from the literature and from 15 pilot interviews allowed us to design a portfolio of research tools that were appropriate to the ontology of religion in prison. The pilot study provided an opportunity to get feedback on the questions used in the survey and interviews in order to make sure they were clear enough to be properly understood by informants and were testing the underlying construct of interest. We could change the wording of questions and statements to make them more comprehensive and clearer. During the pilot, we uncovered some difficulties faced by participants in understanding survey questions. One survey question worded as 'It is part of Islam to oppose injustice in society' was very confusing for participants; it was simplified to 'It is part of Islam to change things that are unfair in society'. We also refined our qualitative interview schedules based on our research experiences during the pilots. Our mixed methods approach was therefore crucial in the development and refinement of our research tools.

Micro level generative mechanisms- religious change in prison

At the individual, micro- level, the literature bore out the intense and individualized nature of experiencing religion in prison. In particular, research on religious change in prison focused on the contradictory role of religion in on the one hand promoting an ethos of ethical self-improvement (Giordano et al. 2008; Maruna, Wilson, and Curran 2006) and on the other as being used to justify involvement in crimes (Topalli, Brezina, and Bernhardt 2013), particularly violent extremism (Wilkinson 2018)

The role of religion in rehabilitative transformations of identity that occur in prison has also been a subject of social scientific inquiry since the creation of the penitentiary in the early nineteenth century (Ignatieff 1989). In the prison context, religious conversion or change can be an important means of making positive personal changes (Giordano et al. 2008; Maruna, Wilson, and Curran 2006).

It is equally important, that the image of the prison convert also tends to provoke cynicism and that a sudden and complete positive change in the prison context can seem far too convenient to be believed (Maruna, Wilson, and Curran 2006). Most frequently sudden and dramatic change in the prison context is seen as inauthentic and linked to other strategic aims such as gaining parole, getting time away from the cell or as a means of gaining sympathy (Clear et al. 2000; Liebling, Arnold, and Straub 2011). Affiliation with Islam in

prison is also of concern as it might be an indicator or first step in political and radical transformation which leads to terrorism (Bouhana and Wikström 2011; Hannah, Clutterbuck, and Rubin 2008). Some of the most sophisticated terror plots in recent times have been perpetrated by offenders who converted to Islam in prison.

Islam(-ism) as worldviews

Within our critical realist-inspired theoretical framework and informed by the philosophical characterizations of metaReality, we conceived the individual religious experience of prisoners, including significant religious change, using the concept of Worldviews. Worldviews are integrated ways of being-in and knowing-the-world that draw together facts (and fictions), laws, norms, generalizations, answers to ultimate questions, with the aspiration to form a consistent idea of the self and its relationship to the world together with a concomitant way of behaving in the world. Using the previous research of PI Matthew Wilkinson and tested for their empirical utility and for refinement by means of a pilot study of 15 interviews, we defined these Worldviews as:

1. Traditional Islam characterized philosophically by unity-in-diversity;
2. Activist Islam characterized philosophically by diversity-in-unity with an ethos of transformative change;
3. Ideological Islamism the exaggeratedly divided 'Us, Muslim' versus 'Them, Infidel' Worldview with an ethos of revolutionary change;
4. Non-violent Islamist Extremism the absolutely divided 'Us, Muslim' versus 'Them, Infidel' Worldview which strips non-Muslims of basic human properties and rights; and
5. Violent Islamist Extremism the absolutely divided 'Us, Muslim' versus 'Them, Infidel' Worldview which strips non-Muslims of basic human properties and rights and includes the threat or perpetration of violence (for a detailed account of these worldviews see Wilkinson 2018).

This worldview schema was useful as it enabled us to encompass the breadth of prisoners' experience and practice of Islam, conversion to and within Islam and its potential for positive and negative effects on their rehabilitation. These Worldviews as held by prisoners were captured bluntly and broadly using quantitative variables (for a detailed outline see Wilkinson et al. 2021b).

The interviews and observations allowed us to penetrate the generative mechanisms behind the Worldviews and explore the types of complexity and contradictions within the religious life of the individual that the survey could not capture. We exemplify this in the example of Alain in the case study below.

Conversion as any significant change in type or intensity of religious worldview

Using the idea of religious commitment as Worldviews in dialectic with literature of conversion, we developed a typology of micro level religious conversion as 'any significant change in type or intensity of religious worldview'. The following typology of conversion was made based on responses to survey questions:

- Switchers: those who, having another religion or no religion at all, became Muslim.

- **Intensifiers:** those who intensified their religious Worldview, such as increasing ritual practices such as praying or fasting more regularly, as well as those who deepened their understanding of Islam, by reading or attending congregational services or religious classes.
- **Reducers:** those who reduced their religious commitment to a religious Worldview and considered themselves as less religious in prison.
- **Remainers:** those whose involvement in religious activities as well as comprehension of Islam did not change in prison.

Switchers were identified through a positive response to the survey question 'I have changed my religion in prison.' *Intensifiers, Remainers and Reducers* were identified by using mean aggregate scores on responses to variables 'I pray more now than I did before prison' and 'My religion is more important to me than before prison.'

Two types, that only emerged from the qualitative data, were also added:

- **Shifters:** those who went through changes in their understanding of Islam and gave new interpretation to their previous beliefs and practices.
- **Concealers:** those who, for various reasons, decided to hide their faith.

These changes were identified through our quantitative data to develop factors such as 'Religious Intensification' which was derived by using mean aggregate of variables 'I pray more now than I did before prison' and 'My religion is more important to me than before prison' as well as qualitative interview data which enabled us to understand the generative mechanisms of 'Religious Intensification' such as the desire to seek forgiveness, the availability of time for reflection and the value of good company (see Wilkinson et al. 2021a).

Our survey data was used to map internal religious change through the factor 'Religious Intensification' (discussed above) and other factors¹ such as 'Attitudes towards Rehabilitation', and 'Religious World views' which were also used to capture individual religious views and commitment. The internal consistency of these dimensions was established through a principal component analysis (Appendix 1).

Our quantitative and qualitative data were used to triangulate and embed findings drawn from each type of methodology. The coding schedule for the qualitative interviews included the themes covered in the survey. The survey findings were imbedded into the NVivo file through the classification sheet. For every participant their responses to the survey questions and their scores on the different dimensions were part of the NVivo file and during analysis the quantitative and qualitative data was combined to develop detailed case studies. In this way the quantitative data and the qualitative data were integrated in the process of analysis.

See below a summarized version of a detailed case study of one prisoner in which information from his survey responses and qualitative interview were integrated to outline the different aspects of his demographic background, changes to religious beliefs and practice as well as experiences in prison (Table 2).

The framework of change construed quantitatively was given depth, nuanced and occasionally challenged through our interviews and observations and its generative mechanisms in different contexts. In the case study included above Alain is quantitatively categorized as an Activist based on his response to survey questions, but analysis of his

Table 2. Case study.

| Portrait: Alain at – Hauterive (B Category Medium security local prison) in France | |
|---|--|
| Biographical elements | Alain is aged 47. He is a French national who converted from Roman Catholicism to Islam two years before prison. He has higher education. He was working as a kinesitherapist. |
| Criminal profile | Conviction: murder. Sentence: 18 years. First incarceration. Been in prison for 9 years. |
| Type of religious change | <i>Quantitative</i> Intensifier (5) <i>Qualitative</i> Intensifier & Shifter |
| Worldviews | <i>Quantitative</i> Activist <i>Qualitative</i> Traditional & Activist |
| Attitude toward rehabilitation | 1,67 (low) |
| Engagement with chaplaincy | 3.5 (high) |
| Religious provision | 2,5 (medium) |
| Officer treatment | 3 (high) |
| Prison environment | 1.75 (low) |
| Treatment by CJS | 1 (low) |
| Religious Background and Conversion to Islam | |
| Alain was educated in a Catholic environment: was an altar boy, did his first communion and confirmation. He explained that ‘I’ve always believed. As a kid, I just took the religion of my parents. But after a while, it did not suit me. For me, Jesus was not the son of God, he was a Prophet. Eureka! And then, I am in favor of the law of Retaliation. If somebody hurts me, I hurt back. I do not harm anybody if no body hurts me. And this belongs to Islam, it is in the Quran.’ | |
| Meaning of Islam | |
| For Alain, being Muslim is ‘to believe and practise. To be a Muslim means normally to be submitted to Islam, so the definition of a Muslim is the one who prays and follows the five essential principles of the Muslim religion.’ | |
| Practising Islam in prison | |
| He explained that in general ‘we avoid praying in the common spaces, in order not to be listed (as radical).’ He also specified that ‘in Islam, ostentation is a sin. We are not here to show off, to make propaganda or proselytism. It happens in the inside.’ Alain can be pictured as an intensifier as well as a shifter , since he started practising in prison, but it is also in prison that he started to ask himself new questions and understanding Islam in a different way. | |
| Worldviews | |
| For Alain, the three monotheisms are the same, ‘it is the same story, but each one sees it a bit differently’. He considers the scriptures as highly important: ‘To learn religion correctly, it has to be based on the scriptures. In Islam, everything has to be confirmed through the scriptures. It is not possible to state something just like this. I have to be sure it is written.’ In his opinion, lack of knowledge leads to mistakes. According to some statements, Alain could be classified as Traditional or Activist . Note that when he talks about the Shia, he tends to make an opposition between us and them and could sound Islamist . | |
| Attitude towards Rehabilitation | |
| Alain agreed that thanks to Islam, he had abandoned bad behaviour such as alcohol and drug consumption: ‘In Islam, it is forbidden’. | |
| Engagement with chaplaincy | |
| Alain agreed that he got knowledge about Islam through the Muslim chaplaincy. He explained that the chaplains teach ‘the main principles of Islam, the rules, the proper behaviours, how to be Muslim on a daily basis, basic stuff that are rules and that one has to obey’. | |
| Prison environment and relation to officers | |
| For him, the prison system does not function. There should be alternative to imprisonment, such as community service, resocialization programmes. In his opinion, nothing is done for resettlement. ‘If you don’t have a little bit of brains, if you don’t question yourself, you move yourself, you come out worse than before, worse than before, and on top of that you are embittered, because all you see is injustices.’ | |
| Suspect community and radicalization | |
| Alain regrets that prison staff lack knowledge about Islam and that some officers look at Muslims with ‘unhealthy looks’ or that they assimilate them to somebody who could ‘take action or refuse the law of the country, who prioritize sharia.’ | |

qualitative interview reveals a more complex story in which his views are seen to shift between, Activist, Traditional and at time Islamist worldviews.

Our surveys captured a snapshot of the prisoners' understanding of the importance of their faith and their worldview at the time of the survey. The interviews gave us more processual information about changes to the religious practice of prisoners at different times in their lives and the changes to their worldviews through exposure to different religious beliefs through either social interaction with other prisoners or the chaplain as well as through personal religious study. Understanding the direction and the complexity of processes of individual religious change could only be gained by integrating the qualitative and quantitative data.

Meso level- institutional generative mechanisms that influence religious change in prison

The influence of the prison environment on religious identity and adaptations to faith have also been noted in recent research (Beckford, Joly, and Khosrokhavar 2005; Hamm 2009; Williams and Liebling 2018). Extrinsic factors such as the general prison environment (Hamm 2009), the level of religious provision in the prison (Beckford, Joly, and Khosrokhavar 2005) and the exercise of power through the chaplaincy (Williams and Liebling 2018) are all seen to have an influence on the types of religious change that can take place in prison.

The influence of institutional factors on the prisoners' understanding and practice of their Islam was gauged through the integrated use of our surveys, interviews and observations. This triangulation and embedding of research outputs was replicated throughout the process of data analysis.

The quantitative data were useful in accounting for the structural aspects of the prison experience, such as having access to goods and services. The surveys allowed us to compare the perception of prisoners about their quality of life and access to religious provision in each of the prisons. Principal Component Factor Analysis (Appendix 1) allowed us to identify component factors that captured meso level differences in the quality of the prison environment, the level of engagement of prisoners with the chaplaincy and the level of religious provision in prison.

From our survey data 'Engagement with chaplaincy' (Appendix 2) was an institutional (meso level) factor which emerged as statistically significant in explaining a positive attitude towards rehabilitation. Our field observations and qualitative interviews with a range of stakeholders which included prisoners, prison chaplains of different faith, prison officers and governors confirmed the findings of our survey, as most stakeholders regarded the chaplaincy as playing an important role in prisoner rehabilitation. Our observations allowed us to see the ways in which chaplains conducted religious classes, congregational prayers as well as one-on-one engagement with prisoners in the different prisons and jurisdictions. Our qualitative data sources showed that chaplains who took on a mentoring role were successful in developing close, positive relationships with prisoners. These relationships were an important influence that led to rehabilitative changes in prisoners. In other words, we mapped how prisoners' engagement with chaplaincy was affected by both the quantity and quality of religious and pastoral provision.

A summarized example of a Triangulated Field Observation shows the ways in which the different methods of data collection and the voices of the different actors were

integrated to develop a more holistic understanding of this theme of interest. The triangulated fieldnote amalgamates information from the survey, field observations, qualitative interview with the Muslim chaplain and informal conversations with prisoners to look at the importance of a mentoring scheme, organized by the Muslim chaplain, for Muslim prisoners, which was part of Quran classes at HMP Coquet (Table 3).

It was through an integration of qualitative and quantitative research results that we could understand broad patterns emerging from the data which explained both the

Table 3. Triangulated field observation.

| Site | HMP Coquet | | |
|----------------------------------|--|--------|--------------|
| Date | 27/02/2019 Time: 13:30 | | |
| Researchers | MW- MQ | | |
| Event | Quran Recitation | | |
| General ambience | Calm and focused | | |
| Persons present | 13 Muslims prisoners +2 imams +2 researchers | | |
| Survey data on HMP Coquet | | | |
| Factors | Low | Medium | High |
| Engagement with Chaplaincy | 5.3% | 12.3% | 82.5% |
| Religious Provision | 8.8% | 45.6% | 45.6% |
| Attitude Towards Rehabilitation | 10.5% | 22.8% | 66.7% |

Stage one- Observations and Fieldnotes

We came across to the set-apart education block. The room is set up like a standard classroom. Three rows of desks; comfortable blue chairs; white board; absolutely bare walls; bars on windows; views of fence. Free flow is suspended. The class is attended by 12 prisoners: 6 black; 3 Asians; 2 Turkish. As we enter, two men recite Quran quietly. 13:35 Imam Abdullah enters and greets the learners and says: ‘Get into your groups’. The prisoners are grouped into pairs or groups of three according to their level of recitation. Some are reciting at an advance reading level; some are reading faltering in groups; some learning basic alphabet. 13:40 Imam Abdullah says: Go over some same Surah with Tajwid. This is mentored learning: in each group one prisoner takes the lead. Imam Abdullah guides the senior readers at the front, who are reciting Surat al *Mutaffifin* with traditional tajwid. The learners repeat small sections of the Qur’an. This is a traditional Qur’an madrasa replicated in prison. 13:55 The pairs appear genuinely to be helping each other to sound out the letters correctly by tracing the letters with fingers. The atmosphere is focused. Imam Hussein moves from pair to pair like a teaching assistant. 14:00 Imam Abdullah moves to help the beginner readers. A young prisoner Faizal works with the old grizzled Jamaican Hamza ... Faizal comments that ‘mentors are good.’

Interview Data with chaplain

Later at interview I ask Imam Abdullah about the mentoring system.

Imam Abdullah: ‘Because, number one, for myself, as a one-man show, it’s not possible for me to run a Qur’an class who are on different levels, you see? That would be a very lengthy process and I would not be able to achieve my goalBut I have found, in Cat C prisons there are genuine brothers who help only for the sake of Allah, OK, not for noodles or mackerel or for any worldly gain, only for the sake of Allah. And I thought I can use this. And then I have asked the brothers, first I started with one mentor and he would come and I have praised that, Alhamdulillah’s, my group is running and also I have a Qur’an mentor, with the help of the mentor, we’re able to run another group.’

Informal Conversations with prisoners

My conversations with other prisoners confirm Imam Abdullah’s view that the Qur’an mentoring continued between classes on the wings and that mentors also provided a reliable source of more general Islamic advice.

Stage two- Triangulated Analytical Reflections

Mentoring scheme seemed to create a sense of responsibility and brotherhood throughout the Muslim community in the prison. It played well with the natural inclination to brotherhood and sharing of many of the prisoners and the paternal instincts of some of the older prisoners such as Hamza. It enabled the learning of the Qur’an to continue between the one official class per week which is essential to decent progress with the Qur’an and provided a bridge between the authorized Imam and the prisoners. It also provided a natural Muslim advisor on many of the Wings. The Mentoring system sustained the engagement of prisoners with the Muslim Chaplain, even when he is not there or available. Since we know that, statistically, engaging with the Muslim chaplain is a significant predictor of positive attitudes to rehabilitation, the mentoring scheme can be regarded as an especially important part of prison life in Coquet. The overall percentage from our sample of prisoners, in HMP Coquet, who scored Engagement with Chaplaincy and Attitude towards rehabilitation as High was 82.5% and 62.7% respectively.

reasons and outcomes of prisoners' positive engagement with chaplaincy, whilst also having the flexibility to provide rich descriptive accounts that captured contextual nuances.

As discussed earlier, causal powers which manifests in open systems are called generative mechanisms by critical realists (Blom and Morén 2011). This concept acknowledges both the reality and complexity of change in social settings. We identified changes to prisoners' worldviews and behaviours, quantitatively through principal component analysis and then explored qualitatively the generative mechanisms of change for Muslim prisoners. The fact that we were able to identify these mechanisms that lead to change, suggests that these are tendencies that can be further developed through other interventions. Bringing together the qualitative and quantitative data was crucial in developing a holistic view of religious change in the prison setting.

Macro level generative mechanisms- the politics of imprisonment

Macro level, structural analysis focuses on imprisonment as institutions for the control and management of already marginalized and socio-economically deprived populations (Foucault 1979; Wacquant 2005, 2009). Structural analysis has looked at the role of imprisonment in further entrenching racial differentials and class inequalities (Wacquant 2005, 2009). What these studies highlight is the central role imprisonment plays in altering the behaviour, understanding and opportunities for social inclusion of groups already marginalized within society.

While classical prison research regarded prisons as institutions which exercise a 'total' control over individuals incarcerated within their walls (Goffman 1961; Sykes 1958), later research built on these studies and discussed prisons as complex institutions that are influenced by internal as well as external factors (Crewe 2011; Irwin and Cressey 1962). Internal factors include the degradations and deprivations within the prison environment that work to alter the behaviour and understanding of inmates. External factors include the influences from their life before prison that continue to have significance on their identity inside prison. Both internal structures and external influences were seen as significant in altering and changing the behaviour and self-understanding of prisoners, and both aspects are regarded as important in prison research.

Going back to the emphasis within a critical realist inquiry on a multi-dimensional explanation of social phenomena we used macro level differences in the three different jurisdictions in which our research was based as the contextual basis for understanding the differences at the meso-level in chaplaincy and at the micro-level of individual experience. Our survey data allowed us to make cross jurisdictional and cross prison comparisons of the prison environment as well as differences in demographics, the type of religious change and worldviews in different prison categories and different jurisdictions. The aim of the survey was to identify patterns of religious change in the prison environment. The qualitative interviews and observations were used to explore how these patterns were emerging.

Our survey data showed that although all three jurisdictions had a significant number of Muslim prisoners, the socio-demographics of the Muslim prison population was very different in each country. This made it useful and interesting to adopt a comparative approach. Comparison of data collected from the three jurisdictions pointed to significant differences in the ethnic makeup of the prisoner populations in the three countries. In England the largest ethnic group was South Asian, in France and Switzerland it was Maghrebini (Figure 1).

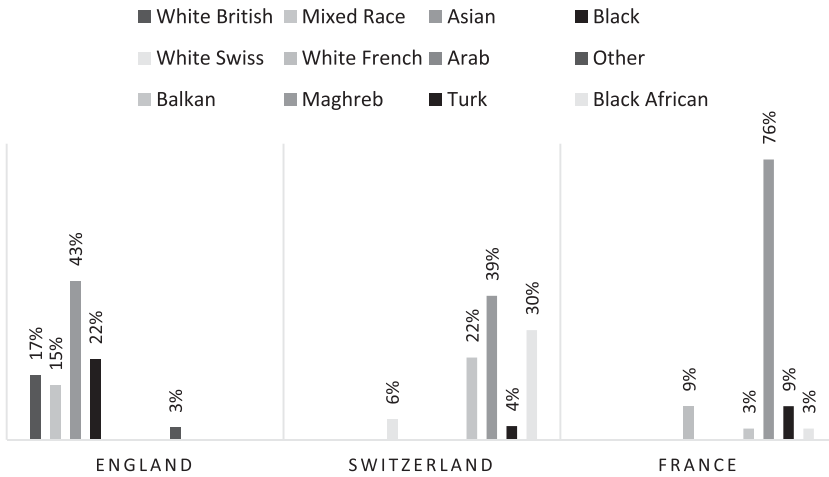


Figure 1. Ethnicity.

In England and France, our sample of Muslim prisoners were predominantly nationals of the country in which they were incarcerated. In Switzerland however a majority of the sample were foreign nationals (Figure 2).

In England a majority of prisoners (61%) were serving a sentence which was longer than ten years, while in Switzerland (11%) and France (10%) only a small percentage of the sample were serving a sentence of more than 10 years (Figure 3).

Another key difference between the jurisdictions was the type of religious change that occurred in prison. Our survey data showed that in England *Switchers* and *Intensifiers* made up the majority of the sample while in Switzerland and France *Remainers* and *Reducers* were in a majority in the sample (Figure 4). This difference in ‘Type of change’ was confirmed through a Kruskal Wallis test which confirmed that the two variables used to determine ‘Type of change’ – the ‘Religious Intensification’ Score and the question which asked if participants had changed their religion in prison were both statistically significantly different

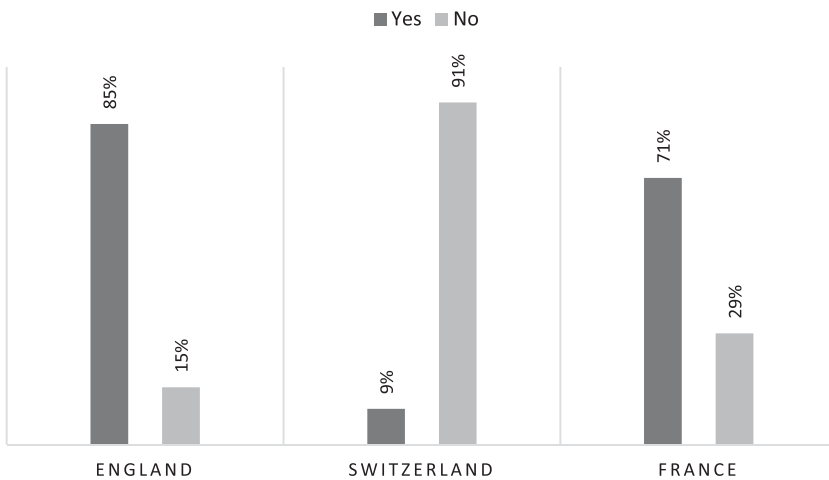


Figure 2. Citizens of the country in which they were incarcerated.

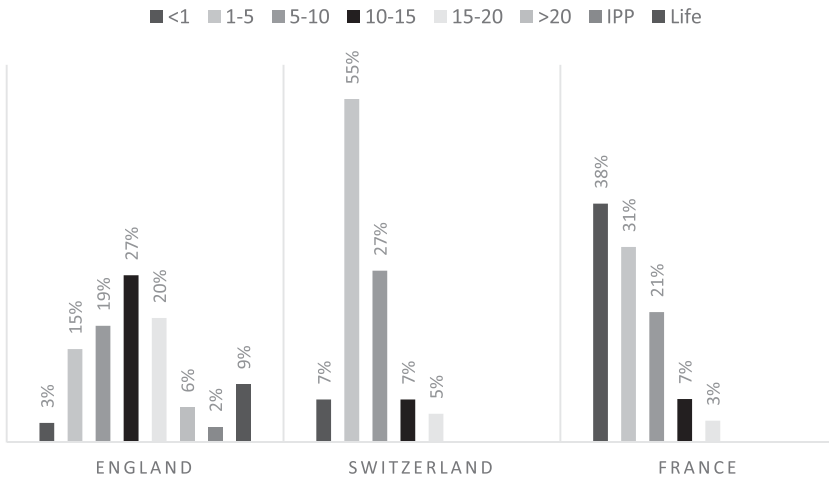


Figure 3. Sentence length.

between the different jurisdictions (Appendix 3). Subsequently, post hoc analysis of both variables revealed statistically significant differences between England and Switzerland, and England and France but not between France and Switzerland.

The reasons for these differences, in the type of religious change, were identified through our qualitative interviews and field observations which provided contextual information about the different factors in the prison environment of the different countries which made particular types of religious change more likely in the different jurisdictions (Wilkinson et al. 2021a, 2021b). Our observations and interviews showed that religious provision in the three jurisdictions varied significantly, and this had an effect on how comfortable prisoners felt practising their faith in prison. Our research illustrated how the macro level prison policy context and the legal status of religion within each country

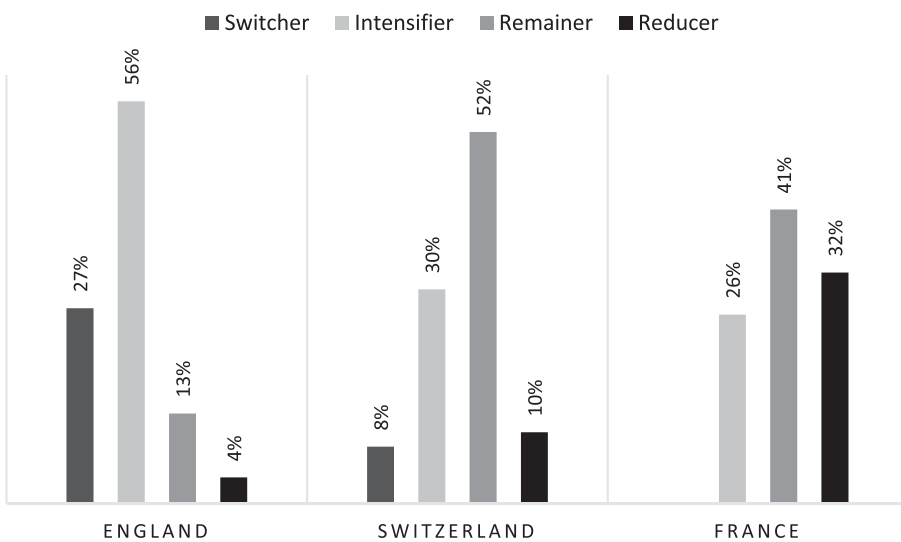


Figure 4. Type of change.

influenced meso level religious provision as well as micro level religious change in prison (Wilkinson et al. 2021a, 2021b). It was through an integration of qualitative and quantitative research results that we could make such cross-site comparisons whilst also having the flexibility to provide rich descriptive accounts that captured contextual nuances.

Conclusion

The critical realist idea of the primacy of ontology allowed us to construe the nature of religious change in prison as existing in micro-, macro- and meso- laminated dimensions, which produced 'knock-on' effects and in turn mandated a mixed methodology. Using mixed methods to study religious change in prison allowed us to depoliticize a usually fraught area of research so that we could describe, as well as explain, the complexity and depth of religious change whilst retaining the ability to make cross jurisdictional comparisons. This degree of insight would not have been possible without the integrated use of qualitative and quantitative research tools brought together in analysis, which was facilitated by our giving primacy to ontology when considering the nature of Islam in prison. The quantitative elements of our research allowed us to provide demographic information about our sample and to compare responses across different jurisdictions and prisons. The details and complexity of the qualitative interviews gave explanatory depth and nuance to our results and to improve the survey questionnaire making it more sensitive to the complex reality of religious change in prison. The uncovering of generative mechanisms at the micro, meso and macro level also open up the possibility of designing interventions which can influence positive religious change and can counteract the mechanisms that drive negative religious change in a prison setting.

Capturing the multi-dimensional complexity of religious change in an environment which has been shrouded in mystery and fear is an important step in mainstreaming the understanding of a growing prisoner group in order to support their development and their reintegration back into society upon release from prison. Thus, giving primacy of ontology can be regarded as a first step towards a penology of emancipation.

Note

1. We used a five-point Likert Scale for each statement/variable. Both positive and negative statements were included to avoid acquiescence bias and mean scores were calculated when more than one statement was used to check an underlying construct. Mean scores were used to develop scales where a high score suggested a positive attitude and low score a negative attitude (negative statements were reverse coded to maintain consistency).

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the support and input of the Steering Group of UCIP and, in particular, James Beckford and Eoin McLennan Murray for their sage advice and dynamic support. We would like to acknowledge the trust placed in us by Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, UK and the Prison Services of Switzerland and France by granting us access to prisons to conduct our research. In particular, we would like to acknowledge the contributions of prison governors, prison chaplains, prison officers and prisoners from the ten prisons without whose friendly participation this research would not have happened but who, for reasons of anonymity, must sadly remain nameless.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was supported by The Dawes Trust Charity no. 1142951. This has been included in other publications from this research project, such as: Muzammil Quraishi, Lamia Irfan, Mallory Schneuwly Purdie & Matthew L. N. Wilkinson (2021) Doing 'judgemental rationality' in empirical research: the importance of depth-reflexivity when researching in prison, *Journal of Critical Realism*, DOI: 10.1080/14767430.2021.1992735.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Factors

Rotated Component Matrix^a

| | Component | | |
|---|--------------------|----------------------------|---------------------|
| | Prison Environment | Engagement with Chaplaincy | Religious Provision |
| This prison encourages respect between staff and prisoners | 0.804 | | |
| This prison makes me feel safe | 0.752 | | |
| The authorities in this prison discipline fairly | 0.743 | | |
| This prison helps me to stay in touch with my family | 0.701 | | |
| This prison is giving me useful education and training about how to succeed in my life after prison | 0.668 | | |
| This prison is preparing me to re-enter society ... | 0.667 | | |
| In this prison, the officers treat me fairly | 0.666 | | |
| The understanding of prison officers in this prison about Islam is ... | 0.522 | | |
| The advice that I get from the Muslim prison chaplain about Islam is ... | | 0.789 | |
| I have learnt about Islam from classes with Muslim prison chaplains | | 0.708 | |
| The classes this prison gives on Islam are ... | | 0.699 | |
| When I need advice about Islam, I usually ask the Muslim prison chaplain | | 0.664 | |
| The place where I wash for prayer in this prison is ... | | | 0.774 |
| The books and information in the prison library about Islam are ... | | | 0.754 |
| The place where I do group prayers in prison is ... | | | 0.718 |
| In this prison, Muslim group prayers happen ... | | | 0.542 |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. | | | |
| Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. | | | |
| a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations. | | | |
| Rotated Component Matrix | | | |

| | Component | |
|---|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| | Religious Intensification | Attitude to rehabilitation |
| Compared to before I was in prison, NOW I pray | 0.896 | |
| Compared to before I was in prison, NOW my religion is | 0.875 | |
| Because of my Islam, I am motivated to work hard in prison ... | | 0.775 |
| I give up bad behaviour for my religion | | 0.733 |
| Because of my Islam, I have taken up a class, a training course or some private study in prison | | 0.637 |
| Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. | | |
| Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. | | |
| ^a Rotation converged in 3 iterations. | | |

Appendix 2. Regression

Religious Intensification and Engagement with Chaplaincy explain 30% of the variation in Attitudes Towards Rehabilitation. Adjusted R^2 equal to .30 a medium size effect according to Cohen.

The regression model is statistically significant, $F(2, 269) = 61.72$ $p < .0005$. It is statistically significant because $p < .05$. A statistically significant result also indicates that there is a statistically significant linear relationship.

| | | Coefficients ^a | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|-------|-------------|--------------|------------|---------|-------------------------|-----------|-------|
| | | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | 95.0% Confidence Interval for B | | | Correlations | | | Collinearity Statistics | | |
| Model | | B | Std. Error | Beta | t | Sig. | Lower Bound | Upper Bound | Zero-order | Partial | Part | Tolerance | VIF |
| 1 | (Constant) | .471 | .222 | | 2.126 | 0.034 | .035 | .908 | | | | | |
| | Engagement with Chaplaincy | .389 | .055 | .365 | 7.112 | .000 | .281 | .497 | .429 | .398 | .359 | .970 | 1.031 |
| | Religious Intensification | .302 | .042 | .367 | 7.167 | .000 | .219 | .385 | .431 | .400 | .362 | .970 | 1.031 |

^aDependent Variable: Attitude towards Rehabilitation.

Appendix 3. Kruskal-Wallis and post-hoc testing

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine if there were differences in Intensification scores between jurisdictions 'England' ($n = 190$), 'Switzerland' ($n = 50$) and 'France' ($n = 34$). Distributions of Intensification scores were similar for all groups, as assessed by visual inspection of a boxplot. Median Intensification scores were statistically significantly different between the different jurisdictions, $\chi^2(2) = 62.048$, $p < 0.0005$. Subsequently, pairwise comparisons were performed using Dunn's (1964) procedure with a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Adjusted p -values are presented. This post hoc analysis revealed statistically significant differences in median 'Intensification' scores between the England (4.5) and Switzerland (3.5) ($p = .008$), and England (4.5) and France (3.0) ($p < .0005$) but not between France (3.0) and Switzerland (3.5).

In our sample of 256, there were 52 (29.2%) switchers in England, 3 (6%) switchers in Switzerland and 0 switchers in France, a statistically significant difference at $p < 0.005$. Post hoc analysis involved pairwise comparisons using the z-test of two proportions with a Bonferroni correction. The proportion of switchers were statistically significantly higher in England compared to Switzerland and France ($p < 0.005$).