The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice

The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice | Howard League for Penal Reform

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

'We Still Have a Duty of Care, but How Legitimate Is Her Allergy to Fish?' Practitioner Engagement in Food Practices in Women's Prison

Talitha Brown[1] | Maria Adams[2] | Daniel McCarthy[2] | Erin Power[3] | Vicki Harman[4] | Jon Garland[2]

[1]School of Criminology, University of Leicester, Leicester, UK | [2]School of Social Sciences, University of Surrey, Guildford, UK | [3]School of Justice Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK | [4]Department of Politics and International Relations, University of Reading, Reading, UK

Correspondence: Maria Adams (m.n.adams@surrey.ac.uk)

Received: 12 July 2024 | **Revised:** 19 November 2024 | **Accepted:** 6 December 2024

Funding: This research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to explore how staff members in women's prisons understand their role in relation to the food practices. Given the budgetary restrictions, staff shortages and overall concerns around the quality of food in prison, there is a critical gap in engaging with these staff perspectives which urgently needs addressing. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in four women's prisons in England, this paper will explore the food practices in prison from a range of staff ($n = 10$). The paper focuses on the following themes: (i) understanding the different ways in which staff navigate structural issues in serving food practices; (ii) examining how staff manage the expectations of women in prison around food; (iii) analysing how they link food practices to notion of normality; and (iv) exploring the ways in which staff navigate the debates on whether food should be seen as a form of punishment or rehabilitation.

1 | Introduction

In this paper, we adopt an explorative approach to analyse how prison staff, beyond the uniformed prison officer, understand their own role in relation to the prison's food practices. While the sociological literature on food in prison is growing (Smoyer and Lopes 2017; Ugelvik 2011), the perspective of staff members in relation to food remains absent (Woods-Brown et al. 2023). This paper will address this gap by providing insights into the contributions made by a diverse range of prison staff members, including those involved in catering, religious advisory and managerial roles.

In the UK, several policies in recent years have acknowledged the structural constraints which instruct food practices in prison. The *House of Commons Prison Health* report (House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, 2018), for example, notes that prison establishments 'frequently struggle to provide meals of a reasonable quantity and quality with the daily food budget of £2 per prisoner' per day (23)[1]. Moreover, an *HM Inspection* briefing paper (2016, 8) attributes the irregular mealtimes found across most prisons to staff-shortages; with breakfast packs 'normally distributed with the previous night's dinner'; and then lunch and dinner in some establishments being 'served as early as 11:10 and 4:15', respectively. The briefing paper from the HM inspectorate also emphasises that, given staff shortage, meals for Muslim prisoners during the month of Ramadan are often not fresh; stored and served in insulated containers.

Despite these constraints, staff are required to comply with the guidelines in relation to food, as set out across several prison instruction manuals and policy documents. The obligation that prisons meet the cultural, nutritional and diversity needs of prisoners, for example, is referenced in *HMIP Women's Expec-*

tations Version 2 report (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2021), the *Catering instruction manual* (PSI 2010, 1) and the *Faith and Pastoral Care for Prisoners Instruction Manual* (PSI 2016). The former document (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2021, Section 46) also outlines that 'catering staff provide meals that meet medical dietary requirements', and that mealtimes should match those in the general community. It also recommends (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2021, section 47) that supervisors overseeing the food-serving should prevent food tampering and to ensure that there is 'appropriate portion control'.

Additionally, the Faith and Pastoral Care for Prisoners *Instruction Manual* (HM Prison and Probation Services, PSI 2016) advises that chaplains liaise with catering staff to accommodate religious festivals and food requirements. Appendix 6 of this manual outlines some of the practical requirements' prisons are required to negotiate in relation to the food for religious festivals. While the cost of the food should be 'within the agreed food budget' (PSI 2016, 36), staff members are required to be 'equitable' in their provision of food, as prisoners 'should be afforded the same opportunity to mark festivals communally together with food and snacks' (PSI 2016, 35). In explaining the significance of equity, this instruction manual (PSI 2016, 35) outlined that:

> Some prisons, in attempting to provide equitable provision, have decided to mark two festivals for each faith with food. This is not acceptable, nor compliant, and the main festival dates across all faiths.

Overall, the instruction manuals as well as policy documents such as the *HMIP Women's Expectations* report (HM Inspectorate of Prisons 2021) provide an insight into the range of staff, beyond the uniformed officer and the catering staff, that engage with the food practices in prison. However, despite the focus on food across policies and instructional manuals, food practices within UK prisons remain largely underexplored in academic literature.

In this paper, we take an explorative approach to address the question 'how do staff members in women's prison understand their role in relation to the food practices?'. We will address this question by focusing on the following aims: (1) to identify some of the considerations and values which underpin food practices for staff members working in prison and (2) to examine the perceptions staff have of the women's relationship to food and the food practices in prison. Overall, this paper will argue that prison staff are required to negotiate a range of structural challenges in relation to the food practices and that their views on the food provided in prison are situated in broader debates regarding the purpose of the prison and their perceptions of the women.

1.1 | Food in Prison

Literature on food in prison has primarily focused on the experiences of those incarcerated, and many of the themes have considered issues on power, resistance and social control (Ugelvik 2011; Smoyer 2014). Research by Ugelvik (2011) highlights that those in prison identify subtle ways of resisting the prison regime by making the food taste better and edible. Through cooking in their cell, the men in his study would mark their autonomy and resist the way in which prison positioned them as passive and dependent on the regime. Similarly, findings from Smoyer (2014) demonstrate how women in a US prison breached prison rules by cooking in their cell and sharing their food with others. The women constructed themselves as caring and interrupted the 'judicial narratives' of inmates being selfish' (Smoyer 2014, 530). Smoyer's later work (2016, 198) also highlighted how women would resist the institutions' attempt to instruct their eating schedule by smuggling food from the cafeteria and hoarding it in their cell, often resulting in negative repercussions from prison officers.

The notion that food, food practices and hunger are experienced as part of the punishment resonates with the findings presented in other studies (Smith 2002, Struthers Montford 2023). Those incarcerated, in Einat and Davidian's interview study (2019), for example, described guards in Israeli prisons as indifferent to their experiences of inedible and poor-quality food. They also exemplified how the guards acted punitively, restricting the access of those they considered to be disobedient to the prison shop or prohibiting them from cooking in their cell. Whilst Einat and Davidian's study (2019) illustrates how food is a site in which power structures are reinforced and negotiated, literature relating to the perspective of staff, in relation to food and food practices is limited. There has been some development by Woods-Brown et al. (2023) in their meta-ethnographic synthesis of papers that focus on experiences of food in prison. By organising the themes presented in academic literature relating to food, they identify the limited focus on how staff balance the management of resources with the need to care for a prison population with diverse needs. Therefore, this article on staff perspectives of food in prison provides a platform to further the analysis of these themes.

1.2 | Existing Literature on Prison Staff

A broader literature on the work of the prison officer (e.g., Liebling 2000) underlines the ways that officers are required to continually negotiate their role and may have different motivations in terms of doing prison work. This section will foreground the complexity of this work of prison staff, with specific emphasis on prison officer rule discretion, as well as the role of trust in prison.

1.2.1 | The Role in Negotiation of the Prison Officer

Liebling (2000) described prison officers as 'invisible ghosts of care and penalty' in which she identified officers to be heavily burdened by work pressures associated with mental and physical fatigue. Others have similarly argued that prison officers embody the functions and cultures of the prison, which can sometimes reflect discipline-orientated values to the role (Crewe et al. 2015, 311; Liebling 2011b; Nixon 2022). Prison officers carry out multiple tasks of monitoring security and ensuring harmony within the prison, as well as promoting the desistance and rehabilitation of prisoners (Maycock et al. 2023). Indeed, they are often required to negotiate conflicting roles, such as providing trauma-informed care, while also giving 'orders or physically restrain[ing] people' (Kelman et al. 2024, 1269). Working in a highly stressful, low-trust environment, prison officers are often required to negotiate the

tensions of their job by exercising discretion and deciding which rules to enforce and which to circumvent (Nixon 2022). Discretion pre-requires the weighing up of personal, organisational and security considerations, with officers drawing on their knowledge of the prisoner and prior experiences to evaluate how decisions could affect the 'unfolding of future relationships' (Haggerty and Bucerius 2021, 146).

Writing in the context of women's prisons in England, Rowe (2016) demonstrates how discretion could further be a source of staff contention, as some staff would disagree about the strict enforcement of some rules. Similarly, Liebling (2011b) exemplifies how discretion is contested as officers negotiate their roles according to different values and ideas about prisoners. In their semi-ethnographic study in women's prisons, Crewe et al. (2023), reported that there were contradictions and inconsistencies in how officers used their discretion. Such inconsistencies reinforced the women's ontological insecurity, as they were left feeling uncertain about how to act and what rules to obey. Further to this, Crewe et al. (2023) describe that the infantilisation of women in prison manifested itself through pettiness of rule enforcement on part of the staff, as well as intense regulation and surveillance of women of 'the minutia of their lives being policed' (Crewe et al. 2023, 927). These findings extend back to classical work by Carlen (1983) in Scotland, who noted how women lose their 'adult status' with officers referring to women as 'girls', as well as to the work of Britton (2003), who argued that women prisoners are more likely to be classed as less obedient and more deceitful than men, according to the perspectives of prison officers (Britton 2003). In her book, Britton (2003) documents the feelings of suspicion and distrust officers felt towards women, especially when they complained about practices in the prison (such as pat searching). Distrust is equally noted by Tait (2008, 78) who observed that 'male officers would often see the women in prison as manipulative and therefore would be more likely to establish a distance from them to not be seen as 'gullible''.

The theme of distrust and trust is also referenced by Waite's research (2022, 2023), which explores how it is experienced by women. In her study, the women in prison acknowledged their lack of power and described how staff exerted control over their lives. Trust, Waite (2022, 518) posits, is 'monopolised' by the prison regime, as women have to continually evidence their trustworthiness to staff and *earn* a trusted position. In the prison context, trust appears conditional, as it is contingent on the compliance of the women in prison. Her work (Waite 2022, 516), however, also includes accounts in which women described trusting staff members, who they felt cared for them and who spent time with them and went 'beyond their job'. This finding corresponds with Wood's research (2015), which attests to the ways in which structural issues, like staffing and budget cuts, undermined the staff-prisoner relationship in women's prison. Officers, she notes (Wood 2015), often felt overwhelmed, as they had less time available to care for the women and respond to their mental health needs. Indeed, the reduction of staff levels can lead to the role of the officer becoming 'more rigid' and less relational (Wood 2015, 125). In Wood's study (2015), these low staffing levels resulted in the women spending significantly longer time periods being locked up in their cell. It also documents (Wood 2015, 134) the deep concern female officers felt when they were unable to spend time with and care for the women who were likely to 'harm themselves if they had no one to talk to'.

1.2.2 | Methodology

This article draws on qualitative data from an ESRC-funded study, which explored the role of food in women's prisons. In this, we used a range of methods including observations, interviews, focus groups, diaries and art workshops. We interviewed 80 women and 10 staff members across four prisons[2].The staff sample (outlined in Table 1) was diverse and included prison managers, a chaplain, health and leisure staff, and catering managers. We spoke to both technical and specialised staff members. All received basic training in order to work in prison, however none of them were prison officers. The diversity in roles provided us a holistic approach in understanding the experiences of working in a prison around food. While the larger project aimed to understand women's experiences of food in prison, and primarily focused on the perspective of women in prison, the insights of prison staff are an important standalone theme, providing us with insight into their experiences of food in prison, the operationalisation of food and supply, as well as the operation of rules surrounding food provision in prisons.

For the whole study, ethical approval was granted by the University and Her Majesty's Prisons and Probation service. Six researchers worked on the study, with four of mixed genders (two men and two women interviewers) conducting most interviews with staff members. Interviews were semi-structured, drawing on an interview schedule to produce directed but flexible conversations. The themes around the interview schedule focused on the participant's role, their involvement with food practices, what conversations they'd had with women in relation to food and what challenges they faced and observed in relation to food. To encourage interview participation and to accommodate the time pressures staff members face, the majority of the interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams, however, there were some that conducted face to face. All interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min. These interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised and then coded thematically using NVivo software. Themes were identified through two cycles of coding. While the first coding cycle was general and descriptive, the second coding cycle focused specifically on the values and attitudes that participants held (see Saldana 2013). The coding cycles yielded several themes including work stress, normality, the negotiation of expectations, trust and dis-trust, as well as rehabilitation and punishment. These themes were furthermore contextualised in scholarship on prison officer culture and women's experiences of prison and in the wider data set which featured the perspective of the women.

2 | Findings

In this section, we analyse the perspectives of staff by focusing on structural challenges, expectations of women and debates about whether food is situated in the realm of rehabilitation or punishment.

TABLE 1 | Research participants (staff members).

Role	Remit as relating to food	Pseudonym	Gender
Catering Manager	Preparing, serving and planning food	Albert	Man
		Jo	Woman
		Will	Man
Health & Recreation Staff	Includes a range of staff who the women interact with on a voluntary basis. Some have organised activities that feature food, such as cookery or farming courses	Sarah	Woman
		Graham	Man
		Beth	Woman
		Dan	Man
Senior managers	Directing the prison and have an overview of the logistics of the prison	Laura	Woman
		Polly	Woman
Religious advisor	Interact with the women, hold space for their emotions and negotiate cultural and religious requirements of food.	Stan	Man

2.1 | Structural Issues on Food Practices

Qualitative approaches, including ethnography (Liebling 2011a, 2011c; Crewe 2009) and interviews (Dennard et al. 2021), have highlighted how stressful the role of the prison officer can be. The stress of non-uniformed staff members has also been documented and primarily related to the feeling of overwhelm, the unpredictability of the mood on the prison wing, inadequate resourcing, insufficient staffing, and an absence of staff support (Clements and Kinman 2021, Dennard et al. 2021). Interviewees from our study also described the high levels of stress underpinning food practices in women's prisons. Catering managers, themselves, described the lack of autonomy they felt, as they were '*absolutely tied to these* [centralised food order] *contracts'* (Jo, catering manager), and frequently experienced staff shortages:

> [A former colleague] has handed in his notice, recruitment has now started, I expect, I hope to have someone in place in six months' time, so June time. In the meantime, I still have to deliver. As I've said, you'll hear on the radio here a lot, "All out stations, there's no farms and gardens today; all out stations, there's no education today." The one thing you'll never hear in this prison is "There's no kitchens today." So, yes, we cannot afford to not deliver. (Jo, catering manager)

Despite being essential to the prison, the kitchen staff did not feel valued the same as other departments. The consequences of staff shortages led Albert to feel resentment towards officers:

> The bit that really rubs the salt in the wound in the chefs, at a weekend and there's two chefs allocated at the weekend, if one of them goes sick and we have to get an officer in, they'll pay the officer overtime to come in, he hasn't got a clue what he's doing, but they won't pay a chef who knows what they're doing the overtime. (Albert, catering manager)

Staff shortages, the lack of training and budget constraints were dominant themes across all interviews:

> There's been ongoing struggles to recruit catering staff, so you've got a busy kitchen and no staff that are trained or qualified to actually prepare it with the prisoners. (Laura, senior manager)

Managerial staff also commented on the skill of the catering staff in managing the budget, arranging the storage of food within the limited space, and responding to the allergies of the women in prisons. They characterised prison caterers as '*inventive*' and acknowledged that their work consisted of creating '*a miracle every day'* (Laura and Polly, respectively, both are senior managers). The consequences of these stressors were also felt by the health and recreational staff who participated in our study:

> [The catering manager] said he's got to look at taking pizzas off the menu because the price of cheese is drastically [high]. I don't think that the budget is viable. That said, there's very little public money swishing about. [. . .] I've been told we need to start reducing that debt. I've done my best without trying to affect the menu and what we offer. I've stamped down on people taking extras. [. . .] You get what you're entitled to and that's all until we can get a handle on where we are. (Beth, health and recreation staff)

This quote demonstrates how a lack of resources affects the relational dynamics between staff and the women in prison, as the provision of food is a task to be managed, rather than a site of relational action (Liebling, 2011a). The monitoring of food portions, due to the budget restraints of the kitchen, caused tensions with the women who resided in the prison. Indeed, Beth went on to describe that she had to do a lot of work '*explaining the reasons why'* she had to '*stamp down on people'*. In most of the interviews, staff described how they are required to negotiate a range of structural challenges, such as resources and the logistics

of food preparation, with the responsibilities they have towards the women.

2.2 | Managing Expectations

Staff discussed how they managed the expectations of the women who resided in prison, as well as other staff they interacted with. We spoke to one religious advisor, Stan, who acknowledged the stress of the kitchen while also emphasizing the obligation of catering staff to uphold the *'legal right'* of the prisoners. He described his own role as mediating between the kitchen and the women in prison, trying to '*de-escalate*' tensions and *'calm* […] *things down'*:

> The women do, you know, regularly also come and have chats with us, and they let us know that oh, you know, there is this issue with food or that issue with food. We also have to understand the perspective of the kitchen manager, that's he's got a budget and he's got logistical issues, he's got staffing restrictions, […] but at the same time it's about ensuring the governor who the kitchen manager reports to explains to the kitchen manager that this is a legal right of the prisoners, it's enshrined in the PSI[3]and it's something that we must provide, and we can't negotiate on it, so we have to just plan from beforehand etc. So, it's about, kind of, keeping that balance, maintaining the peace. (Stan, religious advisor)

His role description in relation to the food practices resonates with Liebling's (2000, 347) description of prison officers who she notes are 'specialists in mediation and arbitration'—the reflections of different sub-divisions of the prison, their competing priorities, and how to create a semblance of 'balance'. Similarly, Power (2021) illustrated to the ways in which family engagement workers took on a less punitive role than officers and occasionally acted as mediators between the women and staff. In the interview, Stan also noted that he had to manage expectations of women:

> It's about giving the prisoners that pastoral advice and talking it through with them to calm them down, that look actually, you know, if you were to go to a restaurant and you're a vegetarian and you ask for a vegetarian dish, now you don't expect that that pot or that pan or that spoon or the utensils used have never ever been used for anything other than vegetables and vegetarian dishes. What you expect is that it's washed thoroughly and kept contamination free in the process of preparing and serving the meal. (Stan, religious advisor)

The managing of the women's expectations was also referenced in other interviews. Albert, a catering manager, explained the need to make a small amount of extra food in case of new admissions. However, he cautioned against this practice being used to raise women's expectations about additional food being available:

> Say we're making 72 ham and cucumber sandwiches, okay, make 74, because you never know what's going to happen, someone's going to come in, so they'll then go out on the wings, and I've got two left over. Then [a catering member of staff] goes and gives it to someone, and says, "There you go, you can eat that." I said, "Don't do that." She says, "Why not? I'm just throwing it in the bin." I said, "Yes, but the problem is if you say it's fine to eat the sandwich, they then know if I make extra sandwiches, we can all have a sandwich later." Therefore, I said to her, "That food goes in the bin." We don't give it to anybody, because the minute we start giving them food, they'll think I'll just make an extra couple of sandwiches, and we can have a sandwich ourselves. (Albert, catering manager)

The anticipation of later consequences and the consideration of 'long-term advantages and disadvantages precedes both the enforcement of rules and the exercise of discretion' (Haggerty and Bucerius 2021, 140). Here, Albert's instruction to dispose of the spare sandwiches is motivated by the notion he must manage the women's expectation by being consistent in relation to the food practices. Nonetheless, the way he positions the women as thinking that they *'can all have a sandwich later'* can also be interpreted as paternalistic and can be linked to a mistrust he felt towards the women (this is further explored in theme 4).

Jo, another kitchen manager, also talked about the importance of keeping food consistent so that '*women know what they are getting'*. Several kitchen managers and staff outlined the significance of being consistent and expressed their frustration when the routines or practices were interrupted. These interruptions were exemplified in narratives around officers not delivering the food to the cells on time, or situations in which trainees added additional ingredients to meals. Setting the expectations of women related not only to the food itself but also to the food times and routines in the prison. The 'demand for consistency' is referenced by Liebling (2011c, 140), as she notes that it is valued for its predictability and safety.

2.3 | (Contested) Normality

Staff thought it important that the mealtimes and routines mirrored life on the outside. The 'normalization' process is a term developed in Scandinavian countries which focuses on the idea that the prison conditions should reflect the outside world (Fransen 2017; Engbo 2017; Reiter et al. 2018; De Vos 2023). These sentiments have been echoed in many of the participants' views on food practices. Indeed, several participants described the importance of '*something to look forward to'* on Friday night like special food from canteen, just like she would have '*a bottle of wine at home*' (Beth, and Jo, respectively). Polly also spoke of how the mealtimes were trying to '*reflect a sort of normal life*' and contribute to a *'a normal routine'*:

> Monday to Thursday might be bog standard run-of-the-mill food for tea but Friday, yes, we know we're going

> to have something nice and then at the weekend you might have your roast dinner on the Sunday or that kind of thing and just, again, make the women know they're worth that. (Polly, senior manager)

Beth also referenced *'home'* life when discussing the importance of having *'hot meal in the evening'*:

> It always was a hot meal in the evening which is meant to reflect more like your everyday life, so you'd go home and have your sandwiches at lunch time and then you'd go home, and you'd have your dinner in the evening. (Beth, catering manager)

De Vos (2023) observes that normalization process is underpinned by either an instrumental or intrinsic approach. Indeed, normality can be regarded as *instrumental* in influencing the behaviours of the prisoner and the promotion of their reintegration into society; or it can be considered *intrinsic*, based on values of human dignity, a way of securing the rights of the prisoners, and as an end in itself (De Vos 2023; Engbo 2017; Fransen 2017). Beth linked the mealtimes to the notion of rehabilitation, and accordingly appears to take an instrumental approach, while Polly mentioned the value of women and her view hereby appears to resonate with that of an intrinsic approach. Taking a comparative lens to consider how the normality is defined and enacted in prisons in Norway and Belgium, De Vos (2023) complicates the notion of normality in prison and highlights its artificial character. She notes that what is used as a benchmark for normality varies across different societies and is highly subjective. While staff members in prison consider it normal to eat collectively, this may not reflect life on the outside for others who reside in prison, who would eat alone upon release. Moreover, while it may be normal for some to eat collectively outside of the prison, eating with other prisoners or with staff may feel artificial, as opposed to normal (De Vos 2023).

Engbo (2017, 344) also draws on self-catering practices in Danish prisons to exemplify how processes of normalization can be interpreted as 'educational paternalism' and 'forced social education'. This link between education and 'normality' was equally observed in our data:

> They don't do desserts every day of the week now. It's just on Sundays now. They used to, when I joined the Prison Service way back in 1995 desserts were every single day. I was never brought up like that. You know myself, I'm in my 50s, and desserts were for Sundays. […] They look forward to it more. It is more of a treat rather than just a norm, and they get educated that it is not a norm. if you forget about it [meal-prep], then it is going to slip, and you suddenly forget it is going to slip, so you know if you don't prepare. You know, when I'm coming to work, I prepare my own food before I come into work, so I have got my lunches prepared and stuff like that. So, I'm thinking 'Fail to prepare, prepare to fail.' If you don't prepare something, it's a bit like someone going out to work and they go into like a petrol garage and just get a quick fast-food sandwich, they are not really knowing what they are going to be eating. (Graham, health and recreation staff)

The '*norms*' Graham outlines regarding dessert did not accord with that of the women, who were *'quite shocked'* when the change was implemented. His references to education, furthermore, appeared paternalistic and responsibilizing; marking his authority and reifying the distinction between him and the women. In the interview, Graham positioned the women as collectively 'uneducated' as he described how he would '*drip-feed them information*' on healthy eating. Accordingly, he understood his role as *'trying to educate them'* about food routines. Graham's narrative, in which he positions himself as a teacher and role-model shows that he saw himself as responsible for shaping 'the good woman', who acknowledges her responsibilities and could 'live up to neoliberal and patriarchal ideals' (Waite 2023, 85, Rutter and Barr 2019). Across the interviews, food practices were intertwined both with the notion of normality, as well as how staff members positioned the women and how they understood their own roles. This is further reflected in the subsequent theme.

2.4 | Suspicion and Trust

Several members of staff spoke openly about their suspicion towards the women in prison and how they questioned the allergy-claims or dietary requirements of the women:

> A lot of women say, "I want to convert to veganism," basically they just want the extra box with the extra food. So, they have to sign a vegan compact, fill out three weeks' worth of menus, and then if they are making the right choices, then I'll give it to them, but then I'll spot check them occasionally just to make sure that they're not ordering non-vegan, and if they're ordering non-vegan then I just take the box off them again, take them off the list. (Albert, catering manager)

In talking about one women's food requirements, Albert, the catering manager, went on to say:

> She's [imprisoned woman] what we call a challenging customer. I guarantee you; it doesn't happen in a male prison. It's only in female prison. The problem is these women, they make enough noise, and they push enough buttons, get their lawyers involved, and the prison service says, right, we shall have to acquiesce to your needs. Ultimately, we still have a duty of care, but how legitimate is her allergy to fish? How legitimate is her fiery problem that says that she can't have spicy food? (Albert, catering manager)

In the above quote the women were positioned as intractable, entitled, and deceitful. Here, as well as in other interviews, complaint was gendered, with participants drawing a comparison to '*men's prisons*' and seeing criticism as a distinctively female ('*that's the beauty of working with women, they'll tell you when*

things are going wrong' (Jo, catering manager). This characterisation of the women as complaining echoes literature that locates prisons within broader discourses on gender (see Britton 2003; Crewe et al. 2023; Tait 2008). The suspicion staff had towards the women further influenced how they understood their role working within the prison.

Like prison officers who are required to balance values of harmony and security (Maycock et al. 2023), Albert described having a '*duty of care'* towards the women, while also enforcing the rules and '*spot-checking'* their canteen. He appears as holding a degree of 'natural authority' which in Tait's interview study (2008, 80) was a characteristic associated with male officers working in women's prisons. For us, the above interview extract from Albert raised the questions of what the remit of the catering staff is, how their authority and control is established and legitimized, as well as where the boundary of their role lies. Given Albert's focus of spot checking the canteen, Albert's account appears to resonate with that of a disciplinarian work type (see Scott 2012). Moreover, while previous literature highlights how women in prison draw on food to negotiate power (Smoyer and Minke, 2019), Albert's quote suggests that some staff similarly can draw on food to exert their control. His '*duty of care*' appeared to relate to the Prison Service Instruction manual (HM Prison and Probation Services 2010), which mandates prisons to meet the dietary requirements of the women.

Nonetheless, while some of the participants were critical and suspicious of the women, others focused exclusively on the relationships to the women they '*trusted'* or considered *'reliable'*. The trust staff extend to women in prison is, as Waite (2022, 518) posits, 'complex' and often 'based on compliance'. In describing his relationship with the women, Stan, a religious advisor, stated that 'there is a level of trust, we trust the ladies'. In the interview, he went on to say:

> They almost expect that [I] [name] will calm [them] down. […] We just say, "Look take a deep breath, breathe, it's not the end of the world, look you're in […] prison, think about the wider objective. You're not coming here to have a fight with the kitchen manager or the governors about utensils, you're coming here because you want […] access child custody, you know, you want that process to start where you can start seeing your children after years, so you need to stay focused on these things and not let the smaller things bog you down."
>
> Now of course they do, you know, it's upsetting for you, of course, but you've got to focus on what is expected of you […] It's not acceptable for you to riot, cause issues, general alarm on the wing, a fight kicks off, this kind of thing. We don't expect that from you when you're here because you're trusted to behave in an appropriate way. (Stan, religious advisor)

Here, trust is situated within a power-imbalance between himself and the women. Stan knows what they stand to risk by being disobedient or having a '*fight*'. Given his relationship with the women, who sought him out when they needed to calm down, he was able to have a frank conversation with them and remind them of their immediate context and what was '*expected*' of them. Trust was related to the expectation that women would '*behave in an appropriate way'*. His account illustrates Waite's (2022) point that trust is conditional and contingent on the women's compliance.

Like Stan, Will also discussed the 'trust' he had in some of the women:

> A lot of the women here do the dishes, and we supervise, so they take a lot of ownership because I would say they're slightly more reliable, trustworthy. We can afford that. […] I've done a considerable amount in terms of getting the team working together [that] was my biggest key priority. Getting some ladies that weren't offering as much out. Getting the right ladies in. (Will, catering manager)

Will's trust was not extended to all the women. Indeed, the notion that he could '*afford*' to let the women '*do the dishes'* could be linked to the fact that he had been selective when putting together a cookery team. In the interview, Will listed the skills and contributions of different women, whom he trusted. He spoke of one '*super intelligent lady'* who helped him track *'who's on what diet'* and was '*heavily involved in* [the prison's] *menu development'*. By trusting some of the women, he was able to draw on their knowledge of others in the prison. During the interview, Will went on to talk in more detail about this one woman, whom he trusted:

> She's like a staff member without keys. She's really reliable. She's turns up every single … She supports [the catering manager] who is my head chef to the point that when we just walked past, they were actually just going through the production plan. She's heavily involved in that (Will, catering manager)

Will considered her responsible and saw beyond a 'criminalised position' (Waite 2022, 514). Despite being a catering manager, a job that is not traditionally associated with building relationships, Will found it important to spend *'time with these ladies'* and get to know them. Notably, he considered it the role of the prison to '*develop these ladies to the point that we can trust them'* and saw it '*rewarding'* to see how women '*developed*'. His account, hereby, echoed Waite's contention (2022) that women in prison continually have to signal to staff that they are trustworthy and have to prove themselves by demonstrating their compliance.

The distinction between accounts like Albert's and Will or Stan's correspond with Scott's premise (2012) that personality types of staff are intertwined with their views of prisoners. While Albert focused on discipline and had a cynical view towards the women, Stan and Will considered the interaction with the women in a positive light. The differences between the accounts could further relate to the differences in their jobs, as Albert, working as a catering manager, felt he was required to '*manage the bottom line'*, while Stan and Will had the capacity to prioritise the relational

components of their jobs. The different attitudes towards the women in prison could equally be reflected by their approach to gender roles. While Will discussed his relationship with the 'lifer' and his willingness to have women in the kitchen and teach them, Albert described how he only focused on cooking and kept the women at a distance. Albert's approach to his job hereby resonates Tait's interview study (2008, 78), which found that, male officers would often see the women in prison as manipulative and accordingly would be more likely to establish a distance to women in order not to be seen as 'gullible'. The suspicion or trust prison staff felt towards the women influenced the ways in which they controlled or worked with the women in relation to food. It furthermore was intertwined with how they perceived the legitimacy and role of the prison.

2.5 | Punishment or Rehabilitation

Food was seen as an example for staff to explain the legitimacy of the prison. Many spoke about food either being a form of punishment or rehabilitation. Beth spoke about food in relation to the rehabilitative agenda and stressed that the quality of food should be considered in relation to women's self-worth, which to some degree can be connected to Sparks and Bottoms' (1995) argument that prisons can uphold forms of authority but can only be legitimised via a humane treatment of those in prison. In the interview Beth stated:

> We've moved away from the Victorian era where prisoners were just fed gruel and left to get on with it. We take the rehabilitation of prisoners seriously now, quite rightly, and we have to, again, it links to women feeling confident and their self-esteem being appropriate. If we feed them food that is just awful, what are we saying, this is all your worth? [the food quality] […] it needs to be better but it just links into kind of the purpose of prison, I suppose, with if we want people to make a success themselves on release, by giving them awful food and awful nutrition they're going to be weak, they're not going to want to work, concentration levels won't be where they need to be. (Beth, health and recreation staff)

For Beth, food was seen as a way of '*investing*' in women. It was further linked to their worth and was seen as instrumental in supporting them to '*develop[e][…] their skill*' and training them in the kitchen (Will). This view of prison being a place in which women could be supported for life outside was further disrupted when women were *'swept away'* or moved on (Will). For Beth, quality food was a way of distinguishing prisons '*now*' to the prisons in the '*Victorian era*', as well as the chance of the women making a '*success of themselves*'. Contrastingly, a few participants commented on prisons as a form of punishment. When asked what he would change in his job, if given unlimited resources, Albert commented:

> You've got to remember where we are, we're in prison, this is meant to be a punishment for them. Now, I always get told I can't say that, and I always get told the punishment is that they've had their liberty taken away from them, so therefore that's punishment enough, and I get that. I always say to people, "I'm not here to judge them, I'm just here to feed them." So, I'm quite happy with the catering that I do here, and I certainly don't want to burden the taxpayer more than I have to. (Albert, catering manager)

The quote reflects an ambiguity- on the one hand Albert emphasised that his role consisted of feeding the women, however, on the other, he emphasises that food is meant to be a punishment for the women. Additionally, he refers to what he '*always get[s] told*' that the deprivation of liberty is '*punishment enough*'. The dictum of prison as 'for, not as, punishment' has been observed to resonate with officers in private prisons who saw themselves as delivering a service (see Crewe et al. 2015, 321). Here, Albert relates it to his own role of not being there to *'judge them'*. He, nonetheless, links the quality of the food to punishment and hereby he echoes studies that suggest that food practices are experienced as 'a symbolic form of punishment' (Woods-Brown et al. 2023, 13; De Graaf and Kilty 2016).

3 | Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper we have focused on the how staff members in prison understand their role in relation to food in prison. While, prior research has focused on how food is a site of resistance and experienced as an embodiment of punishment (Smith 2002; Struthers Montford 2023; Einat and Davidian 2019), our findings suggest that staff considered food in relation to the structural challenges they were required to navigate, the expectations of the women, and the core debates on whether food is situated in the realm of rehabilitation or punishment. Indeed, although the constraints on the prison's food budget have featured in policy discourse (The *House of Commons Prison Health* report 2018; *HMIP Women's Expectations*), the perspective of staff in relation to this has been limited. Our findings have addressed this gap. We have highlighted how staff acted '*creatively*' and were required to limit portion sizes, restrict purchasing certain food items for budgetary reasons and in so doing, illustrating the ways in which wider themes of austerity have affected the provision of food in prison.

A second set of findings identified that staff values were underpinned by seeing women's experiences in relation to what they considered normal. The concept of normalisation (Reiter et al. 2018; De Vos 2023), was important to staff and informed their views on the mealtimes and routines in prison, as well as the quality of the food. Examples made by staff members around normality echoed many of the sentiments made by Scandinavian scholars (Fransen 2017; Engbo 2017), who contend that prison conditions should replicate the conditions of community living. In the interviews, staff referred to the normalisation process when they spoke about the significance of an evening meal, the importance of treating oneself or the impact that desserts can have on the women's sense of well-being. We however, drawing on Engbo (2017), discussed the contested character of the normalisation principle, as the subjective experiences of the women were not considered. Indeed, the norms introduced, like dessert only on Sunday, reflected those of the staff rather than

the women who were shocked at the changes of the menu. In this sense, some of the views of the staff appeared paternalistic, as they considered it their duty to educate or *'drip-feed'* them information about healthy dietary choices (quote from Graham). The observation that some staff acted paternalistically towards the women by educating them or by surveilling their canteen corresponds with findings from Crewe et al. (2023) who note that the infantilisation of women is embedded within the broad practices of the prison. While concepts like normalisation may underpin food practices for staff and be motivated by notions of the women's '*success'* upon release, they may be disregarding the views and values of the women and hereby appear paternalistic.

Lastly, during the interviews there were many conversations about the legitimacy of the prison, as staff perceived food as either a form of rehabilitation or punishment. Sparks and Bottoms (1995, 59) quoted 'a legitimated prison regime demands a dialogue in which prisoners' voices (as to what is 'justified in terms of their beliefs') are registered and have a chance of being responded to'. Staff spoke about the need for food practices to be based around women's feelings of self-efficacy and worth, but this was also steered with the ideas around rehabilitation and the notion that women could be a *'success upon release'* (Beth). In essence, food practices were a form rehabilitation and a way in which they could perform a sense of care. However, some staff also discussed food as part of the women's punishment. Indeed, in this article we highlighted that staff hold a range of diverse, competing and opposing views about the role of food in prison. The mediation and incorporation of these different views remain a challenge and can form a source of tensions between staff.

4 | Future Research and Practice

Whilst this article has presented a platform to understand the relationship between food and prison staff, we have identified further research and practical recommendations.

- It would be instructive to build on these findings to explore on how the gender and cultural identities of those who work in the prison service shape their views on the food practices in prison. Research as such would mark the diversity of staff and could tap into how 'care' or surveillance is performed in relation to food.
- Secondly, research could further investigate how different departments within prison liaise with one another in relation to food, including how they resolve competing challenges (e.g., budgetary challenges, food diversity, adherence to equality agendas). Such research could explore the extent to which food practices are both contested and collaborative.
- Based on our findings, we would advocate for the budget to increase to provide further resources for staff training, catering practices, and the development of education tools around food in prison. With this, we would want to engage with conversations around the importance of women using food as a way to connect to the outside. We would advocate the arguments centred around a normalisation approach, and examples of this could be for women to be involved in the consultation with kitchen staff on making changes to prison food, and also widening opportunities for women to cook for themselves including more self-catering provisions.

By exploring the perspective of staff members, this paper has contributed to the small but growing scholarship on food in prison. It has demonstrated the range of considerations staff are required to negotiate, as they balance the '*duty of care'* they have to the women with an attempt to deal with the structural issues of providing food on a limited budget. This paper also contributes further towards understanding what *'duty of care'* entails. There were descriptions made by participants that aligned to the prison service agenda, but there were also divergences where staff would ensure women were listened to and given some autonomy to feel normal.

Endnotes

[1] The budget increased to £2.71 in 2024 (Waddell, 2024), and has now increased on average to around £3.00 in 2025.

[2] However, there were 108 women who contributed to at least one method from this study.

[3] Prison Service Instruction.

References

Britton, D. M. 2003. *At Work in the Iron Cage: The Prison as Gendered Organization*. New York: University Press.

Carlen, P. 1983. *Women's Imprisonment: A Study in Social Control*. London: Routledge.

Clements, A. J., and G. Kinman. 2021. "Job Demands, Organizational Justice, and Emotional Exhaustion in Prison Officers." *Criminal Justice Studies* 34, no. 4: 441–458.

Crewe, B. 2009. *The Prisoner Society: Power, Adaptation and Social Life in an English Prison*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Crewe, B., A. Liebling, and S. Hulley. 2015. "Staff-Prisoner Relationships, Staff Professionalism, and the Use of Authority in Public- and Private-Sector Prisons." *Law & Social Inquiry* 40, no. 02: 309–344.

Crewe, B., A. Schliehe, and D. A. Przybylska. 2023. ""It Causes a Lot of Problems": Relational Ambiguities and Dynamics Between Prisoners and Staff in a Women's Prison." *European Journal of Criminology* 20, no. 3: 925–946.

De Graaf, K., and J. M. Kilty. 2016. "You Are What You Eat: Exploring the Relationship Between Women, Food, and Incarceration." *Punishment & Society* 18, no. 1: 27–46.

De Vos, H. 2023. *Beyond Scandinavian Exceptionalism: Normalization, Imprisonment and Society*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing (Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology).

Dennard, S., D. K. Tracy, and A. Beeney. et al. 2021. "Working in a Prison: Challenges, Rewards, and the Impact on Mental Health and Well-being." *The Journal of Forensic Practice* 23, no. 2: 132–149.

Einat, T., and M. Davidian. 2019. "'There Is no Sincerer Love Than the Love of Food' (George Bernard Shaw, 1903): the Meaning of Food and Its Uses in Prison Subculture." *European Journal of Criminology* 16: 127–146.

Engbo, H. J. 2017. "Normalisation in Nordic Prisons—From a Prison Governor's perspective." In *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice: Embraced by the Welfare state?*, edited by T. Ugelvik and P. S. Smith 327–352. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Fransen, P. 2017. "The Rise of the Open Prisons and the Breakthrough of the Principle of Normalisation From the 1930s until Today." In *Scandinavian Penal History, Culture and Prison Practice: Embraced by*

the Welfare state?, edited by T. Ugelvik and P. S. Smith 327–352. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/978-1-137-58529-5#:~:text=About%20this%20book&text=Based%20on%20extensive%20new%20empirical,by%20a%20powerful%20welfare%20state.

Haggerty, K. D., and S. M. Bucerius. 2021. "Picking Battles: Correctional Officers, Rules, and Discretion in Prison." *Criminology* 59, no. 1: 137–157.

HM Inspectorate of Prisons. 2016. "Life in Prison: Food: A Findings Paper." https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2016/09/Life-in-prison-Food-Web-2016.pdf.

HM Inspectorate of Prisons. 2021. "Expectations Criteria for Assessing the Treatment of and Conditions for Women in Prison Version 2." https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2021/07/Womens-Expectations-FINAL-July-2021.pdf.

HM Prison and Probation Services (PSI). 2016. "Faith and Pastoral Care for Prisoners Instruction Manual." https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/faith-and-pastoral-care-for-prisoners-psi-052016.

HM Prison and Probation Services (PSI). 2010. "Catering—Meals for Prisoners." https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5f455d08d3bf7f69a7fbe189/psi-2010-44-catering.doc.pdf.

House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee. 2018. "Prison Health 12th Report." https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhealth/963/963.pdf.

Kelman, J., L. Palmer, R. Gribble, and D. MacManus. 2024. "Prison Officers' Perceptions of Delivering Trauma-Informed Care in Women's Prisons." *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 33: 1258–1279.

Liebling, A. 2000. "Prison Officers, Policing and the Use of Discretion." *Theoretical Criminology* 4, no. 3: 333–357.

Liebling, A. 2011a. "Distinctions and Distinctiveness in the Work of Prison Officers: Legitimacy and Authority Revisited." *European Journal of Criminology* 8, no. 6: 484–499.

Liebling, A. 2011b. "Moral Performance, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment and Prison Pain." *Punishment & Society* 13, no. 5: 530–550.

Liebling, A. 2011c. *The Prison Officer*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Maycock, M., K. McGuckin, and K. Morrison. 2023. "What Are the Implications of Changing Place for the Professional Performativity of Prison Officers?," *Corrections* 8, no. 2: 57–73.

Nixon, S. 2022. ""You Can't Un-see What You've Seen": an Ex-prison Officer's Autoethnographic Account of Suicide and Self-harm in a UK Male Adult Prison." *Incarceration* 3, no. 2: 2632–6663.

Power, E. 2021. ""Without It You're Lost": Examining the Role and Challenges of family Engagement Services in prisons." In *Critical Reflections on Women, Family, Crime and Justice*, edited by I. Mason L. Baldwin, and N. Booth, 1st ed. Bristol: University Press.

Reiter, K., L. Sexton, and J. Summer. 2018. "Theoretical and Empirical Limits of Scandinavian Exceptionalism: Isolation and Normalization in Danish Prisons." *Punishment & Society* 20, no. 1: 92–112.

Rowe, A. 2016. ""Tactics", Agency and Power in Women's Prisons." *British Journal of Criminology* 56, no. 2: 332–349.

Saldana, J. 2013. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications, LTD.

Scott, D. 2012. *Creating ghosts in the penal machine: prison officeroccupational morality and techniques of denial*, In J. Bennett, B. Crewe and W. Azrini. *Understanding Prison Staff*. 2nd ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Smith, C. 2002. "Punishment and Pleasure: Women, Food and the Imprisoned Body." *The Sociological Review* 50: 197–214.

Smoyer, A. B. 2014. "Good and Healthy: Foodways and Construction of Identity in a Women's Prison: Good and Healthy: Foodways and Construction of Identity in a Women's Prison." *Howard J Crim Justice* 53: 525–541.

Smoyer, A. B., and G. Lopes. 2017. "Hungry on the Inside: Prison Food as Concrete and Symbolic Punishment in a Women's Prison." *Punishment & Society* 19: 240–255.

Smoyer, A. B., and L. K. Minke. 2019. "Hygge: Food and the construction of safety among incarcerated women in Denmark." *Appetite* 141.

Sparks, R., and A. E. Bottoms. 1995. "Legitimacy and Order in Prisons." *The British Journal of Sociology* 46, no. 1: 45–62.

Struthers Montford, K. 2023. "The Embodiment of Contempt: Ontario Provincial Prison Food." *Social & Legal Studies* 32: 237–256.

Tait, S. 2008. "Prison Officers and gender." In *Understanding Prison Staff*, edited by J. Bennett, B. Crewe, and W. Azrini, 2nd ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Ugelvik, T. 2011. "The Hidden Food: Mealtime Resistance and Identity Work in a Norwegian Prison." *Punishment & Society* 13: 47–63.

Waddell, E. 2024. "Prison Food Budget Increases by 25% for 2023/24." The public sector catering. https://www.publicsectorcatering.co.uk/news/prison-food-budget-increases-25-202324.

Waite, S. 2022. "Imprisoned Women's Experiences of Trust in Staff-prisoner Relationships in an English Open prison." In *The Routledge Handbook of Women's Experiences of Criminal Justice*, edited by I. Masson and N. Booth, 1st ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Waite, S. 2023. ""Their Ethos Is All About Building Trust": An Exploration of Staff-prisoner Relationships at a Women's Open Prison." PhD thesis, Leeds Beckett University. https://figshare.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/articles/thesis/_Their_ethos_is_all_about_building_trust_An_Exploration_of_Staff-Prisoner_Relationships_at_a_Women_s_Open_Prison/22268983.

Wood, A. 2015. "Challenging Occupational Norms: An Ethnographic Study of Female Prison Officers in a Women's Prison." PhD thesis. The University of Salford. https://salford-repository.worktribe.com/output/1404153/challenging-occupational-norms-an-ethnographic-study-of-female-prison-officers-in-a-womens-prison.

Woods-Brown, C., K. Hunt, and H. Sweeting. 2023. "Food and the Prison Environment: A Meta-Ethnography of Global First-Hand Experiences of Food, Meals and Eating in Custody." *Health Justice* 11, no. 1: 11–23.