If You Complain, You Get Your Head Kicked In

Alex Applebee & L. N. Combe

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How Naming the Problem Makes You the Problem, and Why the Prison Is Just the Clearest Example

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Abstract

In prison, if you say the food sucks, everyone starts thinking about the food sucking. Now everyone's unhappy. Tension rises. Incidents happen. Lockdowns follow. Lockdowns affect everyone. So the person who named the problem becomes the problem — not the food. This paper examines the violence-enforced prohibition on naming problems within carceral environments, and argues that this mechanism — not the psychology that follows it — is the primary reason formerly incarcerated people minimize their suffering. The psychological adaptations documented in the literature (prisonization, system justification, masculine performativity) are downstream of a simpler, prior fact: saying something is wrong gets you hurt. This rule is learned with the body, not the mind, and it does not stop at the prison gate. It is carried into families, communities, workplaces, and every conversation about what happened inside. We further argue that this mechanism is not unique to prison — it is the same structure that operates in whistleblowing, domestic violence, institutional abuse, workplace culture, and military service — but prison is where it is enforced with maximum violence and zero ambiguity, producing the clearest case study of a universal human problem: in environments where power is unaccountable, the person who names the harm becomes the target.

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1. The Food Sucks

Imagine you are in prison. The food is bad. Not bad like a disappointing restaurant. Bad like the same grey slop served under fluorescent lights in a room where you cannot leave, surrounded by people who are also not allowed to leave, some of whom are dangerous, all of whom are stressed, and you will eat this food tomorrow and the next day and the next day for months or years.

The food sucks.

Now imagine you say so.

What happens next is not about food. It was never about food. Here is what happens:

Everyone around you was managing. They had found a way to get through the day. They had flattened the experience into something survivable. They were not thinking about how bad the food was because thinking about how bad the food is when you cannot change it and cannot leave is a form of torture. They had, through effort or habit or necessity, stopped noticing.

You just made them notice again.

Now the guy next to you is thinking about the food. Now he's angry. Not at the food — at you. Because he'd found a way to not be angry, and you took it from him. Now the tension at the table is higher. Higher tension means higher likelihood of an incident. An incident means a lockdown. A lockdown means everyone goes back to their cells. A lockdown means the guy who was going to call his daughter tonight doesn't get to call his daughter tonight.

Because you said the food sucks.

You are now the problem. Not the food. You.

And if you keep being the problem, someone will solve it. Not with a conversation. Not with a complaint form. With their fists. With a shiv. With the kind of correction that doesn't require a committee.

This is how you learn — with your body, not your mind — that naming what is wrong is more dangerous than what is wrong.

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2. The Rule

The rule is simple: **don't name the problem.**

It is not written anywhere. It is not part of the official prison rules. It is not in the inmate handbook. It does not need to be. It is enforced by the population itself, through violence, through exclusion, through the immediate and obvious consequences of making everyone around you aware of something they were trying not to be aware of.

The rule has layers:

Layer 1: Don't make things worse for everyone. If you complain about conditions, you introduce dissatisfaction into a population that has no outlet for dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction without outlet becomes aggression. Aggression becomes incidents. Incidents become lockdowns. Lockdowns punish everyone. Therefore: your complaint punished everyone. You are the cause.

Layer 2: Don't show weakness. Complaining is noticing that something is wrong. Noticing that something is wrong is being affected by it. Being affected by it is being vulnerable. Being vulnerable in prison is being a target. De Viggiani (2012) documented this as "masked masculinity" — the strategic performance of invulnerability that prison demands. Ricciardelli, Maier, and Hannah-Moffat (2015) found it is not an identity but a **risk management tool.** Complaining breaks the tool.

Layer 3: Don't talk. If you'll complain about the food, you'll complain about other things. If you'll complain about other things, you might complain to people with authority. If you'll complain to people with authority, you're talking to them. If you're talking to them, you're a risk. The distance between "the food sucks" and "snitch" is shorter than it looks from outside.

Each layer reinforces the others. Together they produce a single behavioral output: silence about conditions. Not the silence of someone with nothing to say. The silence of someone who learned what happens when you say it.

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3. Learned with the Body

This is not a belief system. It is not an attitude. It is not something a person thinks through and decides. It is a conditioned response, learned through pain.

The neuroscience is straightforward. The amygdala encodes threat associations faster than the prefrontal cortex can evaluate them (LeDoux, 1996). A single violent consequence for voicing a complaint is sufficient to create a lasting association: *speaking up → danger.* This is classical conditioning operating on the same pathway as any other fear response. The person does not need to consciously remember the specific incident. The body remembers.

Repeated exposure strengthens the association. In an environment where complaints are punished consistently — and prison is nothing if not consistent — the conditioned response becomes automatic. The person doesn't decide not to complain. The decision is already made before the conscious mind engages. The words don't reach the mouth. The body intervenes first.

This is why the rule survives release. The environment changes but the conditioning does not. The formerly incarcerated person is sitting in a pub, or at a family dinner, or in a rare honest conversation, and someone asks: "What was it like in there?"

The body answers before the mind does: *don't name the problem.*

"It wasn't that bad."

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4. The Same Structure Everywhere

Prison is the clearest example because the enforcement is maximally violent and maximally unambiguous. But the structure — **naming the problem makes you the problem** — operates everywhere that power is unaccountable.

4.1 Domestic Violence

The victim who names the abuse faces escalation. "You're overreacting." "You're making this into something it's not." "Look what you made me do." The mechanism is identical: the person who names the harm becomes responsible for the consequences of naming it. If naming the abuse leads to a worse beating, the lesson is the same as in prison: don't name it.

Lenore Walker's cycle of violence (1979) documents the tension-building phase, where the victim manages the abuser's mood by minimizing, accommodating, and — critically — not naming what is happening. The victim learns, with their body, that silence is safer than speech.

4.2 Institutional Abuse (Churches, Schools, Care Homes)

The child who reports abuse in an institution is "making trouble." The institution closes ranks. The child is moved, discredited, isolated. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (Australia, 2017) documented this pattern across hundreds of institutions over decades: the person who names the problem is treated as the problem. Whistleblowers were transferred, silenced, or expelled. The abuser often stayed.

4.3 Whistleblowing

Daniel Ellsberg. Edward Snowden. Chelsea Manning. Frances Haugen. Every whistleblower in history has experienced the same structure: the person who names the institutional failure becomes the institutional problem. The failure continues. The namer is prosecuted, fired, exiled, or destroyed.

C. Fred Alford (2001), in *Whistleblowers: Broken Lives and Organizational Power*, found that whistleblowers consistently report the same experience: the organization's response to the disclosure was worse than the original problem. The organization does not address the named problem. It addresses the namer.

4.4 Workplace Culture

"Don't rock the boat." "That's just how it is here." "You're not a team player." The employee who names a problem — inefficiency, safety violation, harassment, bullying — is reframed as the problem. Not the problem they named. They are difficult. They are negative. They don't fit the culture. Performance reviews decline. Opportunities dry up. The lesson is the same: silence is rewarded, naming is punished.

4.5 Military Service

"Suck it up." "Embrace the suck." The soldier who names the conditions — sleep deprivation, inadequate equipment, leadership failures, mental health deterioration — is weak. They can't hack it. They're letting the unit down. The mechanism is identical to prison: your complaint introduces dissatisfaction into a population with no outlet, and you become the cause of the dissatisfaction, not the conditions.

Veterans minimize their service experiences through the same conditioned response as formerly incarcerated people. "It wasn't that bad" is not unique to prison. It is the universal output of any environment where naming the problem gets you hurt.

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5. The Silence Machine

What makes prison the definitive case study is that all of these mechanisms operate simultaneously, at maximum intensity, with no exit:

1. **The violence is immediate.** In a workplace, naming a problem might cost you a promotion in six months. In prison, it might cost you your teeth tonight.
2. **The environment is total.** You cannot go home. You cannot take a break. You cannot quit. The mechanism operates 24 hours a day. There is no space where the rule does not apply.
3. **The population enforces it, not the authority.** This is crucial. The prison administration does not need to suppress complaints. The inmates do it themselves. The system outsources its own defense to the people it confines. Guards don't need to punish you for saying the food sucks. Your cellmate will.
4. **The conditioning is long-duration.** Sentences are measured in months and years. The fear response is reinforced daily for the entire duration. By the time a person is released, the association between speaking up and danger is as deeply encoded as any other survival instinct.
5. **The social group outside reinforces it.** The community a formerly incarcerated person returns to often operates on similar codes. The rule doesn't stop at the gate because the social environment outside shares the same values: don't be soft, don't talk, don't name problems that can't be fixed.
6. **There is no counter-narrative.** Nobody inside is modelling the alternative. Nobody is saying "actually, it's okay to say the food sucks, let's talk about it, let's fix it." There is no example of naming a problem leading to the problem being solved. Every example confirms the rule: naming the problem makes you the problem.

The result is a population of people who have been trained, through consistent violence over extended periods with no alternative model, to not name what is wrong. And when they are released, they carry that training into every interaction for the rest of their lives.

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6. The Function of the Silence

The silence is not a side effect of the prison system. It is one of its primary outputs.

A system that produces people who cannot or will not articulate what happened to them is a system that is **immune to testimony.** It doesn't matter how many journalists visit. It doesn't matter how many inquiries are convened. It doesn't matter how many researchers conduct interviews. The primary witnesses — the people who were there — will say: "It wasn't that bad."

And they will mean it. Because saying it means it is the only thing they've been allowed to do with the experience. The body learned: don't name the problem. The mind followed: there is no problem. The testimony follows: it wasn't that bad.

This is why prison reform moves so slowly despite overwhelming evidence. The evidence exists in data — recidivism rates, PTSD prevalence, mortality statistics, international comparisons. But data doesn't move people. Testimony moves people. And the testimony is suppressed — not by the state, not by policy, not by censorship — but by a violence-enforced cultural norm that the prisoners themselves maintain.

The state doesn't need to hide what happens in prison. The people who experience it hide it for the state. For free. Because saying otherwise gets your head kicked in.

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7. What Would Happen If They Could Speak

Consider what it would mean if formerly incarcerated people could speak freely about their experience without the conditioned fear response, without the cultural enforcement, without the masculinity performance.

The testimony would be:

I was put in a room smaller than three times my body length. A lab rat gets six times. I shared it with a stranger. There was a toilet with no screen. I used it in front of another human being every day for years. I was locked in that room for 16 to 23 hours a day. The food was not fit for an animal — and I know this because animals in laboratories have legally mandated nutritional standards and I did not. Nobody — nobody — was required to ask whether my suffering was justified before it began. No community member who was not part of the system reviewed my conditions. I was afraid every day. I could not say I was afraid because saying I was afraid would have made me more afraid. I learned to say it was fine. I am still saying it is fine. I am saying it is fine right now, to you, and I am not lying — I believe it. But I believe it because the alternative was my head getting kicked in, and I believed it for so long that it became true.

That testimony would end the prison system as it currently exists. Which is why the system is designed to make sure it is never given.

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8. The Comparison That Should End the Debate

A laboratory rat in a research facility is guaranteed the following, by law:

- **An ethics committee review before confinement begins** — including at least one community member with no institutional affiliation
- **Someone is required to ask: "Is this suffering justified?"** — and document the answer, and have it reviewed, and defend it
- **Minimum space of six times the animal's body length**
- **Environmental enrichment** — objects, nesting material, things to do
- **Social housing by default** — isolation requires written justification
- **A veterinarian on call**
- **Regular inspection** — every six months, with written reports and mandatory corrective action
- **An endpoint** — the experiment must end

A human being in a prison is guaranteed:

- **Confinement at approximately three times body length** — half what a rat receives
- **No ethics committee** — no one reviews the conditions before or during confinement
- **No community member in the oversight process** — the system reviews itself (in Australia, a layperson is required for animal ethics committees but not for prison oversight)

- **No one is required to ask "is this suffering justified?"** — the question does not exist in the process
- **No enrichment requirement**
- **Solitary confinement without justification** in most jurisdictions
- **Inspection once every five years** (New York) to **never** (31 US states)
- **No guaranteed endpoint** — life without parole exists

The rat gets twice the space, an ethics board, a community representative, a mandatory justification question, and an endpoint. The human gets none of those things. And the human is trained by violence to say it's fine.

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9. Conclusion: The Silence Is the System

The prison system does not survive because of political will. It does not survive because of public indifference. It does not survive because the evidence for alternatives is insufficient — Norway's 20% recidivism versus America's 77% is not a subtle finding.

The prison system survives because it produces a population that cannot name what happened to them.

The mechanism is not psychological first. It is violent first. You learn with your body: don't name the problem. Naming the problem makes you the problem. The food sucks but saying the food sucks gets your head kicked in, so the food is fine. The conditions are inhumane but saying the conditions are inhumane introduces tension that leads to lockdowns that punish everyone, so the conditions are fine. You are afraid but saying you are afraid makes you a target, so you are not afraid. You are damaged but saying you are damaged means you'd talk, and talking means you're a snitch, and being a snitch means you're dead, so you are not damaged.

Then the psychology kicks in. You said it was fine so many times that you believe it. Festinger's cognitive dissonance resolves the gap. Jost's system justification stabilizes the belief. Clemmer's prisonization normalizes the conditions. The body learned the rule through violence. The mind made the rule into a belief. The belief became testimony. The testimony protects the system.

And the system never had to lift a finger. The population does it to itself. The silence is self-enforcing, self-perpetuating, and self-replicating — carried out of prison and into every community, every family, every conversation, every generation.

The silence is the system.

Until someone asks: why does a rat get an ethics board and a human doesn't? Why does a rat get six times its body length and a human gets three? Why is someone required to ask "is this suffering justified?" for a rat but not for a person?

And until the person who was inside can answer those questions without their body telling them to shut up.

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