

Ethnicity and Social Relations in a Young Offenders Institution¹

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Introduction

The idea of 'race relations in prison' brings together potent symbols of troubled times. The numbers of young men being confined to prison seems to reach record levels on an annual basis while concerns about social cohesion are haunted by a fear that British society no longer has a strong image of itself. Ever since the riots in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley in Spring/Summer 2001 there has been intense political concern that white and minority ethnic communities in Britain are growing apart, not together³. More recently, public unease about knife and gun crime has led to calls for tougher prison sentences, alongside bewilderment at the perceived violence and nihilism among Britain's young people.

Relatively few research studies in the UK have focused on 'race relations' between prisoners and have instead tended toward an examination of relations between prisoners and prison officers⁴. The most comprehensive examination of race relations among prisoners was conducted some twenty years ago by Genders and Player⁵. The research found pervasive prejudice among prisoners, which largely resulted in an avoidance of contact and verbal aggression rather than overt physical violence. Edgar et al.⁶ more recent work found that prison conflicts sometimes appeared to be exacerbated by ethnic tensions and cultural misunderstandings.

As with many aspects of British society the contemporary prison population is increasingly characterized by ethnic, national, and religious diversity⁷, but it is a diversity that remains far from well understood, particularly from the perspective of prisoners themselves. Our study, part of the ESRC *Identities and Social Action* research programme⁸, has

explored issues of cohesion, conflict, and identity through an ethnography of social relations in an adult male prison and a young offenders' institution. A primary objective of the current study has been to explore how the 'daily negotiation of ethnic difference'⁹ is managed within the emotionally fraught and confined world of the prison, to see how ethnic and masculine identities affects *prisoner-prisoner relations*.

Methods

The first phase of this research at HMYOI Rochester in Kent was completed in February 2007, while the second phase, in HMP Maidstone, concluded in January 2008. Much of the substantive analysis of a large and complex data set remains to be synthesized but here we present some early findings from our work in Rochester.

We adopted an exclusively qualitative and relatively long-term approach, drawing on ethnographic methods of observation and in-depth interview. Eight months fieldwork was conducted at HMYOI Rochester during which we sought insights into the rhythms and routines of prisoner's lives. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 prisoners. On the basis of a small set of pilot interviews the interviews explored aspects of identity by encouraging the young men to talk with us about their life before coming to prison and social relations within the prison, with specific reference to identity.

Considerable care was taken constructing the interview sample to ensure that it reflected the composition of the prison population in terms of ethnicity, nationality, and religion (see Table 1). Over half the sample was drawn from contacts established during fieldwork, but to avoid recruiting only very vocal prisoners, a large part of the sample was randomly

1 This article draws heavily on Phillips, C. (2008) 'Negotiating Identities: Ethnicity and Social Relations in a Young Offenders' Institution', *Theoretical Criminology* 12 (3): 313-332.

2 The authors gratefully acknowledge the kind support and assistance of the Governor and staff of HMYOI Rochester. We are equally grateful to all the young men serving sentences there who made us welcome and generously shared their experiences and thoughts with us.

3 Cantle, T. (2001) *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team*. London: Home Office.

4 An exception is Burnett, R. and Farrell, G. (1994) *Reported and Unreported Racial Incidents in Prisons*. Oxford: University of Oxford Centre for Criminological Research.

5 Genders, E. and Player, E. (1989) *Race Relations in Prison*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

6 Edgar, K., O' Donnell, I. and Martin, C. (2003) *Prison Violence: The Dynamics of Conflict, Fear and Power*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

7 Home Office (2005) *Offender Management Caseload Statistics Quarterly Brief: July to September 2005, England and Wales*. London: Home Office.

8 See www.identities.org.uk

9 Amin, A. (2002) 'Ethnicity and the Multicultural City: Living with Diversity', *Environment and Planning A* 34 959-980, p.959.

Table 1: Interview Sample HMYOI Rochester

	N=60	per cent sample	per cent prison*
Informal Contact Sample	35	58 per cent	
Stratified Random Sample	25	42 per cent	
ETHNICITY (HMPS)			
White	26	48 per cent	56 per cent
White European/Other	3		
Black/Black Caribbean/African	20	33 per cent	30 per cent
Mixed Heritage	4	7 per cent	7 per cent
Asian	7	12 per cent	6 per cent
RELIGION			
Christian	28	47 per cent	49 per cent
Muslim	14	23 per cent	19 per cent
Sikh	1	3 per cent	2 per cent
Hindu	1		
Nil Religion	16	27 per cent	30 per cent
NATIONALITY			
British National	49	82 per cent	85 per cent
Foreign National	11	18 per cent	15 per cent
STATUS			
Ordinary	55	92 per cent	-
Vulnerable	5	8 per cent	-

* Figures: HMP Rochester Diversity Manager, October 06

selected from the prison roll, with a further five prisoners identified by prison healthcare workers as struggling to adapt to prison life.

Some preliminary findings

The Good News: inter-ethnic interaction

Many of the young men in prison at HMYOI Rochester recognised the diverse origins of the prison population. A Mixed Race British national prisoner (R35), for example, observed, 'whenever you go into education, well I think anyway, you have a class of may be six and no one's the same race in there... They might almost be the same skin colour but they're from different parts of the world and stuff.' Many prisoners seemed at ease with the difference and diversity they encountered. Their accounts revealed that racial and ethnic difference was often considered to be unremarkable and irrelevant to prison life. A White British national prisoner (R23), for example, commented, '...with like fifty of us that's been on this wing for ages, we all know each other, it doesn't matter if you're black, white, Indian...you'd all be together'. Similarly, a Black prisoner of Muslim faith noted:

It's just an ethnic group innit like?... Obviously I'm Muslim, you're Christian, it don't mean I can't be friends with you and I can't talk to you, that's it, it don't mean nothing. It just means that we believe in different things innit.

(Black, British National, Muslim — R50).

It was not unusual to find prisoners, even those from the predominantly white rural areas of Kent and Sussex, referring positively to the ethnic diversity of the prison population. One White British prisoner from a rural county reflected 'I've never seen so many black people before....Never met a Muslim before in my life before I come to jail' (R8). Prisoners spoke of gaining knowledge of other cultures and nationalities — examples included learning about halal diets and political repression. It appeared to engender greater understanding and empathy, particularly for refugees and foreign national prisoners. This reflects the 'contact hypothesis' proposed by social psychologists who have suggested that contact between individuals from different racial and ethnic origins has the potential to reduce racial prejudice and discrimination¹⁰. Indeed,

¹⁰ Allport, G. W. (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

prisoners recognised that living in proximate conditions implicitly required 'mixing' as this prisoner observed:

You have to [mix] in here though, don't you, because there's no choice about it, is there? Because on road you can avoid that mixing with people but in here, like, you're all here, ain't you.

(White, British National, Christian — R39)

At the same time, our initial observations noted a certain degree of apparently ethnic separation during exercise, free-flow and association, and this was reinforced (often with qualifications) by both staff and prisoners' accounts:

'That is simple man. The Asians keep to themselves, the blacks to themselves and the whites too. Just simple. I don't know why but that is how it is.'

(Unrecorded prisoner comment, RE Fieldnote — 31st August 2006)

What can I say, well I get along with everyone, I get along with everyone. This will make me sound... but I have more in common with the black people... You see he is Asian, and me and him are cool, I'm not prejudiced at all. Some of the [white] people who rap I get along with them as well, but a lot of them tend to be black, it's just the way it is.

(Black, Foreign National, Christian — R2)

Positively, in the interviews with prisoners, there was a reasonably consistent absence of talk about racialised conflict and exclusion. In fact, acting in an explicitly racist manner could invoke considerably more than disapproval. Prisoners frequently referred to the existence of an informal code in which racist behaviour would be met with violent retaliation. We were told of some specific examples where such action had been taken by black prisoners and there was widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of this kind of behaviour, and, by extension, the illegitimacy of explicit racism. The unanimity with which racism was stigmatised was such that it had even entered the arsenal of prisoners' range of informal sanctions against each other:

Say I wanted you kicked in I'd say to a black feller, 'Look he's a racist, him, he's telling me you're a monkey and all that', and you'd get your head kicked in.

(White, British National, Christian — R30)

Beneath the surface

The simple acknowledgement of diversity and the violent disapproval of overt racism we found in prisoners accounts belies the extent of a more complicated and paradoxical set of social relations. As Amin reminds us, '[h]abitual contact in itself, is no guarantor of cultural exchange. It can entrench group animosities and identities, through repetitions of gender, class, race and ethnic practices'¹¹. The general tenor of relations between prisoners of different ethnic heritage was far from routinely antagonistic but it was not entirely free of tension, fear and anxiety.

For some white prisoners the simple presence, never mind assertion, of black identities appeared bewildering and disorienting. Various comments by prisoners acknowledged the ways in which some white and Asian prisoners displayed behaviours and cultural symbols,

particularly concerning language, music, and clothes, typically associated with black people, as a way of appearing 'cool'¹². This was often resisted and resented by some white prisoners who saw it as a misguided aspiration and an implicit betrayal or denial of white culture as the following quotes indicate:

Prisoners frequently referred to the existence of an informal code in which racist behaviour would be met with violent retaliation.

I don't understand why some white boys they wish that they was black boys and they ain't proud of like being a white boy...they walk around with their trousers round their ankles showing their arse, it's silly...the black boys don't wish that they was white, so why do the white boys wish that they was black?

(White, British National, Christian — R33)

Like the black boys, the London lot. And like they'll be more like they say things like 'hey blood', you know what I mean, and that's offending to me, do you know what I mean I mean because I don't understand their lingo.

(White, British National, Christian — R28)

11 See n.9, p.969

12 See Back, L. (1996) *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture: Racisms and Multiculture in Young Lives*. London: UCL Press and Frosh, S., Phoenix, A. and Pattman, R. (2002) *Young Masculinities*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

A minority of white prisoners' talk was indignant, resentful and barely suppressed rage regarding the cultural practices of black and Asian prisoners at Rochester. However, expressions of racist sentiment or slang were used sparingly, and rarely in 'mixed company'. Our fieldwork provides further evidence of the use of language motivated by negative racialisation or racism — 'the niggers', 'white cunt', 'Pakis' — were noted in the interviews with prisoners at Rochester. The comments of some foreign nationals were particularly illuminating because their sometimes ambiguous white status¹³ offered them insights into the hidden dynamics of racialised antagonism:

There are a few prisoners, there are some English that live around Kent around here, they saying they don't like refugee, like black people, stuff like that. They don't really like us. I am white and when I'm with them I can see they say like 'Oh fuck the black fucking', you know, 'look the niggers', stuff like that.

(White, Foreign National, Muslim — R22)

Often such racialised discourses had an ambivalent quality. Prisoners would vehemently disagree with overt racism, at the same time as describing the culturally inferior behaviour or morality of ethnic, national, and religious Others. This ambivalence was personified in one prisoner who described himself as 'a racist' and a member of the National Front. He was compelled to conceal the swastika tattoo on his hand and faced segregation for his own safety. He was already unusually isolated having been transferred progressively eastward from his home area in the west of England as a result of persistent conflict. At the core of his anger was a perception that minority ethnic groups had acquired more social and political rights than the white majority, who could 'trace their ancestry back many centuries' (R4). His crude racism was unacceptable to most prisoners but his racialised claims to victimhood and experiences of marginalization found ready echoes in other white prisoners' accounts as these extracts demonstrate:

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...it's just the way they talk, like, 'That little White ting, and that little White prick,' you know and 'White this and White that'...But if we're sitting there going, 'Yeah that little Paki cunt,' or 'Big black prick', then all of a sudden, we're, we're labelled as a racist.

(White, British National, Nil religion — R53)

No I'd be with the white guys, straight up. I'm not racist or nothing like that it's just black guys will obviously respect black guys more and white guys always respect white guys more. It's nothing to do with racist or anything like that. But I believe black people are more racist than white people, and that's what I've watched. And religion-wise yeah, Muslims yeah, they are highly racist. You're a Cafar, that means a non believer yeah. So if you're a Cafar I will not talk to you. So that's highly racism in my book yeah.

(White, British National, Christian — R30)

Thus, the ethnic affinities referred to earlier also serve as fault lines when flash points and

everyday conflicts common to prison life surfaced in the form of racialised tensions¹⁴.

Knowing me, knowing you, aha! — local identifications

Our interview data quickly revealed the significance of local neighbourhood identities among London-, Kent- and Essex-based prisoners. One prisoner described how in the evenings while locked in their cells some prisoners 'shout where they're from, you know, they shout out their postcode' (R2 — Black, Foreign National prisoner). Another argued that 'it don't matter what you're in for it's just who you know and what area you're from' (R18 — Asian, British National, Muslim prisoner).

In HMYOI Rochester home neighborhood helped to establish common connections. Referring to local street names, shops, schools and colleges, clubs or pubs, provided a means of bonding between prisoners through familiarity with the outside. This might be

13 Neal, S. (2002) 'Rural Landscapes, Representations and Racism: Examining Multicultural Citizenship and Policy-Making in the English Countryside', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (3): 442-461.

14 See Edgar et al (2003) n.6

regarded as more important than racial and ethnic identification, as this prisoner suggests:

I suppose if you've got people from your area like you just stick up for them innit...When you come to jail like people bring their area and stick together... it's just like black and white people like arguing, but that goes out the window when you're standing next to a black boy who's from the same area as you, you know what I mean, you're backing him up or something.

(White British National, Christian — R10)

Such neighbourhood loyalties meant that area 'beefs' (conflicts) from outside may permeate the prison walls, providing particular management issues for prison officers, coping with historical disputes which may arise between the various 'London Posses, or the Faversham Boys, Essex Lads, Kent Boys, North Kent Boys etc' (RE, unrecorded conversation with prison officer, Fieldnote 17th July 2006). Local allegiances operated to provide collective support to individuals as this extract indicates:

Well I had here a few friends from my area in here, innit, like ones that I used to know and speak to on road...They'll tell you, they'll say like I'm backing you. Say they see you with a bit of beef or whatever, and then they will come behind and they'll say like, I'm backing you.

(White, British National, Nil religion — R21)

Area disputes might be sustained in prison, suspended until prisoners are back 'on road', or even ended through negotiation. As one prisoner remarked 'I've seen people that were the worst of enemies become good friends in jail' (Mixed Race, British National, Muslim — R15).

It is possible that young prisoners' 'postcode pride' is what James Scott¹⁵ calls a 'transcript of

resistance'. The young men's claim to know their area like no one else can provides them with a positive sense of self which may stand up against how they are known by others in authority — such as the police. Such territorialism has been a common feature of working class cultures, according to Robins and Cohen¹⁶. Young people's 'ownership' of their locality is demonstrated through 'gangs' or 'fighting crews' which are pitted against local rivals. There is anecdotal evidence that this is a feature of recent knife crime incidents.

Conclusion

What our initial findings have shown is that prisoner's identities, like ours on the other side of the prison wall, are complex and varied. Prisoners' declarations of the absence of racism and the illegitimacy of its status in prisoner society at Rochester, is significant in its own right and significantly at odds with dominant images of prison life, both those presented in the US-influenced media and those which can be drawn from the limited and dated academic research in this field. However, as our study shows, racism persistently seeps into daily inter-ethnic encounters even as we find that prisoners are 'doing their own multiculturalism' whilst 'doing their time'.

The serious application of HMPS policies that address racism and the needs of minority ethnic groups in prison are important and have undoubtedly contributed to the kind of ethnic equanimity we encountered at HMYOI Rochester. However, it is also important to recognize the proactive statutory duty on all public authorities, including prisons, to promote 'good relations between persons of different racial groups', described in the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000. HMPS has understandably concentrated most of its efforts on improving relationships between prisoners and prison officers. Our research indicates the need to focus on prisoner-prisoner relationships too.

15 J Scott. (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition have Failed*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

16 Robins, D. and Cohen, P. (1978) *Knuckle Sandwich: Growing up in the Working-Class City*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.