

“Don’t mess with me!” Enacting masculinities under a compulsory prison regime.

INTRODUCTION

It is our nature to conform; it is a force which not many can successfully resist [...]. Self-approval has its source in but one place and not elsewhere – the approval of other people [...] by the natural instinct to passively yield to that vague something recognized as authority, and [...] by the human instinct to train with the multitude and have its approval. (Mark Twain 1923: p.401)

The need to feel part of the social group, feel socially accepted and fit in can be compelling and seem instinctual. Normative attitudes and behaviours are perceived in all walks of life, from pre-school playgroups to workplace settings. Self-perception and presentation of self operate synergistically, relative to time and place. This dramaturgical perspective – initially developed by Goffman (1956) – seeks to explain social relations in the manner that individuals present themselves to their different audiences. According to Goffman, the ‘actor’ presents to others an idealised impression, attempting to ‘incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society’ (p.35). So within any given social situation, individuals act and associate with others according to the interactional *modus vivendi* or ‘working consensus’ (p.4), which is shaped to the setting. This consensus is partly governed by normative values associated with what is perceived to be the dominant culture, identified through social signifiers or symbols associated with gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, religion and/or social class. Furthermore, the setting brings into play the intersection of multiple identities, where gender is not the only signifier (Truong 2006).

Criminal justice settings typify any social situation in which individuals find themselves in a state of interdependence with others, and where social relations may be beneficial or harmful for health and wellbeing (Helliwell and Putman 2004; Schwarzer and Leppin 1989; Tay et al 2013). On entering the setting, the individual encounters a social environment in perpetual flux as ‘actors’ jostle to acquire social literacy, legitimacy and status. This intense social experience can represent a challenge to psychological and social health and wellbeing. This chapter draws upon ethnographic research with male prisoners to illustrate how gender is interpreted, operationalised and enacted in subtle ways to shape and influence social relations. The research findings illustrate how masculinities are enacted, sanctioned and condoned at individual and institutional levels, consistent with historical conventions of gender, power and discipline.

MASCULINITIES – playing by the rules

Connell’s (1995: p.19) original discourse on masculinities proposed that gender power operates through varying forms of domination and subordination – or social hierarchy – providing a means to explain social status, subjugation and exploitation within different social contexts. Masculinities describe individuals’ social positioning and practices relative to others and to the social system they are part of. ‘Hegemonic masculinity’ essentially refers to those ‘patterns of practice’ or ‘things done’ that position or attribute social status to the individual within the social hierarchy, rather than implying a set of role expectations or identity traits. They prevail within interpersonal and social relationships as intersubjective power relations between people and

groups. At a macro organisational level, this may be understood in relation to the institutionalised gender order, where the system of organisation may empower or disempower its 'subjects', resulting in social inequities, exclusion or even forms of discrimination. Connell's primary emphasis was on the exercise of power through gender, gender being something socially constructed relative to cultural context. Ridgeway and Correll (2004: p.510) further argued that gender then functions as 'rules of the game', influencing behaviour and performance. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) provide a theoretical lens with which to make sense of hierarchical social relations within transient cultural contexts, where social and institutional environments orientate 'actors' towards normative – yet relational – hegemonic organising principles. Within any given setting, individuals embody masculinities as subjects of those cultural practices that characterise the social environment, whilst simultaneously operating as active agents in these social practices.

West and Fenstermaker (1995) described individuals' attempts to fit in with others, through their attitudes and behaviours, as 'situational accomplishments'. Likewise, Messerschmidt (1997: p.4) referred to masculinities as 'situated, social and interactional accomplishments'. Rather than passively internalising pre-scripted gender roles or identities, individuals enact gender in interaction with others, relative to the given situation (Renzetti 2013), engaging reciprocally with the social structure. Masculinities then symbolise social relationships enacted by individuals and groups across the infinite range of social contexts, ascribing, reinforcing and supporting normative ideologies of male gender identity and role. Messerschmidt (1993) argued that most social institutions then embody and reproduce a dominant masculine value system that is often heterosexual and reinforces the appearance of a meaningful gender division based on normative

‘male’ and ‘female’ positions, to which individuals seek identification, recognition, status and social legitimacy. Men and women – conscious of the need to fit in – regulate their own and others’ attitudes and behaviours, participating in forms of interpersonal and social surveillance involving techniques of self-subjectification and objectification (Foucault 1977). Male identity, attitudes and behaviours are explained in relation to a ‘broader framework of idealized masculinity’ (Collier 1997: p.94), a series of culturally specific gender reference points with which individuals align themselves to greater or lesser degrees. Individuals derive purpose and meaning from the social setting partly through accessing these symbolic resources for constructing a meaningful social identity (Holstein and Gubrium, 2000). This has been observed across many research studies of men where individuals have been described as typically orientating themselves around an ideological ‘stake’ that compels particular settings-specific conduct (see, for example, Fielding 1993; Hinojosa 2010; Hockey 1986). Such studies suggest that male-dominated institutions can become centrally orientated around a hegemonic masculine value system, as described by Connell (1995).

PRISON MASCULINITIES

Ethnographic research from the mid-Twentieth century yielded compelling insight into how gender was perceived to feature within single sex, usually male, prison contexts. Significantly, Sim (1994) noted that research conducted during this era focused exclusively on men as prison research subjects; women were relatively invisible, reinforcing the perception that being male was a prerequisite for being an offender or a prisoner. Indeed, Chesney-Lind and Pasko (2013) observed that female offending and imprisonment were largely ignored within criminology until

the 1970s. Many examples of gender-blind prison-based research focused on prison culture and presumed that studying men in prison was consistent with studying prisoners (see, for example, Berger and Luckman 1967; Clemmer 1958; Cohen 1979; Cohen and Taylor 1981; Glouberman 1990; Goffman 1961; Mathiesen 1990; Sykes 1958; Towl 1993). Cohen and Taylor's (1981: p.66-7) study of inmate culture within Durham Prison reported that prisoners tended to identify with a hierarchical social structure defined around 'the man who exemplifies the ideal'. Foucault (1977: p.305), while discussing control and normalisation in 'Discipline and Punish', inferred a normative masculine role characterised as 'knowable man ... the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination observation'.

Despite this, some of these earlier studies conveyed the deleterious impact of prison life on the prisoner, characterising imprisonment in terms of its 'deprivations' and progressive assault on individuals' identities. Clemmer (1958: p.299), for example, described how individuals would assimilate 'in greater or lesser degree ... the folkways, mores, customs and general culture of the penitentiary [becoming] more deeply criminal [and] antisocial.' Sykes' (1958: p.xv) notion of 'prisonisation' – a 'pathological, repressive and depriving system of total power' – described an insidious de-socialisation process that disempowered prisoners through deprivation of self-worth, self-esteem and self-concept:

'The individual's picture of himself as a person of value - as a morally acceptable, adult male who can present some claim to merit in his material achievements and his inner strength - begins to waver and grow dim' (Sykes 1958: p.79).

These ethnographers inferred that gender is strongly influenced by institutional, ideological and social factors, Sykes (1958) suggesting that single sex, compulsory custody could degrade a male prisoner's masculine identity. Sykes assumed that all prisoners shared a heterosexual orientation, arguing that enforced, involuntary celibacy would be perceived by prisoners as an assault on their masculinity, which he termed 'figurative castration'. Miller (2000: p.4) similarly described imprisonment as 'a castrating and infantilising process', whilst Newton (1994: p.198) suggested that male prisoners would sense their 'masculinity' being 'besieged' due to sexual deprivation, loss of autonomy and independence, and enforced submission to authority. In his view, this assault on masculinity cultivated attitudes and behaviours designed to conceal vulnerability and exhibit toughness or aggression. Mathiesen (1990: p.129) likewise argued that single sex imprisonment could challenge the heterosexual male's sense of 'masculinity':

'Basically, one is shut off from the other sex which by its very polarity gives the world of one's own sex much of its meaning ... a diffuse but serious threat is brought to bear on the prisoner's self-image.'

Despite these somewhat reductionist, heterosexist generalisations, it could be argued that some male prisoners will adopt maladaptive attitudes and behaviours associated with a normative, hegemonic masculine culture shaped by the prison context. The experience of imprisonment can engender and reinforce values, attitudes and conduct that assist individuals to fit into the social group. Several studies have supported the notion that hierarchical social relations of dominance and subordination occur within male prison populations. Sykes (1958: p.87) observed self-centred, egotistical 'alienative modes' that included coercion, exploitation, violence and deceit,

along with subordinate, servile behaviour amongst prisoners accorded lesser social status. King and Elliott (1977) observed 'active' and 'passive' conduct amongst prisoners, characterised as exploitative ('jailing'), servile ('gleaning') or opportunistic, low profile ('doing your bird'), plus those who took the 'victim' role who were likely to be exploited or to become socially withdrawn. Cohen and Taylor (1981) noted that whilst prisoners viewed friendships with other prisoners as important for 'psychological survival', they would balance this against maintaining a level of detachment and reserve. Miller (2000: p.3) more recently argued that prisons should be viewed as 'sites of sexual and gender complexity' that required a much more 'nuanced understanding' than one based purely on dominant-subordinate relations.

Such arguments imply that prisoners have little choice over their circumstances, their identities and their status. Certainly, prisons structure prisoners' lives around strict regimes of compliance, discipline and order, whilst prisoners play an active role in presenting and projecting their values, attitudes and identities (Jewkes 2002). However, criminal justice settings do not operate in a simple, predictable and deterministic way, progressively stripping prisoners of their identities, as many former studies have suggested. Rather, individuals can become involved in an interdependent relationship with these institutions, adapting to and internalising the social structure, yet acting back on and shaping the social structure itself (Jewkes 2002: p.208). They may actively engage in strategies of 'front management' to avoid being exploited by fellow inmates, endeavouring to 'simultaneously maintain a private, 'pre-prison' sense of self *and* a public identity for presentation during social engagement with others' (Jewkes 2002: p.211), which Goffman (1956) referred to as presenting one's 'backstage' and 'frontstage' selves. So, as Jewkes (2002: p.211) suggested,

‘The tensions associated with sustaining the particular bodily, gestural and verbal codes that are demanded in such an overtly masculine environment are particularly marked, and the necessity for a deep backstage area where one can “be oneself”, “let off steam” and restore one’s ontological reserves is therefore arguably even greater than in other settings.’

It cannot be denied that people in social groups do manufacture roles and responsibilities in response to the circumstances they find themselves in, and therefore experience compulsion to conform and to orientate themselves around what is perceived to be the ‘normal’ or popular value system. This reflects Foucault’s (1980: p.115) notion of the ‘historicisation of the subject’, where, within a prison context, the individual is constituted within an historical context and norms of masculinity then provide the benchmark for the prisoner’s conduct. In this artificial world, where responsibility and choice are strictly rationed (and awarded as privileges), dominance and subordination are enacted by individuals, whereby they strive to earn respect, legitimacy and status, from other prisoners, from prison staff and from their families, friends and associates on the outside.

(UN)HEALTHY PRISON MASCULINITIES

The remainder of this chapter presents findings from an ethnographic study undertaken for my PhD research conducted between 1999 and 2003 (de Viggiani 2004; de Viggiani 2006; de Viggiani 2007; de Viggiani 2012). The research employed ethnographic methods to study the

experiences of adult prisoners and prison officers in a state-run male closed category-C training prisonⁱ in South West England.

The fieldwork was undertaken over eight months on an Enhancedⁱⁱ wing, involving participant observation, focus group interviews and one-to-one, semi-structured interviews. It explored how prisoners perceived imprisonment, especially living as men in a single sex environment, and in terms the perceived effects of imprisonment on their health and wellbeing. Throughout the research, I was granted relatively unrestricted access to prisoners and staff on the wing during association periods (time out of cell) to undertake one-to-one interviews, observation and focus groups. Given the enhanced status of the prisoners, I was permitted to conduct fieldwork unsupervised, in cells or association areas. Part of this time was spent observing and participating in social, educational and employment activities; these included informal social activities (playing board games, pool and darts and engaging in casual conversations), attending education sessions (an anger management programme, an enhanced thinking skills programme, a business studies class, an IT class), and visiting the various employment sites in the prison. Despite this level of freedom, measures were instituted to protect my safety, including undertaking security training, requiring escorts between parts of the prison, and staff being aware of my location at all times.

The research design drew upon Hammersley's (1992) reflexive, 'subtle realist' approach to ethnography, which requires striving to build meaningful relationships with research participants in order to elicit rich research data. Over my eight-month period of fieldwork, I became recognised and increasingly accepted by staff and prisoners. This enabled me to gather data

slowly and develop an effective snowball sample of thirty-five prisoners and four prison officers. These four male officers comprised the regular wing staff in post for the duration of the fieldwork. All participants were involved in participant observation and the majority also in focus groups, one-to-one semi-structured interviews or both. Thematic analysis, based on constant comparative method, was undertaken using transcribed observation, interview and focus group data. The themes discussed here primarily arose from the semi-structured interview data. Where verbatim quotes are cited, pseudonyms are used to indicate the participant, whilst 'PO' denotes Prison Officer. Abridged citations are marked with [...], with the intention of reducing density whilst not losing the essential meanings of participants' expressions. More than 200 themes were elicited from the data principally relating to social and structural factors associated with imprisonment, some of which are explored elsewhere (de Viggiani 2006; de Viggiani 2007). For this chapter, I discuss the findings that best illustrate how prison masculinities could be seen to manifest within the prison regime and within social relations amongst prisoners and with prison staff.

PRISON REGIME

In exploring how gender manifested in this prison context, not only was I compelled to seek to understand the values, attitudes and conduct of individuals, but I also wanted to explore how institutional policies and practices operated at an ideological level. This essentially required examination of the character and perceived effects of the prison regime and prisoners' engagement with and resistance to institutional processes. Hence, prison masculinities were

evident within the characteristically paternalistic and oppressive policies, regulations and practices of the institution that appeared to privilege or subordinate prisoners and staff.

Good Order and Discipline

Perhaps understandably, prison authorities instinctively seek to control and discipline prisoners on account of their previous offending behaviour. However, in the mind of the prisoner, imprisonment can then be perceived as being primarily concerned with control and discipline:

‘... complete control between the prisoner and the staff, that’s all prison is about – control. This prison is basically a controlling institution. As long as they can control you, that’s it. As far as I’m concerned, rehabilitation and all the rest of it is bullshit.’ (Jake)

Most prisoners I interviewed spoke of the shock of coming to prison for the first time, and how a ‘short, sharp shock’ approach was an intentional strategy by prison authorities to engineer control. Many described how, as new prisoners, they had felt vulnerable and fearful of other prisoners, naivety compounding this sense of vulnerability, especially when they did not know the prison rules or procedures, the social mores and language of prison, and thus had to try to adapt quickly. Chris compared the experience with starting a new school, having to learn to fit in, not displaying one’s ignorance or naivety and avoiding becoming a target for the bullies.

Barry said,

‘For that first month you’re just in a daze ... You’re scared because you’ve heard bad rumours about prison ... it’s the worst feeling you could honestly imagine.’

Even the more experienced recidivists conceded that the start of a new sentence was a difficult time; as Pat put it, it was always ‘... a complete and utter shock to the system’.

During the induction stage of prison, most prisoners admitted they had felt at their most vulnerable and described the experience as intimidating, degrading and incapacitating, and the manner of imprisonment as paternalistic and authoritarian. Many used these kinds of adjectives to characterise prison, where – once inside – they found that they had lost their sense of autonomy, accountability and personal responsibility:

‘You’ve got to get used to *not* thinking for yourself ... You’re told when to get up, when to get ready for bed, when to eat, when to go and do exercise, when to go to work ... everything.

You’ve got to work your head around that, big time ... The screws basically think for you.’ (Pat).

This is compounded by having to endure long periods of forced idleness. Prisoners described this as ‘lie-down time’, ‘hibernating’ and ‘living in a dream world’, referring to the sedentary, unproductive periods of ‘lock-up’ time. Education and employment were perceived as futile or purposeless, as discussed elsewhere (de Viggiani 2006; de Viggiani 2012). Nonetheless, even in a training prison where education and employment are prescribed four days a week, these prisoners had experienced up to twenty-three hours a day locked up, mostly during the three-day

weekend but also during unscheduled 'lock downs', the statutory minimum time out of cell being sixty minutes of which thirty must be in open air (MoJ 2014).

'You're banged up and you've got four walls and a door, which you can't get through. And you're just staring at four walls. I don't care who you are, people say, "Oh, yeah, I can do my bird, I can do it standing on my head". Put them behind that door and they can snap like that. They're in tears. Nobody can handle staring at walls for twenty-three hours a day.' (Jim)

These men also described what they perceived as the physical costs of enforced sedentary time:

'You're lying around in your cell all day. What can you do apart from lay on your bed? So your muscles and your bones are just seizing up, really.' (Barry)

Bill had a chronic, painful form of degenerative arthritis, which he claimed had been exacerbated through the long sedentary periods when he had to lay on his bed:

'As I'm talking to you now, my back's aching just sitting here. And I've been getting this back pain a good two and a half years [...] I wake up in the morning with a stiff back, so I go over there and ask for a day off work and I'm treated as a fucking malingerer and sent back to work. Obviously, I'm worried about what's going to happen to me ...'

Despite additional time out of cell being a rationed privilege within this prison, absurdly from a health perspective, certain privileges incentivised prisoners to remain sedentary. One prisoner remarked:

‘As far as their idea of rehabilitation goes, the introduction of TVs was just another form of control, another carrot to dangle in front of you to tempt obedience. And PlayStations – prisoners sitting around playing fucking war games – I don’t know. PlayStations are there just to keep them calm, keep them fucking cabbaged!’ (Bill)

Correspondingly, prison officers viewed in-cell television and gaming consoles as a positive intervention that pacified prisoners, reducing episodes of disorder on the wings, especially during lock-down periods.

Divide and Rule

The Incentives and Earned Privileges Scheme (IEPS) operates in all English prisons (MoJ 2011b) and is designed to incentivise individuals towards good behaviour and manage unacceptable behaviour (NOMS 2015). Prisoners perceived this approach towards their management as a strategy of ‘divide and rule’. In their view, some individuals were rewarded or favoured, whilst others were not, despite there sometimes being no discernible reason. Prisoners spoke disparagingly about the scheme, arguing that it was unjust, firstly because all prisoners – even if transferred from another prison with a good behaviour record – would enter the prison at the most ‘basic’ level of regime, a minimum subsistence level, until they had undergone

evaluation. Moreover, individuals who lacked the emotional disposition, resilience, motivation or life skills to become incentivised by the regime and to correspondingly make progress, could find themselves disadvantaged; so, whilst some prospered, others did not, some shunning incentives for fear of appearing complicit to the regime. Secondly, prisoners perceived the regime as divisive because there was no guarantee a privilege would be granted on account of good behaviour. Prisoners expressed a range of grievances over this perceived source of inequity, referring to injustices they had experienced. They also viewed it as a system of rationing that reduced the incentive to progress and instilled lack of trust in the system:

‘I really don’t see the incentives any more. The carrot has been taken away. There’s no incentive any more to listen to the rules, obey them, and be recognised for it, ‘cos there’s people coming in now doing things their own way but who are getting the same treatment. So, I’m obeying and respecting the rules and getting no reward for it.’ (Nige)

Some indeed felt they had been unfairly denied privileges despite consistently good behaviour, and rarely received reasons why these had been declined. Darren, for instance, said he was repeatedly refused a Facility Licence to work outside the prison, despite a record of good conduct. Sean claimed he had served three years without any episodes of misconduct, yet said he had been repeatedly refused applications for transfer to move to a prison closer to his family. Barry’s account about being refused parole illustrates how such rationing could cause individual prisoners to feel out of control:

‘Getting an answer to whether you’ve got your parole or not would take the stress right off. Either one way or the other, whether it’s yes or no, it’s not playing on your mind then, “Am I gonna get it or not?” At least then you can set your mind to what you’ve gotta face: “I’ve either got it and I’m out now in a couple of weeks”, or, “I ain’t, but I’m out anyway in whatever time”.’

Prison staff admitted that overcrowding and understaffing undermined the effectiveness of the IEPS when prisoners – irrespective of their privilege entitlements – were required to spend long periods locked up or to forgo privileges on account of institutional constraints. Doug (PO), however, said it was more than a case of managing scarce resources, as it was also a necessary technique to prevent social cohesion, cooperation and solidarity:

‘If they worked as a team we would be finished. You have to treat each one of them as an individual [...], you’re playing a game with each one of them really, you’re playing them like a fish. You see, prison officers are really extremely two-faced.’ (Doug, PO)

Dave had seen fellow prisoners singled out in this way:

‘You’ll get officers that get on your case, like, and they stay on your case for a while. They haven’t actually done it to me, but I’ve seen it with others, where the officers just won’t leave them alone. They keep on and on to them. And, like, the inmate’s trying to do things and the officers are sort of stepping in their way each time. Like with jobs and that, if an inmate says, “Oh, I’d like to go for that job”, the officer’ll then turn round and get them totally the opposite job. And, I mean, that’s just wrong, it’s unfair.’

Some officers were seen to operate nepotistically, inequitably favouring or rewarding prisoners. Doug (PO), for instance, admitted he was more lenient towards prisoners who had committed 'grace of God' crimes:

'There are some people in here who are genuine victims themselves, who really have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. They have committed a particular type of offence, which leaves them grieving, particularly manslaughter charges and things like this. And you find that they need help as much as anybody else does.'

The line between con and screw

It was evident that relationships between prisoners and prison officers played a key function in terms of order and control, in particular how privileges and access to resources were apportioned and rationed. Prison staff maintained a discernible 'distance' between themselves and prisoners to enable them to exercise control. Indeed, prisoners shared the view that they should maintain their distance from staff, particularly officers:

'You don't cross that barrier. They are screws, we are cons, and that's it.' (Tony)

Prisoners would also reinforce the status gap by only speaking to officers when spoken to and addressing them as 'boss' or 'governor', rather than by name:

‘I’m not up the screws’ arses, you know. If they say “Hello” to me, I’ll say “Hello” back. They then know me how I want them to know me, if you know what I mean. I do it for my benefit, not theirs.’ (Pat)

Amongst the inmates, it was important not to be recognised as a ‘collaborator’:

‘If I sat in here for half an hour talking to a screw, the other guys would be asking fucking questions, like. Personally, I wouldn’t want to sit and chat to a screw, like. It’s not good for your health! The rest of the guys would be thinking you’re a bit of a grass or something funny like that.’ (Len)

Several prisoners admitted that they tried not to get on the wrong side of Doug, the officer referred to previously. Chris and Jim independently remarked that this officer had pushed to have prisoners he had disliked transferred off the wing. Harry admitted that Doug had tried repeatedly to intimidate him, to ‘drag me over the edge, just to nick me’, so he chose to keep out of his way.

Prisoners also recounted how they had felt patronised and belittled by prison staff; Barry described this as ‘being talked to as if you’re a piece of shit.’ This ‘parent-child’ approach – as Stuart described it – served to delineate authority between prison officer and prisoner. Len (PO) said he found it easier to communicate with prisoners by treating them like children. Colin’s (PO) view was that prisoners were ‘children in long pants that haven’t learnt the way of life’, self-centred, lacking in self-awareness, direction and purpose. Doug (PO) argued that an authoritarian approach was the best way to manage aggressive or undisciplined behaviour:

‘Inmates that scream and shout are actually the easiest ones to deal with. If you get an inmate where there is a poor relationship, that’s got a poor attitude, you can actually use that against him. You’ll tend to find they will respond to that.’

Speaking about one prisoner in particular, Lance, he said:

‘I treat him cruel, but he thrives on it. He actually produces better results being treated like that than he does if you try the caring and sharing approach. He sees that as a sign of weakness, you see. So every time he comes near me, I tell him to hop it.’

Jim also described his experience of this ‘parent-child’ approach:

‘He [PO] started speaking to me like a parent, trying to talk down to me, trying to speak to me like a YO [young offender]. But it didn’t work. I just spoke back to him as an adult. I could have just shouted back and slammed my door, but when I explained to him what I’d been doing, he just became sort of stuck for words. I think he realized that I was intelligent enough to turn round and say, “Look, I’m an adult, you’re an adult ...”.’

Furthermore, Jim said:

‘If you’re treated like an animal, you start to act like an animal. And when you’re acting like an animal, you’re being treated like an animal. And it keeps on and on and on. It’s just a full circle. You then believe that you’re not intelligent.’ (Jim)

Pat described an instance when he was yelled at by an officer whilst walking to a scheduled appointment at healthcare for his regular insulin injection:

‘All of a sudden it’s – “Oi!” And I thought, “No, they’re not talking to me” ... “You, in the fucking blue!”, “Me?”, “Yeah, you, where are you fucking going?”, “Injection, gov”, “Who sent you?”, “Mr I, the officer on my wing”, “What wing are you on?” ... and, oh, Jesus! ... I walked a bit faster. Their attitude really does stink.’

This rather aggressive, authoritarian manner displayed by some officers – which I indeed witnessed – served to inhibit relations between prisoners and staff, fostering lack of respect on both sides and reinforcing the ‘con – screw’ divide. Prisoners also perceived officers’ displays of toughness as attempts to *appear* tough, as Jim inferred: ‘... they’re wanting authority ... thinking they’re something they’re not’.

PRISONER SOCIAL RELATIONS

Relationships amongst prisoners can be temporary and superficial, especially where prisoners are not serving life sentences, and given the transience of prison populations with average sentence length in England of 16 months and 57% of prisoners in custody for under six months (Prison

Reform Trust 2015: p.4). On entering prison, prisoners said they endeavoured to remain anonymous and ‘keep their head down’ to avoid drawing unwarranted attention and risk exploitation or victimisation. This could involve projecting a ‘front’ as a strategy of self-preservation:

‘As soon as that door’s open, everyone puts up a front. It’s like trying to be something you’re not.’ (Sean)

‘Everybody’s trying to prove that they’re somebody [...] all this striving to be noticed, you know, just to be an individual. It’s just one big competition to be noticed.’ (Nige)

Prison Talk – putting up a front

Front projection was particularly evident in the banter – or ‘prison talk’ – that revealed some individuals’ efforts to attain social standing, to fit in and to express confidence. I observed prisoners exaggerating their stories to get their point across, sometimes to outwit or impress. Paul, for instance, was outwardly a joker and crowd pleaser, and used coarse language and anecdotes when with others, which he openly admitted to me was a prison survival tactic, declaring, ‘I’m a different person on the out, we all are.’

Such behaviour was also viewed as annoying, provocative or even offensive. Stuart was irritated by the ‘incessant talk’ he described as ‘white van man, Sun reader mentality’, whilst Bill said:

‘I don’t feel that I fit in at all. You’re forced into [...] living with people that you wouldn’t normally live with, like, and, I mean, a lot of the talk I hear is just idle fucking chat, you know, just talking for the sake of talking.’

Banter was also of a sexual nature, sometimes a means to communicate heterosexual orientation through reference to wives, girlfriends and sexual exploits, coupled with expressions of frustration associated with involuntary celibacy whilst in prison. Some prisoners talked openly about women in a sexual way, using coarse, sexist or misogynistic language:

‘A lot of birds want to know when you’re getting out, because they know you ain’t had none for a while, and that you’re really up for it ...’ (Chris).

Some prisoners used demeaning, sexist language to describe female prison officers. Harry referred to one officer as a ‘little woman’ and another as a ‘little girl’. Nathan referred to a particular female officer as ‘a bit of a dog’. Pat had noticed ‘one or two tasty screws’ in the prison, and Sean’s view was that ‘all the girls in here are lovely!’ The fact that the governor was also a woman was a further point of interest for several prisoners who criticised her managerial style on account of her sex, Jake for instance suggesting that ‘a woman with little experience of the male prison system will have little idea of how to manage one’.

Several prisoners described the female prison estate as ‘dolls’ houses’. One prison officer, spoke crudely about the time he had worked at HMP Holloway in London:

‘You’d open the door ... and there’d be a woman stood there stark naked with a big smile on her face. And quite often you’d walk into their cell and they’d be sitting playing with themselves, legs wide open. So I’d just turn round and say, “I’ve seen hedgehogs better than that dead on the street!”.’

Len (PO) made allegations about sexual misconduct perpetrated by female prison staff, which he used to justify his view that all staff should be male:

‘We’ve had female staff shagging inmates. One was suspended and one got the sack about three years ago, a nurse. I mean, even the teachers have done it as well. It’s happening all over the place. It happens in all the prisons. That’s why I don’t agree with female staff at a male prison.’

On the other hand, sexist and misogynistic banter were a source of irritation for some prisoners. Bill found the coarse sexual language used by others offensive:

‘I’ve listened to conversations about women and some of them are bordering on rape. They look at them as a piece of meat, and that’s it. A woman to them is from the neck down ... I never really experienced that sort of attitude until I came here.’

Such individuals expressed more positive views of female staff, several suggesting that they reduced tension on the wings:

‘I think female officers actually have a positive effect [...] they actually help the environment, I think they soften it quite a lot. They do calm a situation quite quickly.’ (Stuart)

Nearly all the cells I entered had pornographic images from magazines displayed on the walls, which prompted me to ask about this during interview. Derek had a few pictures on his wall but admitted they frustrated him. Sam admitted:

‘They’re there purely and simply because of people coming in here saying, “It’s about time you got some pictures up.” It’s not actually through choice.’

Interestingly, I noticed that some officers kept pornographic magazines in the staff room on the wing, presumably for their own use.

Homophobic language was also frequently characterised the informal banter. When I asked directly about this, it tended to trigger the response that same sex relations were taboo in prison, that gay, bisexual or transgender prisoners were usually invisible, and that such individuals should keep this private. Warren remarked:

‘There’s no queers or nothing like that running around. It’s just not the done thing, you know. You’d get battered, you’d get proper battered. So there’s none of that goes on.’

Projecting Toughness and Machismo

In a similar fashion, some prisoners projected a tough ‘don’t mess with me’ front that Jim referred to as ‘strutting’. As Bill put it:

‘Some of ‘em will walk about with carpets under their arms ..., pushing each other about, and fucking jousting and shadow boxing, and all that fucking nonsense.’

Harry admitted:

‘You’ve got to sort of build yourself up, you’ve got to pump yourself up, like, and make yourself look a big guy. It’s not necessarily all about muscles and all that. It’s a man thing.’

Referring to Lance, an ex-soldier, Bill said:

‘I had this fella in here the other day, an ex-squaddie, and the fucking nonsense he was coming out with! I thought, shall I start arguing with him and giving him my view, but I thought, no, he’s too far fucking immersed in it. He was talking about the stuff he wants to do when he gets out, how he wants to die in combat. And I thought, “”Fucking hell!” There was this barrier he was putting up, like. I could feel it, like. I felt that if I said the wrong word, I was going to get fucking floored, like.’

I interviewed Lance, who was indeed heavily built and intimidating in his demeanour. He had his left leg in plaster and admitted with pride in his voice that he had shattered the tibia and fibula

doing heavy-weight 'squats' in the gym, and refused help from other prisoners to collect his meals from the server, so as not to appear weak:

'I'm walking on it, but that's just through sheer stubbornness, because I don't want to rely on no one here.'

Use of the weights room in the prison gym seemed to be a 'must have' privilege for some prisoners. Tommy painted a rather comic picture, referring to Geoff Capes, the 1980s Olympic Athlete and Strongman:

'You sees people come in skinny as fuck, then six months later you sees 'em looking like Geoff Capes ... and their attitude changes with it.'

Likewise, Harry said:

'They're building up their bodies trying to look good and eating all the garbage under the sun ... They're trying to portray a healthy, fit person, who's not going to be messed with. But, really, they're not projecting a healthy image at all, they're projecting an image of masculinity.' (Harry)

Barry described how prisoners who used the weights room would become patronising and sanctimonious:

‘You’ll get ones coming up, you know, that go to the gym – “Hey, you wanna *eat* some more”, or, “You wanna go over to the gym”. And you get the ones that try to talk down to you, the bigger ones, and all this. At the end of the day, just because you’ve got a lot more muscle don’t mean you’re any bigger or harder than anyone else, you know.’

Ewan referred to the weights room as ‘very, very macho ... everybody trying to outdo everybody else’, and Stuart described it as a ‘tense, testosterone-fired’ place. Trevor said it ‘breeds testosterone [...] you’ll get people coming back all hyped up, and that just breeds violent people.’ Ken said:

‘They go up there, like, to prove themselves. They do it to pose. They will do one exercise and then they’re in the mirror, checking out their muscles.’

Stuart admitted that the first time he had visited the weights room, he had been put off by the tense, competitive atmosphere and the poor level of supervision. Others admitted embarrassment or fear of ridicule had prevented them using *any* of the prison sports facilities. Soccer and softball tournaments were periodically organised between wings, which led to pressure to participate. Trevor, who was in his 50s and had a heart condition, had been talked into playing in a softball match. He recalled how, whilst making a run, he was cajoled by the rest of his team:

‘It was, “Come on you old fart! You’re not gonna get anywhere!” ... and the lads on my team were yelling, “yeah, yeah, go on pops!”’

Frank, who was quite heavily overweight, was persuaded to play five-a-side football, despite reservations:

‘Why should I join in and then get people saying, “Look at that fat cunt!”? ... I went over to play football last week, and the screw came up to me and said, “Oh, fucking hell, what’ve we got here, then?”’

The Gendered Pecking Order

Prisoners and prison staff – to greater and lesser degrees – evidently strove to project an ‘acceptable’ façade to others, through language and conversations and in the ways they endeavoured to present themselves physically and emotionally. These responses were crudely aligned with normative and somewhat artificial dominant or subordinate modes of expression, personality, status and identity, whereby individuals would derive respect or disdain from others, and/or mete this out to others.

Some individuals referred to their own or others’ criminal reputations as a symbol of notoriety or to convey a tough façade:

‘I could easily end up back in jail through fighting, like, ‘cos I won’t take shit from anybody, like. So I suppose that’s the main problem I’ve got to deal with, like. You know yourself, there’ll be a lot of times when there are cunts winding you up, and they take great pleasure in it. And

they end up hurting and you're locked up. What can you do about people like that, you know, apart from bury them?' (Ian)

Dan had a long conviction history for violence, which most prisoners knew about. The officers referred to him as the 'daddy of the wing' on account of this experience, and recalled how he would offer advice and protection to new prisoners:

'When the younger ones have problems, they'll always go to him for help. Someone will come into the office with a black eye and we'll say, "Oh, so what happened to you?" "Oh, I fell over". And Dan will come down later and say, "It's all right, boss, I've sorted it, enough said". I mean, to be perfectly honest, we know what's going on, but we let it go because we know Dan will calm the wing down. You can turn a blind eye to it. And if we want something sorted, we'll let him go ahead and sort it, so long as he don't assault no-one.'" (Len-PO)

Less experienced prisoners would seek social recognition from more experienced or respected prisoners, attempting to improve their own social standing:

'If they can be seen as close to him [Dan], then their status is that much improved, 'cos that's what prison's all about, where you are in the pecking order.' (Tom PO)

Speaking about Dan, Chris said:

‘He’s very unpredictable. That’s why people respect him. ‘Cos they don’t wanna get on the wrong side of him. He’s got respect ‘cos of his age. But I think it’s ‘cos of who he is as well. He’s a nice bloke and all, but he *has* got a temper on him. So if you’re a bit of a tasty person like Dan, and you’re unpredictable, and people are a bit wary of you, they’re gonna be nice and polite. People might think he’s a wanker, but they won’t say it to his face.’ (Chris)

Thus, a prisoner’s offending history, as well as their demeanour in prison, could affect their social standing, criminal notoriety drawing respect. For example, Frank claimed that his conviction for armed robbery raised his credibility. In a similar way, prisoners would endeavour to legitimise their offence either by embellishing or spinning an acceptable version, or by contrasting it with offences perceived to be more heinous, immoral or unacceptable.

‘The gangster who blows another gangster’s head away and kills him is given higher regard than the lad who knocks over an old woman and grabs her handbag.’ (Tom PO)

In this regard, sexual offences, especially those against children, were considered the most heinous, attracting the label of ‘nonce’ⁱⁱⁱ. Ian used the term ‘nonce’ specifically referring to child sex offenders, whom he viewed as ‘a separate class of prisoner’ and despite having been convicted for rape and assault, Harry declared: ‘The real low-lives in here are the fucking dirty kiddie fiddlers.’

He found it necessary to put up a ‘defensive shield’ whenever questioned about his own offence; Dan’s response illustrates this, where he referred to Harry:

‘Anyone can get done for rape. There’s one on this wing, for instance, who had a row with his missus, and she yelled “Rape!” It’s so easily done, isn’t it? So, I don’t believe that rape is so bad. But when it comes to indecently assaulting children, that’s bad then, isn’t it?’

It was common for prisoners to contrive carefully rehearsed accounts of their offences, so that if questioned they had a prepared response:

‘You might have assaulted and robbed an old woman in her home, which, in here, makes you scum ... There’s fucking loads of them who’ve done that in here, who go to the elderly because they’re easy pickings. But then they’ll say they’re in for burglary or something like that ...’

(Harry)

Trevor was serving time for fraud, but being in his 50s and aware of his middle class accent, was routinely probed by others about his offence:

‘You don’t go round saying what you’ve done. But then they’ll say, “So, what are you in for?”, and I’ll say, “Theft”. And ‘cos I’m older, then I’m hearing comments like, “I’m sure he’s a nonce”. And then somebody else has picked up on it, so you’ve got a problem.’

Crying behind your cell door

It emerged that key to social survival was to avoid exploitation or victimisation at all costs, and this was partly achieved through various normative performances of masculinity, where individual endeavoured to fit in socially or through maintaining a low profile, which was characterised as ‘keeping one’s head down’. This commonly necessitated projecting an uncontroversial, unemotional and confident façade, concealing weakness or potential vulnerabilities. Most prisoners said it was important to stand up for oneself when challenged, not to overreact to being taunted and not to be perceived as a ‘push over’ (Pat). Chris said he had ‘learned the hard way’:

‘I’d be shouted at through the windows, and I was in a pretty bad way. I was weak mentally and I was scared. But I wouldn’t show it. I couldn’t show it. But I was frightened.’

Many, including staff, suggested it was preferable to suffer in silence than to ask for help:

‘You’ll get an inmate with a black eye who comes to the office and says he’s being bullied. And when you ask him who’s been doing it, he goes, “I’m not a grass. I won’t grass on ‘em.” It’s partly fear, but it’s also the culture that they have here. Grassing is the lowest of the low, even though you try and explain to him that he’s protecting the one who’s robbed from his own. They’ll still protect the bullies’ (Doug, PO)

This usually meant that while individuals could have significant personal and emotional issues going on, they would keep this quiet:

‘Most of these [fellow prisoners], I think, would cope much better if they faced their problems and had a good cry. Some of them must be really hurting inside, but they won’t show it ...’

(Kieran)

‘I’ll guarantee you that 80% of [prisoners in] this jail have cried when they’re behind that cell door. Every man’s had a cry. I’ve had a cry or two, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. If having a cry’s the way you can relieve some tension, pressures, hassles, fucking heartache, whatever, you know, that’s what you should do, like, if it helps.’ (Ian)

Kieran admitted he had attempted suicide in a previous prison when he had been too scared to leave his cell. Warren, on the other hand, admitted he had become increasingly withdrawn and spent as much time as possible in his cell to avoid contact with others. Sam described how he had noticed some individuals would appear withdrawn and detached, adopting various mask-like expressions:

‘You get the almost ‘autistic’ mask, where people don’t show any emotion, and then you’ve got those who wear a ‘constantly pissed-off’ mask.’

CONCLUSIONS

A key dimension of ‘handling one’s bird’ lies in the individual’s capacity to survive the social environment of prison - imprisonment is indeed fundamentally social. Within this social context, power is exercised through identity, more specifically through signifiers of gender, sexuality,

race, ethnicity, religion, class and background. This chapter has focused principally on gender; however, race, ethnicity, religion, class and background constituted key thematic areas within the original research, although there is not scope here to explore these in further depth.

As Foucault argued, power is exercised through the body, and is expressed through individuals' 'actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives' (Foucault 1980: p.30). Thus by observing prisoners and prison staff, and through listening to their accounts, it became clear to me that the prison social context engendered and perpetuated language, attitudes and behaviours polarised around normative expressions of gender identity. First, at the institutional level, the incentives based system was employed to appeal to prisoners to conform to good order and discipline. Yet, in my view, this mechanism was flawed and counterproductive, since – according to prisoners and prison officers – it progressively disenfranchised and disempowered individual prisoners by rationing their choices and reducing their capacity for personal responsibility. Essentially, prisoners were treated as docile subjects, impotent within a regime of paternalistic authoritarianism that was enacted through the disciplinarian conduct of staff. This system of control reinforced dissonance towards prisoners' personal rehabilitation goals, especially their desire to rebuild their lives beyond prison, and fostered mistrust in the institution and its staff.

Secondly, within this strongly normative gendered social world, individuals had to learn quickly to fit in and avoid unwarranted attention. Some would play an active and visible role in this regard, while others would attempt to 'keep their head down', maintaining a low profile. The strategies prisoners used to fit into the everyday social life of prison were evident in how they

presented themselves to others, both prisoners and staff, especially through use of language (prison talk), their attitudes towards others and their conduct. Close social proximity meant that normative discourses became acute and magnified, orientated around narrow values associated with a heterosexist masculine ideology, which compelled individuals to present a tough façade even if this meant suppressing or concealing their emotions. Carrying this off effectively necessitated adopting ‘alienative modes’ (after Sykes 1958) – attitudes and behaviours signalling that the individual appears to be in control, loyal to others, prepared to join in, and willing to condone normative heterosexist, homophobic and misogynistic values. Conformity in this respect was perceived to be essential to avoid becoming exploited or victimised.

However, it is essential to avoid focusing solely on prisoner identity when endeavouring to theorise about prison masculinities, as this risks shifting responsibility and accountability away from the broader institutional system. Rather than pathologise and problematise the prisoner – or indeed the prison officer - per se, it is important to acknowledge the ideological character of the criminal justice system and of the host society. In this regard, Sim (1994: p.108) argued that power in prisons should not be interpreted solely in terms of individuals’ quests for power, but in terms of society’s exercise of its institutional apparatus to manage and ‘normalise’ individuals whom the state labels ‘offenders’. Arguably, then, the criminal justice system materially and symbolically reproduces the ideology of the host society, mediating the identities of prisoners and of prison staff. The efficacy of prisons as mechanisms to improve and rehabilitate offenders is then questionable, given that the system itself – at least as I observed within this prison between 1999 and 2001 – can create the ideal conditions for exploitation, nepotism and inequity, via a masculinist ideology of paternalistic authoritarianism. Under this ethos, to survive and

thrive, individuals feel compelled to act as they perceive others would expect them to, by adopting the normative masculine apparel. The individual is therefore expected to embrace the identity of 'criminal' and 'offender' and then jostle with the experience of striving to conform, whilst engaging in an existential battle of self.

Prison is undoubtedly a stressful experience, but this extends beyond being locked up and separated from one's family or peer group. Whilst prison is 'designed' to remove an individual's liberty as a free citizen, prison brings into play a range of additional losses, which Mathiesen (1990: p.138) referred to as deprivations of control, responsibility and choice. Prison forces prisoners to conform, often in unintended ways, whereby they may actively resist the regime to become socially accepted, thereby avoiding a difficult time in prison but forgoing potential opportunities and privileges. Social survival becomes paramount, even if this serves to compromise a prisoner's health, wellbeing and longer term rehabilitation. Prisoners and prison staff become involved in acts of self-censorship, self subjectification and objectification, acceding to an institutional culture shaped by archaic, artificial hegemonic ideals, where 'masculinities' emerge in the performances of the actors and within the very fabric of the theatre.

'You're either up there with the boys or you're down there with the more timid weaker people. You're either popular or you're not. And if you're not, you're in for a hard time, you're in for a rough ride. You're either one of the boys or you ain't.' (Chris)

'The strongest rule, and the one at the bottom just lies down and they wipe their feet on him.'
(Doug, Prison Officer)

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ⁱ Closed Category C training prisons are for adult prisoners who are serving medium to long-term sentences, who are employed in a variety of education, employment and offending behaviour programmes. They accommodate prisoners who cannot be trusted in open conditions but who do not have the resources and will to make a determined escape attempt (MoJ 2011a)

ⁱⁱ Under the Incentives and Earned privileges Scheme (PSO 4000), prisoners are incentivised and rewarded with privileges through good behaviour and performance. Prisoners on enhanced level receive additional visits, better accommodation, additional time for association, more private cash and priority consideration for higher rates of pay. (MoJ 2011b)

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Nonce' is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (2016) as "a sexual deviant; a person convicted of a sexual offence, esp. child abuse". The term may be derived from nance, meaning nancy-boy, or from nonse, the Lincolnshire dialect meaning 'good-for-nothing fellow' (OED 2016). 'Nonce' is also interpreted as an abbreviation for 'Not of Normal Criminal Ethos' (McFarquhar 2011).