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## **Negotiating Identities: Ethnicity and Social Relations in a Young Offenders' Institution**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the situated nature of male prisoner identities in the late modern British context, using the contrasting theoretical frames of Sykes' (1958) indigenous model and Jacobs' (1979) importation model of prisoner subcultures and social relations. Drawing on eight months ethnographic fieldwork in an ethnically, religiously, and nationally diverse young offenders' institution, consideration is given to how prisoners' manage and negotiate difference, exploring the contours of racialisation and racism which can operate in ambiguous and contradictory ways. Sociological understandings of identity, ethnicity, racialisation and racism are used to inform a more empirically-grounded theoretical criminology.

### **Key Words**

Racism, Prisoners, Ethnicity, Religion, Nationality

### **Bio-bibliographical note**

Coretta Phillips is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of School Policy at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has published widely in the field of ethnicities, racism, and criminal justice.

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## Introduction

On a recent train journey into central London, I heard a middle-class white woman admonishing an Eastern European woman for speaking loudly on her mobile phone. Shortly after, a black woman angrily pushed past the Eastern European woman, muttering something under her breath. I was reminded of another journey on a No. 36 bus in the early 1980s. Another middle class-sounding white woman complained to other passengers about a young black man listening to loud music on his Walkman. She said - the comment always having stayed with me – “I am fed up with being a second class citizen in my own country”. Her words exposed her categorisation of him (and me) as ‘different’, and encircled her in an exclusionary zone of bounded white Britishness and implied superiority. Jump forward to 2007, and my train ‘drama’ has the same plot and dialogue – ethnicity, racism, class, culture and hierarchy – although the parts are taken by different (ethnic) actors. Both incidents caused me to feel discomfort and despair that such interactions are so often framed by notions of racial/ethnic hierarchy imbued with a class dimension where the ranking of those who are white, English, and middle class is forever higher than those of other ethnicities and class positions. However, there is also evidence of shifting identity dynamics in late modern Britain. The Eastern European woman was ‘racially’ white, and the indignation shown by the black woman was indicative of a shared hostility between white and black residents towards the newer white and minority ethnic groups in Britain. These two experiences, twenty years apart, lead me to a personal and intellectual question. What role does racism play in early 21<sup>st</sup> century British society? Can we see continuity or variation in contemporary accounts of ethnic relations which have been shaped by Britain’s imperial past (Gilroy 2004)?

This story about the trials of public transport is intended to introduce the key strands of this paper. The late modern prison is used as a(n equally crowded) site for exploring individual and collective narratives of ethnicity, racialisation, racism, and exclusion, within the context of ‘prisoner society’. The first part of the paper situates this empirical study within the theoretical field of prison sociology. Next, I discuss

key analytic themes from the study, centring on how racial, ethnic, religious and national difference is experienced, negotiated, and contested by prisoners, in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. I then explore the significance of area-based local identification to prisoner solidarities. The paper concludes - within the constraints of using a single case study to reflect on broad theory - with a consideration of the implications of the research for a more nuanced and empirically-grounded theoretical criminology.

### **Indigenous and Importation Models**

Two contrasting models of prisoner identity and social relations exist within the sociology of prisons literature. The 'indigenous model', proposed by Sykes (1958), and developed in the work of Goffman (1961), sees the 'pains of imprisonment' – the deprivation of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy and security – and societal rejection of criminals as features which unify prisoners and require their interdependency. Emotionally brutalized by the deprivations and ritualised degradation of incarceration, prisoners' fragile sense of self leads them to invest in a collective identity characterized by internal solidarity that stands opposed to the prison regime and its custodians (cf. Clemmer 1958). The social roles prisoners adopted outside prison are set aside, as prisoners succumb to 'a recoding of existence' (Foucault 1979: 236). Demonstrating agency, nonetheless, prisoners develop a normative 'inmate code' of values which governs social relations within the prison so as to maximize personal security and counteract isolation (Sykes and Messinger 1960).

In sharp contrast, the 'importation model' emphasizes the influence of external statuses and behaviour patterns on prisoner subcultures (see Cressey and Irwin 1962). Jacobs' (1979: 8) review, for example, regarded racial and ethnic cleavages as defining features of US prisons, subsuming the collective identity of prisoner, with white and black inmates instead living in 'separate conflict-ridden social worlds' (see also Bartollas et al. 1976; Jacobs 1977). Race was seen as structuring social hierarchies, the informal economy, religious activities and prisoner relations, largely through the collective opposition

of Black Muslim prisoners that held sway at the time. Such racial and ethnic divisions have persisted in US prisons, sometimes represented through gang or religious affiliations, with high levels of self-segregation, mistrust and hostility (Diaz-Cotto 1996). Wacquant (2001) has even argued that the new 'master status trait' for prisoners is racial affiliation, with no space for inmate loyalty as a generic class. Social relations are no longer determined by a normative code of prisoner solidarity against prison officers, as the racialized 'street code' epitomized by hypermasculinist notions of honour, respect and toughness reigns, with a blurring of the boundaries between prison and ghetto. A synthesis position, borne through much empirical research, however, has recognized like Jacobs (1979: 21) that '[I]t is possible both to speak of prisoners as a class or group and, at the same time, to recognize this class to be internally fragmented.'

In the UK, qualitative prison studies have illuminated our understanding of masculinities, social order, power, adaptation and resistance in prison (Sparks et al. 1996; Jewkes 2002; Crewe 2007), but these studies have not fully interrogated issues of ethnicity and racisms *among prisoners*. Crewe's (2006) ethnography of Wellingborough prison has considered ethnicity and heroin-dealing, but it is Genders and Player's (1989) now dated work which remains the most comprehensive study of race relations in prisons. It describes primarily same-race solidarities within three prisons, with a racially stratified social hierarchy in one institution, headed by white professional 'gangsters', with black and 'terrorist prisoners' in the middle echelons and sex offenders at the bottom of the hierarchy. Bosworth's (1999) analysis of women's prisons takes this work forward, exploring how intersecting identities of race, ethnicity, gender, and class, provide a mechanism for resisting institutional power and control, whilst Wilson (2003) found strong black prisoner solidarity in response to the racialised power dynamics of a young offenders' institution.

### *The Current Study*

The current research builds on the work of Bosworth (1999), using a micro-level approach to understand the influence of identity positions on social relations *between prisoners*. It examines how the

construction and negotiation of ethnic and masculine identities are enacted in prison life, and how they intersect with faith, nationality, and locality at the individual and collective level. In so doing, it connects with sociological understandings of the social organisation of ethnic difference and ethnicised boundary-setting, particularly within youth cultures. Reflecting the postmodern turn, sociologists have increasingly turned their attention to recognising cultural hybridity, the popular symbolism of black cultural practices, and varying configurations of whiteness (see for example Back 1996; Frosh et al. 2002; Nayak 2005), all of which have relevance for those incarcerated in the UK's culturally diverse prison estate.

The current project is a two site study carried out in Kent, a county in the South-East of England. At the time of writing, fieldwork was ongoing in HMP Maidstone, a Category C prison for adult men. This paper is based on the initial findings from HMPYOI Rochester, a prison for young men aged 18-21 years. The Young Offenders' Institution is located just beyond the M25 London orbital motorway in the 'garden of England', nestled within idyllic and quintessentially English rolling countryside. The semi-rural environment and predominantly white population is distinctively different from the multi-ethnic London urban and suburban neighbourhoods where many prisoners are drawn from. The research has an ethnographic orientation, involving informal conversation with prisoners, observing the routines and rhythms of their lives, paying attention to what may appear as trivial or mundane interaction, and interviewing them about their experiences and understandings of identity. The fieldwork<sup>1</sup> consisted of 575 hours spent at the prison between July 2006 and February 2007. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 35 informal contacts and 25 randomly sampled prisoners were conducted, broadly representing the ethnic origin (56% white, 44% minority ethnic), religion, and

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<sup>1</sup> The bulk of the fieldwork and two-thirds of the interviews were carried out by Rod Earle. I am indebted to him for this physically and emotionally demanding work.

nationality of the Rochester population<sup>2</sup>. Fieldnotes and interview data were thematically coded in QSR NVIVO.7.

### **Living Diversity in the Prison**

Late modern prisons are characterised by ethnic, national, and religious diversity (Home Office 2005). A primary objective of this research study has been to explore how what Amin (2002: 959) has termed 'local liveability' and the 'daily negotiation of ethnic difference' is managed within the emotionally fraught and confined world of the prison. It is perhaps not at all surprising then, that many prisoners at Rochester were, at a surface level at least, accepting of difference in prison life. Their accounts acknowledged the reality of diversity, and racial and ethnic difference was rendered unremarkable and unexceptional. A White British national prisoner, 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'<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, from an Asian Muslim prisoner,<sup>4</sup> 'Ethnicity is not really a big thing...nobody takes it as a main mark. It's more on the lines of who you are personally. Not your race as an individual, exactly.' Fieldnotes also recorded many positive interethnic interactions, including an enthusiastic repartee between two black British national prisoners, of Nigerian and Jamaican origin in a contract services workshop. Whilst sticking bubblewrap onto empty fruit punnets, 'their time was spent 'racially' abusing each other and claiming the superiority of African or Caribbean cultures', the humorous mood surviving even when one called the other a 'jungle monkey'.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The ethnic composition (based on HMPS ethnic group codes) of the prison (n= 385), was 56% White British/European, 30% Black Caribbean/African/British, 7% 'Mixed Race' and 6% Asian. The interview sample slightly over-represented the minority ethnic population. The population self-defined as Christian (49%), Muslim (19%), Other (2%), and of nil religion (30%). Eighty-two per cent of prisoners were British Nationals, and 18% were Foreign Nationals.

<sup>3</sup> Interviewee R23 – White, British National, Christian prisoner

<sup>4</sup> Interviewee R51 - Asian, British National, Muslim prisoner

<sup>5</sup> CP Fieldnote – 3<sup>rd</sup> January 2007



Even those prisoners from the semi-rural areas of Essex and Kent, who had limited previous exposure to minority ethnic and faith groups, expressed positive sentiments about difference. Census estimates of the minority ethnic populations of these Home Counties were three and six per cent respectively, although Kent has experienced an influx of migrant labourers, refugees, and asylum-seekers from Europe, and has long-standing and diverse Romany and Traveller populations (Ray and Reed 2005). Prisoners' apparent enthusiasm for diversity was consistent with the high-profile official discourse of diversity and race equality (particularly Prison Service Order 2800) that pervaded the prison alongside a myriad of other prison rules, regulations, and directives. Moreover, it mirrored widely expressed opinions about the benefits of ethnic and cultural diversity reported in attitudinal surveys in the general population (MORI 2005).

Sometimes prisoners' accounts pointed to the educative potential of diversity - learning about 'halal' meat or tribal lineage in African countries – were examples given by prisoners who valued learning about other ethnic and religious cultural practices. Habitual contact could also produce empathy towards linguistically disadvantaged and politically oppressed foreign national prisoners. Such views seemed to co-exist in the prison with a stated abhorrence of racism. In fact, acting in explicitly racist ways in prison was regarded as indefensible, with the tag 'racist' legitimating retaliatory violence and condemnation from the whole wing and across the prison. It might even allow prisoners to flout the inmate code of not 'grassing'. A white prisoner noted, for example, 'If you tell a guard that someone's racing you or being racist to you that's not snitching, right. That is standing up for your own religion and your own culture or what you are'.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, prisoners strongly supported and respected their fellow prisoners' rights to practice their faith in prison.

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<sup>6</sup> Interviewee R41 – White, British National, Christian prisoner

Nonetheless, when prisoners were asked more directly about inter-ethnic friendship groups at Rochester, many described ethnic separation in the prison based on shared cultural understandings and commonality rather than rigid lines of racial or ethnic division. Prisoners described ‘feeling better with’, ‘safe’, having ‘more in common with’ those who came from the same racial or ethnic group as themselves. Observations of inter-ethnic interaction in exercise periods at Rochester were largely consistent with prisoners’ accounts, as this fieldnote records:

The guys quickly settle into two large groups at either end of the yard, with some pair groups, scattered in between and one of four/five. Of the two large groups, one is basically white, though there is one tall South Asian guy among them. The other is black... There is some to and fro. One guy goes over to the smaller black group, stays for a while and then comes back. Another guy from the black group goes over to the white group, and comes back after a few moments. The hour passes without any significant shifting around...<sup>7</sup>

However, amid the buzz of the more playful atmosphere of young prisoners at the pool or table tennis tables in evening ‘soash’ (association) or during their relaxed saunter across the prison complex during freeflow<sup>8</sup>, where fist-to-fist greetings or handslaps, youthful chattering, and playfighting occurred, the divisions appeared less static with more fluidity between groups. There was a low-key ethnic component in that white, black and Asian individuals tended to cluster together but these groupings did not appear to be actively exclusive or conflictual, and the boundaries were permeable with some mixing within groups. Elsewhere, for example, when we observed education classes and a poetry/rap/video workshop, we noted relaxed and engaging encounters between prisoners of different ethnicities.

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<sup>7</sup> RE Fieldnote - 8<sup>th</sup> September 2006

<sup>8</sup> Where prisoners are unescorted by officers between the wings and place of work, education, gym, etc. It is a time of informal congregation in the rigid schedule of the prison day, allowing prisoners from different wings to chat, organize trade, or engage in illegitimate activities.

The cultural fusion and hybridity described in urban youth cultures (Back 1996; Sharma et al. 1996; Nayak 2003), was also apparent in the closed world of the prison. Influenced by black fashion styles, the most popular and vivid display had prisoners going 'backsy', wearing their emerald green prison uniform trousers or jogging bottoms very low, below their hips with their (designer) underwear on show. Other creative attempts to resist the regulated prison issue clothes at Rochester (and implicitly the control of the institution) had led some prisoners working on the servery to turn their jumpers and jogging bottoms inside out with their prison issue green trousers worn back to front (R25 - Mixed Race, British National, Christian prisoner).

The discourse of racial accord which was present among prisoners suggests a spirit of unity and tolerance reminiscent of the shared solidarity of prisoners described by Sykes (1958) and Sykes and Messinger (1960). It could therefore be viewed as an adaptive response to one of the pains of imprisonment, namely, the forced and close interpersonal contact with individuals that the prison engenders, which may be mediated through friendly relations and harmony. Alternatively, it may simply reflect what social psychologists have theorised as the 'contact hypothesis' where contact with different racial and ethnic groups reduces prejudice and increases positive and tolerant attitudes towards them (Allport 1954). Even so, as Amin (2002: 969) 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.' As the next section shall reveal, there were signs of this occurring at Rochester.

### **Contesting and Negotiating Difference**

*Re-inscribing boundaries of inclusion/exclusion*

White representation of black cultural forms has never been uniformly accepted (Back 1996; Nayak 2005), and this was true in the prison too. Some white prisoners were bewildered by, even scathing of, what they perceived to be white prisoners emulating blackness. Moreover, the practice of 'acting black' cannot be divorced from the commercial exploitation of black cultural symbols, which may do nothing to dismantle traditional stereotypes of black people (Hill Collins 2006). A bifurcation of imagery can operate as Sewell (1997: ix) has demonstrated in his study of schooling, where young black men may be simultaneously regarded as 'the darling of popular sub-culture and the sinner in the classroom', which can shape their active anti-school hypermasculinities to often detrimental effect.

This tension was further exposed by the way in which older entrenched ethnic ascriptions and boundaries of belonging in a Barthian (1969) sense were apparent in social relationships between prisoners of different ethnicities. For white prisoners, there always remained the option of returning to traditional narratives of white superiority where culturally othered prisoners were positioned by an absence of shared understandings which prompted their exclusion. Some, for example, derided the particular linguistic forms or 'street' words – such as 'Wha Gwan', 'Hey Blood', 'Fam' and 'Wasteman' – commonly associated with black prisoners' talk. As a key marker of identity which could be negatively evaluated in the social world of the prison, language was used to inscribe some white prisoners' own identities in contra to the sound of the Other and it is this relational feature which is integral to self-identification (Hall 1991/2000). A minority of white prisoners' talk drew on disturbingly racist logic with the source of indignation and rage similarly being language, in this example reinforced with profoundly gendered abuse:

like in the showers, yeah, when there's like fucking group of like Pakis there  
and they fucking speak their own language and I think they're blatantly fucking  
rude. ...I think that's being a racist really...It could be like fucking talking  
about my mum or something, the cunts, right next to me, and I wouldn't even

know [laughs].

(White, British National, Nil religion – R40)

Such racialised discourses had an ambivalent quality - infused with envy, disdain, and resentment – and on occasion, readily employed in reference to Muslim identification among prisoners. A particular source of jealousy was the collective organization of Muslim prisoners who were perceived and whom perceived themselves as a self-protective brotherhood at Rochester (cf. Beckford et al. 2005 for a discussion of inter-ethnic divisions among Muslim prisoners; see also Spalek and El-Hassan 2007). As was noted by one Mixed Race Muslim prisoner, ‘You get the Muslims that stick up for each other because it’s our religion, we need to look after our own’<sup>9</sup>. It appeared to be the rigid solidarity engendered which was most acutely resented by some white prisoners, refracted by the perceived absence among white prisoners. The demands of Islamic religious practice, such as praying five times a day or following halal food regulations, were also problematised by some prisoners, particularly where they might have a direct impact, such as in cell-sharing. One white Christian (R8) prisoner, for example, described a dispute with his Muslim cell-mate who asked for the television to be turned off when he prayed five times a day. His perverse retort was for prayer to take place in the toilet with the television resolutely remaining on. Like assumptions about the inherent aggression of black people as illustrated in the following interview extract, all of these boundary-making devices function to mark out the other and implicitly or explicitly impute an inferior quality about their behaviour or morality (Barth 1969):

I’d say a lot of black people ... it’s just the way that they’re brought up and they live they have to have that bit of attitude ... I think it’s just their culture really.

(White, British National, Christian – R47)

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<sup>9</sup> Interviewee R15 – Mixed Race, British National, Muslim prisoner

Thus, the ethnic solidarities referred to earlier also served as fault lines when flash points and everyday conflicts common to prison life surfaced in the form of racialised tensions (see also Edgar et al. 2003)<sup>10</sup>. Indeed, one white British National prisoner observed that it is was the ‘cussing’ of female family members (‘Your Mum...’) or using racialised and heavily gendered insults - calling someone a ‘black cunt,’ or saying ‘You white fucker whore, you honkey,’ - which was always guaranteed to lead to fights or things ‘kicking off’ at Rochester<sup>11</sup>. Such utterances demonstrated how hegemonic forms of masculinity premised on the implicit denigration of women were superimposed in the everyday lives of male prisoners (see also Earle and Phillips 2007).

Encounters between white prisoners of different nationalities could also be fractious, further underlining the limits of a black-white dichotomy. Incidents were described which revealed deep-seated prejudices and resentments which flowed from ‘road’ into the prison. Expressions of xenophobia were made on occasion by white British national prisoners – ‘Out on road basically I would normally kick the shit out of them [Kosovans] because they... they come over and they harass girls, sort of thing’<sup>12</sup>. However, there was less evidence of such perceptions shaping prison life for white foreign national prisoners, whose experiences were more greatly determined by the constant threat and anxiety of deportation. Relations between black and Asian prisoners also exposed the complexity of intra-minority ethnic relations. A white prisoner, described observing an Asian prisoner edgily joking and laughing about calling a black prisoner a ‘jungle bunny’ and being called a ‘Paki’ in response<sup>13</sup>. From a black prisoner, this similarly expressed hostility – ‘...like I ain’t got nothing against them but I can’t

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<sup>10</sup> Some such incidents between prisoners (n=24) during the fieldwork period were formally reported and recorded in the prison’s Racist Incident Monitoring Forms which are scrutinised by the Governor.

<sup>11</sup> Interviewee R41 - White, British National, Christian prisoner

<sup>12</sup> Interviewee R28 - White, British National, Christian prisoner

<sup>13</sup> Interviewee R21 – White, British National, Nil religion

make friends with Asian people. I've got Asian friends but they have been there from day dot... don't need to make no new ones'<sup>14</sup> - was rooted in tensions in his neighbourhood in East London.

At a surface level, these racialised<sup>15</sup> and ethnicised conflicts appeared to be submerged in everyday social relations in the prison where ethnic diversity was considered by most prisoners to be unproblematic. Indeed many prisoners commented on the absence of racism among prisoners at Rochester. However, as Frosh et al. (2002) have observed researching young masculinities in London, those who espouse the irrelevance of race may simultaneously project racialised and sometimes racist perceptions. In this sense, negative racialisation and racism can be seen as having a 'hidden presence' which requires of prisoners racial allegiance when friction occurs or violence seems likely to erupt.

#### *White privilege 'on the back foot'?*

In Rochester, perhaps because of the relatively large number of minority ethnic prisoners in the population, it seemed that black prisoners were able to assert their presence and influence in social relations, with some white prisoners 'acting black' (Nayak 2005) an important example of this<sup>16</sup>.

Occasional references were made to black prisoners being at the top of the pecking order or controlling the informal economy and some facilities at Rochester – who and at what time other prisoners could enter the showers, play pool during association, receive larger food portions from the servery, or sell burn (tobacco) - and here a black prisoner hints at the bullying behaviour of some black prisoners who it is suggested deliberately seek out vulnerable white prisoners:

... you do get incidents that like two or three black boys and they will target

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<sup>14</sup> Interviewee R16 - Black, British National, Christian prisoner

<sup>15</sup> Racialisation is used here to signify the ways in which meaning becomes attached to the ideas or actions of culturally differentiated individuals or groups, which is then evaluated positively, negatively or indeed in ambiguous ways (see Murji and Solomos 2005). This conceptualisation recognises racialisation as a temporally and spatially contingent process which may be shaped by political, economic, or social factors at any given moment, and therefore may be unpredictable or contradictory.

<sup>16</sup> This contrasted with black prisoners' accounts where they had been in prisons with a small minority ethnic population, where they had felt threatened and ostracised.

one white guy... actually they walked to his cell, they took his stuff and his CDs and stuff and they walked off... when I see a black person do that to another person if he's white or Asian or Chinese and it really, it gets me really angry because that's why, that's why other cultures how they look at black people, you know, they seem to think all the same.

(Black, Foreign National, Christian – R37)

The examples given in interviews were of dominant black prisoners targeting more vulnerable white or Chinese prisoners, but the degree to which such behaviour was racialised is hard to ascertain. Most prisoners' accounts of hierarchies within Rochester did not explicitly claim that prisoners of one particular racial, ethnic, religious or national group were at the pinnacle of the power structure. However, what did emerge was a sense of the often unpredictable and intimidating way in which racism could be invoked in the volatile environment of a young offenders' institution, as these interview extracts reveal:

...the kid said I looked like Elvis, we were having a laugh and a joke through the pipes and that, 'You look like fucking Elvis'. I said 'You're funny, mate' [unclear], you know having a laugh with him. I said, 'You look like Side Show Bob, mate,' you know, coming back to him, then 'Fuck you, I don't joke with white boys', you know what I mean. I said why are you bringing the racial issue like...And I said 'Fuck it, mate, you're like Aladdin, mate, you know, not racial, and he said, 'Why you being racist?' ... He said, 'You're racist, you're racist like, fucking you Cafar', and all this like.'

(White, British National, Christian – R30)

...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)

The anxiety and resentment expressed in these accounts is testimony to the difficult terrain that race and ethnicity occupies in late modernity. Far from inhabiting an uncontested position of power and privilege within the social hierarchy of the prison<sup>17</sup>, such comments reveal an uncertainty among white prisoners about how to navigate everyday contacts with black prisoners. There is the dual risk of being misunderstood and labelled as racist or alternatively having their whiteness negatively racialised and denigrated, and thus many may be angrily struggling with the notion of being victims of racialised exclusion themselves. A safe option requires that white prisoners at Rochester mimic the language, mannerisms, and dress of black prisoners, - a finding similarly reported by Bartollas et al. (1976) in their study of juvenile prison culture in Ohio. As one prisoner admitted, 'I do speak of... 'Wha g'wan, 'What am I like?' ... I know there's other people doing it to fit in, cos they don't want to be outside the group or being picked on'<sup>18</sup>.

Such fears are heightened by the demonstratively violent and immediate way in which racism is policed by black prisoners at Rochester. In one interview, a white prisoner described how 'JJ', having used the 'nigger' epithet after evening lock-up, had been stamped on and had his head flushed down the toilet by a group of black prisoners the following morning<sup>19</sup>. Other prisoners recalled similar occurrences, whilst a prisoner who was a member of the National Front had on several occasions to be segregated for his own safety.

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<sup>17</sup> See also Haylett's (2001) work on the positioning of the white working class, which he has argued challenges dominant social systems of privilege as they pertain to class and race, as economic privilege and success are not 'naturally' assured.

<sup>18</sup> Interviewee R52 - White, British National, Christian prisoner

<sup>19</sup> Interviewee R39 - White, British National, Christian prisoner

## **The primacy of local identification: ‘it’s the area zone thing’<sup>20</sup>**

Whilst prisoners spoke at length about the tricky negotiation of racial, ethnic, and religious difference in the routine life of the prison, area-based identification among white and minority ethnic British national prisoners was also a significant dimension of young prisoners’ identities. Prisoners’ narratives revealed a strong investment in neighbourhood- or estate-based identities with powerful sentiments of territorialism or ‘postcode pride’<sup>21</sup> expressed. A black, foreign national prisoner (R2) described the ‘tribal’ practice of prisoners calling out their postcodes after evening lock-up, whilst, another noted ‘it don’t matter what you’re in for it’s just who you know and what area you’re from’<sup>22</sup>.

Prisoners described local identification as a mode through which new friendships were forged at Rochester. It enabled them to make meaningful connections with their local communities as conversations could cover mutual friends, relatives, and leisure, education, or employment venues. Significantly, local identities operated as a way of anchoring prisoners’ belonging to somewhere external to the prison, and this was true even if those places were a site of family discord, personal disappointment, or violence, thus representing a familiar, but also vulnerable location.

Local affiliations created additional obligations among prisoners to assist in prison disputes involving fellow prisoners or even prison officers, as Crewe (2005) found in his ethnography of Wellingborough prison. As one white Rochester prisoner opined, ‘...if you’re from someone’s ends [neighbourhood] then, yeah, they are, they got a certain amount of liability to look out for you innit...you have to look

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted from Prisoner R50 – Black, British National, Muslim prisoner

<sup>21</sup> This term was first used by Rod Earle in a co-presented conference paper (Earle and Phillips 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Interviewee R18 - Asian, British National, Muslim prisoner

out for each other'<sup>23</sup>. This would typically mean 'backing them' in a 'beef' or disagreement with another prisoner. Within the prison, these local identities might need to be reconfigured to some degree.

Whereas reference was made to very localised area 'beefs' while 'on road' – for example, between Brixton and Peckham or Hackney and Tottenham, in prison broader identifications would lead prisoners from South London to be aligned against prisoners from East, West or North London, or the Home Counties of Kent and Essex.

There was a near universal acceptance of area-based solidarities within prison, which often usurped or overlaid identities organized through race or ethnicity. This from a prisoner:

I'm from West. I don't care if you're black. I don't care if you're brown. I don't care if you're white. I will catch [hang out] with people from the West because they're my boys, they're my Westmans, I'm a West boy.

(White, British National, Christian – R41)

Of course, given the residential clustering of ethnic groups within the UK (Simpson 2007), a local or neighbourhood identification could also be largely synonymous with an ethnic identification, but this was primarily articulated by the young men through locality rather than ethnicity. This must be viewed alongside a convergence among many white *and* minority ethnic prisoners regarding the emptiness or latent qualities of ethnicity for their own *self-identities*. For a multitude of prisoners at Rochester, ethnicity had a dormant or undeveloped sense - it was perceived as immutable but not at the forefront of lived experience inside or outside prison (see also Back 1996; Frosh et al. 2002). This is a further reminder of the need both conceptually and theoretically to move beyond binary understandings of race and ethnicity in late modernity.

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<sup>23</sup> Interviewee R13 – White, British National prisoner of nil religion

Local identification acted as a powerful channel for dividing prisoners and was directly linked to social relations at Rochester. Prisoners' spatialised identities, on occasion, meant the permeation of 'area beefs' into the prison where local conflicts and antagonisms that had set up rival groupings on road were imported into and sustained in the prison. A prison officer described the difficulties involved in managing these locality-based tensions among 'the London Posses, or the Faversham Boys, Essex Lads, Kent Boys, North Kent Boys'<sup>24</sup>. During the fieldwork, on one of the larger residential wings, serious clashes between black prisoners from South London and from East London had occurred, following a prior dispute at Feltham prison, which led to the Governor shipping out five ringleaders. More commonly, however, it seemed that area beefs from road were suspended or mediated through individual interaction in prison as this extract reveals:

But like before I came to jail and that yeah, Brixton and Peckham yeah, they're always in this mad beefing thing, yeah. Since I came to jail I met a lot of Peckham boys...I get on with them and them sort of things innit. They don't make what's on the outside bother them on the inside...

(Black, British National, Christian – R12)

Whilst area affiliations seemingly serve the same function of providing a secure base for prisoners, as Sykes envisioned when he described the all-encompassing prisoner self- and collective identity, for foreign national prisoners, their local might be geographically distant. This was particularly true for prisoners who had been arrested in transit at airports, whose primary spatial attachments remained their countries of residence. Dislocation was uppermost in their accounts of incarceration, often experiencing bewilderment at the British criminal justice system, and situating themselves as separate

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<sup>24</sup> RE fieldnote – 17 July 2006

and different from the majority of other prisoners. For foreign national prisoners whose lives before prison had allowed them to establish a place of work and residence in England, there was a sense of new belongings, and immediate connections to where they had been living in the UK. Their narratives, however, described a personal life history lived in their countries of origin which appeared to becoming increasingly tenuous with their longevity in England, and their desire to stay in the UK. These stories are the outcome of globalised stratification where people from countries of the South are located at the bottom of the global hierarchy which is structured around new modes of economic production and labour informalisation (Bhattacharyya et al. 2002). Such processes lie behind economic migration, crime across borders, and immigration offences which have brought foreign national prisoners into Rochester. At the same time broader exclusionary discourses transpose a prison sentence to one of indeterminate uncertainty and double punishment through deportation following recent moral panics over crime committed by 'foreigners'.

### **Implications for Theoretical Criminology**

This ethnographic study of Rochester young offenders' institution points to the fragmentary nature of prisoner society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century British context. Whilst limited to a single case study, prisoners' accounts at Rochester suggest the declining influence of a unified prisoner group, a finding similarly reported by Crewe (2005) at Wellingborough prison. As he and Carroll (1974) have speculated, this may result from the less brutalising conditions of incarceration compared with the era of Sykes' classic study, and in the UK, the individualist influence of the Incentives and Earned Privileges scheme, which has diluted the role of unified prisoner collectivities. The importation of external identities is more significant in prisoners' lived experience at Rochester, although individual support and collective security appears more often to be sourced through local affiliations than ethnicity.

The complex identities of young prisoners and their impact on prison social relations also requires engagement with theoretical work developed outside criminology. Recent social theory has been dominated by the key theme of globalisation in late modernity (Lash and Urry 1994 ), and yet much of this work has failed to make explicit the empirical links in relation to race and ethnicity (Knowles 2003). Moreover, while other scholars have emphasised mobility and extensive communication networking as modes of reconfiguring and hybridising youth cultures in disparate nations (Pilkington and Johnson 2003), young prisoners' identities need to be represented and understood through the lens of the local. Their claims to localised identities vigorously demonstrated through postcode territorialism must also be part of the picture. This undoubtedly reflects a typical youthful preoccupation with the immediate environment and real limits to mobility which may be common to all groups of young people, whatever their ethnicity or class position. Bauman (2004) may also be right, however, when he claims that, in times of insecurity and uncertainty, territorialism provides a mode of being through which individuals can find safety and security in their everyday lives. By erecting boundaries of belonging which exclude others from strictly delineated and symbolic 'area zones', these young men claim dominion, (perceptions of) power, and perhaps most importantly, status. The opportunity to exclude may be one of the few means by which these young men, marked by their low social, political, and economic position in late modern society, can exercise agency, and avoid the bashing of stigma which Bauman (2004) sees as the lot of the 'underclass', undoubtedly further hardened in the case of the criminalised.

These identities, in indicating an emphatic allegiance and emotional attachment to place in British society, are particularly significant for those of minority ethnic origin. Territorialism, more generally, may reflect what Robins and Cohen (1978) long ago saw as integral to working class cultures, and what Clarke (1979) has argued can act as a defence against changes wrought by globalising forces. According to Robins and Cohen, deeply embedded in working class cultures is participation in the symbolic process of 'owning' a material locality, which for young people is managed through 'gangs' or 'fighting crews' which are pitted against rivals who engage in ritualistic displays of aggression. Although class identification was not articulated by Rochester prisoners, their area-based allegiance was implicitly

inflected with a class-based solidarity, which often trumped ethnic identification, a finding Back (1996) too reported in his South London study of urban youth cultures, where ‘neighbourhood nationalism’ prevailed amidst notions of inclusion and racial harmony, at least between white and black people. As such, it reminds us of the critical need for the motif of class to remain central to analyses of identities, at a time when much academic writing has eschewed the significance of class, particularly in relation to the white working class (Haylett 2001). Moreover, criminology must avoid contributing to what Johnson (2008: 78) has described as ‘the wider paradox of class in social life: class differences are everywhere yet appear largely unnamed’ (see also Webster, this volume).

This is not to argue that race and ethnicity no longer matter. Indeed, the fault lines may be as sharply drawn as in the past, but they may be less often invoked, perhaps refracted by a widespread acceptance of diversity as young prisoners have been socialised into notions of a multicultural society. Prisoners’ declarations of the absence of racism and the illegitimacy of its status in prisoner society at Rochester belie the multiple manifestations of racialisation and racism which seep into daily inter-ethnic encounters. However, the black-white polarities of old have been splintered beyond recognition by the more complex identity dynamics of Britain in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, which include vacillating racialisation and articulations of racisms which intersect with ethnicity, faith, class, and nationality. A degree of black (and Muslim) cultural (and physical) pre-eminence in the social world of the prison, can be likened to the black hegemony of prison subcultures in the US, referred to thirty years ago by Jacobs (1979). Whilst Jacobs attributed this to the majority presence of black prisoners in many US correctional institutions, and their shared history of collective organisation through race, the study at Rochester appears to signify the instability of social hierarchies where white privilege is no longer assured but black prisoners’ assertive presence is more certain, albeit contested. As Nayak (2005: 145) suggests, drawing on insights from post-structuralism, particularly the work of Brah (1996), ‘blackness is split, marked by an ambivalence that does not necessarily equate with ‘powerlessness’...the process

of racialization may render visible minorities more powerful in certain arenas and less powerful in others'<sup>25</sup> (see also Rattansi 2005).

Furthermore, it seems that the young prisoners interviewed in this study are 'doing multiculturalism' – in ways that are akin to what Gilroy (2005: 439) describes as the 'unruly, untidy and convivial mode of interaction in which differences have to be actively negotiated'. Notwithstanding this, the insecurity and anxiety that are being generated by varying forms of racialisation among many white prisoners suggests that they have yet to come to terms with these changed times. This is an increasingly apparent element of late modern white ethnicities (see Nayak 2003, see also Webster this volume), where the normative content of whiteness only becomes visible through othering *by* minority ethnic groups (Garner 2006).

The nuanced understanding of social relations set out in this article seeks to incorporate and foreground agentic understandings of *diverse* white *and* minority ethnic experience. I have shown how racialised and ethnicised identities intersect with faith, nationality, class and gender, and incorporate a significant degree of local identification. I also point to the importance of an awareness of the flux of white privilege and the contingent nature of white ethnicities. I think that these theoretical strands drawn from research in a prison environment can supplement research across the subfield of ethnicities, racism and criminology. Following these lines of inquiry has the potential to invigorate theoretical and qualitative research in an area that hitherto has been dominated by quantitative analyses of crime and the criminal justice process (see Phillips and Bowling 2007 for a review of this work and discussion of some excellent qualitative exceptions). Work in this vein must not lose sight of the striking over-representation of black people in the prisons of England and Wales, a 'fact' that criminologists should engage with politically as well as in theoretical and empirical research. As Wacquant (2002: 386) has observed, the prison is a '*template* or vector of broader social forces, political

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<sup>25</sup> The possibility that this power differential is skewed against minority ethnic groups in the arena of officer-prisoner relationships will be the subject of future analysis.



nexi, and cultural processes that traverse its walls', and as such it may be possible to provide a positive answer to the personal and academic question that I asked in the introduction to this paper. It seems clear that race *and* racism are not what they were (Gilroy 2005: 438), but historical continuities remain (Miles and Brown 2003).

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