

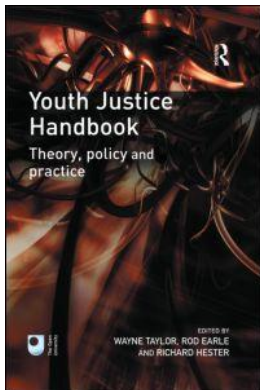
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On: 09 Jul 2020

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Youth Justice Handbook Theory, Policy and Practice

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Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315820064.ch14>

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Published online on: 06 Oct 2009

How to cite :- Rod Earle. 06 Oct 2009, *Living in a box: ethnicity and identity inside a young men's prison from: Youth Justice Handbook, Theory, Policy and Practice* Routledge

Accessed on: 09 Jul 2020

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315820064.ch14>

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Living in a box: ethnicity and identity inside a young men's prison

Rod Earle

That's what makes this age group so difficult. Some are just so ... so difficult. Especially the eighteen year olds. They are the worst I think. Still, emotionally, children really. But in a man's body. I think it's after 21, about 24 I reckon, that you notice change, a bit of sense emerging. (HMYOI Rochester officer, unrecorded conversation, fieldnotes, 2 August 2006)

Introduction

As the evening association period draws to a close there is a Tannoy announcement, 'Last ten minutes!', followed by lots of calls and shouts, then further Tannoy announcements, 'One minute'; '30 seconds – behind your doors' then a countdown through the Tannoy speakers – 'ten', 'nine', 'eight', 'seven' 'six' etc. – and suddenly, as doors slam shut, the wing is quiet. The transformation of the noisy 'ragged edged vitality' (Irwin 1980) of dozens of young men to still, almost clinical, silence is eerie. The procedure is repeated five or six times a day as prisoners are locked back in their cells after meals, activities and association and, finally, at 7 p.m., for the night. Each day of a custodial sentence, the same rhythm of 'banging up', and the same dull routine of unlocking, is repeated, day, after day, after day.

This chapter offers an account of life inside a young offender institution (HMYOI Rochester in Kent) that houses nearly 400 young men aged between 18 and 21 years. It draws from a study of the ways in which ethnicity and masculinity are understood and experienced by the young men and how ideas about gender, race and racism shape daily interactions between them (Phillips 2008; Earle and Phillips 2009; Phillips and Earle 2009). As the preceding

chapter made clear, the prison population of children and young people includes a statistically disproportionate number of minority ethnic youth. Despite this there are relatively few studies that focus on how conditions inside prison are experienced in relation to ethnicity. This is all the more surprising given the duty placed on public institutions, such as prisons, by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000 (s. 2(1)a), to 'promote equality of opportunity and good relations between persons of different racial groups'.

It was the murder of Zahid Mubarek by a white racist cell-mate in HMYOI Feltham in March 2000, as well as the preceding Macpherson Report into police mishandling of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, that placed the issue of 'race relations' in the criminal justice system under fuller public scrutiny (Bowling and Phillips 2002). In the Prison Service the investigation by the Commission for Racial Equality (2003), prompted by Zahid's murder, identified 17 incidents of unlawful racial discrimination, including widespread acts of racist abuse and the circulation of racist material among prisoners and staff. As a result of this report, considerable investment and effort has been made to improve relations between officers and prisoners and to address other inadequacies within the secure estate. However, there continues to be a dearth of research into the influence of ethnicity on social relations between prisoners. What research has been done on prisoner/prisoner relations is now rather dated, tends to neglect ethnicity and is heavily influenced by American experiences (see Phillips 2007).

HMYOI Rochester is situated on the Thames estuary just beyond the M25 London orbital. It lies at the eastern edge of the largest, most cosmopolitan city in England while also being adjacent to one of its most famous rural idylls: Kent, the 'garden of England'. It was the site of the original Borstal institution established by the Children Act 1908, and much of the accommodation dates from that time. Its presence as a thriving, full-to-the-brim, custodial institution, with two new neighbours in the form of the Medway Secure Training Centre and Cookham Wood Women's Prison,¹ speaks volumes about the trajectories of crime and punishment over the last 100 years.

The prison's catchment area includes the massive and diverse population of London where, notwithstanding their higher-than-average general presence, black and minority ethnic youth are heavily over-represented in the criminal justice system. Prisoners are also likely to be sent to HMYOI Rochester from courts in the counties of Kent, Essex and East Sussex where white ethnicities predominate, and from other YOIs in southeast England.

The inmate population of HMYOI Rochester at the time of the research was composed of:

- 56 per cent white British, white European, white other;
- 30 per cent black/black Caribbean/black African;
- 7 per cent mixed heritage; and
- 6 per cent Asian.

This chapter draws on the findings of two researchers, Earle and Phillips, who attended the prison for three to four days each week over a period of eight-months during the latter half of 2006. A relatively long-term period of access to the prison was felt to be necessary to secure understandings of the depth and range of prisoners' experience. The eight month period of fieldwork gave the research team the opportunity to appreciate the flux and flow of prison life over a reasonably sustained period of time. During the course of the fieldwork, 60 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample selected to reflect the composition of the prison population, in terms of religion, nationality and ethnicity. Part of the sample was made up of informal contacts established during the fieldwork but, to avoid selection bias (i.e. talking only to talkative or confident prisoners), just under half the sample was drawn at random from the prison roll, stratified by ethnicity.

This research was influenced by an interest in the daily negotiation of ethnic difference and the micro-politics of everyday social contact (Amin 2002), but within the closed world of the prison. Insight into this was gained by adopting an ethnographic style of research and spending as much time as possible with inmates in conversation and social interaction.

Negotiating ethnic difference

When asked directly about inter-ethnic interaction, many of the inmates described a process of informal separation, although it was usually emphasized that this loose gathering was not marked (as in many American prisons) by aggravation and stress. For instance, a common first reaction to the research project's interest in ethnicity and social relations between prisoners was: 'That is simple man. The Asians keep to themselves, the blacks to themselves and the whites too. Just simple. I don't know why but that is how it is' (RE fieldnotes, August 2006). Conversely, however, another inmate commented as follows:

What can I say? Well, I get along with everyone, I get along with everyone. This will make me sound . . . but I have more in common with the black people . . . You see he is Asian, and me and him are cool, I'm not prejudiced at all. Some of the [white] people who rap, I get along with them as well, but a lot of them tend to be black, it's just the way it is. (black, foreign national, Christian – R2²)

Although prisoners initially referred to the existence of loose ethnic separation, involving 'black', 'white', 'Asian', Muslim and foreign national groupings, the fieldwork and in-depth interviews indicated that these groupings and associations between prisoners were not rigidly fixed and were only rarely actively exclusive. Hence, while prisoner groupings appeared to have a low-key ethnic component, this was just part of the story, a part that receded when it was discussed more extensively in interview.

Conjuring with racism: now you see it, now you don't

A notable finding of this fieldwork was the extent to which overt or explicit racism was suppressed within the YOI. While there appeared to be a general acceptance of the simple facts of ethnic diversity and grouping, the opposite was the case in respect of overt racism. Racism of this kind was widely regarded as totally unacceptable, and inmates acting in an explicitly racist manner risked considerably more than disapproval from other inmates, both black and white. Interestingly, many prisoners referred to the existence of an informal code in which racist behaviour would be met with violent retaliation.

For example, the researchers were told of some specific examples where such action had been taken, usually, but not always, by black prisoners and there appeared to be widespread acceptance of the legitimacy of this kind of behaviour among inmates. This suggested a consensus against explicit racism, and condemnation of any inmate identified as 'being a racist'. This consensus went so far as to be included and exploited, instrumentally, in the informal sanctions inmates used against each other: 'Say I wanted you kicked in. I'd say to a black feller, "Look he's a racist, him, he's telling me you're a monkey and all that"', and you'd get your head kicked in' (white, British national, Christian – R30). The stigmatization of racism seems to have acquired a kind of dual currency within the prison, part of both its informal and formal structures of social control. Hence, the prisoner's self-policing of racism co-existed with the high-profile diversity policy of the prison but was quite distinct from it.

However, this did not mean that the prison was free of tension, fear or anxiety around the questions of race and ethnicity. For example, there was a tendency, in the privacy of interviews with the white researcher, for white inmates to invoke traditional narratives of white superiority. Some, for example, expressed irritation with the linguistic styles and expressive vernacular of minority ethnic inmates, objecting to the use of words and phrases such as 'Wha' Gwaan', 'Hey Blood', 'Fam' and 'Wasteman', or the habit of wearing trousers low down off the hips. The research team (composed of a white man and a mixed-race woman) were struck by the extent to which their own ethnic identities tended to elicit and/or obscure aspects of these racialized narratives (Phillips and Earle 2008).

For white prisoners, it appears that racism remained a potent resource, although the sanctions against it (both informal and formal) meant that it was activated mainly in private. Public expressions of racist sentiments or slang were used sparingly and rarely in 'mixed company'. Nevertheless, the fieldwork provides further evidence of the common use of racist language and of the existence of racist hostility (see Wilson 2003) expressed in interview through terms such as 'the niggers', 'black pricks', 'Pakis'.

Moreover, the comments of some white foreign nationals were particularly illuminating, reflecting perhaps how their own ambiguous white status offered

them insights into the hidden dynamics of racialized antagonism. As one white foreign national commented:

There are a few prisoners, there are some English that live around Kent around here, they saying they don't like refugee, like black people, stuff like that. They don't really like us. I am white and when I'm with them I can see they say like 'Oh fuck the black fucking . . .', you know, 'look at the niggers', stuff like that. (white, foreign national, Muslim – R22)

Thus, although there appeared to be a remarkably durable, consensual and stable 'surface' equanimity among an ethnically diverse prisoner population, this was relatively thin, concealing the persistence of submerged racialized tensions.

One of the most common ways white prisoners vented these tensions and anxieties was through the vocabulary of racialized victimization, arguing that they suffered as a consequence of both the prejudice of black inmates and the existence of double standards in the recognition of what constituted 'racism'. A typical comment was:

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 the accounts of some white prisoners can be seen as testimony to the difficult terrain that race and ethnicity occupy in late modernity (Phillips 2008). The comments reveal an uncertainty among these white prisoners about how to navigate everyday contacts with black prisoners. Clearly, some white prisoners experienced this more acutely than others, and their bewildered and resentful withdrawal seems to reproduce the phenomenon of 'white flight' from some urban areas in open society (Frey 1979).

Postcode pride

Many of the informal exchanges with the young men, and the more structured interviews exploring aspects of their identity, revealed that a sense of ethnic identity was superseded by a locality-based identification. Although most white English prisoners frequently regarded ethnicity as something suspiciously prescriptive, a label attached by others and for 'others', many of the minority ethnic young men also expressed similar sentiments, conveying an impression that ethnicity was a dormant, low-profile aspect of their identity. The disavowal, by white prisoners, of ethnicity in general, and whiteness in

particular, is consistent with much of the empirical and theoretical work on the perceived normative, naturalized, character of whiteness. White ethnicities are invisible, denied or regarded as devoid of ethnic content (Nayak 2003; Garner 2007). A white prisoner, for instance (R6), put it like this:

No, I don't feel white, I don't feel white, you know. I know I'm white and all that, but the thing is, though, I'm still the same person as a black and Asian, Chinese people, you know, I'm still, they're still the same person as me. You know, we all grewed up from the apes and everything you know.

While an Asian Muslim prisoner (R51) remarked: 'Ethnicity is not really a big thing. Obviously it is a big thing but 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.'

The fieldwork firmly suggested, however, the experiential significance of local neighbourhood identities among both London, Kent and Essex-based prisoners. It is, of course, possible that, because of the geographical concentration of ethnic groups within Britain, a local or neighbourhood identification could also be largely synonymous with an ethnic identification (Simpson 2007), but what was notable was that a sense of belonging was primarily articulated by the young men through locality rather than ethnicity. In other words, many inmates frequently chose to talk about themselves primarily in terms of place and territory rather than race (Phillips 2008).

We found frequent reference to a London differentiated by the compass points, North, South, East, West and, more specifically still, the use of postcodes to situate selves and anchor belonging. For example, one foreign national prisoner described how, in the evenings while locked in their cells, some prisoners would 'shout where they're from, you know, they shout out their postcode'. In one of the prison workshops postcodes or other area identifiers, like 'E3', 'Roman Rd' or 'Eastside', were often painted, graffiti style, on to the storage boxes prisoners could make for themselves.

Significantly, local identification appeared to operate as a mode through which new contacts were forged at Rochester or old ones re-established. It enabled the young men to retain a sense of ontological connection with their local communities despite the prison severing their physical connection to them. Asserting local identities operated as a way of anchoring belonging to somewhere external to the prison, helping them to resist the 're-coding of their existence' that Foucault (1979) argued is a key feature of carceral regimes.

'Postcode pride' can be thought of as a means of resisting the punitive attempts at dislocation, displacement and exclusion that accompany imprisonment. The young men's assertion of postcode pride might be read as a 'transcript of resistance' (Scott 1998). Their territorial claims assert how they want to know themselves as opposed to how they might be known by others in authority. The young men's accounts of local identification can be taken as a form of resistance to other ways of knowing them and their lives, particularly

a knowledge that seeks to rule them. In their frequent references and claims to a postcode and local area the young men in prison deploy a short-hand for obscure, illicit and potent social networks. In de Certeau's (1984) terms they use the convivial tactics of the weak in the face of the ordering strategies of the powerful (see Earle and Phillips 2009).

Local affiliations also created obligations among prisoners to support and assist each other in disputes involving fellow prisoners or even prison officers. As one young man put it: '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 out for each other' (R13 – white, British national, nil religion).

These narratives of locality echo what Robins and Cohen (1978) long ago claimed was an integral part of masculine, working-class cultures: the participation in the symbolic process of 'owning' a territory. Their effacement of ethnicity also recalls Back's (1996) study of south London urban youth cultures, where neighbourhood nationalism attempts to banish the racial referent and replace it with a simple commitment to a local territory. According to recent research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, these localized, territorial identities are assuming greater significance for marginalized young people throughout Britain. They represent 'a sense of inalienable belonging . . . something that no one could, and could be allowed to, take away' (Kintrea *et al.* 2008: 32).

Implications for youth justice policy and practice: new understandings of race, ethnicity and social relations

The study in HMYOI Rochester was followed by further similar research (Phillips and Earle 2009) at an adult men's prison (HMP Maidstone). It suggests that, while a certain level of convivial equanimity remains, the strength of local identification declines, and there is, particularly among older white men, an increasing level of racialized resentment expressed through frustration and incomprehension of formal diversity policies.

The young men in HMYOI Rochester are, as the quotation from the prison officer at the start of this chapter indicates, often regarded as being on the cusp of transition from childhood to adulthood (see Chapter 2 this volume). The 'young adult' categorization of the YOI formally institutionalizes this understanding of a linear progression towards an adult identity. If male adulthood is becoming increasingly recognized as both elusive and complex (Frosh *et al.* 2002; McDowell 2003), the struggle to understand how young men cope with 'maturing' and adversity becomes all the more urgent. The 'senses' they come to in prison, and elsewhere, are shaped by social dynamics of class, gender and ethnicity, personal biography and unique experiences. This new research finds

that the 'ragged edged vitality' (Irwin 1980) of imprisoned young men sustains a variety of lived understandings of masculinity, 'race' and ethnicity. While the new conviviality of multiculturalism (Gilroy 2004) was in evidence in HMYOI Rochester, so also were more traditional working-class assertions of local identity. Emergent among these there are problematic articulations of 'whiteness' organized loosely around feelings of victimhood, loss and disorientation. These have significant implications for people working in public institutions governed by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, such as YOIs and other elements of youth justice system.

The concept of white resentment takes shape in the YOI as incomprehension of diversity policies, hostility towards minorities who are accused of 'playing the "race" card' and dispirited retreat into white ethnic enclosure. White resentment is increasingly identified as a reaction to deeply felt perceptions of unfairness that key into the wider public discussion of the so-called 'failure of multiculturalism' (Ware 2008: 1.1). It fosters and justifies identification with a myth of white decline and the embrace of embattled, resentful, victim identities (Hage 2003; Sveinsson 2009). These reactions pose a considerable threat to the fragile, but remarkably convivial, multiculturalities we found in the prisons, that are themselves sourced in the vibrant, unruly, cosmopolitanism of modern urban Britain (Gilroy 2004). Youth justice practitioners in these areas can find ways of engaging with multiculturalism, but everyone must also develop resources to challenge a white retreat into racialized resentment that recasts hard-won progress as mere political correctness.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of Dr Coretta Phillips of the London School of Economics in developing this chapter. None of it would have been possible without the generous support of the Governor and staff of HMYOI Rochester. The author is equally grateful to all the young men serving sentences there who made the research team welcome and who freely shared their thoughts and experiences.

Notes

- 1 In July 2007, after the research was completed, Cookham Wood was re-roled as a YOI for 15–17-year-old young men.
- 2 Responders are referred to in this fashion to protect their anonymity and to indicate their ethnicity, nationality and faith as recorded in HMPS data.

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