

Playing 'the Game' Inside: young black men in custody

David Wilson's interviews with young black men in prison revealed a behaviour strategy they used to cope with a system they perceived as racially biased.

This article presents the findings of research undertaken on behalf of The Children's Society about the experiences of young black people in custody. As such, 45 young black men aged 16 or 17 were interviewed, in the hope of amplifying James and Prout's (1990) assertion that children are not just 'natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete', or as John Muncie (1999) has put it, children are not just being defined by what 'they lack', but are also more positively agents in, as well as products of, social processes – in this case their lives in custody.

Until now there has been very little written about what imprisonment means for the disproportionate numbers of young black men who receive a custodial sentence (for an exception see Genders and Player, 1989). Yet could young black people devise strategies to overcome the circumstances of their incarceration? In what ways could they actively construct their lives, in a space formally controlled and regulated by adults with more power? Could they resist the intrusions and surveillance of the youth justice system?

'Playing the game' in prison

In interviews, two broad themes emerged, which using the descriptions provided by the interviewees, are called 'keeping quiet' and 'going nuts' and which are both aspects of 'the game'. Within these themes several other issues are accommodated, such as their dealings with staff, their relations with white prisoners (although the research does not try to compare their respective experiences), and specific regime requirements or benefits. However, these themes form a basis for understanding how these young black men attempt to deal with the reality of their incarceration, and should be seen as related to the strategies that they adopted in relation to their day-to-day dealings with the police on 'the streets'.

This strategy – which was described as 'the game', is thereafter imported into prison, but adapted to suit prison conditions and especially their relations with prison officers and thus includes aspects of both 'indigenous' and 'importationist' models of prisoner social organisation. The prison officers were seen by the interviewees as being able to 'get away with more' than police officers. Thus 'the game' could not be played as it was in the community, but rather had to be modified and adapted to deal with the perception that prison officers were able to exercise

greater control over their lives. Nonetheless 'the game' was indeed played inside and in listening to how 'the game' takes shape we are able to gain a deeper understanding of how these young black men resisted the regulation, inspection and control of prison.

'Keeping quiet'

'Keeping quiet' is the first part of 'the game', although it should be noted that, as one interviewee put it 'we're not actually quiet'. Rather it meant 'biting your tongue', 'holding fire' or 'sucking it in' rather than being silent. Thus 'keeping quiet' did not imply a passive response to authority, but was rather a prelude to seeking the solace of other black friends on the wing and a way of sharing information.

'Keeping quiet' was in short a form of intelligence gathering and a prelude to inter-group communication about individual members of staff. In this way the interviewees could establish which of the staff were 'safe' and which were not, thus allowing them to adapt 'the game' to a micro level. Of course, sharing this information had the added advantage of further cementing group loyalty. As one interviewee put it – "we're all one, we're all black. We stick together." Thus it was normal for one interviewee to describe another as his 'brother' or 'cousin', despite the fact that they had never met prior to coming into prison.

Of course 'keeping quiet' and using each other as sources of support meant that either the interviewees had never heard of the prison's formal complaints procedures – and in particular the Race Relations Liaison Officer (RRLO) and Race Relations Management Team (RRMT) or other formal processes including the Prisons Ombudsman, or that they had heard of them and had chosen, for a variety of possible reasons, not to use them. With a handful of exceptions it soon became apparent that the interviewees had in fact never encountered the RRLO or the RRMT. The vast majority of interviewees never made complaints through official procedures because they were unaware that they could. However, describing how these young black prisoners used each other as sources of support should not be taken to imply that all young black prisoners behaved in the same way.

Most obviously, whilst the majority of black prisoners were on the basic prison regime, one or two had reached enhanced or 'privileged' status. Those who had reached this level were described by their

peers as having got there through 'licking arse'.

'Going nuts'

The second half of the strategy – which was clearly not the way that the interviewees lived day by day but was instead reserved for moments of crisis, was called 'going nuts'. This was the strategy to employ when 'keeping quiet' failed to deliver the life that they wanted, or when a line was crossed that had to be responded to in more dramatic ways. This line could take many forms, and in no particular order interviewees described issues in the prison related to their regime status, time out of cell, relations with prison officers or other staff such as education staff, jobs and orderly status, their canteen and their access to electricity in their cells.

A smaller group of interviewees who were Muslim also described issues related to access to religious facilities and a failure to 'respect' Islam amongst the staff (Beckford and Gilliat, 1998; Wilson, 1999; Spalek, 2002). 'Going nuts' was the other side of the resistance coin, but was used sparingly given the odds that they faced when adopting this strategy, for the end result was being 'twisted up' by the staff – a reference to Control and Restraint (C&R) techniques, which are the approved Prison Service method for physically controlling prisoners, and being segregated.

'Going nuts' was not something to be done lightly, but was instead a strategy to be used sparingly and when other options had been exhausted. Indeed in conversation there was a sense of embarrassment from the interviewees that this strategy was adopted at all, especially as the end result was that they always 'lost' – physically out-numbered by the 'Govs' and thus over-powered and humbled.

All this having been said, being young and black and in prison was not an ideal place to be, status to have, or situation to be in. Indeed attention has already been drawn to the fact that the majority of those interviewed were on the basic prison regime and thus had few privileges. Prison was not a good place, but a 'pause' in their lives that stopped them achieving what it was that they had wanted to achieve. More than this, their ethnicity – and for some their religion, remained an issue inside, and one interviewee asked me to consider the following hypothetical situation: "What if it was all black Govs, and all black lads on the servery? What if it was all black lads that worked outside as orderlies and it was all the white lads that were banged up? What if all the black lads were on the highest regimes and all the white lads on the lowest, and who kept getting stitched up and twisted up? Then they'd know how it felt, because that's how it feels to me."

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References

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