

Black Women Prison Employees: The Intersectionality of Gender and Race

By Marcia Morgan

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Criminal justice worker and academic Marcia Morgan, has produced a powerful book that illuminates the experiences of Black women working in the prison system in England and Wales. Much of the research on prison staff focusses on the experience of the predominant group — white men¹. While some attention has been directed towards the experience of women² and staff from minority ethnic groups³, the novelty of Morgan's work is that it focusses on the intersection of race and gender. In total, seventeen Black women took part in the study, covering a range of roles and also encompassing public and privately-run prisons, and headquarters.

Morgan's book attempts to use the stories of Black and Asian women working in prison services and offers:

...an invitation to those who do not know what it feels like to be a black woman located on the margins of their organisation because of gender and racial inequality. [it is] an opportunity to see through the lens of this group of employees and walk their footsteps through their challenges and experiences.

The book uses the experience of these women as an guide to

exploring crucial aspects on their experiences including: the process in which Black women are acculturated into the world of prison employee; the participants' perception of themselves and their relationship dynamics with others within the organisation; the participants' negotiation of the organisational dynamics, and; the mobilisation and impact of psychosocial defenses on Black women. The analysis draws heavily upon both psychodynamic approaches to understanding organizational and individual behavior, and critical race theory.

The interviews with these women show that they often feel that they are an 'outsider within', not fully accepted by their peers and often experiencing discomfort with the organizational culture. Morgan describes a culture of suspicion and mistrust in prisons, which is often directed towards 'suspect' groups, including particular racial and ethnic groups. She describes that prisons are dominated by a white masculine culture in which the presence of Black women professionals is disruptive. Examples of how this played out included the mistrust directed towards one interviewee when she communicated in a different language with a prisoner. A further example was where one interviewee witnessed inappropriate use of force, which she considered to be racially motivated. The subsequent investigation not only concluded that the allegation was not proven but recommended that the complainant received further training. Such events caused some Black women to feel pressured into assimilating and remaining passive in the face of situations and actions that they felt uncomfortable about. Organisational attempts to transform

the institution, for example through the appointment of diversity managers, Morgan describes, are often ineffective as these posts are located on the margins of organisational power structures, with the post holders possessing neither race and gender privilege nor positional status.

One fascinating element of Morgan's study is to describe how some, including herself, masked their vulnerability and projected a façade of the 'Strong Black Woman' (SBW). The characteristics of this identity included self-reliance; independence; strength; assertiveness, and; perseverance. Morgan describes that this identity is deeply rooted in social and historic response to persecution, marginalisation and adversity. The SBW identity is interwoven through Black women's psychosocial experience, that is, the preoccupation of always being battle-ready to overcome personal challenges, as well as having the strength to support others through their battles. This highlights the complex inner world and external relationships Black women encounter within the workplace, a space that is sometimes experienced as a hostile environment.

Although Morgan's book is written in a gentle and empathic way, drawing upon the real experiences of people, the messages it carries are hard hitting. This book is an important contribution to the literature on occupational cultures in prisons. It is also a book that deserves careful consideration by practitioners who genuinely want to contribute towards tackling inequality in prison work.

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1. For example Liebling, A., Price, D. and Shefer, G. (2011) *The Prison Officer* Second edition Abingdon: Willan; Crawley, E. (2004) *Doing Prison Work: The Public and Private Lives of Prison Officers* Cullompton: Willan
2. Crewe, B. (2006) *Male prisoners' perceptions of female officers in an English prison in Punishment and Society* Vol.8 No.4 p.395-421; Tait, S. (2008) *Prison officers and gender* in Bennett, J., Crewe, B. and Wahidin, A. (eds) *Understanding Prison Staff* Cullompton: Willan p. 65-91
3. Bhui, H. and Fossi, J. (2008) *The experiences of black and minority ethnic prison staff* in Bennett, J., Crewe, B. and Wahidin, A. (eds) *Understanding Prison Staff* Cullompton: Willan p. 49-64; Bennett, J. (2015) *The working lives of prison managers: Global change, local cultures and individual agency in the late modern prison* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan