Violence and Brutality in Prisons: A West Australian Context[*]

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Introduction

This paper is about violence in prisons. It is an integral part of a larger, mainly ethnographic study which involved in-depth conversations with prisoners serving long-term sentences in West Australian prisons. The original study[1] explored issues related to the reintegration of long-term prisoners into the community. Although questions about violence in prisons did not feature in the original interview schedule, violence featured heavily in each of the male participants' accounts of their prison experience. Using prisoners' narratives this paper looks at theories of violence, gendered nature of violence, prevalence of sexual violence, participants' accounts of violent incidents and their claims of officially sanctioned violence. The paper also addresses prisoners' perceptions of their own violence and theorises on the position of violence within the prison environs. Prison violence is examined in four inter-related categories, looking specifically at (1) self harm/suicide, (2) prisoner to prisoner violence, (3) prison officer to prisoner violence and (4) prisoner to prison officer violence.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is qualitative. The participants' own accounts of their experience of imprisonment are central and so, in this sense, it is largely ethnographic or 'micro-sociological' in nature. Because it is the participants' experiences of prison that are the focal points, I found ethnomethodological, symbolic interactionist and phenomenological frameworks useful analytical tools for the research process. I also found Smith's (1987) *The Everyday World as Problematic*, Goffman's (1961) *Asylums* and Katz' (1988) *Seductions of Crime* particularly helpful.

My research methods are eclectic and contain important elements of the aforementioned micro-sociological theories, being situated within a methodology whose starting point is 'the sociological subject as actual individuals located in an everyday world' (Smith 1987:98). I used in-depth interviews as the main method of gathering information from participants. For this purpose I designed interview schedules built around open-ended questions. I recorded and transcribed each interview. The original, larger study involved

interviewing participants in the days immediately prior to their release and re-interviewing them several weeks after release. However, the data used in this article are taken only from the initial interviews conducted in prison. The interview schedules served mainly as a prompt to ensure I covered all issues with each participant. I also worked from a feminist standpoint, seeking to establish, as much as was possible under the circumstances, a relatively equal power relationship between researcher and participants.

A West Australian Context

Prisons are dangerous places where the threat of violence is ever present. Prisoners cannot, for example, control their living environment and they have little or no choice regarding the people they associate with and have few avenues of escape open to them if violence erupts. Prisons can, therefore, be considered high risk, high fear environments. Paradoxically, though, the constant threats of violence and environment of unrelenting fear brings with it a propensity towards an overwhelming desensitisation to violent acts against others. Alan, a long-term prisoner who has served lengthy sentences in several West Australian prisons, described the violent nature of prisons as he experienced them:

> Prisons are violent places. You live with tension every minute in here, no matter who you are. The hardest, most violent, most infamous and most vicious prisoners live with constant tension. Fights, violence can break out just like that. That's just how prisoners live. Violence is an everyday reality … In terms of violence, the desensitising process within prisons is very quick. It's a survival thing. It's not just a physical thing; it's a mental survival too. You've got to be violent in your mind as well as sometimes physically violent, and it's such a common occurrence in prison — violence at lower levels, fights and that sort of thing, occasionally knives and occasional serious bashings. It's so common that you have to become blasé about it … if you let it affect you it'll affect your whole prison life. Desensitisation is nearly automatic.

Indeed, the interviews with each of the male prisoner participants in the larger study indicated a collective, apparently nonchalant, attitude to extreme physical violence. It was as if each of the male participants had become desensitised to violence in all its forms; unless such violence was directed against the self.

The perceptual frames promoting violence in prisons are marked by a positive attitude towards the use of violence, a lack of general social connectedness or sense of belonging (except to the group), and a perception of provocation from others. Within prisons, this can create a 'subculture' of violence.

> This standpoint purports that individuals become criminally violent through a process of socialisation whereby they learn that the use of violence is an acceptable and normal way of dealing with particular problems or situations. Within this context it is possible to conceive of a subculture as providing a framework of references and values within which certain individuals make decisions (Genders & Morrison 1996:36).

David's case illustrates this. David is known throughout the West Australian prison system as a violent prisoner. Nevertheless, he claimed that he was not a particularly violent person prior to his first term of incarceration. He first came to prison as a 20-year-old heroin addict on a two-year prison sentence. During his period of imprisonment David became a problem prisoner with a record of serious violent offences towards other prisoners and prison staff. This led to further criminal charges within the system and the extension of his sentence from two to nine years. David also has a prison history of self-mutilation. When asked what he thought had made him act so violently given that he had claimed to be relatively non-violent before he went to prison, David said:

> Most of my adult life has been spent in prison and I started off by being violent whilst under
> the influence of drugs in prison. Prison makes people more angry and violent. It doesn't stop
> them offending. I have suffered most violence in prison and have become an extremely
> violent person in prison myself. The prison officers could antagonise me by being sarcastic,
> trying to upset me and winding me up … I'd react violently and that's what I am now, a
> pretty violent person. Before, I'd have to struggle to act violently. Now, I have to struggle
> not to.

David's claim that prison officers were at least, in part, responsible for his violent tendencies is a relatively common assertion amongst prisoners. As Toch (1977:40) argues, 'a prison inmate can begin to see his keepers as potential sources of violence. This view is harrowing because it removes the most prominent source of institutional stability and control and makes for an environment that has a person totally at its mercy'. Such perceived threats to personal safety increase the degree of tension within the prison environment and hence the likelihood of outbreaks of violence. When I asked Alan whether prison staff attempted to stop violence when it occurred, he responded in this way:

> It depends on who's involved and what the issue is about. If it's somebody who's well
> known and is likely to turn violent on them (prison officers) they tend to turn a blind eye
> unless it gets out of hand … In the past prison officers and administration have promoted
> violence for their own reasons … It's a good tactic, turn prisoner against prisoner, a model
> of control.

Foucault (1977:10) suggests that 'those who carry out the penalty tend to become an autonomous sector: justice is relieved of responsibility for it by a bureaucratic concealment of the penalty itself'. This, he comments, is because, 'it is ugly to be punishable, but there is no glory in punishing. Hence that double system of protection that justice has set up between itself and the punishment it imposes'. Seen another way, community apathy together with the general lack of accountability and transparency of prison systems may have the effect of encouraging the formation of a subculture wherein both prisoners and their keepers develop their own code of ethics.

Theories of Violence

There are two main theoretical approaches to criminal violence. These are the 'individual's rational choice' and the 'social' approaches (Indermaur 1996:3). While Genders and Morrison (1996:29) argue that 'social explanations of crime and criminal violence stand in sharp contrast to explanations which locate the causes of crime within the individual', I prefer a dialectical slant which incorporates both approaches. That is, I position violence as a rational choice of individuals within a context of their prior and continuing social and cultural conditioning and environment. I also underline the point that violence stands to be heightened when individuals, many with a social and cultural conditioning that accepts violence as a rational act, are incarcerated together within the limited physical and social space of the prison.

Genders and Morrison (1996:30) observe that the interconnectedness of factors such as past experiences, personal values, motivation, the use of drugs and alcohol, and situational opportunity must be taken into account when exploring the causes of violent behaviour. In general, their approach leans toward the notion of the instrumental, or goal oriented, nature of violence rather than 'expressive' or uncontrolled violence. This is the notion which is followed here. However, my focus is not so much the violent criminal acts which may precede or lead to any given term of imprisonment, as the prison culture where violence is considered to be a norm. My basic argument is that the culture of violence in prisons has evolved largely through the state sanctioned and enforced containment of numbers of (often

violent) people in an institutionalised setting for long periods of time. Further, the acceptance of violence in prison culture is produced and maintained by the processes of institutionalisation, which demand adherence to the values and mores of the desegregated life of the total institution (Goffman 1961:37) where 'all aspects of life are conducted in the same place and under the same single authority' (Page 1994:80). In essence, 'prisons are sites of institutionalised violence. They constitute the social space where ascendancy of one group of men over the other is explicitly and legitimately based on brute power' (Aungles 1994:185).

Gendered Nature of Violence

Chappell and Egger (1995:274) maintain that 'the empirical results from research studies, official statistics and victim surveys provide unchallengeable evidence of the relationship between masculinity and violence'. Indermaur (1996:7) and Messerschmidt (1993:1) make the same point. Although the masculinity–violence nexus is mediated by factors such as class, race and degree of marginalisation, Indermaur states that 'when we turn to demographic differences in violence the single most important variable is gender'. He goes on to argue that 'not only are males within western society much more likely to engage in violence, but the degree of patriarchy of a society has also shown to be related to the level of violence' (1996:7). In line with this, I found the machismo nature of violence to be clearly demonstrated within the prison environs. Although the women participants in this study were subjected to equally, if not more, punitive and austere prison regimes, their coping strategies were different from those of most of the male participants.

For example, whilst the hierarchical structure of Bandyup maximum security prison for women remains basically patriarchal in nature, there was always a high ratio of female prison officers and the inmate population was entirely female. There was also a constant presence of mothers with babies in the prison nursery. All these factors exercised a continuing influence on the nature of life within the women's prison, in what might be called an 'anti-machismo' direction. However, here too were incidents of overt physical violence. These, though, were generally short-lived and rarely resulted in serious physical injury to either perpetrator or victim (personal observation; interview: Superintendent, Bandyup Women's Prison, November 2001). Within the women's prison most violence tended to be within the range of self-harm or self-mutilation. At the same time, brutalisation in terms of severe deprivation and emotional violence were evident. Linda talked about this in relation to the time she spent in the punishment cells in Bandyup:

> When I was under close supervision I felt really sick for a lot of the time. you know, the side effects of drugs etc and I would need to see the doctor but they more or less forgot about me down there. I would ask to see the doctor but it wouldn't happen. For a couple of months there I felt really sick. I couldn't eat and I would vomit but the muster [prisoner count] is that high that they just forgot about you down there. I would put my name down to see the doctor but they [prison officers] would say my name wasn't there — stuff like that ... I've done 7 years all up and I'd say I've done more than half of it in punishment .. I've done hard jail. I've done it rock hard compared to others in the system.

These conditions of hardship and humiliation affect women in remote regional prisons in particular and additional ways. For instance, female prisoners of medium-security rating held in Broome Regional Prison suffered under a particularly inappropriate crossover between health care and prison security. These women, mostly Aboriginal inmates from remote communities, were often chained and handcuffed to male prison officers during medical examinations. They were also chained around their ankles when attending family visits (Harding: Verbal Report, Prison Inspectorate Community Reference Group meeting:

25 July 2001). Neither of the two female participants in this study spoke of physical violence within the prison.

Indermaur's (1996:8) arguments suggest that women are likely to act in a less violent fashion than men when subject to shame and humiliation. He claims that 'in traditionally female worlds, where the tasks are centred around support and caring, violence and aggression are non-functional and thus women develop a belief that violence is non-productive'. He also argues that the pattern of men's and women's violence is different. While for men, violence is often associated with a need to take control, for women, violence is often associated with a loss of control. In other words, for men, the use of violence is generally instrumental as it is used to achieve certain social or material aims or gains.

Accordingly, the place of violence within male prisons is central and magnified by a prevailing machismo culture. Here violence, as Genders and Morrison (1996:29) put it, may be considered a 'rational' manifestation of previous experiences, a pattern of behaviour which 'conforms to the norms of the culture ... in which they must live'. Alan illustrated this when he described a very violent incident that occurred between two prisoners within a maximum-security prison. During the incident, one prisoner cut another prisoner's throat and killed him. This attack was carried out in view of many prisoners on the prison oval, as they were moving between work, education and their units. What struck him was not so much the nature of the act itself, as its potential justification. Alan told me:

> He almost had his head cut off. It was held together by one single vertebra. I'll give you my personal reaction first. My first reaction was it's about time it happened. The guy who was killed was a child molester... the word was that one of his victims was that bloke's [the perpetrator's] son. So my reaction was 'about time'... the reaction that was most common was that it was about time he got it. There might have been a few [prisoners] who weren't child molesters who felt stressed enough to need medication, but not many, and nearly the entire prison population saw it ... the sight of this paedophile with his head hanging off didn't worry me at all.

There was a general consensus amongst most mainstream prisoners that paedophiles, those prisoners classified as 'dogs' or 'rock spiders', were fair targets for random acts of violence. Beau, who had also spent many years in most West Australian prisons, described the hierarchical structure and belief system within prison culture in this way:

> In prison terms a dog is a giver. He's someone who will sell you out for his own benefit. Also rock spiders — well, child molesters — are looked upon as dogs as well because they are the lowest form. The hierarchy within the prison, on our side of the fence ... well, dogs, they're at the lowest end of the scale. Lifers and murderers are at the top and everybody else fits in between ... I wouldn't talk to a dog. It's just not a done thing.

Prisoners' Perceptions of their own Violence

Most of the male participants told me that when they first entered the prison system they considered themselves to be either non-violent or only mildly violent people. Peter reinforced this notion:

> I wasn't a violent person when I first went to prison. I committed a crime that certainly frightened some people but I didn't (physically) hurt them. When I first went to prison I was young and small built so I was picked on by a group of predators. In my first week in jail I was raped by several prisoners. I learned to be very violent very quickly after that but it was always controlled. I mean violence doesn't come naturally to me.

The forms of predatory behaviour or prisoner victimisation mentioned by Peter — usually against young, vulnerable prisoners — are relatively common in the prison environment

where, in many cases, 'clues to vulnerability are not picked up or where no allowance for weakness is made' by prison staff (Toch 1977:142).

The participants all spoke in terms of degrees of violence. They recognised a 'non-violent' category of prisoners. These were people who did not provoke a physical fight and who walked away if physical violence ensued. John, who described himself as 'non-violent' reflected on the fact that:

> In prison people get so annoyed with other people that there's confrontations, arguments, fights. Once that sort of animosity starts it spreads like wildfire ... I've been subject to several assaults and I built up my own self-protective mechanism ... I'll spend anything up to 16–17 hours in my cell to avoid confrontations.

Mark also described himself as a 'non-violent' person and said that he would 'avoid anyone who's a troublemaker and any situation that looked as though it might end in a fight'. One notch up, the participants recognised a 'mildly violent' group of prisoners who did not set out to provoke a physical fight, who sometimes fought when provoked themselves but never used weapons such as knives, clubs or firearms and never set out to inflict serious physical injury on another person. Alan described the typical career of a 'mildly violent' prisoner:

> It's like this, young bloke comes to prison, looks young, slightly built perhaps, and he becomes prey ... I've seen plenty of young blokes come in. Initially they're scared, they cop a flogging or they get raped ... so what happens is they won't go looking for fights but even when they know they're going to take a hiding they know they're never going to take a backward step again. Even a person who hasn't got the physical ability to fight or even a violent nature will learn that it's better to put up some sort of a fight than to go along submissively.

In line with this, Toch (1977:97) suggests, '... men who have had to fight for survival are apt to gird their loins in anticipation of the next threat or challenge'. Being on the losing end in an attack is often regarded as an indicator of weakness while strength is ascribed to the aggressor. Thus the incentive to fight back is high since we can assume that 'where fight is subculturally admired, we can infer that flight is subculturally despised' (Toch 1977:170).

While several of the respondents were imprisoned because they committed crimes of violence, some of them said they used the threat of violence as a means of getting their own way rather than because they wished to harm their victims in the first place. As Indermaur (1996:12) indicates, 'the instrumental use of force is often not considered by offenders to be "violence", that is, to fall within their definition of what constitutes violent behaviour'. Dick's statement echoed this type of justification as well as revealing another dimension:

> Look, you set out to do a burg (burglary) because you need money for a hit. The house is empty but someone comes back while you're still in there. What are you going to do? Of course, you threaten them but you're not going to hurt them. Fuck, you're more scared than they are. You just want to get out of there.

Here Dick's line of reasoning supports Indermaur's argument that although violence and power are constantly interconnected, 'contrary to some popular views, violence is not an expression of the existence of power but its absence' (Indermaur 1996:6).

Along these lines, several participants said that they had used weapons to threaten their victims. Their collective view, however, was that there was a distinct difference, in terms of degree of violence, between *threats* of harm and *actual* physical harm. John illustrated this when he spoke of his crimes, 'I committed three armed robberies but the actual thing I used was an empty box. I created terror in the mind of the lady teller but there was never

any risk of physical harm'. Dick also described what he perceived to be the difference between threats of violence and actual violence:

> I was convicted of several armed robberies for my first prison sentence. I used various weapons to commit these crimes but, although I threatened or implied by my actions that I could hurt people, I never physically hurt any of my victims. I only threatened to hurt them to achieve my aim, which was to get them to hand over the money.

As Indermaur (1996:12) observes, 'once learned as a functional response, violence can easily be seen as appropriate in meeting the perpetrator's social (power) goals'.

Only two of the eleven participants in the study described themselves as violent people. These were Beau and David. Beau portrayed himself as a person both capable of and comfortable with, extreme violence. He described his propensity for violence thus:

> With the reputation I have of being a violent person, I mean I may not seem that way ... If I have a fight with somebody and really, really want to hurt this person I will. I will jump all over his head and I will beat his head in. I will make him hurt real bad and possibly take him to the brink of death before I stop.

Beau was not released within days of this interview as expected. He was charged with assaulting another prisoner and spent several more months in prison before eventually being released.

Sexual Violence in Prisons

According to Heilpern (1998:41), 'one-quarter of males aged 18 to 25 incarcerated in New South Wales prisons report they have been sexually assaulted while in custody' with the perpetrators of these assaults almost always being other male prisoners. Heilpern further claims that 'sexual assault in prison is rarely reported' (1998:41). It is sometimes argued that male to male sexual assault in prisons is a simple consequence of the placement of many men of sexually active age in a male-only environment. However, this fails to address the question of domination related to sexual violation, regardless of gender. Like all forms of rape, prison rape is not about sexual gratification but is about power and control – this time within an all-male enclosed physical and social environment where violence is viewed as a rational act and where the penis becomes one of the weapons of choice. As Heilpern (1998:81–82) suggests, 'the focus is not on who is your sex partner so much as "who is in charge, that is who is doing the fucking, the penetrating, who is the man"'.

> Prisons are, above all else, a closed environment with a pecking order based on brute force, gang power and fear. They have their own economy, hierarchy, discipline and even their own language ... The power stratifications of prison populations also apply to sexual relations between prisoners ... Each system has a hierarchy with "punk" — the term punk is used for a man who is coerced ... into a passive homosexual role — at the bottom (Heilpern 1998:77).

Although none of the research questions in the larger study specifically related to the issue, several of the participants spoke about sexual assault during interviews. Three of the male participants said that they had been anally and orally raped by other prisoners on more than one occasion. One of these men acknowledged being gang-raped when he first went to prison as a teenager. Another said that he had anally and orally raped other prisoners and, throughout his long prison sentence, had engaged in both consensual and coercive sex with other prisoners. Three of the remaining male participants said that it was not uncommon for young male prisoners to be raped or coerced into having sex in exchange for protection or drugs. One of the women participants said that she had been propositioned and 'felt up' by

both male and female prison officers and, whilst in a regional prison, had been offered rewards (extra phone calls) for sexual favours.

Only one of the three participants who had been sexually assaulted had reported the assault to the prison authorities. John told me:

> When I was subject to my last assault... I had to fight the Department so that I could get a representative from SARC (Sexual Assault Resource Centre) to come in and see me...They decided to give me twice weekly sessions with the psychologist to get down to the nitty gritty of why I was like I was. And in the meantime I've had conditions playing up where I ended up having to be hospitalised because of the panic attacks I had since then.

John said that he had been subjected to several sexual assaults throughout his many years in prison. From his interview it was apparent that he had been led to believe, or had otherwise assumed, that somehow he was at least in part to blame for his victimisation in this way. John is physically small and frail. He is a gay man in his late forties who has spent almost all his adult life in prison. Heilpern (1998:41) found that 'younger, smaller gay prisoners' were at greatest risk of sexual assault in prison.

Peter was anally and orally raped by a group of five prisoners when he first went to prison. He said, 'I was nineteen but looked fifteen...they grabbed me in the shower block, beat the crap out of me, held me down and took turns butt-fucking me. I thought they were going to kill me and I thought I was going to die from the pain...I learned how to fight dirty after that'. Peter never reported his sexual assault to the authorities and instead attached himself to a group of prison 'heavies' for protection. He said that he felt a great deal of shame because of what happened and had continual emotional and behavioural problems which caused him to 'act up' and attract prison charges which resulted in loss of parole and an extended prison term. He said that 'from time to time I'd just freak out and they'd quieten me down with Largactil'.

David said that he had been sexually assaulted when he first went to prison as a teenager, and that he had subsequently exchanged sexual favours with other prisoners for drugs. He went on to say that he had sexually assaulted other prisoners, '...well, you are either predator or you are prey. I started off by being beaten, raped and intimidated, then I lost all fear and thought "what's good for the goose"...most of my sexual aggression has been played out under the influence of drugs but I can get all the sex I want in prison'. In this way David played out the scenario whereby victims of sexual assault seek to regain their power 'through the same violent means by which they think it was lost' (Heilpern 1998:90). Also, by becoming a sexual predator within the prison, David avoided being assigned to the bottom of the pecking order 'where life is most unbearable'.

In contrast to these accounts, Linda said that she had 'never been touched or propositioned by another prisoner but I'm obviously straight and they'd respect that'. However, she also claimed that it was 'a fairly common occurrence for young, attractive prisoners to be propositioned by prison officers, mostly male but sometimes female. They'll usually suggest it when you need an extra phone call or some other favour'.

I note here that during the course of this study, a female prisoner (not one of the participants), who had been in custody for more than a year, became pregnant. The prison authorities publicly suggested that this prisoner had obtained semen in a container from her imprisoned male boyfriend during a public court appearance and impregnated herself. In this way the authorities ignored the occurrence of sexual activity between male prison staff and women prisoners. As Heilpern (1998:87) claims: 'The [prison authority's] culture of turning a blind eye is endemic — and enduring'. Such official acquiescence is seen as 'the

paradox of institutional control. Selective blindness, the creation of "heavies", the control of privileges, and maintaining the inmates' code of ostracising the sexually exploited all amount to culpability on the part of prison authorities in perpetuating victimisation'.

The Position of Violence within Prison Subculture

Criminological and sociological research on violence has most often focused on the heightened incidence of violence amongst the socially and economically disadvantaged within society. For example, the Newcastle *Thousand Family Study* found that, 'densely populated households are more likely to produce violent criminals' and that there is 'an association between multiple deprivation in childhood and subsequent violent behaviour' (Jones 2000:105). Indermaur (1996:7) also suggests that while 'social structure may influence the value of rewards of violence it may also lead to an increased propensity to violence' when 'individuals who are truly disadvantaged in social power relations are likely to experience... "angry" aggression... and conclude that a violent response is needed'. In short, both criminological and sociological arguments suggest that within wider society it is persons of least power and the lowest socio-economic status who are more likely to perpetrate crimes of violence. In contrast, within prison culture this power structure is inverted and it is those prisoners with high status who are most likely to act in a violent manner.

Within the prison hierarchy it is so called 'prison heavies' who wield most power and are most likely to be violent. It is vulnerable prisoners of low status — protected prisoners such as child molesters — who have little or no power and are least likely to be violent within the overall prison context, but who may replicate similar 'mini' hierarchies of violence within closed protection units. Within the mainstream prison context, this means that protected or low status prisoners are most likely to be the victims of violence as well as being least likely to display overt violent behaviour towards other prisoners. John, a protected prisoner, explained his situation this way, '... when you're in protection you're targeted by mainstream prisoners because they think we're all tamps (paedophiles). So we have to go to places like the library or canteen all together on a Friday to cut down the risk of assault'. Mark, who was also a protected prisoner, described his position in this way:

> When I was in maximum at Casuarina I was in unit six. All of unit six is protection. We were always the targets for the other prisoners, you know, yelling abuse at us, threatening us with violence and ... we had to be escorted everywhere we went in the prison. We had to go to work at different times from mainstream prisoners but every now and again the officers would let down their guard and one or more of us would get beaten up.

Conversely, Beau who agreed that he was known within the system as a 'prison heavy' and who described himself as 'someone who is looked up to within the system, a spokesman for my people' explained that he had to occasionally 'break a few heads when the young guns try to flex their muscle and give me grief'. Alan also described this phenomenon:

> The pecking order in jail is simple. Once again it's a survival thing and if you want to do your time in some degree of comfort, and by that I mean physical safety without worrying too much, then you have to display mental and physical toughness. In here that means you have to show that you're capable of looking after yourself physically so, when you're threatened, you react with violence. Sometimes it's even necessary to be the aggressor to keep your position of strength. You don't have to act violently all the time, just often enough to be seen by others as someone who it's best not to mess with ... sometimes this can mean you do extra time.

On this, Toch (1977:150) suggests that in prison 'the index of manliness is pugnaciousness' and, conversely, that the 'criterion of unmanliness is fear… to show fear is to invite further threatening… the most stressful environmental pressures are invoked against those who are most helplessly susceptible to stress'. In sum, within the prison community, the ability to use violence or threats of violence to generate fear in others lifts the status of the prison heavy who, in turn, 'feels fearless because his victims … are terrified' (Toch 1977:152).

Categories of Prison Violence

I have identified four main categories of violence related to which group perpetrates such acts. These include acts of violence against the self such as suicide attempts and self-mutilation. The other categories of violence are: prisoner to prisoner violence; prison officer to prisoner violence, and prisoner to prison officer violence.

Self-harm and Suicide

Between 1980 and 2005 there were 150 deaths in West Australian prisons. According to the Deaths in Custody in Australia: National Deaths in Custody Program Annual Report (2005:65) seventy-seven of these deaths were classified as suicides. Liebling (1992:49) found that 'about 90 per cent of prison suicides are accomplished by hanging and that they are most likely to occur at night'. The number of incidents of self-harm in prisons is more difficult to calculate accurately as, according to the State Ombudsman (2000:172), there is no accurate reporting mechanism for incidents of self-harm within West Australian prisons and this has resulted in the Department of Corrective Services not knowing 'the true extent of self-harming activity in its prisons'. Biles (1994:23) suggests that self harming activity is likely to be 'at least 16 times' more prevalent than completed suicides. Within this study, five of the eleven participants had self-mutilated and/or attempted suicide whilst in custody. The violent and brutalising culture of prisons, together with the effects of institutionalisation, often leads to despair and self-loathing in prisoners. David spoke of his experiences of self-harm:

> I've only ever harmed myself when I've been really strung out to the point of total confusion. It's been when I've been at my most powerless to get anywhere… like, recently, when the screws kept winding me up, saying I had more prison charges and wasn't being released on my due date… I couldn't find out anything…one screw would tell me 'yes' and the next would tell me 'no'. It fucked with my mind so much I got hold of a razor blade and slashed up my ears. I've done that a few times, cut bits off my body.

Judy said that she had attempted suicide when she first went to prison. She said that she 'had to go cold turkey from the grog and I was seeing things and it felt real dark. It was the worst feeling: feeling nothing really. I got hold of some pills and swallowed the lot but it wasn't enough to kill me'. Linda also told me that she had wanted to die when her baby was taken from her in prison. She said that she started using heroin again and 'never cared if I overdosed. Sometimes I thought it'd be better if I never woke up'. John spoke of the hopelessness some prisoners felt: 'you get the constant tension in here…there's some mornings you wake up feeling you can't face the world…take all these deaths in custody. It's pointing out how much desperation there is here'.

Liebling (1992:67) verifies such participants' accounts and reports that self-harm 'is a continuum along which one step may prove to be the first stage of a pathway of despair'. Johnson and Toch (1982:82) also suggest that:

> If a prisoner is placed in an unbearably stressful situation with no means at his disposal to cope with this overwhelming experience, he may divert his feelings of hopelessness

towards himself. This 'self-destructive breakdown' has been identified as unique to the prison setting, and it is seen as an index of the personal difficulties that face prisoners.

Prisoner to Prisoner Violence

According to the participants, violence between prisoners is the most common category of prison violence. Alan explained the pervasive nature of prisoner to prisoner violence in these terms:

> You've got the nature of the person who's in prison…they may not be violent out there but they're not really upstanding members of the community either. To them, to go and bash someone senseless is not as serious as it is to someone in the community. It's a whole set of different values in here. The most common solution to problems in here is to use violence… It's not just the violence but you need to quickly adjust to the prison routine, how things are done and the pecking order…this is a different world. Everything's magnified in here, every problem, every deprivation…and the level of violence that's acceptable is also magnified… so you quickly become desensitised to violence and all the little daily humiliations. They all become part of your life as a prisoner.

The participants talked about several types of violence between prisoners. These were 'payback', 'predatory' and 'random' or 'impulsive' violence. Alan said that payback violence was normally the most extreme form and often resulted in some degree of permanent physical incapacitation or even death.

> Payback violence in prison probably accounts for the most extreme forms of violence because it's an emotional thing. If something has been done to you or someone close to you then you've really got to make an example of the person who did it…you've got to, or you'll be seen as weak and therefore likely to become the victim of violence at some stage…Payback violence is probably worse than the rapes and sexual violence. Payback is probably the worst physical violence of the lot. I have seen prisoners die from payback violence.

Beau agreed that payback was the most serious form of violence and potentially fatal for its victims. 'If some punk does something to you or your cobber or a family member then you've got to sort them out. You lose face if you don't... and inside [prison] you're likely to have an audience egging you on so you might take it too far…then that can lead to more payback and so on'. John also spoke of payback violence and claimed that the most common form of payback was '…when you're arrested with someone and he tells the police on you to get a lighter sentence then his payback will usually come in prison. It'll usually be a severe beating at the very least'.

Predatory violence between prisoners is usually used to cement position or recruit subordinates to a group or gang. According to Alan, 'predators prey on the young, weak prisoners, often those with a habit…they see a young bloke come in scared and if he hasn't got some form of protection arranged then they'll target him. They'll flog them, rape them or just take their gear. It's like a jungle: survival of the fittest'. John acknowledged that he had been the victim of both predatory and random violence. He described his experience of what he termed predatory violence thus:

> I've been sexually assaulted on several occasions. I know it's because I'm physically small and weak… They wanted me to do stuff for them and the sexual assault was their way of forcing me to be part of their group…I went into protection because of that but you're not safe from predators there either. There's a pecking order in protection too and that's why I spend most of my time in my cell.

David acknowledged that the authorities classified him as a predator within the system. He said that he had, on occasion, used threats of violence towards other prisoners in order to

achieve certain objectives. He claimed that instrumental violence such as this might be used to 'get some gear [heroin] or avail myself of some sex or even just to make sure the other bloke knew who was in charge, especially if he was sharing my slot [cell]. Also, you've got to establish your position of strength or you're fucked'. Beau also believed that the prison authorities saw him as a predator. He said:

> I tend to be a spokesperson for my people and that gives me position...but by the same token, if there's a bit of family feuding in the wind or someone's poked sticks at me I'll have to front up and that means you see another side of me that not many people like...I can be very scary.

Impulsive or random acts of violence between prisoners are also recognised in the prison environment, linked to sudden dislikes or expressions of hatred rather than the planned, instrumental or rational use of violence. In talking about his 'predatory' forms of violence, Beau also recognised the impulsive nature of his behaviour:

> In a fight I tend to lose my temper to a degree where I can really hurt somebody and not know because my temper takes over like I'm not thinking logically. It has to go full cycle before I wind down...I have been like this on several occasions and hurt people real bad but then the upside is it reinforces my position and lets them know not to mess with me.

On the other side of the fence, John said that 'because I'm in the protection block other prisoners just assume that I'm a tamp [paedophile] and I can just be walking out of the unit and another prisoner will kick my legs out from under me or push me around...that can happen any time'. Alan described impulsive violence as 'part and parcel of being in prison...someone looks at the wrong crim in the wrong way and can cop a belting, even if you bump into someone accidentally it can be seen as an insult and end up in a fight...that sort of violence is usually no big deal, no one usually dies from that'. Dick said that random acts of violence happen frequently in all areas of the prison. His reaction to such violence was 'if you see a couple of blokes at it you usually turn away and see nothing. Violence usually flares up quickly and subsides just as quickly, especially if a screw comes along...the only time I'd get involved is if it's a mate copping a flogging'.

Prison Officer to Prisoner Violence

The participants maintained that prison officers were at times violent to prisoners. In this respect, they spoke of both officially sanctioned and hidden violence. Officially sanctioned violence includes official use of violence via various punishment and control mechanisms such as authorised use of shackles, hobbles and chains, use of chemical restraints such as mace and pepper sprays, enforced use of prescription drugs, enforced orifice searches and in extreme cases, the use of a five point restraint bed. I asked Alan to describe how a prisoner is shackled. He said that there were two main ways to shackle a prisoner:

> It depends how they apply the shackles which position you'll be in. If we're talking a MSU [Metropolitan Security Unit] escort shackle...I mean this is how I'm shackled if I've got to go to hospital. You're shackled leg to leg at the ankles, arm to arm at the wrists, then there's a chain from the arm to leg shackle and you're handcuffed to an officer and can just about walk upright [demonstrates an upright shuffle]. However, that chain from arm to leg can be shortened to any length they like. For a prisoner who's been violent or is going off then they'll drag that chain and shorten it to keep you in the foetal position...shackles are certainly over-used in this system...there are guidelines for their use but individual officers just make that decision and sometimes it's only because they don't like the bloke and just for the fun of it they'll shackle him.

David said that he had been physically subdued on several occasions by the enforced administration of drugs. He described his experience thus:

> When I've gone off on occasion and they've done a cell extraction on me — which means at least four screws or the MSU all kitted up coming in and getting me — then they've dragged me off to an 'obs' (observation) cell, generally giving me a going over on the way and zonked me out with a needle full of whatever … you might not wake up for two days.

The use of unofficial violence by prison officers against prisoners was viewed as less common and generally conceded to be a form of payback violence. According to Alan:

> It's very unusual for prisoners to be violent against screws, but if they are or even if they complain about a screw, then they can expect payback…that payback usually involves ongoing and long-term punishment and continuous revenge from other prison officers. This can be as simple as a continuous violation of the prisoner's rights but most often it also involves regular floggings…most crims won't complain because it just means more floggings.

At the time of writing Alan had spent seventeen years in various West Australian prisons and claimed that overt physical violence by mainstream prison officers had lessened in the past decade. Against this, he also claimed that the Metropolitan Security Unit (MSU) was trained to instil terror in prisoners in situations such as cell extractions or riots. He described MSU methods of prisoner restraint:

> They'll come in with their boots and their batons, their shields and their helmets, their yelling and whatever else they use… and they'll flog the living sense out of somebody to subdue them… In prison there is a degree of acceptance of violence like this… often it's more of a psychological thing. I mean if you see ten people with helmets, batons and shields then 99 times out of a 100 you're going to say 'sorry, I'll stop what I'm doing'… that's the bottom line…In the early eighties the physical brutality was pretty high… physical violence was their way of doing things… now it's more of a mental brutalisation…There's much more psychological brutalisation goes on from officers to prisoners. That is an everyday occurrence; the constant threat that if you do this you will lose this; visits, television, phone calls.

Although several of the male participants claimed that overt violence is not as common as it once was within the prison system, many deep concerns remain. At the turn of the century, the Deaths in Custody Watch Committee (WA) compiled a report on violence against prisoners in West Australian prisons and took the report to the 25th Session of the Committee against Torture in Geneva. The main aim of the report was to bring to the Committee's attention 'systematic and individual cases of violations of Australia's obligations under the Convention against Torture in Western Australian (WA) prisons and other places of detention'. It claimed that:

> No general inquiry has addressed the large task of investigating the treatment of prisoners across the range from serious allegations of torture and assault, excessive and unreasonable use of restraints and of isolation cells in injurious, cruel and degrading conditions, to less severe but more routine and systemic abuses. As a result, the institutional culture of contempt for prisoners and the related systemic problems, which are conducive to torture and cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment… in prisons, remain unresolved (Deaths in Custody Watch Committee WA 2000:1).

The Report of Deaths in Custody Watch Committee provides more than twenty case summaries of examples of violations of the Convention. These are based on prisoners' statements, many of which can be corroborated by evidence 'in the form of witness statements, medical reports, photographs or other materials' (2000:11).

Prisoner to Prison Officer Violence

According to the participants, prisoner to prison officer violence is very rare. Alan claimed that 'it happens, but usually only with a prison officer who's a real bastard and then hardly

ever … I've been in jail in WA for seventeen years all up and I've probably heard of half a dozen incidents where prisoners have used actual physical violence against prison officers'. John supported this: 'most prisoners wouldn't think of hurting a prison officer … well they might mouth off about it but commonsense would prevail because the repercussions would last for the entire sentence'.

Nonetheless, there are documented cases of serious prisoner to prison officer violence. I refer in particular to violence directed against prison officers during the Fremantle Prison Riots of 1988 and the 1998 Christmas Day Riot at Casuarina Prison. Alan was heavily involved in the riot at Fremantle Prison and I asked him about the mindset of the prisoners involved and the degree of violence.

> (How violent in real terms was the riot?)

> Initially it was very violent. The initial purpose of the riot was not violent in terms of violence against persons. It was to draw attention to problems and very bad conditions within the prison; inhuman conditions. We were intent on destroying the prison not hurting any person, be it prison officer or whatever. The goal was to burn the prison right down.

> (So this was quite calculated. It wasn't just an ad hoc spontaneous riot?)

> It was a strategically planned operation. What went wrong initially was that a lot of the young blokes not involved in the planning…saw an opportunity to go berserk and grabbed any weapons that were available — iron bars, lumps of wood, anything like that and just started belting any uniform in sight. That was never the plan…there was full on violence for about five minutes…after that there was no more violence but there was the threat of violence in the air the whole time…there were five prison officers held hostage in the yard and there were plenty of prison officers on the top cocking firearms, pointing them at people…so the potential for violence was always there…it was never meant to be a violent exercise…although with hindsight the potential for violence was always high in a prison where conditions were so bad and feelings were running high.

Alan's contention that the 1988 Fremantle riot was a strategically planned operation to draw attention to ongoing problems and inhumane conditions in the prison is supported by Sykes' (1971:110) argument that prison riots:

> … do not suddenly come into being but are a long time in the making. They are the culmination of a series of minor crises, each of which sets in motion forces for the creation of a new and more serious crisis… riots are not an 'accident'… nor is the prison always a powder keg, as it is so commonly presented, waiting to be touched off by some chance spark.

Concluding Comments

In concluding, I reiterate that the research schedule from the original larger study contained no questions relating specifically to violence. Instead, violence was raised by each of the male participants during the course of the interviews. Most alarming is the matter of fact manner in which the men spoke about acts of extreme violence, as though violence in all its forms was part and parcel of everyday prison life; thus supporting Bottoms' implication 'that prison culture might exhibit a perverse kind of order in which violence is the norm' (cited in Edgar, O'Donnell & Martin 2003:6). McVicar (in Marsh & Campbell 1982:201) repeats this argument, claiming that 'most prison violence, both between prisoners and between warders and prisoners, was a perfectly normal phenomenon… It was as normal, for example, as the law-abiding citizen calling the police when he himself is assaulted'. And, while the female participants did not specifically refer to violence, their interviews clearly outlined the systemic brutality they endured and observed during their terms of imprisonment.

In addition, the prisoner participant, Alan, who supplied much of the background information for the study has described the violent nature of imprisonment and has, over the years, spoken to me of specific incidents of extreme violence and the general propensity for aggression within the prison system. Because of the violent and brutal nature of prisons we cannot then assume that prisons present 'a just form of punishment — which at least limits the severity of punishment to what is proportionate to the seriousness of the crime' (Duff & Garland 1994:334).

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