

# **‘Kidulthood’: Ethnography, juvenile prison violence and the transition from ‘boys’ to ‘men’**

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## **Abstract**

The article explores how teenage boys (aged 15-17 years old) in an English young offender institution (YOI) engage in and construct prison violence. Focusing on the relationship between violence and the performance of *adolescent* prison masculinities, it presents three key findings. First, there are key differences between juvenile and adult prison violence, (behaviour that is framed in terms of being a ‘real man’ or a ‘little boy’). Second, the performance of masculinity is complicated by the striking vulnerability of child prisoners and masks the real problems that all young people experience ‘*handling jail*’. Third, the performance of ‘manhood’ is an unfinished, negotiated and incomplete work where young people exist in a state of liminality and ‘kidulthood,’ catapulted into premature adulthood but retaining aspects of their childhood sensibilities and needs. Thus, gendered performances are mediated and constructed in accordance to youth and adulthood.

## **Key words**

Prison, ethnography, violence, masculinities, juveniles

## **Introduction**

In July 2016, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Prisons, Peter Clarke, declared that the ‘simple and unpalatable truth about many prisons’ in England and Wales is that they have become ‘unacceptably and violent and dangerous places’ (Clarke, 2016). Of particular concern is the disproportionate amount of recorded violence involving child prisoners. Juvenile young offender institutions (YOIs) have the highest assault rates (MoJ, 2016) and concerns about levels of violence and bullying have been a consistent theme of a series of YOI inspection reports.

Although the correlation between age and prison violence has long been recognised (Butler, 2008; Arbach-Lucioni et al, 2012), few studies focus specifically on juveniles and those that do typically originate from North America where juvenile custodial institutions are quite different (see Sorenson and Cunningham, 2007; Kuanliang et al, 2008; Keith and Griffith, 2014; Scott, 2014). The available British research is not only dated, but has tended to focus on specific aspects of victimisation, such as bullying (see, for example, Beck, 1995; McGurk and McDougall, 1992; Palmer and Farmer, 2002) or sexual victimisation (McGurk *et al*, 2000), without exploring the problem of juvenile prison violence more generally. This has led some scholars to explain the incidence of juvenile prison violence by stressing the relatively immature, impulsive reactions of young people (Bottoms, 1999). However, as this article will argue, there are deeper issues at stake.

Building on an extensive, on-going ethnographic study of prison violence within juvenile, young adult and adult prisons in England and Wales (see Gooch and Treadwell 2015, *forthcoming*; Gooch et al, 2015; Gooch, 2016), this article focuses on

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the dynamics of prison violence amongst teenage boys aged 15-17 years old. It contributes to the debate by documenting the distinctive features of contemporary juvenile prison violence and exploring the relevance, construction and performance of *adolescent* prison masculinities.

A wealth of studies connect the incidence of prison violence with the construction and performance of gender (see, for example, Sykes, 1958; Newton, 1994; Jewkes, 2002, 2005; Sim, 2004) suggesting that the acquisition of status as a 'real man' is linked to the appropriate use of violence (Michalski, 2015). However, previous research regarding prison masculinities has largely focused on adults (Crewe, 2009; Crewe *et al*, 2014; de Viggiani, 2012; Jewkes, 2002, 2005; Sabo *et al*, 2001) and although consideration has been given to the relevance of ethnicity and sexuality (Bosworth and Carrabine, 2001; Phillips, 2012), limited research has considered the importance of age. This is a significant oversight.

Juvenile prisoners are in a critical stage of maturation, and, crucially, transition - from childhood, to adolescence, to adulthood. The boundaries between childhood, adolescence and adulthood are not neatly marked and, as Robinson and Hockey note (2011), it is not just a question of how young people perceive and situate themselves within the *chronological* development from childhood to adulthood, but also how they *experience* and negotiate that transition which is important. In young prisoners this transition is complicated by the status of juvenile prisoners, who, by virtue of the Children Act 1989, are still children, but are held within a very 'adult' prison environment where they are defined first and foremost as a 'prisoner' (Gooch and Treadwell, 2015; Gooch, 2016).

The article begins by reviewing the literature on prison violence and masculinities and outlining the ethnographic study that informs the argument. The discussion then focuses on three key issues. First, it analyses how young people constructed the relationship between prison violence and masculinity. Second, the article explores how young people explained and justified the use of violence. Finally, it explores the complex relationship between the performance of a 'tough,' masculine bravado and a child's vulnerability. It is argued that prison violence is not only seen as a necessary survival tactic, but is also tied to the performance of *manhood*. It is not just a matter of masculinity, but the difference between adulthood and *boyhood*. Negotiating the transition from childhood to adulthood is by no means straightforward, nor is it completely achieved and, although these teenage boys sought to perform as 'men', they also behaved like the children they still were.

### **Prison Violence and Masculinities**

Prison violence, and the way it shapes the experience of imprisonment, has been of longstanding interest to prison scholars, generating a strikingly large number of studies testing the many variables that might explain its incidence (for an overview, see Bottoms, 1999). Understanding the purpose of prison violence is, however, complex and, in reality, its use may serve more than one aim or objective (Butler, 2008; Edgar *et al*, 2003). Although there is no consensus regarding those factors that might explain or predict the incidence of prison violence, the link to gender is often quickly made (Crewe, 2009; Butler, 2008; Jewkes, 2005; Newton, 1994; de Viggiani, 2012; Sims, 1994; Sabo *et al* 2001). Prison becomes a 'key institution site for the expression and reproduction of hegemonic masculinity' (Sabo, 2001: 5). Despite the early recognition

of gendered prison performances, it was not until fairly recently that scholars, often informed by Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity, interrogated the relationship between gender and prison sociology (see, for example, Abrams *et al*, 2008; Butler, 2008; Jewkes, 2002, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2001; Crewe, 2009; de Viggiani, 2012, Ugelvick, 2014).

Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity allows for multiple forms of masculinity but presupposes that there is a culturally dominant form of masculinity - hegemonic masculinity - distinguished from other (non-hegemonic) 'subordinate masculinities' and femininity (Connell, 1995). This same plurality of masculinities, and the power relations between them, is 'exemplified' in the prison context (Messerschmidt 2001; Sabo *et al*, 2001). Hegemonic masculinity in prisons has typically been described in terms of male dominance and power, toughness, physical aggression, heterosexuality and emotional fortitude (Sim, 1994; Sabo *et al*, 2001; Jewkes 2005; Crewe, 2006). However, more recently, scholars have sought to present a more nuanced analysis, suggesting that hegemonic masculinity is more fluid and malleable than initially supposed (Ricciardelli et al, 2015; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Masculinity is not a 'fixed entity' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 836), but finds expression in different ways depending on the setting, time and place. The construction of prison masculinities may vary depending on the penal culture, structure and environment (see Ricciardelli et al 2015). As Sim notes (1994), 'hegemonic masculinity' in an open prison may be different to that of a maximum-security prison or a YOI. Context matters. Thus, it is more appropriate to recognise the range of hegemonic masculinities evident in different prison environments (Ricciardelli et al 2015).

The potential differences in penal culture and environment are of particular importance when considering the experience of young people. Juvenile YOIs should operate a different regime to young adult and adult establishments, with a greater emphasis, theoretically at least, on the care and welfare of the child (see Her Majesty's Prison Service, 2012, Gooch, 2016). The ways in which this does, should or can generate differences in the experiences of children in prison is little understood. Only a small number of studies have focused on prison *adolescent* masculinities (see, in a North American context, Abrams *et al*, 2008; Cesaroni and Alvi, 2010) and these do not consider the notion of masculinities in transition. Child prisoners are at a key stage in life but are also growing up in unique circumstances. Imprisonment serves to disrupt normal life course and the extent to which this distorts young people's perceptions of 'childhood' and 'manhood,' and how it frames their conduct within prison, warrants attention.

The concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' does not assume that it is available to all men, but that it is an idealised version of masculinity to which they subscribe (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Prisoners may experience doubts about their ability to embody this vision of masculinity but fear the physical, social and economic repercussions should they appear vulnerable or weak. In such circumstances, the performance of a masculine identity has been described as a 'front' or 'mask' (Crewe, 2009; Jewkes, 2002, 2005; de Viggiani, 2012), one that emphasises a 'tough,' 'hard' masculinity and conceals the fragility of the 'macho' identity and any feelings of anxiety, powerless or fragility (Crewe, 2006). Notably, whilst it is widely recognised that children may be vulnerable in prison, how this frames the performance of

adolescent prison masculinities and gendered prison behaviours has attracted limited attention.

### **Prison Ethnography with Teenage Boys**

As part of an on-going ethnographic study of bullying and violence across the prison estate (including young adult, adult male and sex offender prisons), initial, exploratory research was conducted in an English YOI accommodating sentenced and remanded teenage boys aged 15-18 years old.<sup>1</sup> The YOI accommodated approximately 400 teenagers, often for less than three month periods. Initial access was facilitated by a colleague who had previously conducted research at the YOI and established a relationship with the senior management team. Initially, a period of time was spent observing daily life within the YOI and recording any observations made. The YOI was visited at different times of the day and week. Time was spent in all areas of the prison, including education, healthcare, segregation unit, residential units, and observing different aspects of prison life, such as adjudications and sentence planning meetings. This allowed the researcher to observe the incidence of violence and bullying as well as staff responses to such behaviour, including the use of force and segregation. It also enabled the researcher to experience the 'feel' of the prison.

Over a two-month period, time was spent observing every area of the prison, including education, healthcare, segregation, residential units, Reception and visits. This period of participant observation created opportunities to establish rapport with both staff and young people, which assisted the interview process. Semi-structured interviews were completed with 21 young people and 11 staff members. Interviews were conducted in a private room and digitally recorded. Young people were randomly selected from the prison roll before being invited to participate in the study. None declined to do so. Young people engaged easily in the interview process and were candid in their responses. They shared moving stories of their childhoods, expressed their fears, anxieties and feelings of remorse, guilt and self-doubt. In many of the interviews, young people's keen sense of pain, loss, frustration, bitterness and anger as well as, but to a lesser extent, hope freely emerged. Some interviews were very emotive while others were laced with humour. Some were keen to display their education folders, photographs of children, illustrations they had drawn and 'bars' (lyrics) they had written. The interviews generated rich data and were complimented by countless hours of informal dialogue. Additional access to wing files provided some triangulation of the data (King, 2000: 306), allowing details such as incidents of self-harm, the use of force, engagement in the regime etc., to be verified. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the transcripts coded and analysed using NVivo. All the names presented below are pseudonyms, some chosen by the participants.

There has been a growing trend in prisons research to introduce greater autoethnographic elements, foregrounding issues such as emotion, gender, age, class or ethnicity and positioning the researcher within the analysis itself (Jewkes, 2012; Earle and Phillips, 2016; Sloan, 2016). In analysing the performance of masculinity in a YOI accommodating teenage boys, it would therefore seem self-evident that my position as a young, female researcher would be a fruitful source of enquiry. However, as Crewe observes, is often difficult 'to reflect in meaningful ways on the links between our emotional or biographical experiences and the outcomes of our research,' (Crewe, 2014: 393) particularly as a lone researcher (Crewe, 2014: 393; Earle and Phillips, 2016: 233). As the research on prison violence continued across other sites, and first

one and then another male colleague joined the project, the relevance of gender (and other aspects such as class, background and professional experience) in the research process and its outcomes was not only rendered more visible but also generated new and different forms of data (see Gooch and Treadwell, *in progress*, Gooch, Treadwell and Sheldon, *forthcoming*; Gooch, *forthcoming*) as others have likewise found (Earle and Phillips, 2016). The absence of research partners in this initial study meant that it was impossible to know how the responses of the participants might have been different if undertaken by a male researcher. While it is undoubtedly true that my presence as a young, female researcher was of interest to both young people and staff – instigating questions about who I was and what I was doing – such questions are not atypical for prisons researchers. That said, some young men did display behaviour that suggested a degree of sexual objectification, by, for example, whistling, shouting comments about my physical appearance out of the cell windows, and giving me greater quantities of food in the staff canteen (which the prison officer queuing beside me said was a sign that I was ‘liked’). Such behaviour was quickly reprimanded by staff and never featured in the interview process. Whilst I developed strategies to ensure that appropriate boundaries were maintained, I never felt fearful, intimidated or unduly stressed. I was also never given the impression that participation in the research was deemed to be more attractive because I was a woman (cf. Gooch and Treadwell, *in progress*). Moreover, in the interviews itself, young men did not appear to stress their violent potential in order to bolster their masculine performances for my benefit, rather the primary and intended audience was each other.

### **‘Terrorising Others’<sup>2</sup>: Juvenile Prison Victimization and Masculinities**

Victimization was a central aspect of young people’s prison lives, with physical assaults and fights occurring on a daily basis. It is, therefore, not surprising that their primary concern was personal safety. This is not to say that they all lived in constant fear of assault, but they were aware of the fundamental need to ‘survive’ in an environment where they may be tested, intimidated and threatened. Young people could not ‘*let their guard down*’ and, as Crewe *et al* acknowledge (2014: 57), the need to remain vigilant against potential threats caused anxiety even amongst those capable of defending themselves.

Victimization was described as ‘*terrorising others*,’ and typically took the form of verbal abuse, physical assault, robbery and intimidation. Verbal abuse was a discrete and especially prevalent form of victimization. It included: insults; name-calling; ‘*little comments*’; ‘*taking the piss*’; and, shouting through cell windows. Like Edgar *et al*’s (2003) research, there was a certain amount of verbal abuse and ‘banter’ that was perceived to be a legitimate social interaction. Being able to engage in these competitive exchanges was important for social acceptance, but also reinforced aspects of ‘one up-manship’ (de Viggiani, 2012) and, specifically a young person’s wit and ability to overcome an opponent were respected. Conversely, failing to engage in verbal sparring or appearing to ‘lose’ was interpreted as a sign of weakness. Such exchanges could quickly become provocative, easily escalating to physical violence and, in this way, verbal abuse functioned as a ‘catalyst’ (Edgar *et al*, 2003: 34).

Shouting profanities, threats and abuse out of the windows is a particular problem in juvenile YOIs. Typically, it was a response to boredom but also allows young people to (often anonymously) victimise others without any immediate risk of physical harm. However, this ‘protective anonymity’ (Edgar *et al*, 2003: 68) could be

short-lived and such behaviour frequently initiated violent retaliation the following morning. Shane (17 years old) commented:

*A lot of fights go on there, when someone is shouting through the window. At night, if someone shouting through the window, starts getting cheeky, straight in the morning, that's a fight.*

'Cheekiness' was interpreted as an attempt to undermine the person at whom it was directed and could not go unpunished. Such behaviour had a very public dimension. Young people were so consumed with the desire for respect that attempts to undermine their public image were difficult to ignore. Anyone shouting through the windows would be heard by most, if not all of the wing, and could not be ignored without damage to their reputation. It was not enough for young people to believe that they were manly - they must prove it and do so publicly. Even if they had doubts about their manliness, their survival depended, in part, on the ability to project and perform a 'manly,' in a credible way (Goffman, 1959).

Verbal abuse not only serves to determine who would have 'the last word,' but cuts straight to issues of 'manhood,' not just masculinity. Such abuse was typically described as 'mugging off' or 'boying off,' referring to the public embarrassment and humiliation caused by slights, insults or slurs. The phrase 'boying off' directly connects abusive and violent behaviour with the performance of masculinity. When asked what started fights, Ryan (17 years old) responded:

*I would say mostly comments, things that have happened, people taking the mick, stupid things, I've seen people fight over stupid things like someone just stepping on their trainers, blatantly someone saying sorry for stepping on their trainers, that would cause a fight, bringing up the past, trying to mug someone off. Anything like that will bring it out, anything, minor things, minor.*

Similarly, in the context of discussing the outcomes for victims, Darrell explained how being placed on 'access', a scheme designed to allow isolated movements around the YOI, led to 'boying off':

*Put the matie who is getting bullied on access but the problem is once you get put on access is the whole jail knows that you are a faggot ... Once you are on access, always with the govs [officers] and that, it's not just your wing that can see it, all the wings can see it. You know they would boy him off about it.*

The significance of 'boying off' is the damage that it could do to a young person's reputation and the diminution of his status as a 'real man' to that of a 'boy.' Young people's experiences of prison victimisation were mediated by their age and stage of maturation: victims were not just exposed as inferior, but also as children who could not compete in the adult prison world. The language of 'boying off' is simply not used in young adult or adult prisons and reflects the transitional process experienced by young prisoners. The seriousness of being 'boyed off' was such that young people believed that it required physical retaliation. Any attempt to 'violate' a young person's image, reputation or status had to be clearly and severely dealt with. Aaron (17 years old) explained:

*Aaron:*

*The boy had tried to violate one of my other friends n'it, and I punched him in his face yeah and he tried to come to me n'it and so then I took my stuff off and went to him, started punching him, kicking him, both fighting and then I picked up a pool ball, flinged it at his head and it bounced off his head and bare blood just starting spilling out.*

*Interviewer:*

*So when you said that he tried to violate your mate, what do you mean by violate?*

*Aaron:*

*Like obviously like the pool game yeah, we were playing pool and he was last and the gov was like. "He's next," and he was like, "No, I'm next." Do you get me? And obviously that's a violation - do you get me? Because he has to wait, til the end n'it before.*

Viewed objectively, the acts or verbal exchanges that triggered physical retaliation might seem relatively minor. Triggers included being laughed at (David), pushing in line for the telephone (Stephen) and looking at someone the wrong way (Chris). Thus, perceptions of 'threatening behaviour' extended beyond physical threats to include perceived affronts to their public identity. Young men were highly sensitive to instances of 'disrespect' and any possibility that their manliness might be publicly challenged.

The ability to mete out physical violence was a key feature of the construction of masculinity. Since violence was part of the 'everyday framework' of prison life (Bottoms, 1999), reinforcing the 'survival of the fittest' mentality. Reciprocal victimisation was commonplace (Edgar *et al*, 2003) and young people would use force to defend themselves 'even if I'm David and they're Goliath' (Tre, 15 year old). Physical violence was seen as an acceptable way to resolve disputes and 'get things done:

*If they say, "Give me a burn [tobacco]," you just turn around and say, "What the fuck are you on about?" Like just stand up to them and if they say, "Let's fight it out," you fight it out. If you get knocked out, you get knocked out, defended yourself (Chris).*

Whilst a certain amount of physical violence was seen as an acceptable way to resolve conflict, unlike adult prisoners (see Jones and Schmid, 2000), very serious events were not 'explained' acts but appeared to 'shock' young people, disrupting their sense of equilibrium. Young people distinguished between 'honest' fighting and 'snaking' people, language peculiar to the juvenile YOI and describing physical assault from behind with a weapon, such as pool cue or ball:

*Wow, it's [snaking people] popular in this prison; you can never catch someone fighting face to face. It's always from behind, always from behind ... And it don't always happen with fists, even on the wing with pool balls in socks and pool cues and that. This is far for me. 'Cause in another prison, you can at least tell someone, "Come here, come here," not even loud but just tell them, "Come here, I'm going to whack you up," but they at least have a chance to get ready*

*to know that you are going to hit them or something ... But if it was by surprise ... I reckon I've got more chance of getting knocked out (Nathan).*

Such 'blind' assaults lacked something of the perceived masculine nature of violence: it was not 'manly violence.' Thus, in much the same way as street violence (Anderson, 1999; Brookman, Michalski, 2015), a distinction was drawn between 'normal', legitimate violence and illegitimate, excessive violence (also see, Caputo-Levine, 2012; Jewkes, 2005). Whereas the construction of hegemonic masculinity was predicated upon physical strength and the use of the physical body as a weapon, the use of weapons was more likely to induce serious injury and rendered the assault unevenly balanced in favour of the aggressor. This heightened the perception of physical vulnerability and reinforced the belief that you always had to '*watch your back*' (Tyrone), further endorsing the perceived need to respond quickly and decisively to threats.

Like 'snaking' others, bullying was also seen as unacceptable behaviour. Bullying was an identifiable problem within the YOI. However, young people appeared more concerned about other forms of victimisation, such as physical violence, and failed to provide clear definitions of 'bullying' (also Edgar et al, 2003). That said and in the context of bullying, verbal abuse was seen to serve a specific purpose, isolating young people and making them feel inferior. For example, John explained:

*Say someone was in there and I wanted to bully him like, just say little comments to him that are going to make him feel low and that...*

Verbal abuse was often a precursor to more sustained attempts to exploit and rob the victim. In custody relatively benign objects attracted disproportionate significance. Rosary beads in particular, appeared to become a 'status symbol' divorced from any religious connotations or significance. Stephen remarked that '*jaws [are] broken for these rosary beads that they've got around their necks, different colours, it's ridiculous.*' Rosary beads were compared to '*gold chains on the out*' and Chris noted that beads would not be worn '*on the out*' but that '*it's fashion here.*' Since young people are required to dress uniformly, they could only display particular aspects of their identity through their choice of trainer: 'most inmates ... literally wear their masculine credentials on their feet' (Jewkes, 2005: 57). Thus, the acquisition of rosary beads provides another visible display of status and their masculine credentials since they imply (custodial) experience and the ability to acquire restricted items.

Young people were keen to avoid being labelled as a bully and it was not surprising that they should do so. Being officially identified as a bully prompted more intensive supervision, could quickly lead to a loss of privileges and, if they persisted, a prison transfer. A third of those young people interviewed described bullying others either previously or at the time, but all were quick to point out that they were not *really* bullying others. For example, Terror (15 years old) commented:

*Terror:*  
*I always tell people to sing ba ba black sheep. It's funny.*

*Interviewer:*  
*And do they sing it?*



*Terror:*

*Yeah. All the time. Not like bullying, like messing around. If I tell them a song to sing, they sing it out proper loud. They start singing "I'm a little teacup" and everything. "Ba Ba black sheep." "Twinkle little star." But there's a boy called Michael and he gets bullied. He acts like a hard man but he's on access [an initiative to protect victims of bullying] ... everyone always says to him, put your pillowcase on your head. Sing "Ba Ba black sheep." Just bullying him because they know he won't do it but they know he will shut up, he'll stop making noise and everything.*

The use of nursery rhymes as a tool to belittle and intimidate another young person is significant. It imposes a childlike status on the (child) victim, ultimately frustrating any attempts to distinguish themselves as 'real men' and publicly humiliating them. The effects of this in the early days of confinement and/or over time are profoundly damaging, particularly since some young people were also forced to cover their heads with red pillowcases. Such perverse forms of entertainment publicly reinforced the vulnerability of the victim. Bullying was not seen as 'manly,' adult behaviour: young people distinguished between acceptable forms of victimisation and bullying, which was unpopular. Young people suggested that bullying was childish and 'unmanly,' especially if the bully sought to exploit much younger or smaller '*little kids*'. Ryan commented:

*There are people in here that act like kids still and there are people who have grown up and know what it feels like to get bullied ... I've heard bear people say that he's been bullying so I smacked him up so there are a couple of people in here, you get me.*

Ryan makes a distinction between those who are childish and those who have '*grown up*' and did not engage in such behaviour. Such childish behaviour – either by bullies or victims - was not tolerated. This demonstrates the uneasy tension between childhood and adulthood. Ryan navigates this transition by casting himself in a paternalistic role, legitimising his own acts of violence. Punishing bullies was not uncommon and this form of 'private justice' (Edgar *et al*, 2003: 142) usurps the prison authority and is, in and of itself, an indication of power and domination. Whilst it is largely assumed that bullying involves an asymmetrical power relationship (Gooch and Treadwell, 2015), this does not necessarily guarantee power and status more generally. The punishment of bullies exposes some of the hypocrisy of the hyper-masculinity culture, which condemns certain acts of victimisation but condones others (Sim, 1994: 104).

### **'If you've got a reputation...'<sup>3</sup>: Separating the 'Men' from the 'Boys'**

It was clear that the early days of confinement were a crucial period for the formation and projection of the right 'reputation' – one which left no doubt that the individual concerned could employ violence and competently and tangibly manage the threatening, risky prison environment. To fail in this task was to be confined to the status as a vulnerable, weak '*boy*' and, ultimately, a victim. Jason (17 years old), for example, explained:

*Once you let someone talk to you, then they are all going to start. From the first moment, that's what a lot of people don't realise, from the first moment, if they make a mistake then it will stick with them. The first time someone says*

*something, go smack, might escalate from there but after it's all over, it will go back to the same and you'll have a bit of your name, that's how it goes.*

In this context, 'getting tough' had two interlinked purposes: to form and strengthen a no-nonsense reputation and to reduce the likelihood of victimisation and exploitation. A key feature was to 'send signals to the aggressor, and to the wider audience of inmates, that the target is willing to use violence in defence of self' (Gambetta, 2009: 78). Young people sought to present a 'tough' image that has credibility. The emphasis is on the *performance* of masculinity (also see Jewkes 2002: 213). Alternative modes of masculinity were limited. Unlike older prisoners, few were fathers or had established a long-term relationship (cf. Ugelvik, 2014; Gooch, 2016). Few excelled in education or admired scholars, and it was only through athleticism or excellence in vocational training could young people earn respect unrelated to violence. However, even then, this alternative performance of masculinity had to exist alongside an ability to '*stand up for yourself*' when needed.

Young people were particularly sensitive to cues about another's vulnerability. Those who were socially inept, withdrawn, had poor hygiene habits, were of small physical stature or who had the 'wrong story' about their index offence were targeted. Chris (15 years old) explained:

*Come out the phone box and boom, stamping on his head and everything. Because he come on the wing saying, "My dad's a pervert, my dad's a pervert," and everything and that ain't the sort of thing you wanna do in prison. Two Welsh lads went up to him, knocked him out and stamped on his head and everything... Got put down healthcare, think he had a couple of broken ribs, head fucked up.*

The perceived inadequacies were reinforced with the use of derogative labels. Victims were labelled as '*meeks*' (weak), '*fraggles*' (generally inadequate) or '*faggots*' (homosexual) and '*nonces*' (homosexual/sex offenders) or '*rats*' and '*grasses*' (informers). These terms were readily understood by young people as indicating that they were not only 'fair game,' but in some way unmanly. Whilst it was the disloyalty of '*rats*' and '*grasses*' that attracted disdain, it was the femininity, weakness and homosexuality of the '*meeks*,' '*fraggles*,' '*faggots*,' and '*nonces*' that made them contemptible to others, disqualifying them from the status as a 'real man.' The prison argot not only reinforced the undesirability of falling foul of the masculinity challenges but served to legitimise violence. It reinforced the hierarchical nature of the prisoner society and status to those whom the derogatory labels were ascribed. Young people justified the use of prison violence with reference to the failings of the victims. It was largely assumed that a young person would not be victimised for no reason at all. For example:

*Darren (15 years old):*  
*Obviously, they wouldn't just come up and do it for no reason ... Obviously they come in and see that they're a bit of a faggot or something.*

*Shane (17 years old):*  
*... if they are getting bullied it's for something, they don't bully them for nothing. If they own stuff, they are just going to get bullied all the time.*

The belief amongst young men was that victims had precipitated their own victimisation, legitimatising such action (Edgar *et al*, 2003) reinforces the masculine prescript: if you cannot behave like a man you deserve to be exploited and victimised. It also sustains and reproduces the culture of masculinity (also see Sim, 1994).

Young people generally accepted the inevitability of violence and justified the victimisation of others by virtue of the fact that '*it's prison*'. Young people were expected to simply endure this aspect of prison life: it was the 'manly' thing to do in a man's world. For example, Nathan (16 years old) remarked:

*... what they call bullying here, I just call normal, that's just life, you are in prison once again, what did you come prison if you can't hack someone telling you to shut up every now and then. Obviously it gets to your head but that's life n'it.*

Being a 'man' meant being able to '*hack jail*' (Tom, 16 years old) both bolster their own masculinity and emphasise the vulnerability of those who do not have the strength or will to '*handle it*.' These rationalisations illustrate the potency of the 'survival of the fittest' mentality, which leaves little room for empathising with those who cannot 'cope'. This did not mean that the presentation of self was not burdensome or that the experience of abuse did not '*get to your head*,' but that it was expected that you *should* 'be a man' and '*do your time*.'

#### **'You've got to make yourself look big'<sup>4</sup>: The Public Self v Private Self**

The performance of identity and masculinity was an insecure, unfinished work. The young people were seeking to present themselves as 'real men' but were often forced to confront, their own childishness and vulnerability. Like adult prisoners (see Ricciardelli *et al*, 2015), they were keenly aware of their physical vulnerability and the potential risk both physically, but also socially, of being threatened or assaulted. However, the task of preforming 'manhood' was complicated by the reality that young people typically imported a range of welfare needs into the secure estate and were forced to confront their own emotional and psychological vulnerability. Young people were keenly aware of the negative implications of appearing vulnerable and, in seeking to safeguard their public image, employed a range of defensive and protective practices (Goffman, 1959; de Viggiani, 2012; Ricciardelli *et al*, 2015).

Young people were strategic about who they 'terrorised.' They did not exhibit unbridled aggression, nor a complete disregard for personal safety. Rather, they would limit the level of risk posed to self. For example, David commented: '*Everyone does it but they just do it to people they know that they can do it to.*' Yet the cohort would rely on peer support. Those young people who believed that they did not have the requisite strength or fortitude to overcome potential aggressors would rely on convenient alliances forged either in the community or upon arrival into custody. For example, David commented:

*I wouldn't say I could trust anyone in here but people are like, I think that they would back me if I got in a fight, I would back them, they would back me ... if your haven't got people backing you ... then you will probably get rushed, like jumped on by three, four people.*

The availability of peer support serves to temper any feelings of vulnerability or cowardice, feelings that would be perceived both internally and externally as an indication of weakness. Young people were, therefore, complicit in one other's attempts to maintain a tough façade. Being with the 'boys' (Risze, 17 years old) serves to affirm the masculine status, however much it lacked integrity. In addition, there was a real sense that there was 'safety in numbers.' This was partly precipitated by the (misplaced) fear that there were gangs within the prison. These groups were more often convenient transitory alliances connected by territorial or geographical loyalties (Earle, 2011). Yet paradoxically, the protective function offered by group membership also increased the likelihood of engaging in altercations to protect the group or individuals within it. Thus, like gang membership on the streets (Melde and Taylor, 2009), being associated with a prison 'gang' or 'group' may reduce fear without necessarily reducing the threat of violence.

Young people selected, as far as possible, when and where they assaulted others. It was a commonly held belief that minor and serious fights were more likely to occur in certain areas. The showers offered the possibility of serious altercation and the settling of differences without staff intervention. Conversely, other locations, such as 'mass move' (when young people walked from the residential units) and education, were seen as ideal times to assault another where staff intervention was likely to be swift and the incident short-lived. On such occasions, young people were able to 'save face,' publicly displaying aggression without the risk of significant harm: 'you can scrap them and be safe' (Risze, 17 years old). Thus, once the fight was broken up 'the primacy purpose was often already served' (Crewe, 2009: 43). John (16 years old) explained:

*If you want a fight, a proper fight, then people say to someone come in the shower and we'll have a fight do you get me, 'cause it can't get split up because half the time they [the officers] don't know about it and the doors are locked anyway. That's the best way, place to fight him. People know if they only want a little [fight] where they are going to hit each other once or twice, they will do it on the wing, they know it's getting split up in seconds do you get me, round about ten, twenty seconds of a fight if that.*

This distinction between 'proper' fights and 'little' fights is indicative of the compromises made when seeking to maintain a tough image whilst limiting the risk of personal injury. Staff intervention also carried the risk of formal sanctions but this was preferred to 'losing face' in front of peers. Yet the young people keenly felt the loss of familial contact, the deprivation of autonomy, the loss of material goods and the forced confinement both to and within the prison (see Gooch, 2016). The use of violence could do little to address these underpinning anxieties. Even the most confident and aggressive young person could face real difficulties dealing with the time problem and the inertia of prison life, especially when alone in their cell. Risze explained:

*It's hectic when you are in a pad. If you are in a single cell, you get really depressed at times like that and makes, you've got a lot left to think, because you've got so long to think, you're have all these different options in your head... Little things like the TV and stuff like that, being out on soc with the boys, it*

*makes time go quicker. If you don't have it, it just drags. You have lots of time to think, that's when all your problems start.*

'Coping' was not a fixed event, but an on-going, dynamic process. Managing daily life could take considerable effort and any sense of 'coping' could be quickly destabilised or shaken by seemingly trivial events. Young people had to confront their own emotional or psychological vulnerability. There were few respites and few moments or spaces of privacy. A young person's cell represented one of few 'backstage' areas (Goffman, 1959) but even then, whilst adults may feel able to release their feelings in their cells (see Crewe *et al*, 2014), the shouting through the windows forced some young people into relentlessly performing for others. The cohort experienced a need to maintain a macho facade and contain distress as a secondary pain of imprisonment (Crewe, 2009: 409). However, feelings of anxiety and stress could not be suppressed indefinitely and young people typically resorted to cell destruction and self-injury to discharge emotion. Yet these were described as symptomatic of the inability to 'keep cool' (Chris, 15 years old) and something that girls in custody do, rather than a natural man's response to the difficulties. For example, Aaron (17 years old) explained:

*... because they can't hack it and so they have to try to do something to themselves because they can't hack jail n'it, it's too hard for them.*

'Self-harm' sent the wrong signals. As Liebling (1992: 232) comments, 'no status is conferred on those who declare their bankruptcy.' For those who did not resort to self-harm, constructing those who did as being unable 'handle it' served to bolster their own sense of masculinity:

*Nathan:*

*Personally I think they are crack heads. What's slicing yourself going to do, who are you hurting, what pain is that taking away from you, I think it's just stupidity ... some people have fights, some people have arguments with other people, they go back and slice themselves. Okay, you had an argument with him, I thought you were going to slice him but you went back and cut yourself. What happened there, where's the justice in that, wimp.*

Whilst, 'slicing' yourself is seen as 'wimpy,' victimising others is perceived to be a prudent response to conflict, as well as feelings of emotional vulnerability. Self-preservation is the most pressing need and the impact on others is ignored. When young people were perceived to be 'dangerous', these difficulties were easily overlooked by staff who were caught up in responding to their aggressive behaviour and failed to recognise the striking vulnerabilities it disguised. In part, this was exacerbated by the culture of control within the YOI, which left little room for young people to approach officers if they were experiencing difficulties (also see Gooch 2016). Whilst the outcome of the physical violence is the same - self-injury - young people constructed hitting a wall as a more acceptable form of behaviour. Hitting a wall was associated with 'masculine' behaviour whereas self-harm was seen as childish and feminine.

The use of violence allowed young people to discharge emotions that could not otherwise be expressed and the rationale for such behaviour was not called into question in the way that self-injury was. Jason reported:

*... you'll see a snooker cue go flying around someone's head, that's what it's like. You know we are all young lads and we have all got our, some of us don't know what other people are going through. Pressure that's all it is.*

Responding to 'pressure' in this way was preferred to 'losing your head' in the form of self-harm and cell damage, which exposed themselves to greater risk and pain. Violence became the preferred option for overcoming vulnerability, raising real concerns about the way children were socialised to inflict pain on others as a means of emotional discharge. The emphasis upon the performance of masculinity and the connection to violence raises questions about how imprisonment prepares children for the lives they will lead as adults (Willis, 1977), especially for those young people who will essentially 'grow up in custody' and become the 'state raised youth' (Irwin 1970).

## **Conclusion**

Although doing time could often be mundane, young people were never insulated from the perpetual threat to personal safety. Violence and victimisation was a 'taken for granted' aspect of prison life. One key distinction between adult and juvenile prison violence was the tendency to frame such behaviour in terms of *adolescent* masculinities. Behaviour that also occurs in the adult prison environment, such as verbal abuse, physical violence and intimidation, was given a different meaning precisely because young people made distinctions between 'manhood' and 'boyhood.' They keenly felt any threats to their public identity and appeared far more willing to overtly use physical violence in response to perceived threats, slights or slurs. Those who failed to perform in this 'manly' way attracted little sympathy, but were scorned and targeted. This served not only to legitimise violence, but to also sustain the wider culture of violence and masculinity within the YOI.

The purpose of prison aggression was not solely to perform masculinity, but the fact that young people did use violence to communicate to others had important implications for the negotiation of 'adulthood' and 'manhood.' Young people's attempts to 'do gender' represented something more than simply 'doing maleness;' it was about being a 'real man' rather than a 'little boy.' They believed that they had to cast off their 'childish' identity by being violent in a manly manner. Their childhood, and all that it implied for vulnerability, dependence, immaturity and inexperience, could not help them survive in prison. They were essentially catapulted into premature adulthood. Yet the desire to 'be a man', because it was so narrowly understood was often fraught with difficulty and presented its own tensions trapping them in a pyric process of exhibiting a manliness in stark contrast to wider societies norms and the expectations of custodial authorities.

The relevance and significant of age in framing masculine performance in prison has previously received very little attention, however, as this article demonstrates, age (and the available resources for performing 'manhood') does define how, when and why prisoners engage in certain forms of masculine performance. The often well-trodden and frequently rehearsed notions of prison masculinities needs to take far greater account of how differences such as age, class, sexuality and institutional setting frame, define and dictate the performance of masculinities. Moreover, the notion of transition, and transitions through young adulthood, adulthood and into (prison) retirement, needs far greater attention. Life stage does define the performance of masculinity and the tendency of scholars has been to narrowly describe prison

masculinities with reference to a group of adult, young men, ignoring and overlooking those who have not yet reached adulthood, those who are transitioning into adulthood, and those transitioning into middle age, old age and retirement. As this article illustrates, these transitions are by no means straightforward or neatly achieved. They are often fraught with difficulty and complexity, influencing perceptions of self and the performance of masculinity.

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