

LISTEN WITHOUT PREJUDICE was first published in the Prison Service Journal in July 2001. It is an insightful article covering the experiences of Dr Yvonne Jewkes (now Professor of Criminology at the University of Leicester) whilst attending Prison Dialogue sessions in HMP Whitemoor and HMP Blakenhurst in 1999, and was part of her research for her doctoral thesis.

Listen Without Prejudice

Exploring the role of Prison Dialogue

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Introduction

This paper arises from research carried out for my doctoral thesis, *Captive Audiences: The Media's Role in Everyday Life, Power Relations and Constructions of Masculine Identities in Prisons*, conducted at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge. As the title suggests, I was primarily concerned with the changes that have been brought about by the introduction of media into prisons and the difference that media resources make to the individual's experience of incarceration. But a broader concern of the research was with the 'effects' of imprisonment on the identities of prisoners. A number of prison researchers have argued – following Goffman – that one of the primary strategies adopted by individual prisoners is the suspension of their pre-prison identities and the construction of social identities that will conform to the expectations and demands of a performative and excessively masculine prison culture (Cohen and Taylor, 1972; Schmid and Jones, 1991). But my research found that, while a public persona can be an effective means of preserving one's sense of self and warding off unwanted attention from other prisoners, it is only useful in so far as it enables the prisoner to adapt – usually temporarily – to life inside. The 'mask' that is worn when interacting with others cannot be sustained continuously over a long period of time, and the work involved in maintaining a convincing public identity may, in some cases, impede prisoners' sense of security and their trust in others.

The research thus found that while the construction of a public facade (a 'social' identity) is

crucial to the survival of imprisonment, the necessary precursor for the maintenance of a convincing public persona is the facility to drop the mask and 'be oneself' (a private, 'individual' identity). For most prisoners most of the time, this can only be achieved when alone in one's cell, or with one or two close companions. But a notable exception was Prison Dialogue, a semi-formal gathering of prisoners which has been instituted at several prisons in the UK, where prisoners meet and discuss their innermost thoughts, hopes, and fears with openness and honesty. The purpose of this paper is to outline what I believe to be the main advantages of dialogue within prisons, and to explore the different approaches of the initiative that I observed in two prisons, Whitemoor and Blakenhurst.

What is Prison Dialogue?

Prison Dialogue is a charitable trust, the aim of which is to promote collective inquiry among groups who are related in terms of their occupational or life circumstances, but who would normally have little, if any contact with each other, and might usually communicate only in very prescribed, rigid or conventional ways. Part of a much wider organisation which aims to promote dialogue within many different types of organisations, various levels of personnel are brought together to share their beliefs and experiences in an open and egalitarian environment where everybody's contribution is equally valued. For example, in addition to around twenty prisoners and a couple of representatives from the charity, other guests might include one or two invited prison officers, someone from the Home Office, or individuals with a professional interest in prisons. Among other outside participants during my visits to the group were a

solicitor, a lecturer in law, a prison governor, and the Director of the High Security Prisons who was soon to become Deputy Director of the Prison Service.

According to its Statement of Purpose, Prison Dialogue explores not only the content of what each of us says, thinks and feels but also the underlying motivations, assumptions and beliefs that lie therein (Bohm *et al.* 1991). Frequently these will be shaped by preconceptions or prejudices, and the aim of dialogue is to recognise the characteristic patterns that lie behind one's own opinions and actions, and to share one's new-found insights with the other participants in the group (*ibid.*). The removal of traditional barriers between those with power and those who are literally or relatively powerless (for example, everybody is addressed by their first name, whatever their status outside the group) is intended to create an atmosphere conducive to reflexivity and self-revelation, and these meetings are thus one of the few opportunities that prisoners have to speak truthfully and openly to each other and to those in authority about matters of concern to them. This inevitably leads to some heated debates and in many meetings, it was not just the 'masks' that were removed: the gloves were off as well.

In the course of my involvement with the group during the first six months of 1999, I attended Prison Dialogue at two different prisons: Whitemoor and Blakenhurst. At Whitemoor's dialogue meetings, which were held once a week, the discussion was always decided by someone in the group. It was usually prompted by an issue from the week's news, and many participants used references from the media to give form to their ideas and opinions. The degree of knowledge that some prisoners demonstrated about national and world events that they could play little part in, was impressive. With very limited opportunities to watch television (in-cell television had not been installed at the time of my research), prisoners at Whitemoor relied greatly upon newspapers and radio broadcasts, both of which may contain a greater degree of editorials, opinion, and in-depth analysis than television. Consequently they had a breadth and depth of knowledge about current affairs which, I reflected at the time, was probably greater than that of most university students.

Participants proved themselves to be highly sensitive to reports about crime and criminal justice, and those who had experienced being the subjects of news stories almost universally felt that they had been unfairly represented by a biased press. In addition to the media's misrepresentation of prisoners, two themes were returned to frequently: the problem of racism, both within the prison and in society at large; and the perceived injustices of the prison system. Discussions around all these subjects crystallised many of the opinions that I had formed while conducting the literature review for my thesis. In particular, I found the conversations – often intense, often confrontational – to be especially pertinent in relation to the 'deprivation

literature' made famous by Clemmer (1941), Sykes (1958), Goffman (1961) and Cohen and Taylor (1972). If I had previously held any doubts about the 'pains' of imprisonment described by these authors, they were quickly dispelled by the twenty or so prisoners who attended the group and who, by their very location in a high security prison, were experiencing a 'depth' or 'weight' of imprisonment (King and McDermott, 1995) as great as almost any other prisoner in the country.

The spirit of dialogue is democratic and its aim is that everyone can share information without fear of it going beyond the discussion group. On the occasions when it worked well, the breadth and depth of discussions permitted participants to present publicly aspects of their self which were normally kept private, and this seemed to be the factor that ensured that most participants returned. Not only did this allow for a temporary denial of the primary identity 'prisoner', but it also served to diminish the stigma of their convictions and convict-status (although on the rare occasions when someone alluded to their violent past or said something like 'I know I've killed someone but ...' it caused the kind of *frisson* that Cohen and Taylor, 1972, describe when one of their informants on Durham's E-wing casually said 'of course, I'm a murderer').

Inevitably, though, in a forum where opinions were expressed with passion and conviction, there was also a degree of polarisation. At some of the meetings I attended, the immovability of certain people's positions was matched only by the strength of their challenges to the opinions of others who took a different view. In one memorable exchange at Whitemoor a prisoner who had (somewhat mistakenly) positioned me as an 'expert' because of my identity as a university researcher, seized upon a minor disagreement between myself and one of the other Prison Dialogue representatives concerning the safety of genetically modified crops and turned it into a full-blown verbal attack on him. The essence of the disagreement was that one prisoner had once worked in a related industry and strongly believed that research into genetic modifications in the food chain should be allowed to progress unhindered. That I felt differently was hardly material when the other prisoner, a participant whose contributions to the group were frequently vociferous and confrontational, took over my position and started to ask: 'Why should we believe you? *She's* the expert, *she's* the researcher, *she* hasn't got an axe to grind or a profit to make from it'. The noisy exchange continued for some time, and made us both feel uncomfortable. Ironically, my argument had been hijacked by someone who was positioning me as the 'expert', yet was rendering me invisible and unheard.

Indeed, although Prison Dialogue appeared to offer many tangible benefits to its participants, several individuals admitted privately that they felt nervous about speaking out in the group. One informed me that despite the efforts of the dialogue facilitators to

encourage not only personal reflexivity but also tolerance towards the views of other members, in fact, differences of opinion were being taken from the 'safe' environment of the group back to the wings, occasionally resulting in bullying and intimidation.

At Blakenhurst, the dialogue group took a rather different format consisting of four three-hour sessions held over two full days which resulted in a more intensive and yet less highly charged gathering. Most participants came to all four sessions, as did one female officer. Another female officer attended on the second day only, and the prison management was represented by the Allocation Manager (who categorises prisoners according to their security risk) on day one and the Finance Manager on day two.

Instead of the subject matter being decided by someone from the group, we started the sessions by breaking into smaller groups and discussing a few questions posed by the Prison Dialogue facilitators. These included: 'what small thing has made the biggest difference to your life?' which prompted some profound and very personal responses; and, 'How much would you like to win on the lottery and what would you spend it on?' which invited rather more light-hearted replies. We then reformed the larger group and talked about various subjects, some of which arose from the earlier discussions.

Apart from their different format, the meetings I attended at Whitemoor and Blakenhurst were qualitatively different. At Whitemoor, the participants were all high security prisoners serving long (or life) sentences. Many had been at the prison for a significant period of time, and most knew each other quite well. Long-standing friendships were evident, but so were long established differences and divisions. At Blakenhurst, by contrast, the prisoner population was awaiting categorisation as B, C or D prisoners and the variations in their backgrounds, attitudes and beliefs were much more visible. As a local prison, Blakenhurst has a relatively rapid turnover of prisoners, and many participants had not met before. More surprisingly, some who had been on the same wings for several weeks, months or even years spoke to each other for the first time at these sessions. More prisoners attended at Blakenhurst than at Whitemoor, but the time-scale of two full days allowed for a more explorative and intensive series of discussions. Participation was extensive and open, at times very humorous, at times almost painfully self-revealing. Among a group who generally did not know each other well, but perhaps more crucially would mostly be moving on to different prisons comparatively soon, there was far less reticence about showing a degree of emotional sensitivity.

Yet some participants continued to hide behind a mask, preferring to present a carefully managed 'front' than expose their inmost thoughts and feelings, and many discussions were led by a small number of individuals who had clearly developed a repertoire of stories, jokes, routines and gestures, which had the

primary purpose of entertaining the audience. One individual in particular had constructed his identity around his skills as a performer, a persona that was itself reinforced by the fact that his brother is a well-known musician and actor. In an extreme version of the tendency noted by Tolson (1977) in his analysis of working-class masculinity, this individual's every action and utterance was aimed at reproducing the expectations of his public. Even his clothing, which was expensive, yet flashily so, constituted an integral part of his performance which almost literally involved 'putting on a show'.

His interpretation of the requisite masculinity demanded by the prison culture was to act the clown, and he created an atmosphere of jovial camaraderie and bonhomie, assigning nicknames ('Dirty Den', 'Betty Boo', 'Homer Simpson', 'Mr Bean' etc.) to all the participants at the dialogue meeting based on television characters. This use of media content in defining individuals parallels the experiences of other prison researchers: Thomas Lindlof tells of the prisoner named 'Benny Hill' by his fellow prisoners because of his resemblance to the comedian, and the inseparable duo known as the 'Smurfs' after the animated characters of the 1970s (Lindlof, 1987). Richard Sparks and Will Hay recount how they became known by their respondents as 'Pinky and Perky', 'Bill and Ben' or 'The Dynamic Duo' (Sparks *et al.*, 1996); and Roy King and Kathleen McDermott became 'Dempsey and Makepeace' during their prison research (King, 1999). Like these examples, Mikey's nicknames were meant – and taken – good-humouredly but, as Lindlof suggests, such ascriptions that are at once familiar and amusing to an audience, may be primarily designed to deflect seriousness from what are, in fact, serious circumstances (Lindlof, 1987).

At Whitemoor, by contrast, the demands of a 'tough jail', together with the serious or violent criminal histories of many of the prisoners, meant that the dialogue group was an altogether more unpredictable affair, and the Prison Dialogue facilitators frequently had to prevent skilfully dialogue from degenerating into monologue. Here, many participants attached a great deal of kudos to winning the argument and not losing face, and the forum was dominated by those who could assert themselves most forcefully. Often, it was the strength of an individual's intellect or the breadth of his knowledge that gave him a platform, but it could also be a person's ability to shout louder than anyone else that determined their precedence! Among a few participants, their outward presentation of aggression and physical strength had become, as Tolson predicts, part of their internal self-image (Tolson, 1977), and the conventional characteristics associated with masculinity – authority, competitiveness, physical presence, aggression, and so on were always conspicuously displayed at these meetings.

Furthermore, Bostyn and Wight highlight what they see as the intrinsically masculine attributes of

many commodities, and suggest that one's identity as an adult, a father, and a man, are inextricably bound up in certain products. The deprivation of such items particularly when associated with the inability to purchase them with a 'man's wage' – emasculates the individual and attacks his sense of self-worth (Bostyn and Wight, 1987). One notable indicator of the need to signal to the group something of one's masculine identity and lifestyle aspirations, was footwear. At the Whitemoor dialogue group, most participants were young and street-wise, and they literally wore their masculine credentials on their feet. Their new and expensive designer-label trainers indicated a desire to fit in with the dominant norms, and yet also suggested a degree of competitiveness; for some prisoners it seemed important not to get left behind in the rapidly moving worlds of fashion and footwear technology.

My Identities

Of tangential interest to me were the identities that were constructed of and for me by prisoners. As previously indicated it was my academic – and, by implication, non-Prison Service – credentials that were among the most salient aspects of my identity when it came to gaining acceptance by the group (I also discuss aspects of my 'femaleness' in a predominantly male environment; see Jewkes, 2000). Several prisoners related to me most strongly on the basis of someone with whom they could exchange scholarly information and ideas. Some discussed aspects of my thesis with me; some presented me with copies of their own work or with information that they thought might be of interest to me; others took a paternalistic approach, seeing an opportunity to 'teach' me or pass on to me some of their own special interests. This occasionally happened with respect to television or radio programmes ('You must tune in to ...'), but mostly occurred in relation to books, as with one prisoner who was devoted to the work of Jane Austen, and another who feigned profound disbelief that someone he had talked to happily for over three hours did not share his love of books by James A. Michener.

A memorable and poignant encounter was with someone who emphatically wished to relate to me as a like-minded and intellectual equal. On my very first visit to Prison Dialogue, he told me that although he knew that he would inevitably be regarded as 'one of them' (a 'con') he also felt himself to be like me. He said that if things had gone 'according to plan' he would have just finished university and be thinking about his career and marriage, but as things stood, he had to make do with reading for an Open University degree within prison. Over the next three months, he always made a point of seeking me out and asking me about my research and teaching. He told me much about his family and his comfortable and happy childhood, all the while reinforcing his middle-class credentials and emphasising his 'otherness' compared

to the group as a whole. His desire to be seen as someone other than a maximum-security life-sentence prisoner was profoundly affecting, and his 'otherness' was tolerated and even encouraged by the education staff who, on a later occasion, told me that they had bent several prison regulations to allow him to continue studying for a science degree.

It's Good to Talk

The long-term benefit of Prison Dialogue is hard to measure, although I had no doubt that it has the capacity – at least in the short-term – to restore the beleaguered self and provide a rare opportunity in prison for individuals to reclaim a sense of their personal identity and stand out as 'figure' against 'ground' (Burman, 1988). It also has a slightly paradoxical social benefit in that, while addressing the needs of the self, it precludes indulgent self-interest. Although personal reflectiveness is encouraged, the opportunity to identify with and learn from the experiences of other prisoners prohibits over-introspection and self-regard, both of which can afflict the self under 'normal' prison conditions. In Patrick Burman's account of unemployment, he describes the social effects of the 'Unemployment Working Centre', a loose coalition of various interested parties, which provides a range of services to unemployed people, including an opportunity for them to get together and share their experiences. His assessment of the success of this group in bridging the gap between self and social world, exactly mirrors the experiences of many of those who attended Prison Dialogue:

In these forums for the telling and handling of personal accounts, one's experiences were seen to occur on a more general plane, where they were elements and outcomes of complex practices and discriminations. The social findings learned so vividly with experienced others became conceptual tools of escape from self-blame. No longer a solitary sufferer, one was taking part in a slow, collective awakening to the social conditions from which many suffer. Out of these gatherings...was born a basis for new solidarities and understandings...In these groups, practices changed from pure self-interest to the synergistic combining of self and others.

(Burman, 1988: 105-6).

In short, Prison Dialogue diminishes the sense of social rejection and loss of status inherent in the label 'prisoner' and allows participants to express themselves in ways that are not necessarily available to them elsewhere in prison, while at the same time connecting them to their fellow prisoners in a spirit of common experience and shared humanity. For a few hours at least, individuals in prison can be something other than prisoners. In fact, Prison Dialogue gives participants the opportunity to exhibit quite separate and

multifarious identities (for example, at various times one prisoner constructed his identity around his roles as a black man, a 'Brummie', a musician, a father, a son and an Open University student), or quite subtle and inseparable identities, as in the many discussions that took place concerning aspects of black people's histories, cultures and ethnicities. As Westwood observes, 'one can be, at one and the same time Afro-Caribbean *and* Jamaican *and* various religious identities *and* a 'black man' and many other things' (Westwood,

1990). Nowhere is this potential more evident in the constrained and limiting world of the prison than in the relatively democratic and mentally stimulating space which constitutes the meetings organised by Prison Dialogue ■

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A full list of references can be obtained from the author.