

## **The Psychosocial Impact of Prison Culture on Black Women Employees**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article discusses the effect of organisational culture on black women Prison Service employees' psychosocial experience, and examines how the specificities of prison culture(s) affects this employee group.

The author examines how black women as gendered and racialised subjects experience mistrust and suspicion, because of their gender and racial minority status within the British Prison Service. It is suggested that a white masculine culture exists because of the dominant group that comprise white men. This may cause the majority group to intentionally/unintentionally exclude black women because feelings of trust and shared understanding are greater when there is more similarity among group members. In addition, organisational pressures may also lead to the exclusion of black women. The author asserts that black women's work experience is multi-dimensional and complex because their lives are shaped by social categories such as gender and race. She provides an insight into the internal and external world of the participants, taking into account components such as expectations, subjectivity, culture and anxiety to examine the individual's experience within their work environment, by applying an organisational psychodynamic framework, as well as highlight the dynamics of the British Prison Service.

The narratives of three black women Prison Service employees are used as examples to show how individuals' subjectivity can be influenced by their interaction within the social world as members of a group marginalised because of their gendered racialisation.

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## **Introduction**

This article discusses the impact of organisational culture on the psychosocial experience of black women employees within the British Prison Service. The term 'black women employees' refers to an ethnically diverse group of women prison workers whose origin or descent is African and/or Caribbean and/or Asian. It is suggested that black women's gendered racialisation positions them as 'outsiders within' (Lorde, 1984), located on the margins of the Prison Service because of gender and racial inequality. The term gendered racialisation is used to describe how meanings attributed to black women's physical characteristics of 'female' and 'black', often influences their position as members of the passively constructed and 'socially excluded' (Yuval-Davis, 1993). Ergo, within the prison context, knowing a black person works in a white-dominated organisation is insufficient information to describe their experience of racialisation; rather, it is also necessary to know the person's gender and his or her position within the organisation. To fully understand the racialisation of black women, it was necessary to examine the ways in which racialising structures and social processes are shaped by gender and occupational positionality within the workplace.

I focus on black women's gender and racial characteristics to investigate two linked dynamics. First, how the category of 'black woman' 'fits' with and has effects on the lived experience of those who inhabit this subject position. I am suggesting that 'black woman' tends to be conceptualised through a binary position of 'woman' equals gender and 'black' equals racial within the British Prison Service. Second, to what extent, and in which ways, this binary logic is central to the complex hierarchies of status and power within prison institutions.

Starting from the position that the experience of black women employees in the workplace is under-researched (Davidson, 1997), to my knowledge there is no documented research which examines solely black women's experience as employees within the British Prison Service. There are studies however, that have investigated black female prisoners' experience of prisons in the UK and black staff experience (HMIP, 2005), but very little is known about the impact of prison culture on black women's experience because of the intersection of race and gender. This lack of knowledge has implications for British prison occupation literature in that valuable information about gender and/or racial difference amongst staff may be missed in studies which claim to investigate staff experience.

In the current study an examination of the psychosocial experience of black women and their occupational positioning within the British Prison Service was completed, while developing an understanding of the organisation itself, in respect of its internal culture within which individuals are situated. It was found that the work environment acts as an active element in the process of gendering and racialising black women. Two elements of prison culture were identified from the participants' narrative: suspicion and mistrust, and were found to be dominant aspects of prison culture that impact the experience of being a black woman employee.

### **The study**

Participants were recruited mostly via the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) black minority ethnic staff support network – RESPECT. The network was used to access as many black women employees as possible over a short period of time as they tend to be relatively few in number in the British Prison Service. The network was asked to publish a

leaflet advertising the study in their annual magazine and circulate the leaflet at their annual conference. The leaflet included a request for potential participants to contact the researcher directly.

Seventeen black women were interviewed. Eleven participants worked in Public Sector Prisons across England and two participants worked for a private sector prison provider. Six women worked at NOMS HQ. The participants worked in a variety of roles, as prison officers, senior prison officer, teachers, administration staff, probation officer, middle and senior management. Seven participants were interviewed twice. The participants selected for the second interviews were chosen on account of their availability and also to achieve a range of participants working in various roles. The main emphasis of the second interviews was to explore participants' views about the notion of Strong Black Woman (SBW). SBW is a concept in which I bring together the social aspect of the term, that is, that SBW is a social construct derived from a distinct cultural history with specific characteristic traits with organisational psychodynamics, to illustrate how the SBW ideology acts as a defense mechanism applied by black women to overcome adversity and challenges within the British Prison Service.

All interviews were recorded and then fully transcribed including pauses, change in tone of voice and body language. During the participants' interviews they emphasised some words, by raising their voice, I have underlined these words. They also paused at times which are denoted by numbers in brackets. To maintain anonymity pseudonyms were used for the names of participants and their place of work.

An ethnographic approach was used to explore how individuals develop their understanding of their organisation and who they are within it as a consequence of their role and duties, as well as their personal characteristics of being black and woman. Ethnographic interviews were completed to capture as much in-depth information about the lived experience of black women within this occupational setting.

My discussions draw on empirical material from my PhD project, 'Defining our experience: a psychosocial analysis of the racial, gendered and subjectivity of black women employees in the British Prison Service' (Thomas 2016). I selected three participants: Trina and Rosa are both prison officers and Raisa is a teacher, they were chosen because their narratives gave good examples of how the culture of suspicion and mistrust becomes embedded in the individual through subtle ways. Their narratives also showed how this affected the relational dynamics between them and their colleagues.

### **Theoretical and methodological approach**

The epistemology framing this qualitative research draws upon intersectionality theory and organisational psychodynamics which are centred on understanding rather than explaining reality. The focus is on subjective realities constructed through a process of creating meaning, thus the epistemological stance I have taken is that experience can tell us something about social reality.

The study integrates intersectionality theory and organisational psychodynamics into a single conceptual framework, to illustrate how the inner psychological world of individuals relates to the organisational systems in which they are working (Miller, 1993), more specifically, how

the emotional needs of individuals and groups shape and are shaped by the culture of the organisation.

### **Intersectionality**

The term intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, underlines the ‘multidimensionality’ of marginalised subjects’ lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1989, p.139), it emerged in the late 1980s and 1990s from critical race studies, a scholarly movement born in the legal academy committed to problematising law’s purported colour-blindness, neutrality, and objectivity. According to Crenshaw (1991) the location of black women at the intersection of race and gender makes their experience structurally and ‘qualitatively different than that of white women’ (1991, p. 1245). Collins’ (1990) work supports Crenshaw’s view by asserting that a black woman’s experience is a result of the intersection of gender and race that form and inform each other.

Crenshaw and Collins are American scholars and have a different approach to some European scholars who apply intersectionality theory in their work. Prins (2006) asserts that Crenshaw’s (1989) work is ‘systemic’ stating ‘the meanings of social identities are determined by racism, classism, sexism, etc., which are taken to be static and rigid systems of domination’ (Prins, 2006, p. 281). Prins asserts that European feminist scholars take a constructionist interpretation of intersectionality, by asserting that ‘British scholars focus on the dynamic and relational aspects of social identity’ (2006, p. 279). This perspective relates to system-centred approaches, inferring that intersectionality shapes the entire social system and thus goes beyond looking at specific inequalities in institutions, but rather the analysis focuses on processes that are fully interactive, historically co-determining and complex.

I draw on Crenshaw and Collins' application of intersectionality theory as I do not view race and gender as multiple identities because they are not layered on top of one another or parallel to each other, rather, they are intersectional, formed of different elements at the same time and they are an alloy of social elements that make for a particular subject and related embodied experience. This perspective turns the lens on processes occurring within race-gender subgroups and shifting their experience from the margins to the focal point (Collins, 1990). From this perspective race is viewed as gendered and gender as raced.

While studies such as the Her Majesty's Inspectorate for Prisons *Thematic Review of Race Relations in Prisons* (2005) and Edgar and Martin's (2004) study that examined the perceptions of race in prisons, they typically viewed gender and race as homogenous, unconnected and static social categories within the staff group. The consequence of treating race and gender as separate entities resulted in the misrepresentation of the complexity of black women employees' experience. And thus, privileges the treatment of some inequalities and ignore the fact that inequalities are often mutually constitutive.

A systemic analysis of intersectionality, the way that gender and race hierarchies and inequalities are woven into the organisational fabric of the British Prison Service, can tell us something about the complex system of domination which occurs within this organisational space. Put simply, a person is not simply oppressed or privileged, but can be simultaneously privileged and oppressed by different aspects of their identities. For example, black women employees may be privileged by their employment status, but as they are under-represented in positions of power within white male dominated organisations, they encounter racial and gender inequality. In addition, as they enter these typically white-male dominated spaces that are not particularly open to black women's presence, as a group of staff they may encounter

adversity that is different to their white female counterparts who may encounter gender inequality and black male colleagues who experience racial discrimination.

### **Organisational psychodynamics**

Organisational psychodynamics is a psychoanalytically informed set of theories that examines individuals' behaviour, group behaviour and organisational culture, by looking at the dynamics that occur in organisations. These theories have made many contributions to our understanding of social institutions, and have provided an insight into how individuals affect institutions and how institutions affect individuals. I used this theoretical framework to delve beneath the surface of participants' narrative.

An organisational psychodynamics framework can also illuminate how conscious and unconscious processes play a fundamental role in organisational dynamics. Organisations are made up of a collection of people, therefore, one of the main obstacles for individuals working in prisons is the strong force prevalent within the social structures, which are devised to contain the anxiety formed by fear of difference, which may be a result of the influence of psychic, social and organisational dynamics. It is suggested that the differences around questions of gender markers and racial markers have psychic and social dimensions that are acted out in organisational settings. Put simply, gender and racial social and psychic manifestations are played out in organisations, they constitute the organisation, and the organisation and its dynamics constitute them. Therefore, people who work in large diverse organisations may be resentful or even fearful of black women's presence as employees, without understanding the social context of white male privilege. In addition, black women may enter white male dominated organisations with negative perceptions derived from preconceived ideas of institutional racism.

One of the key points I would like to emphasise here is that people meet each other as people differentiated by gender and race and other hierarchal divisions of status and task, all within an organisational context in which difference is to be avoided. These interactions at times are experienced unconsciously as persecutory anxiety (Klein, 1935), primitive in nature, involving paranoid fears of being attacked and annihilated, which means that the source of the anxiety needs to be controlled and destroyed. Anxiety, derived from the fear aroused from the dynamics of inter-relationships between individuals and groups within the workplace, often activates organisational defensive mechanisms (Stevenson, 2012; Clayton, 2001 [1961]; Menzies Lyth, 1960), such as splitting, introjection, projection and projective identification (Klein, 1932), in an effort to reduce anxiety.

An explanation put forward for the activation of defenses to avoid anxiety within an organisation is put forward by Laurence Gould et al. (2006) who quote Otto Fenichel (1946). They assert that institutions are created to satisfy individual and group needs and to accomplish required tasks. However, these institutions become 'external realities comparatively independent of individuals, which affect individuals in significant emotional and psychological ways' (Gould et al., 2006, p. 3).

### **British prisons**

British prisons form one aspect of NOMS, which is an Executive Agency of the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) and one of the instruments that society uses to prevent and control crime. Prisons have multiple functions highlighted in the 2016 White Paper entitled *Prison Safety and Reform*, it stipulated that prisons are vital in keeping the public safe by depriving offenders of their

liberty, by punishing them and making prisons places of reform. (Ministry of Justice, 2016). The Mission Statement of Her Majesty's Prison Service for England and Wales highlights the purpose of prisons as follows:

Her Majesty's Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to look after them with humanity and help them lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release (Ministry of Justice, 2012).

The Prison Service can also be understood as a set of organisational dynamics which give rise to different relational constellations influenced by the social structure of prisons, i.e. organisational culture; the multiple tasks of prisons; and informal structures between different staff groups, which is compounded by racial and gender difference. According to Edgar (2010), Edgar and Martin (2004) and HMIP (2005), prisons are racialised spaces. Authors such as Viggiani's (2003) and Sabo et al. (2001) in their respective studies have also shown that prisons are gendered in that the majority of prisoners are men and the majority of prison staff are men. There is also some overlapping with the three tasks of prisons, for example, the task to protect the public and punish offenders may be associated with more masculine ideologies, whereas rehabilitation may be deemed to be more of a nurturing role.

The multiple tasks of prisons underpinned by gender and racial difference may lead to tension amongst staff because prison staff groups comprise individuals from different racial and gender backgrounds, which may create different perceptions of the role of prisons and generate different experiences. I am suggesting that race and gender becomes the key meaning-making device that generates expectations and explanations. These differences may activate a range of defensive mechanisms, (Obholzer and Roberts, 1994) to overcome the anxiety experienced

by staff within the organisation. Ergo, prisons are more than places where people are incarcerated and work, rather, they exist as organisations-in-the-minds (Armstrong, 2005) of employees in different ways.

### **The unconscious task of prisons**

Gordon Lawrence (1984) asserts that organisations perform three tasks: the normative primary task; the existential primary task; and the phenomenal primary task. Hence, organisations have three levels: the mission statement; the work; and the reality. The Prison Service Mission Statement outlines the normative primary task, while the existential primary task can be described as the rehabilitation of offenders, but unfortunately, rehabilitation tasks tend to be restricted by the prison regime in favour of the phenomenal primary task, the sole function of which is to uphold security in respect of maintaining well-ordered prisons.

This may cause anxiety because people choose to work in prisons for different reasons. Dowden and Tellier (2004), referring specifically to correctional officers, assert that correctional officers enter their careers with either a rehabilitative or punitive orientation towards prisoners. Thus, the different perspectives of the role of prisons, and the way in which prison staff carry out their duty in accordance with their job description may be related to the multiple tasks of prisons, because the different roles prison staff undertake may create tension as a result of suspicion and mistrust between individuals, and the roles they undertake in relation to the Prison Service Mission Statement.

### **Suspicion and mistrust among prison officers**

People are central to the culture formed in prisons, but culture also endures beyond individuals who come and go. Cultures are perpetuated through symbols, stories, rituals and language that link the organisation with its history and send a message about what is important. According to Liebling (2004), cultures and values are inextricably linked, and together they have a major influence on the prison environment. She further reports that the mind set of staff influences the prison's moral climate (Liebling, 2007). Academic research on prisons have also found that officer culture comes from the social structure of the prison and not the individual officers (Sykes, 1958), it is a result of the environment of the prison and not the people who become officers (Zimmer, 1986; Kauffman, 1988; Crawley, 2004). According to Kauffman (1988) correctional officers develop shared attitudes and behaviours over time after constantly being exposed to the environment of the prison.

Kauffman (1988) identified nine prison officer norms in her study and asserts they lead to the formation of a symbolic boundary around the correctional officers that result in an insider/outsider divide, that lead to a relationship which can be characterised as 'us-them' (Crawley and Crawley, 2008; Kauffman, 1988). Kauffman also found that there was a strong solidarity amongst prison officers, which she referred to as norm eight – 'maintain officer solidarity versus all outside groups'. I apply Kauffman's norm eight to the issue of mistrust, to examine participants' perceptions of their treatment when they first join the Prison Service and how this may be intensified by racial difference. I also explore their self-categorised feelings of mistrust and isolation within the prison context.

Scholars such as Shaver & Hazan (1994) have argued that trust is an essential ingredient for a healthy organisation and the basis for stability in social institutions (Zucker, 1986). Within the prison context trust among prison officers is very important and is necessary for a bond to develop between individuals. Kramer & Lewicki (2010) apply the term 'presumptive trust', referred to as positive social expectations that increase an individual's willingness to trust their colleagues. Here, trust is defined as one party's optimistic expectation of the behaviour of another when the party must make a decision about how to act under conditions of vulnerability and dependence (Hosmer, 1995). In reciprocal terms mistrust refers to the expectation that others will not act in one's best interest, even engaging in potentially injurious behaviour (Govier, 1994) and the expectation that capable and responsible behaviour from specific individuals will not be forthcoming (Barber, 1983).

Presumptive trust, according to Kramer & Lewicki (2010), can be based on identity, roles, rules, or leadership actions. It is their contention that identification plays a significant role in the formation of trust amongst individuals, by claiming that identification with others who share a common category membership, that is, homophily, increases the positive social expectations that underpin trust. In the context of British prisons, the term homophily is used in a specific way to refer to an observable tendency and opportunity to form an immediate bond within a specific group. From a racial perspective, the idea is based on the premise that most prison officers are white, therefore white prison officers will identify and bond with other white prison officers. Likewise, from a gender angle most prison officers are men and therefore male prison officers will identify and bond with other male prison officers. These definitions imply that trust is established when people perceive a shared background, or identity, and interact well with each other, and once trust is established people are willing to assume assistance, group support and cohesion is formed.

To explore the idea of trust further it is important to take into consideration how mistrust can increase, which may indicate the prevalence of phantasised fear of annihilation. By taking the idea of trust/mistrust and linking it to the effects of socially inscribed difference around race and gender, I will show how a culture of mistrust and suspicion is traceable in prisons. I am using the term suspicion in a very specific manner, taken from the notion of ‘suspect community’ initially developed by Hillyard (1993) and expanded by Hickman et al, (2011) to investigate Muslim and Irish people being treated as ‘suspect’ and the impact this has in their everyday lives. I relate this phenomenon to the way individuals within the prison context may assume a person may do something wrong, based on little evidence or without proof.

I am linking the idea of mistrust and suspicion to racialised and gendered difference within prisons, by asserting that identification along racial lines establishes boundaries and bonding between groups of staff. For example, prison staff groups are dominated by white male staff, so black female employees may be viewed with suspicion, which may lead to a lack of trust by their white male/female colleagues because of racial prejudice. When black women take on the role as prison employee they also take on a role that is perceived by their colleagues as incongruent for someone of their race and gender. This creates a ‘them/us’ in which white male/female prison officers as a racial group forms an allegiance with each other based on race, which overshadows their group identity as prison officers. This sets the foundation for suspicion with the resulting negative and/or uncomfortable intergroup encounters among individuals of diverse racial and gender backgrounds, producing anxiety for the individual and the organisation.

In the following sections I will discuss what Robinson et al. (2004) refers to as cycles of trust and will use this term to show how new prison officers are presented with conditions of low trust and are initially perceived as outsiders, this may then create an expectation that he/she will be treated as an outsider and not automatically accepted into the group. The concept will also be applied to show how suspicion can lead to presumptive mistrust, which in turn damages relationships in ways that are resistant to repair.

### **Suspicion and relational dynamics**

The first extract presented gives an example of how suspicion can lead to new recruits feeling isolated and vulnerable. Trina is a 45-year-old mixed race heritage prison Officer at HMP Mali. She describes her experience when she first became a prison officer.

urm, well when I first started, that weren't very nice because people don't really talk to me (Trina giggles) so don't really have many people to talk too. Urm you have a lot of stab backing, (Trina tuts) stab back, people stabbing you in the back, urm but I think that's just a general really, I don't think that's because I'm female, I'm black, I think that's just, I didn't feel it was that way anyway. I do feel that sometimes it takes that little bit; bit longer to settle in somewhere and a prison is one of them places where that takes a lot more to settle in. Urm, (1) I don't think anything of it really (1) no more than any other job. Urm, (1) but now I mean I'm very settled in urm (1) get on with most people, I'd say anyway in general. (3) Now that I've stuck it out. (We both laugh) Urm I enjoy the job.

Trina's extract shows how mistrust and suspicion permeates the inter-relationship amongst staff. At the start of her extract, Trina describes an imposed isolation from the moment she started working at HMP Mali and relates this to her colleagues not talking to her. She then proceeds to give a picture of the organisational culture depicted by the statement: 'Urm you have a lot of stab backing, [Trina tuts] stab back, people stabbing you in the back.' This statement might suggest that not only are 'you' being stabbed in the back, but also 'I' stab back in the sense of retaliating. There is an element of ambiguity of who is actually doing the stabbing in the sense of trust and mutual support, thereby suggesting that a culture of mistrust and suspicion abounds. This highlights the harshness of the organisation and the statement metaphorically implies that 'you' give and give back, or 'you' get and 'you' get back. In this context, suspicion and mistrust might act as a social defense in the sense of being forearmed and 'ready' for any attack, it is also a way of defending against the anxiety produced by fear, but it is ineffective.

Freud's theory of slips of the tongue, can tell us something about Trina's unconscious processing. Freud deemed slips of the tongue as revealing an unconscious thought, belief, wish or motive occurring in everyday life (Freud, 1901). According to Freud, when a slip of the tongue occurs it is an indication that the individual unconsciously does not want to put into words a disturbing thought. However, once the slip of the tongue has happened this forces the thought back into words which is probably against the person's will. The phrase 'stabbing' gives us a hint of Trina's suspicion directed towards her colleagues, which provides an indication of the inner tension in relation to the way in which individuals form allegiances or exclude others within the prison context.

Trina's frequent pauses after her slip of the tongue and the tone of her voice denotes a sense of uncertainty, perhaps with regard to whether she should disclose this information. Furthermore, her recollection may have generated negative feelings that were too painful to verbalise, or were perhaps an indication of her struggling to convey what she wanted to say. Subtle forms of racial inequalities in prisons (Edgar and Martin, 2004) may prompt black women to think about, and often guess, whether or not their white male/female colleagues are secretly prejudiced. This may lead to black women prison employees wondering whether their white co-workers secretly hold them in contempt because of their gendered racialisation and likewise, white prison employees may have similar unspoken thoughts about their black female counterparts.

The tangling of words might also signify Trina attempting to make sense of her experience at HMP Mali, which can be seen in her evaluation of her initial enforced isolation. Trina states that the rejection of new recruits may not necessarily be about gender or race, but may occur in any workplace, highlighted by this comment: 'urm but I think that's just a general really, I don't think that's because I'm female, I'm black, I think that's just, I didn't feel it was that way anyway.' Trina goes on to state that prisons are places where it takes a long period of time for new staff to settle in. This is an illustration of how mistrust and officer solidarity contradict each other in the early stages of prison officers' careers, as there is a lack of trust between new and existing prison officers.

As mentioned earlier, mistrust and suspicion can stem from gender and racial difference. In June 2016, the NOMS Workforce Statistics Bulletin reported that 31,091 staff worked in public sector prisons of which 6.8% were recorded as black, Asian minority ethnic male and female staff (Ministry of Justice, 2016). There was no breakdown by ethnicity and gender. My own

study showed that in 2012, there were 1,214 black women, 15,761 white women, 1,835 black men, and 28,541 white men (Thomas, 2016). The low numbers of black women employees may place pressure on them to assimilate into their staff group because their differing backgrounds, experiences, values, and gendered racialisation may affect the relational dynamics between colleagues. This in turn positions black women on the margins, where they may be more susceptible to isolation, suspicion and mistrust.

The next extract presented is taken from Rosa a 48-year-old black British prison officer at HMP Kerma, she describes a housekeeping task which occurs in every prison, every day: cleaning. All newly trained prison officers during their prison officer entry level training period in an establishment complete cleaning officer duties. This involves supervising prisoners cleaning different areas of their residential units, including the toilets, landings, stairs, etc. It is one of the most despised jobs and loathed by prison officers. Newly trained prison officers spend a period shadowing experienced officers completing various tasks and then are expected to replicate the behaviour. In this scenario, Rosa is suspicious and wary of her colleague's instruction about the cleaning task, but nevertheless undertakes the task in accordance with the instructions given by her colleague.

Rosa explains:

I realised that staff provoke prisoners and yes somebody could get it in their back and I thought you know that's not gonna be me. And then it comes to a point when staff provoke prisoners and it's the innocent staff get problems (4). So urm where I came, huh Gordon Bennett where I came across that experience. (2) Urm the first time I was gonna take a party of prisoners out to do a job (3). Coz luckily when I'm training so I don't forget what I'm doing, so I'll have a book and a bit of paper and I write down

task 1; 2; 3, you know, coz when I've got to do it myself, I've got to refer to my notes.....

So anyway, I took notes when they took me out when someone else was doing it. So I've got an idea generally what we're doing, and cleaning in fact my past from about 11 and a half, I had a cleaning job pretending I was certain age (MT giggles), urm so knew how to clean, then now in the prison, got to clean and now how security is paramount as, as number 1. (1) So I done the cleaning task wrote down the way they said it's got to be done. So I'm telling the girls I want it to be done this way, they're telling me no (3). 'No miss,' (Rosa impersonates the prisoner) (4) so I'm saying this is the way I was trained to do it, this is the way you're going to do it. But they said 'nah miss,' but the way they said, good thing I listened to what they said, because the no and the refuse to do it, it wasn't a defiant no, it was 'no miss we've done it before and we do it like this.' So I said okay, show me how you do it then. So she did it, security in tack, whatever, yeah makes sense common sense, way to do it anyway, go ahead. So I realised when they were showing me (MT giggles) they showed it me wrong on purpose. (Rosa is referring to her colleagues) So that would have made conflict with the girls and it's and now, look where I'm gonna have conflict with the girls, me lock in a stairwell, with nine woman (Rosa speaks in Jamaican patois), on my own. So what can I do on my own. Direct order, you're nicked, you're charged, they're gonna kill me (Rosa speaks in an authoritarian voice). So I realised I was set up.

Rosa's suspicion of her colleague is actualised when she realises that her colleague's guidelines for cleaning were incorrect. She believes her colleague deliberately placed her in a dangerous situation and had knowingly shown her a wrong technique to antagonise the prisoners and place her in a vulnerable position.

Rosa emphasised that some staff provoke prisoners and ‘innocent staff get problems’. This comment subtly conveys fear as well as highlights the dynamic interaction between individuals, I am suggesting that ‘innocent’ may be used to refer to ‘good’ staff in contrast to ‘bad’ staff who provoke prisoners. This highlights a division between staff, creating a ‘them and us’, whereby different groups of staff may take up positions ascribed to them. This division is further laden with racial and gender undertones which in turn produce tension and conflict.

As shown by the extract Rosa was already suspicious because she felt that some staff provoke prisoners, but then she begins to have doubts about her colleague’s genuineness and integrity. This idea can be linked to the very task of the organisation i.e. the multiple role of prisons is to punish, protect and rehabilitate, which are contradictory positions, which may symbolise a lack of trust throughout the whole organisation. The idea of mistrust is very significant because it plays a role in basic tasks such as cleaning and staff safety.

This incident also illustrates that prison officers must learn to adjust to ambiguous and/or conflicting directives in order to find the most appropriate action. Rosa’s comment ‘good thing I listened to what they said’ is an illustration of two significant points. Firstly, a transgression of prison officer culture; I am referring to the fact that Rosa disregarded the instructions given by her colleague and allowed the prisoners to complete the cleaning task in the way they suggested. Secondly, it shows how shared racial identity (the prisoner was a black female) acted as a communicative tool, that is, the word ‘no’ was not interpreted as defiance, but rather as a means to show Rosa an alternative method to completing the task which stemmed from an ethnic and gendered identification. Their shared gender and race may not have necessarily increased trust between Rosa and the prisoner because of the boundaries that exist between

these groups, this is specific to prisons and is related to Kauffman's norm eight mentioned earlier.

### **The impact of white superiority**

I now relate the idea of suspicion and mistrust to the make-up of prisons which are white and masculine spaces. Prisons in the UK may be seen as organisations in which white masculine culture dominates the social structure and functions as a system of control and privilege.

Puwar (2004) has shown what can happen when women and/or racialised minorities take up privileged positions in organisations. Their presence disturbs and disrupts the status quo as they enter spaces that historically have been reserved for white men. This may explain the tension produced by black women and the relational dynamics occurring as a result of their professional presence that disrupts the spatial order of white masculine superiority.

There is a misconception that prisons are race-neutral spaces on account of the attempts made by the Prison Service to implement positive race relations and increase the number of black staff. However, prisons are racialised spaces because race mediates the relational dynamics between staff and staff, and staff and prisoner. The case I use to show how prisons are racialised and also how this space of white masculine culture is disrupted by black women's presence as professionals, is taken from a scenario involving Raisa, a 43-year-old British Asian female teacher who worked at HMP Sahelian. Raisa begins by describing the quality and skills she brought to her establishment.

Well the quality and skills that I brought to the service was I think the quality of being non-white, from being from a different, different culture, because what I found initially, the prison staff they (1) they were um [Raisa tuts] their inadequacies, their limited knowledge of different ethnicities, different religions, cultures, language, food, you know and I thought that was something I brought with me, because as part of, not just working in the education department I also worked with the race relations liaison officer as well. I mean she was a race relations liaison officer, but she had no idea, you know, she had no idea of people's religious backgrounds, their cultures they have, the prison itself didn't facilitate people of different races um, their cultures, their religion there was nothing there. And I actually helped with this um liaison officer, I actually helped build some of the ethnic communities such as the Muslim communities, um getting them prayer mats, you know little simple things, like that. Copies of the Quran in English, this officer wasn't aware that you could buy copies of the Quran in English and in fact the prison didn't spend any money because I got them donated from the very communities, you know. Um so those are the qualities I thought, you know, I did bring and if anything else, um I felt I was a resource, you know so if I'm a resource, then use me, ask me, but they're very reluctant to do that because it's like if they stay ignorant, therefore, they don't have to do anything about it. (1)

Raisa deemed her racial and ethnic background to be an asset to the organisation. In Raisa's account she appeared to be eager to utilise her skills when working with prisoners from different ethnic groups. Her attitude to her work and keenness to improve race relations may be viewed in the task of establishing positive staff-prisoner relationships.

The account also provides an insight into race, or in this case ethno-religious difference. Ethnicity and religion rarely exist or operate in isolation, rather, they interact with one another in a complex way. According to Khattab (2009), ethno-religious difference may be used to explain 'the degree of ethnic penalty that various minorities are likely to face as a result of two interrelated factors: the visibility of the group (measured by skin colour), and the cultural proximity to the hegemonic culture (measured by religious background). Ethno-religious difference is deeply embedded in prisons because the lack of collaboration and trust between individuals of different ethnic groups can affect the understanding between ethnic groups, and their willingness to accept each other's values (Hewstone, 2003). Therefore, those who are appointed to improve race relations sometimes lack awareness of racial, cultural, ethnic and religious difference, and have limited insight into provisions available to facilitate religious observance. This in turn may lead to rejection of other's culture and values.

Raisa's account above illustrates how she was able to draw on her own experience as a British Asian woman and her connections with community groups to acquire resources such as the Quran for Muslim prisoners. Furthermore, prison employees from different ethnic groups may be able to identify barriers encountered by prisoners from minority groups more easily than their white British counterparts. This highlights the significant role of ethnicity understood as a cultural phenomenon, referring to a person's identification with a particular cultural group (Hinman, 2014), may be used as a resource upon which staff from different ethnic groups may draw to respond to prisoners' needs.

The notion of suspicion and mistrust can also be related to structural racialisation, which is entwined in the organisation's culture. This is maintained through practices and procedures and is reinforced by belief systems such as the notion of white superiority and/or associating

‘Muslim’ with terrorist (Hickman et al., 2011). This notion occurs implicitly and is difficult to detect. It is illustrated in Raisa’s earlier account when she refers to the lack of provisions for Muslim prisoners, and is an indication of the way this group was treated differently from, and considered inferior to, the dominant group. Moreover, the lack of provision and reluctance of managers to increase their knowledge of different cultural and religious groups perpetuates the alienation of this group from the broader prison community, while simultaneously embedding racist myths and stereotypes about them.

Another example of the way different ethnic groups are treated differently at HMP Sahelian is shown in Raisa’s extract below:

So it was quite a positive start to it um and then I started. It wasn’t until I started the job and then I could see how (1) not me, but I could see the difference how prisoners were being treated. If you were black, you were treated differently. If you were Asian you were treated differently. If you were white you were treated differently. And when I mean differently, differently is, staff would say, oh these people, or those people [Raisa emphasises the word ‘these’ and ‘those’] it was the language. And I sort of, used to think, you know, I felt that it was discriminatory language. So that’s where it sort of triggered from (4) yeah, I think that, that sort of what made me think about it first um that’s where the sort of negative bits started falling into place. Before I went into the prisons I didn’t realise it was like that.

Raisa explains how she quickly began to notice how dissimilar ethnic groups were treated differently. She makes reference to a ‘them and us’ culture, which I have interpreted as relating to race in favour of the dominant group – white, and also in this situation ethno-religious

difference. Raisa provides an example of the terms used by her colleagues when she mentions 'oh these people, or those people'. She emphasises these words, which illustrates the rhetoric and animosity towards minority ethnic groups.

Furthermore, studies have indicated that there is a fundamental problem of trust in general between white prison staff and black staff and prisoners, specifically towards those of Asian descent. For example, the HMIP (2010) found in their thematic review that Muslim prisoners reported more negatively on their prison experience, particularly with regard to their safety and their relationship with staff, than other prisoners. It is also worth noting that a large proportion of Muslim prisoners are of Asian descent, and this suspicion can extend to staff of Asian heritage.

The account below describes a scenario between Raisa, her managers, and an elderly male Asian student. She explains that her white colleagues and managers were inquisitive when she spoke to an ESOL (English for Speakers of other Languages) prisoner in another language.

And what did I learn from that well in, in my whole years of being at school, going to university, working, this was the first time, I urm that I was actually faced with urm, urm racism and I didn't know it was racism. Urm I really, really didn't know it was racism at all. Urm the staff would become very urm (2) what's the word I'm looking for (5)? They would become very suspicious if an elderly prisoner spoke to me in an Asian language and the reason he would speak to me in that language is because he couldn't speak English and it would be simply like, where do I need to go? You know, who do I need to speak to? Can you do this for me because I didn't get my meal last night? And the very managers, and staff and officers would come very suspicious of

why this urm prisoner was not speaking English and urm very often I would be called, almost ordered to the manager's office and asked, why are you talking in a different language, you know urm. (1)

Raisa's account describes the way her colleagues reacted towards her as a result of her speaking in a foreign language to an ESOL prisoner. Her action had a negative impact on inter-staff relations. The negative reaction of Raisa's white colleagues demonstrates how race and ethnicity may act as structuring social hierarchies. Raisa's response to the prisoner, that is, to communicate in a different language, created hostility and intensified the mistrust between her and her white colleagues, thus further highlighting her racial and ethnic difference.

The culture of prisons is characterised by solidarity between prison staff, enforced through the prison officer code, which operates above any other identity position (that is, ethnicity, age, sexuality, and so on), because prison officer's identity assumes the greatest significance (Liebling et al., 2011; Liebling and Price, 2001; Kauffman, 1988). This creates inequality in prisons because it perpetuates a white masculine culture exemplified by the axiomatic white male prison officer's attitude and practice that controls the processes and practices within prisons. For example, only English is spoken by staff to prisoners, hence Raisa's action was disruptive to the established process.

This perspective might explain why Raisa's managers reacted in a negative way and chastised her. Their actions implied that there was something sinister in Raisa speaking another language to an ESOL prisoner. Their response may have been fuelled by the characteristics of the axiomatic white male prison officer, resulting in the majority of staff not being able to identify with people from other cultural groups. This illustrates the process of identification in relation

to white male prison officers and creates a 'privileged' position and status that leads to white staff differentiating themselves from those who are 'not members of that group'. It is also linked to the general 'suspicion' with which Asian people are greeted, this may also lead to negative attitudes towards such groups (Bartel, 2001) and create irreplaceable trust relationships between different racial groups.

Raisa's account gives an insight into the organisational culture whereby difference is not allowed and shows how staff who do not resemble the iconic image of prison officer are automatically faced with suspicion. Furthermore, her comment suggests yet another important consideration in defining prison culture and its pressure to eliminate racial difference within the staff group. Raisa's portrayal of the incident in terms of institutional racism provides an indication of how racism does not occur in a social vacuum, nor is it 'over' after the incident; it is a process rather than an event. This is shown by her analysis of the whole situation and how she relates it to racism, while implying that before she worked in the prison she was not able to recognise racism, but the organisation opened up a new lens that made her recognise racism in organisational life.

From an organisational psychodynamic perspective, Raisa's account illustrates the emotional currents that in part give shape to the interactions among and between staff and prisoners in the context of ethnic diversity and prison culture. The incident demonstrates the ways in which people from different racial backgrounds work in an organisation in which racial dynamics may erupt and can become more salient than other dynamics (McRae and Short, 2010). In this context, unconscious phantasies are laden with racial manifestations that strongly affect the relational dynamics within the prison, producing tension and anxiety. This incident also has cultural meanings; in other words, as a socially situated, dynamic process involving context,

individuals and structure. I have constructed a conceptual definition that takes into account the historical and social context and relationships between the individuals concerned and this has shown how suspicion and mistrust towards difference in this context is a natural extension of racism that usually allocates privilege along racial lines.

## **Conclusion**

Attention has been concentrated mainly on how a dysfunctional consequence of exaggerated mistrust and suspicion in British prisons is, in part, a result of the multiple purpose of prisons, highlighted by the Mission Statement and stems from the anxiety produced in response to the fear of racial and gender difference.

The data collected during this study illustrated that a prison culture exists permeated by suspicion and mistrust and it is experienced subtly by individuals. Suspicion and mistrust leads to individuals not recognising each other as valuable members of the organisation and thus empathy and respect decreases.

I gave three examples of how organisational culture may encourage and perpetuate adverse gender and racial dynamics between staff groups, especially between black women and her white colleagues, which may not always be obvious to the individual. I have also shown how suspicion and mistrust may lead to individuals not recognising each other as valuable members of the organisation and thus empathy and respect may decrease. A notable aspect of the tension created by mistrust and suspicion, highlighted by the participants' narrative was the way they experienced not being trusted and the reciprocity of not trusting their colleagues, creating feelings of exclusion and a sense of not belonging, thus supporting the claim that black women

are outsiders within, not fully accepted by their peers and have to rely on social defensive mechanisms to endure the challenges they encounter.

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