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**The Impact of Disrespect on Prisoners' Aggression: Outcomes of Experimentally
Inducing Violence-Supportive Cognitions**

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¹ The views presented in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of the National Crime Council.

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ABSTRACT

Self-report research suggests that much violence is triggered by perceived insults and disrespect. This may be particularly true in the context of a prison or another environment of acute deprivation, whereby individuals have little other recourse to means of reputation enhancement. This paper presents the findings of two studies conducted with prisoner volunteers inside a Category C (minimum security) prison in England. In the first study, the authors randomly assigned a sample of 89 prisoners to one of two conditions: the experimental group were asked to discuss times they have been disrespected by authority figures inside and outside the prison; the control group were asked more neutral questions. Both groups then completed several measures of cognitive beliefs, distortions, and hostile attribution biases. None of the measures differed across the two groups except the measure of excuse and justification acceptance. Controlling for other factors, the experimental group endorsed these rationalizations at a significantly higher rate than the control group. This finding suggests that raising the salience of disrespect – reminding prisoners of times they have been made to feel unworthy of consideration – may raise the risk that prisoners will engage in violence by providing prisoners with justifications or excuses for actions they might not otherwise endorse. These findings received some additional validation in the second study, a qualitative analysis of offender accounts of violence and aggression within the prison. Implications for reducing violence within prisons are discussed.

Key words: Cognition, Aggression, justifications and excuses, hostile attribution bias

Right, some geezer pulled a glass bottle on me, he smashed it and said he was going to do me with it, yeah, so I said “Alright, hold up I’ll be back in a minute”... So I went and got a broomstick, yeah, snapped it in half. So I’ve got a tool now so I’m ready for combat ... It was all over a banana. I used to be giving out the bananas [in the prison cafeteria], yeah, and... he had been given a banana with a bruise on it. (Int. #23, Male, aged 22)²

Lind and Tyler (1988) suggest that people care deeply about whether they are treated fairly by others because fair treatment indicates something important about our social status and identity as judged by others. Respect involves treating another as worthy of consideration and is especially important for the development of a secure self (Kant, 1964; Miller, 2001; Pilling, 1992; Quinton, 1991; Tyler, 1990; Tyler & Lind, 1992; Tyler & Bladder, 2000). In contrast, disrespect entails a disregard for the individual and implies that they are not worthy of consideration. Individuals tend to expect a reasonable level of interpersonal sensitivity, accountability and respect in their interactions with others (Bies & Moag, 1986; Miller, 2001; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997). When others fail to behave accordingly, they give the impression that they do not perceive us worthy of such consideration (Miller, 2001).

Perceived insults or disrespect are often reported as catalysts for aggression and hostility (Barbalet, 1998; Gaylin, 1984; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; Storr, 1991; Toch, 1992). Yet, such affronts may be particularly dangerous in the context of the prison, where the perception of being devalued is already widespread and can become amplified by the smallest of reminders (Butler & Drake, 2007). Sennett states “In places where resources are scarce and approval from the outside world is lacking, social

² A quote from a research participant in this study, interviewee number 23 out of 89 total participants.

honor is fragile; it needs to be reasserted each day” (2003: p34). Prison is just such a place. As Edgar, O’Donnell, and Martin argue “Respect becomes particularly important in prison when one has little else” (2002: p138).

In 2005, there were over 12,200 fights and assaults between prisoners in England and Wales (Home Office, 2006). However, this figure is believed to underestimate the true rate of prisoner confrontations due to definitional issues and prisoner reluctance to report such incidents to prison officers. Self-report studies reveal that between 10-20 per cent of adult prisoners report having been assaulted inside prison and approximately 33 per cent have been threatened with violence (Dodd & Hunter, 1992; Edgar, et al. 2002; King & McDermott, 1995; O’Donnell & Edgar, 1996; 1998).

A considerable amount of this violence may be triggered by perceptions of disrespect. Research by Edgar and colleagues (2002) suggests that the most frequent reasons prisoners give for engaging in prisoner-on-prisoner confrontations were feeling wronged, feeling a threat to status, feeling a threat to self-image, drugs, material gain and enjoyment. Even aggression arising over debts and drugs can revolve around issues of respect, self-image and status, as prisoners seek to establish themselves as potentially violent forces to be reckoned with rather than easy targets for exploitation (see Edgar et al. 2002; Sykes, 1958).

The prison, therefore, provides an interesting setting within which to explore the psychology of disrespect and its links to aggression, as well as wider questions of cognition and violence (e.g., Gannon, Ward, Beech & Fisher, 2007). In the following, we present two linked studies designed to interpret and dissect the mediating cognitive mechanisms involved in aggression within prison walls. In the first, we experimentally test the impact of raising the salience of feelings of disrespect on

prisoner's self-report cognitions, measured in a series of vignettes. The findings from this study are then explored in more depth in qualitative interviews with prisoners about their experiences of violence and aggression in the prison.

Disrespect, cognition and aggression

Theories of social-information processing provide a framework for understanding how aggression is mediated by cognition (Dodge, 2003). These theories suggest that individuals develop routinised patterns of processing social cues that help to shape behavioural outcomes (Dodge, 2003; Huesmann, 1988; Newell & Simon, 1972). Crick and Dodge (1994) propose a social-information processing theory involving six steps: the encoding of social cues; the interpretation of social cues; the clarification of goals; response access and construction; response decision; and behavioural enactment. Numerous researchers have examined the social-information processing of habitually violent individuals to determine whether they have "biases" or "errors" in their cognitions that might contribute to their aggressive behaviours (e.g., Dodge & Newman, 1981; Huesmann, 1988).

The most robust finding in this regard is the hostile attribution bias (see de Castro, Veerman, Koops, Bosch & Manshouwer's 2002 meta-analysis). Hostile attribution bias involves the tendency of some individuals to routinely make attributions of hostile intent to the actions of others (Nasby, Hayden, & DePaulo, 1979). In particular, hostile attribution bias has been found to be strongly associated with reactive aggression whereas instrumental forms of aggression are typically linked to positive outcome expectancies for violence (de Castro et al. 2002; Walters, 2007). Longitudinal studies of children, such as those by Weiss, Dodge, Bates and Pettit (1992), Dodge, Pettit, Bates and Valente (1995), Egan, Monson and Perry

(1998), and Dodge, Crozier and Lansford (2001), find a relationship between measures of the hostile attribution bias and aggressive behaviour, even when controlling for prior levels of aggressive behaviour and intelligence. This effect has also been found among adolescents and samples of adults convicted of serious violent crimes (see Dodge, et al. 2001). Individuals who engage in aggressive behaviour are therefore believed to selectively focus upon and perceive more hostile cues over and above other cues within a social setting, form more hostile interpretations of ambiguous situations and generate more violent responses to these situations (Dodge, 2003; Dodge & Newman, 1981).

A related cognitive bias is the denial of responsibility for one's aggressive actions. Neutralization theory suggests that "much delinquency is based on what is essentially an unrecognized extension of defenses to crimes, in the form of justifications for deviance" (Sykes & Matza 1957: p666). Sykes and Matza identify five "neutralization techniques" that allow offenders to engage in wrongdoing without suffering from pangs of guilt: denial of responsibility, denial of injury, denial of the victim, condemnation of condemners, and the appeal to higher loyalties. They argue that "It is by learning these techniques that the juvenile becomes delinquent" (Sykes & Matza, 1957: p667) More recently, Bandura (1990) developed a similar theory of "moral disengagement" involving the following "techniques" for avoiding self-sanction: displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, distorting the consequences of an action, dehumanising the victim, and assuming the role of victim for one's self (see also Barriga, Landau, Stinson, Liao & Gibbs, 2000; Gibbs, Potter & Goldstein, 1995; Slaby & Guerra, 1988).

This theoretical focus on the role of excuse-making in the psychology of crime and violence has had a profound influence on the applied world of offender treatment,

where excuses and justifications are often assigned the specialist label of “cognitive distortion” (e.g. Abel, Gore, Holland, Camp, Becker & Rathner, 1989; Blumenthal, Gudjonsson & Burns, 1999). Murphy defines “cognitive distortions” as “Self-statements made by offenders that allow them to deny, minimize, rationalize and justify their behaviour” (1990: p332). It is consistently recommended in the treatment literature that a primary purpose of treatment interventions are “to identify and confront cognitive distortions, rationalisations and excuses for offending” (Salter, 1988: p114).

The relationship between these cognitions and violent behaviour is controversial (see Maruna & Mann, 2006), but even more questions remain about how and why these cognitive patterns emerge in the first place. Dodge (2003) theorises that environmental stimuli, emotions, and life scripts influence an individual’s social-information processing. Additionally, he states that an individual’s biased cognitions “may emerge at least partially as an adaptive response to past life experiences of actual threat, such as physical abuse and peer victimization” (Dodge, 2003; p256).

These biases in cognition may be particularly acute in situations in which people feel devalued or generally disrespected. Ethnographic research suggests that when an individual’s access to social capital and/or symbolic indicators of social status are limited, being treated in a respectful manner becomes most important for one’s sense of social worth (Bourgois, 2003; Gilligan, 1996; Sennett, 2003). Anderson writes: “In the inner-city environment, respect on the street may be viewed as a form of social capital that is very valuable, especially when other forms of capital have been denied or are unavailable” (1999: 66). In particular, men who are in some way socially marginalised or structurally restricted in the performance of their masculinity (e.g., through opportunities for gainful employment) are believed to

utilise aggression as an alternative means of obtaining masculine status and respect (Anderson, 1999; Bourgois, 2003; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Sykes, 1958; Young, 1999, 2003). According to Gilligan (1996), such individuals use aggressive behaviour to deflect threats to their identity as they attempt to replace feelings of shame with feelings of pride achieved through an aggressive display of ‘manly’ behaviour. Likewise, Katz argues that when an individual feels wronged, manipulated or exploited, he may experience himself as the object of another, and thereby seek to regain his “lost control of his identity” (1988: p24) through aggression. In such circumstances, individuals may feel justified in hurting others as a way of “reasserting one’s dignity and identity” (Young, 2003: p408).

Researching disrespect in the prison context

This study seeks to examine the influence of perceptions of disrespect on cognitions thought to be related to violent and aggressive behaviour. Rather than utilising undergraduate psychology students, the research setting for this study is a British Category C (minimum security) prison and the research participants were all prisoners. As such, we have sought to take advantage of this opportunity by employing a mixed-method qualitative-quantitative design, involving both a small, controlled experiment as well as open-ended interviews with prisoners about their experiences of aggression and disrespect inside the prison.

METHOD

Hypotheses

It was predicted that those individuals in the experimental group would score more highly on the measures of aggression-related cognitions, such as hostile attribution

bias and the denial of responsibility. The experience of feeling disrespected should heighten such individuals' sensitivity to further threats and slights in social interactions. It was also predicted that the experimental group would score lower on the measure of self-esteem.

Sample

A random stratified sampling technique was used to voluntarily recruit 89 adult male prisoners serving time in a Category C prison. Participants ranged in age from 21-66 years, with a mean age of 32.58 years ($SD = 9.77$). Most participants were either white British or black Caribbean (see Table 1).

[Please insert Table 1 here]

The majority of participants were serving sentences for burglary, robbery and drug related offences although a few were convicted of offences as serious as manslaughter (see Table 2).

[Please insert Table 2 here]

A majority of participants (57 percent) self-reported working class origins, 15 percent considered their background to be lower middle class, 24 percent middle class, and only 3 percent upper middle class background. Nearly three quarters said they had no school qualifications while over half reported a history of drug addiction. For just over one third of the sample, their present sentence was their first, whereas the remaining two thirds reported serving a number of previous sentences, with a mean of 4.40.

All participants were voluntarily recruited and informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time should they wish to do so.

Materials

In order to investigate the relationship between disrespect and cognitive distortions, participants were asked to complete a tape-recorder semi-structured interview about their life in prison and their life history as well as various demographic, personality and cognitive questionnaires. A more detailed description of each questionnaire is provided below.

Demographic Questionnaire:

The demographic questionnaire requested participants to complete the following information: age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, school qualifications, age at first conviction, number of previous sentences, current offence, proportion of prison sentence served and history of drug addiction.

Locus of Control

Valecha's (1972) locus of control questionnaire was used to investigate whether participants had an internal or external locus of control. Valecha's questionnaire is an eleven item abbreviated version of Rotter's (1966) locus of control scale. Higher scores indicate an external locus of control while lower scores indicate an internal locus of control.

Big Five Personality Inventory

The Big Five Personality Inventory was used to measure the participants' personality traits (John & Srivastava, 1999). In an effort to keep interviews as brief as possible, not all items were included. Instead, only items measuring agreeableness, extraversion and conscientiousness were included in this study. These items retained an acceptable level of Cronbach's alpha (.75, .71 and .75 respectively) with higher scores indicating a greater level of agreeableness, extraversion and conscientiousness.

Self-Esteem Questionnaire

Rosenberg's (1986) self-esteem questionnaire was used to measure the participants' self-esteem. This questionnaire consists of ten items with a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .77 to .88 and test-retest correlations varying between .82 and .88. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha for the questionnaire was .75. Higher scores indicate high self-esteem while low scores indicate low self-esteem.

Hostile Interpretation Questionnaire

Simourd and Mamuzá's (2000) Hostile Interpretation Questionnaire (HIQ) was used to measure the extent to which participants demonstrated biased cognitions. The HIQ is a 28 item vignette style questionnaire based on a social-information processing perspective. It focuses on four biased cognitions which are thought to promote the use of aggressive behaviour. These include: the extent to which participants engage in overgeneralisations of hostility, attribute hostile intent to the actions of others, respond aggressively to social situations and deny responsibility for their aggressive behaviour. In an attempt to minimise potential participant response bias the HIQ uses seven vignettes. Each vignette is followed by four questions examining a different cognitive bias. All questions are scored on a five point Likert scale ranging from

strongly disagree to strongly agree. The HIQ is scored by summing all item responses together to obtain a total measure of biased cognitions or by summing each question together across the different vignettes to obtain sub-scores on the four cognitive biases focused upon in the HIQ. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of biased cognitions.

Procedure

In order to investigate the relationship between disrespect and offence-related cognitions, the participants were asked to complete the questionnaires and interview in the following order: demographic questionnaire, locus of control questionnaire, Big Five Personality Inventory, semi-structured interview, self-esteem questionnaire and Hostile Interpretation Questionnaire. The participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups, an experimental (n=44) and a control (n=45). The experimental group was asked a series of three questions about incidents in their lives in which they felt disrespected, in particular by figures of authority. The participants were asked to talk about situations in which they felt disrespected in prison; situations in which they felt disrespected by authority figures (e.g., teachers, social workers) outside of prison; and, lastly, whether they felt they would get more respect if they were wealthier. The purpose of these questions was to temporarily increase the men's salience of being disrespected by others. Immediately following this, participants were asked to complete a self-esteem questionnaire and a Hostile Interpretation Questionnaire. Members of the control group participated in these questionnaires and interview as well, but not the disrespect manipulation.

The participants were asked to complete the demographic questionnaire, locus of control questionnaire and Big Five Personality Inventory in order to control for possible confounding variables. Both groups were also asked to participate in a tape-

recorded and transcribed interview about their life stories and, in particular, their lives within the prison. These were inductively analysed for patterns in the explanations prisoners give for their own involvement (and that of others) in violence inside the prison. This analysis, it is hoped, can both illustrate and illuminate the findings from the controlled experiment by utilising the prisoners' own words and insights regarding the psychology of aggression.

EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS

Independent t-tests were used to examine whether there were any differences between the experimental and control groups on their demographic, sentence and personality profiles. The two randomly assigned groups were well matched in general with basically identical personality profiles and social backgrounds (see Table 3). However, the age of the participants differed significantly between the two groups, with the experimental group significantly younger than the control group [$t(87) = -2.01$; $p < .05$]. This result appeared to be due to two outliers in the control group; the median age of the two groups is reported below.

[Please insert Table 3 here]

Next, independent t-tests were used to examine whether the men's self-esteem and cognitive biases as measured by the Hostile Interpretation Questionnaire differed depending upon whether the men's salience of being disrespected had been increased. This analysis found that only one³ of the measures of cognitive distortions differed across the two groups: their denial of responsibility [$t(87) = 2.63$; $p < .01$]. The

³ Because a manipulation check was not utilised in this study, it is not possible to determine the reason for the absence of a hypothesised effect on the other measures of social cognitions. The manipulation may not have achieved its desired effect of raising the salience of disrespect in participants' lives.

experimental group appeared to endorse the use of excuses and justifications at a significantly higher rate than the control group (see table 4).

[Please insert Table 4 here]

As the participants' denial of responsibility was significantly correlated with their age [$r(89) = -.28; p < .01$], an ANCOVA was used to test whether manipulating the men's salience of being disrespected increased their denial of responsibility while controlling for their age. This analysis found that increasing the men's salience of being disrespected increased their denial of responsibility even when the men's age was controlled for [$F(1, 89) = 4.63; p < .05$]. As a result, the hypothesis that those who are treated disrespectfully may be the most likely to deny responsibility for their actions is supported. No other differences, in self-esteem or attributions of hostility were detected.

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

Following the experimental aspect of the study, research participants took part in an hour-long, face-to-face tape-recorded interview about their lives in and outside of prison. A particular focus of these interviews was the violence they experienced inside of prison from both staff and other prisoners. Interviewees stressed that although the threat of violence was ever-present in their lives inside the prison, actual experiences of confrontation inside the prison were relatively rare (see also Sparks, Bottoms & Hay, 1996). Indeed, the majority reported experiencing no more than one, significant verbal or physical confrontation a month.

Like with the experimental findings, the interview data suggest that prisoners generally engage in an uneasy truce with one another that appears to be broken only

“when there are triggers from the social environment which act on a personality that has been sensitised to shame” (Gilligan, 1996; p223). Interviewed prisoners consistently described incidences of disrespect as being the most important immediate trigger for episodes of violence within the prison. Some used the term “disrespect” directly, which allowed interviewers to probe what they meant by this phrase. The most consistently used synonym for disrespect was the experience of being “made to feel small” or feelings of “invisibility”:

Yeah, I made him look small in front of all his mates, then he has come back on the wing, he’s come over to me calling me ‘Listen ____, let’s forget about that’ and he went to shake hands with me and as I went to go shake hands with him, he threw a punch at me and that was when the fight started. The fight escalated [...] into a proper fight (Int. #36, age 42).

I was just queuing up and some person cut in in-front of me. I said something like ‘What is wrong with the rest of the queue?’ and he just turned round and started sort of squaring up to me and giving it this and that, and I just sort of explained to him that it wouldn’t look very good for him to be laid out on the floor [...] with his little plate trying to get his dinner, you know, it might get a bit messy for him. [...] I think it was more ‘Hang on, what am I invisible’ you know? [...] Yeah, you know ‘You’re nothing and I’m better than you and I’m going to cut in in-front of you’ (Int. #38, age 41).

Participants were clear that the issue was one of both internal pride, but also external reputation. The self being shamed by acts of disrespect was a “looking-glass self” (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983) involving the eyes of significant others:

He was queue jumping [i.e. *cutting in line*] and it is the same here as it is on any [prison] wing. It is sort of a respect issue, if you let someone push in front of you in a queue or whatever, people's opinion of you goes down slightly (Int. #68, aged 36).

[He] went around and told everybody on the wing that I was an idiot. Yeah, calling me an idiot because I couldn't pay him back [for a borrowed phone card]. I thought [...] 'Yeah, going to sort this out'. So I went up to him and I said 'What's all this I hear about me being an idiot?' [...] Before he said anything, I like punched him in the nose. [...] I'm the sort of geezer that is a nice fellow but if someone is going around taking the piss⁴ out of me, things going round, people saying stuff about me, then I'll do something about it (Int. #74, age 35).

As a result of perceived challenges to their identity, the participants generally felt compelled to 'defend their honour' in a similar manner as discussed by Gilligan (1996). Sometimes this sense of dignity was ascribed to one's upbringing:

I don't take disrespect, I'm from somewhere where we don't take disrespect. If you disrespect me I'll honour myself. (Int. #60, aged 29).

For many prisoners, the easiest way available to them to defend their honour, and replace their feelings of shame with feelings of pride, was through aggressive means. Some described this recourse to violence as "natural" or innate:

And why do you think that when someone is disrespected they end up fighting?

That's, that's the natural thing to do ain't it?

Okay, it is just a natural response?

⁴ 'Taking the piss' is a colloquially term used by the participants to refer to an individual or group of individuals attempting to disrespect or belittle another.

Yeah, well it is for me, I don't know about them but it is for me. (Int. #28, aged 21).

Things like being rude or disrespectful, things like bumping into people, that's what it all comes down to. It's a child's game, did you ever see kids hitting each other and walking away and then twenty minutes later hits him back, know what I mean, that is the kind of thing that goes on. (Int. #78, age 26).

Others argued that the prevalence of violence among prisoners over issues of disrespect had deeper roots, and might even be linked to the daily humiliations experienced inside and outside the prison in their own lives. Like every sample of prisoners, of course, most of the research participants grew up in highly disadvantaged circumstances and experienced childhoods characterised by abuse and fear. Many had been in and out of institutions through-out their lives, and few had hope that the future would be much different than the past:

Well I know what's going to happen, if I go back out to the same area I'm either going to be dead or I'm going to end up killing someone that's how, that's how its going to be. That is how it is where I live, its just survival out there. [...]
Some people live on the outskirts of London, like the private places and that, some people don't grow up to see things like some of us have seen, they don't care, they don't care, do you get me? They just want us to kill each other and put the other person away. [...] It's like even the police are against us in my area (Int. #21, aged 24yrs).

The research participants made clear that they were acutely aware of what others thought of them in the wider society:

[S]ome of them [people outside prison] might not want to know me because being a heroin addict is one of the worst things that people can do in a lot of people's eyes and 'once an addict always an addict'. My dad used to own a garage, he died like but the mechanic there spoke to my sister and said something like 'There'll be no happy ending to this, you'll find him somewhere with a needle in his arm, he's a smackhead' and all this, you know. (Int. #43, aged 43).

In particular, most had had negative experiences in the world of work. Not only had they suffered years of the indignity of unemployment, but when they were able to find work, it was often of the most demeaning, demanding and poorly compensated variety:

I think that [employers] just treat you like shit knowing that you've got a record, [so] you'll suffer anything, do you know what I mean? And when they start treating you like shit and you put your foot down and stop suffering, they turn around and say, 'Hey, look, we told you, it is the type of person he is, good for nothing' (Int. #13, aged 39).

Few held out hope that employers would give them the opportunity to earn a living wage and support a family upon their release:

When I get out [of prison], I am going to need housing, I am going to need employment without the snub nosed people who are going to look at my record and go, 'Oh, you've got a criminal record, you can't work for us' (Int. #16, aged 21).

Although prison staff at the particular prison at which the data was collected were sometimes held out as being "far better than any of the other prisons" some of

the interviewees had lived in, prison staff were not exempt from the list of those who prisoners felt treated them with scorn:

There are some staff that are generally nice people. [...] They don't want to see you in here and they want to help you out while you are in here. However there are some officers, you know, they look at prisoners all the same whether one prisoner is constantly down the block or getting into fights [...] they will paint them with the same brush. [...] They will treat them all the same. (Int. #47, age 26).

I don't know, some of the staff are alright. I get on well with some of them but some of them I just don't like. [...] The way they act, they think they are better than us but they're not. [...] It's like the way they look at you and the way they talk to you as if you are scum like, do you know what I mean, as if you are nothing. But you are, you are something, [sigh] I don't know (Int. #28, age 21).

As in the experimental findings, such disrespect might create an environment or an immediate situation in which violence appears justifiable. That is, if others are treating you in an inappropriate manner, you might be excused in the wrongful treatment of others. Moreover, the accumulation of these experiences of disrespect over a lifetime may result in an insecure sense of self or an identity "predisposed to shame" in Gilligan's (1996) terms, leaving individuals vulnerable to violence. One interviewee articulated this possibility extremely well in the interview process:

I don't know, I think, I don't know, disrespect is like, I think people think they are made to look little in front of other people, it is insecurity isn't it, do you get me? Insecure in themselves so they react because they want to show the person that they can't do that to them because they will do this and then that

will send a message to anybody else who is thinking of dissing⁵ you, do you get me? (Int. #78, aged 26).

When challenged or insulted, individuals with an insecure sense of self may feel that they must react to this challenge to reaffirm their sense of self and status:

Definitely, yeah, definitely, you get a lot of people who while they are in jail, a lot of people, like their mentality, a lot of people think that they have got something to prove, especially a lot of people trying to talk down to people, like disrespecting them (Int. #40, aged 32).

Ironically, then, the use of confrontational behaviour between prisoners might be seen as an expressive demand to be treated with respect among those who feel they have none:

I have a lot of expectations about what I want to be. I want to be a somebody, I don't want to be a nobody. (Int. #85, aged 26)

Aggression could be a means by which prisoners, feeling insecure in their sense of self and their place within society, attempt to replace the shame they experience at being labelled a criminal and excluded by society with a sense of (at least temporary) pride.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The combined qualitative and quantitative findings from this research paint a consistent picture regarding violence inside (and perhaps outside) the prison. The experience of personal indignity – being made to “feel small” or “invisible” – raises the risk that prisoners will engage in violence or aggression. The experimental aspect of our research indicates that this process might “work” through the promotion of neutralizations and justifications for violence. That is, when individuals find

⁵ ‘Dissing’ is a term used by the participants to refer to the process of being disrespected.

themselves “pushed around” by the world (e.g. prison authorities, employers, love interests, parents or authorities) this appears to have a measurable impact on how justifiable or excusable they find the recourse to violence. According to these analyses, feeling disrespected does not so much trigger retaliatory violence (although it surely provokes it); instead, the experience of disrespect makes violence possible. It provides a justification or excuse for violence, and allows an individual to go against his or her general moral inhibitions against such things (see Matza, 1964; Sykes & Matza, 1957;).

The excuses and justifications offered by offenders for their behaviour have been the focus of considerable research, with several theoretical traditions linking the acceptance of these rationalizations to re-offending (see Maruna & Copes, 2004). The findings of this research, however, suggest that these neutralizations of responsibility may be subject to environmental and socio-dynamic influences and interactions. In particular, those who are treated disrespectfully by those in authority may be the most likely to feel themselves to be ‘victims’ and hence not take responsibility for their actions.

If confirmed in future research, these findings would have important implications for the psychology of violent behaviour where the focus of much cognitive work is on the individual’s distorted thinking patterns rather than on social and environmental conditions that might exacerbate these patterns of thought. More specifically, the findings have applied implications for the containment of violence inside the prison system. Ethnographic research suggests that prisoners are routinely subject to arbitrary and petty treatment by authorities, and that these daily indignities contribute to the prisoner’s anger and sense of unfairness. In his classic *Society of Captives*, Sykes writes:

The frustration of the prisoner's ability to make choices and the frequent refusals to provide an explanation for the regulations and commands descending from the bureaucratic staff involve a profound threat to the prisoner's self image because they reduce the prisoner to the weak, helpless, dependent status of childhood (1958: p75).

This research suggests that the more respect prisoners feel from those around them, the less justified they will feel in resorting to aggression, and (perhaps) the less violence the prison will endure. In other words, the principles of procedural justice (Thibaut & Walker, 1975; Tyler, 1990) may be especially important in the prison context (see Liebling, 2005).

Of course, the deep levels of shame and humiliation that prisoners struggle with goes well beyond the treatment at the hands of prison staff (and may be endemic to the experience of banishment and incarceration). Still, prisoner-staff interactions are not at all unimportant judging by the number of times cruel or sadistic acts by prison officers are mentioned by prisoners and ex-prisoners themselves in their accounts of life in prison. Indeed, considerable research suggests that respectful treatment by staff can reduce the number of suicides and level of self-harming inside a prison (see Liebling & Maruna, 2005). The present findings suggest that violence between prisoners also may be related to such procedural justice. Prisons that ensure that prisoners are treated respectfully may not be violence free, but they might provide fewer excuses and justifications for prisoners prone to aggressive interactions.

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Table 1: Participant Ethnicity

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>No of Participants</i>	<i>% of Participants</i>
White British	43	48.32
Black Caribbean	15	16.85
White Other	11	12.36
Black African	9	10.11
Black Other	5	5.62
Asian	3	3.37
Mixed	2	2.25
Other	1	1.12

Table 2: Offence for Current Sentence

<i>Offence</i>	<i>No. of Participants</i>	<i>% of Participants</i>
Robbery	19	21.35
Burglary	17	19.10
Drug Related	17	19.10
Other	8	9.00
GBH	7	7.87
Wounding with Intent	6	6.74
Manslaughter	4	4.49
ABH	3	3.37
Possession of Firearm	3	3.37
Threats to Kill	2	2.25
Harassment	1	1.12
Theft	1	1.12
Assault and Robbery	1	1.12

Table 3: Demographic, sentence and personality means

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Experimental Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Median Age of participants	28yrs	31yrs*
Ethnicity:		
White British	42.3%	53.3%
Black Caribbean	20.5%	13.3%
Other	37.2%	33.2%
Offence:		
Burglary/robbery/theft	43.2%	42.1%
Assault/violent offences	25.0%	24.3%
Drug related offences	20.4%	17.7%
Other offences	11.4%	15.9%
Socioeconomic status:		
Working class	50.0%	64.4%
Lower middle class	18.2%	13.3%
Middle class	25.0%	22.2%
Upper middle class	6.8%	-
Age of first conviction	21.98	24.07
Number of previous sentences	3.77	5.02
Proportion of sentence served	60.43	58.24
History of drug addiction	54.5%	55.6%
Locus of control	24.91	24.36
Extraversion	26.14	26.71
Agreeableness	32.32	31.76
Conscientiousness	31.55	32.00

*p<.05

Table 4: Cognitive and behavioural means

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Experimental Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Self-esteem	28.98	28.67
Overgeneralisations of hostility	18.43	18.47
Hostile attributional bias	19.16	18.58
Hostile response	19.20	18.76
Denial of responsibility	21.16	18.58**

**p<.01