

The Prisoner Hierarchy

Previous chapters have described the nature of power in HMP Wellingborough and the adaptations that were shaped by the practices and principles of contemporary prison governance. They have shown that prisoners' adjustments to the environment were outcomes of interactions between various forms of penal power—implemented within the particular context of HMP Wellingborough—and the different values, expectations, and ambitions that prisoners carried with them into the establishment. The rest of this book provides an analytic description of the social life and culture of HMP Wellingborough, arguing that the form of this social world was also determined by the prison's inherent conditions, its institutional policies and practices, and the attitudes, orientations, and characteristics that prisoners imported into the prison. This chapter turns specifically to the system of power and status between prisoners. Through a framework that incorporates existing theoretical approaches, it describes the prisoner hierarchy and untangles its determinants and consequences.

In studies influenced by 'indigenous' perspectives, power and status were seen as the outcomes of *structural* and *institutional* factors. Certain behaviours were rewarded and reinforced by official incentives or generated kudos among prisoners because they alleviated the deficits and frustrations of imprisonment. Sykes (1958), for example, argued that the most respected prisoners were men who conformed to codes of behaviour that mitigated collective pains. These men were loyal, generous, and tough without being provocative, for example. Other prisoners accrued power by taking advantage of scarcities in information, goods, and services, or exercised power over their peers as a reactive consequence of threats to their masculine status, autonomy, and personal safety. Among other roles, there were 'merchants' who sold desired commodities at profit, and 'toughs' who strong-armed what they

wanted from weaker inmates. The institution stimulated relations of domination and exploitation, as well as behaviours that reaped moral admiration.

Recent works by McEvoy (2001) and Buntman (2003) have likewise suggested that prisoner leadership is defined in relation to changes in institutional cultures and strategies, with certain prisoners ascending internal hierarchies when their values are appropriate to the environment (see also Boyle 1977). Such studies endorse a more dynamic, interactional approach to the analysis of hierarchy than earlier work. Power and status are responsive to shifts in the tone and technique of prison administration, and the needs and values they produce. But they are also conditioned by social and cultural tides *outside the prison*. The significance of these factors has been documented in a range of work which has emphasized how social structures in prison are defined by social movements, cultural values, and notions of power and prestige imported from the community. Irwin and Cressey (1962), for example, differentiated between the status held by professional 'thieves' and the influence acquired by 'convicts', and traced these different forms of power within prisons to criminal experiences and identities outside them. Jacobs (1977) described how the power structure in *Stateville* prison directly reproduced gang structures on the streets of Chicago, with leadership automatically transferred to top-ranking gang members on their entry into custody. Other writers (e.g. Newton 1994) have noted the parallels between hierarchies of masculinity outside prison and hierarchies of power within them. Although little consideration has been given to the role of *biographical experiences* in shaping the terms of status and stigma, these factors also merit attention.

Some comments about definitions should be offered, for, in some studies, little attempt is made to distinguish between power (influence, or the capacity to achieve things) and status (social standing or prestige), or between different forms of 'respect'. In their research on inmate culture, for example, Winfree *et al.* (2002) asked participants to rate offender types 'according to how much respect you would give them', without clarifying what this 'respect' might entail. Clarity is crucial here because the term 'respect' is used in prison in a number of ways. In its first use, it conforms to the Kantian notion that all persons are worthy of respect as a virtue of being human. Respect here is a moral right. It involves an obligation not to treat others as means or with

contempt, not to ridicule them, and so on. In Darwall's (1992) schema, this ethic is defined as 'recognition respect', the disposition to take something or someone into account in one's deliberations and regulate one's behaviour accordingly. When prisoners talk of 'treating everyone with respect', they are acknowledging this basic right of others to be taken into due consideration.

Darwall argues that recognition respect is 'essentially a *moral* attitude' (1992: 40, italics added). However, he notes—without much elaboration—that, when 'a boxer talks of having respect for his opponent's left hook and an adventurer of respecting the rapids of the Colorado' (1992: 40), their concerns are primarily *prudential*. The term 'respect' is very often used in this way in prison. It conveys an obligation to restrict one's behaviour towards someone that is based not on moral consideration but rather fear, awe, and other such sentiments. 'Respect' of this kind is offered for the sake of self-protection. When prisoners say that 'you *have* to respect someone', because of their physical potential or social influence, they convey the instrumental nature of this requirement.

A third form of respect is what is commonly thought of as admiration, regard, esteem, or veneration. Darwall calls this 'appraisal respect', and distinguishes it from recognition respect by noting that it involves the positive appraisal of a person's personal qualities or character, not just the recognition of their right to respect as a member of humanity. This kind of respect has normative dimensions, although, as Darwall highlights, it is possible to have appraisal respect for someone's ability (e.g. as a sports player) without having any moral regard for them. In prison, as this chapter explores, the admiration among some prisoners for behaviours that induced fear in effect conflated appraisal and instrumental respect. Nonetheless, this chapter seeks to distinguish conceptually between what could be called recognition respect, instrumental respect, and appraisal respect.

Structural Components of the Prisoner Hierarchy

A number of dimensions of the prisoner hierarchy in Wellingborough related to the intrinsic conditions of prison life. As seemed appropriate in an environment of physical and social compression, appraisal respect was given to men who showed loyalty, sincerity, and respect for personal space and property, who dealt skilfully

with prison staff, did not create problems for others, exhibited stoicism in the face of provocation, and upheld high levels of personal hygiene (see Kaminski 2004). As would be expected at this structural level of analysis, the list of respected traits is redolent of Sykes's (1958) description of admired characteristics. These are qualities that have been repeatedly identified as the basis of prison prestige (see, for example, King and Elliott 1977; Winfree *et al.* 2002). As Cameron summarized, the backbone of respectability was to be someone who 'don't cause trouble, keeps his mouth shut, if a problem comes to him, he deals with the matter, [and is] never in need of anything'. In the terms of another prisoner, 'lads are proper, clean, have an aura, know how to have a conversation, and don't get in debt' (fieldwork notes).

Stigma was also structured by intrinsic conditions. The main terms of abuse and derision were reserved for prisoners who struggled to cope with environmental necessities or did not respect the imperatives of collective living. The primary pariahs of the mainstream prisoner community (i.e. where sex-offenders were not openly identified) were 'grasses'. As Chapter 8 details, definitions of grassing were heterogeneous. Despite this variance, to be labelled a grass was to be branded almost indelibly as treacherous and untrustworthy. Grasses could not be trusted to keep the silences required for the prisoner community to sustain its hidden activities. 'Pad-thieves'—prisoners who stole from cells—were denounced for similar reasons. While stealing in the outside community or from the prison could be justified, a prisoner who stole from his peers transgressed a fundamental rule of the prisoner community.

Among the mainstream population, 'fraggle' and 'muppet' were the most common labels of disrespect. Although the terms were often used interchangeably, the former carried an implication of mental fragility or instability: prisoners who 'don't know where they are [or] what they're doing' (Den), who 'ain't got a clue...and don't really learn' (Callum), or who simply 'can't do their bird' (Zack). Prisoners often appreciated that some 'fraggles' simply did not comprehend the boundaries of appropriate social action. They over-reacted to banter and provoked conflict; they discussed trade and conflict with insufficient caution; or they struggled to keep themselves and their cells clean and hygienic. Those who scavenged for tobacco and begged for goods advertised their vulnerability, both in their inability to fend for themselves and their failure to disguise these acts of desperation.

To be a ‘muppet’ (alternative terms included ‘donut’, ‘numpty’ or ‘idiot’) denoted a range of behaviours. These included ‘messing around’, having needless ‘attitude’, moaning excessively, and causing unnecessary trouble e.g. by setting off fire alarms or throwing newspapers out of cell windows. These were acts that had collective consequences, causing general irritation, collective punishment, or ‘bringing heat’ from staff. The term was also used to characterize prisoners who exaggerated their wealth or criminal credentials. When untrue, such claims were easily falsified by information flows from outside the prison or through narrative flaws that were easily exposed in the prison’s compact informational environment. Stories were told with insufficient knowledge, in incompatible ways—‘he told one man he done this armed robbery and got a hundred grand, and [he told] the next geezer fifty grand!’ (Bradley)—or they were inconsistent with behaviour—‘they say “I’ve got this, I’ve got that, I’ve got a Lexus”, and then ask you for some burn ...’ (prisoner, fieldwork notes). To lie in such ways was seen as unnecessary, although such boasts were promoted by the association of affluence with moral status. It was also considered a breach of honesty in a world where identity cues were limited and trust relied on truthfulness. As Bradley noted, ‘if they’re going to lie to you, what else are they going to do to you?’

Prisoners deemed physically defenceless or lacking in emotional fortitude were also labelled *fraggles* or *muppets*. Some prisoners despised weakness as a thing in itself, punishing others for representing the fears that they fought to suppress. These prisoners held the vulnerable responsible for their own persecution. Jordan argued that: ‘a victim is someone who *allows* themselves to become a victim. Anybody can be a victim, but anybody can choose not to be as well.’ Having ‘guts’ was inherently admirable, whatever the outcome of their display, as one exchange with Cameron illustrated:

If you was a fraggle, and I was slapping you round the face and you retaliated, I’d respect you a lot more.

You might hit me again.

Yeah, yeah, possibly. But you’d be taught something about hitting, wouldn’t you? And I’d respect you a lot more for it. And you’d get respect off loads of other people.

Prisoners repeatedly testified that ‘standing up for yourself’ was admired whether a fight was won or lost, whereas ‘backing down’ led to an instant loss of credibility (see Chapter 8). Such views

reproduced notions of masculine credibility imported from the streets. These gendered imperatives carried particular intensity in prison, where the social stage was restricted and opportunities to be 'tested' were manifold (Sykes 1958). Weakness was also associated with grassing. Prisoners who lacked courage in their dealings with their peers were assumed to be less resilient to staff pressures to expose illicit activity. If accused of grassing, to put oneself 'on protection' (by asking to be segregated from other prisoners) was deemed an acknowledgement of guilt, whereas to stand up to allegations was to refute them: 'If you come out and stand your ground, then I'll look at you and think "my man can't be an informer, it can't be him". Because he's come out for his beating and he's still there' (VJ). Grassing and weakness were thus mutually associated.

A third source of stigma was heroin use. The majority of prisoners were from communities that had been ravaged by hard drugs. Many had lost family members to drug abuse, had experienced drug-related crime within their families, or had themselves suffered the degradations of addiction. Heroin was seen as a particularly 'dirty' drug that reaped social devastation, and brought out ruthlessness and moral squalor in its users. Zack's description was typical. A heroin addict would 'take the gold teeth out of his dying fucking grandmother's jaw; they're just conniving, manipulative bastards, who'll try and get anything out of anyone just for a fix'. Inside prison, users were repositories for the resentments that prisoners harboured about these activities in the outside world, and, often, for the feelings of shame that they carried about their own past acts while on drugs.

In addition to this, as Chapter 5 noted, heroin was blamed for having 'fucked jail up' (Carlton), dissolving whatever bonds of trust and mutual toleration had pre-dated its widespread appearance in UK prisons from the late 1980s (Atherton and Lloyd 1995; Bond *et al.* 1995; Walker 1995; Duke 2003; Crewe 2005b). 'It's hugely, hugely eroded the relationship between inmates, hugely', said Nathan. 'People on heroin become very, very desperate. Literally the level of grassing, the level of thieving's gone up, the level of bullying has gone up.' The solidary nature of the prisoner community prior to this influx may have been exaggerated. There was no doubt though that, in maintaining their habits, 'smack-heads' breached a range of norms that helped lessen the everyday frustrations of imprisonment.

Some such breaches were major violations of ethical codes. In order to get items with which to buy heroin, users stole from cells, ‘ripped off’ other prisoners in deals, or intimidated weaker men into handing over goods: ‘[They’ll] just go to a geezer and basically put it on him: “you’re giving me something or we’re fighting”. As soon as there’s drugs involved, people just lose all their morals’ (Connor). Once in debt, users often revealed the names of drug dealers to staff in order to secure transfers to other establishments, thus breaching norms about grassing. Many drug users put pressure on their families to send in money to repay debts or obtain more drugs, often lying in the process of persuasion. As Matt summarized, ‘a smackhead resorts to any dubious moral practices to get the gear—stealing from people, grassing, [he] doesn’t give a fuck’.

Many violations exacerbated the mundane frictions of the prison experience and polluted its everyday culture. Heroin users begged and borrowed in order to replace goods (such as tobacco) that they had already traded for drugs. These requests put pressure on other prisoners to eat into their own supplies or risk generating confrontation by refusing to do so. Drug users also cultivated friendships with cynical motives, making others wary of extending trust. Their moods were volatile and unpredictable. In conversation, they were fixated on individual needs at the expense of collective issues. In these respects, they ignored and infringed the physical and social boundaries that reduced interpersonal tension.

Disdain for heroin users also had symbolic dimensions. The much-used term ‘dirty smackhead’ implied contamination and moral decay. Some prisoners considered ‘smackheads’ an affront to collective dignity and an insult to more heroic versions of the prisoner identity:

My attitude has been, and I’ve actually said it to people, ‘where’s your self-respect gone?’ Staff that come in, and go out at night to the pub, those people are gonna go out tomorrow and tell all the pub that you’re selling your arse or your shoes or whatever you’re selling, and then that society thinks that all of us are like that, all prisoners are like that. (Stephen)

Almost all forms of prison heroin use were stigmatized. The taint of usage was such that prisoners who confessed in private to being ‘occasional users’ nonetheless condemned heroin when in public arenas. Any suggestion that a prisoner was a habitual consumer

or that his life revolved around drugs was fiercely resisted. The distinction mattered in practice and took form in everyday language. Terms such as ‘bag-rat’, ‘bag-head’, and ‘smack-rat’ denoted men whose behaviours and identities were dominated by the search for their next fix:

There is a difference between a heroin user and a baghead. A baghead is the kind of person that will go all out to get a little touch [of heroin], the kind of bloke who would rob his mum and all that shit. That’s why nobody likes being called it because they know what it suggests. (Callum)

Terms of this kind carried a moral insinuation. Sometimes, they were used to describe prisoners who had shed their physical addiction but retained the mentality of petty hustling, or those, like Alfie, who recognized that they were far from purging their desire for drugs. Heroin users who could control their habits or afford them without cost to others were more likely to be tolerated:

It depends on what type of smackhead you are. [Some are] just open about it, you can’t fault them, as long as they keep themselves locked in their pad and pay their debts. Then you’ve got the ones who spend all their canteen buying brown, and then they ain’t got shit, so they’re begging and they try and bullshit you: dirty smackheads who don’t give a fuck, they just want their smack. (Wilson)

Heroin users whose use caused no secondary effects could avoid the ‘smackhead’ label and its moral censure. Some cachet could also be derived from being an occasional user with sufficient will to resist addiction or dependence, from knowing where to find drugs, or from hustling successfully in order to obtain them.¹

The same conditions were applied in relation to prisoners who self-harmed. Any activity of this kind connoted weakness and an inability to cope. Self-harm was also a visceral reminder of pain—one that many prisoners did not want to be confronted with. Prisoners who self-harmed repeatedly were labelled ‘fraggles’ and ‘attention-seekers’ and were aware of being objects of both fascination and disgust (although they were also given sympathy from

¹ No such stigma was attached to the use of medicinal drugs. Men whose behaviour was psychologically ‘off-key’ were considered ‘fraggles’, but those whose use of psychotropic drugs rendered them stable were not disparaged. Indeed, prisoners talked very openly about medical and psychological conditions, even when their descriptions drew attention to mental health issues such as personality disorders or problems such as dyslexia.

some quarters).² Those who ‘managed’ their self-harm without seeking pity or monopolizing staff resources lost far less credibility. The need to meet the requirements of the environment was also signalled in less common terms of stigma. Thus, a ‘stress-head’ was a prisoner who could not handle everyday frustrations, while a ‘debthead’ was someone perpetually in arrears and incapable of managing his money.

Institutional Components of the Prisoner Hierarchy

Sykes (1956, 1958) argued that the inmate hierarchy was structured by institutional characteristics. Power and honour accrued to those prisoners who helped assuage the pains and scarcities of prison life through trade and cultural leadership. These pains also created ‘alienative’ responses. Some prisoners compensated for deficits in power and autonomy through interpersonal exploitation. If the prison could diminish the burdens of imprisonment, Sykes speculated (1956), patterns of coercion, fraud, and ‘chicanery’ could be altered or reduced.

In the UK, institutional policies have been refigured with such social consequences in mind. The IEP scheme in particular was conceived as a means of altering the prison’s social dynamics by tying rewards and privileges to individual compliance, and by easing some of the material and psychological deficits that would otherwise be alleviated through the prisoner subculture. The consequences in Wellingborough were twofold. First, the institution appropriated some of the power that would previously have been attained by individual prisoners. For a prisoner to improve his lot, he could turn to the institution’s formal structures as well as to members of his peer community. The possibility of raising one’s living standards through legitimate means also decreased the need to exploit or manipulate others. Second, there was more to lose from being involved in the informal economy, and from efforts to obtain power or status through strategies of extortion

² Although this was not a topic covered by the interview schedule, four of my seventy interviewees discussed having self-harmed. Three were relatively powerful prisoners, who had tried to disguise their behaviour from other prisoners. Stephen explained: ‘I was weak, I was weak. It’s an embarrassment now, a part of my life that I don’t want people to know about. I don’t want people to know that I was weak and felt inadequate.’

and deception. In a Cat-C prison, prisoners were all the more reluctant to accrue power conspicuously, in case it jeopardized their release. Power in prison is always somewhat provisional: to assert it too openly risks inviting challenges from men more determined to obtain it. In Stephen's words, 'there's always someone in the system who's badder'. With freedom so proximate, it was hazardous to risk such battles. Moreover, at this 'shallow' end of the system, the impulsion to counteract feelings of powerlessness was not as strong as in higher-security establishments, where the deprivations were more potent (Wheeler 1961).

In the culture that resulted, most prisoners sought to avoid being labelled 'trouble-makers', bullies or 'subversives'³ and stressed the significance of having social status in the outside community as well as in the prison. Riz stated his views as follows:

[Prisoners] who don't know me, they probably think I'm some dumb Indian. And I'm quite happy with that. It doesn't bother me. Status doesn't really bother me within prison. The ones that know me, they know what I'm about—that I can look after myself, that I know a lot of people out there what are dealing drugs in large quantities. The ones who don't, I don't really care.

In such ways, the prison's Cat-C status directed the gaze of many prisoners outside the institution.

Veteran prisoners and those with significant criminal experience often observed that influence would be easy to seize in Wellingborough. Officers were diffident in their use of authority and there were few organized groups of prisoners, leaving power relatively open to amass. Only one prisoner did this visibly during the period of fieldwork, using his notoriety and charisma to build around him a small following of acolytes. In general though, men with criminal reputations had neither the desire nor the need to assert themselves overtly, and instead kept low profiles. For them, recognition respect and instrumental respect were guaranteed, while the appraisal respect of Cat-C prisoners was barely worth having. Since the prison did not cede power to influential prisoners, there was little to gain from the institution in ascending the prisoner hierarchy.

³ Some prisoners noted the decline of an institutional terminology of 'subversion' and its replacement by a language of 'non-compliance'. The shift seemed emblematic of the change in penal ends from containment to engagement.

The overall outcome was a flattening of the top end of the social hierarchy. Most prisoners could identify men with *less* power than the norm—largely, those described above—but dismissed the notion that there were men with significantly *more*. Nobody ‘ran’ the wings. Weakness was more identifiable than strength, as staff also noted. ‘You can spot the victims quicker than you spot the major players’, said one senior officer: ‘You can normally spot somebody the minute they walk in that’s going to be a victim.’ Prison terminology reflected this state. There were fewer shared terms for prisoners who were powerful or respected than for those who were the opposite. To be in the former category carried fewer consequences. As Callum noted, ‘if you’re sound [i.e. alright], everybody [just] knows you’re sound’.

As most prisoners saw it, the main social division on the wings was a relatively simple split between prisoners to whom you gave some leeway and ‘wouldn’t mess with’, and those whose status was more questionable. While the former garnered instrumental and recognition respect, the latter were guaranteed neither. Prisoners expressed this division in various ways, and some identified further tiers, but there was near consensus about some basic distinctions:

We’re virtually all equal, but you’ve got people who are *on* the line, then you’ve got a certain amount of people who go *above* the line. You get the people who sit in their cell on their own, don’t really associate with anyone, they’ll be bottom.... Half of the wing to two-thirds of the wing are normal, then you’ve got the top-tier people, about ten. (Ewan)

There’s people that are one of the lads. They’re somebody who’s not a fucking idiot, but he’s decent. Then you’ve just got the normal people on the wing. Just normal people who you wouldn’t have a conversation with but you’d have a laugh and a joke with. All the people that sit in their cells. (Fin)

As far as I’m concerned there’s only three labels: you’re either an idiot (a muppet, div, whatever); you’ve got nutters, which are not right in the head; and you’ve got the lads. (Danny)

There’s always that one person you don’t fuck with, on every wing. There’s the fraggles and the normal people, [i.e.] the staunch people. (Zack)

The variance in such descriptions partly reflected the different locations from which prisoners viewed the hierarchy. It also indicated the relatively unfixed and unclear nature of the ‘pecking order’. Unlike in some penal jurisdictions, the power structure was

not rigid or highly prominent; nor was it determined by formal, organizational status (such as paramilitary or gang ranking) or set through ritual practices (c.f. Jacobs 1977; McEvoy 2001; Kaminski 2004). Rather, the division between the more and less respected denoted several interrelated distinctions, each of which was emblematic of certain deficits in prison life. The first related to economic resources and activity. As Alfie suggested—albeit at a stretch, in his own case—a certain form of status was assured by the ability to ‘make do’ materially:

It’s the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’. I would classify myself as a ‘have’. I’m a have through my personal choice. I smoke a brand of tobacco that’s cheaper, and that’s how I started off, I just bought a shitload of that and forced myself to smoke it.

Are there people who would say, ‘Alfie’s only smoking shit tobacco’?

Yeah, but Alfie’s got a jar of mayonnaise in his cupboard and a jar of coffee and fresh milk every week! And noodles whenever I want it, and peanut butter and jam and pork scratchings.

Prisoners who avoided debt and managed personal resources with skill thus derived some basic credibility. One prisoner characterized the hierarchy in terms of those prisoners who had to buy ‘double-bubble’ and those with enough goods not to require such transactions. Organized involvement in trade derived further status: ‘the respect comes from what you do. If you shop things—phone cards and burn and drugs, you’re respected, because you’re offering your service’ (Cameron).

On the prison’s induction wing, where there was a constant turnover of prisoners, the informal economy was dominated by a handful of cleaners and servery workers, whose relative permanence on the wing gave them a foothold to establish themselves as intermediaries in trade and information:

There’s a certain few of us who are the ones to go to if you want burn, or to see if you can get bits and bobs. Cleaners. We’re out all the time, so when people come on they [ask us] ‘what’s it like on here?’ or if they’ve got things to sell, they come and see us. So we’ve got more respect in that way than every other con. And we get away with more things with the screws. (Leon)

Elsewhere in the prison, trade was dispersed more widely. As suggested above though, workers on all wings held some influence through the amount of time they spent unlocked and the

relationships they developed with staff: 'they find out what's going on on the wing before anybody else, so it's usually them that know things [and] if they go to the office and say something, the screws would listen to them more because they are trusted more' (Ronan). Deficits in information thus gave some power to prisoners in high-trust positions.

A prisoner's material subsistence and his potential to trade were assisted greatly by his integration into social networks. To be part of a social group enabled a prisoner to borrow small quantities of goods from his peers without charge. Prisoners who were socially isolated relied on more formal transactions to get by. Further, men with 'things on offer' tended to socialize together, whereas those without were more often loners, either by nature or precisely because they were perceived as drains on the goodwill of others. Sociability and trade—social and economic capital—were mutually reinforcing. Each advanced the other, and both symbolized and consolidated status. Group membership was thus a further marker of credibility, with 'lads' often described simply as men who 'know a lot of people' or 'mix with everyone'. To socialize widely was a sign that one was a 'good lad', worthy of trust, and wise to the prerogatives of prison life.

Social networks provided the kind of physical capital that placed a prisoner beyond the realms of victimization. But 'lads' were also defined to some degree by their *personal* capacity for violence, their willingness to defend themselves without help from others. Connor described the key line of distinction as 'people who you know not to say certain things to, because you'd end up fighting with them [and] people who you can say what you want to, and they're not going to go for you no matter what'. Danny divided prisoners likewise: 'people know whether, if they tried to take a liberty with you, you're gonna accept it or whether you're gonna fight back'.⁴ Prisoners who did allow themselves to be 'mugged off' or 'took for a dickhead' (Cameron) risked widespread and daily exploitation (Edgar *et al.* 2003; and see below). 'Prison is hard if you're weak—you get asked for tobacco every day', one prisoner commented (fieldwork notes). When prisoners talked of some men being 'above the line' and others 'below it', it was this possibility of routine victimization that their terms delimited. 'It's not about

⁴ To 'take a liberty': to do something unacceptable.

power’, said one prisoner. ‘It’s about not getting fucked with’ (fieldwork notes).

Accordingly, ‘respect’ was sought out by most prisoners not as a way of accumulating power, but as a means of carving out relative autonomy (see Sparks *et al.* 1996). Defined in this way, respect was something that you ‘had to have’. As on the streets (Anderson 1999), to be at the top of the hierarchy was to be assured of being ‘left alone’, to be free to go about one’s affairs without external interference: ‘there’s some people you don’t mess around with, you don’t play games with them’ (Dave). This power was frequently expressed in terms of what could or could not be ‘said’ to another prisoner without sparking confrontation. ‘No-one can say nothing to me’, Paul boasted, explaining that he played his music at high volume even though he knew this was an irritation to others and a breach of normal practices. In similar terms, Martin claimed that no one could ‘tell me nothing’. These anodyne phrases spoke of the daily injuries of social subordination, of having been told what to do throughout one’s existence (see Charlesworth 1999). They also highlighted the importance of autonomy in some versions of masculine pride (Jewkes 2002).

In queues for phones or meals, powerful prisoners could push in line with little risk of challenge. Other men recognized that to do so, or take more than their share of time or resources, would meet resistance. ‘If I go on [the phone], I’ll only take five minutes’, said Callum, ‘some people don’t give a shit’. Power and status were thus acknowledged in silences and unstated allowances. Indeed, they were continually expressed and reinforced through space and symbolism—the volume of one’s music, the quality of one’s trainers (Jewkes 2005a)—and fought out in micro-interactions around scarce resources. High-status prisoners were the first to choose sports equipment in the gym; they asserted themselves confidently and vocally around pool tables and on the landings; and they consumed more space than other prisoners as they walked down corridors. In these ways, the capacity for violence was communicated without the need for its actual assertion (see Gambetta 2005). Prisoners drew conclusions about violent aptitude and other aspects of identity from what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as *hexis*: gait, posture, and the minor but multiple ways that the body’s potential is expressed. Prisoners maintained that you could ‘spot a lad or a donut straightaway’, through ‘gut instinct’ (Tyler). Confidence, physical prowess, and the determination to impose

one's will—the essence of machismo—were shown immediately in ‘the way you carry yourself’ (Danny), ‘your attitude, how you deal with people—and at the end of the day you don’t have to fight’ (Paul).⁵ Stigmatizing labels were also allocated on the basis of unusual appearance or demeanour. Prisoners who carried themselves without confidence or simply looked ‘a bit different’ were especially liable to be labelled ‘shady characters’ or sex-offenders.⁶

A prisoner's physical capacity and appearance, his integration into social networks and his involvement in trade all, therefore, contributed to his social power. In practice, as Danny explained, physical, social, and economic capital were interlinked:

It all goes hand in hand, the dealers, the barons and that.⁷ They wouldn't be able to do that if there were [physically] light. And they've got some respect—you couldn't take the piss with em. So they're all what I would call ‘the lads’, they're the ones with the influence, the main players. People that you can't take liberties with and that have got back-up, if needs be.

All such prisoners were unlikely to ‘get trouble’ unless they courted it, but they did not necessarily seek out power as such. On all wings, however, there were a handful of prisoners (between five and ten) who did covet influence and were more powerful than the wider cohort of ‘normal lads’. Described variously as ‘proper lads’, ‘heads’ or ‘faces’, these tended to be prisoners with reputations outside prison: ‘a geezer who does pretty heavy things. He could have shot a couple of people, robbed a few drug dealers, and got away with [it]’ (Tyler); ‘in a [certain] family, with a slight bit of menace behind them, and you know that they're a competent person in their line of business’ (Ewan). These reputations preceded or accompanied prisoners as they entered custody, enabling them to establish social and economic clout as leaders of primary groups.

⁵ This was more than a question of size or muscularity. Prisoners who were disposed to use weapons (in particular, knives forged from toothbrushes or toilet brushes and razor blades) needed little physical strength. Those who talked a sufficiently convincing game, or successfully conveyed threat, volatility or ruthlessness, could also avoid confrontation through display alone.

⁶ Listeners—prisoners trained by the Samaritans—reported that one of the most common problems that prisoners expressed was being mocked or rejected by their peers, or by staff, for ‘being ugly, not fitting in’ (fieldwork notes).

⁷ A ‘baron’: an old-fashioned prison term for a tobacco dealer.

The nature of power

Ashley was a prime example of this kind of prisoner. A well known pimp and robber in his home city, his criminal experience, propensity to use violence, and ability to make connections with other influential prisoners placed him by common consensus among the most powerful men in the prison. From his perspective, 'normal lads' were merely 'neutral—they're not from a city that's recognized, but they are good lads'. Paul expressed a similar form of snobbery:

I'll say hello to most people but I don't talk to everybody. I ain't got a problem with no-one on the wing but I've got a set of friends and that's it, people I talk to, who can come in my cell and sit down and talk and I'll talk to them. The rest I have nothing to do with.... There's other people that do double-bubble or drugs or they just carry themselves in a way that people know they're alright. I only talk to people that are like that. I don't talk to idiots.

Such dismissals were characteristic of these men. They were not necessarily given appraisal respect, but they had significant influence through their economic activity and the physical and social capital that accompanied such dealings. Paul clarified the nature of this influence as follows:

Are you one of the people on the wing that's influential?

Yeah but—how can I put it—in my own little circle. I'm influential to people that need to know. If you want burn you can get it [through me], double-bubble. Maybe drugs, and if I haven't got it I might know where it is. If you're getting bullied. Anything like that, I'm influential in that way.

Your influence is from what you can get people, is that what you mean?

Yeah and the people around me who are my friends who I get on with.... There's a clique of us that the officers don't like because we seem to have influence. If I'm upset everyone could be upset. It's influence.

To some degree, power was limited in scope to those who 'needed things' or were involved in certain activities. Certainly, it was only activated in some situations. The most powerful heads sometimes arbitrated conflict between factions, and men like Paul and Ashley were consulted by less powerful prisoners on whether to settle disputes through violence. However, they exerted little direct influence over prisoners who were not involved in prison trade and politics. To be powerful was, to a large degree, to have

things that other people wanted. It was for this reason that a number of prisoners (particularly lifers, who were generally more self-sufficient than other prisoners) claimed not to be able to identify a hierarchy at all. Claims that 'I'm not interested in it' (Derek) or 'don't see it' (George) evidenced the degree to which power could be invisible from certain social angles and was normally held in reserve. As Rhys noted, 'you don't have to be part of the power scene'.

Whatever power one individual held over others, there was no person or grouping that 'called the shots' across the prisoner community. 'No one clique is going to be big enough to take the whole wing on', Alfie commented. Noah concurred that: 'you might run things in two or three cells, and you might be running one thing, but you can't run everything'. As the next chapter describes, on most wings there were a number of cliques whose influence was limited by the weight of other groupings. The scope of power was often a matter of peer group influence, with 'heads' generally the leaders of these co-existing factions, formed around shared hometowns or ethnicities.

Institutional policies were significant in delimiting the shape and reach of power. First, any grouping that became too large was highly conspicuous to the authorities and tended to result in certain prisoners being 'shipped out' or moved to other wings. As a consequence, power was widely distributed, not concentrated in the hands of groups operating with the tacit approval of staff. Second, since interpersonal dominance among prisoners was officially discouraged, powerful prisoners recognized the importance of disguising their activities from the authorities:⁸

It's not good to be too noticed. You've got this anti-bullying campaign. You could get away with it before, but not now. They'd be on you like a rash. You have to become more devious, more underground. Nowadays, you won't find the real bullies. You'll notice the weaker people more. Because the bully's in the background. He doesn't really need to leave his cell. He's got ten lads on the wing doing what he wants.... They're getting

⁸ Some prisoners complained that their influence within their peer group was conflated with 'leadership'. To be identified as a leader was not desirable, as Mohammed suggested:

Every time, when [we] pray [on the landings], they come straight to me and they will speak to me. But I would say to them, 'don't speak to me, speak to everyone'. Because everyone else wants to pray, it's not just me. But they would really straight first come to me. They would think I'm a leader, but I'm not really leading anything.

noticed. So the screws will look at them and not him. Whereas before the bully could be upfront.... A top dog doesn't want to be spotted. You might not notice him at all.

Powerful prisoners rarely caused problems for staff directly. Staff often commented that they were normally 'chatty and friendly to staff, and very polite' (senior officer). Often, they were enhanced prisoners—*players* who subverted the system without appearing disobedient. Influence was exerted by building 'links' and orchestrating the activities of other prisoners rather than employing direct physical coercion.

Drugs and power

Drugs, in particular heroin, provided the hidden dynamic of interpersonal power. Prisoners testified with almost universal consistency that they were the primary source of power and influence:

If you've got powder in jail, you are a fucking powerful man. If you've got enough smack in jail you could get someone killed, no problem. If you want someone to wipe your arse for you, the geezer will wipe your arse for a bag. You ain't got to do a thing. You ain't got to lift a finger. That geezer will put a roll-up to your mouth and pull it away from your mouth. (Bradley)

What are the sorts of things that give people power?

Power? Power's drugs. Drugs is power. (Alfie)

All you need in this place to have respect is a pocketful of drugs. (Ronan)

The nature of the power bestowed by drugs was complex. It held particular sway over those prisoners dependent on its supply, allowing dealers to buy other prisoners to 'do their dirty work for them' (Kai). Often, it was only by carrying out tasks for their dealers that drug users could settle their debts. These tasks might involve duties such as ironing or storing goods (e.g. phonecards). They also included acts of robbery, revenge, and intimidation undertaken on behalf of creditors. Paul described such transactions as follows:

At the end of the day, people owe you. [So if] you don't get on with someone and you want their cell burnt out: 'you owe me ten items: burn his cell out'; or 'my mate's just come in, he ain't got a radio—you've got a radio, you owe me items, you're going to give me your radio and [I'll] forget the items'.

In this way, influence could be exerted beyond the immediate pool of drug users. Although dealers had no direct hold over those prisoners who did not require their supplies, they had abundant means to terrorize them in the event of conflict. Heroin was also the currency on which the rest of the informal economy depended (Crewe 2006b)—‘without drugs, tobacco and phonecards don’t work’ (Paul). This meant that anyone who borrowed other goods (or who associated closely with someone who did) could be drawn into the wider politics of the heroin economy. Non-users could avoid drug culture, and were not hassled to become consumers, but the power accumulated through the drug trade could skew and stain social relationships beyond its primary markets. In these respects, although heroin’s influence was to some degree circumscribed, its potential meant that dealers were given enormous levels of instrumental respect.

To be a prison drug dealer also generated appraisal respect among certain prisoners. Dealing was a high-risk activity that required nerve, contacts, organization, and a level of entrepreneurialism that many prisoners admired. As Kai noted, ‘they must be big people if they can get drugs into jail, big quantities of drugs. Just like people who get mobile phones—“god, he’s got a mobile phone, how the fuck did he get that?”’ Alfie expressed similar sentiments of awe and incredulity:

I was just standing back, admiring the way they done it, because they had everything under wraps; they just went on a power trip. Started treating everybody with total disrespect, started leading a very laid-back lifestyle. I admired the way they done it. They got the whole wing under wraps, under control. They could have lifted a pinkie and got somebody wiped out, just through sheer power.... They had everything: boxes and boxes under their beds, chocolate bars, boxes of brand new trainers and track-suits all hanging up.

Such terms partly highlighted heroin’s immense profitability. Heroin was not only valuable in itself; it could reproduce its value exponentially through the other goods it could purchase, which were then lent out for further income. This capacity, and the need for some users to sell their clothing or possessions to fund their consumption, meant that dealers did not want for material goods—‘if you’ve got drugs, you can get anything’ (Howard). The display and possession of consumer items was a further source of symbolic prestige. Drugs, goods, and the status they provided

were then magnets for social allegiance: dealers could always ‘get aggressive people around them’ (prisoner, fieldwork notes).

Yet many prisoners distinguished between appraisal respect and instrumental respect, and drug dealers were sources of resentment as well as awe. One reason for this was that the power relationship between supplier and consumer was so easy to exploit. The term ‘powder power’ captured the tendency for some dealers to flaunt their power or abuse their grip over users by holding out for gratuitously exploitative deals or delaying transactions repeatedly. It also signalled the transient nature of the power that heroin imparted. As the term suggested, dealers held power and popularity due not to personal qualities, but what they held in their possession. While a prisoner had drugs to offer, his public status appeared high and he attracted popular attention—‘like flies around shit’, Ian remarked. Once supplies ran out, influence, and popularity also dissipated. ‘It’s what I call “king for the day”’, said Gerry. ‘He’s suddenly promoted to the top rung of the ladder until his parcel’s gone. And the minute his parcel’s gone, he’s back down again. It’s not respect. It’s false. It’s artificial’. A prisoner with access to drugs was therefore a ‘top dog’ in certain respects: someone with influence. However, as Tyler noted, that ‘doesn’t make him a leader’, someone whose views were respected.

Much of the antipathy directed against drug dealers reflected these perceptions that their power was unmerited and their social allure artificial. ‘Powder power is thinking you’re the man because you’ve got drugs, but not really being anybody’ one prisoner commented. Others complained that heroin distorted established patterns of status and corrupted social affiliations. ‘Powder power means you can have a twenty-three year old selling to a grown man, who’s licking their arse’, one prisoner protested. Pete lamented heroin’s ability to suppress traditional sources of stigma:

Whoever brings in the most drugs is the hierarchy now. If you can get drugs in, you’re somebody. You can be the biggest rapist on fucking earth, but as long as you’re bringing smack in, it doesn’t matter a fucking toss what you’ve done. The hierarchy now is definitely drugs.

Despite its hyperbole, Pete’s statement succinctly described the way that heroin could inflate a prisoner’s social credibility. However, claims that heroin conferred power on men who were otherwise powerless were overstated. Heroin amplified a

prisoner's influence and kudos, but it was insufficient on its own to secure them, certainly beyond the short-term. Weak prisoners who meddled in the drugs trade were quickly relieved of their stocks. 'If you're not a face and you're selling drugs, you're going to get robbed' said Zack. In this respect, the potency of drugs made them risky business: '[they can] set you up for a big fall—you could start thinking you're a lot more powerful than you are, and then people come and rob you, take your things [and] you lose respect' (Martin). In fact, drug dealers were generally prisoners who already had some degree of social or physical clout—extended networks, violent potential, or interpersonal confidence. Drugs did not simply 'create' power. Rather, 'powerful people end up in control of drugs' (Callum). In summary, heroin expanded the amount of power available to prisoners who were already relatively strong or secure within the prisoner community. When drugs were not available, the hierarchy was considerably less extended: 'there isn't really no top dog no more, [because] there isn't really no drugs' (Paul).

For prisoners who had access to drug supplies but lacked other forms of power, one solution was to establish mutually beneficial relationships with prisoners who could offer trade networks or protection: '[Heroin] don't make you a head, but it means you've got the back-up. You go to one of the heads', Fin explained. Drugs provided the purchasing power to build alliances with prisoners who held physical and social capital. Several prisoners argued that Asian prisoners involved in the drugs trade had made up for their relatively low physical capital by purchasing security. There was little other evidence that the hierarchy was structured by race or ethnicity.

While the supply of drugs led to social elevation, their use promoted the opposite trajectory, undermining the status claims of prisoners who would otherwise have been respected:

Before the introduction of heroin, you would have had people who would have become strong within the prison system, who would have been higher up the hierarchy, [but] because they're heroin users, they may be strong physically, they may be strong willed, they may be a bit of a bully, but because they're on the brown, people will frown on them. (Nathan)

Prisoners often made reference to former friends or criminal associates whose use of heroin had transformed them from men of strength and honour to men of weakness and dependence. 'He's

a smackhead now' was a term used ruefully and frequently. To become a heroin addict was to be marked permanently by associations of immorality and unreliability, and therefore to lose the essential credentials of criminal culture. Established patterns of status and power were thus skewed.

Heroin's central role in the power structure merits one further observation, for it appeared almost perfectly adapted to the official techniques of penal power. As the excerpts above have described, suppliers could pay other prisoners to store their products and proceeds. They had no need for personal involvement in the handling or distribution of drugs, or the enforcement of debts. Crucially then, heroin allowed power to be exercised covertly, inconspicuously, and at distance. Despite their use of network-mapping software, officials were often unaware of who drug dealers were. When they had suspicions—either through observations of wealth or, more often, information from others prisoners—these were often too weak a basis for formal action. Dealers could move through their sentences with minimal visibility or maintain unblemished official records even when under suspicion. Significantly too, unlike other goods or services that alleviated everyday frustrations, heroin could not be integrated into the IEP scheme. As one of the few things that prisoners desired that could not be provided by the institution, it offered an ideal basis for the accumulation of power.

Institutional Culture and the Prisoner Hierarchy

Systemic policies and institutional characteristics set the terms for the structure of Wellingborough's hierarchy, but status was also shaped by the particular culture of the establishment. General and local factors interacted most clearly in relation to the role of violence, whose currency throughout the prison system had apparently diminished in recent decades:

You can't show violence now. Violence does not rule no more in prison. [In the past] if you could look after yourself, it got you the respect you wanted. But the system's changed where violence is not viewed by you, the system, [or] the [world] outside as an 'in' thing. (Pete)

Subtly, it's changed. If you don't agree with what people say, then you're not in the clique. In the old days you didn't have to agree. If you were rough and ready, you'd be in the clique. Your status was more important than what you agreed with.

What did your status come from?

Violence. Or the potential of your violence. . . . Physical status was everything, because in those days there was real violence. Nothing like today.

And what is it now that matters?

Opinions. Whether they can relate to your opinion or not. Whether you'll conform to their opinion. Timidness is only to do with how you present your own opinion. If you're strong in your opinion, then you can hold your own. [It's about] what you believe, or what you're willing to accept. Opinion is a must now, where years ago it used to be 'I like him because he's aggressive, he can kick off in violence. I'm in that pack'. [There's] a certain amount of underlying [violence]. But violence in prison is a last resort now. (Gerry)

There were a number of reasons why violence had been devalued. First, it was no longer tolerated by the institution. For reasons already outlined, staff were less inclined to turn a blind eye to exploitative behaviour, and prisoners were aware that overt aggression was imprudent. Second, violence was less likely to be incited by everyday antagonism or institutional violence (c.f. Scraton *et al.* 1991; Sim 1994a). Prisoners took their behavioural cues from uniformed staff—'if prison officers are aggressive towards you, you know you're in an aggressive environment. You know it's on top if you step out of line. So when you go on the wing and somebody steps over that line, you know what to do—you deck him' (Gerry). Since staff did not resort to violence too eagerly, prisoners responded in corresponding style. Violence against officers was less often merited than in the past. Meanwhile, in their interactions with each other, prisoners were less prone to the kinds of aggressive outbursts that in earlier times had been inflamed by poor access to phones, limited visits, and degrading physical conditions. Many prisoners felt powerless but not completely without autonomy. Feelings of subordination were not so profound that interpersonal domination was the only means of recouping a sense of agency or control (cf. Hassine 1999).

Wellingborough's culture built upon these tendencies. As previous chapters have described, it was generally considered 'a laid-back jail, nice and slow' (Callum), where control was exerted with little aggression and prisoners were not constantly on edge. 'It's not a fronting prison', VJ noted, 'you don't need to front nothing'. For the prisoner hierarchy, this ethos had significant consequences:

This jail's soft, man. In some prisons, if you push it too far, you expect to get done in. If you've done a lot of bird and you've been to places like

Stafford or Winson Green, it's what you expect: if you push it too far, you expect to get done in. If you're a lad, or if you want to be known as a lad, it's standard. You fuck about with them, you expect to get hurt. When you want to be a boss or a lad, you're pushing all the time, and when you step over the line, you expect to be done in. (Fin)

By resisting the over-use of coercive measures in response to defiant behaviour, Wellingborough avoided reinforcing the status of prisoners whose identities were built on direct confrontation with the system. A more measured institutional reaction meant that prisoners did not gain rebellious credit through the acts of deliberate provocation that Fin described. Having a credible threat of violence certainly served as a means of self-protection and marked someone out as 'above the line'. But the institutional ethos contributed to a culture in which violence did not lead to perverse forms of credibility. Prisoners saw little heroic quality in attacking an officer who did not deserve it, or little bravery in acts whose consequences were to be walked calmly rather than dragged violently to the segregation unit. As Stephen explained, violence was not therefore the key component in the pecking order:

In more violent prisons, obviously the more violent person rises to the top, whether they're likeable or not. But in these more mellow places like our wing, you respect people for different reasons.... If you're clever, it doesn't matter how [little] money you've got, people will still want to know your opinion. Whereas you might meet someone who you can tell within moments of speaking to them is a div.⁹ (Stephen)

Indeed, because everyday treatment was not brutal or antagonistic, and since being released as soon as possible was an almost universal ambition, overt resistance was seen as naïve, unnecessary, and outdated. For a high proportion of prisoners, the battle worth fighting was the pursuit of liberty. Respect was reserved for men who were: 'doing whatever they can to get out. [Because] this ain't where it's at, it's all about outside' (Isaac). Even prisoners who were relatively resistant appreciated the benefits of caution and recognized the value of mental as well as physical competence. 'Being staunch is being wise', Ashley commented, providing a significant twist on traditional norms. Paul agreed: 'If you get into a confrontation you're an idiot in this day and age. There's ways of being passive but still assertive. I stand up for my rights,

⁹ A 'div': an idiot.

but I'm careful how I do it'. Appraisal respect was thus related to shrewdness and stealth, manipulating the system effectively and inconspicuously.

Agency was an important factor here. Although acquiescence to the regime was given little credibility, a prisoner's status was not diminished if he could present his compliance as a form of self-improvement rather than an attempt to satisfy the system. In this respect, by linking progression through the system to self-management, and by providing educational and vocational opportunities, the Prison Service had restructured the status system so that prisoner values and the ideals of the system were not in direct opposition. 'We're a jail full of silver back gorillas', said Kyle, '[but] the game is not to try and be "the daddy" all the time, it's to try and work alongside the zoo-keeper'. A 'model prisoner', in institutional terms, could be admired by his peers. Jobs that appeared subservient were often taken up by prisoners of fairly high status. As Pierce observed: 'The best way to get what you want is to be a screw-boy [and] half the time it's the lads [who are]!'

Intelligent prisoners and those who understood the intricacies of the system were also given some appraisal respect by their peers. This was particularly the case if they were willing to help other prisoners or could play the system in ways that officers could not challenge. Prisoners who offered advice on legal issues and prison rules or who assisted their peers in writing applications for early release were considered 'decent' and 'staunch'. Those who helped others beat adjudication charges on technicalities were likewise celebrated. For Stephen, opportunities to draft other people's requests and complaints allowed a kind of surrogate resistance, one which could not be held against him: 'I can get my grievances with the system, and put their name on it!' Prisoners who required such assistance were among the new losers of the system. As Stephen commented:

It's all very well having different ways of complaining, [but] if [someone] doesn't know how to express himself, it's not going to do any good. I've seen people tearing up complaint forms because they can't write down what their complaint is.

Men who were not skilled in using bureaucratic avenues were not disparaged by other prisoners, but they were unlikely to reach the zenith of the hierarchy.

Some prisoners suggested that a growing respect for intelligence was partly an outcome of increased access to the kinds of materials that stimulated serious discussion: current affairs programmes on television, improved library facilities, opportunities to do Open University degrees. But personal views and attitudes were also easier to express in an institutional culture that eschewed the routine use of violence. Relative to other prisons, and earlier times, Wellingborough did not put prisoners constantly on edge or demand public performances of taut machismo. Space was therefore opened up for social roles and credibility to be linked to non-coercive traits.¹⁰

The Hierarchy of Crime

Some criminal offences have traditionally carried more esteem than others. Both within criminal culture and in most prisons, organized crime and certain kinds of murder have occupied the apex of the hierarchy of kudos, with petty crimes and sexual offences at its base (Winfree *et al.* 2002; Sapp and Vaughn 1989; Jewkes 2005a). This hierarchy featured in discussions of crime and credibility among Wellingborough prisoners. Men convicted of burglary understood the shame and dishonour attached to their crimes and tended not to advertise their index offence. Breaking into another person's house was seen as an intimate intrusion, and as 'stealing from your own': destroying the lifetime material accretion of an ordinary working family.¹¹ Generally therefore, burglars tried to convince other prisoners that their targets were commercial rather than domestic—the former being considered victimless.¹² Robberies were evaluated according to similar factors, based largely on the status of the victim. To mug a woman or a pensioner—'some poor old lady, somebody's mum, who can't defend herself' (Den)—was considered an act of cowardice. However, it was more acceptable to rob a man of normal age: someone deemed able to resist and recover from assault. Taking

¹⁰ The use of the term 'head' as a suffix to many labels (e.g. 'stresshead', 'smack-head', 'debthead') was suggestive of the significance of character and inclination in defining social roles.

¹¹ Burgling from the wealthy was seen slightly less negatively.

¹² Prisoners generally argued that, since companies could claim back their losses through insurance policies, there were no real losers from commercial burglaries.

the proceeds of a rival drug dealer was considered a crime of courage and intelligence, a contemporary counterpart to the traditionally admired crime of armed robbery.¹³

The respect accorded to bank robbery reflected a number of factors: the organization required to target a secure building, the confidence needed for 'face-to-face' crime, the dangers of an armed response, the corporate victim, and the potentially enormous spoils. The amount of money that could be gained through crime was an important source of respect (professional fraudsters were highly admired, for example). Offences such as armed robbery were also signifiers of certain forms of masculine bravado. The language of 'balls', 'bollocks', and 'guts' used in descriptions of such acts was indicative of these notions of machismo, based particularly around the imposition of personal will onto a situation (see McVicar 1974). Terrorists were admired for similar reasons, although more for their internal self-assurance and unyielding determination than for the outward bravado of the armed robber. Burglary, car theft, and petty fraud also served as shorthand descriptions of identity and attitude, with their perpetrators assumed to be of '[lower] calibre—more furtive, more petty in their views and the way they conduct themselves' (Nathan).

These discourses of agency, ambition and masculine esteem were more potent sources of status than criminal acts *per se*. It was far more prestigious to be involved in a pre-meditated robbery of a large bank than an unplanned hold-up of a rural post-office, undertaken to feed a drug habit. Not least, the latter was a crime of dependence, and addiction was a mark of passivity, physical degeneracy, and moral deficiency. Prisoners who dealt drugs outside prison were highly reproachful of the clients who bought their goods. They condemned their customers for the crimes that they tended to commit (e.g. domestic burglary, shop-lifting) and looked down on their socio-economic subordination. As Paul described: 'if you're a person that takes drugs, you're a loser, and you've got to pay. If you're a seller, you're receiving it. A person who takes drugs will be forever selling his things, so [they'll] always be below you.'

¹³ Robbing someone else involved in criminal activity was also considered astute, since victims in such cases were very unlikely to turn to the police (see also O'Donnell and Edgar 1998).

These external hierarchies were reconstituted within the prison in complex ways. Some crimes were judged to sit outside normal considerations of prison status. White collar criminals convicted of company fraud or drink driving, and ‘ordinary blokes’ who had been involved in pub fights, were largely seen as unlucky and out of place. In effect, these men were exempted from judgment. Crimes of passion were likewise relatively ‘neutral’, seen as unplanned acts of anger.

Life-sentence prisoners generated instrumental and appraisal respect as much because of their sentence lengths as their crimes.¹⁴ Category-C prisoners with shorter terms were often awestruck by the sheer amount of time that lifers had already served. Many were fascinated by tales of ‘heavy-duty’ jails, and impressed by the dignity, stoicism, and intelligent cynicism that most lifers exhibited. More experienced prisoners deferred to the needs of those on very long sentences, recognizing that the anxieties and difficulties faced by lifers were more profound than their own. Those with less experience acceded out of fear as well as respect. These men believed that lifers were, by definition, dangerous and had ‘nothing to lose’ given their distance from release. Since most lifers in fact conducted themselves with incredible caution, such perceptions were generally misguided.

The clearest offence distinction among prisoners was between those who saw themselves as accumulative career criminals, many of whom were drug dealers outside prison, and those convicted of petty acquisitive crimes, most of whom were drug addicts on the streets. Experienced prisoners bemoaned the influx of ‘non-criminal types’ into prisons—men who were drawn into the carceral net mainly because of drug addiction and neither looked nor acted like professional criminals:

Ten years ago, you had a lot of hard men. Everyone was a big bloke. Now it’s so much more mixed. You’ve got little weedy guys running around the wing. Anyone can be a criminal nowadays, because there’s so much more of it. (Den)

Prisoners like Den were nostalgic for an era when crime was (putatively) the preserve of organized gangs and was conducted

¹⁴ Some lifers also claimed that staff treated them differently—both more cautiously and more respectfully—once they knew that they were serving long sentences.

with flair, pride, and expertise: 'it was more of an art—nowadays, it's just gung-ho, charge in, wreck people's homes.' According to these prisoners, prison was 'no longer prison', its culture diluted by men with no concept of appropriate behaviour. The honourable—perhaps apocryphal—identities of the old-fashioned criminal and the dignified prisoner were thus threatened. No doubt such memories were romanticized to some degree. However, there was certainly a cultural split between prisoners who perceived themselves as criminal *agents*, for whom crime was a commitment, and narcotic *subjects* whose crimes were a direct outcome of addiction. This division overlapped considerably with in-prison categories of 'haves' and 'have nots', and 'lads' and 'idiots'.

Convicted drug dealers continued to perceive their former consumers as weak, inferior, and untrustworthy (see Jewkes 2005a). However, within prison, such judgments were to some degree suspended. In terms of everyday social interaction, established hierarchies were compressed considerably:

You get more respect if you're an armed robber than if you were a house burglar, of course you would. But nobody's gonna pick on you because you're a house burglar. Everybody mingles, you have to mingle in prison. I'd have no problem talking to a housebreaker inside, I would have no problem classing him as a friend inside. But I wouldn't associate with a house burglar outside, in case it rubbed off on me. That's a lowlife crime.... If you're out there dealing, then you look down on them sort of people. You think, 'you fucking smackhead'. The chances are they're burgling houses, they're robbing off friends, they're robbing off family, they're scum. (Danny)

A senior, heavy, millionaire drug dealer—he will be polite and have polite conversation with a house burglar, whereas outside he wouldn't be seen dead talking to that person. (Stephen)

As these quotations suggest, it was not only hierarchies organized around drugs that were flattened by the terms of imprisonment. Many prisoners felt that their shared predicament should overwrite disparities in status and that no-one was entitled to assert social superiority on the basis of imported characteristics alone. 'I don't see anyone higher or lower', said Ross. 'It's just a group of blokes doing time.' Asif argued that: 'in jail, it doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, or what you are out there. You're all the same. No-one's better than no-one else.' Jacob put things in more self-effacing terms: 'we're all as stupid as one another for being here in the first place'. In recognition that the struggles of

surviving imprisonment trumped personal conflicts, enmity from the streets was often set aside:

Somebody can come in that I've got problems with on the street and I'll probably speak to him, and he'd probably speak to me. What goes on out there isn't brought in here. You've got enough problems in here anyway (Danny)

For the same reasons, the majority of prisoners were more socially tolerant in prison than in the community:

Ninety-five per cent of the wing, I wouldn't give the time of day on the out. They're not in my league out there. In jail, you've got to live with everyone, so I show them the respect they show me. For instance, there's a lad opposite me, he must be about four stone. Every day he comes to my pad: 'can I have a look at your telly guide?' or 'have you got a bit of sugar?' or a tea bag. And I'll give it him. I wouldn't give him the time of day out there. (Kieran)

Most prisoners, like Kieran, claimed to give recognition respect to anyone who reciprocated, 'regardless if they're the biggest smackhead or the biggest drug dealer'. Imprisonment thus functioned in some respects as an equalizing force. For a small proportion of prisoners, it was not common circumstances that levelled the social surface so much as the prison's despoiling effects. Incarceration stripped away accessories of wealth, such as cars and consumer goods, and guarantors of power, particularly guns. As Leon said: '[People] can have a big reputation out there because they're not afraid of using a shooter. But anyone can pull a trigger, it don't mean you're handy with your fists.' Prison thus became a site where the importance of many past credentials was expunged, while new spurs had to be earned, with few external props.

The exception to this relative flattening of external hierarchies was in relation to sexual offences. The anonymous integration of sex offenders into the mainstream prison population was a source of febrile outrage among Wellingborough's prisoners (the majority of whom supported capital punishment for serious sexual crimes). Fears of being contaminated by the presence of 'nonces' were voiced constantly and with neurotic concern. Some prisoners were so preoccupied by the spectre of paedophilia that they did not display photos of their own children on their cell walls, for fear that 'some nonce might perv over them' (prisoner, fieldwork notes). Sex-offenders undoubtedly served

a symbolic function within the prisoner world, as the cultural bogey-men in relation to whom anyone could claim moral superiority.¹⁵ But the opprobrium directed at these offenders was sincere, often based on a view that victims of sexual offences were 'scarred for life' (Darren) and that there was a moral distinction between 'doing something to survive and doing things for gratification. People who rob, steal, sell drugs, kill people—it might sound stupid, but they've got morals' (prisoner, fieldwork notes).¹⁶

In summary, a prisoner's index offence could virtually guarantee contempt but could not ensure credibility (Morris and Morris 1963). Certain crimes (and their connotations) incurred more kudos than others, and behaviour inside the prison often reproduced aspects of criminal choice and behaviour outside. Yet imprisonment compressed many status distinctions outside prison, and there was no necessary overlap between offence type and the traits that generated status and regard within the institution. As Tyler summarized: 'just being in for an armed robbery and being a hard cunt doesn't mean you're a good, decent lad. People can be an armed robber and be a right knob.'

Consumer Masculinity

Another significant source of status, with both indigenous and imported components, was consumer possessions. To wear branded-clothing and bright white trainers,¹⁷ and to have a large number of toiletries, was in part a display of wealth and power outside

¹⁵ Sex offenders have their own hierarchies, with child rapists at the base of the substructure and those who rape adult women sometimes able to defend their actions to their peers e.g. if the victim can be presented as having in effect consented.

¹⁶ This aspect of the prisoner hierarchy was often reproduced by uniformed staff, as were denunciations of 'granny-bashing'. In discussion with prisoners, one senior officer pointed out that 'there would be more room in the system if we shot all the nonces' (fieldwork notes). At the same time, in challenging definitions of sexual offending, he reinforced a deeply regressive form of masculinity: 'we've all been there... who hasn't carried on when a woman's said "no"?'

¹⁷ It is notable that white trainers, the footwear of choice in prison, are the goods most capable of displaying newness and therefore indicating income. This may be particularly important in those prisons where shoes are the only items of their own that prisoners are allowed to wear.

prison.¹⁸ 'It's like the peacock effect', Tyler explained. 'Everybody wants to fan their tail out, show you what they are. Jail's a very materialistic society.' Prisoners entering Wellingborough, especially those who were young, were often fixated on issues relating to clothing: what could be handed in or worn on visits, for example. One new entrant to the prison was more concerned that his spare trainers had gone missing in transit than that his phonecards had also been lost. Prisoners were judged to some degree on the amount of money they earned through crime, and a prisoner with 'the best trainers, the best clothes on' was generally assumed to be 'hiding money out there, a drug dealer or something' (Morgan). Expensive jewellery or top-end designer clothing therefore operated as forms of decorative violence, communicating a prisoner's criminal success and experience. Possessions and appearances were also equated with personal ethics and social standing:

His cell—that plays a good part in [defining status]: what he's got in it, what clothes he wears, what trainers he's got on, if he's got a bit of dough or not. If he's got scruffy clothes on, [and] fucking stubble round his face, a trampy-tramp, you think 'fucking hell'; and if you see a man next to him smart as you like—nice jumper, nice pair of jeans, bad-boy pair of trainers, looking all fresh and sharp and that—you think 'they respect this, they've got morals'. The other guy obviously hasn't. (Cameron)

[If] you can afford things obviously you know the way to work the system, like how to do double-bubble, how to always never go short, how to get extra things and live a better life.... If someone comes into your cell and they see you've got everything in your cell, and your cell looks nice, they're going to think 'well obviously this guy's got something'. You'll go into someone else's cell and he's got nothing in there, he might be hard but he's got nothing—he don't know how to get things, he don't know how to sort himself. That's just the mentality of how people think.... They'll look at you and think: 'he's got nothing so he must be a nobody'. (Aaron)

The association of goods and clothing with status and morality had several dimensions. In part, it reflected a common belief that men who dressed in prison clothing were social and criminal failures, with few friends or resources on which

¹⁸ The possession of toiletries was particularly important to younger prisoners, especially those who had come from YOIs, where toiletries were ostentatiously displayed in cells to demonstrate status, and personal appearance carried huge significance. The same values were applied to prison staff. One governor was particularly admired for his choice of designer shirts.

to draw.¹⁹ Most prisoners questioned the moral credibility of anyone without such support. Indeed, a lack of external contact was often interpreted as a signal of disloyalty and depravity:

The way I look at it, if you've got friends outside that are in contact with you, that are sending you money and doing things for you and you've got family that are sending you money and doing things for you, then you must be a half decent person outside. [If they] don't have private cash, don't have friends writing or visiting, they must be a shitbag out there, they must be robbing friends or family, they can't be much of a person if they've got no contact with anybody. (Danny)

Cameron's quotation (above) also illustrated a perception that low self-respect was a manifestation of a lack of respect for others. Accordingly, prisoners who were drug users outside prison but sought to distance themselves from stereotypes of addiction often emphasized that they had always preserved personal pride, cleanliness, and visual respectability. Kieran asserted that, even when on crack: 'I've always maintained my personal hygiene... and I always dress good. That don't change. I never let my appearance go AWOL.' Aaron's statement highlighted the general materialism of prison culture. It also illustrated the alignment of personal possessions with prison wherewithal. A prisoner who could accumulate goods in a world of deficit transmitted intelligence, self-discipline, and an awareness of how to work the system. Conversely, to live in scarcity was to be marked out as a debtor, drug user, or poor coper. Here, the indigenous terms of imprisonment supplemented consumerist judgments imported from the wider community.²⁰

Biographical Factors

Culture cannot be reduced to individual psychology. However, prisoners regularly referred to life events when expanding on views of status, and the links between moral attitudes and personal experiences were often plain. These connections inflected four

¹⁹ There were some exceptions here. It was possible to generate kudos through an identity of ascetic purity: doing prison 'the hard way', without luxuries such as in-cell television or mattresses. This strategy was extremely uncommon, expressed in claims more than action.

²⁰ Disputes between prisoners and staff about cell hygiene and tidiness had different causes. These skirmishes represented wider struggles about power and control, particularly in the light of the escapes of the mid-1990s, when prison officers had been conditioned not to enter or interfere with prisoners' private spaces.

main areas: views on grassing, violence against women, sexual offences, and bullying and victimization.

A large number of prisoners blamed their predicament on having been grassed on, often by criminal associates or former friends. This attribution contributed to an intense resentment against forms of perceived treachery. For many prisoners, norms against grassing had been inculcated from an early age and were reinforced by experiences of emotional rejection by parents or girlfriends, creating acute sensitivities about disloyalty and breaches of personal trust. The contempt expressed for grasses was in part symptomatic of these deeper-seated feelings of betrayal.

Hostility to the physical and psychological abuse of women had its roots in widespread experiences of being raised in abusive households or by single mothers. Protective discourses about female officers were grounded in codes of honour that had often developed from witnessing domestic violence and being powerless to intervene, or from associating the difficulties of being a female worker in a male environment with the daily struggles of single motherhood. 'I've seen my mum get beaten long enough', Zack commented. 'No woman deserves a fucking beating. They weren't put on this fucking earth to be battered by blokes.' Many prisoners considered anyone who threatened to assault a female officer and anyone convicted of an offence against women as morally reprobate.

Life events had most significance in relation to sexual offences, bullying, and victimization. A large proportion of prisoners had been sexually and physically abused as children. These men struggled to contain their personal anger when discussing sex offenders or convictions relating to child abuse. Likewise, many prisoners had been bullied as children. When talking about prison victimization, they expressed their contempt for perpetrators with a searing sense of their own experiences (see Crewe and Maruna 2006).

Just because somebody's weaker, doesn't mean they're wrong. I don't like it, I don't like hearing about it. Because I was bullied when I was at school. And I won't sit around and watch people do it. (Carlton)

If anyone goes near [a vulnerable prisoner], the person that gives him grief will be in hospital. He's been bullied the whole of his life. I was bullied by my dad up to the age of eighteen so I know what being bullied is like. Anyone touches him, then the person who it is will be carted off the wing on a stretcher because I can't see that geezer get bullied. He's so vulnerable and he's suicidal with it. . . . I hate people that pick on the weak in jail, I really do detest bullies in jail. (Bradley)

Prisoners often insisted that there was no toleration for ‘outright bullying’ and that perpetrators were ‘dealt with’ on the wings. Although such claims were somewhat overblown, and prisoners defined bullying rather narrowly, interventions did sometimes occur. On E-wing, servery workers collectively confronted a prisoner discovered to have been bullying a foreign national who had few friends and a poor grasp of English. In a prison workshop one morning, Danny challenged a large, aggressive prisoner who had been berating an older, mentally vulnerable man for his lack of personal hygiene. Discussing the incident in an interview some weeks later, Danny explained his actions:

I can’t abide a bully, I won’t see it, because I know from my own personal experience what it’s like.... Bad as I am, I’ve got a heart, and when I see that I feel sorry for that geezer [and] there’s a big rising anger in me for the bully.... I’ve nearly been in a few fights over that guy.... I understand that he smells and all the rest of it, but you don’t have to start shouting your mouth off and making him feel bad. I just can’t understand how people can be so insensitive. I dunno whether that’s because of what happened to me when I was at the kid’s home, but I’ve always been the same. If I see somebody’s scared, I won’t let it happen.

The compassion conveyed in these quotations was not unique to those prisoners who had personal experience of victimization. In this respect, it is important to emphasize the ethical codes that exempted certain prisoners from normal judgments and placed limits on the consequences of weakness.

The Consequences of Weakness and Stigma

Sympathy for the vulnerable, weak, and drug-dependent was limited by two main factors. The first was a widespread ideology of personal responsibility that held individuals accountable for their own outcomes. ‘I don’t feel sorry for them because I’ve told them not to do it, or someone else has, but they’ve completely not listened, and now they’ve fucked themselves up. That’s their fault’ (Chris). Debt and addiction were widely seen as self-inflicted matters:

I feel sorry for anybody that’s in a bad way, but at the end of the day, you normally find with those characters, bad smackheads, they quickly burn that [sympathy] off, y’know, you lose that very quickly, because it’s self-afflicted. They’ve got themselves into that position. They never learn. (Stephen)

As implied here, the second limitation was the fact that, in the context of the prison, sympathy was quickly diminished and easily exploited (see Chapter 7).

Displays of emotional vulnerability were considered acceptable only in exceptional circumstances. These would include the death of a close family member, but not necessarily the break-up of a relationship, 'unless people knew that you'd been with your missus for say fifteen years and you was married and had kids' (Martin). As Danny noted, in general, the prison environment made emotional control crucial:

I've seen him on the phone crying, so I take it he must have family problems, but if you come to prison, you've got to know how to deal with it. Outside it's the same, it's just more intense in here. If you're weak, there's always gonna be somebody there to exploit you.

Most prisoners considered emotional expression a mark of weakness and a trigger for derision outside prison as well as inside. Masculinity was associated with emotional fortitude. The majority of prisoners came from socially dense communities, where reputation could be corroded by signs of frailty. In prison, where personal reputations were even more essential and masculine identity was under greater threat (Sykes 1958; Newton 1994; Sim 1994a; Jewkes 2002), it was all the more important to suppress displays of emotional fragility.

Prisoners who could not 'handle themselves' or 'deal with their bird' were generally scorned. Verbal abuse was used to isolate prisoners from social support (O'Donnell and Edgar 1998), and men who succumbed to intimidation or failed to stand up for themselves were vulnerable to more intense forms of victimization:

In the majority of prisons you're not allowed to show any weakness at all. On my first sentence, I noticed then that people weren't allowed to show any weakness, because if they did they were targeted. People beat people up with words in prison; they'll find out who is the weakest by beating them up with words first and then spread the word, so then people will move in for the kill. (Jordan)

If anybody sees a weakness in you in jail, they'll prey on that weakness and they'll keep picking away at it. I'd prefer to have my face punched everywhere than let somebody take a liberty with me. I don't like violence. But I wouldn't let anybody take liberties with me. Because you back down to them once, you're going to back down to them all the time. And they're going to prey on that all the time. (Darren)

Concerns about appearing weak pervaded social interaction. Great significance was attached to seemingly trivial incidents, and apparently minor exchanges served as tests of nerve and character (Morris and Morris 1963; Toch 1992). These tests took several forms. When new on wings, prisoners who appeared weak or naïve were subjected to requests for tobacco or phone credit that ranged from outright intimidation—‘I’m taking this off you’—to pressure—‘you got some burn for me?’—or manipulation: ‘can you lend me some burn, my private cash hasn’t arrived; I’ll give it you back’. Such situations demanded social skill. Refusal required an ability to say ‘no’ with enough assertion to be taken seriously but with suitable courtesy not to cause offence. Agreement required a capacity to say ‘yes’ without betraying fear and opening oneself up to more taxing demands. Men who responded naively or submissively risked further exploitation: ‘you give them some burn, the next day they come back, and the next day—“oi, gimme some burn”. Because I’ve given them it in the first place, they’re taking kindness as weakness’ (Leon); ‘you ask for it [back], and they say: “listen, fuck off”. You do get took advantage of’ (Ross). Individual persecutors could intensify their level of victimization—‘once they start taking the piss they think they’ve got one over you and they think, “I’m borrowing that” ...’ (Max)—or exploitation could snowball and proliferate: ‘if one person takes you for a pussy, there’s going to be another twenty that will take you for a pussy’ (Rhys).

Tests were built into the everyday social architecture, in particular, around the servery, phones, and pool tables, where confidence and assertiveness were routinely challenged.

People try and jump on the pool table. If you say, ‘next’, and some guy comes along and says, ‘hold on, I’m next’, and you say, ‘hold on, you weren’t here’, then that’s it: the chest comes out, the neck gets put forward, and one of you has got to back down. (Kyle)

If you’re waiting for the phone or the pool table and a group of four lads come over, and say ‘no, we’ve booked it’, and you know quite well they haven’t, you’ve got to say ‘no you’re not. I’ve been waiting ages. I’m next’. And just show them that you can’t be walked over, basically. (Wilson)

These disputes were trivial in their immediate outcomes, as prisoners often recognized, but not in their wider consequences. To take a small amount of sugar from someone’s cell or use complicated language in front of someone could be interpreted as an

attempt to 'take liberties' or 'mug them off'. Allowing such things to occur put one's public credibility at risk.

For some prisoners, the possibility of being 'disrespected' was more than a matter of practical consequence. Morgan, for example, had contemplated attacking a prisoner with an improvised weapon simply for having sat in a seat normally used by his hometown associates and refusing to move when challenged. The event had 'really done my nut in', and left him feeling 'humiliated'. Other prisoners used similarly emotional language when they felt someone had 'taken the piss'.²¹ These prisoners were paranoid about social reputation and hypersensitive to perceived slights, which they interpreted as slurs upon their entire character. Johnson (1987) argues that such reactions are typical of 'state-raised' prisoners (see Irwin 1970), who feel a kind of 'impotent rage' towards a world that has rejected them and precluded their emotional development. These men present menacing façades of cold masculinity, and are easily provoked to violence, but these psychic defences conceal brittle self-identities. Other authors have argued that the anxieties provoked by perceptions of being 'disrespected' often reflect childhood experiences of abandonment and residual feelings of shame (Gilligan 1996; Butler 2006). Certainly, for these prisoners, minor threats appeared to resonate with deep-rooted concerns about masculine status. To be 'above the line' of victimization was thus a psychological as well as a physical concern—protection from feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy.

²¹ Interactions with staff were imbued with similar significance, as Fin's tale illustrated:

I said 'Miss, is there any chance you could possibly open my cell door for me?' She said 'no, no chance' [and] turned away and carried on talking. I put it across exactly that way. And the other lad ripped the piss out of me basically, for how nice I was. Now all the staff on the wing, even the ones that I particularly don't like, I'm always really polite with them. So straightaway my back was up. So I went downstairs, got a senior officer to open my door, [then] went in the shower. And I'm having a shower and I'm thinking 'how the fuck does she think she can talk to me like that? I've been nothing but courteous and nice to her'. And I thought 'no, I'm not having it'. If I didn't get it off my chest it would wind me up all night. So I've come out of the shower and I was rude. I went up to her and I said 'listen miss, it's obvious you didn't get this job for your looks'—another way of saying 'you ugly cunt'—'so I know you're not bone idle. So next time, when I speak to you nicely and ask you politely, don't think you can talk to me like I'm a prick, because I'm not a prick'. And I did go back afterwards and apologise to her, but it worked. Because it got my frustrations out. I went back and I said 'listen miss. I did go a bit ballistic at you but I just wanted to know that you did really offend me. I talked to you with nothing but courtesy. And talking to me like that especially when there's another inmate in earshot round you, I'm not having that. I'm not having you treating me like a cunt. Because I'm not a cunt and you can't treat me that way.'

For sex-offenders and informers, it was critical to maintain anonymity. Prisoners discovered as either risked hostile ostracism at best and organized violence at worst. Since there was much to lose in attacking another prisoner, exposure did not always lead to direct confrontation (see Chapter 8). A more common strategy was to leave a note under a prisoner's door advising him to put himself on protection or face the consequences. An alternative tactic was to set fire to a prisoner's cell. This was a form of retribution that could be enacted without a face-to-face encounter and was therefore less hazardous than a direct assault.

Similar reasons meant that 'muppets' and 'fraggles' were not always subjected to direct victimization. Outright harassment and physical terrorism were uncommon, and stronger prisoners often looked out for their weaker peers. Instead, bullying took forms that were softer, subtler, and less direct. Verbal derision and social exclusion were commonplace. Men considered 'bullshitters' were mocked and disregarded. Those who were particularly impressionable were used as entertainment ('stress toys')—wound up, misled, and manipulated. For example, one prisoner who had clear mental health deficits was persuaded that he should propose marriage to a female officer on the wing. Prisoners who were mentally slow or who struggled to make ends meet were easily exploited—paid to store goods or carry out acts of violence. Often, these prisoners did not recognize that they were being taken advantage of and were mocked all the more for the gratitude they showed when carrying out tasks that actually placed them at risk. To use Irwin's (1970: 79) term, these men were 'human putty' in the social world of the prison.

Yet it was rare for prisoners who were particularly weak, or whose agency was deemed defective, to be exploited ceaselessly or ruthlessly.²² Little status could be derived from proving one's strength over prisoners who were old, defenceless, 'not made for prison' or 'not the full shilling' (prisoner, fieldwork

²² It should also be noted that the hierarchy was not expressed through sexual exploitation. There were no specific terms for forms of interpersonal sexual activity or coercion, and no indication that they occurred at any time during my fieldwork. No doubt they do (O'Donnell 2004), but they are not central parts of the prison experience for the majority of UK prisoners.

notes). Prisoners often extended sympathy to white-collar criminals—although there were few—arguing that it was harsh to place them in an environment that was so alien to their experience.²³ Many also expressed a view that men who were ‘just not fighters’ should not be forced into physical confrontations. These exclusions were gendered: being either weak or effeminate meant being exempted from attack because both signified an acceptance of being subordinate in a hierarchy of masculinity.

Prisoners who had manifest mental health problems were also exempted from customary judgments. One such prisoner—who smoked cigarette butts discarded by other prisoners onto the wing floors, and begged for basic goods—was deemed too damaged to be held responsible for his own actions, even when these violated normal protocols:

He don’t realise certain things. He owed me burn, and he was shouting downstairs, ‘I’ll pay you back next week!’. You can’t do that in front of the screws because that’s what brings it on top. I don’t want to be seen as bullying—and he did it about four or five times. He’s slow, it’s too much work to make him understand (Wilson)

Seb also expressed a widely held sympathy for mentally ill prisoners for whom incarceration was patently inappropriate:

There’s one kid I was padded up with, he can’t read and write, he don’t know the meaning of time, he don’t know what a week is. I tried to explain it to him. He can’t grasp it. I’ve helped him read and write his letters. He’s had a bit of stick, been thumped a couple of times, because he’s slow and he’s trying to fit in. He’s completely and utterly on his own. He don’t know the difference between right and wrong, you know. I just think why on earth is something like that in here?

Compassionate sentiments were by no means universal. Nonetheless, to exploit vulnerability was to breach shared values, and carried penalties (at least in principle): ‘If you do pick on somebody who everybody knows is weak, other heads will do you in’ (Fin). Prisoners at the extremity of the hierarchy were often therefore protected, as well as sometimes abused. Men who

²³ Explaining that one prisoner did not ‘suit prison’, Danny observed as follows:

I’m not being funny or anything, but he’s more like you than what he is us.

What, straight?

Straight, yeah.

were considered capable of looking after themselves or who had no obvious handicaps were afforded no such latitude:

If you're 'alright'—one of the lads, not an idiot—and someone's giving you a hard time, the chances are—depending on who's bullying you, what social status they've got, how aggressive they are, how game they are to have a straightener²⁴—you've got to sort it out. If somebody's bullying somebody but you think they're roughly the same [in terms of ability to fight] people will leave it, unless it was the main geezer on the wing [or] somebody was directly taking a fucking liberty. (Fin)

If you're quiet on the wing and you're not doing no business, only a bully is gonna put it on your toes.²⁵ And then a couple of lads on the wing would probably do something about that. But if you was a loud character, a bit boisterous and someone puts it on your toes, for you to back down, you will probably have a couple of people say to you: 'I wouldn't have had that, I wouldn't have done that'. (Martin)

Prisoners who had already established their authority were allowed to display forms of kindness or vulnerability that other prisoners were wary of exhibiting: 'If you're a big, massive lad, if you've got muscles coming out of your neck, you can show as much weakness as you like and no one is going to say a peep to you' (Jordan). At the same time, a prisoner who was physically large but was witless or unwilling to fight was open to ridicule: 'If you're big and you're an [idiot], then people are going to slag you more. People are going to single you out in front of other people more' (Fin). Powerful prisoners who betrayed others or failed to support their claims to status were regarded with particular contempt:

If you're supposed to be a head, and you don't back it, you're a fucking faggot, and you're even worse than a faggot. Because you're trying to back it. You're trying to make out you're a head, but you're not. People will target you even more, it irritates [them] even more. Because you're trying to be something you're not. You're trying to rise up in the ranks and you ain't got it. And if you ain't got it, you're going to get punished. And people will go out of their way to do you in, because it's almost justified.... Like a weak person, a very weak person grassing on somebody: it happens. But, if you're a head, you're getting done in [if you grass]. (Fin)

²⁴ 'A straightener': a one-to-one fight, often informally arranged, which takes place without the use of weapons.

²⁵ To 'put it on someone's toes': to confront someone, forcing them to act or explain themselves.

To be powerful or to engage in status games carried certain expectations and responsibilities. Prisoners who pushed in queues had to be 'prepared to brazen it out' (Callum); those who got involved in trade had to be 'willing to take the consequences. [If] you're not willing to stand up for yourself and fight, then you're in big trouble' (Ashley).

Such consequences formed an oppressive social obligation. For some prisoners, gaining enough respect to avoid victimization meant embellishing tales of personal prowess and presenting a façade of fearlessness. Yet be found out as inauthentic, to be unable to 'back' one's claims, or to over-assert power were violations of the value system, and could justify retribution. Prisoners were therefore at risk if they showed weakness *or* if they faked strength. If strength was not naturally conveyed through a prisoner's aura, he walked a narrow path between deficient grit and excessive bluff. Admiration respect was greatest for prisoners who naturally *embodied* the prisoner code. These prisoners stood up for themselves when required and fulfilled the obligations of power without abusing their strength or imposing themselves without reason.

I think Bert is quite respected, because he doesn't go pushing his weight around just because he has got a lot of tobacco and if people don't pay up he don't go off his head, he says 'if you can't afford to pay me, tell me now, don't tell me when it comes to pay-day and you can't pay me'. He's that kind of person. He's not going to say he's better than anybody else. (Ian)

There's a few inmates on the wing who I have got genuine respect for because I like the way they carry themselves. They *could* be right intimidating bastards and they're not. They know what they're capable of and they don't flaunt it about. They don't abuse their power. There's a certain inmate on my wing, and he is one seriously fucking hard nut [but] he doesn't chuck his weight about [and] he will not tolerate bullying. (Zack)

The parallels with Sykes's (1958) analysis are striking. Admiration respect was strongest for prisoners who personified shared values while mitigating collective pains—showing generosity, consideration, and concern for others. Other prisoners carved out admiration through skills and talents (in sport, music or arts, for example), but these were seen as natural abilities rather than character *per se*, and they benefited the individuals who held them rather than the prisoner community as a whole.

The Experience of Stigma

Prisoner autobiographies have tended to be written either by high-status, relatively violent prisoners (McVicar 1974; Boyle 1977; Smith 2004) or by middle-class prisoners whose experiences have been conditioned by their social and cultural capital (e.g. Caird 1974; Peckham 1985; Archer 2002; Aitken 2003). The former are 'insider' perspectives, written from the vantage point of power. The latter are 'outsider' observations, whose narratives document a 'loss of innocence' about the system that is predicated on imprisonment being 'an aberration which has no coherent links to a past' (Morgan 1999: 335). Much less is known about prisoners for whom imprisonment and stigma are customary experiences. Although few interviewees characterized themselves as low-status prisoners, those who did exposed the particular pains that this burden engendered. Max, a prisoner trying to escape a reputation for grassing, reported feeling 'under stress, under pressure', and a 'niggling thought every time a new set of lads come [into the prison]' that they might know his history. Sid, who had placed himself in the segregation unit when other prisoners discovered the nature of his offence, described his situation thus.

Very stressful, very depressing, I sit in my cell and break down and have a little cry to myself, but there is nothing I can do about it, I've just got to hold strong.... Deep in my own heart and soul, I feel very vulnerable, I feel at risk, I don't know which way to turn, who to talk to, just in case they say, 'my mate knows you're...' whatever. I do get a bit scared, I can't deny that. [And] I've got to go back to the same area.... God knows what will happen.

How much of your time do you spend fearing this stuff?

Every day and every night and every second. I put a mask on, to hide the pain, so I try to have a laugh to bury that pain, and when I'm back in my cell I take that mask off and the pain is there again. It's been very painful.

Another prisoner in the segregation unit commented ruefully that, by placing himself in protection, his 'pride [had] gone'. If people from his home community were to find out, he said, his name would be permanently tarnished. To go on protection for reasons of debt or severe emotional vulnerability was not to be stained irrevocably, but it certainly tainted any claim

to status.²⁶ Flows of information from the prison both to the outside world and to other prisons meant that bad reputations were easy to gain and much harder to discard.

Prisoners who struggled to cope materially expressed deep embarrassment about the lengths they went to in order to subsist. Lacking private resources and unemployed, Colin resorted to loaning out his television (in return for enough tobacco to make three roll-up cigarettes) and selling his food in order to get by. Explaining how this affected his self-esteem, he highlighted how personal dispossession reinforced shame and stigma:

I just feel bad that I have to do it. I suppose I feel bad that I've only got one pair of trainers in prison. And I don't have nice clothes. I feel that bad basically, when I look around.

What does 'bad' mean, when you say 'bad'?

Low, I just feel low, low in myself.

Ronan expressed similar sentiments:

I ended up selling loads of my stuff to get heroin. I had a brand new Ben Sherman watch, ended up selling that, I had a brand new Nike jacket that cost a hundred and forty quid, ended up selling that, I've sold a brand new Reebok tracksuit to get a bag of heroin for a tenner. And now I'm walking around with jeans that have got holes in. It don't make sense. I wish I had all them things back.

Weakness and stigma were mutually compounding. 'Smackheads' were disparaged in part because they were forced to sell goods in order to fund their habits. Prisoners who got themselves into debt were considered weak both for allowing themselves to sink into arrears and for the roles they were obliged to take on as a consequence.

Other prisoners were aware that they had little status among other prisoners, but professed little concern at this position. Ian, for example, knew that he was 'at the bottom', but declared that: 'it's where I want to be, I don't want to be part of the clique. Right at the bottom: that suits me fine. If I'm a fraggie I'm not bothered.'

²⁶ Any prisoner who had sought protection struggled to salvage his reputation (against suspicions of grassing and general mistrust), but this barrier was not absolute. Some interviewees were sympathetic to certain causes of self-segregation:

If they've shown vulnerability in the past, it might have been a stressful time, they split up with their wife, not getting any money sent in, having to borrow things, buy tobacco on the wing for double back and stuff and got themselves into debt and then had to protect themselves. I can show a bit of sympathy there and understand. (Alfie)

Claims of this kind were plausible because a prisoner did not need to seek status as long as he was above the line of potential exploitation. They also signalled important differences in views about status and stigma.

Status, Stigma, and the Prisoner Typology

The analysis up to this point has provided a broad picture of the prisoner hierarchy. The aim has been to provide as much detail as possible without underplaying the complexity of the status system or eliding the differences that cut across the general portrait. Given the significant differences between prisoners that were outlined in Chapter 5, it follows that there were important variations in what prisoners feared, admired, and denounced.

Focused on personal missions, *enthusiasts* avoided prison politics and struggled to comment on the details of the status system. Although they recognized that a hierarchy existed and that they were not its heroes, they inverted its normal co-ordinates. They condemned terms like ‘fraggle’ and ‘muppet’ as disrespectful; they were disdainful of prisoners who rocked the system; and they were openly apprehensive of the ‘very, very dangerous’ people (Luke) who inhabited many of the cells around them. Indeed, they sought symbolic distance from these men, differentiating the scope and morality of their offences from people who wilfully caused hurt or destruction. While they gave instrumental respect to armed robbers, murderers, and drug dealers, they granted them no appraisal respect, considering them immoral, irresponsible, and anti-social. They admired other *enthusiasts*—men who were trying to improve themselves and give something back to society. To illustrate their social munificence, they offered recognition respect fairly freely—certainly, to anyone prepared to reciprocate it. In terms of the respect they sought for themselves, they craved only certain forms of validation. Both Zack and Ian believed they were respected for their decency and sincerity: ‘Because I am what I am, you know, the way I act, I don’t put any [masks] on’ (Ian). Luke sought respect only from his ‘mature friends’, ‘for the fact that I keep myself clean and carry myself well’. Power over others was of no interest.

Retreatists expressed similar sentiments, although they were less inclined to judge other prisoners and more capable of acknowledging their own low status. ‘I’m just a petty criminal really’, Rhys mused, ‘they look on me as nothing’. Alfie’s shame about his own

history meant he tried not to evaluate others on the basis of past behaviour: '[I] judge them face value, what they mean to me [and] their conversation.' Both Noah and Alfie acknowledged that they mixed in relatively low-status cliques: 'they wouldn't be looked at as cool characters on the landing. Mine's a bit of a mix-up, odd-job sort of mob' (Noah). Like *enthusiasts*, they were wary of, rather than impressed by, serious, violent criminals, and dismissive of the 'belligerent' behaviour of younger, more boisterous prisoners. In general though, their withdrawn mentality meant that they were more ambivalent than *enthusiasts* about matters of respect, and about their own moral value being recognized overtly. Whereas *enthusiasts* took care of their appearances in order to exhibit their pride and spiritual rebirth, for *retreatists*, it was unimportant to display these sentiments to others. Neatly worn prison clothing was adequate in order to signal self-esteem. At most, *retreatists* wanted to be acknowledged by others as worthy of basic respect and civility, and then left to their own devices. Reflecting their hopes to be treated with recognition respect despite their past transgressions, they offered respect to others as a matter of course.

Different kinds of *pragmatist* held quite different attitudes about power, status, and stigma. Some claimed indifference to such matters, recognizing that they were ordinary, somewhat invisible, prisoners with little claim to status and little interest in its accumulation. Younger *pragmatists* were the men most likely to lack compassion for weaker prisoners, often reflecting the culture of ruthless and endemic bullying that existed in the Young Offenders Institutions from which they had graduated. They expressed little sense of automatic allegiance to other prisoners and considered some men almost unworthy of recognition respect. Cameron used a pitiless language of 'fraggles', 'saps', 'tramps', 'dickheads', and 'out and out fools', for whom he disclosed little sense of empathy or compassion.²⁷ He also admitted that he used his size to his advantage against prisoners with less bulk and confidence:

I stamp my authority a little bit too much sometimes. I'll pick on a weak person, for some reason. I don't know why, I just will. Probably just to

²⁷ The term 'disclosed' is used here because it seems likely that he felt compassion even if he did not express it. The life stories of prisoners like Cameron were awash with contradictions. They frequently veered between heartlessness and vulnerability in ways that betrayed their overt appearances of callousness and instead suggested that any admission of softer feelings provoked considerable anxiety.

get a bit of confidence for myself. [Or] just to get on the phone first, or something like that.

Bullying served in part to boost low self-esteem and to ensure being classified as 'above the line'. Cameron employed an analogy of 'managers and employees' to characterize what he saw as the key division on the wings. He was desperate to belong among the former. This distinction also marked a particular admiration among younger *pragmatists* for prisoners with 'things to offer'—goods, services, and wisdom about the prison experience. Cameron disapproved of drug users, but he revered the men in prison who supplied them. Pragmatists thought highly of prison drug dealers (mainly *players*), while lacking the contacts, confidence, or resources to emulate them. Callum, for example, noted that, 'because I'm a loner, I'm just not in a position to do it'. He was also candid about the power differential between himself and more dominant characters on the wing:

Certain people you don't fuck with. I'll walk in the front [of the dinner queue] and there will be at least five people going, 'fuck off, what are you doing, man', and then somebody else will walk in and it's 'alright mate'.... Nobody will argue with them and say no.

For these *pragmatists*, the ability to defend oneself and 'keep quiet' were characteristics that were considered both admirable and prudent. The conflation of these traits—of instrumental and appraisal respect—was significant. It indicated the socialization of these prisoners within a range of environs where such behaviours were essential both for respect and for survival: urban ghettos, children's homes, juvenile detention centres, and YOIs (see Irwin and Cressey 1962; Irwin 1980). For these men, status within the prison was both a means to an end and an end in itself.

More vulnerable *pragmatists* professed slightly different values. They were aware of their lowly status and their relative insignificance in the eyes of others, although they often claimed that the terms by which they were labelled were used widely or in jest. 'Everybody gets called a muppet', said Dom, 'I mean I have a few times, as a joke, but I just laugh at it'. These claims were the protective techniques of the disrespected, prisoners who strived to claim status but often did not receive it. Accordingly, they resented prisoners who they knew looked down on them: men who 'think [they] rule the wing' (Declan) and 'like to think they're bigger than others' (Joey). These men they branded as bullies or 'cowards [that] hide behind other people's muscles' (Chris). The prisoners

they most admired were the older, more mature men who coped with imprisonment in ways that they could not, and who often provided them with guidance, advice, and pledges of protection. Lifers and *players* were to some degree feared and were certainly seen as a different category of ‘more serious’ prisoner. As low-status prisoners, often having committed petty offences, there were few peers on whom these *pragmatists* could look down.

Stoics tended to avoid prison politics. Many of them were willfully oblivious to the dynamics of wing affairs. George, for example, had stopped playing pool on the wing in order to escape status games and competitive bravado.²⁸ Since their primary purpose was the avoidance of trouble, *stoics* did not actively seek to be respected so much as ensure that they were not *disrespected*. As Nathan put it:

I don’t wanna be put on a pedestal by anything or anyone. But also I don’t want the reverse of that. That’s what it’s all about you know, you don’t want to be labelled, to get a negative label, because it can cause problems and the whole purpose of going through jail, from my point of view, is to avoid those problems: ... grass, nonce, they’re the two extremes [labels], but then you’ve got debt-heads, hypocrite, two-faced, shit-stirrer, bully—they may cause you hassles.

Given the sentence lengths that most *stoics* were serving, and the awe this yielded among many prisoners, the ambition to avoid being tested or troubled was achieved almost automatically. From their perspective (and compared to the higher-security establishments they had experienced), the hierarchy in Wellingborough was relatively shallow and insignificant. Labels carried ‘less weight’ (Tommy). These included some categories that they privately felt were significant—in particular, the label ‘wrong ’un’, when applied to domestic burglars and those who robbed the vulnerable. ‘I wouldn’t piss on these granny-bashers if they were on fire’, one lifer claimed (fieldwork notes). Many expressed nostalgia for a more dignified era of imprisonment and looked down both

²⁸ Many prisoners also talked about the petty dangers of the gym, where the amount of weight one lifted could be the basis for macho brinkmanship:

If I go to the gym I would just like to go and just do my little bit and keep my muscles flexed and tight but some guys... their mentality, they’ll be in the gym and they’ll be watching you and because they’re probably pushing more weights they think ‘oh he’s a wimp’. They’re just waiting for a little raindrop to just drop and catch them before they blow it into a big argument and then before you know it you have to end up trying to push your weight. (Jacob)

on drug addicts and drug dealers, who they felt had sullied the prison environment. Likewise, they despaired of the immaturity of many younger prisoners, who they felt were excessively noisy, inappropriately fussy, insufficiently stoical, and too easily mollified by the prison's material incentives. *Stoics* were judgmental in these respects, and often rather snobbish about petty criminals, but they also dismissed the notion that more serious crimes were 'impressive'. Years of prison experience meant that there were few prisoners whom they feared, particularly in the Cat-C estate. Their default position was to give recognition respect routinely, on the basis of shared predicament. Often too, they reserved judgment about the particulars of other people's cases and behaviour: 'he's got his own burden to bear, y'know, who am I to judge him?' George asked rhetorically. Admiration respect was granted primarily on the basis of prison behaviour, to men who were self-contained, honourable, and sensitive to the imperatives of institutional living.

Players were considerably more judgmental and were less inclined to respect other prisoners on principle. As signalled in the terms they employed to describe the prison's pecking order, they perceived the hierarchy as steep and clear-cut. There were 'leaders and followers... those who give and those who take' (Paul), 'head men and soldiers' (VJ). Prisoners in the subordinate categories were viewed as socially inferior: 'thick, stupid, immature... not on my level' (Wilson), 'nobodies' (Paul). These included 'screw-boys', drug users, 'punks, who talk shit' (VJ) and 'plastic gangsters who think they're the main man' (Pierce). Whereas *enthusiasts* distinguished between 'sensible lads' and 'jack-the-lads', *players* divided prisoners into 'lads' and 'idiots', while often casting young *pragmatists* as pathetically aspirational 'wannabes'. More powerful *players* exploited men who were weak and pliable, and felt little concern about the humiliations that they imposed on others.

In contrast, their veneration of power meant that more powerful *players* had admiration respect for other prison leaders, even when these men were from rival cities or factions. Throughout his life story, Ashley described his regard for other powerful men and detailed his realization that he could bolster himself by establishing connections with other 'heads' and 'faces'. His declared strategy in prison was similar: to 'get to know the top boy in each job' and reinforce his influence through social links across the establishment. One prison work area had become a magnet for a number of heads, who had recognized each other's social

prominence. These more powerful *players* admired other men who were at the centre of prison trade and politics. Although other *players* (and some *pragmatists*) had little lust for power, they still granted esteem to men of influence:

Ashley's a well-known and feared man in Nottingham. Very well known and very, very, very feared. He's dangerous. He's known to switch on people, and he'll beat them and humiliate them. But at the same time he's the most lovable guy you can meet. He's a really nice guy.... He was a bad boy, but he would talk to anyone. And he would talk to anyone with respect. [If] you're vulnerable, he wouldn't see that and try and take advantage. I think a lot of people respected that. Because he could have took liberties on there with people and he didn't. (Kieran)

Ashley got on with everybody. Grew up in the slums, but nice as pie. Could talk properly, could act properly. Very smart, really. And he had a lot of respect for the way he was. Because he wasn't a cunt. But at the same time, he were an evil cunt. He can be an evil cunt, but he weren't an evil cunt. (Fin)

For these *players*, the fusion of ruthlessness and beneficence was admirable. Power was a thing respected in itself, and to be respected through fear was as good a reason as any. *Players* policed their reputations fastidiously, drawing clear lines around the behaviours they would tolerate from others, and reacting aggressively if anyone tried to label them pejoratively.²⁹ They almost never expressed any fear of others; rather (as above), they redefined their fear as admiration. Appraisal respect and instrumental respect were in this way conjoined.

Players cared more than other prisoners about the geographic origins of their peers, distinguishing between major conurbations and what Wilson branded 'faggot towns'. Kudos was attached to big-city criminality. They also made more categorical judgments than most prisoners about the offences for which other men were convicted. Paul evaluated prisoners according to whether they were in prison

²⁹ Paul was shocked to see a man allow other prisoners to shave off his eyebrows, dunk him in the showers, and cover him in custard as part of his pre-release celebrations:

I wouldn't have that, no way. No-one could shave my eyebrows. I'd say: 'whoever does it, do it—but I'll do them', and I would, that's it, end. I wouldn't take it. I've been involved when people go home. I'll chuck water on them, I might give them the odd little [punch], [but] that's the end of it. And that's all I expect. If anything goes further than that then I'm not having it, and most people know. Most of the dickheads that do [that] rubbish, I don't [mix] with them so if they join in they ain't got no right to.

for selling drugs or for using drugs. In direct contrast to *enthusiasts*, *players* saw 'blatant', violent crime as morally superior to minor, acquisitive offences—less 'shady' or 'dirty', more honest, upfront, and masculine. They judged others on the basis of their backgrounds, but they also saw prison as a key site of authenticity—a place where 'true colours' were exhibited and 'real men' made their marks afresh.

The relationship between adaptive mode and status was not straightforward. No prisoners were universally respected. In Noah's words, 'some kids are top dogs just because they are the muscle and nobody can beat them. [But] what some people's top dog [is] to me might be top mug. To me, he's top plonker.' *Players* tended to be relatively powerful prisoners, and more credibility was granted to men who manipulated the system than those who complied with it. But even *players* acknowledged that there were benefits in having positive relationships with staff and in certain forms of compliance. 'Even the baddest man talks about his parole', Isaac commented. For some *players*, there were limits to the steps that might be taken to appear submissive: Stephen was adamant that he would never become part of the 'toilet cleaning gang' (i.e. wing cleaners). Others dismissed the possibility of applying to be on the voluntary testing unit because it meant being subjected to a more demanding, and therefore humiliating, regime. Yet many prisoners with powerful reputations were unashamed to make compromises if these accelerated their progression or allowed them to continue their illicit activities. They, as much as others, considered being released as quickly as possible the primary objective. Obedience could therefore be presented as an enlightened form of wisdom.

Enthusiasts who complied without cynicism, or aligned their aims to those of the system, were rarely accorded high status. In the eyes of many *players*, these men were 'mugs' and 'suckers'. Yet they were often influential among other *enthusiasts* and among those *pragmatists* who saw self-improvement as an admirable objective. When pursued with caution, without yielding too fully to institutional objectives or without an explicit discourse of moral 'goodness', self-improvement was certainly not looked down upon. This path was steered by most *stoics*, whose status was more or less guaranteed by their prison experience. *Pragmatists* occupied various points in the status system. Some were the prison's most vulnerable inhabitants, and sat on the lowest rungs of the social ladder. Others were more neutral, or were the mobile young tearaways whose future trajectories were as yet unclear.

Conclusion

The sociology of American prisons tells a story of the gradual dovetailing of appraisal and instrumental respect. In the Big House prison, while 'toughs' who exercised coercive power in exploitative ways were both feared and envied, it was 'real men', whose behaviour was co-operative, who were admired (Sykes 1958; and see Irwin 2005). By the 1970s, changes in the prison's population and administration had transformed its normative system and social structure. As racial and ethnic conflict outside the prison seeped into the institution, the prisoner society fragmented into mutually antagonistic groups. Violent street gangs began to dominate the prisoner world, and rejected the informal incentives that until then had structured the inmate hierarchy and been the basis of institutional order. Gang membership became the most effective way of alleviating the pains of imprisonment. Codes of allegiance and equality applied only within these secondary groups. Other norms encouraged the exploitation of out-group prisoners (Jacobs 1977, 1983; Irwin 1980, 2005; Johnson 1987; Hassine 1999). The collective ideals of toughness and machismo that had previously helped to diminish the frustrations of imprisonment became sources of exploitation. Aggression supplanted fortitude as the basis of admiration. In many institutions, the administration accommodated gang leaders in the interests of stability, reinforcing their power over other prisoners (Jacobs 1977). More recently, this stratum of violent and gang-affiliated prisoners has been amputated from the mainstream prison population through super-max segregation. These ultra-coercive environments have produced behaviours that are ever-more violent and desperate (Rhodes 2004).

In the UK, the prison's social structure has been defined by very different interactions between the institution and the external environment. Most European societies have not had the kinds of organized gangs or profound racial cleavages whose importation into prison have led to so many problems in the US (Morgan 2002). Mathieson (1965) accounted for the much flatter hierarchy within a Norwegian therapeutic prison in part by pointing to the country's much less developed criminal culture. Yet the similarities between some aspects of Wellingborough's prisoner hierarchy and those described in the international literature show the significance of structural factors in defining prisoner prestige. Attributes such as bravery, stoicism, criminal maturity, intelligence, honesty, and

generosity have been repeatedly identified as sources of respect, while stupidity, naivety, cowardliness, disloyalty, and instability have been consistently associated with stigma and dishonour (e.g. Clemmer 1940/1958; King and Elliott 1977; Winfree *et al.* 2002; Irwin 2005). Such factors reflect the inherent properties of the prison: its compressed social environment, and its deficits in personal space, safety, trust, information, and material wellbeing. Prisoners who conform to collective imperatives acquire appraisal respect. Those who breach them—in changing ways, for example, through drug use—are degraded and devalued.

Instrumental respect and influence can be achieved through the exploitation of the prison's deficits and the provision of services that mitigate its pains. In Wellingborough, the primary source of power—heroin—was notable in that its provision could not be integrated into the official reward system, and its influence could be exercised indirectly and inconspicuously. Drugs fulfilled an important need, and the service that dealers offered gave them considerable power, if not necessarily admiration. Physical and social capital were likewise useful resources within the environment, allowing prisoners to forge some degree of social autonomy. But violent potential was not the primary basis of prestige, reflecting an institutional culture that eschewed authoritarian means. Violence against the regime was difficult to justify and was not stoked or rewarded by institutional reactions. The prison was not defined by an all-pervasive culture of violent masculinity (c.f. Sim 1994a). The traits that reaped benefits and elicited appraisal respect were more often shrewdness and stealth than unrefined aggression.

Institutional factors were thus significant in shaping the terms of power. As previous chapters have explained, there was much to lose in explicitly asserting power or engaging in many of the illicit activities that could lessen the pains of imprisonment. Meanwhile, the institution relinquished little power to influential prisoners or factions in the interests of accommodation (c.f. Carroll 1974; Jacobs 1977). The main frustrations of prison life could be resolved more effectively through institutional compliance than through other prisoners. The degree to which individuals sought to amass power and exert interpersonal influence was thereby diminished. There were no 'king-pins' directing affairs between prisoners or pulling strings across the establishment with tacit institutional approval. Category-C conditions, where status could be forecast into external spheres, meant that prisoners were

less inclined to try to acquire visible influence or dominate their peers: for most prisoners, the battle was 'getting outside'.

At its apex, the social hierarchy was therefore relatively flat. For the majority of prisoners, the most important thing was to be left alone—'above the line'. Prisoners who actively sought power did so within limits, and through relatively surreptitious means. Influence was generally restricted to cliques or trade circles. In general, its scope was cellular rather than linear, creating pockets of interpersonal power. There was almost no 'leadership' to speak of, and—as Sparks *et al.* (1996) also reported—no 'ruling class' as such. Where leadership did exist, it was fluid and informal. Unlike in some jurisdictions (see, for example, Kaminski 2004), the hierarchy was not highly rigid or steeply stratified. Most prisoners knew their approximate location within the hierarchy, but these were not formalized rankings or well-defined positions so much as vague categorizations. There were no ritual procedures for vertical mobility and few barriers to contact between prisoners of different status. Inasmuch as some prisoners did not mingle across social strata, they did so electively—often because of their general orientation to the sentence rather than because of being actively excluded. These distinctions in adaptation and attitude also meant that there was not a universal consensus about what crimes and activities were worthy of awe, admiration, and fear.

Structures of power from outside prison were not reproduced or translated inside prison in a simple manner. Certainly, criminal experience and wealth, and a range of attitudes about issues such as masculinity and drug use, were relevant in the allocation of status and stigma. But status could not be guaranteed by offence category alone, and there was no simple equation between crime-type and social prestige (Morgan 2002). In many respects, imprisonment compressed criminal hierarchies from the streets, inciting prisoners to mix more broadly than outside, stripping away many identity props, and exposing prisoners to conditions that could revise and transform existing reputations. Judgments and perceptions inside the prison were also mitigated by notions of strength and weakness, with prisoners at the extremes of the hierarchy held to account in different ways for their actions and behaviour. Power meant obligation, while extreme vulnerability did not lead to brutal or universal exploitation. The hierarchy was shaped by moral considerations as well as structural deficits, institutional imperatives, and views imported from the community.