

Prisoner society in the era of hard drugs

BEN CREWE

University of Cambridge, UK

Abstract

A telling indication of the decline of ethnographic prison sociology is the paucity of research on drugs and their influence on the prisoner social world. Based on long-term fieldwork in a medium-security English prison, this article argues that the key components of prisoner social life are deeply imprinted by the presence and prevalence of hard drugs in and around the penal estate. After outlining the appeal of heroin to prisoners, and the terms of the prison drugs economy, the article shows how heroin restructures status and social relations in prison in a number of ways. First, users are stigmatized, particularly when their consumption has consequences that violate established codes of inmate behaviour. Second, heroin grants considerable power to those prisoners who deal it within prison, although this power is not necessarily equivalent to respect. Third, heroin transforms the terms of affiliation that exist when drugs are scarce. Meanwhile, for those prisoners whose lives prior to incarceration have been dominated by drug addiction, the experience of incarceration has a number of distinctive qualities.

Key Words

drugs • prisoner society • prisons • Sykes

INTRODUCTION

In his (2000) article, 'The "society of captives" in the era of hyper-incarceration', Jonathan Simon lamented 'the disappearance of inmate social life as an object of knowledge outside the precincts of prison' (2000: 290). For a range of practical and political reasons, Simon argued, the tradition of ethnographic prison sociology founded by Donald Clemmer and Gresham Sykes had largely dried up: 'In the 1990s', he summarized, 'the whole question of the prison social order appears distant from the concerns of both social science and prison management' (2000: 288). Simon has not been alone in expressing these concerns. The 'curious eclipse' of American prison ethnography has recently been highlighted by Loïc Wacquant (2002: 381), while, in the UK, where Simon identified signs of renaissance (inter alia, Sparks et al., 1996; Edgar et al., 2003;

Liebling, 2004), Alison Liebling (2000) has called for renewed empirical scrutiny of what goes on every day inside the prison gates. On both sides of the Atlantic, then, the inverse relationship between incarceration rates and the available knowledge about the social organization and culture of prison life is a worrying trend. There is also an asymmetry between the advances made in penal history and theory (Garland, 1985, 1990, 1997, 2002), and the relative paucity of concrete, sociological investigations of the functioning of penal practices, policies and powers. We understand relatively little about how life on the landings has been affected by the significant changes that prisons have undergone in recent years, changes that are embedded in the broader context of late-modernity that has, likewise, transformed the world outside the prison in which its inhabitants are socialized.

Among other forces and factors, drugs are central in this world. Drug dealing and addiction are associated with a large proportion of criminal offending (Bean, 2002). Within the prison population, high levels of lifetime drug use and addiction would therefore be expected. A recent survey of UK sentenced male prisoners found that 47 per cent had used heroin and/or cocaine/crack in the 12 months when they were last at liberty, generally on a regular basis. Thirty-eight per cent of the total sample declared that they considered themselves to have a drug problem (Ramsay, 2003; see also Boys et al., 2002). Such levels are significantly higher than among the general adult population, around 40 times in the case of heroin use (Boys et al., 2002).

Research also confirms that drug use during incarceration (predominantly cannabis and heroin) is common, though at levels lower than before imprisonment, and at rates that differ greatly between establishments (Edgar and O'Donnell, 1998; Hucklesby and Wilkinson, 2001; Ramsay, 2003). In Boys et al.'s (2002) sample, 62 per cent of lifetime heroin users and 64 per cent of lifetime cannabis users had used these drugs at some time while in prison. Other studies in UK male establishments have found similar levels of in-prison drug use: around 70 per cent of prisoners at some time during their current sentence (Hucklesby and Wilkinson, 2001; Edgar and O'Donnell, 1998), though recent Home Office research (Ramsay, 2003) reported slightly lower figures. In terms of more immediate use, using figures from five establishments, Edgar and O'Donnell found that, in the month before being interviewed, 49 per cent of prisoners had used cannabis and 27 per cent heroin. Research into the regularity of use reported that 64 per cent of prisoners using heroin and 68 per cent of prisoners using cannabis did so on a less than weekly basis (Ramsay, 2003). Overall then, it has been argued that 'few prisoners maintain problematic levels of use', mainly because of the lack of availability of desirable drugs, but that occasional drug use in prison is widespread (Bullock, 2003).

Given the prevalence of drugs in the pre-incarceration experiences of prisoners, and in daily prison life, it would be surprising if drugs had no effect on the prison as a *social system*. However, there exists no sustained, contemporary analysis of the role of hard drugs – heroin being the primary consideration here – in the prisoner social world. Where drug use has been discussed in relation to imprisonment, the focus has tended to be on public health implications, particularly around the issue of HIV/AIDS (Keene, 1997; Swann and James, 1998; Shewan and Davies, 2000), and on policy initiatives, such as mandatory drug testing (MacDonald, 1997; Edgar and O'Donnell, 1998; Gore et al., 1999; Hucklesby and Wilkinson, 2001; Duke, 2003).

Drugs have also been considered in the context of the debate about whether inmate

behaviour is better explained through functionalist theories (Sykes, 1958), which see prison social life as primarily determined by prison specific variables, or importation theories (Irwin and Cressey, 1962), which highlight the significance of pre-prison and extra-prison factors. Irwin (1970) related in-prison behaviour patterns to pre-prison identities, and argued that prisoners involved in dealing and drug use prior to their imprisonment adapted to prison life differently from other inmates. In contrast, Akers et al. (1974) found that the amount of drug taking in a prison was more a function of institutional character than the social characteristics imported by inmates. However, the character of inmate society and its relationship to drug use receives little attention in such research. In the more recent literature on some of the broader social dimensions of prison life, such as violence (Edgar et al., 2003), inmate subculture (Grapendaal, 1990; Winfree et al., 2002) and order (Sparks et al., 1996), drugs feature only parenthetically, if at all.

Munson et al.'s (1973) discussion stands out for its explicit concern with the contribution of drugs to the social character of prison life. Primarily focused upon the practices and logistics of drug distribution and consumption in the Californian prison system, their account registers the complex social relationships and affiliations that maintain the contraband chain: for example, the key role of 'trusties' in the delivery system, the importance of friendship and credit-worthiness in securing drugs and the ambiguous status of the drug user in the prisoner community. The trafficking of narcotics is also suggested to have a social and psychological function,

for it provides a community activity that binds together, at least the younger cons, into a working system that exalts cunning and ruthlessness in the service of inmate solidarity [...] it is an exercise in the subversion of the straight world's morality and power. (Munson et al., 1973: 197–8)

There are echoes in this statement of Sykes' (1956, 1958) seminal observations about the content, function and broader significance of 'the inmate code'. Sykes identified five maxims as the tenets of a value system that he regarded as a collective response to the intrinsic pains of imprisonment. Put simply, these were: don't grass on other prisoners, don't interfere in other prisoners' business or interests, don't exploit other prisoners, be tough, dignified and manly and don't give respect or credibility to staff. The more that prisoners adhered to this normative system, Sykes argued, the more they could alleviate the deprivations of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relations, autonomy and personal security that imprisonment entailed. Those prisoners who embodied this set of norms, and encouraged the same collective orientation in others, were the most admired members of the prisoner population and could operate as inmate leaders. Beneath them in the inmate hierarchy were a range of social types who sacrificed inmate solidarity for individualistic ends, for example, by grassing to the authorities, displaying weakness or exploiting others physically, sexually or financially. Status and stigma, then, were assigned to prisoners according to their conformity to or deviation from the code of inmate cohesion.

Munson et al.'s comments are therefore suggestive in signalling the key role of drugs, rather than a collective value system alone, in inmate adaptations to prison life, and, more broadly, in prison's everyday culture and social relations. This article explores these

relationships based upon recently completed research conducted over a 10-month period in HMP Wellingborough, a medium-security training prison in the UK. It argues that the key components of contemporary prisoner social life first elaborated by Sykes are deeply imprinted by the presence and prevalence of hard drugs in and around the penal estate. The consumption and provision of heroin restructures status and social relations among prisoners in a number of ways. It stigmatizes users, gives considerable influence to dealers/suppliers¹ and shifts the terms of affiliation that exist in times when drugs are scarce. Meanwhile, for those prisoners whose pre-prison lives have been characterized by drug addiction, the personal and social experience of incarceration has a number of distinctive qualities.

THE 'NEW SOCIETY OF CAPTIVES' STUDY

This article draws on material from a broader study of ordinary prison social life, designed to revisit the classic themes of prison sociology initially articulated in the 1940s and 1950s (most obviously, Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958). These include areas such as the 'inmate code', solidarity, conflict, leadership and stratification among prisoners, modes of adaptation, relationships with prison staff, the 'pains of imprisonment' and the flow of power in the modern prison. Although it does not seek to be directly comparative with earlier work, one aim of the research is to examine the relationships between these different components of the prison social world. This does not represent a simple return to functionalist analysis, but a recognition that everyday aspects of the prisoner world, such as inmate hierarchies and collective norms, are inter-connected, and are partly determined by structural characteristics of prison life, including official policies, relations with staff and the deprivations that attend incarceration. In turn, these norms, policies, relationships and frustrations are shaped by a multitude of forces outside the prison institution (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Jacobs, 1977). In this respect, the study locates the prison within the broader context of late-modernity and a penal system that has undergone significant change in recent years (Liebling, 2004).

In attempting to capture the complex interplay of internal and external relations, the study has replicated the method of sustained immersion in a single establishment that has been the preferred method of the benchmark studies of prison sociology (Clemmer, 1940; Sykes, 1958; Mathiesen, 1965; Carroll, 1974; Jacobs, 1977), incorporating interviews with staff as well as prisoners, and life history interviews alongside interviews about prison life. The main fieldwork phase was conducted in HMP Wellingborough between October 2002 and August 2003, following a two-month pilot study in spring 2002. The prison lies on the outskirts of Wellingborough, a small town (pop. 68,000) in the East Midlands, UK. It opened in 1963 as a Borstal, and was a young offenders' establishment until 1990, when it was briefly used to hold the temporarily decamped population of HMP Grendon, a therapeutic prison. When HMP Wellingborough reopened, it did so as a Category C training prison.

At the time of the study, the prison had an operational capacity of 526 prisoners, making it a medium-sized establishment of its kind. Prisoners were accommodated in single cells, except those on the large induction wing who shared double cells. Most were serving sentences of between two and six years, for offences such as burglary, robbery and possession (of drugs) with intent to supply. One wing, in the prison's main

buildings, held around 60 life sentence and long-term prisoners deemed suitable for medium-security conditions. Two of the other six residential wings formed the Voluntary Testing Unit (VTU), which opened in 1999. The unit housed 180 prisoners who voluntarily underwent regular urine-testing for drug use, in return for brighter, cleaner and more spacious living conditions.

The author was allowed to roam the prison as he wished, and was provided with keys that enabled access throughout the establishment. Visits were made around four times per week, including weekends and evenings. The first three months of fieldwork were spent observing everyday practices and interactions, and talking informally with staff and prisoners about daily life in the prison. In the months that followed, and informed by the initial phase, a large number of long, semi-structured interviews were conducted, generating around 300 hours of recorded material. These took place in an office allocated to the author on the induction wing. Seventy of these interviews were with prisoners, half of whom were randomly selected, the others being men with whom some kind of relationship had already been established through informal interaction on the prison landings, and in the workshops, gymnasium and education block. Forty of these prisoners were also interviewed about their life-histories.

The importance of drugs to daily prison life became apparent in the early stages of the pilot study. Drug taking and dealing were accepted by officers and prisoners as inevitable, almost banal, features of the inmate world. When I explained my research aims, drugs were recurrently spotlighted as the main motor of social dynamics: 'this prison is run on drugs' remarked one prisoner; '70% of things in jail are about drugs', specified another (fieldwork notes, March 2002). However, it was only through ongoing discussions and interviews during the main research period that the precise nature of the role of drugs in the prison's social system was ascertained. Drugs featured prominently in both kinds of interview, and prisoners made it clear that there were a number of features of the relationship between drugs and prison social life that were generalizable across establishments.²

HEROIN AND THE PRISON SYSTEM

According to prisoner recollections, heroin ('smack') had a noticeable profile in the UK prison estate from the late 1980s, but it was in the mid-1990s that its consumption became a more common and accepted form of inmate behaviour. It was also around this time that the Prison Service began to take more seriously the consequences of prison drug use (see also Duke, 2003). In his 1991–2 annual report, the Chief Inspector of Prisons had noted that 'the extent of the problem in UK prisons is not known and only tacitly acknowledged' (1992: 52). Three years later, extended discussion of drugs in a themed issue of the *Prison Service Journal* (issue 99) signalled growing awareness among practitioners of the implications of mounting drug use within the estate. These included issues of control and discipline (bullying, violence and intimidation linked to the drugs economy, which could spill from the prison into outside communities), resettlement, morale (staff disillusion; the agitation of prisoners keen to stay drug-free), personal and public health and associated operational problems (segregation units filled with drug debtors; increasing numbers of adjudications linked to drug consumption and possession) (Atherton and Lloyd, 1995; Bond et al., 1995; Walker, 1995). It was in

response to such concerns, and in the light of a government White Paper *Tackling drugs together* (HM Government, 1995), that mandatory drug testing (MDT) was introduced in all prison establishments in England and Wales by March 1996.

An early criticism of the MDT system was that its introduction was responsible for accelerating heroin's ascendance in the prison system. Cannabis can be traced in urine for up to 28 days after use, compared to 3 days for heroin. Critics (in particular, MacDonald, 1997) have argued that this flaw encourages prisoners to switch their consumption to the drug that is less easily detected, but more personally and socially problematic. Many prisoners claim, bitterly, that they and their peers had never used heroin until they entered prison, and that their decisions to use heroin rather than cannabis were directly related to the MDT regime. Evidence from official and academic studies is mixed. Almost half of the heroin users interviewed by Edgar and O'Donnell for their 1998 Home Office study had begun their use while in prison, and the report suggested that MDTs were certainly less effective in reducing heroin use than cannabis use. However, 'switching', from cannabis to heroin, was documented as a relatively rare occurrence, a finding supported by Hucklesby and Wilkinson (2001). In a more recent study, Boys et al. found that over 25 per cent of prisoners who had ever used heroin reported having used it for the first time while in prison, compared with 10 per cent of cocaine/crack users, 15 per cent of cannabis users and less than 1 in 40 amphetamine users (Boys et al., 2002: 1558).

These patterns of prison drug use are likely to reflect the relative availability of different drugs within the system (Boys et al., 2002). This will, in turn, relate to drug supplies in outside communities, as well as factors such as the relative ease with which different drugs can be smuggled into prison establishments.³ It therefore needs noting that the mid-1990s represented the start of what has been identified as a 'second heroin epidemic' in the UK (Parker, 2000: 71), after a quieter period in the early 1990s that followed an initial outbreak in the late 1980s. It is possible, then, that the relationship between the introduction of the MDT system and the escalation of prison heroin use is coincidental rather than causal.

Since the mid-1990s, greater attention has been paid both to drugs' supply and demand within prison. In relation to the latter, for example, an integrated Counselling, Assessment, Referral, Advice and Throughcare service has been widely developed, more links have been made between the Prison Service and external drugs agencies and there are a greater number of Voluntary Testing Units across the prison estate (Duke, 2003). Supply routes have been targeted as part of the general tightening of prison security that followed the recommendations made in the Learmont and Woodcock reports, and through more specific measures. This includes the deployment of sniffer dogs and CCTV cameras during prison visits, the use of drugs-related activity as a major factor in decisions about prisoners' privilege levels and the development of a performance indicator on action taken against suppliers and dealers (HM Prison Service, 1998; Duke, 2003). Overall, supply reduction strategies have been considered fairly successful. That drugs can still enter prisons is not so much an indictment of the prison system as a reflection of the difficulties of closing off all drugs routes given finite resources, ingenious supply channels (see later) and the desire to maintain regimes that are not excessively restrictive.

The attraction to prisoners of opiates and cannabinoids must be understood in the

context of their psychological and chemical effects and how these relate to the conditions of incarceration. Both drug types are reported to aid relaxation, relieve stress and counteract boredom. More specifically, heroin's attraction lies partly in the way that it 'kills time', alleviates anxiety and allows the user a temporary escape from reality (Larner and Tefferteller, 1964; Dorn and South, 1987). In this respect, the argument made by one member of Wellingborough's drug testing and treatment team, that, since heroin and cannabis provide different effects, it was illogical to argue that they were interchangeable options, is misguided. Rather, cannabis and heroin share the characteristics liable to make them popular prison drugs, but, if anything, the specific nature of heroin's effects make it all the more attractive to the prisoner seeking basic comfort or distraction. One interviewee declared heroin a drug that 'could've been invented for prison' (interview, June 2003).

Most testimonies about heroin's appeal as a prison drug reproduce discourses of sanctuary, diversion and relief.

Wrapped in cotton wool: like a cotton wool cloud, that's how I felt. Lied in bed, it was like I was wide awake dreaming. (interview, March 2003)

It just made jail that bit easier; it used to bring the walls down, used to feel like you weren't in prison, didn't really used to seem that you had no cares in the world. (interview, February 2003)

Although many prisoners prefer the less intense effects of cannabis, others favour heroin because of, and only within, the prison context.

I don't take heroin on the street, but I will take it in 'ere, because it takes the walls away, the walls just disappear [. . .] Cannabis, you're still aware of what's goin' on. With heroin, you're not, you're proper gone. [. . .] Twenty-four hours is gone like that. [. . .] It's a jail thing, because you just don't care [. . .] if you're just startin' a four year prison sentence, you're gonna do drugs, you don't care if you get caught on a piss test because you've got all that time to get that remission back. [. . .] But now I'm comin' to goin' home, I don't take anything now, because I don't wanna be given a piss test and be caught out and end up havin' more time. Plus, I've known certain people take heroin right up until they go out and when they get out, it's still fresh in their mind, y'know, they might have a little bit of boredom out there one day and they're supplyin' and they got a big bag of it there and 'yeah, I'll just have one little go, I'll be alright.' But if you leave it a couple of months before you get out, it's not immediately in your head. In prison, I don't mind doin' it but I wouldn't take it outside; to me it's just a jail drug. (interview, February 2003)

While many prisoners who use heroin in prison do not consume the drug when outside, conversely, those whose offences are addiction-related often use imprisonment as an opportunity to get clean. As also suggested here, prisoners may be quite calculating in their decisions about drug use at different stages of their sentence.

Several commentators have depicted the pleasure derived from heroin use in sexual terms. Stephens reports heroin highs as 'often said to be almost sexually orgasmic' (1991: 8), while Larner and Tefferteller describe the injection of heroin as 'like the rush of orgasm after a long, slow build-up of sexual tumescence' (1964: 16). Given the near elimination of opportunities for heterosexual contact that imprisonment entails, it is

possible that part of heroin's appeal is this quasi-sexual effect. Some research also indicates that heavy opiate use reduces sexual desire (Stevenson et al., 1956; Irwin, 1970), an effect that may add to its attractiveness as a prison drug. One prisoner's comments were highly suggestive of a link between addiction, intimacy and sexual desire.

Heroin's like a woman you know. The woman could be the best fuck you've had in your life, but I tell you what, the ear-ache and the head-ache you can get out of it at the end of the day just ain't worth the shag. You might love her with all your heart but you can't be together. Heroin to a degree was the love of my life. [. . .] I loved heroin, it fucking took over my life [. . .] Heroin is the love of my life. You know, she's like a woman. (interview, February 2003)

Descriptions of this kind were uncommon, but the intense ambivalence of the heroin addict's relationship to the drug was a recurrent theme in prisoner narratives. Alternative depictions, built around metaphors of incarceration and self-mortification, likewise conveyed the power of heroin's hold over the thoughts and lives of prisoners, both prior to and during their imprisonment.

HEROIN AND HMP WELLINGBOROUGH

Munson et al. propose that a prison is more likely to have a 'heroin character' according to how many young, lower-class habitual offenders with drug histories it contains, its proximity to a big city and the frequency and nature of contact it allows between prisoners and the external world (Munson et al., 1973: 173). There are other relevant variables in the current UK prison system, where certain prisons have reputations for the quantity and variety of their drugs. These include the permeability of the establishment's outer perimeter, the number of staff available to conduct drug searches and collate security information and the potential for staff to be corrupted.

When fieldwork began, in summer 2002, prisoners described HMP Wellingborough as a relatively 'dry' establishment. The incumbent governor, shortly before leaving the prison for a post elsewhere, identified the drugs strategy as the prison's most positive feature and the aspect of his governorship of which he was most proud. As he recalled it, the prison had something of a 'drugs problem' at the time of his takeover, and he had decided to prioritize this area as a means of improving the conditions and culture of the institution as a whole.

I decided consciously to really focus on the drugs and use the drugs as a way of enthusing staff, but also of supporting prisoners, of dealing with bullying and assaults. And so I began to use the drug strategy to run the prison [. . .].⁴ It sounds one dimensional, but it was very successful in getting the prison sorted out, such that in the first year we halved the drug taking, [and] in creating a very strong feeling of self-worth with the staff. (interview, August 2002)

At the same time, he recognized that the Prison Service's growing preoccupation with prisoner resettlement would compromise this policy: the greater provision of home leaves and town visits was likely to lead to an increased flow of contraband into the establishment. However, that the amount of drugs in the prison increased significantly in subsequent months was due less to this than to a predictable rise in drug circulation as Christmas approached, and, most significantly, a suspected staff supply source

believed to have been smuggling a very large quantity of drugs into the prison over a period of several months. At this time, staff and prisoners estimated that up to 70 per cent of prisoners on some wings were regularly using heroin, and MDT figures confirmed a significant increase in the use of illegal substances.⁵ Once the flow was stemmed, the prison returned to a state of low-level drug use. The contrast between the prison's culture, social organization and emotional climate during these phases, and prisoners' comments about their current and past experiences of prison life, allow for the analysis that follows.

THE HEROIN ECONOMY IN PRISON

Heroin can be brought into a prison through a number of channels. The most popular routes are through corrupted staff, from friends and family during visits or in letters and over a prison's perimeter fence or wall (fieldwork notes and interviews, 2003). Staff will be paid large amounts of money for their co-operation, and can be blackmailed into importing larger or more varied quantities of contraband once they have agreed to a first transaction. In visit rooms, drugs are most likely to be passed during a kiss between a prisoner and his visitor, or by being placed in the packaging of an item of food or drink once purchased from the snack booth. The prisoner will then swallow the package, to be passed out later in private, or will 'plug' it in his anus, where he cannot be searched. If drugs are thrown over a prison's fence or wall, a prisoner whose job involves cleaning up the rubbish strewn outside a wing may be paid by the dealer to pick up and pass on the relevant package (a filled tennis ball, for example). In prisons with large numbers of remand prisoners, court visits provide opportunities for drugs to be picked up and secreted before return to the establishment.

Once inside the prison, drugs are stored and sold through complex networks of trade and friendship. High-level dealers are unlikely to handle or have contact with their drugs for any significant period of time. Rather, having organized the importation, they will arrange for other prisoners to hold shares of their goods and take care of daily exchange operations. Dealers may engage in direct competition with other suppliers on their wing, but will often co-operate with those elsewhere in the prison. By lending stock to another supplier in times of surplus, a dealer can ensure that he has a reserve stock to draw upon if his own deliveries temporarily falter. He may also use small quantities of drugs to pay off prisoners who have the potential to disrupt the smooth functioning of his operations.

Drugs in prison are worth three to four times their street value. Inside prison, a 'bag' of heroin, enough for around one night's personal use, costs the equivalent of between £8 and £10. In the absence of a cash economy, for small quantities, payment is made in 'items' including phonecards, tobacco, toiletry products and food purchased out of weekly wages and private cash. If drugs are readily available in the prison, on Fridays, when prisoners spend their weekly funds, there is an observable difference in the level of activity on the wings, as debts are settled and further drugs purchased. The start of the evening association period sees small groups of prisoners darting between cells, trying to accumulate enough currency for a shared bag. For much of the remainder of the evening, the wings are relatively quiet. Those prisoners involved in drug consumption smoke their purchases in small groups in their cells, while non-users tend to avoid

the wing's public areas when drugs are rife, for reasons discussed later (fieldwork notes, October–December 2003).

A prisoner making a more substantial purchase has to involve friends and family outside prison in his transaction. Typically, he will call his wife, partner or parents and ask for money to be sent to an address or account specified by the dealer. Once the dealer has spoken to the outside contact whose details he has given out, and received confirmation that payment has been made, he will deliver the appropriate quantity of drugs to the cell of his customer. One prisoner summarized the process as 'like ordering a pizza' (quotation from fieldwork notes, March 2002).

The relatively high price that can be charged for heroin creates an expansive and multi-level economy. Prison wages are low, and there are limits on the amount of private cash that prisoners can spend each week. As a result, prisoners with heroin habits have to borrow or steal forms of currency in order to finance their consumption. And whereas cannabis and tobacco debts can add up to a few pounds, heavy users of heroin can accumulate much larger and more problematic debts within very short spaces of time, as one prisoner outlined: 'Whereas ten years ago someone might have owed a tenner, for tobacco, say. Now they can owe two or three hundred pounds. Very quickly. In a week y'know' (interview, June 2003).

The cap placed on the amount of tobacco or number of phonecards that any one prisoner can have in his possession forces dealers to spread the currency they amass among others on the wing. These middle-men often re-lend the goods to the drug users who have originally provided them, at the standard prison interest rate of 100 per cent (known as 'double bubble'). This generates spiralling levels of debt which either have to be paid off by outside parties, or are written off (but not forgotten) when debtors ask to be segregated for their own protection. In doing so, they are pushed to reveal to prison staff the identity of the dealer whom they owe. This not only collapses the drugs market, since dealers are shipped out to other establishments. It also violates one of the fundamental rules of the prisoner community: that one should never inform ('grass') on another inmate. Indeed, between them, prison heroin users and dealers violate numerous elements of the inmate code, and it is partly for this reason that heroin's social and symbolic role in prison life is so significant.

HEROIN USE AND THE INMATE CODE

It has always been clear that the inmate code is 'an ideal rather than a description' of prisoner behaviour (Sykes, 1995: 362). One might therefore be sceptical about testimonies that evoke an era in which prisoners followed these stipulations of approved conduct. Yet there is remarkable consistency in the assertions that older and more experienced prisoners make about how heroin, among other things, has undermined a culture of inmate solidarity, trust and goodwill. The following quotation captures common sentiments:

Smack – that's what's changed things a lot in prisons. People would never steal from people or grass each other up. Now that's just commonplace: grassing and co-operating with staff. [. . .] It's lowered general morals in the prison system. Proper heroin addicts have got no morals, y'know, they'd steal from their mum, they can't be trusted with anything. [. . .] So there's a

kind of general mistrust around the place. [. . .] The violence levels have gone right up because of drugs, as well, y'know. It was unusual for someone to get slashed up.⁶ There was fights – always gonna be fights – but now people are getting slashed up and set fire to, whatever, just over nothing, five or ten pounds [debt], y'know. There's a lot more debt now in prison than ever before. And big debts as well. [. . .] People sell their clothes now in prison, which you never saw, for drugs, and all their belongings, stereo, everything. People work for other people in prison for drugs now. They'll spend their life cleaning someone else's cell out for drugs, or whatever else they have to do. General moral standards have gone downhill, because of heroin. [. . .] It's hardened people's feelings towards their fellow prisoners. If someone's ill or poor or in a mess – a few years ago people would've gone to them and said 'here you are mate, here's some tobacco', or a phonecard, 'get yourself sorted out'. Now they say 'oh, he's a smackhead, forget him'. [So] people's good nature to other prisoners has got less and less. [. . .] The drugs culture, the heroin culture, has destroyed the humanity that was to other prisoners, that's gone now. That's why I think there's more slashings and whatever, because people don't look at each other as humans anymore, especially if they're smackheads – that's all they are: they get that label and they're finished. (interview, June 2003)

Central, then, to the erosion of an apparently more collectively oriented prisoner community is the culture of debt and need generated by the heroin economy. Prisoners who have maintained heroin habits in prison report the lengths that some users will go to in order to obtain a fix, describing themselves as violent, 'ruthless and moralless' manipulators prepared to rob and intimidate their peers (interview, February 2003).

Alongside the major norm-violations associated with heroin use, such as bullying and stealing from cells, are a number of less obvious breaches of inmate codes. In manipulating others and feigning friendships, heroin users not only undermine general levels of trust, but also contravene a shared belief that prisoners should act without front or pretence. Heroin users also make repeated requests to other prisoners either for items that they can trade or, having already bartered all their personal goods, for small amounts of tobacco for personal consumption. These interactions are greatly resented, for those who are asked are placed in the invidious position of neither wanting to create confrontation by saying no and causing offence, nor wanting to give in and appear weak. Heroin users thus infringe the physical and social boundaries that, in what is a tensely compressed social environment, normally serve to avert interpersonal friction. Similarly, their mood-swings and volatility add to the stress and unpredictability of prison life, as well as inadvertently drawing officer attention onto the landings, and thus towards the illicit activities of other prisoners.

Prisoners with insufficient financial reserves will often sell their labour or clothing in order to meet their consumption expenses.

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 140 quid, ended up selling that [. . .] I've sold a brand new Reebok tracksuit a few months ago to get a bag of heroin. The tracksuit cost me 65 quid, it was brand new, and I ended up selling it for a tenner and now I'm walking around with jeans that have got holes in; it don't make sense. [. . .] I wish I hadn't sold things like that, I wish I had all them things back. (interview, April 2003)

Such dealings generate shame and regret, not least because what one wears in prison is one of the primary markers of status. In fact, when heroin is rife within the prison,

many prisoners express guilt about a range of deeds that they have perpetrated, both inside and outside the prison, in order to satisfy their habits. 'It makes you into a worse thug than you already were', one prisoner commented, remorsefully (fieldwork notes, 2002). Others simply resent the vulnerability that their habit forces upon them, and on which they know they will be judged. 'By the end of the week, you can have someone's dinner for a smoke', reported one prisoner: 'you can't respect them for that' (fieldwork notes, 2002).

In their dependency, desperation and degenerate physical state, heroin users have also come to represent an affront to the collective dignity of the prisoner community, as one interviewee highlighted:

My attitude has been – and I've actually said it to people in the last few years – where's your self-respect gone? And also, staff go to the pub at night [and] tell all the world about you selling your arse or your shoes or whatever you're selling in here, and then that society thinks all prisoners are like that. (interview, June 2003)

STATUS DISTINCTIONS AMONG HEROIN USERS IN PRISON

That all forms of heroin use are, to some degree, stigmatized is made apparent in the disparity between prisoners' public condemnations and denials of heroin consumption, and their private admissions of personal involvement. Many prisoners are candid about occasional consumption, but will disguise the extent of their use and deny any suggestion of dependency or lack of control. This distinction is critical. Prisoners differentiate between users who can control and afford their habits and the 'smackheads', 'smackrats' or 'bagrats' whose inability to do so leads to the kind of consequences outlined earlier.

One reason why there is little sympathy for 'smackheads' is that prisoners tend to subscribe to theories of individual responsibility, as the following quotation indicates:

A smackhead won't have anything on a Friday afternoon, cos he owes it all out. [When] they keep askin for burn [tobacco], they do get on people's nerves. People think, 'well, hang on a minute, this isn't something that's out of your control, you've got no burn because you've smoked heroin.' People don't feel sorry for them sort of people. (interview, February 2003)

Such judgements are also bound up with discourses about strength and weakness. Like the inmate code as a whole, these reflect criminal, cultural and moral values imported into prison from external subcultures as well as norms generated indigenously by the deprivations of imprisonment (Irwin and Cressey, 1962; Irwin, 1970, 1980). First, then, as inside prison, heroin users outside are regarded as physically and socially deficient: unable to 'handle' life. Second, within criminal value systems, there is great distaste for people who steal within their own communities, commit crimes against the old and vulnerable and mistreat members of their own family. Heroin addicts outside the prison typically transgress these standards. Inside prison, heroin users and former addicts become the repositories of resentment for these acts, including the drug-related crimes that have been committed against many prisoners themselves.

In almost every respect, then, although tolerated in ways that 'grasses' and sex-offenders are not, 'smackheads' in prison are among the pariahs of the mainstream

inmate world. It is not simply that hard-drug use is associated with passivity, dependence and retreatism (Cloward and Ohlin, 1960), but that the pursuit of heroin entails a range of activities that contravene criminal, prisoner and masculine codes of behaviour. Preble and Casey's (1969) claim, that the heroin addict may obtain status and satisfaction from his daily 'hustle', is borne out only in relation to modes of acquisition where control, wealth and knowledge can be publicly exhibited.

It is [stigmatized], yeah. But it's also, it's also a status symbol to them. Somebody that can be seen to be running about, and eventually get the prize, i.e. a bag of smack [. . .] they'll come out and walk about the wing, scratching their nose, 'yeah, I'm a gangster man, I can afford smack, and I know where to get it'. (interview, May 2003)

Such victories only partially recover the credibility that heroin use in prison otherwise corrodes. For users themselves, the satisfactions derived from obtaining heroin are relative to the desperation felt without it.

HEROIN DEALING AND POWER

A minority of prisoners – typically, 'old-school' cons and reformed addicts – regard drug dealing inside and outside prison as immoral. However, in the eyes of most criminals and prisoners, it carries considerable kudos as an organized, entrepreneurial, high-risk and potentially very lucrative endeavour. Inside prison, there is no question that, through the cost and desirability of their product, drug dealers can become extremely influential and comfortable figures, as interviewees repeatedly testified.

If you've got powder in jail, you are a fuckin powerful man. If you've got enough smack in jail, you can get someone killed, no problem. It's as easy as that, in whatever jail you're at. [. . .] you haven't got to do nothin'. If you want someone to wipe your arse for you, a geezer will wipe your arse for you for a bag [. . .] 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. (interview, June 2003)

What are the sorts of things that give people power?

Power? Power's drugs. Drugs is power. (interview, May 2003)

The first way you'll find out [who's powerful] is, 'who's controlling the drugs?'. (interview, February 2003)

The power held by drug dealers is most significant in relation to those prisoners directly dependent upon their supplies. But this dependence can allow dealers to exert influence throughout a wing: 'Obviously, if you want someone burnt out or you want someone beaten up, you can always find someone you pay a bag to do it', reported one interviewee (interview, February 2003). Drug-free prisoners – and, in particular, prisoners on drug-free wings – generally report that it is possible to keep away both from drugs and the social effects of their presence. However, as indicated earlier, they may still be subjected to bullying and intimidation by inmates who can be paid by suppliers to collect debts or settle personal scores. Non-users can also be drawn,

unwillingly, into the violent politics of the drugs economy if their friends find themselves in debt.

Dealers operate with a variety of motivations, and at a number of levels (see Dorn et al., 1992; Akhtar and South, 2000). Some claim to have little interest in accumulating goods and status within the prison and are more oriented to life after release.

Some people in jail, they get heroin, sell it for items, get loads of items. [We were] Never interested in items, all we wanted was cash sent out. [. . .] the idea was if I can make two grand for when I get out then I'll be alright, instead of just having like 100 quid. [. . .] I want to be able to go and buy myself a nice pair of trainers, shoes, everything and get myself on my feet quickly. [. . .] I just seen it as a quick way to make money for when I get out. [. . .] I'm not really interested in getting all brand new clothes sent in jail – I'm not here to impress nobody. (interview, April 2003)

As outside, high-level suppliers rarely consume their own goods. In contrast, those dealing in smaller quantities often do so in order to subsidize their own expenditure. Others seek prestige and commodities within the prison that can offset some of the deprivations of incarceration. In an environment in which personal possessions often represent power, and in which power and respect are frequently conflated, these traders may be held in high regard.

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 just 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 upon boxes under their beds, chocolate bars, boxes of brand new trainers and tracksuits all hangin up. (interview, May 2003)

Those with less interest in prison status accrue respect and reputation regardless, through what their ability to import drugs symbolizes in terms of 'nerve', resistance to the system, ambition and connections to organized drug networks outside prison.

[Dealers get] Respect for getting the gear in in the first place [. . .] 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 in?', and then people respect you. (interview, June 2003)

Largely though, prisoners differentiate implicitly between power, possessions and respect. In doing so, as these extracts illustrate, they highlight the nature of the power that heroin bestows:

They're not respected. They get false friendship. If you're a dealer in prison, then people are gonna want to get on with you cos you've got something they want, so it's all false [. . .]. A dealer will have food in his cell, he'll have burn, he'll have phonecards. [. . .] He can get people beat up if he wants to. [But] as soon as your gear runs out, it's gone, your power's gone [. . .] When your supply goes, you're forgotten, they go on to the next man. You're only used, and what respect you get for dealin' only lasts as long as the gear you've got. (interview, February 2003)

They're not really friends with you, they're being friends with *your drugs*. (interview, June 2003)

The resentment felt towards most drug dealers stems from various factors. Primarily, they contravene inmate codes about the exploitation and equality of other prisoners. One way in which they may do this is by taking advantage of – indeed, flaunting – the short-term power that drugs give them by making clients wait far longer than necessary before serving them, or by forging highly exploitative deals.

I've been guilty of it. Where somebody's come up to me and said 'I've got these brand new pair of trainers, give us three bags for them.' I say 'nah, I've got too many trainers, don't fucking want them'. And you know they're going to come back and say 'ah, give us two bags for these trainers', and you say 'look, honestly, I don't want them'. Then they'll go away and come back and say, 'give us one bag'. And you'll go, 'fucking hell, I'm gonna do you a favour, I don't really want them' – but you know you've got a bargain and you can go and sell them for twenty quid or something. (interview, March 2003)

Such over-assertions of the temporary power conferred by drugs are commonly referred to as 'powder power'.

HEROIN AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

The power imparted by heroin is also begrudged by many prisoners because it disturbs the normal terms of the prisoner hierarchy, allowing otherwise ordinary inmates to climb the social ladder or, in breach of inmate norms, to inflate their social image.

They kind of, become something different to the day before, when they didn't have anything to sell. (interview, June 2003)

Powder power is thinking you're the man because you've got drugs, but not really being anybody. (quotation from fieldwork notes, 2002)

Such complaints may have racial undertones, particularly in relation to Asian prisoners,⁷ who have traditionally been a relatively weak social formation in prison, but whose involvement in the drugs economy is transforming their social position. As one prisoner exclaimed, disdainfully: 'They're not powerful *people* – they're like matchsticks! – but they have power, through the drugs they bring in' (quotation from fieldwork notes, 2002).

If this suggests that heroin grants its holders a rather ephemeral form of power, it is also worth noting that heroin is not enough in itself to make this power operable. A prisoner who is weak without the power that heroin gives him will struggle to hang onto the drug stock that is the source of his power. In this respect, a prisoner needs to have physical clout or confidence, a network of friends or some other basis of power or status in order to be a dealer in the first place. Drugs alone are very unlikely to enable a very weak prisoner to become a very strong member of the inmate social world.

It is the opposite social trajectory that is more likely to result, as a consequence of heroin use. Experienced prisoners argue that heroin has contributed to the dissolution (which is not to say destruction) of a pecking order in which criminal offence, age,

physical strength and machismo were the main markers of status, with armed robbery at the apex of the pyramid of credibility.

You can have like a senior heavy armed robber type character who'll be hangin' around with a house burglar, simply because they both take smack, whereas in the old days you wouldn't get that: people were drawn to each other because of what they were in for. Now, it's still to an extent to do with what you're in for, but the drugs has made a big influence on that. (interview, June 2003)

Before the introduction of the heroin, you would have had people who would have become strong within the prison system who would have been higher up in 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 – other people will frown on em, [. . .] they're not in the position to establish themselves as well as they may have wanted to. (interview, January 2003)

Powder power means you can have a 23 year old selling to a grown man, who's licking their arse. (quotation from fieldwork notes)

First then, heroin acts as a social equalizer. Second, its presence redefines the terms of prisoner affiliation. When drugs are scarce, prisoners associate in social pockets based primarily on prior relationships, ethnic or regional identity and lifestyle interests. These groups are generally instrumental in nature, offering various reciprocal forms of support. When drugs are more abundant, many of these affiliations disintegrate. It is a prisoner's orientation to heroin that is likely to determine his social interactions. Non-users distance themselves from users with whom they would previously have associated, for fear of being exploited by them or dragged into their debt.

Meanwhile, users gravitate towards each other, becoming one of the most visible groupings on a wing. As research into street addicts reports, their affiliations to each other are loose, low-trust, practical and shifting, formed to aid the daily logistics of drug procurement and consumption (Larner and Tefferteller, 1964; Preble and Casey, 1969; Irwin, 1970). 'It's not loyalty', explained one source, 'it's "co-operative finding". You find the knowledge of where the man is, and once you know, it's every man for himself. [Once] the smack appears, loyalty goes out the window' (interview, July 2003). Prison drug users trust each other no more than they are trusted by non-users. As Larner and Tefferteller summarize, they are simply 'loyal to each other's company' (1964: 14).

HEROIN AND THE PAINS OF IMPRISONMENT

Heroin's role in the experience of incarceration is multi-faceted. For some prisoners, it is a means of coping with the problems of imprisonment. However, the sanctuary and relief that heroin brings to these men is only temporary, and its acquisition and consumption are accompanied by social, symbolic and economic degradation. Perhaps more significantly, whereas the inmate code can be regarded as a collective means of alleviating the intrinsic pains of prison life (Sykes, 1958), drug use represents a largely individualistic response. There is no heroic role available to the heroin user that corresponds to the status granted to the prisoner who embodies the code of loyalty and

collective concern. The use of heroin in prison creates as many problems as it assuages, and does so at a collective as well as individual level: it creates new pains of imprisonment at the same time as it mitigates others. Many prisoners now articulate a value system that confronts drug use as an intrinsic aspect of prison life. Exhortations not to get involved in the drugs trade are a standard part of contemporary prisoner norms.

My guiding principles [are]: if you're not a nonce, you're alright. If you're not a grass, you're alright. If you don't get involved in the drug trade, you're alright. [. . .] If you stay out of the drug problem, you've cut out 90% of all problems. (interview, May 2003)

Prisoners who overcome addiction during their sentences have a distinct social experience of imprisonment. A common adage both in prison, and among heroin addicts outside it (Preble and Casey, 1969), is that you 'don't have proper friends, only associates' (fieldwork notes, 2002–3). Most prisoners make a firm distinction between these types of relationships, arguing that the prison world is one of 'front' and insincerity, and that it is imprudent to trust people who one meets only in the context of incarceration. For an 'ex-addict', however, it is the outside world and his former self that come to appear artificial. Meanwhile, life, decisions and self-identity inside the prison are experienced as comparatively lucid, straightforward and real. Accordingly, ex-addicts trust themselves, their judgements and, by projection, other people, far more when they are inside prison and free from drugs. Often grouping together with other ex-users, based on shared experiences of addiction and shared hopes of desistance, they renounce the peer relationships that they have clung to outside, recognizing them as instrumental, pragmatic and misguided, and claim that it is in prison where their friendships are 'real'.

I'll be able to trust [other prisoners] in a jail scenario, but otherwise, I don't know, they could get out of jail and change totally. I know that I would. I change when I get out. It's not as if I come in prison and put a mask on. I come in prison and I revert to *me*. This is me, this is the *real* me. Outside, I'm totally false. I'm lying, cheating, swindling, robbing. It's a chemical lifestyle I lead outside. My whole character changes. (interview, May 2003)

These people you're getting friends with in here with a perfectly clear head, so they're real friends. A guy I met in my last jail, he's the closest friend I've ever had [. . .] It depends on the person, don't it. If that person's gonna go out the prison and become a smackhead again, then they won't be the same person when you meet them again outside. But if that person doesn't do that, you're meeting the genuine person, aren't ya, you're seeing the real person. (interview, June 2003)

Thus, while the exclamation that 'the only loyalty here is heroin' (fieldwork notes, 2002) captures the belief held by many prisoners that hard drugs have eroded general bonds of commitment and allegiance, for others, it is the past experience of addiction that helps cement their friendships to other inmates.

Ex-addicts also generally report improvements in their relationships with partners and family members whom they have often exploited and marginalized during times of addiction. For these prisoners, incarceration very often provides a welcome interruption – albeit often only a brief one, and one with other costs – to a life on the street

portrayed as chaotic, immoral and wretched. Imprisonment is described as an 'opportunity' or a 'relief', as the following quotation illustrates:⁸

When I was on the street and on heroin, I knew then that I was ready, I wanted to go to prison, I know it sounds mad. For me, prison is the only place you can come and get off the drugs and stay clean, y'know. [. . .] when I got locked up it was sort of a godsend. [. . .] I was homeless, I was a drug addict, so no I didn't have control of my life, no.

So is being in prison less bad than being on heroin out there? How do they compare?

I'd prefer to be sat here now than I would to be on heroin out there. I know it sounds mad. (interview, June 2003)

Metaphors of incarceration are common in descriptions of addiction, and this has implications for the experience of incarceration itself. Compared to other prisoners, ex-addicts find confinement a relatively less painful phenomenon because many of the deprivations and degradations of imprisonment documented by past researchers (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961) – for example, the lack of power and control – are considered less arduous than those that characterize addiction on the streets.

Do you find it hard not having control of your life in the way that you might do on the outside?

I don't have control of my life, heroin has a control over my life. I don't have any control. I hand the reins to heroin [. . .]. It's in prison that I can find I'm able to control my life more . . . and I'm happy, I'm happier. [. . .] How can a prison have power over you when you're in no rush to go beyond the boundaries of the gates? Cos I'm not. The situation as it is now is wrong, the time is wrong; if I was to go out there, I would end up in a bigger state [of addiction] than I've ever been in. (interview, May 2003)

Furthermore, whereas outside prison, drug addicts and their acts are viewed with contempt by dealers and other 'professional' criminals, once inside, provided they have shed their habits, ex-addicts experience far more tolerance. Thus, while heroin flattens status distinctions in prison, prison flattens status distinctions built into criminal subculture and the drugs economy on the streets, as one convicted drug dealer explained:

[Outside] The people that buy off you, you think, 'you fuckin smackhead,' [. . .] the chances are they're burgling houses, robbin' off friends, robbin' off family, they're scum. [In prison though] Everybody mingles, you have to mingle in prison. [. . .] I'd have no problem talkin' to a housebreaker inside, I would have no problem classin' him as a friend inside, at all. [. . .] But I wouldn't associate with a house burglar outside, no. (interview, February 2003)

The depressing irony, then, is that while some prisoners find drugs a respite from prison, others find prison a respite from drugs: a chance to improve their physical and psychological health, to recover some status and to repair the state of their personal relationships. For prisoners like these, the influence of imprisonment is complex. Prison may feel restorative rather than punitive: it is the world outside that carries more threat. As Loïc Wacquant has recently suggested then, one problem with the notion of the 'collateral damage' caused by imprisonment is that it suggests that the prison serves only as a 'distortive and wholly

negative' force, rather than one which might, perversely, act 'as a stabilizing and restorative force for relations *already* deeply frayed by the pressures of life and labor at the bottom of the social edifice' (Wacquant, 2002: 388, emphasis in original).

HEROIN, SOCIAL ORDER AND STAFF ATTITUDES

Whether their status is anchored in communities outside prison, or on adaptations inside it, inmate leaders are able to deploy their influence to aid or undermine the everyday accomplishment of prison order (see Sykes, 1958; Jacobs, 1977). As suggested earlier, prison drug dealers have power, but not necessarily respect, and the nature of this power has implications for their role in generating and controlling disorder. Dealers are primarily oriented to the preservation of their markets, and have little inclination to pursue issues that would benefit collective ends. Meanwhile, the instrumental ways in which they operate are unlikely to generate the kind of admiration or popularity that could establish them as leaders.

None the less, dealers certainly have a lot to lose if officers tighten their grip on a wing, and, for this reason, at the same time as their trade creates problems, dealers also police and discourage disorder that might jeopardize their markets. Prisoners who are making excessive noise, openly fighting or trading too conspicuously will be warned to curb their behaviour. Dealers themselves are rarely 'troublemakers', and tend to be polite and 'compliant' in their daily interactions with officers. Meanwhile, as Pearson and Hobbs (2001) have noted in relation to middle-market drug distribution outside prison, while intimidation and threats of violence serve to ensure contract compliance, overt violence can attract unwanted attention and disrupt business. Some prisoners suggest that it is only when drugs markets collapse, and debts are 'called in', that violence flares up, but that, when markets are operating smoothly, the wings are relatively calm and controlled. This partly depends upon the quantity of drugs in an establishment. One manager noted that, when drugs are plentiful, violence is likely to reflect competition for markets, whereas when supplies are limited, higher prices lead to greater debt, enforcement-related violence and informing:

When drugs are scarce [there's] squabbling over the scarce amount of deals that are going on, and that's when we get to hear about them, because dealer B will say 'oh no, I'm not selling to you because you didn't pay me the last time'. So this person dobs him in and says 'he won't sell it to me so no one can have it'. And we see a rise in information when there's scarce amounts. When there's more, we don't seem to hear about it as much because everyone's happy, but [there are more] turf wars and fights and whatever.

Dealers themselves report that having a credible threat of violence is a critical part of their operations and that violence sometimes has to be used to enforce payments and assert authority. However, they also suggest that it is 'good business' to be lenient in certain situations, and to give small amounts of drugs to all the main cliques on the wing, not least because this 'keeps the wing happy' and reduces the likelihood of being informed upon.

It is conceivable that, in some prisons, officers may collude in the peace that is achieved when dealers are allowed to control the wings.

You can see where all the main heads are on the wing. The screws know where they are, what's happening, what they're doin'. They know it's not them that's kickin' anything off on the wing. The wing's quiet because people that bring the wing on top⁹ will get hurt, because [the heads] don't need it. (interview, June 2003)

In [prison x], the main people on the servery are drug dealers. They're drug dealers, and the staff know. [. . .] They get turned a blind eye because they keep the wing quiet. [. . .] They know that they can't fucking do somebody in for debt. They'll give them a slap. But they can't do them in. The staff in there will know whether an inmate will comply just to that edge – [so, a dealer on the servery isn't] an out-and-out thug. He's got a brain, basically. He says 'right, this is the game I'm playing now, and I've got to give [to] them for them to give [to] me. I've got to give them a quiet wing'. (interview, April 2003)

The influence that dealers wield may make them attractive partners for this kind of accommodation and in the daily negotiations between officers and powerful prisoners (for example, when prisoners with influence are told that if anyone else sets off an alarm, everyone will be locked up early, encouraging them to sort the problem out themselves). However, staff at Wellingborough generally recognized the dangers of the illegitimacy of this form of management, and its potential to allow dealers to dominate the wings, intimidate others and encourage further drug use. When known dealers were given cleaning and servery jobs, the aim was usually to 'keep an eye on them', rather than use them as part of the mechanism of control. Although some officers appeared resigned to the presence of hard drugs on their wings and to the difficulty of catching major dealers, most regarded heroin as a symbolic challenge to their authority and a source of multiple problems in the establishment. 'Dealer' was unquestionably a negative label, often expressed with contempt, and considerable pride was taken when drugs were prevented from being passed in visits and when dealers were caught and prosecuted.

Since, although heroin consumption has a calming effect on individual prisoners, its pursuit leads to debt, stress and violence, officers were relatively unsympathetic to prison heroin users. Like prisoners, they tended to associate heroin use with selfishness, weakness and immorality. 'Druggies' – one of the predominant labels used by officers to classify prisoners – were generally viewed with derision. However, there was some recognition that drugs were a means of relieving tension and boredom, and compassion was sometimes expressed about the vulnerabilities exhibited by prison drug users. Officers regretted that heroin had become such a prevalent means of alleviating frustrations. In this respect, it was the drug itself, as much as its users, that was resented. Meanwhile, since ex-addicts were the prisoners least hostile to the prison institution and to notions of rehabilitation, officers often developed highly positive relationships with them and viewed them as model inmates.

CONCLUSION

In terms of power, status and everyday culture and social relations, hard drugs have multiple effects on the prisoner community. At one level, they accentuate existing inequalities between the powerful and the vulnerable, stretching the hierarchy at both ends, and increasing the amount of power that can be exercised within the prison. At the same time, they restructure social relations by destabilizing established sources of

status and affiliation. Much of the stigma attached to prison heroin use reflects the belief that it has eroded a more solidary inmate culture, and transformed the prison social world into one of exploitation, manipulation and self-interest. Prisons are already low-trust environments (Liebling, 2004), and the presence of heroin within them only exacerbates levels of suspicion and alienation, as well as shame and indignity.

At the same time as they are used as a coping strategy, hard drugs create a number of problems for the incarcerated population. They both increase and alleviate the everyday pains of imprisonment. For individual users, there are indications that prison drug use might have a profile similar to those identified in early studies of socialization into inmate norms (in particular, Wheeler, 1961) functioning to make prison life more bearable and tailing off when prisoners anticipate release into the community. Such patterns will relate to prison drug policies and interventions, and to external events, life patterns and other factors not directly attributable to the institution itself. At the collective level, the distinctions made by prisoners between the acceptable heroin user and the 'smackrat' are striking, in classifying drug use in ways that relate to collective interests and contribute towards the alleviation of shared frustrations.

The benefit of a loosely functionalist analysis is apparent here. Clearly, there is some relationship between the experience of incarceration, patterns of drug consumption and collective inmate values. A great strength of early prison sociology was precisely its attempt to provide a broad analysis of these inter-connections, and to be analytical as well as descriptive. Those seeking to revive the study of prison social life would do well to apply some of the same approaches, albeit with caution, and with a recognition that empirical realities are not as neat or coherent as functionalist theory would hope. There is little room in functionalist analysis for the kind of self-awareness and agency displayed by many prisoners in the deliberate management of their drug consumption at different stages of their sentence; nor for the internal conflict that heroin users experience as they break their own, as well as collective, principles, in their pursuit of drugs. There is no simple way to integrate the role of hard drugs into a theory of inmate leadership and social order. As this article has also illustrated, the pains of imprisonment are not interpreted homogeneously, but in the context of pre-incarceration biographies that can significantly transform the experience of imprisonment. The prison social world, its rules, roles and effects, cannot be explained in reference to itself alone.

None the less, to recognize such complexities, and that the prison is less socially self-contained than early theorists suggested, should not prevent researchers from attempting to chart the links between different elements of the prisoner social world, and between the prison's interior social life and the society outside it. Hard drugs have a significant presence in both, imprinting all the components of prisoner society that have preoccupied researchers since the 1940s and 1950s. Their study requires the same methodological commitment and conceptual ambition that was exemplified by the discipline's pioneers, but which has become increasingly uncommon in recent years.

Notes

- 1 The terms are used interchangeably in this article.
- 2 The present tense is used during most of this article to convey these general characteristics.
- 3 By these terms, heroin is a particularly attractive drug because it takes up far less

- space than equivalent quantities of cannabis. The profits that can be made from heroin are also greater than from most other drugs.
- 4 One element of this strategy was reducing the number of home leaves and town visits granted to prisoners. Another was making a high proportion of jobs within the prison, such as kitchen and laundry work, conditional upon negative drug testing.
 - 5 The official figures (between 13.3 per cent and 38.4 per cent during September–December 2002, after which time they returned to a level of around 5 per cent for several months) indicated a rate below estimates by prisoners and officers. This would be expected given the various flaws in the testing system. For example, few tests are conducted at weekends, allowing a prisoner to take heroin on a Friday and spend the following days drinking large enough quantities of water to flush its traces out of his urinary system by the time that tests are conducted on the following Monday. Edgar and O'Donnell (1998) suggested that almost one-third of current drug users were able to evade detection.
 - 6 'Slashed up': cut with a knife, razor or similar instrument.
 - 7 In the British context, this designates prisoners whose roots are in the Indian sub-continent.
 - 8 Such comments may, of course, be rationalizations. It is also worth noting that ex-addicts may be an inherently conservative group and unrepresentative of other drug users and prisoners (Maruna, personal communication). Likewise, I suspect that the vociferous condemnations of drug use made by ex-addicts are projections of guilt as much as straightforward expressions of disapproval.
 - 9 'Bring the wing on top': attract attention, cause trouble.

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BEN CREWE is a senior research associate at the Cambridge Institute of Criminology and a research fellow at Robinson College, Cambridge. He is currently writing up an ethnographic study of the everyday social life and culture of a UK men's training prison, which was funded over a three-year period by the Nuffield Foundation. He has published or is publishing elsewhere on 'the inmate code', staff–prisoner relationships, power in prison and ethnographic research methods, as well as on masculinity and the media industries.
