

## WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING AT?

*Prisoner Confrontations and the Search for Respect*

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*This article examines the occurrence of fights, assaults, arguments and threats of violence between adult male prisoners in an English category C prison. The self-narratives of 40 men are analysed to investigate whether some prisoners engage in more confrontations than others due to a psychological need to protect their identity. The findings indicate that how an individual understands and constructs their self-narrative can influence their involvement in aggressive behaviour. Implications for interventions attempting to reduce aggression are explored.*

In March 2000, Zahid Mubarek was beaten to death by his cellmate in Feltham Young Offenders' Institution. However, homicide represents an extreme form of aggression and is generally a rare occurrence amongst the prisoner population (Dooley 1990; Sattar 2001; 2004). Instead, fights, assaults, arguments and threats of violence (referred to here as confrontations) appear to be a frequent part of prison life (King and McDermott 1995; O'Donnell and Edgar 1996; 1998; Edgar *et al.* 2003). In this paper, prisoners' involvement in confrontations is examined to determine whether their self-narratives can influence their use of aggression. Previous studies on prison aggression are briefly reviewed, before moving on to describe the methodology employed in this research. Following on from this, prisoners' self-narratives are analysed to determine what role, if any, identity concerns may play in influencing their involvement in confrontations. Lastly, the potential implications for interventions attempting to reduce aggression are explored.

*Aggression in Prison*

Although most prisoners appear to engage in an uneasy truce with one another (e.g. Sparks *et al.* 1996), self-report studies indicate that, in a one-month time frame, approximately one-third of adult prisoners are threatened with violence, while 10–20 per cent are assaulted (King and McDermott 1995; O'Donnell and Edgar 1996; 1998; Edgar *et al.* 2003).

Indeed, the nature of the prison environment is believed to facilitate aggressive behaviour amongst prisoners (Sykes 1958; Lowman 1986; Bottoms 1999; Wortley 2002). Confining large numbers of men in an area that restricts their movements can lead to personality clashes, as their ability to avoid antagonists is limited (McCorkle 1982; Lowman 1986; Wortley 2002). In such circumstances, prisoners report being aware of others monitoring their behaviour so as to judge how able and/or willing they are to

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defend themselves (Sykes 1958; McVicar 1974; Boyle 1977; Wortley 2002). Prisoners may also feel anxious about their personal safety due to the companionship of unfamiliar and potentially dangerous others. This anxiety, combined with a scarcity of available goods and drug use, can increase the pressures prisoners feel to engage in confrontations so as to protect themselves and their possessions from harm (Sykes 1958; McCorkle 1982; Crewe 2005*b*). In this way, the prison environment can lead prisoners to engage in confrontations as they attempt to deter others from exploiting them.

In addition, the prison regime can result in feelings of frustration, deprivation and powerlessness, which can contribute to the occurrence of confrontations (Sykes 1958; Wortley 2002). Imprisonment, in its current form, tends to involve segregation from the community and the placement of prisoners in an environment that minimizes expressions of autonomy (Sykes 1958; Wortley 2002). Prisoners struggling to deal with the deprivations associated with this segregating can become frustrated and behave aggressively as they attempt to release these emotions. In particular, prisoners may experience a sense of powerlessness, as their ability to demonstrate their autonomy is limited and their ability to engage with those in the community is restricted (Sykes 1958). This may lead some to attempt to resist and/or replace feelings of powerlessness with feelings of power and control obtained by overcoming another (e.g. Bosworth 1999; Bosworth and Carrabine 2001; Carrabine 2003). As a result, confrontations can occur as individuals attempt to release frustrations and return a sense of power and control to the self (Sykes 1958; Toch 1977; Edgar *et al.* 2003).

Prisoners also tend to behave aggressively over incidents of disrespect, threats and challenges to their identity (Sykes 1958; Toch 1977; Sim 1994; Edgar *et al.* 2003). In particular, behaviours which threaten male prisoners' masculinity can prompt them to behave aggressively as they attempt to conform to prisoner norms of masculinity and obtain status amongst their male peers (Sykes 1958; Toch 1977; Sim 1994; Sabo *et al.* 2001; Crewe 2005*a*; 2006). However, confrontations can arise as prisoners attempt to protect their identity and reputation not only in the prison environment, but also in the wider community (see Crewe 2006). As prisoners may have friends and/or associates detained in prison, how they behave in prison can impact upon their identity in the community. Consequently, male prisoners may engage in confrontations out of a concern with protecting and/or maintaining their identity, in both the prison environment and the community, as well as projecting a positive image to others.

Further, characteristics of the prison environment and the prison regime can interact with, and enhance, the pressures male prisoners feel to engage in confrontations. For example, the companionship of predominantly working-class males, limited contact with females and the autocratic nature of the prison regime can encourage and reinforce definitions of masculinity based on 'toughness' and power (Scraton *et al.* 1991; Sim 1994; Sabo *et al.* 2004). This can lead male prisoners to feel pressurized to behave aggressively in order to demonstrate their masculinity and defend and/or improve their reputation (Sykes 1958; Toch 1977; Sim 1994; Sabo *et al.* 2001). For those already associating 'toughness' with 'manliness', the use of aggression to demonstrate their masculinity may be reinforced (Sim 1994; Crewe 2006). For others, this can lead them to 'put on a front' while in prison so as to appear 'tough' and deter victimization (Sykes 1958; McCorkle 1982; Sim 1994; Sabo *et al.* 2001; Edgar *et al.* 2003). Hence, male prisoners may engage in confrontations in order to ensure their personal

safety, and that of their possessions, as well as demonstrate or reaffirm their identity as a 'man'.

Aggression in prison is, therefore, believed to serve many functions, including, but not limited to, demonstrating one's masculinity, demanding respect from others, achieving status, deterring victimization, relieving frustration and for reasons of self-defence (Sykes 1958; McCorkle 1982; Sim 1994; Edgar *et al.* 2003; Gambetta 2006). As a result, confrontations between prisoners appear to occur due to a variety of situational and/or social factors as well as a desire to protect, promote and/or maintain a particular identity. However, some prisoners, especially young male prisoners, appear to engage in more confrontations than others, despite exposure to similar social and situational pressures (see Bottoms 1999). This suggests that some prisoners may be more especially susceptible to a psychological need to engage in confrontations in order to defend and/or maintain their identity than others.

### *Defending the Self*

Researchers examining the occurrence of aggression theorize that individuals feel a psychological need to engage in confrontations when they feel their identity is being threatened (Wolfgang 1958; Luckenbill 1977; Katz 1988; Toch 1992). According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), our identity is composed from our self-image (i.e. how we perceive ourselves) and our social status (i.e. how we are perceived by others). McAdams (1985; 2001) states that people solve the problem of identity by constructing a self-narrative. Self-narratives are stories that individuals construct to explain their behaviours, motivations, feelings and desires within a meaningful, sequential framework and are used to make life understandable and predictable (McAdams 1985; Canter 1994; Maruna 2001). These self-narratives represent personal outlooks or theories of reality, not necessarily reality itself, and tend to be used to explain experiences in a person's life that make them unique (McAdams 1985; 2001; Bruner 1987; Canter 1994; Maruna and Butler forthcoming). How an individual constructs their self-narrative is believed to shape their behaviour as individuals strive to maintain the image they have created about themselves (Giddens 1991; Maruna 2001; McAdams 2001).

Individuals insecure in their identity are believed to use aggression as a compensatory tool designed to boost their ego and/or social status (de Zulueta 1994; Young 1999; 2003; Gadd 2004). These individuals are believed to be unsure of themselves and their moral worth, hold less positive views about themselves, fear negative evaluations by others and seek external validation of their self-worth (Baumeister *et al.* 1989; Wagner and Tangney 1991; Vohs and Heatherton 2001; Crocker *et al.* 2004). They are also thought to be more susceptible to conforming to social norms in order to achieve status amongst their peers (Crocker *et al.* 2003; 2004).

In contrast, individuals who are secure in their identity are believed to be less inclined to use aggression as a defence mechanism, as their positive relationships with others provide them with a sense of self-worth and self-confidence (Bowlby 1969; de Zulueta 1994; Cocker *et al.* 2004). They are believed to be less susceptible to seeking external validation of their self-worth from others and less likely to experience incidents of disrespect, threats and challenges to their identity as psychologically threatening (Baumeister *et al.* 1989; de Zulueta 1994; Gilligan 1996; Crocker *et al.* 2004).

Research by Athens (1997) offers suggestive evidence for the influence of an individual's identity on their involvement in confrontations. He suggests that there is a relationship between the self-images of offenders and their involvement in aggression, such that individuals with violent self-images tend to behave aggressively. However, Athens does not explain how individuals form violent self-images or what a violent self-image may consist of. Gilligan (1996) theorises that violent self-images may actually be self-narratives characterized by feelings of shame and insecurity. He proposes that violent men tend to engage in confrontations as they attempt to distract their attention away from feelings of psychological anxiety and return a sense of power and agency to the self. According to Gilligan, how men define their identity, particularly their identity as a 'man', can lead them to engage in confrontations as they attempt to gain the respect of their peers, protect the self from feelings of shame and 'prove' and/or maintain their masculine identity.

However, Gilligan argues that confrontations only occur 'when there are triggers from the social environment which act on a personality that has been sensitised to shame' (Gilligan 1996: 223). In particular, insults and incidents of disrespect are believed to 'trigger' aggressive behaviour (Luckenbill 1977; Miller 2001).

The experience of disrespect is believed to make violence possible, as it allows an individual to go against his/her general moral inhibitions by providing a justification or excuse for violence (Butler and Maruna forthcoming). Respect involves treating another as worthy of consideration (Kant 1964; Quinton 1991; Pilling 1992; Sennett 2003). In contrast, incidents of disrespect involve a disregard for the individual and imply that they are not worthy of consideration. In prison, Edgar *et al.* conclude that prisoners 'are often fighting for their self-respect. ... They take perceived slights and what they symbolise seriously' (Edgar *et al.* 2003: 183).

The use of aggression as a means of defending one's identity can be especially important when an individual's recourse to other means of demanding that others acknowledge their social worth is limited (Sykes 1958; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2001). More than ever, this can be true in the prison environment, as 'the culture of masculinity which pervades male prisons is all inclusive and reinforces hierarchies based on physical dominance' (Scraton *et al.* 1991: 66). This can lead to confrontations as male prisoners attempt to replace feelings of psychological anxiety and/or unease with feelings of pride obtained through an aggressive display of 'manly' behaviour (Gaylin 1984; Gilligan 1996; Miller 2001). In this way, how prisoners interact with each other, through how they look, speak and behave towards one another, can lead to confrontations if they believe they are being disrespected.

Biased cognitions are also thought to contribute to the occurrence of aggression and, as a result, numerous cognitive-behavioural interventions have been developed (see Bush 1995; McGuire 2002; Dodge 2003; Edgar *et al.* 2003; French and Gendreau 2006). Yet, recent research has failed to find a relationship between these cognitive biases and involvement in confrontations between prisoners (see Butler 2007). Nevertheless, this research did observe a significant relationship between themes of shame and masculinity in prisoners' self-narratives and their involvement in confrontations. These findings suggest that cognitive biases do not play as strong a role in encouraging individuals to engage in confrontations as had been anticipated. Instead, they point to the importance of other psycho-social issues, such as identity, as being possibly more relevant for the explanation of confrontational behaviour.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether some prisoners engage in more confrontations than others due to a psychological need to protect and/or project a particular identity. More specifically, prisoner self-narratives are analysed to investigate whether how prisoners understand and construct their self-narrative can influence their involvement in aggressive behaviour.

### *Exploring Prisoner Narratives*

This paper draws on a study conducted for a doctoral dissertation exploring the relationship between prisoner self-narratives and involvement in confrontations (see Butler 2007). In this research, a random stratified sampling technique was used to voluntarily recruit 89 adult male prisoners from an English category C prison. English category C prisoners are thought to lack the skills and/or motivation to escape and are therefore deemed as a minimal threat to the public. Regression analyses revealed that narrative themes of shame and masculinity predicted the participants' involvement in confrontations, while controlling for possible confounding behavioural, demographic, sentence, personality and cognitive variables. In order to further explore the relationship between these narrative themes and involvement in confrontations, the self-narratives of 20 men who did not engage in any confrontations during a one-month follow-up period were analysed and compared to the self-narratives of 20 men who engaged in the most confrontations during the same time frame. This paper is based on a qualitative analysis of these self-narratives.

The participants' self-narratives were obtained through the use of a modified version of McAdams' (1985) life history interview. In this interview, the men were asked to think of their life as a story and describe significant moments in their lives as well as why these moments were important to them. These moments included a high point, low point, turning point, life challenge, plans for the future and what they think it means to be a man. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

In order to identify the 20 most 'confrontational' participants, the men's follow-up scores on a self-reported involvement in prisoner confrontations questionnaire were examined. Based on these responses, the 20 participants who reported engaging in the most confrontations during the one-month follow-up period were identified. This questionnaire was also used to identify 20 participants who did not report engaging in any confrontations during the same time frame. However, as 45 participants did not report engaging in any confrontations during this period, an independent colleague, blind to the research questions of the study, was asked to randomly select 20 participants. This was to ensure the researcher could not consciously or unconsciously influence the selection of the participants' life stories. None of the men received any official adjudications for fighting and/or assault during this time frame.

The participants were male and ranged in age from 21–65 years, with a mean age of 31 years and a standard deviation of 9.39. The majority were either white British or black Caribbean and were serving sentences for burglary, robbery and drug-related offences. However, some were also serving sentences for wounding with intent, harassment, GBH and manslaughter. Over half stated they were from a working-class background, while the remainder either reported a lower-middle-class or middle-class background. The majority (over 80 per cent) had no school qualifications, while 60 per cent had a history of drug addiction.

The participants' self-narratives were analysed using a grounded theory approach. Grounded theory is an approach to the analysis of qualitative data that aims to generate theory from data by creating generalizations from the data that apply to different situations and/or by defining differences that can differentiate between different groups (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The following sections describe the themes arising in the 'confrontational' and 'non-confrontational' participants' self-narratives.

### *Insecure Self-Narratives*

Chaotic and problematic relationships with others and an uncertainty about their abilities to succeed were common themes in the 20 'confrontational' participants' self-narratives. For many, their life story was one in which they experienced problematic family relationships, became involved in criminal activities, felt stigmatized and excluded from society and doubted their ability to succeed on release from prison.

In describing their childhood, many appeared to be struggling with memories of major family disagreements, being kicked out of the family home and family break-up through divorce and abandonment. The consequences of these experiences varied but, in general, resulted in feelings of betrayal, distrust, insecurity and instability:

When my parents got split up. ... It was all the arguments and the back stabbing. ... You've got one person saying this and another saying that, and it just tore me up inside. ... I still don't forgive them for lying to me. I don't forgive them for not listening to me when I needed help. Our relationship just went downhill. ... I thought if you can't trust your mum and dad, who can you trust. (Int. #16, age 21)

Others recalled feeling rejected by their parents and/or significant others. Many of these men reported feeling rejected, lied to and abandoned, which led them to feel unsure of their social status and/or self-worth. They described a lack of security and stability during their childhood years, as they were constantly moved from one foster home to another and/or from one institution to another:

You just get placed in one institution after another, I wasn't sure who I could talk to, friends were few and far between, never really had anyone to talk to really. You are a person in a pack of people, you are not treated like an individual really, you are just one of a group. (Int. #40, age 47)

Memories of stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion seemed to further amplify these emotions. In the majority of cases, the men described feeling stereotyped, stigmatized, discriminated against and excluded because of the stigma associated with their criminal convictions and/or drug addiction:

They know when you are on drugs, well where I come from they do anyway. They just, they whisper behind your back and things like that, they just don't trust you do they ... and that is not just the police. ... They just see the drugs and they don't see beyond that. (Int. #54, age 34)

However, feeling stigmatized was not only a problem within the community, but also occurred within the prison environment. In particular, the interactions between the participants and prison authorities appeared to affect their sense of self. For instance, some participants believed the prison officers took advantage of their position, behaved

unfairly and judged them to be inferior or 'scum'. Such interactions led the men to question whether they were indeed scum:

It's like the way they look at you and the way they talk to you as if you are scum like, do you know what I mean, as if you are nothing. But you are, you are something, [sigh] I don't know. (Int. #28, age 21)

These feelings could also be magnified by their separation from the community:

Hmm, every time you've been to prison, it eats a little bit away from you each time. ... Just wasting a lot of life even though I suppose taking drugs is just wasting your life as well but at least you are outside, you are part of the community. (Int. #36, age 42)

A feeling of being unsure of their ability to overcome obstacles was also described by many of the 'confrontational' men. They felt their ability to control the direction their life was taking, overcome their drug addiction and/or cope with difficult situations was limited. Some doubted their abilities to such an extent that they had previously considered committing suicide:

Hmm, the first few days [in prison] were the worst, I've got to admit ... I was sitting there thinking to myself 'I ain't going to get through this, there is just no way I'm going to get through this'. ... There was a couple of times when I thought that if I had a belt in here it wouldn't take long. (Int. #19, age 41)

Narrating these stories, the 'confrontational' men appeared to be consciously or unconsciously insecure in their identity and their relationships with others. While some recounted positive relationships with others and/or moments of success in their lives, their self-narratives tended to be characterized by insecurities and problematic social interactions. These experiences appeared to hinder their ability to develop a secure identity. As a result, they seemed to place a great importance on how they were treated by others, as they were constantly seeking to reaffirm their identity through their social interactions. For example, one participant explained that he tended to react aggressively when others:

... disrespect me because ... for me when people mention things about not having much or getting anywhere then that hits on a raw nerve, or if they say anything about my family. (Int. #79, age 31)

This participant explained that he felt ashamed of his failure as a father, as he had been too busy going out partying to be there for his daughter and his partner. He also felt stigmatized and excluded from society due to his drug addiction. He yearned to be able to better his life so that if his daughter should try and find him, he would be someone whom she can look up to:

I would like to have a job and things like that ... I would like not to be using cocaine, definitely, I would like to be making some kind of steps to better my life so if my daughter does come to find me I will be respectable, perhaps have somewhere of my own so she could come and live with me and have a secure kind of job. (Int. #79, age 31)

However, he goes on to state: 'I don't trust myself that's the problem' (Int. #79, age 31).

Given his life-story, it is not surprising that he found behaviours that questioned his abilities to do well or to look after his family to be threatening to his identity. In his own words, such behaviours 'hit on a raw nerve', as they highlighted potential shortcomings in his identity. In such circumstances, he appeared to use aggression to deflect these threats to the self and reduce feelings of psychological anxiety.

*Secure Self-Narratives*

In contrast, the life stories of the 20 'non-confrontational' men tended to be characterized by positive and supportive relationships with others. They described feeling supported by family and friends, confident of their abilities to succeed and recalled moments in their lives in which they felt proud, successful and respected by others. This does not mean that they did not also recall memories of a disruptive family environment, stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion, but rather these themes were not as prevalent within their life story.

In particular, these men felt supported by their family and friends. In describing their struggle to deal with their drug addiction and/or the consequences of their criminal activity, many of these men spoke of the love and support their families provided:

My family has always provided for me, looked after me, I mean they have been through a lot of rough times with me. ... My family is very important to me. ... The family is always there for you through good and bad times. (Int. #39, age 21)

However, not everyone claimed to have experienced a supportive family environment. Some described a problematic childhood due to family breakdown and/or general family difficulties such as fighting or addiction. Despite this, these men described finding alternative means of support through friends, partners, children or the community:

Where I grew up, it was like 99 per cent of everyone on my estate, they grew up like, single parent with just a mum or just a dad, like when we were out playing together and doing things together and that, we did it as family. We made our own little family, yeah, together like as friends. ... Like, even when I am in prison now, like all my friends and that I grew up with, they all come to see me ... they let me know that when I get out, don't worry about it. (Int. #2, age 22)

The 'non-confrontational' men also tended to believe in their ability to overcome obstacles and cope with difficult events:

Well, it is all about controlling yourself and I think I can control myself ... that is the type of person that I am, when I say I am going to do something I will control myself. (Int. #24, age 26)

The vast majority described taking control of their addiction and successfully withdrawing from drugs. They believed imprisonment had provided them with an opportunity to come off drugs and get their life together:

They [prisoners] have asked me if I wanted any [drugs] and I looked at them as if they are crazy, do you know what I mean, that's the reason I am in here, do they really think that I am going to smoke it in here too? For me, this is like my chance, I'm not going to come to prison to start on drugs. ... This is my chance. I'm not going to smoke drugs. (Int. #20, age 35)

Unlike the 'confrontational' participants, these men trusted themselves and believed in their ability to control the direction their life was taking.

A number of these men also recalled moments in their lives in which they had previously felt proud, successful and respected. These memories appeared to have a profound effect on their sense of self, as they felt others looked up to them and valued their opinions:

I got my first job ... I've always tried to get a job and that but I never really got any so like when I got it I was just over the moon. ... In a way it felt good to go around my mates house after work and you're



talking and they're like 'How was work?' and you're like 'Work was okay, how was work for you?' That was fun man! I felt proud of myself. (Int. #4, age 22)

Further, when their achievements were recognized by others, the men's feelings of being respected, successful and proud seemed to be further amplified as their social worth was validated and reaffirmed by others:

I got a job as a bus driver. ... It made my gran proud and it made my mum proud, my friends were proud, do you know what I mean? It was a good time in my life. ... Everyone was proud of me, it was like a real credit to me. (Int. #10, age 35)

Some of these men also recalled experiencing episodes of stigmatization, discrimination and exclusion. However, their memories of being respected, valued and supported seemed to counteract the potentially destabilizing effects of these experiences on their identity. For instance, one 'non-confrontational' participant recalled a difficult childhood in which he struggled with his parents' divorce and was constantly moved around from one family member to another. Yet, he did not dwell on these experiences but instead focused on his more positive experiences with others and his belief in his ability to succeed. He described how he began to attend rock concerts and bike shows and believed his life began to improve due to the feelings of support, care and belonging he experienced from attending these shows:

Because I started meeting proper people ... it was like one huge big family. ... Everyone treats everyone alright, everyone talks to everyone, it is very safe at those places. (Int. #32, age 48)

He appeared to downplay his more difficult experiences to focus on the positive areas within his life. This seemed to lead him to be less prone to seeking external validation of his self-worth from others, and, consequently, less likely to use aggression as a means of ego defence. For him, incidents of disrespect, threats and challenges to his identity did not represent a serious threat to his ego and, therefore, did not require an aggressive response. He explained:

Someone hide some food in my cell when I was out of it. They hide it, it is a joke they play with meat so that when it goes off it stinks up the cell, and one of these plastic skinheads came up and started giving it a bit of aggravation. ... He had been on the wing a day or two and he started off just mouthing off, just mouthing off and not using his brain. ... I just laugh at it ... yeah I'm not going to make a poor man worse. (Int. #32, age 48)

In comparison to the 'confrontational' participants, their self-narratives appeared to facilitate the development of a secure identity. Their recollections of being supported, valued and respected by others, combined with a confidence in their abilities, seemed to provide the men with a reliable platform on which to build and maintain their identity. As a result, they seemed to be less likely to engage in confrontations, as they were less inclined to seek to reaffirm their identity through their interactions with others because they already felt valued and supported by significant others.

### *Being a 'Man'*

The participants' views regarding what it means to be a man also seemed to shape their identity and their behaviour. For many of the 'confrontational' participants, feelings of doubt and uncertainty appeared to affect both their life story and their identity as a

man. Amongst the ‘confrontational’ men, those basing their masculinity on their relationships with loved ones seemed to experience feelings of frustration and unease while imprisoned, as they did not believe they were able to maintain these relationships as they ordinarily would. This seemed to lead them to seek alternative ways of demonstrating their masculinity:

Being in here [prison] separated from my family is a big challenge. ... You are separated from the people you know and care about ... you can’t relax, it makes you uneasy, your natural reaction is towards violence. (Int. #37, age 39)

However, many of the ‘confrontational’ participants seemed to base their identity as a man on their ability to be ‘big’, ‘hard’, ‘bad’ and ‘flash’:

Being a man is about playing the ‘Big man’, you want the flash cars, clothes and all that. Always thinking about what other people think of you, all the drama that comes with that. (Int. #37, age 39)

These men appeared to be insecure in their masculinity, as they were always striving to behave ‘like a man’. When their ‘Mr Big’ status was questioned or challenged, they seemed to feel the need to engage in confrontations to ‘prove’ their ability to be ‘big’, ‘hard’, ‘bad’ and ‘flash’.

In comparison, the ‘non-confrontational’ participants tended to base their identity as a man on behaving considerately towards others and taking responsibility for how their actions affected others:

I think now you have got to be able to realise the effect of your actions and be responsible for those around you and look after them. ... Yeah you have got to take responsibility for your actions on others. (Int. #13, age 39)

In particular, these men seemed to be concerned with their relationships with their family. Yet, in contrast to the ‘confrontational’ men, they did not feel that their masculinity was frustrated while imprisoned:

I think it [being a man] means to be responsible, have respect for others, responsible for yourself and your family, being there for your family, being able to look after them is the number one priority. (Int. #85, age 26)

As a result, the majority of these men appeared to be secure in their masculinity and were more concerned with maintaining their relationships with others than engaging in confrontations to ‘prove’ their manliness. This, combined with their self-narratives, appeared to assist the men in developing a secure sense of self, which seemed to lead them to be less inclined to use aggression as a means of protecting their identity. One participant explains:

People have tried to diss<sup>1</sup> me and I have just laughed it off because I know that no matter what they say I know what’s what, or whatever you say is irrelevant to me. (Int. #35, age 34)

They already felt a sense of belonging and respect in their interactions with others and did not feel the need to engage in confrontations to demonstrate their worth and/or demand respect from others.

<sup>1</sup>‘Diss’ is a term used by the participants to refer to disrespect.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a small number of the ‘non-confrontational’ participants also based their identity as a ‘man’ on their ability to be ‘big’, ‘hard’, ‘bad’ and ‘flash’. As with the ‘confrontational’ men, they seemed to engage in confrontations in situations that threatened their masculinity. This suggests that their lack of involvement in confrontations during the one-month follow-up period may be due more to a lack of exposure to situations in which their masculinity was threatened rather than a lack of a need to ‘prove’ their masculinity.

An analysis of the men’s masculinity and self-narratives, therefore, suggests that self-narratives that focus on the men’s strengths and positive relationships with others can promote a sense of security in their identity. In turn, these feelings can reduce the need they feel to engage in confrontations to protect and/or maintain their identity. In their own words, they have ‘nothing to prove’ (Int. #2, age 22). In contrast, the ‘confrontational’ men appeared to be insecure in their masculinity. This, combined with a self-narrative that did not provide them with a sense of security and/or self-worth, seemed to lead them to be especially prone to engaging in confrontations when events in their social environment threatened their masculine identity. In the words of one participant:

It is insecurity isn’t it, do you get me? Insecure in themselves so they react because they want to show the person that they can’t do that to them because they will do this and then that will send a message to anybody else who is thinking of dissing [disrespecting] you. (Int. #78, age 26)

### *Discussion*

These findings suggest that how male prisoners construct their self-narrative can influence their involvement in confrontations. The research findings indicate that insecure self-narratives can facilitate the occurrence of aggression, as they do not provide individuals with a reliable platform on which to build and maintain their identity. In particular, how individuals recall and understand their social interactions appeared to affect their use of aggression. This implies that if we are to appreciate how some individuals come to engage in more confrontations than others, we need to understand how an individual’s social environment interacts with their self-narrative.

Based on the research findings, stable, loving and supportive social interactions seemed to lead to the development of a secure self-narrative and, consequently, a secure identity. In comparison, unstable, difficult and problematic interactions seemed to facilitate the development of an insecure and uncertain self-narrative. An insecure self-narrative appeared to hamper the construction of secure identity, which seemed to lead the men to be especially susceptible to seeking reassurance of their social worth from others. For these individuals, exposure to social norms, behaviours and/or beliefs emphasizing the use of aggression to obtain respect can lead them to believe that they can obtain the admiration of others by behaving aggressively (see Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2001). This may be especially relevant for men if they believe that behaving aggressively is symbolic of ‘manly’ behaviour (see Connell 1987; Messerschmidt 1993; Hearn 1994; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Individuals insecure in their identity may, therefore, be especially sensitive to their interactions with others and engage in confrontations in situations that question or challenge their identity so as to reaffirm and/or reassert their self-image and/or social worth.

In this way, self-narratives in which individuals recall chaotic and problematic social interactions can contribute to the development of an insecure identity, facilitating the occurrence of aggression. This suggests that the extent to which individuals engage in confrontations can be influenced by their self-narrative and the psychological need they feel to be respected by their peers. In particular, as individuals with an insecure identity tend to be more inclined to actively seek external validation of their self-worth from others, how they are treated by others appears to hold a greater significance for their identity and self-worth than would normally be expected. For this reason, individuals with an insecure identity may be especially sensitive to situations that threaten or challenge their identity and may consciously and/or unconsciously use aggression as a defence mechanism in order to protect their fragile sense of self.

### *Aggression as Defence Mechanism*

When confronted with events that threaten their identity, individuals are believed to use 'security operations' or defence mechanisms to reduce feelings of psychological anxiety (Sullivan 1950; 1953). Defence mechanisms consist of behaviours that distract one's attention to other thoughts and/or behaviours aimed at returning a sense of security and power to the ego (Sullivan 1950; 1953). Engaging in confrontations is believed to be one such 'security operation', as individuals can challenge another's behaviours or assertions towards them (e.g. 'What are you looking at?' or 'What did you say?') while also replacing feelings of shame and/or inferiority with feelings of pride achieved through an aggressive display of 'manly' behaviour (Katz 1988; de Zulueta 1994; Gilligan 1996; 2001). de Zulueta (1994) suggests that for those who feel insecure in their identity, feelings of shame can trigger aggressive behaviour, as these feelings can threaten their fragile sense of self. Incidents of disrespect are thought to lead to feelings of shame, as individuals feel that their basic human dignity and worth are being denied and/or that others believe that they are in some way inferior or inadequate (see Miller 2001). In this way, incidents of disrespect can lead to aggressive behaviour, as individuals attempt to defend a specific self-image so as to avoid feelings of inferiority or weakness. In such circumstances, individuals are believed to feel justified in hurting others in order to regain a sense of dignity and control over their identity (Katz 1988; Butler and Maruna forthcoming).

Behaving aggressively can be an especially important defence mechanism for individuals who feel their access to alternative ways of demonstrating their social worth is limited (see Gilligan 1996; Anderson 1999; Bourgois 2001). As a result, aggression may be an important means of ego defence for male prisoners due to their limited access to alternative methods of demonstrating their social worth and prisoner norms emphasizing 'toughness' as 'manliness'. The nature of imprisonment can lead those insecure in their identity to be especially inclined to behave aggressively as they attempt to adhere to a prison culture of masculinity (see Sykes 1958; Sykes and Messenger 1960; Crewe 2005*a*). As aggression in the form of 'toughness' tends to be idealized as a masculine trait within the prison environment, prisoners who feel their masculinity is in some way threatened or hindered may engage in aggressive behaviour to reaffirm their masculine identity and/or gain status amongst their peers. In contrast, those secure in their masculine identity may be less susceptible to challenges to their

masculinity and less likely to conform to prisoner norms of toughness. It is this interaction between an individual's self-narrative and their environment that may assist us in understanding how some prisoners come to engage in more confrontations than others as well as why they tend to behave aggressively in some situations and not others.

Aggression may also be used as a defence mechanism for those experiencing the prison environment as psychologically threatening due to their inability to maintain their relationships with others. For those basing their identity as a 'man' on their relationships with others, their masculinity may no longer provide them with a source of self-respect but may instead become a source of shame due to their failure to maintain their relationships while imprisoned. In such situations, Jefferson (2002) proposes that men will engage with different culturally available 'models' of masculine conduct to choose one that best helps them to ward off feelings of anxiety and powerlessness. In this way, how an individual conceptualizes and judges his identity as a 'man' may change and/or be reinforced depending on the social environment and the characteristics emphasized as masculine in that environment (see Crewe 2006).

This is relevant for not only the prison environment, but also the wider community. Social norms, practices and beliefs may emphasize different ways of constructing one's identity and obtaining status and/or respect for different individuals, depending on their age, gender, ethnicity, etc. (see Sennett 2003). As such, social norms, practices and beliefs can provide the framework within which individuals learn how to construct their identity and behaviour as well as respond to threats to their identity.

Further, the extent to which individuals feel secure or insecure in their identity may change over time, depending on their interactions with others and wider societal and/or political discourses. For example, the men's belief that prison officers perceived them to be 'scum' appeared to lead them to question whether they were indeed 'scum'. This suggests that how those in authority or a position of power interact with prisoners can influence how the men see themselves as well as how they conceptualize their relationships with others (Britton 2003; Butler and Drake 2007). According to Lind and Tyler (1988), people care about how they are treated by others, as this treatment indicates how their social worth is judged by others. In addition, the experience of being disrespected by those in authority may also facilitate the occurrence of confrontations by encouraging individuals to feel justified in using aggression, as they perceive themselves to be victims and therefore do not take responsibility for their actions (see Butler and Maruna forthcoming). Consequently, wider political discourse and interactions with authority figures may influence an individual's self-narrative by demonstrating how their social status and identity are evaluated by others as well as providing a justification or excuse for the use of aggression.

Understanding how people construct and understand their self-narrative can, therefore, help to explain differences in their level of aggressiveness. However, individuals secure in their identity may still engage in confrontations due to situational pressures within the prison environment. This implies that interventions attempting to reduce the occurrence of confrontations should focus on both the situational and psychological pressures prisoners feel to engage in confrontations if they are to reduce both the opportunities for confrontations to occur and the psychological motivation these men feel to engage in confrontations.

*Reducing Aggression in Prison*

It is important to note that if a prison environment is characterized by a high degree of intimidation, bullying, drug use and mentally unstable prisoners, then prisoners may have little option but to engage in confrontations for reasons of survival. While identity concerns may still play a role in these confrontations, these concerns may be minimized in comparison to self-protection and survival needs. However, in situations in which worries regarding personal safety are not as prevalent, identity concerns may become especially important for influencing prisoners' involvement in confrontations.

The findings from this study highlight the importance of psycho-social issues, such as identity, as being especially relevant for the explanation of confrontational behaviour. In particular, prisoners' recollections of being rejected, stigmatized, discriminated against and excluded appeared to play an important role in influencing their susceptibility to engaging in confrontations as a means of ego defence. Interventions aimed at addressing these psycho-social issues may, therefore, assist in reducing prisoners' motivation for engaging in these types of confrontations.

Currently, cognitive-behavioural interventions tend to be frequently used to reduce aggressive behaviour (Bush 1995; McGuire 2002; French and Gendreau 2006). However, there are concerns about their pathologizing nature, limited ability to address the social causes of behaviour and their failure to grasp how men's use of violence relates to their view of themselves and their masculinity (Merrington and Stanley 2000; Kendall 2002; Gadd 2004; Maruna and Mann 2006). These approaches tend to focus on perceived 'deficits' and, as such, do not encourage feelings of being respected and valued by others (see Liebling and Maruna 2005). This can hinder the prisoner's formation of a secure sense of self. Nevertheless, Maruna and LeBel (2003) suggest that by changing the focus from perceived 'deficits' to potential areas of 'strength', a sense of respectability and self-worth may be returned to their identities.

Strengths-based approaches to penology 'ask not what a person's deficits are, but rather what positive contribution the person can make' (Maruna and LeBel 2003: 97). An example of this process might include helping prisoners to reconstruct their identity from one of criminality to a 'Professional Ex-' (Brown 1991; Maruna 2001). 'Professional Ex-' refers to offenders who use their prior involvement in criminal activity to help deter others from following a similar path (Brown 1991). Brown (1991) suggests that professionalizing a deviant identity rather than abandoning it facilitates desistance. This implies that by assisting prisoners to reconstruct their identity into that of a 'Professional Ex-', prisoners may begin to develop/regain a sense of respectability and self-worth in their identity without the use of aggression.

Nevertheless, the ability of strength-based approaches to return a sense of respectability to an individual's identity may be limited without the positive reinforcement of authority and community figures with whom the individual interacts.

Assisting individuals to develop self-narratives that foster a sense of security and self-worth in their identity may, therefore, reduce the psychological need they feel to engage in confrontations. However, further research is required to investigate the applicability of these findings to other populations, the causal relationships between an individual's self-narrative and their behaviour and the extent to which broader societal narratives may influence an individual's self-narrative. In addition, longitudinal qualitative research is required to identify whether it is an event itself or the individual's perception of an

event that exerts the most influence on the construction of their self-narrative. Without longitudinal qualitative research, it is difficult to determine whether it is the experience of problematic and chaotic social interactions, the individual's interpretations of these experiences or some combination of the two that may have the biggest impact on their identity and use of aggression.

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