

Multiculturalism Under Confinement: Prisoner Race Relations Inside Western Canadian Prisons

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Abstract

What do race relations among Canadian prisoners tell us about national mythology, liberal multiculturalism, and racial colour-blindness? Drawing from almost 500 semi-structured interviews conducted with male prisoners inside four provincial institutions in Western Canada as part of the University of Alberta Prison Project, we analyse prisoners' perceptions of race and detail how their beliefs in Canada's national mythology – particularly multiculturalism – foster racial colour-blindness in daily prison life. Our data speak to both support for, and critiques of, liberal multiculturalism as a lived political philosophy. For instance, racial colour-blindness helps reduce ethnic conflict and encourages inter-group relations among racially diverse prisoners. As critics of liberal multiculturalism suggest, however, our participants individualized racism, focusing on what is often called 'overt racism' (such as white supremacy). Few participants acknowledged 'structural racism' or dwelled on the overrepresentation of people of colour in the prison system (even when housed on a unit that could contain over 60 per cent Indigenous prisoners). Some prisoners expressed a belief that Canada had overcome racism.

Keywords

Canada, gangs, Indigenous, multiculturalism, prison, race and ethnicity, racism

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Multiculturalism, Race, and Prisoner Culture

Canada enjoys a reputation as a multicultural society and haven for immigrants (Reitz et al., 2015), something that is a source of pride for many Canadians (Reitz, 2011: 18, 21). It also celebrates difference in a culturally, racially, and socially diverse society with relatively diverse political representation; currently half of the 31 Canadian cabinet members are female and eight are people of colour.

Some, however, see Canadian multiculturalism as largely a 'symbolic project' masking racism and segregation. Harder (2010) and Winter (2014), for example, point out that Canada is often imagined through narratives of the white, patriarchal (Christian) family; leaving limited space for racial minorities to express their identity (Modood, 2011). Further, on almost every possible measure, Indigenous peoples in Canada fare worse than Black Americans in the United States (Gilmore, 2015). Racial inequality is particularly pronounced in the prison system, where Indigenous people are 10 times more likely to be incarcerated than the national average (Gilmore, 2015).

Despite these divergent opinions on the topic, empirical studies on the lived realities of liberal multiculturalism are rare (see also Koopmans and Statham, 1999: 658, 659), with critical commentary tending to be dominated by cultural critique. This article stems from the findings of the University of Alberta Prison Project (UAPP), and provides empirical insight into the perceptions, experiences, and consequences of Canadian multiculturalism, and how it manifests in the unique setting of Western Canadian prisons. Drawing from almost 500 semi-structured interviews conducted with male prisoners¹ inside four provincial institutions in Western Canada, we analyse prisoners' perceptions of race, detailing how their beliefs in Canada's national mythology – particularly multiculturalism – foster racial colour-blindness in prison life. Such a focus is particularly important in light of the widely recognized fact that relationships among prisoners are key to how order is maintained in prison, and how the day-to-day realities of prison life are structured (Crewe, 2007, 2009; Sparks et al., 1996).

This research contributes to scholarship on racial-colour-blindness, liberal multiculturalism, and the sociology of prisons. First, almost all our participants espoused colour-blind attitudes about race, asserting that they 'don't see race', that race is insignificant to everyday prison life, and that inmates encourage a racially and ethnically tolerant environment.

Second, our data speak to both praise for, and critiques of, liberal multiculturalism as a lived political philosophy (Kymlicka, 2018) in several ways. Our participants, for example, view 'multiculturalism' as equality of treatment irrespective of differences, and consequently equate racial colour-blindness and tolerance with practising the colour-blind philosophy. Enacting racial colour-blindness helps reduce ethnic conflict and encourages inter-group relations among racially diverse inmates. However, as critics of racial colour-blindness suggest, our participants individualized racism, focusing on what is often called 'overt racism' (such as white supremacy). Few participants acknowledged 'structural racism' or the overrepresentation of people of colour in the prison system, and some (prisoners of colour) even expressed that Canada had overcome racism. For us, this was often a jarring assertion given that many living units contained over 60 per cent Indigenous prisoners. Our findings support the theory that liberal multiculturalism and racial colour-blindness sometimes fosters 'post-racism' views (see Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Satzewich and Liodakis, 2013).

Our findings also contribute to the sociology of prisons. We argue that racial colour-blindness complements the ‘prudent individualism’ (Crewe, 2009: 229) that characterizes provincial prison culture and is enacted through how prisoners police racism among their peers, as overt displays of racism create unwanted conflict in daily prison life and disrupt gang business.

Our findings are at odds with numerous maxims in prison research. For example, we show how race and ethnicity are of little consequence to prison life in our settings, sharply contrasting American research which suggests race profoundly structures daily prison life. Our findings also challenge the scholarly trope that racialized gangs have undermined ‘inmate solidarity’, as our participants demonstrated a strong shared inmate culture despite the presence of racialized gangs.

Minimal research focuses on prisoner relations, especially race relations among prisoners (Phillips, 2008: 315) and little empirical research exists on Canadian prisons in general. The reluctance of Canadian correctional officials to allow independent researchers into their facilities has resulted in few published works derived from qualitative research inside Canadian prisons (Pelvin, 2019). Canada provides a heretofore unexplored research setting to study the dynamics of race relations.

Social Context: Multiculturalism and Race Relations in the Prairie Regions in Western Canada

While we focus on micro-level analysis, prisoner race relations are inseparable from Canada’s unique history and structural conditions. As we show, many inmates connect their perceptions of race to Canadian multiculturalism, a political ideology we outline below. Furthermore, while research on gangs in Canada’s Prairie region is limited (Chalas and Grekul, 2017: 365), our findings suggest multicultural ideology might help explain why the prison gangs we encountered are racially fluid (while still racialized). In short, to understand race relationships among inmates, it is necessary to appreciate political factors external to the prison. We identify some such factors here, recognizing that a litany of other external, contextual, and historic factors undoubtedly play a role in shaping the racial dynamics in the prisons we studied, including most conspicuously assorted manifestations of Canada’s settler colonial history.

Canada’s multicultural policy was introduced in 1971, and today functions as a symbolic gesture giving rise to sets of economic, political, and social practices designed to maintain the ethnic and cultural identities of Canadians (Satzewich and Liodakis, 2013: 160, 161). It exalts diversity in the pursuit of national interests and encourages cultural pluralism. This is exemplified by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s comment that Canada could be the world’s first ‘postnational state . . . there is no core identity, no mainstream in Canada’ (Foran, 2017), and by the motto inscribed on Toronto’s coat of arms: ‘Diversity is our Strength.’ While praised for its progressive ethos, the multicultural policy has been criticized for ignoring and sanitizing systemic racism and social inequality, for dissolving inter-group relations, and threatening the coherence and stability of a pan-Canadian identity (Day, 2000; Satzewich and Liodakis, 2013: 160, 169). Critics see multiculturalism as pacifying critical thinking about Canada’s race relations, particularly as it pertains to Indigenous peoples in Canada, who have long been disproportionately affected by poverty, poor health, and incarceration (Gilmore, 2015). Critics portray multicultural rhetoric as a

political veneer that downplays Canada's settler-colonial history (Razack, 2002). Among other injustices, this includes the high number of Indigenous women in Canada who have been murdered or gone missing and the corresponding failure by authorities to seriously prioritize this crisis (Anderson et al., 2010). It also encompasses the infamous practice of forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families and placing them in residential schools or foster care. The multicultural policy also appears to detract from the right to self-determination and sovereignty among Indigenous communities (see Satzewich and Liodakis, 2013: 174). By simultaneously rendering ethnic groups as 'Canadians' working towards shared interests, yet as unique cultures worthy of equal political consideration, many argue that multiculturalism disengages with the reality of racial inequality in Canada (Ku et al., 2019).

Critics argue that liberal multiculturalism's simplistic approach to race is more likely to foster racial colour-blindness among Canadians, rather than critical 'race-conscious' politics. Proponents of 'racial colour-blindness' insist they do not notice skin colour – a position which denies how historical legacies of racism affects life chances (Bonilla-Silva, 2014: 26; see also Bell and Hartmann, 2007). For adherents of colour-blindness, 'racism' is a problem of intolerant individuals, manifesting in singular acts of 'hate' carried out by fringe elements of the population unrepresentative of the status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Gallagher, 2015: 45). Racial colour-blindness is often connected to 'post-racist' thinking: the common-sense belief that western countries have conquered racism, that race and ethnicity no longer matter; and that 'the problems afflicting people of colour are fundamentally rooted in their pathological cultures' (Bonilla-Silva, 2014: 13).

Traditional prejudice (overt racism) in Canada has declined, with pro-immigrant attitudes, for instance, having been particularly strong in Canada over the last 20 years (see Reitz, 2011: 20). Yet there is no material basis for suggesting a 'post-racist' era (St Louis, 2015: 120). Racial inequality has not decreased significantly (Bonilla-Silva, 2014: 60), and is perhaps most starkly apparent in Canada's criminal justice system, where Indigenous peoples and people of colour face different treatment from their entry into the system to the point of exit (Henry and Tator, 2010; Razack, 1998; Roberts and Doob, 1997; St Lewis, 1996; Wortley and Owusu-Bempah, 2011). Task force reports, commissions of inquiry, and scholarly work show that people of colour are under-policed when victims of crime and over-policed when viewed as perpetrators (Satzewich, 2011: 75). Moreover, Indigenous adults account for 28 per cent of admissions to provincial and territorial prisons and 28 per cent of federal admissions, despite only representing 5 per cent of the of the Canadian adult population.³ Overrepresentation is even more pronounced for Indigenous women, who account for 43 per cent of female admissions nationally (versus 26 per cent for Indigenous men) (Maleakieh, 2018). In the federal system, Indigenous women account for 31 per cent of admissions to sentenced custody (versus 23 per cent for Indigenous men) (Reitano, 2017: 5). Similarly, the federal incarceration rate for Black Canadians is three times their representation rate in general society (Blaney, 2015).

Despite being housed in arguably the most racially unequal setting in Canada, our participants were nearly unified in their commitment to Canadian multiculturalism and their beliefs in a post-racist Canada. Our findings suggest that provincial inmate culture

valorizes racial and ethnic tolerance, even among prison gangs, sharply contrasting dominant prison scholarship, as the following section illustrates.

Race in Prisons

A common narrative in prison research suggests that solidarity among inmates – in the form of cohesive norms upheld by prisoners to govern daily life inside (also known as the ‘inmate code’, or ‘prison subculture’) – has been undermined by the rise of racial conflict and racialized prison gangs. This argument is most popular in the United States, but few have systemically studied inmate culture, often making terms like ‘codes’ and ‘solidarity’ simple abstractions. Moreover, gang and race politics can be distinctive to each institution, complicating the generalizability of assertions about how gangs have transformed prison culture. Outside of early research from scholars such as Sykes (1958), there is limited detailed empirical analysis of how ‘inmate solidarity’ works in practice (but see Crewe, 2005, 2009). Scholars writing on this topic often take solidarity among prisoners for granted and focus on what leads to its reduction. For example, Conrad and Dinitz (1977) and Jacobs (1977) documented how pervasive conflicts among prison gangs reduced inmate solidarity. The early works of Carroll (1974) and Scacco (1975) also found that racial conflict decreased prisoner solidarity. Contrasting these characterizations, our findings demonstrate that despite the presence of racialized gangs⁴ the provincial prisons we studied are characterized by a loose but cohesive ‘inmate culture’⁵ with minimal racial conflict.

Sykes’ (1958) classic book *Society of Captives* is an inescapable reference point when studying the inmate social system. He focuses on social roles in prison culture, where inmates categorize one another based on reputation and personality traits (such as ‘toughs’, ‘rats’, ‘center-men’, ‘gorillas’, and ‘punks’, etc.). For Sykes, inmate groups and hierarchies involve the intersection and coordination of these roles, reinforced through a loose commitment to a normative ‘inmate code’. Conspicuously, he did not address questions of race, despite a considerable over-representation of Black inmates in the prison he studied. While Sykes’ social roles have been taken up and nuanced by others (Atchley and McCabe, 1968; Einat and Einat, 2000; Hensley et al., 2003), some modern scholarship suggests such individualizing typologies are less important in today’s inmate culture. In other words, the ‘old con power structure’ defined by personal reputation and a general sense of ‘convict solidarity’ (Carroll, 1974; Jacobs, 1977: 5, 159, 226; Sykes, 1958), has been largely displaced by entrenched inmate groups vying for power. Jacobs (1977: 159) documents early signs of such collective power struggles in his study, *Stateville*, arguing that the emergence of racialized gangs in the late-1960s undermined inmate unity and ‘balkanized the inmate social system’ (see also Carroll, 1974). The few empirical studies on inmate socialization appear to reinforce Jacobs’ (1977) contention, where scholars suggest that inmate relationships are structured foremost by collectivist markers like racial and ethnic identity or gang affiliations, rather than through individual reputation and the social roles identified by Sykes (1958) and others (Skarbek, 2014). As Irwin (1987: vi) puts it: ‘There is no longer a single, overarching convict culture or social organization, as there tended to be twenty years ago . . .’ Most research supporting this perspective comes from California.

In the 2015 case of *Johnson v. California*, the Supreme Court in the United States struck down the practice of formally segregating prisoners by race, although it unofficially remains a common practice in many institutions, reproduced through both inmate culture and prison administration. Californian prison authorities had argued that pervasive gang membership was so strongly demarcated along racial and ethnic lines that efforts to ‘racially mix’ inmates inevitably resulted in violence (Trulson et al., 2008: 275). Noll (2012: 854) characterizes Californian prisons as ‘hyper-racialized’ spaces while Goodman (2008: 748) found race to be the leading rationale for conflict in such institutions. Richmond and Johnson (2009: 573) place race at the absolute centre of prison life, characterizing inmate culture as ‘Racially Organized Prison Politics’ (ROPP), defined by a system of racial segregation where, as one ex-inmate puts it: ‘everything, absolutely everything is decided upon and based upon your ethnicity’. While there is much evidence for ‘ROPP’ in Californian prisons, there is a near-absence of scholarly work directly studying inmate perceptions of race and race relations in such institutions or in prisons more globally (Goodman, 2008: 741; see also Goodman, 2014; Walker, 2016; Phillips, 2012b).

Popular media depictions of prison life also tend to reproduce an image of California’s distinctive inmate culture. At an international level, however, strict racial segregation is more likely the exception, rather than the rule. Some European research suggests racialized groups and gangs are almost insignificant to daily prison life. For instance, Fassin’s (2016: 63) study of a short-term institution in France found that while Black and Arab men were overrepresented in the prison, racial and ethnic differences were insignificant to the inmate culture.⁶ He also found minimal evidence of gang activity. Similarly, in her study of a young offenders prison in the United Kingdom, Phillips (2008: 316, 321) found ethnic diversity to be ‘unremarkable’ and ‘unproblematic’ to prison life. In a subsequent study, however, Phillips (2012a) found that solidarity among Muslim prisoners – often stereotyped as ‘Muslim gangs’⁷ – provoked conflict among inmates and anxiety for staff concerned about radicalization (see also Liebling et al., 2011). While racialized, Phillips (2012a) argues that loyalty and affiliation among Muslim inmates has more to do with stigmatized religious identity, territorial allegiances, and rival street collectives, rather than race⁸ (see also Ellis et al., 1974; Phillips, 2012b). Crewe (2009) makes a similar observation in his study of Wellingborough prison in the United Kingdom. These findings contrast the experience in the United States, where, for instance, Hamm (2013: 49) portrays the typical convert to Islam in prison as a ‘poor Black man upset about racism’.

The evidence shows that racial and gang politics vary by institution and region. As Phillips (2012a: 54) puts it, American prison gang variants (and by extension, race politics) cannot be transposed to the United Kingdom. Inmate culture, at some level, is also always embedded in the local cultural and political landscape (see Phillips, 2012b). In this article, we turn our attention to the Canadian setting.

The data from this article are derived from the largest independent qualitative study ever conducted on prison life in Canada. For this article, we draw upon close to 500 semi-structured interviews with male prisoners inside four provincial institutions in Western Canada, analysing factors shaping prisoners’ perceptions of race, how racial beliefs are enacted on the living units, and how prisoners deal with racism. In doing so,

we detail how our participants import ideas about Canadian multiculturalism and subscribe to racial colour-blindness. Further, we demonstrate how prisoners police overt displays of racism (particularly white supremacy), as such behaviour generates unwanted conflict in daily prison life and risks disrupting gang business.

Methodology and Setting

Our data are derived from a multi-year study of life experiences inside prisons in Western Canada – the University of Alberta Prison Project. For this article, we focus on the interviews with the 495 male prisoners in our sample.

Provincial prisons house inmates sentenced to two years of custody or less, and/or remanded inmates (people who have been arrested but are legally innocent and awaiting trial). In Canada, anyone who has breached parole conditions for failing to pay a speeding ticket, for example, to someone who has committed multiple homicides or is charged with a terrorism-related offence, will serve their time awaiting trial in remand facilities. The great majority of participants in our sample were remand prisoners ($N = 426$).

Two of the prisons in our study were remand prisons, one was a mixed facility, and one was a sentenced facility. Except for the sentenced facility, each housed male and female prisoners. The prisoners in remand generally had little to no programming and, at one institution, were locked in their cells for 23 hours per day. Two of the prisons were severely overcrowded, requiring three prisoners to share cells designed for two people (with one sleeping on a thin mattress on the floor).

Our data collection at each institution lasted three to four weeks, with a research team comprised of the two principal investigators and six to eight graduate students. The team consisted of 10 interviewers, split evenly by gender. The interviewer's gender had noticeable effects on how inmates responded to the project, with male inmates tending to prefer female interviewers.⁹ Team members had varying ethnic backgrounds, though all could be perceived as white (one team member was half Indigenous, one half Iranian). As a researcher's positionality and background can influence building rapport with research participants (Ferrell, 1997) it is possible a more ethnically diverse research team might have garnered more varied answers regarding race and other issues (see Phillips and Earle, 2010). That said, the racial composition of the research team did not appear to affect our participation rate. On most prison units, nearly all inmates signed up for the study and were often unsparingly candid in their observations on various aspects pertaining to their biography and life in prison.

To recruit participants, we made in-person announcements to prisoners on their living units and posted sign-up sheets. Designated staff initially accompanied us to the unit entrances, but we quickly built enough rapport with the prison staff to be allowed to navigate the prisons at our own leisure.

Our interviews were semi-structured and used a generalized prompt guide. Interview questions centred on daily prison life and personal experiences with other inmates and staff. Race and discrimination were not the initial or primary foci of our research, but over the course of hundreds of interviews and several months of field research these

emerged as recurrent topics. This included discussions about the racial politics of a unit, different racialized groups, and cliques in prison. We asked about prison stereotypes, which often led to discussions of race: ‘What was the biggest surprise for you when you first came to prison?’, ‘How is this place different from what you see in movies?’ Discussions about relationships with correctional officers also occasionally addressed issues of race and discrimination. Finally, we asked our participants who had served time in American prisons to compare those experiences to Canadian prisons, which quickly turned to discussions about race.

All interviews were audio-recorded, took place in private interview rooms,¹⁰ and typically lasted around 90 minutes. We transcribed all recorded interviews verbatim and coded the documents using Nvivo Pro 11.

Findings

Racial Segregation and Pro-Tolerance Attitudes

While the living units were racially diverse, we were initially surprised by the near-absence of racial segregation among inmates. We conducted surveys at two of the four prisons, inquiring about demographic information relating to our participants. Almost all participants identified as Canadian, with 43.1 per cent being Indigenous, 45.5 per cent white, and 9.4 per cent were of other ethnicities, with the dominant ‘other’ ethnic groups being Somali, Sudanese, and Vietnamese. This pattern appears to roughly reflect the prisoner population in Western Canada more generally. Despite this fact, there were no discernable cliques or groups strictly based on race or ethnicity (including on gang units). This was consistent across all four prisons.

When discussing racial segregation (or the lack thereof), our participants often explained that while most people are attracted to their ‘own kind’ (culturally, racially, ethnically), racialized cliques in the prison are informal and fluid. The following excerpt from Mitko¹¹ represents a common characterization of these racialized groups. This was Mitko’s first time in jail, and he was particularly attuned to how people organize when arriving on the living units:

Yeah, you’ll see a lot of cliquey types of things on different units [. . .]. The Natives¹² will automatically stick together. Say a new Native guy comes in. His first instinct is looking around, seeing all these doors, all these lights, and this big room. It’s intimidating. The first thing you see are a couple Native guys who look like you, so your first instinct is – you get drawn towards them. If you try to talk to them and they don’t like you, then they probably slough you off or something. It’s always been like that. The white guys will go to the white guys, and the Black guys will always go to the Black guys. It’s always coloured in jail.

Mitko recognizes race as a social fact (‘it’s always coloured in jail’) yet acknowledges its informal character as a ‘cliquey-type of thing’ and as a coping mechanism for newer inmates adapting to the stressors of incarceration (see Crewe, 2011). Robert, another first-timer in prison, outlines the comparatively relaxed nature of prison racial politics:

- Robert: Yeah everybody hangs out. And in this unit, we've got an Indian, a Chinaman, a white guy, a Hebrew guy and a white supremacist, they're all sitting at the same table playing poker. You know. That's a perfect example right there.
- Interviewer: Is the white supremacist guy in a group or anything?
- Robert: No, he's not. He's done all that stuff. When he was younger he got the tattoos, and he was into that when he was 20 or 30. The guy's 50, 60 years old now. He's still got the hate tattoos on, but you know. Like . . . 'Kill all Black people' on him, and there's an Indian guy sitting right across from them.
- Interviewer: Do you see a lot of those white supremacist guys around?
- Robert: No, not too many white supremacists, no. Mostly just Muslims, and Chinese, Taiwanese, whatever you wanna call it. Everybody gets along in here.

While Robert makes crude racial distinctions, he, like Mitko, emphasizes their negligible consequence on the living unit. Similarly, Abdullah highlights the fluidity of racial and ethnic groups inside, which he describes as casual, mostly welcoming, and at the very least indifferent to ethnic or cultural distinctions. Individuals of all ethnic groups articulated such views. Abdullah, who has served time in multiple prisons (as he puts it: 'I've spent more time in jail than I have [out] since '99') accentuates this point:

I've seen on the other units that the Black guys will hang out with the Black guys. They'll play ball together and do their little thing, but it's not that they won't talk to other races, and it's not that the whites won't talk to them. You do see cultures kind of stick together a little bit. Even in the federal jails, you see your Muslims with their Muslim groups. Bowden Institution [federal prison] has so many groups. They've got Muslims. They've got Jewish. They've got a whole bunch of different groups. Everybody's welcome to come join the groups.

Matthew is another experienced prisoner who identifies similar themes, contrasting the prison's informal racialized cliques to TV stereotypes:

you know some of the Natives tend to stick together a bit [. . .] And um, you know we mingle and shit, you know? It's like there's groups, but we mingle, right? But it's not like what you see on *Sons of Anarchy* and shit, where it's like 'Yo, I'm going to join the Mexicans', or like, it's not like that in here at all.

When asked to elaborate on interracial mingling, many participants of varied ethnic backgrounds referred to abstractions like Canadian multiculturalism and diversity – 'This is Canada', or similar sentiments were a frequent response to questions about racial divisions and segregation. Owen, who has spent time in three provincial prisons, equates multiculturalism to racial diversity and the absence of racism:

- Interviewer: Have you ever seen any racism between inmates?
- Owen: Not really, no one is racist. It's a pretty multicultural place, there's all sorts of races here. We live in a pretty multicultural environment – that

stuff has ended a long time ago. But there's still racism in the community, but not really here. There's no prejudiced people on the unit that I've noticed.

Many participants contrasted their experiences to stereotypes of hyper-racialized American prisons.¹³ Caleb, an older and more experienced inmate (having completed several sentences in federal prisons), expressed distaste for the United States' (perceived) hyper-racialized inmate culture, making clear 'It's different in Canada. That's all American' because 'America sucks, that's how they are down there.' Caleb's negative opinion of the racial politics of American prisons was nearly universal to our sample. This is perhaps predictable given that a leading attribute of Canadian national identity is a sense that Canadian culture and values are in some important respect different and superior to those of the United States (Stewart, 2014). This 'not-American' patriotic/nationalistic narrative contributed to prisoners expressing disdain in their perceptions of the more violent, radical, and racist prison subcultures in the United States, which they explicitly and consistently distinguished from the Canadian context. The United States consequently served to underscore the superiority of Canadian prison race politics, which were presented as more sophisticated and refined. As Adam explains, grouping up by race is an American phenomenon, where provincial inmates in our study foster relationships using different criteria:

Interviewer: How are people forming friends or groups?

Adam: I don't know, man. There's all sorts of. . . Not really race. That's more the States. It's mostly to do with the outside, or friends you previously had in jail. Some dudes will stick to their own little group, because they have these drug friends on the street. It's pretty much all different. Everything's different. Nothing is the same.

At the end of this excerpt Adam suggests that, unlike how race operates in the United States, there is no racial master category determining how inmates organize in the provincial system (Wacquant, 2000). Instead, 'everything's different' – prisoners may group up based on street friendships, criminal enterprises, or shared addictions. In other words, individual reputation and biography foregrounded interactions among our participants.

Altogether, we found racial and ethnic divisions to be informal and not determinative of everyday life inside. This also extended to Muslim prisoners who seem more segregated in the prison systems in France and the United Kingdom (Crewe, 2009; Phillips, 2012a). For example, Kayden, a highly educated first-time inmate, was initially taken aback by the ethnic and religious tolerance among his incarcerated peers:

in my previous dormitory, there [. . .] were a couple of Muslim fellows and so they do their sunrise and sunset prayers every day. And they quietly head over to one window, carry on, and [. . .] I was surprised – really nobody called them out on it, or made an issue out of it. And it's, it's been one of the few heartening things about being in here.

While participants portrayed race relations as casual and spontaneous, and sometimes rooted in cultural or religious rituals like the Muslim prayer, many also expressed a

commitment to maintaining an atmosphere of racial tolerance. In other words, racial ideology materialized through norms and rules enacted on the living units. In the following section, we show how prisoners policed overt racism, particularly white supremacism.

Racism and Anti-Racism

Most participants conceived of ‘racism’ as overt expressions of racial prejudice or as a general hostility to certain groups (as opposed to a focus on racialized forms of social and structural inequality) (see Bonilla-Silva, 1999). Many inmates (mostly white) explained that racial slurs would be (somewhat) tolerated or excused on a unit if voiced when confronting an inmate who is being disruptive or unreasonable, as Caleb tells us:

I don’t know, I’m not a racist or what not, I don’t care what colour you are: you’re a retard, you’re a retard. If you’re good, you’re good. Whatever the colour is. Some people, I don’t know, it’s a little bit like that in the federal system [referring to racial segregation]. I think everybody has got a bit of racism instilled in them. [If] Some Black guys come to me [in a confrontation], I would call them a fucking nigger. It’s bad, but it’s the first thing that comes to mind. Which is bad. But it’s just the first thing that pops into my mind. But it’s not cuz I’m racist. But I think a little bit of racism like that, everybody has it in them.

While Caleb previously expressed his distaste for American race politics, he explains that racial animus is sometimes unavoidable, particularly in heated confrontations between inmates. For our participants, however, such isolated incidents (such as racial slurs used in fights or casually in jokes) do not rise to the level of ‘racist’ (see also Phillips, 2012b: 103). Alex – a prisoner who held influence over a gang unit – also expressed this sentiment when describing a situation where a prisoner used a racial slur. We asked him whether such situations escalate the conflict:

Alex: That’s basically it. [They] get in a fight and someone drops the N word, you know what I mean? Or calls a white guy a cracker or. . .

Interviewer: So just in the heat of the moment?

Alex: Yeah [. . .] But there’s no. . . I’ve never seen a fight that was like to do with religion or skin colour. It’s always to do with something else, right? Like the way you carry yourself, if your word is good. [. . .]

Some participants, like Alex, were proud of their belief that Western Canadian provincial inmate culture transcends racial prejudice. For almost all participants, ‘racism’ was a problem of hateful individuals and fringe groups. Consequently, discussions of ‘racist’ inmates focused almost exclusively on white supremacist gangs or individuals.

We did not find any gangs organized around white supremacism in the prisons we studied, and inmates who self-identified as racist or white supremacist were outliers. The contrast with the American prison situation could not be starker (Blazak, 2009; Goodman, 2008; Hamm, 2013). We did, however, interview several prisoners who: (1) were members of white power groups when they were young; (2) had affiliations with white power groups in federal prisons (although some of these groups had since disbanded), and/or; (3) were affiliated with motorcycle gangs that allegedly adhered to white supremacism.

One reason white supremacy is not tolerated on the living units is because it can create needless and counter-productive racial tensions. Jackson, a 46-year-old inmate who has been in and out of prison his whole life, explains how he had to distance himself from white power groups, despite his personal racist beliefs:

- Interviewer: Have you ever seen Nazi guys around?
 Jackson: Yeah, you got one [referring to himself].
 Interviewer: Yeah?
 Jackson: I's got a swastika tattoo above the head about this big. Its covered up now.
 Interviewer: What made you get into that?
 Jackson: Around personal preference. And I kept my mouth shut about it when I covered my tattoo. I didn't gang up. I hung out with bikers, right. And most of them are all, you know, white supremacist or whatever, right. My opinion always stayed to myself and that was the only way it was.

At the risk of violence from their peers of colour, inmates like Jackson tended to conceal their beliefs and affiliations, and sometimes denounce their racist markings. Such measures, however, were not necessarily required for them to be tolerated by the broader prisoner population. Some of our participants indicated that racist inmates could be accepted if they simply keep their beliefs to themselves. James, who has also been in the prison system for most of his life, outlines this point in describing how white supremacists are policed by prisoners of colour:

- Interviewer: What about the guys that have swastika tattoos?
 James: [. . .] I've met a few guys in here with it. They either try to hide it or say 'that was in my bad days. I'm over that now, but I'm going to cover it or something.' Still in their hearts they believe it, but they know not to bring it out in here. Some guys'll hide it, and some won't.
 Interviewer: Because they'll get suppressed [by other prisoners]?
 James: Yeah.
 Interviewer: If you have a tattoo, and a Black guy on the unit is like, 'Hey, what's that?' and you say it was your younger days, that's enough for the guys to leave you alone?
 James: Yeah, most of them. [. . .] As long as you're not preaching out to people.

As many participants explained to us, while gangs can provide members with a sense of identity and belonging in prison, organizing around white racism and white power groups attracts hostility from individual inmates *and* rival gangs (see also Phillips, 2012b: 103, 104). Moreover, the number of prisoners of colour and non-supremacist white prisoners vastly outnumber those few who might be inclined to organize around white supremacy. As one white participant put it when asked about organizing such a group: 'We're a minority! What the fuck are we gonna do? We have no power' [referring to white inmates]. Benjamin, another older and more experienced inmate, and an Indigenous person, scoffs at

the idea of white racist groups in provincial prisons, arguing how absurd and futile it would be to organize around white supremacy in such a racially diverse and hostile setting:

Interviewer: These white supremacist guys: Have you seen them mistreat other minorities in prison at all? [. . .]

Benjamin: Yes. I've seen it in Drumheller [federal institution]. But let me tell you this. If you're a white supremacist guy – and they used to have units in Drum[heller] for white supremacist guys – they do not have the numbers to run around shooting their mouths off. Think about it. If I'm on this unit, and I'm a white supremacist; and there are about 15, 20 white supremacists – let's make it bigger. Let's say there are 40 or 50 in the jail. Do you think 40 or 50 white supremacist guys are going to deal with 30 or 40 or 50 Black guys, and about 500 Natives? You can't. You don't. You just sit back there, and you go, 'Yes, I'm white supremacist; but don't tell anybody.'

Interviewer: But some of them are tatted and stuff, right?

Benjamin: Well, yes, they're tattooed, and they're doing all that; but they're very, very quiet about it. They don't go around, 'Yes, I'm white supremacist.'

Interviewer: So, do you guys just kind of leave them be?

Benjamin: We ignore them completely.

Interviewer: Okay. So, it's not like, if someone has a swastika tattoo on them, you guys are going to . . .

Benjamin: No. Worst comes to worst, if a guy's walking around here acting like he's all that, we check him off real quick [force him off the unit].¹⁴ 'Hey, buddy, take your white supremacist shit to a different unit'; and the guy's got to leave. It's either that or – think about it. You've got 40 Natives, you've got 50 Natives; saying you're white supremacist. These Native guys aren't going to tolerate it. Those five Black guys, I know for a fact aren't going to tolerate it. You're by yourself – or even if there's two or three of you. It won't go that far, because eventually they'll say, you know what? Buddy, take your white supremacist stuff. You can go to a different unit. But it's not going to happen here.

Our findings suggest that white supremacy is an ineffective belief system for building a prison gang in the provincial system. The number of individuals who might join white supremacist groups appears to be comparatively small. By needlessly stoking racial tensions, white power groups cannot provide members with the comfort, security, and support offered by other prison gangs. Put another way, rather than providing protection, joining such a group is more likely to increase one's risk of violence from other prisoners.

Organizing around white supremacy also detracts from the established expectations of gang membership. Prison gangs encourage members to 'rep' their colours – that is, express or parade their gang affiliation – as a display of power, and to attract new recruits. In our research settings 'repping' white power symbolism is more likely to invite violence or unwanted attention, rather than intimidate or inspire followers and potential recruits. Moreover, restricting membership based on race limits the ability to compete

with other gangs. Larger gangs tend to be more powerful gangs. As many participants put it: 'prison gangs are a numbers game'. While the prison gangs we studied were racialized, they did not restrict membership based on race or ethnicity. Henry, a 33-year-old inmate who has dealt with prison gangs throughout his adult life, expresses confusion about the racial diversity of such groups:

Henry: I've heard of white guys being in that gang too.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Henry: You know, so I don't really get that part either, right. So, um, yeah, the gang [called] 'F.O.B.', you know, this is known as a Chinese gang. And [their enemies] the 'F.O.B. Killers' is known as a Chinese gang – they were two Chinese leaders.¹⁵ And now you know, after they grew, there is every kind of race in that gang, even Natives, was all in that gang. So, I don't get it. I think with every gang, there's different set of races in there. If it's a white gang, there's a Black guy in there. If there's a Native gang there's a white guy in there, you know.

Interviewer: So, it doesn't matter.

Henry: I guess they just want their numbers to be up there.

Although the dominant prison gangs had historically been configured around shared race and ethnicity, those factors did not figure into low-level recruitment in the provincial system (but could play a role in advancement and leadership). For example, the dominant gangs in three of the prisons we studied had clear ties to Indigenous heritage, demonstrated in their gang names, symbols, and/or the shared ethnic heritage of their founding members. Regardless, these groups contained members of different ethnic heritage and recruited across all racial and ethnic backgrounds. This even applied to the 'White Boy Posse', a gang with neo-Nazi ideological leanings that had previously disbanded in our research settings. One of our participants, a former leader of that group, explained that the group's far-right politics had been secondary to their drug dealing, and they had begun recruiting prisoners of colour to increase the number of members available to perform roles in the drug trade.

Lastly, inmates pay close attention to the types of charges other inmates face. Some crimes, referred to as 'bad charges', are seen as particularly reprehensible, or indefensible. Classically, these would include crimes against children, sex crimes, elderly abuse, and forms of ideological extremism, such as belonging to ISIS. Prisoners facing such 'bad charges' are assaulted by other prisoners and/or are 'checked off' the living unit for their own protection. In our settings, it was generally accepted that 'hate crimes' – which involve any number of crimes motivated by bias, prejudice, or hate pertaining to such things as race, nationality, language, or country of origin – now fall into the category of 'bad charges'. Prisoners facing such charges tried to keep this situation secret or asked to be transferred to a protective custody unit.

Discussion

Our findings show that provincial inmates import beliefs about Canadian multiculturalism into the prison subculture, particularly racial colour-blindness. This is evident in

their anti-racist attitudes which help discourage racial conflict, overt racism, and organized racism (in the form of strict racial segregation or the creation of racist gangs). Such manifestations of racism can be particularly unwelcome to the extent they disrupt daily life and prison gang business, specifically the drug trade. Our findings contrast the stereotype that inmates organize predominantly through collective markers of race, ethnicity, or gang affiliation. This is in line with other research in our local setting which has focused on gangs outside of the prison. Grekul and LaBoucane-Benson (2006), for example, argue that street gangs in Edmonton (Alberta's capital city) started as groups of ethnically homogeneous friends, family members, or acquaintances. As the gangs expanded, membership and alliances were determined rationally, rather than on the basis of race or ethnicity. In those groups 'the best partners are those who may best enhance and increase the wealth and power of the gang' (2006: 19). In Edmonton, the police's Gang Unit also concluded that most street gangs in the city are comprised of mixed races (2006: 20).

While race and ethnicity influence the prison politics in our setting, individual reputation is the key determinant for how inmates are treated, how they relate to one another, and how they organize (based on types of charges, street affiliations, behaviour inside, and the like). The social weight of personal integrity signifies strong and consistent collective values among our sample, contrasting the popular notion that racialized prison gangs undermine inmate solidarity. It also stands in contrast to research on race in the American prison context which has consistently found that prisoners group together along fairly strict racial lines (Jacobs, 1977; Skarbek, 2014; Walker, 2016). As Wacquant (2001) observes, race is the master status for American prisoners. How do we explain the differences in racial attitudes between prisoners in the United States and Canada?

Theorizing about inmate culture has traditionally focused on the importation and deprivation models developed by Clemmer (1940), Cline (1968), Ellis et al. (1974), Poole and Regoli (1983), Sykes (1958), Thomas and Foster (1973), among others. Importation theory argues that prison subcultures (i.e. inmates' collective values, ethics, and rituals, etc.) are 'imported' into the institution from the outside. For instance, this perspective suggests inmate culture is violent because prisoners bring their 'criminal behaviors' into the institution (Thomas and Foster, 1973: 230). By contrast, deprivation theory asserts that the prison environment predominantly produces inmate culture itself (Sykes, 1958). Using the same example, deprivation theory suggests that prisoner violence results from the stressors of confinement, rather than the 'importation' of violent individuals (see Useem, 1985). These models are not dichotomous, nor exhaustive in how they explain inmate behaviour. While dated, the deprivation and importation theories offer a helpful starting point for understanding race relations in our sample.

While some claim that prison subcultures tend to be 'at odds with society's values as a whole' (Richmond and Johnson, 2009: 569; Santos, 2004: 98), our findings suggest that inmate attitudes relating to race come close to *reflecting* the dominant culture. Put another way, our participants 'import' mainstream Canadian values about race and ethnicity into the prison, adhering loosely to liberal multiculturalism and post-racist thinking – hallmarks of Canadian race politics (Ambrose and Mudde, 2015; Berry and Kalin, 1995). Our findings also reinforce some concerns raised by critics of multicultural policy. First, Canadian nationalism underscored many of the responses to racial segregation,

and stereotypes about prisons in the United States often served as a moral scapegoat to explain racial conflict (or the lack thereof). As race scholars like Stewart (2014: 24) put it, there is a longstanding belief that Canada is 'not as bad' as the United States on matters pertaining to race (see also Reitz, 2011: 18, Reitz and Breton, 1994). Many participants responded to questions of racism and racial segregation with 'this isn't the States' and 'we're a multicultural society'. As Stewart (2014: 67) explains, Canadians often draw comparisons to the United States to reinforce the 'unsupported national story of Canada's victory over racism', reflected in Owen's comment: 'that stuff has ended a long time ago'. It is also possible that the multicultural mythos is heightened for prisoners because of Canada's skewed prison demographics, as prisons are significantly more racially mixed than the country's general population.

Second, our participants consistently articulated racially colour-blind and post-racist attitudes. While prisoners acknowledged the social reality of race, they emphasized its negligible effects on daily prison politics. As they explained, while race and ethnicity provide social comfort and easy initial mutual identification for some, racialized groups are informal and do not reflect the broader culture of racial coexistence in prison. While race politics have little direct impact on daily life, racial attitudes are enacted through how inmates police overt racism. Almost all participants overlooked structural racial inequality and defined racism as an individual attribute – oftentimes synonymous with white supremacy. Fixating on racism as personal prejudice or political ideology is key to post-racist discourse. As critics like Brown (2006: 142) explain, power relations disappear when intolerant individuals are treated as the agents of racial conflict and attitude is treated as its source. Some participants implied that the absence of white supremacists on the living unit signalled the absence of racism. It was the absolute exception to discuss racism in anything other than individualizing terms, and even in those rare occasions, the discussions were generally couched in reference to oppressive state power, rather than of structural or institutional racism. Further, while we certainly heard about racist guards, these complaints were again, scarce. Prisoners were much more likely to talk about correctional officers abusing their power, *independent of race*.

While our findings support the argument that liberal multiculturalism pacifies critical thinking about racism and race relations, racial colour-blindness also helps minimize ethnic conflict in prison. The culture of racial co-existence contrasts the critique that multicultural ideology discourages intergroup relations by hardening stereotypes and devaluing special interest groups (Satzewich and Liodakis, 2013: 169). On the contrary, our participants supported specialized prison programmes, such as those designed for Indigenous inmates, and many non-Indigenous prisoners regularly participated in Indigenous cleansing ceremonies, known as smudges. Respondents were also sensitive to unique religious practices. We found little evidence, for example, of anti-Muslim bigotry, and many expressed a desire for more programmes related to different cultural and ethnic heritages.

While inmates import and reproduce ideas about Canadian multiculturalism, racial co-existence must be partially attributed to institutional confinement (as deprivation theory suggests). Unlike ethnic groups outside the prison, inmates are deprived of their privacy and ability to self-isolate, having little choice but to mingle with their ethnically diverse peers. This speaks to Allport's (1954) contact hypothesis, which suggests that

prejudices rooted in race, religion, or sexual orientation tend to be reduced when interacting with members of groups against whom you hold prejudices (see also Phillips, 2012b: 103, 106, 107). By virtue of being confined to a small space for often long periods of time (we interviewed a number of prisoners in remand who were awaiting trial for two years and longer), our participants naturally interact with each other. While this is also true for American prisons, the difference in our setting may be that our participants embrace the Canadian narrative around multiculturalism and the desire to distinguish their situation from American prisons (whom they view negatively). Moreover, the temporariness and transitory nature of the provincial and remand prison system may also explain participants' commitment to individualism and racial tolerance. Comparatively, provincial inmates spend a short time in prison (two years or less), and consequently may be less inclined to organize and break rules.

Santiago, a highly educated inmate, explains how racialized divisions conflict with the prison code admonition to 'do your own time':

- Interviewer: What about cliques, in terms of race and things like that, ethnicity?
- Santiago: That doesn't really matter in here. You know, there's some, some guys that will [. . .] try and act like 'oh, you know, I'm all this because I'm this race and, you know, I got all these buddies because I'm this race.' But it really doesn't matter [. . .]. It's kind of one big collective in here. *We're all inmates, right, we're all in here doing our own time, right.* So, there's no purpose of – why would you want to clique with a bunch of Black guys, or why would you want to have a bunch of skinheads, or whatever you call them? It's one big happy – well, not really 'happy' – that's not the right word to use, but you know [. . .] it's basically like a family in here, right. [emphasis added]

Like Santiago, many participants identified a collective interest among inmates (who were not affiliated with gangs) to make 'doing time' as easy as possible. While prisoners often sought to circumvent or subvert institutional rules, they typically tried to do so within carefully calibrated limits, not wanting to prompt punishments from officers (such as extended lockup periods or revoked privileges – like phones and television) which made life inside more difficult (see Crewe, 2007, 2009). Consequently, most participants avoid interpersonal dramas and group politics to minimize their risk of infractions and conflict with other prisoners. Crewe (2009: 229) argues that this logic leads to a culture of 'prudent individualism', which encourages self-interest and self-governance among prisoners (see also Phillips, 2012b: 86). Formal organization among inmates – whether politically, racially, or through gangs – complicates daily life and makes 'doing time' harder. Colour-blind thinking complements this individualist institutional culture. For instance, while racial slurs can be tolerated during interpersonal conflicts, displays of white supremacy disturb the code of 'doing your own time' by inviting conflict from rival gangs and racialized conflict from prisoners of colour. By contrast, racial colour-blindness exalts individualism, where *individual reputation* is the master category determining how inmates ought to interact. In other words, race is subordinate to prisoners' street reputation, charges, and their comportment inside. Racial colour-blindness also benefits prison

gang politics, as gangs are free to recruit based on individual reputation and skills, rather than limiting their membership by race. In short, racism is counter-productive for gangs in prison because it limits their ability to expand and conduct business.

Conclusion

Our participants identified with and valued Canadian multiculturalism and subscribed to racial colour-blindness as outlined by critics of the policy. It is undoubtedly the case that there are more nuanced gradations in how racial colour-blindness manifests among the prisoner population that deserves to be the focus of further research. Our data suggest, however, that as a general orientation, racial colour-blindness helps reduce ethnic conflict and encourages inter-group relations among racially diverse inmates. As critics of racial colour-blindness suggest, our participants individualize racism, focusing on what is often called 'overt racism'. Few participants acknowledged 'structural racism' or the overrepresentation of people of colour in the prison system; some even expressed that Canada had overcome racism.

Moreover, there is no evidence that racialized gangs have undermined 'inmate unity', as other studies have found. While 'prudent individualism' may affect political solidarity (such as activism and political resistance among prisoners) (Crewe, 2009), inmate unity manifests in other ways, such as valuing 'easy time', to which racial harmony plays a part. Moreover, collective morals are explicit in discussions about individual reputation, evidenced in most inmates' disdain for white supremacy and prisoners with 'bad charges' (like sex crimes and hate crimes).

Racial colour-blindness benefits prison gang politics, as overt racism can create needless conflict, potentially hindering the business aspect of gangs (i.e. in our context: the prison drug trade). Restricting gang membership by 'race' places gangs at a numbers disadvantage when competing with others recruiting from all racial and ethnic backgrounds.

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Notes

1. We use the expressions 'prisoner' and 'inmate' interchangeably as our participants disagreed on which term was less stigmatizing.

2. 'Indigenous' refers broadly to peoples of long settlement and connection to specific lands who have been adversely affected by colonialism (Indigenous Foundations, 2018). We use 'Indigenous' to refer specifically to the first inhabitants of the land pre-dating Canada, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.
3. No official statistics specifically identify a prisoner's race in provincial prisons.
4. By 'racialized' we mean that a gang is made up predominantly of one ethnic group. This does *not* mean that they explicitly restrict membership based on racial.
5. We conceptualize 'inmate culture' as encompassing patterns of norms, ethics, and values in daily prison life, as identified by our participants.
6. Fassin's (2016: 62) data on racial demographics come from his own census conducted in 2013.
7. Phillips (2012a: 54) argues that Muslim solidarity in the prison setting does not function like a 'gang' in the traditional (American) sense.
8. Where Phillips (2012a, 2012b) emphasizes inmates' pre-prison life and the role of community affiliations in her study on United Kingdom prisoner race relations, our research was focused on the lived realities of prison, and as such prisoners did not often dwell on characterizing their communities outside of prison.
9. While some participants preferred to be interviewed by someone of the opposite sex, it was impossible to identify any larger consistent pattern of 'interviewer effects' given that we were working with a large research team that varied in terms of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, physical appearance, research experience, and other pertinent biographical factors that could conceivably shape the interview dynamic.
10. Most living units featured open-concept layouts. Two or three officers who were typically on duty were located behind a desk and visible to inmates. On some units, officers were stationed in a room attached to the unit, where they could observe inmates through opaque windows. These usually had private interview rooms adjacent to the officer station.
11. All names are pseudonyms.
12. Colloquially used among our participants to refer to Indigenous prisoners. Indigenous prisoners often referred to themselves as 'Natives' as well.
13. Many participants explained that racial segregation and racialized prison gangs were more prevalent in federal prisons.
14. This refers to when inmates force other inmates to transfer ('check-off') to a different living unit, often under the threat of violence.
15. The leaders were actually Vietnamese.

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