

Early Career Academics Network Bulletin

April 2011 – Issue 9

Contents

	Page
1. Introduction Anita Dockley, Research director	2
2. News	3
3. Features:	
Youth in crisis? ‘Gangs’, territoriality and violence Professor Barry Goldson, University of Liverpool	5
Informal support and women’s journeys through prison Dr Jo Deakin, University of Manchester	8
Behind closed doors: An exploratory study of the knowledge and principles which guide probation officer/offender manager decision-making and practice in work with women offenders Rachel Goldhill, University of Portsmouth	12
5. Member profile Anne Pike, Open University	16
6. First look: Doctoral research on British Muslim radicalism Fahid Qurashi, University of Kent	18
7. Get involved Wine Reception	21

Guidelines for submission

Introduction



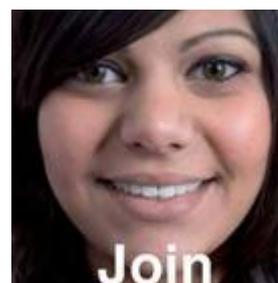
It is almost a year since the coalition government came to power. In that time the Secretary of State for Justice, Kenneth Clarke, has announced his intention to embark on a rehabilitation revolution. One aspect covered in the green paper, *Breaking the Cycle*, is the role of short prison sentences. This has been a preoccupation of the Howard League. We have repeatedly objected to the use of short prison sentences viewing them as both damaging and ineffective.

Over the last year we have been working in partnership with the Prison Governors' Association (PGA) to research the daily reality of short prison sentences from the perspective of those sentenced to them and the staff that work in prisons. The first part of this research, a [survey of members](#) was published in the autumn and revealed that 81 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'short prison sentences serve to reform and rehabilitate the offender', with only six per cent of governors agreeing or strongly agreeing. While 59 per cent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed when asked if short prison sentences serve to reduce crime (including by deterrence).

We are now about to publish the final report exploring the adult men's experience of short prison sentences. The report will be published in June. To support this, we have organised an event for ECAN members with the Mannheim Centre for Criminology. Its focus will be the question "What is the role of short prison sentences in the rehabilitation revolution?" Dr Julie Trebilcock, from Imperial College London, who undertook [the research](#) for the Howard League, and Dr Beth Weaver and Dr Sarah Armstrong, from the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research at the University of Glasgow, will present the key findings from [their research](#) to try and tease out the issues. More information about the event will be emailed to you and it will be advertised on the Howard League website. Places will be limited so please register to reserve a place as soon as you can.

Anita Dockley

Research director



News

Bursary for MA at Birmingham City University

The Howard League for Penal Reform is offering a bursary paying the full time fees for one student on the MA Criminology course at the Centre for Applied Criminology at BCU in 2011/12.



Information on how to apply for the bursary has now been provided [at this link](#).

The Howard League responds to the government's green paper

[Our response](#) to *Breaking the Cycle: Effective Punishment, Rehabilitation and Sentencing of Offenders* highlighted the Howard League's objection to the use of short prison sentences which are ineffective and damaging. We believe magistrates' overuse of custody could be prevented if they were required to remand an individual to the Crown Court for a custodial sentence. This would reduce short term sentences and compel magistrates to work more closely with community projects and programmes.

Frances Crook, director of the Howard League, commented, "The government must take more courageous action to end the use of short term prison sentences and custodial remands. Changes to make community sentences more prompt and intensive should enhance public safety and support for their use. Community sentences should be designed to make amends to victims and local communities and must be proportionate and brisk".



Welfare + Rights

The Howard League has published the first U R Boss interim evaluation report. The team from De Montfort University focussed on the work of the legal team which in many ways is at the heart of U R Boss. The report includes analysis of interviews with legal staff at the Howard League and their client and finds that the team deliver a comprehensive service which does more than supporting legal needs and goes well beyond this, delivering continuing support and genuinely empowering young people facing very difficult challenges.

[Download the report here.](#)

the Howard League for Penal Reform

An interim evaluation report into the Howard League's legal service for children and young people

The Howard League's legal service for children and young people (U R Boss) is a unit established in 2002. It is the only Howard League legal team specialising in the legal rights and entitlements of young people who are looked after – in care, secure children's homes and other secure establishments. Children and young people can call the Howard League legal service from prison on a free legal advice line.

The reports will cover many areas of law and all sorts of problems faced by young people, including help with accommodation on release, help with care and complaints and representations about how they are treated. Where possible the team will also design the way the young people are treated for their care and all other young people in the other U R Boss centres. The Howard League values feedback and is keen to hear what young people need but also to help the government and other bodies to improve services to the benefit of the European Court of Human Rights. All legal work is quality assured by the Legal Services Commission.

There are 3 specialism teams, the children's lawyers, the young people's lawyers and the adult lawyers. The report is available on the Howard League website.



United Nations Commission on Crime

The Howard League has UN consultative status and has just been attending the UN Commission on Crime where it helped to organise a meeting to promote the [Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment or Punishment](#). This goes back to the 1970s with the belief that torture could be prevented, or the risk reduced, by putting in place a system of monitoring based on unannounced visits to places of detention, however the protocol was only adopted in 2002 coming into force three years later. Now around two thirds of the 192 member states in the UN have either ratified or signed up.



The point of our meeting was to provide support and guidance to the states introducing legislation to set up domestic mechanisms for the prevention of torture. [This paper](#) outlines the principles for an inspectorate of places of detention that we submitted to the UN last year.

Use of force in child custody

It is five years since Lord Carlile's inquiry into the use of physical restraint, solitary confinement and forcible strip searching which the Howard League published. This anniversary will be marked by Lord Carlile conducting a public hearing on the use of force on children in custody in the House of Lords on 11th May. Expert witnesses will be called to give evidence. The session will explore the current policies regarding the use of force as well as the impact on children's emotional wellbeing and health.



Earlier this month the Ministry of Justice published a [progress report](#) on how the government has implemented the recommendations from the Independent Review of Restraint in Juvenile Secure Settings from 2008.

Features

Youth in crisis? 'Gangs', territoriality and violence

Professor Barry Goldson, University of Liverpool



The Rt Hon Iain Duncan Smith MP recently proclaimed that 'the modern gang is perhaps the best illustration of how broken Britain's society is' (Duncan Smith, 2009: 9). He is not alone in expressing such anxiety. Indeed few issues appear to attract greater concern and censure than those that surround youth 'gangs'. Whilst academic youth researchers in the UK, unlike the USA and elsewhere, have conventionally been reluctant to even use the term 'gang', more recently such reluctance has receded. Indeed it is increasingly claimed that, in particular urban 'territories', youth gangs are commonplace. Some young people are deeply immersed in violence and the carrying and use of weapons (particularly knives and firearms) is routine. Furthermore, populist discourse and media reporting even imply that 'crisis' conditions afflict identifiable groups of young people in urban locales. Alongside such concern and censure, contemporary policy formation and practice developments are placing greater emphasis upon strategies and modes of intervention ostensibly designed to 'break the cycle' and, it is claimed, offset young people's progress towards involvement in 'gang' activity and/or serious organised adult crime.

Conversely, other social scientists take a fundamentally different view. Simon Hallsworth and Tara Young (2008: 177), for example, have argued persuasively that:

[C]onstructing the problem of street violence as essentially a problem of gangs is an exercise flawed on empirical, theoretical and methodological grounds... there appears to be little evidence to suggest a pervasive and growing gang problem... 'gang talk', as we label this garrulous discourse, runs the risk of misrepresenting what it claims to represent... while sanctioning 'solutions' that might be as misdirected as they are misguided.

Opinion is clearly divided.

In order to develop a rounded understanding of youth 'gangs', together with an appreciation of the meanings that identifiable constituencies of young people attach to specific territorial spaces and their terms of engagement with violence, it is necessary to locate the present within a broader sense of historical context. This necessitates tracing *continuities* as well as *changes* pertaining to youth cultures and subcultures over time, analysing various constructions and reconstructions of 'problematic youth' and 'youth problems'

and subjecting multiple discourses (academic, policy, political, populist) to detailed critical scrutiny.

If this sounds like stating the obvious, it is quite extraordinary that the contemporary preoccupation with youth 'gangs' in the UK and elsewhere often lacks any sense of historical context. Furthermore, the precise nature and derivation of expressed concern is invariably unclear. The existing literature



reveals little consensus about precisely what constitutes a 'gang', how and why 'gangs' originate and/or the purpose and function that 'gangs' are thought to serve. Semantic slippages between terms such as 'peer group', 'informal peer group network', 'fluid and transitional youth group formation', 'street-based group', 'delinquent peer group', 'delinquent youth

group', 'gang', 'criminal gang', 'organised criminal group', 'organised crime network' and 'crime firm' obfuscate meaning, create confusion, produce contrasting and contradictory findings and impede coherent analysis. At its most fundamental accounts of the nature and extent of 'gang' activity, at any given place and time, will be contingent and heavily dependent on the adopted definitions.

Even a sketchy discussion such as this begins to reveal the profound inadequacy of much that passes for 'gang' discourse and 'crisis' talk. Indeed any serious attempt to comprehend the myriad youth group formations that we have seemingly learnt to call 'gangs', to understand the spaces in which they emerge and develop and, at the 'heavy end', to conceptualise youth violence, must be both theoretically rigorous and empirically robust. Theoretical questions – within which the constructs of place, opportunity, power, identity and masculinity are key – must be foregrounded. Place-based attachments, postcode identities and group-centred bonds assume, perhaps as they always have, profound significance for young people whose opportunities, aspirations and horizons are stultified and thwarted by structural disadvantage. For identifiable constituencies of the young power, identity and 'social capital' are closely indexed with reference to street-level 'respect', credibility ('cred') and reputation ('rep'), although the gendered nature of such phenomena and, in particular, the specific agency of girls and young women, is largely unknown. 'Beefs' deriving from territorial trespass and/or any expression of 'disrespect' – and intensified by particular constructions of masculinity (machismo) – are often the motors of violent exchange. But weapons might symbolise anxiety, fear and insecurity and represent the tools of precautionary personal 'protection' as much, if not more, than the instruments of calculated 'gangstas' and purposeful 'street soldiers'.

In sum, ill-defined, historically decontextualised and hyperbolic constructions of 'crisis' offer little by way of understanding the complexity of many young people's worlds. Such phenomena shed limited light, at best, towards

determining whether or not the incidence, gravity and nature of street violence have changed over time. The same inadequate analyses fail to appreciate the complex intersecting tendencies that can produce problematic street worlds for young people and the mediating contingencies that impact upon such worlds, at specific moments and within particular social orders. More detailed, sophisticated and nuanced analyses are imperative.

It is against this backdrop that a group of leading academic youth researchers recently collaborated to produce a book that subjects 'crisis talk' to rigorous critical scrutiny and to provide a challenging and authoritative account of complex questions pertaining to urban youth identities, crime and social order (Goldson, 2011). The book aims to locate the question of 'gangs' in both historical and contemporary contexts; engage a spectrum of theoretical perspectives and analytical positions; present and analyse cutting-edge empirical research; address a range of previously neglected questions, including those pertaining to girls, young women and 'gangs'; and provide a vital resource for researchers, educators, policy-makers and practitioners with an interest in key questions facing criminology, sociology and social policy.



Professor Barry Goldson holds the Charles Booth Chair of Social Science at the University of Liverpool and is the founding editor of Youth Justice: An international journal (SAGE). His work has been extensively published, in particular he is best known for his work in the fields of youth criminology and youth/juvenile justice studies. Professor Goldson is extensively networked across the international research community and has long-standing relations with a range of national and international governmental and non-governmental, human rights and progressive penal reform organisations.

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Informal support and women's journeys through prison

Dr Jo Deakin

As the female prison population rises more women are facing the challenge of returning to communities after completing their prison term. The high reconviction rates after imprisonment suggest that the transition from prison to the community is not a simple one. Most researchers agree that central to the success of this transition is an understanding of women's needs in relation to desistance (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2009; Spencer and Deakin, 2004) and, consequently, the reflection of those needs in the nature and quality of the support offered in the community (McIvor et al, 2009) taking account of histories of economic and social marginalisation and the distinct context of female offending. How female ex-prisoners are supported post release not only becomes the focus of the 'multi-agency' work of the statutory and voluntary sectors but, perhaps more significantly, it also has a bearing on the people that surround the women on a daily basis: their family and friends.



The wealth of research evidence suggests that close ties with friends and family members are key elements in desistance from crime providing the informal support necessary to forge lifestyle changes and to sustain a positive new lifestyle (see for example Laub and Sampson, 2001; Visher and Travis, 2003; Maruna and Immarigeon 2004, Farrell 2000, McIvor et al., 2009). The research evidence presents a clear picture of close links between successful reintegration and positive lifestyle choices supported by informal networks. What is not clear is the changing nature of that support and how it may be experienced throughout a prison sentence and beyond.

The research

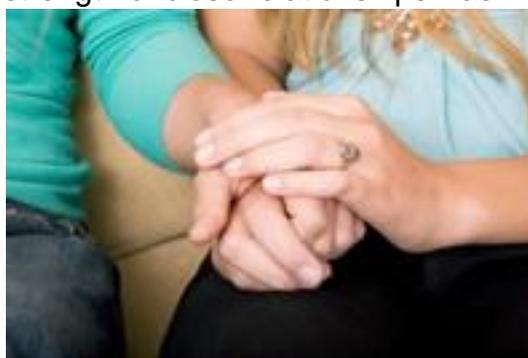
This research, conducted in 2007, attempted to address these issues through an exploratory study focusing on the social networks of women leaving prison. The project considered the changing nature of relationships at three stages of the women's journeys – prior to imprisonment (often during offending behaviour), during imprisonment, and several months post-release. Through in-depth interviews narrative case study data were gathered enabling an exploration of women's experiences of 'reintegration' and desistance, how positive kinship and community ties are maintained/ re-established, and the effect of 'problematic' relationships on the re-integrative process. The research looked specifically at how a period of imprisonment impacted upon social networks and the processes of desistance and reintegration.

Findings

The case studies built a picture showing the complex network of relationships surrounding the respondents and the types of support accessed from different elements of that network at various stages of the journey through prison and beyond. During the sentence women prisoners relied less on 'outside' support replacing previously important family and friends with 'internal' support from other prisoners, prison officers and support staff. There were a number of reasons for changes in the structure of women's networks, for example the desire to protect their family from the realities of their experience, the need for practical support from other prisoners about how to manage incarceration and the ready availability of support from within the prison. Friendships between female prisoners were a main source of emotional support and a vital social resource providing essential internal information about prison procedures, coping with daily life and 'working the system'.

The unique character of prison life creates a shared experience between prisoners (and, to some extent, prison officers) that provides the opportunities for new, intense relationships to form. However while these relationships were important during the respondents' time in prison, few relationships were maintained after release as women began their new lives. The families and friends of some of the women were unsupportive of continued relationships with other prisoners and ex-prisoners preferring to cut all ties with the past.

For some women informal support from friends and family members once again became the most important form of support as they re-entered the community. Practical assistance in finding accommodation and employment were of particular importance but the strength of close relationships was expressed most commonly in the area of emotional support with respondents relying heavily on certain family members and friends for advice and help. The most valuable emotional support for respondents was linked to an acceptance of their offence and sentence as 'the past' and encouragement to 'move on'.



However not all of the women gained support from family and friends on leaving prison. Some previously positive relationships had been damaged or fractured during their prison sentence and respondents expressed acute feelings of loneliness and isolation and on release. The separation they experienced from relationships with family and friends was also reflected in a total separation from other forms of support offered by statutory or voluntary agencies.

In other cases the close relationships discussed were problematic impacting negatively on the woman's perceptions of self, linking closely with depression and low self worth, encouraging risky or criminal behaviour and having a negative impact on the desire to change. In general these relationships would

add to tensions and problems in the women's lives. Many relationships reflected a combination of positive and negative aspects at different times or in response to different situations.

Karen's story

When we first met Karen she had served almost 2 years of a prison term for a series of drug related offences. She was due for release later that month and was desperate to 'get out and start again'.

Karen told us about her troubled background involving drug and alcohol addictions and self-harm from a young age. Her volatile relationship with her family had begun to break down as her drug use became more chaotic and this continued to deteriorate during the prison sentence. She described her sense of isolation and helplessness as her mother and brother failed, time and again, to turn up to prearranged visits. As her sentence progressed, her contact with family members ceased.

Karen sought support from inside the prison and had formed a particularly close relationship with Anne, another prisoner. We learnt of the intensity of the short relationship and the vital support it provided. The relationship ended abruptly when Anne was released, and devastatingly for Karen, contact was severed.

On leaving prison Karen contacted her family but found them unsupportive – she was unable to bridge the gap that had widened during her sentence. She struggled with her addictions and depression and was sentenced to a further prison term for drug-related offences two months after leaving custody.

Conclusion

Close, functional relationships with family and friends can be seen as an essential support in the reintegration processes, impacting positively on desistance and self esteem. However the effect of a prison sentence is to fracture and weaken those bonds in a profound and often highly damaging way. This research revealed experiences of breakdown and distancing in relationships with family and close friends during the sentence resulting in limited informal support at a particularly challenging time.

Additionally, families and friends provide complex forms of support, some of which might be negative in terms of encouraging desistance. The impact of 'negative relationships' is varied: such relationships may be crime generative or crime tolerant, reproduce a negative self image or depression, enable or encourage drug and alcohol addictions, be centred on violence, or simply add to the tensions felt by the women.

In practice there is a need to recognise the importance of close relationships, the strength of bonds and ties and also the potential problems that can emanate from family and friendship networks. Close, functional family and friendship networks are, in many cases, intrinsically linked with the support

necessary to promote behavioural and lifestyle changes in the women prisoners to become ex-offenders.

A longer version of this article forms a chapter in Rosemary Sheehan, Gill Mclvor, Chris Trotter (2011), Willan Publishing

Dr Jo Deakin is a lecturer in Criminal Justice and a Research Fellow in the Criminal Justice Unit at Manchester University. Her specific interests relate to reintegration, offender management, female offenders, victimisation and communities and crime. In 2002 she was awarded a HEUNI scholarship to research specific issues relating to female offenders in the Finnish context. Currently her research considers the social networks of BME offenders pre- and post-custody.

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Behind closed doors: An exploratory study of the knowledge and principles which guide probation officer/offender manager decision-making and practice in work with women offenders.

Rachel Goldhill, University of Portsmouth

It has been argued that one of the most important aspects of probation work is the interaction between probation officer and offender (Trotter, 1999; Burnett and McNeill, 2005; Cherry, 2005). However it is rare that the everyday practice of supervision is either observed or evaluated. This research hopes to explore the communication between probation officers and women offenders using discourse analysis. What this involves is a critical and political appraisal of talk which occurs naturally in supervision sessions and report interviews. Probation officers, ostensibly with a goal of helping women make sense of and gain more control over their lives, both position women offenders and are positioned by them whilst the women themselves position themselves in a number of ways both as women and as offenders. Gendered relations, particularly in situations of institutionalised power inequality, are never straightforward and produce a variety of truths and realities to social circumstances.

As a teacher of probation studies (and formerly a practising probation officer) I have observed from colleagues (and my own practice), as well as in supervision and from reflective reports, differences in attitudes towards and treatment of women offenders.

Female offenders seem to produce a more emotional response. Some male trainee probation officers have

described feelings of discomfort and embarrassment if the women cry. Female probation officers have commented critically on women offenders who are not parenting well and say they feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of problems and chaotic lifestyles that their women cases present. This is reflected in the literature (Horn and Evans, 2000; Warner and Gabe, 2008; Hedderman, Palmer and Hollin, 2008: iii) which suggests that some women practitioners, whether intentionally or not, take a punitive stance with female offenders.

Literature also shows that in other parts of the criminal justice system, such as the courts, certain women offenders continue to be up-tariffed in certain circumstances (Hedderman and Gelsthorpe, 1997; Heidensohn, 1985; Corston, 2007) and custodial sentences have rocketed since the early 1990s (Gelsthorpe, Sharpe and Roberts, 2007).



Imprisonment is known generally to have worse and worsening effects on women (and their families) in areas of social exclusion, poverty and accommodation (Corston, 2007; Gelsthorpe, Sharpe and Roberts, 2007). These factors commonly lead to deterioration in mental health (particularly for individuals made vulnerable through years of abuse) thereby exacerbating their situation (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007: 17). The Corston Report (2007) and Provision for Women Offenders in the Community Report (Gelsthorpe et al., 2007) highlighted these problems and proposed significant changes in interventions for women offenders.

Initially this project would be concerned with exploratory research examining case studies. It would be of a qualitative and interpretive nature aiming to generate deeper understanding of practice rather than extensive generalisable data. The study would explore whether decision-making is based on theories and knowledge that are in the public domain or on practitioner knowledge and examine how the two areas interact. In other words are practices theorised and what are the bases of the theories or are they purely responsive? One aim of the study would be to evaluate whether the information and proposals in the above reports, the subsequent Offender Management Guide for Working with Women Offenders (Ministry of Justice, 2008) and the academic literature on gendered practice have been taken on board and put into practice by probation officers or whether practitioners are contributing, possibly unwittingly (see below) through stereotyping and lack of knowledge and awareness, to a deteriorating situation.

Data will be derived from video or audio interview sessions between probation officers and women offenders. As the study investigates significance and meaning in probation officer/woman offender interaction it is concerned with messages conveyed through language (not just spoken words but communicatory signs such as dress, body language and tone of voice). Ideally the intention would be to video supervision sessions in order to gather more comprehensive data, for example observing how power flows through bodily movements.

Part of the concern of the research would also be focused on a broader remit, investigating how large scale political strategies impact on probation interactions. For example Evans and Walklate (2011: 11) compared the messages from the Corston Report (2007) and *A Report on the Government's Strategy for Diverting Women Away from Crime* (Ministry of Justice, 2009) concluding that the principles of woman centredness promulgated by Baroness Corston have been overpowered by more recent Government publications. At the macro level, outlined by Hodge and Kress (2001: 296) and Van Dijk (2001: 314), it is argued that elite groups, through their authority, are able to prescribe what constitutes 'normality' and 'rationality'. Their influence then impacts on every individual at 'every level of semiotic systems'. Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 54) draw attention to how political messages are employed



to deliver services with an increasing number of interventions designed 'to control and shape' language practices. This "top-down" approach through 'technologization of discourse' is instantly apparent in public services and could be seen to be directly applicable to the probation situation. Farrant's article (2006: 317) exemplifies such a trend through outlining the 'hegemonic masculinist approach' embedded in managerialist and punitive policies that have dominated the probation service, particularly since 1997. These policies dictate rules and language for probation officers and offenders alike.

So this study will investigate why, despite an increased focus on and commitment to diversity, positive change has been limited. Traditional probation values have always emphasised resistance to discrimination, social inequality and exclusion through interventions that promote self awareness and access to social capital (Nellis and Gelsthorpe, 2003). Fairclough and Wodak (1997: 54) stress the importance of this "bottom-up" side involving the commitment to transformation of everyday practices supporting various gender, class and race struggles. The research analysis would therefore attempt to focus on how changes could be made to the interactions through increasing awareness of language in practice. By highlighting probation values and language which supports 'resistance' to discrimination and exclusion, the possibility of real improvement is strengthened.

Rachel Goldhill originally qualified as a probation officer in 1984. With a Masters in social work she spent the following years working in various roles including working in court and case management and resettlement. Having always had an interest in teaching she was an accredited practice teacher and an associate tutor on the MSW until it was replaced by the DipPS. She was then a practice development assessor (PDA) from 1998-2004. Currently Rachel is a senior lecturer at the University of Portsmouth. Her research interests include sex offenders, women and offending, desistance and reflective practice.

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Member profile

Anne Pike from the Open University, Milton Keynes



Hi, I'm Anne Pike and I'm a PhD student at the Open University (OU). My first degrees were in maths and physics and then I worked for several years as a software engineer in the defence industry. It was at this point I turned my hand to adult education.

My first connection with prisons was to teach IT in a category B local prison but it was when I began tutoring maths for the OU in prison that I noticed how this higher level self-directed learning often appeared to be transformational. I have now been involved with prisoner education for many years as a teacher, manager and researcher.

My PhD, which is focused on the impact of higher level distance learning for adult male prisoners on release, builds on two previous research studies. In 2006 a Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded fellowship investigated the 'digital divide' for the OU student in prison. The findings ([Adams and Pike, 2008a](#); [Adams and Pike, 2008b](#); [Pike, 2009](#)) highlighted the many difficulties being encountered by students and their support staff in prison, in particular the lack of new technologies for learning, but also the dedication and sheer determination which enables the learning to take place. Dissemination involved organising a number of conferences and international workshops which produced powerful discussions about the wider benefits of higher education in prison ([Pike and Irwin, 2008](#)). A second study in 2009 further developed knowledge of how distance learning students in prison were actually accessing and using technology for learning in prison. Although this was only a small study most of the student participants had been distance learners in prison for several years, indeed some had gained *all* their education in prison. They provided rich descriptions of vastly different learning experiences across the prison estate but appeared to have an essential student identity which was perceived to be life-changing and most students were very positive about the benefits of their learning for future employment and life chances (Pike, 2010a, b). My PhD is a multi-method longitudinal study which aims to further unravel the student perceptions of HE distance learning in prison and to investigate how the learning is perceived to impact on the student's life after prison.

I have joined the Howard League's Early Career Academic Network because I know how important networking is within research, particularly in cross-disciplinary fields such as this. I have very recently developed a new research group within the Institute of Education here at the OU, it is called the Higher Education in Prison Research Group (HEPRG) and has members from across the OU, other universities in the UK and beyond. I'm hoping to discuss the challenges, share our research ideas and develop our network of research colleagues in higher and distance education in prison.

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First Look

Doctoral research on British Muslim radicalism

Fahid Qurashi

What is my research about?

My PhD examines what has come to be known as the problem of radicalisation in British Muslim communities. Post 9/11 and especially post 7/7 this has emerged as an area which has received a great amount of attention in political, media and academic circles. Despite the immense interest in this area, there still remain many grey areas and therefore great scope for critical reflection.

Why and how did I choose this topic?

This area of study interested me since the days of my undergraduate studies and grew after the events of July 7th 2005. I was particularly keen to engage critically and seriously with this topic and offer some analyses and insights that I felt were missing from prevailing mainstream discourses but that pervaded the everyday lives of British Muslims all around me. Doing a PhD on this topic was the best way I knew to make this contribution on the important issue of radicalism in British Muslim communities.

What is the scope and research focus?

The PhD research is being carried out at a time when there are countless protestations about the nature of British Muslim radicalisation, the motives that underpin it and how best to address this issue (see for example David Cameron's recent speech at the Munich Security Conference). In this context there is a great opportunity to inform this on-going debate with research that asks critical questions and thus opens up space for critical discussion on British Muslim radicalisation. In writing this research project I am attempting to create a counter narrative to the dominant political and media discourses about the processes, motives and meanings of radicalisation by placing the often maligned and misunderstood voices of British Muslims centre stage.

A key interest in my study of British Muslim radicalisation is to draw out the major themes in the discourse and what I am finding is a shift in the discourse through 9/11. Where pre-9/11 key themes included socioeconomic deprivation, parallel lives, race and the far right, post-9/11 these themes are somewhat engulfed by the major theme of the role of religion (i.e. Islam) acting as an instigator of radicalism. This is not to suggest that other themes in the discourse do not exist, rather that these are side-lined given the focus on religion. However throughout my fieldwork what I have seen is that British Muslim radicalism is still concerned, as it was pre-9/11, with socioeconomic deprivation, the far right and race amongst other factors, hence the first key research focus: understanding the relationship between the social conditions in which British Muslim exist and radicalism. Another key research focus centres on addressing the overt, post 9/11 attention on religion as a bedrock

of British Muslim radicalism and attempting to offer a more nuanced understanding of the role of religion, especially in light of some limited research available on the link between terrorism and religion (see for example Pape, 2005 and Munson, 2005). Thus, the second research focus of critically reflecting on the mobilisation of religion in the process of radicalisation.

Methodology and fieldwork

For my research I decided to use the qualitative ethnographic approach, using participant observation, qualitative interviews and focus groups. One of the concerns for my research was how best to gauge a representative British Muslim experience. With this in mind I decided on three research sites – Leeds, Birmingham and London – in which I spent approximately three months each. Through the everyday participant observation I identified the interviewees and focus groups I wanted to carry out and the issues I wanted to explore through them. These meetings ranged from as short as one hour interviews to focus groups that continued for up to eight hours at a time.

Difficulties and obstacles

In working on this PhD I've encountered difficulties which I can group into two distinct categories: those that generally apply to most PhD projects and those specific to my project. On the former I spent a long time grappling with my research question. Because of the contemporary nature of the topic this area of academic study has been growing at a very fast rate (see for example Ranstorp, 2009 and Silke, 2009) and so keeping up to date with emerging research presented its own challenges, particularly when trying to shape the research focus. Secondly, conducting ethnographic fieldwork and living the life of an ethnographic researcher – for what at times seemed an eternity – was very challenging and stressful indeed, not least because I was moving between three research sites. Related to this, having to return to the life of a postgraduate on campus spending long hours in an office writing away in small town Canterbury after nine months of hustling and bustling in the field was not as easy as I had imagined and required a period of transition to re-adjust to the academic lifestyle.

On the latter specific difficulties presented themselves given the sensitive nature of the topic. Gaining access to Muslim communities at the research sites at a time when the British Muslims were, and still are, under intense focus was a big hurdle to negotiate. Ultimately it meant having to spend a significant period of time in the field but also balancing this with the time confines of the PhD. A second fieldwork concern was how best to negotiate potential ethical pitfalls. Particularly for this project I was concerned with the ethical issues of gaining consent and minimising harm. Asking people to sign documents to demonstrate informed consent for a research project on radicalism did not seem appropriate or feasible and so instead I relied upon verbal consent (see point 25 of the British Society of Sociology code of ethics). Minimising harm to the research participants seemed to be the key ethical concern to navigate. I was very conscious of the fact that I did not want to engage a research site and leave it with those that I lived and spoke with worse off than when I entered, and this is something which will continue to affect the research throughout the writing stage.

Early findings

Writing up field notes and starting the process of analysing the data has produced some interesting research findings. What I am finding particularly interesting, however, is the way in which the process of labelling is occurring in British Muslim communities. Labels such as 'radical', 'extremist' and 'moderate' seem to be more widely used and applied by both external and internal forces. But what do these labels actually mean and what effect is this having on those being labelled and maligned?

Fahid Qurashi is studying for a PhD at the School of Social Policy Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent Canterbury where he is also an assistant lecturer.

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Get involved

House of Commons wine reception 2011

The Howard League annual wine reception, hosted by our President, Lord Carlile of Berriew QC will be held on Monday 18 July 2011, 4pm – 6pm on the Terrace of the House of Commons. The event offers an opportunity for our members and supporters to meet in the beautiful surroundings of the historic Houses of Parliament.

This is a fundraising event and all donations will be going towards the Howard League for Penal Reform President's Fund. This year Lord Carlile's President's Fund will support our work with students to nurture and encourage penal reformers of the future. Our students campaign, fundraise and raise awareness of penal reform. We support them with free materials, training and opportunities for volunteering and internships. We provide advice on using social media to campaign and building online communities of support and activism.

We will not be asking for money on the day. This is why we are asking for your donation when you book your place. Please give generously and support the President's Fund and make this fundraising event a great success.

Admission is by guest list only and places are limited, so please book your place early. You can [book your place here](#).



ECAN Facebook Group



The Howard League for Penal Reform is active on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Delicious](#). There is a special page dedicated to the Early Careers Academic Network that you can reach either by searching for us on facebook or by clicking on the button above.

We hope to use the Facebook site to generate discussions about current issues in the criminal justice system. If there are any topics that you would like to discuss, please start a discussion.

Guidelines for submissions

Style

Text should be readable and interesting. It should, as far as possible, be jargon-free, with minimal use of references. Of course, non-racist and non-sexist language is expected. References should be put at the end of the article. We reserve the right to edit where necessary.

Illustrations

We always welcome photographs, graphic or illustrations to accompany your article.

Authorship

Please append your name to the end of the article, together with your job description and any other relevant information (eg other voluntary roles, or publications etc).

Publication

Even where articles have been commissioned by the Howard League for Penal Reform, we cannot guarantee publication. An article may be held over until the next issue.

Format

Please send your submission by email to anita.dockley@howardleague.org.

Please note

Views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect Howard League for Penal Reform policy unless explicitly stated.