'*Oh you're on our side, you're my brother*': Occupational Ontology and Challenges for Muslim Prison Officers in Europe.

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Abstract

Filling a significant gap in prisons research, this paper articulates the experiences and perspectives of a group of Muslim prison officers interviewed as part of an international study examining Islam in prison. These Muslim prison officers occupied a precarious occupational cultural space between Us (prison officers) and Them (Muslim prisoners) which presented both risks of exclusion, religious and racial prejudice and opportunities to build bridges between prisoners and staff and to educate, especially in the dimension of religion. The very presence of Muslim prison officers in prisons challenged traditional occupational cultural stereotypes around both prison officers and Muslims. The disproportionately large numbers of Muslim prisoners in Europe and the haphazard way that Muslim prison officers often encounter the profession, suggest both that better training focused upon Islam in prison for existing prison officers is vital and that more directed recruitment of Muslim prison officers is needed.

Keywords: Muslim prison officers, occupational culture, Islam, Muslim prisoners

Prison Officer Occupational Culture

Our consideration of Muslim prison officers is set within the broader context of Islam in prisons (see Beckford and Gilliat-Ray, 1998; Beckford et al, 2005; Marranci, 2009; HMIP, 2010; Liebling and Arnold, 2012; Becci & Schneuwly Purdie, 2012; Awan, 2013; de Galembert et al, 2016; de Galembert, 2020) and within the findings and literature about occupational cultures in criminal justice settings which has primarily been developed in relation to police officer occupational culture (Reiner, 2010).

In comparison with the police service, the occupational culture of prison staff is significantly under-researched (Crewe et al, 2011; Barry, 2013; Morrison & Maycock, 2021), and we are keen to avoid assuming that one can neatly map one onto the other (Cockcroft, 2016). According to Arnold (2016), prison occupational culture develops from early training during which loyalty to colleagues and cynicism and distrust of prisoners become core principles informing the role. Importantly, however, the role is also typically informed by an aspiration to help others, but when they are faced with the challenges of successful rehabilitation, they alter their measure of success away from reducing recidivism into more achievable metrics such as raising literacy (Arnold, 2016).

Other studies have focussed upon prison officers as the embodiment of the power to punish and the inevitable tensions this causes between them and prisoners [Us v Them] (Hannah-Moffat, 1995; Tait, 2011). This was a dynamic that we directly experienced with several prisoners asking us whether we, as

researchers, were with 'Us' (the prisoners) or 'Them' (the prison officers). Similarly, critical criminologists are keen to stress that prison officers may be perceived as 'the caretakers of punishment' (Scott, 2006:14) operating in a hierarchy within which officers are institutionally deemed to command respect from prisoners who are invariably addressed and construed via derogatory labels such as 'druggies, scum, contagious, needy or poor copers' (Scott, 2011:8).

Despite the presence of the 'Us' versus 'Them' dynamic, some studies have concluded that the cultural gaps between prison officers and prisoners can be narrow. For example, Shapira and Navon (1985) found that in Israel prison officers and prisoners shared similar interests, cultural and social values and experiences of common deprivations. In our research one prison governor in England told us in passing, 'Demographically the prisoners and the prison staff are very similar'. Whilst such commonalities are evidence of a narrowing of a gap between the incarcerated and their incarcerators, the very same proximity can make officers vulnerable to bribery, under-enforcement, yielding to unreasonable demands, conditioning and inappropriate relationships (Shapiro & Navon, 1985; Liebling, 2000).

Unlike that of the police, prison officers' occupational culture is characterised by media, policy and research neglect. Liebling argues prison officers represent the 'invisible ghosts of penality' (Liebling, 2000:337). As one prison officer in our study said:

> '*Unfortunately, we are the forgotten service. We're out [of] the public eye. We're behind them big walls. The public just think, oh, they're locked up. The public don't realise the pressures and the stresses that staff are going through*' (Prison Officer, HMP Severn, 16/05/2019).

The Occupational Culture of Muslim prison officers

If prison officers and their occupational culture have been relatively neglected in research, there is even less UK-based research on the experiences of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) prison officers and virtually nothing on the experiences of Muslim prison staff, who are the forgotten of the forgotten. This neglect in part reflects the historic under-representation of BAME prison officers, which contrasts with the historic overrepresentation of BAME prisoners and more recently Muslim offenders in the UK who currently make up 17% of the male prison population (Ministry of Justice 2020; Sturge 2019). Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) is attempting to address BAME under-representation by raising targets for new officer recruits, revision of application tests and targeting of high quality BAME applicants for senior positions (Ministry of Justice 2020). Nevertheless, simple representation ignores the pervasive power of the institutional biases and occupational cultures which BAME staff are inducted into, consciously or unconsciously, via prison roles and procedures and systems (Awan, 2013). This situation of occupational under-representation is aggravated by the tendency of social scientific disciplines to absent narratives of faith and faith-based identities from professional life (Spalek & Imtoual, 2008) and the fact

that faith-based identities have often been subsumed or even absented under other social scientific categories such as culture or ethnicity[1].

Aims of this paper

In the context of this absence of evidence and understanding, this paper makes an original contribution to understanding the situation of Muslim prison professionals in contemporary Muslim-minority contexts by articulating for the first time what we term the 'occupational ontology' of Muslim prison officers. In so doing we substantiate three purposes:

(1) we delineate and define occupational ontology as 'the multi-dimensional, laminated experience of being and working in a professional setting'. This is drawn from ideas in an emerging critical realist criminology (Bhaskar, 2008; Matthews, 2009; Irfan & Wilkinson 2020; Quraishi et al., 2021; Wilkinson et al., 2021) and factors-in the religious identities and Muslim-ness of our participants as part of their documented professional experience.

(2) Using this framework informed by original qualitative data, we examine what is particular about the occupational ontology of Muslim prison officers *per se* and compared with prison officers from other backgrounds.

(3) Thus, we suggest what the particular occupational ontology of Muslim prison officers recommends in terms of necessary adjustments to existing prison practice around training and recruitment.

Background, Methods and Sample

The empirical data for our exploration of the professional experience of Muslim prison officers came out of a broader research project entitled 'Understanding Conversion to Islam in Prison' (UCIP, 2018-2021) that mapped the faith-based experiences of 279 Muslim prisoners in England, Switzerland and France.

The focus was on England and Wales due to the pressing public and professional interest to understand the impact of Islam and Muslims on prison life in the UK. France and Switzerland were chosen as comparators due to their significantly different legal, penal and religious cultures. UCIP was a multi-perspectival study that included 41 individual interviews with prison officers who, unexpectedly, turned out to generate a significant impact on the religiosity of prisoners and on the likelihood of their engagement with Muslim prison chaplaincy (Wilkinson et al., 2023). Table 1 below provides an overview of the total data collected for UCIP from which the sample of Muslim prison officers informing the current paper is drawn.

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[1] Wilkinson, M.L.N. (5 July 2022) 'Understanding Islam in Prison', presentation to the Parole Board of England & Wales, London.

Country	Prisons	Security Category of the prison[2]	Surveys	Interviews with prisoners	Interview with chaplains	Interview with officers	Interview with governors	Observations: RE Classes + Friday Prayers
England	5		191	122	13	25	12	21
	HMP Cherwell	C	57	33	2	8	4	5
	HMP Forth	A	24	19	3	5	2	4
	HMP Parrett	B	52	36	6	8	2	5
	HMP Stour	D	19	12	1	0	3	3
	HMP Severn	B	39	22	1	4	1	4
Switzerland	4		54	25	5	12	1	10
	Miteithlen	A	20	14	1	0	0	2
	Fontgrise	B	15	5	2	11	1	5
	Doriath	A	11	1	1	1	0	2
	La Citadelle	A	8	5	1	0	0	1
France	1		34	11	2	4	2	1
	Hauterive	B	34	11	2	4	2	1
Total	10	4 x A; 4 x B 1x C;1 x D	279	158	20	41	15	32

Table 1. Overview of data collected in England, Switzerland and France Feb 2018 to March 2020

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[2] For details of security categories see: https://prisonjobs.blog.gov.uk/your-a-d-guide-on-prison-categories/

Respondents were garnered via a combination of purposive, targeted and self-selected sampling across the 10 prisons. Officers were recruited between February 2018 and March 2020 via a combination of word of mouth, formal attendance by researchers at morning wing briefings and introduction through various prison staff including chaplains. Interviews were semi-structured and analysed in NVivo utilising a grounded approach informed by critical realist theory (Irfan et al., 2022). Our Muslim prison officer sample is drawn from three prisons, for the sake of comparison between European and North American contexts, all may be categorised as medium security institutions. In the UK, five interviews with Muslim officers were conducted in one prison (HMP Parrett) whilst two interviews were undertaken in Switzerland (HMP Fontgrise) and one in France (Hauterive)[3]. There is no data to verify the overall faith identity of prison officers in the jurisdictions examined. However, the voices and experiences of Muslim prison officers and staff are particularly underrepresented in the academic literature. Our sample of eight respondents therefore represents a pioneering contribution which generated rich qualitative data allowing in depth qualitative analysis and to begin to characterise the distinctively Muslim[4] prison officer experience. Table 2 below outlines the key biographical information about our respondents:

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[3] All the names of prisons and persons are pseudonyms.

[4] By 'Muslim' we refer to anyone who self-identifies as Muslim.

Table 2. Biographical summary of Muslim prison officer respondents.

Prison & Country	Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Born into Islam (B) or Converted (C)	Approx. Age range	Experience (years)
HMP Hauterive, France	Habib	Male	French-Algerian	B	29-39	7
HMP Fontgrise, Switzerland	Shahid	Male	Swiss-Tunisian	B	29-39	2
HMP Fontgrise, Switzerland	Najm	Male	Swiss-Tunisian	C	39-49	22
HMP Parrett, England	Ahmed	Male	British South Asian	B	29-39	6
HMP Parrett, England	Bilal	Male	British South Asian	B	29-39	2
HMP Parrett, England	Aisha	Female	British South Asian	B	19-29	1
HMP Parrett, England	Dalil	Male	British South Asian	B	29-39	4
HMP Parrett, England	Faris	Male	British South Asian	B	39-49	15

Philosophical & Theoretical Frame

The UCIP team drew upon critical criminology, the sociology of religion and theology. However, an overarching frame was informed by the writings of Bhaskar (1975; 1979; 2008) and more specifically the philosophy of Islamic critical realism (Wilkinson, 2015; 2019). We explain the utility of these approaches in some recent publications (see Wilkinson et al, 2021; Schneuwly Purdie et al 2021; Quraishi et al 2021) which are beyond the remit of this paper. Nevertheless, a key concept -occupational ontology- articulated in this paper is inspired by the ideas around occupational culture outlined above and by critical realist ideas of *emergence*, *laminated ontology and absence*.

The idea of 'emergence' states that higher and more complex dimensions of being emerge from and are dependent on lower and simpler ones and yet are causally and taxonomically irreducible to them (Bhaskar, 1975). For example, in the legal world, 'intent' as a category and *cause* is emergent from and dependent on the chemistry of the brain and yet is not reducible to this chemistry.

This metaphor of emergence in laminated systems has been coherently applied by Irfan and Wilkinson (2020) in their exploration of the experiences of Muslim offenders within six laminated ontological dimensions:

    (1)   Biological-physical Dimension

    (2)   Psychological/identity-related Dimension

    (3)   Educational Dimension

    (4)   Socio-economic Dimension

    (5)   Socio-cultural Dimension

    (6)   Spiritual-religious Dimension (Irfan and Wilkinson, 2020: 486).

Crucially, these 'laminated' and disambiguated layers of being generate 'knock-on effects' with each other. For example, an over-heated prison classroom in the Biological-Physical dimension has negative 'knock-on' effects for learning in the Educational-Cognitive Dimension. Similarly, when examining methodological issues of positionality and judgemental rationality, the UCIP research team acknowledged that their own experiences clustered into various multiple emergent, laminated dimensions of being (faith, ethnicity/ethno-culture, gender, class and professionality) that had intra-personal effects upon them as individuals and inter-personal 'knock-on' effects with our research subjects (Quraishi et al, 2021).

An Occupational Ontology

In this paper, we extend this lens of laminated dimensions in our exploration and explanation of the experiences and occupational ontology of Muslim prison officers. An abductive approach between grounded analysis of qualitative data and critical realist theory articulated above enabled us to identify the original idea of an **occupational ontology** as '**the multi-dimensional, laminated experience of being and working in a prison setting**.' We then moved to identify and describe four inter-related dimensions of the occupational ontology of Muslim prison officers. The four dimensions of this occupational ontology are:

    (1) The Professional Dimension

    (2) The Psycho-social Dimension

    (3) The Ethno-cultural Dimension

    (4) The Religious Dimension

These dimensions exist discretely and also generate pronounced 'knock-on' effects and synergies with each other as we will show in our empirical account to follow. Also, it is axiomatic as part of this laminated framework that elements of prison life, e.g. of training, that are absent or lacking in any of these dimensions will also generate outcomes in prison as much as elements and practices, whether wholesome or faulty, that are present (Norrie 2009). The notion of the effects of absence is particularly relevant to life and work in prison which is an environment unusually characterised by many absences – of family, goods and services, sex, status etc. We have construed these absences as being particularly generative of change, including religious change – both for better and for worse (Wilkinson et al, 2021) and that in prison objects and activities – good and bad – will move to fill the gaps.

Muslim Prison officers & their Inter-related Dimensions

The Professional Dimension: 'Falling into working in the Prison rather than a chosen career'

In the Professional Dimension of their career choices, our UK Muslim prison officers tended to have enrolled as prison officers often by happenchance or indirect opportunities rather than as an expression of a heartfelt vocation or career aspiration. Officer professionalism has been construed as reflective of matters of '[jail] craft, skill and fairness' which arguably require lengthy experience of the role (Crewe et al, 2015:26). It might be that the residue of colonialism makes uniformed service less attractive to Muslims whose heritage is from the Indian subcontinent (Quraishi, 2005), although this did not emerge at interview. The Muslim prison officers we spoke to in the UK had not in the main enjoyed "lengthy experience of the role", since it was their first post as prison officers, into which they had fallen by chance.

For example, Ahmed spoke of wanting to do the role for a brief period initially by way of rising to the challenge of a symbolic bet with a friend:
'it was only meant to be a six-month thing. Just to prove him wrong, but then it lasted for years'.

Bilal reported '*To be honest when I applied for it, it was a good couple of years ago. I was just going through jobs so I saw this as a vacancy. I didn't really know what it really actually entails until I actually started the job.*'

For Aisha, the role was more of a stop-gap between different stages of her education. She saw the post advertised, did not know anyone working in prison and on the off-chance applied.

Aisha: *'So I was just looking for a job generally for when I finished school and then I just saw it and I was like I'll give it a try'.*

Dalil was encouraged to apply for a job by someone already working in the prison. In his own words: *'... I thought, "What's the harm in applying for it?" I applied for it, I got the job, I done the training, once I done the training initially I thought, "Six months and I'll find something else." Nearly four years and I'm still here'.*

Faris was made redundant in a local warehouse role and applied to the prison as an auxiliary grade. It was a matter of convenience, and the push factor of the redundancy was a more powerful factor than any pull asserted by a career in the prison. As in the UK, in Switzerland the two officers in our sample were engaged in a variety of different professions before working in prison. Najm, for example, explained that he was looking for work with human contact after working in accountancy:

'By training, I am a commercial employee, I worked in the field of accounting and human resources until the age of 25. I was in the region of Nyon and Geneva. At one point I was tired of numbers, I was more in the accounting branch, keeping accounts, double accounting, I had the loss of human contact. I was looking for something with a little more contact. And I applied a little by chance to the prison in early 1998'

These extracts indicate that, at least for our small sample of Muslim Prison officers, prison employment was not an aspirational or chosen career. In the UK, this contrasts with the experiences of officers from other backgrounds, many of whom had prior careers in the armed forces and for whom prison seemed more of a natural shift owing to parallels with disciplinary structures and regimes. Furthermore, this haphazard entry to the prison officer profession contrasts significantly with what is known about the entry motives of non-Muslim officers who often have close friends and/or a family tradition or local culture of working in the prison service in the UK (Morrison and Maycock, 2021). Choosing the prison as a targeted vocation is less common in Switzerland where most officers, irrespective of religious or ethnic background, tend to join by happenchance.[5]

2.Psycho-social Dimension: Questions of loyalty and interactions with Muslim prisoners

We have already discussed above how the occupational ontology of prison officers generally is often formed in the context of prevalent Us (officers) versus Them (prisoners) which both parties often replicate (Hannah-Moffat, 1995). In this occupational context, Muslim officers spoke of encountering a highly challenging psycho-social environment and of experiencing tensions between discharging their duties in relation to Muslim prisoners and difficulties in avoiding accusations of favouritism in the perceptions of their colleagues. They tended to inhabit a precarious occupational 'no man's land' of being neither 'Us', Prison Officers nor 'Them', Muslim prisoners which threw up both professional risks and opportunities, often depending on the personality of the officer involved.

Ahmed explained how he was caught between managing the expectations of "Black and Asian" prisoners, whilst demonstrating loyalty to White officers and impartiality to White prisoners:

'When I first started, I was about two three months into the job, the Blacks and Asians, as soon as you tell them off, or do this, do that, oh you're on our side, you're my brother, why are you doing this? Where the White officers then would say, or the White prisoner would say, oh you're siding with them more, which I wasn't, I was being fair to everyone'.

Conversely, illustrating the opportunity presented by this professional positionality, Ahmed also narrated how his perseverance with acting fairly in the face of these expectations enabled him to build good relationships with many different types of prisoners:

'And now, because they know my personality, they know if you're doing wrong, you're doing wrong, it doesn't matter colour or religion to me. If you're doing right, you're doing right. So now, every morning,

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[5] This perspective reflects the experience of Mallory Schneuwly Purdie who has delivered professional education to Swiss prison staff for over 8 years.

or every afternoon whenever I see them, I take my time, talk to them, just by saying good morning to them when they're walking past, they get happy. Because no one really does it to them. So everyone knows, with me, and one thing, I think it was two weeks ago, some prisoner said to me, white prisoner, he says… with you, I don't see you, I know you, I know when I look at you I know you're brown, you're a Muslim. But when I see you, you're just you, I don't think of any colour when I see you. Because the way I talk to him about everything'.

Ahmed specifically spoke of his experience of needing to mediate the Us (prisoner) versus Them (prison officer) environment identified in research on the issue of choice of language (Scott, 2011).

Ahmed: '…they'll [Muslim South Asian prisoners] speak English, as soon as a white officer walks past, normally if you're talking normally about anything, it could be about football, anything. Automatically they'll switch [into Urdu/Punjabi]. And I start thinking, all of a sudden, I think they do it on purpose, just so the other officer says, what are you speaking about. And then the prisoner come and be, oh if you want to know what we're speaking about, you should have learnt the language. Just to antagonise them. And because the prison officers know me, they know they're winding them up, so they ignore it.

Ahmed also recounted a point of friction when his loyalty to Islam was challenged by some Muslim prisoners for his support of the Poppy Appeal and war veterans:

'…they were selling poppies at work, so I thought everyone was wearing it, I know the history of Muslims, Indians for their Commonwealth and all that. Because I know my history, so I wore one, as far as I'm concerned, I'm giving them respect…so happy to wear one, everyone gives respect. They said, 'oh you're with them, you're with these soldiers, they're killing ours, they're doing this, they're doing that'. I said to them, well it was Muslims that fought in that war as well'.

Ahmed's wearing of the poppy represented both a risk for him to be branded by Islamist-leaning prisoners as one of the non-Muslim 'Them', i.e. the non-Muslim authorities, and also an opportunity for him to discuss a contentious issue and to educate Muslim prisoners around it.

In France, Habib talked about encountering hostility from some members of the Muslim community in Paris with regards to his role working in the prison and having Algerian ethnicity. He explained that he had encountered fellow Muslims who described him as an 'Harki'. This was the term used for native Muslim Algerian auxiliary soldiers who fought for France during the Algerian War (1954-1962) and were therefore treated as traitors in Algeria. This treatment explained Habib's reluctance to draw upon his religious or cultural dimension when engaging with Muslim prisoners and how his work with prisoners was hampered by the post-colonial resonances of France's involvement in the Muslim-majority world.

Nevertheless, the fact that it was characteristic for our Muslim prison officers, especially in local prisons, to have come across prisoners in the Muslim community 'outside' also provided an opportunity for Muslim

prison officers to break down or mitigate 'Us' versus 'Them' barriers, as well as being the source of unexpected pressure from prisoners for favouritism.

Ahmed: 'Even now, when people come in, especially from the local area, one or two will come in and say, even though on the outside you've seen them around the local mosque and everything, you never ever talk, but you know the face yeah. But all of a sudden, they come in here, oh we're cousins, we're like brothers. The thing is, you ain't said hello on the outside…and then start saying, oh help us get a better cell, single cell, you know me and my mum, I can't stay here, and all the normal excuses'.

Muslim prison officers' accounts blurred the inside-outside prison dichotomy, since both officers and prisoners tended to reside in the same communities and neighbourhoods. This experience meant that for Muslim prison officers the gap between 'Us' prison officers and 'Them' prisoners was often unusually narrow, notwithstanding tendencies for officers to limit 'contamination' between prison and their personal lives (Crawley, 2004).

3. Ethno-cultural Dimension: Experiences of discrimination
The barriers and risks the Muslim prison officers experienced in the psycho-social dimension often 'knocked-onto' the overt experience of racism in the ethno-cultural dimension. If Muslim prison officers felt at risk of being construed occupationally as a part of 'Them', i.e. non-Muslim prison authorities, they also ran a risk of experiencing religious and racial discrimination from fellow prison officers, or at least a painful absence of professional acceptance, and being perceived by them as part of the 'Them', i.e. Muslim prisoners.

Discrimination was experienced across a spectrum of behaviour, from occasional racist language to serious examples of institutionalised racism. Everyday slights, indignities and insults can be construed as microaggressions (Sue, 2010) operating unconsciously or unwittingly from the perspective of the aggressor, but which nevertheless contribute to hostile working environments for religious, ethnic or gendered minorities (Marcus, 2009; Nixon, 2021). The experiences of racism described below resonate with those encountered by Sharp's Muslim police officer respondents in policing contexts (Sharp, 2015).

Some of the Muslim prison officers we interviewed voiced serious allegations of racial and religious discrimination they had experienced from fellow staff. These experiences mirror previous research which highlights the discriminatory treatment of Muslim prisoners in Europe which showed how Muslim prisoners and Muslim prison officers were subject to the same racist culture (Awan, 2013; Urbanek, 2016).

Ahmed explained that he had been *'called a f**king dirty little Arab'* by an officer a year before our interview. He stated he *'had witnesses, they had camera footage, everything, but yet, I got suspended for 14 weeks'*. Ahmed explained that the officer admitted using the term but claimed it was a *'figure of speech'*. When Ahmed attempted to formally pursue a grievance, he was in turn suspended for 14 weeks since the officer submitted a retaliatory complaint alleging that Ahmed had made death threats to his family.

Eventually, Ahmed managed to obtain confirmation from the officer in question that he had fabricated the complaint but when Ahmed requested formal sanctions against him the managers said they had changed their procedures and, in his words, 'threw it under the carpet'.

This experience gave Ahmed very little confidence that complaints of discrimination would be dealt with satisfactorily by his management team, even though his experience of racism was widespread: "…they've [Asian and Black officers] all had it."

Such apprehensiveness extended to confidence in applying for promotion. Bilal stated

'Well because I've seen where it is not very diverse it puts me off applying because I feel

There are certain people ... there's a certain face that fits that they'd give the job to.'

Faris reported a disappointing experience where he had encouraged a relative to join the prison staff. He felt that the applicants were discriminated against when they were rejected for failing the constraint and restraining competencies part of the training.

He stated: *'That was the reason they made up. But we had two Pakistani people in that particular course out of 30 people and only those two [were] kicked out'.*

A specific point of contention for some Muslim prison officers centred upon their requests for leave to celebrate the festivals of *Eid*[6]. Officers complained that during Christmas and New Year the managers would provide flexibility in the rota to permit most officers to take appropriate leave, but this was not forthcoming on *Eid* despite the Muslim officers forming a very small percentage of the overall officer workforce. Once again, this echoes the experiences of institutional double-standards experienced by Muslim police officers (Sharp, 2015).

4. Religious Dimension:

Relations with Imams & Chaplaincy

Nevertheless, despite persistent obstacles to recognition and fair treatment in the Ethno-cultural Dimension, in the Religious Dimension, which is often absent from prisons research, there were also opportunities for Muslim prison officers to challenge and break down institutional prejudices. The accounts of participants suggested that religious Worldviews impinged significantly on their professional practice, although they

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[6] Muslims celebrate two annual *Eid* festivals (*Eid ul Fitr* (Festival of Breaking the Fast) and *Eid ul Adha (Festival of Sacrifice)*. Since the Islamic year is based on the lunar calendar, the date of a specific Eid changes each year and is subject to formal confirmation of the sighting of the new moon.

often worked in a secular environment in which to express faith or religious inclinations was embarrassing or taboo.

The broader research of UCIP has shown that prisoner engagement with chaplaincy was significantly predictive of their tendency to have positive attitudes to rehabilitation in terms of re-connecting with education, work and avoidance of crime. Our research also showed that positive relationships with prison officers played a part in encouraging prisoners to engage with Chaplaincy (Wilkinson, et al., 2021).

In the UK, our sample of Muslim prison officers spoke about a generally positive working relationship with Imams and the chaplaincy team more broadly. This is reflective of the formal institutionalisation of Islam in British prisons and the professionalisation of the role of Muslim chaplains (Beckford et al, 2005; Gilliat-Ray et al., 2013).

Ahmed explained that he saw the chaplains every day and witnessed them '*cracking their jokes and having a laugh, asking how the day's been'*. He confirmed that he had a good relationship with the '*whole chaplaincy, the imam, the priest, everyone'*. Bilal stated the chaplains were *'quite approachable'* and *'basically whenever we need help they're always there to give us advice.'*

Importantly, in Switzerland and France, where secular norms are dominant, engagement between prison officers and Imams was much more limited than in England and sometimes avoided by prison officers. According to Najm, in Switzerland, he had good relationships with the imam and thought the imam's role should be extended to interaction with prisoners on the wing.

By contrast, within a prevailing atmosphere of suspicion, Shahid avoided working with the chaplains:

'... I don't talk religion with anyone. I took the time to speak with you because most people, even my colleagues, have no idea what religion is'.
'No. I do not work with chaplains. I do not collaborate with anyone'. And you have relations with the imam? Zero. Hello and it stops there'.

Habib in France mentioned that he got on well with chaplains of all faiths but that some prisoners deemed the imam a collaborator or traitor. When asked whether he felt that Muslim chaplains were appreciated by Muslim prisoners he replied:
'It depends on their degree of practice and their understanding of Islam. Because some inmates who are radicalized, they say that chaplains are light-weight, it is a light-weight version of Islam, lacking hardness and rigor. And sometimes they even consider them as collaborators'.

Muslim prison officers as cultural and religious 'assets'.

This positive relationship with chaplains was reflective of the fact that Muslim prison officers were acutely aware of the potentially positive role they played in terms of correcting cultural or religious misunderstandings about Muslim prisoners or over security concerns around radicalisation or extremism.

Furthermore, in the Religious Dimension, the Muslim-ness of Muslim prison officers, when not construed negatively by other prison staff and prisoners, became a cultural and religious asset and could play an appreciable role in de-escalating potential 'Us' versus 'Them' flashpoints and creating a culture of mutual Muslim/non-Muslim respect between prisoners and prison staff.

For example, and ironically perhaps, Muslim officers were less likely to be judgemental in their 'policing' of *Ramadan*[7] than their non-Muslim colleagues because they were aware of the nuanced exemptions from fasting. Ahmed stressed his personal belief that Muslim prisoners were:

'... fasting for themselves, not fasting for me. Because they can say to me, I'm fasting or not, it doesn't make no difference to me. It's between them and God. So if they want to get a Ramadan pack and do that as well, they probably could have a number of reasons. One being they're on medication, but they're trying their best. Second, they just could be, can't be bothered, but I don't know that, I'm not one to judge'.

According to Bilal, Muslim prisoners tended to build better relations with Muslim officers, and they were respectful to him because of his ability to speak in an educated and informed way about their shared faith.

He said:

'I find when I do come across Muslim prisoners, ... because they find out I'm a Muslim ...they build relationships a lot better. I know they seem to get on more if the officers are Muslim...They do talk [religion], they always say today's been quite hard to pray and stuff like that or whenever they've had like a Muslim class. We see them going back and they say we've had a good session with Muslim class'.

Ahmed explained how he could be called upon as a mediating presence when colleagues were conducting sensitive cell searches of Muslim prisoners.

'... someone's getting their cell searched. But he's having a go at the officers, saying, look you ain't coming in my cell because I've got my Qur'an there...so as soon as I come on, he come up to me and said, you can have it…so I held it, searched the cell then gave it back. And I told him, I was like look, they're alright,

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[7] Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims undertake fasting from dawn to sunset.

look they've got gloves on, they're turning you down, he said, yeah but I had bad experiences with other officers. So these are probably alright, I don't know. So I could see the side on both sides of the story.

Interviewer: How did the officers view you, then, in that respect?

Ahmed: They were happy because, I was just walking by, oh do you mind helping out, yeah no problem. Took me two minutes, held it, the prisoner is happy, the officers are happy, everyone is happy'.

This provided a clear example of how a well-informed and approachable Muslim prison officer could both de-escalate a potential flashpoint over handling a sacred object and at the same time build a bridge between the Muslim prisoner and non-Muslim prison officer.

In France, Habib explained how his linguistic and cultural abilities were a useful asset for his role in the prison:

'...I speak classical Arabic very well and... so I can understand the languages ...of North Africa.... And then all the dialects, ...and all the Tuaregs of southern Algeria for example, and classical Arabic and all its variants, either in Syria, Iraq, so I understand everything.'

Najm in Switzerland explained how he was frequently called upon for advice on a range of issues involving Muslim prisoners:
'When things go wrong and well they call me. So it's funny, because they call me the Grand Mufti, (laughs) so, yes, when there is a problem, they call me'.

These extracts illustrate the informal contribution made by Muslim officers in addressing cultural and religious gaps in knowledge and sensitivity in prison contexts, thus serving to mitigate the Us [officer] v Them [Muslim prisoner] dichotomy frequently identified as part of prison officer occupational culture (Hannah-Moffat,1995).

Protecting Muslims; challenging extremism.
In an environment that is riven with mistrust over the pursuit of a security agenda (Earle & Phillips, 2013), some Muslim prison officers also expressed the capacity to tell the difference between mainstream Muslim norms and behaviours and, when necessary, to identify and challenge Islamist or extremist behaviour. This led to the skewed situation in which prison officers' faith-informed professionality was only recognised when they were usefully challenging extremism at the expense of their holistic sense of themselves as Muslim believers.

Ahmed described one incident where he brought his knowledge of the ethical conditions of armed struggle (*Qital*) to bear to challenge a prisoner who had been radicalised in another prison:

'You have to educate them. Some you can get through, but some refuse to listen…I had a prisoner here, normal, everything alright. Then all of a sudden, he got shipped out to another prison, come back four months later, full turban on, full everything, straight up radicalisation, speaking to these unbelievers.

Interviewer: He was saying this to you?

Ahmed: Yeah, you shouldn't speak to these unbelievers, shouldn't do this, shouldn't do that. Reciting verses from the Qur'an, luckily for me, unluckily for him, however he sees it […] but when I was younger, I learnt about […] you shouldn't injure a tree, injure old people, don't take, if you do take prisoners, treat them well…I said, you only know this bit of words, what's the next one. And then he stopped.

Ahmed also explained how he had challenged a fellow Muslim officer, whom he felt held some extremist views and the officer's conduct was subject to an ongoing internal investigation. Similarly, he was able to interact with Muslim prisoners critical of, or attempting to undermine, the Muslim chaplain.

Similarly, Muslim staff in Switzerland are called upon to educate fellow staff about what are Muslim norms and what may be considered extremist. For example, Najm relayed an incident of prisoners cutting out Arabic calligraphy from a calendar brought to them by the imam. Staff were suspicious, but Najm was able to explain that they were simply verses of the Qur'an which the prisoners wanted to decorate their cells with because the calligraphy was beautiful and well made.

Najm also spoke of complications that may arise from imprisoning Muslims who may have mental health problems overlapping with vulnerabilities to radicalisation. However, he also spoke of the lack of training and skills for distinguishing between extremist behaviour and harmless norms:
'So they may be able to process the information appropriately, but whoever collects it and transmits it has no basis. And that's a shame. Because I think we may have been suspicious about people who had no place to be, but maybe also missed some cases'.

Habib in France was able to illustrate how some radical or extremist Muslims he had encountered in prison as converts were often misinformed or had very little knowledge of Islam:
'…And the most dangerous I find that it is the converts, because they take everything in the raw state. That is, there are sermons, there are a number of visions without trying to understand and without thinking what. There is not a work of analysis or thorough reading of the thing. We take a verse from the Qur'an "jihad against disbelievers" but they do not continue, when we are attacked… we must answer and everything. There is jihad on oneself, that is to say to impose a certain number of rules, they take everything to the letter. They botch things and the problem after that is to get them out.'

Habib provided an example of an informal conversation with a radicalised Muslim convert he had encountered:

'We have an inmate here who is in this logic, I told you…, it's extremely rare…: From a Jewish father, from a Catholic mother, and he is an Islamist, he is only 22 years old. I discuss with him, he has understood nothing about Islam as such. But he has a speech, where he wants to impose Sharia by force and violence all over the world, he even wrote a letter to the President of the French Republic "I order you to apply Sharia" …, he said to me "either we warn them verbally, if they don't want to convert to Islam, so jihad and halal, so we can." and I say "but how can you?", he said to me "the whole world", I said "but at home? What are you going to do with your father who is Jewish and your mother who is Catholic? There he looks at me and smiles. And in addition when we discuss Islam and everything I often put him in trouble because he knew nothing at all… nothing at all'.

This type of informal discussion between Muslim prison officers and prisoners, while not being part of any formal de-radicalisation programme, over time may help prisoners who have been radicalised to question and modify their extremist Worldviews (cf. Wilkinson et al., 2021).

A determinate absence of training on matters of faith.

Our study highlights that faith was institutionally a determinate absence from officer training (Norrie, 2009). It was instructive that, in their interaction with prisoners in the Religious Dimension, Muslim prison officers drew on the knowledge of their faith gained as children and members of the Muslim community rather than on any formal officer training. They acknowledged that training on faith issues was improving in the UK but was inadequate when compared with the real-life complexities around understanding Islam in prison, which often required sophisticated religious literacy.

This feeling by Muslim prison officers corresponded with the almost universal feeling with the 41 prison officers from different backgrounds that we interviewed as part of the larger study that their training around religion was inadequate to prepare them for prison life.

Dalil was a senior officer and he told us that his training on issues of faith and diversity had been *'very, very brief'* during the general induction to his officer role.

According to Ahmed, *'… religion, I think it was just an hour, two-hour slot where they just talked about different religions. The only thing I can remember, concerning Islam was servery. And they just ask you a question, "can Muslim servery workers, like prisoners, serve bacon?", basically that's it really.'*

Bilal also mentioned that his religious training which "*was literally five minutes long…Very brief …just like a slide show*":

Aisha, who was a more recent recruit to the prison, said that she experienced a whole day of training about faith needs delivered by the chaplaincy team in addition to another day on diversity and inclusion delivered by a manager.

For Najm in Switzerland, when he began his duties there was no training with regards to Islam or Muslim prisoners. He also expressed a clear idea of the type of religious "up-skilling" that was necessary:

Interviewer: What you would need in relation to your professional practice?

Najm: There are many things… to have historical knowledge, knowledge about the context, knowledge about the texts. How one should understand all this. What are the real prohibitions, the lawful and the illicit? Because here too we hear everything and anything. To remind also people of Muslim faith, wherever they have just put in the legal context. Is it compatible? Yes or no? What is not compatible should we have a tolerance or not?

Similarly in France, according to Habib religious training from prison officers was inadequate:

'They have a training of 2 times 2 hours, something like that, it's a global overview of religions, it's a comparative study, we're not going to go any further. Here they read Islam, Judaism, Christianity, the broad outlines…that's really a brief introduction.'

These accounts illustrate the challenges for prison staff who have been educated in secularising free European cultures when they work in prison cultures in which faith and chaplaincy are unusually part-and-parcel of daily life. This gap also illustrates the potential importance of the mainstream Islamic religious worldviews (Wilkinson, 2018) which foreground human equality and pro-social behaviour that Muslim prison officers bring to their occupation and how it is important that their faith is not left at the prison gate.

Conclusion

Our findings, although derived from a small but telling sample, emphasise similarities of experience between Muslim prison officers in England, France and Switzerland, despite the significant cultural and institutional differences in how Islam is accommodated in prisons in these jurisdictions (Beckford et al, 2005; Joly, 2007; de Galembert, 2020).

We have articulated the original concept of an **occupational ontology** as '**the multi-dimensional, laminated experience of being and working in a prison setting'**. We moved to identify and describe four inter-related dimensions of the occupational ontology of Muslim prison officers:

(1) The Professional Dimension
(2) The Psycho-social Dimension
(3) The Ethno-cultural Dimension
(4) The Religious Dimension

In the Professional Dimension, entry for our Muslim prison officers into the prison service in England, France and Switzerland was often determined by happenstance rather than planning or family tradition.

In the Psycho-social dimension, our Muslim prison officers occupied a precarious occupational cultural space between Us (prison officers) and Them (Muslim prisoners), which presented not only risks of exclusion and religious prejudice but also opportunities to build religio-cultural bridges and to educate.

In the Ethno-cultural Dimension, Muslim prison officers' experiences of overt and covert racial discrimination, including barriers to promotion, suspicion and questions of loyalty map onto the documented experiences of Muslim police officers (Sharp, 2015).

Nevertheless, in the Religious Dimension, our Muslim prison officers also experienced being religious assets in terms of helping to generate a climate of trust and understanding on prison wings. In fact, the very presence of Muslim prison officers challenges traditional occupational cultural stereotypes around both prison officers and Muslims. This was especially the case when Muslim prison officers deployed '[jail] craft, skill and fairness' (Crewe et al, 2015:26) by listening and responding carefully to prisoners, including informally and spontaneously filling gaps in religious understanding, including those that might generate extremist worldviews.

Along with prison officers from different backgrounds, Muslim prison officers universally acknowledged the current inadequacy of training around religion in prison and that this absence hampers their work and that of non-Muslim prison officer colleagues.

Implications and recommendations

Given we have found that even basic religious literacy amongst Muslim officers enhanced engagement with Muslim prisoners and smoothed prison regimes, improved religious literacy through Entry-Level and In-Service professional education for all prison officers is likely to have a similar effect. We can further suggest that the focus of such training would include, inter alia, being able to distinguish between the different Worldviews of Muslim prisoners; specific guidance on handling sacred and sensitive objects and core 'Dos and Don'ts' in Islam and with Muslims (Wilkinson et al., 2022).

At a structural/institutional level, greater diversity amongst prison officers has been formally recognised as a strategic goal to lessen the 'Us and Them' culture of prisons (Liebling et al, 2011; Lammy, 2017). However, given the experiences of discrimination discussed in this paper and acknowledgement that prison officers experience amongst the highest levels of work-related stress of any profession (Kinman et al., 2016), the obstacles to the recruitment of Muslim staff are significant. Nevertheless, this challenge to recruit and retain more Muslim prison officers needs to be addressed urgently given the increasing overrepresentation of Muslim prisoners in European prisons (Ministry of Justice, 2020). Furthermore, We are extending our research and increasing our sample size with Correctional Officers in the USA where, although there exist no records of the religious affiliation of staff, we will seek to describe and understand the particular experiences of American Muslim Correctional Officers between 2024 to 2026.

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