

*Lectio praecursoria*

## Changing meanings of ethnicity in the everyday life of Finnish male prisons

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Helena Huhdan väitöskirja ”Changing meanings of ethnicity in the everyday life of Finnish male prisons” tarkastettiin Helsingin yliopiston valtiotieteellisessä tiedekunnassa 7.4.2022. Vastaväittäjänä toimi professori Torsten Kolind Aarhusin yliopistosta ja kustoksena vanhempi yliopistolehtori Tarja Tolonen Helsingin yliopistosta. Väitöskirjan yhteenveto on luettavissa verkko-osoitteessa <http://hdl.handle.net/10138/340907>

Prisons are closed institutions not only for those who are locked inside but also for the rest of us locked outside. Hence, we, who mostly live law-abidingly, have little if any knowledge about the everyday life behind bars. Perhaps this is the reason why it has inspired so many screenwriters and fiction writers. Prison is also an institution that exercises the most coercive power in a peace time society. The totality of prisons combined with their isolation from society are reasons why they should inspire, or at least be of interest to, the academics as well.

The starting point of this study was in statistics that illustrated a rapid increase in the number of foreign national prisoners in Finnish prisons. In the year 1990 Finnish prisons accommodated altogether 20 prisoners with foreign nationalities. This did not make up even one percent of the prisoner population (Statistics Finland, 2020). In the year 2016, when I conducted my fieldwork, the number of prisoners with foreign nationalities was 537 (FCSA, 2016).

If we count in Roma people, whose estimated number in Finnish prisons is around 200 (see,

Huhta, 2010), the share of ethnic minorities rises to almost a quarter of the prisoners. Additionally, the so-called second-generation immigrants are reaching the age of penal responsibility for the first time in a larger scale. Adding these numbers together raised urgent questions about what do we know about the social life in our prisons today; what is the Finnish prison institution like from the perspective of ethnic minorities; what are the relations like among prisoners and between prisoners and officers? I formulated these and many other questions under the main objective of studying the role of ethnicity for the social reality of everyday life in our prisons.

In order to answer these questions, I spent nine months in two closed male prisons and briefly visited one, conducting ethnographic fieldwork and interviewing 43 prisoners and 25 officers.

The Finnish criminal policy is celebrated for its rationality and humanity. Although these claims might be rightfully contested from various perspectives, what speaks for the exceptionalism of our policy and our prisons is

the access that they provide for press and researchers. This ethnographic study would not have been possible in most countries.

The initial observations I made in prison were largely visual. The physical construction (the gates, doors, fences, corridors, the scarcity of places to hang around) together with the strict daily schedule, formed a specific framework for social encounters. Different spaces in prison called for different kinds of conduct. Doreen Massey (1992; 1993) writes that social is always spatial and moreover that the spatial organization of social order always contains the element of power.

As the social order was organized in space, it revealed the importance of ethnicity. In some spaces, such in the dining hall of Niskala prison (a pseudonym), the ethnic divisions and segregation emerged in a rigid way, and they overrode all other possible social divisions. These spaces also made visible the socially shared ethnic categories as they were acted out on routinely. Three times every day, the prisoners gathered in the dining hall and navigated to their tables that they divided according to ethnic and racial categories.

In other spaces, ethnic divisions were less clearly observable, and in some, they evaporated at least temporarily. Although the three prisons I visited were different in many respects, the very same logic in categories and segregation applied to all of them.

The segregation applied also to the cells and wards. In Niskala, most prisoners with dark skin or Roma backgrounds lived in one large wing. Many of the workshops and education were open to prisoners living in all open wings, but some of them were addressed to particular wings. For most prisoners moving from one wing to another was a question of practicalities whereas for certain ethnic minorities it meant risks of social exclusion, bullying and threat of violence. Hence, the ethnic segregation was not only symbolic,

but it also had concrete effects on the prisoners' possibilities to attend work and schooling.

The social order among prisoners, which was organized in space, was maintained with violence and its threat. Furthermore, the hierarchy was mediated by *contextual ethnic stereotypes* that tied together ethnic prejudices and prisoner code. Ethnic categories that were held in the low ladders of the prisoner hierarchy were told to entail despised characteristics and behavior such as snitching, being dependent on officers, stealing from other prisoners and committing despised crimes. A particular set of characteristics was attached to each ethnic category, and these stereotypes were used to argue for the existence of ethnic hierarchy. The majority Finns at the top of the hierarchy were in the position to modify and maintain these contextual ethnic stereotypes.

The social order concerning ethnicity seemed established in the spatial organization and in the contextual ethnic stereotypes. Nevertheless, however cemented the ethnic hierarchy in prison might seem, behind all my findings was a tendency of change.

In Niskala prison, I had a grandstand view to observe a change in social order that took place in one residential ward I call the E-ward. In the beginning of my fieldwork in Niskala, first two and later a third dark-skinned prisoners were placed in this high-status ward, which had never had men with dark skin before. The placement was the major topic of discussion in the entire prison. The atmosphere was tense, and most prisoners and officers predicted a fast and violent end for this experiment. A few conflicts did occur, but the result was a surprise for many: in the end, the three newcomers were allowed to stay. After a while, they even started to dine in the same tables with majority Finns, which changed the symbolic daily re-establishment of ethnic categories.

Many factors influenced the outcome in the E-ward and although the change seemed dramatic at the time, it appeared to be part of a consistent long-term trajectory which moved towards the lenience of ethnic segregation and hierarchy. It is notable that the change of E-ward occurred at the same time as the large refugee arrival to Europe and Finland in 2015-2016. The “refugee crisis” heavily polarized the societal discussion concerning immigration in general. This debate penetrated the walls of the prisons primarily through the diligent consumption of television programs. Nevertheless, the underlying trajectories were strong enough to resist the influence of sudden societal panic. The interviews with majority ethnic prisoners revealed that their lives in the free society included ethnically diverse friend groups and spouses with foreign backgrounds and furthermore the criminal businesses had become increasingly international. Hence the environment where the incarcerated men came from had largely become contradictory with the racist prisoner culture.

Coming back to prisoner hierarchy, it is important to understand that a prisoner’s position in the hierarchy is affected both by prisoner code and ethnic/racial categories. The weight of different elements in the hierarchy and especially the weight of ethnicity in it can be better understood when we divide these elements into *definitive* and *flexible* characteristics. A sexual offender, squealer or a man who has stolen from other prisoners, is always at the bottom of the hierarchy, regardless of the other characteristics he might have. Typically, the snitches and sex offenders live in separated closed sections for their own security. The flexible characteristics, such as criminal career and social connections in criminal underworld, can be cumulated and compensated. For instance, being a novice in crime can be compensated by using instrumental violence or working out hard in the gym.

Ethnic backgrounds can be either definitive or flexible characteristics. This depends on the ethnic category and the prison. Analyzing ethnic categories from this perspective also provides an angle to understand the change in ethnic relations.

The described changes in the E-ward did not mean that the ethnic hierarchy would vanish, but that having a dark skin did not anymore determine one’s position in the prisoner community. As soon as these prisoners could live in normal open wards, they were evaluated also according to their individual faults and merits. A prisoner with dark skin or Roma background still had a lot to do to prove the contextual ethnic stereotypes wrong in their case, but it was now possible.

Donald Clemmer (1940) wrote in his seminal work of prisoner community that the prisoner culture reflects the society as it is part of it, but that the prisoner culture alters very little as the society around it changes. He might have been right that the prisoner culture is particularly persistent, but social life in prison does not stay unaffected when societal structures alter. I went to prisons to study the current situation of the prosaic social life in prisons. All my major results, however, illustrate change. Change and a direction which I did not anticipate: lenience of the ethnic hierarchy and gradually weakening ethnic segregation. These changes illustrate importantly the changing environment where the incarcerated individuals have grown up in and even the criminal subculture which is becoming ethnically more diverse.

So far, I have illustrated ethnic categories and segregation, ethnic hierarchy and contextual ethnic stereotypes, that is, external definitions of ethnicity. Ethnicity is, however, also a source of group-formation and self-identification. I have studied what kind of individual and collective coping practices prisoners

within the main ethnic and racial categories form, and I argue that these coping practices come close to the idea of distinct prisoner cultures. They draw both from social exclusion and cultures that are brought from outside the prison walls.

Although the change in relations between ethnically and racially defined groups seemed promising, the alternative direction is horrifying – horrifying enough to keep it in mind when organizing the everyday life in prisons. Exclusion of ethnic minorities from the prisoner community can intensify ethnically defined group formation, hostilities between these groups and development of distinct prisoner cultures. This kind of prisoner community is difficult to predict and dangerous to manage, let alone to live in.

The administrations of Finnish prisons have their own work to do in ensuring equal circumstances within the institutions. Racist incidents in encounters with officers, the problems in acquiring information in foreign languages and obstacles in receiving religious guidance must be given more attention in administration - already because injustice encourages prisoners to seek protection from their ethnically/racially defined groups and developing distinct coping practices. It is time for everyone working in prison to realize that similar treatment of all does not provide equal circumstances in prisons that are designed for the majority Finns.

The isolation of prisons is relative. The changes in the free society affect the daily life in prisons, and what occurs inside will further influence the free society. The improving ethnic relations and the lenience of ethnic hierarchy was perhaps a surprising finding. It does not only tell us about prisons but also about fractions of the free society that are not easily studied otherwise. The Finnish society is becoming ethnically more diverse, and it is promising to see that positive trajectories can

be found in those environments that are found otherwise problematic.

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