

Reconciling Custodial and Human Service Work: The Complex Role of the Prison Officer

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Abstract

Expectations of prison officers' work in policy and in academic literature have become more complex in recent decades, with an increasing emphasis on the need to bring together security roles with human services components of the work. However, staff working within prisons face the daily challenge of working closely with prisoners, who are both subjects of community opprobrium and citizens with complex needs and high levels of volatility. The officer is placed at the centre of this dilemma. This article explores the way these challenges are being resolved in three Australian prisons through the conceptualisation of prison officers' work, and reports research that explored with officers and other staff their understanding of their roles. The article describes the diversity of approaches to conceptualising the work of the prison officer and resolving the competing demands of custodial and human services roles and the influence of the particular prison and the length of time in custodial employment on the resolution of this challenge.

Introduction

Despite the common characterisation of the prison as a 'total institution' (Goffman 1961) isolated from the community, the environment within which prison officers perform their role is not an isolated unit but rather a physical and social institution that has been shaped both by historic practices and by its past and current governance context. Although the physical barriers that define the prison are intended to keep both prisoners in and unauthorised persons out, these barriers do not protect the prison, its staff or inmates from the flow of ideas about every aspect of life, including the appropriate conduct of prison and conceptualisation of prison officers' work. Significant changes in expectations of prisons in a variety of jurisdictions including Australia can be seen to be affecting the working life of prison officers (Josi & Sechrest 1998; Liebling & Price 2001; Grant 2005; O'Toole 2005). The prison has become a high profile tool of governments' law and order policies, and a complex and often contradictory set of expectations of the prison are embedded both in policy and in popular discourse. Directly and indirectly penal policy and "penal sensibilities" shape prison life internally' (Liebling 2004).

Little, however, is known about the response of those working within Australian prisons to these new expectations and what is known encourages the belief that staff are resistant to change (Vinson 1982; Liebling & Price 2001). Although staff are not always blamed for

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their resistance to change (see Crawley 2004) the image of staff as cynical and unconcerned by the broader goals of the prison is perpetuated in these reports.

The Changing Role of the Prison Officer

Prison officers, despite having been recognised as playing a central role within the prison (Ross 1981:1) had, until recently, been the focus of very limited sociological research, although Thomas' (1972) study of the English prison officer stands out as an exception to this void (Kauffman 1988; Liebling & Price 2001; DiIulio 1987). A simple custodian role has been brought forward with the prison institution since at least the beginning of the 20th century (Lombardo 1981:159; Hemmens & Stohr 2000). The idea is conveyed in the colloquial descriptions of the role as that of a 'turnkey', 'screw' or 'hack' (Whitehead & Lindquist 1989:83). The custodial conceptualisation of the work of the prison officer, with its emphasis on physical control of the prison, constructs the role as a masculine role (Graham 1981; Farnworth 1992:279, 280; Pogrebin & Poole 1997; Farkas 1999:26; Crawley 2004). This gendered construction has been highlighted in studies of the introduction of women as prison officers into male prisons, where the difficulties experienced by female officers both resulted from and brought to the fore the masculinity as identified (Crouch & Alpert 1982; Jurik & Halemba 1984; Jurik 1985; Zimmer 1986, 1987, 1989; Merlo 1995; Farkas 1999). More recent research (Pogrebin & Poole 1997; Liebling & Price 2001; Crawley 2004:10, 190-199; Griffin et al. 2005) suggests that this masculinity remains an influential attribute of the conceptualisation of the officer as a physical custodian.

Penal policy from the mid 1950s began to express more complex expectations of prison officers at work, as the international movement that resulted in the drafting of the United Nations *Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners* influenced understandings of prison purpose and process that recognised the citizenship of the prisoner (O'Brien 1998). The idea of the work of the prison officer as human services work emerged at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s (Lombardo 1981:160; Hemmens & Stohr 2000).

Although in his 1981 description of prison officers' work Lombardo introduces the 'human services' concept by putting inverted commas around it (suggesting that this is an unusual use of language), he subsequently reports from his study of officers' work:

The officer responds to opportunities and occasionally seeks opportunities to ease the 'pains of imprisonment' experienced by inmates. As a provider of goods and services, the officer lessens the inmate's material deprivation. As an institutional referral agent or advocate, the officer provides the inmate with a chance to exercise autonomy, albeit indirectly. If an inmate knows an officer will intervene on his behalf, the inmate can influence his environment by approaching an officer with a problem. At the same time, the officer lessens the inmate's frustration with the slowness of bureaucratic responses. The human services role also demands that the officer deal with the emotional and psychological problems of inmate institutional adjustment, including institutional concerns and conflicts, and personal or family problems (Lombardo 1981:160).

In Lombardo's analysis, the human services role was a result of spontaneous interactions between prisoner and officer, and was seen as being 'outside of the formal institutional structure' (Lombardo 1981:161). However, in many jurisdictions, encouraging the engagement between officer and prisoner was an official strategy designed to facilitate the achievement of institutional goals (Toch 1978; Hepburn & Knepper 1993; Kommer 1993:133). New names, such as 'correctional officer' or 'correctional services officer', used in many jurisdictions, signalled a changed understanding of the purpose of imprisonment and role of the officer (Toch 1978; Jurik 1985:378).

Although not as obvious to the wider community as the custodian role, the conceptualisation of the role of the officer as a human service worker can be seen to have had an ongoing influence in correctional administration (Hepburn & Knepper 1993). Writing 20 years after Lombardo's analysis, Larivière (2001) identifies admiringly that the Correctional Services Canada mission statement 'genuinely resembles a Human Services Model'.

However, the relationship between human service worker and custodian remains contested. It has generated vigorous debates amongst correctional administration practitioners and researchers. At a policy level, attempts to reconcile this tension can be seen in the introduction of ideas such as Unit Management which constructs the prison officer as a manager of prisoners (Office of Corrections 1989). Embedded within the Unit Management system of prison administration was a conceptualisation of the prison officer as an active shaper of the prison environment through the development of ongoing relationships with prisoners. Over time one element of this model, case management, became influential in Australian prisons and the role of the officer came to be seen as supporting this work (Coulter 1999).

Liebling and Price suggest from their United Kingdom research that a resolution to the tension between custodial and human service roles lies in conceptualising the officer as a peacekeeper (see also Shapira & Navon 1985). The peacekeeping role is described as requiring a high level of skill:

Resolving and avoiding conflict, avoiding the use of force, and under-enforcing some of the rules were not omissions but were acts requiring skill, foresight, diplomacy and humour (Liebling & Price 2001).

Liebling and Price's study of prison officers, managers and prisoners was conducted at Whitemoor prison. They were looking for the characteristics of officers who could best be described as 'role models'. They concluded:

Good officers had verbal skills of persuasion, could use authority appropriately, had human relations skills, leadership abilities and could use straight talk or honesty. They had the ability to maintain boundaries – all boundaries – with different departments, between management and staff, and with prisoners. They had personal strength or 'moral courage' and a sense of purpose. They needed patience, empathy, courage and a professional orientation (Liebling & Price 2001).

The question under examination in this article is how these perceptions of the prison officer's role arising in the policy debates is shaping the views of prison workers.

Research Method

Prison officers' work is shaped in part by the construction of the prison as a form of punishment as articulated by David Garland. He argued that 'penal professionals' 'are defined by penal forms and penal relations in the same way as those whom they punish' (1990).

The work is also constructed through the relationship between officer and prison as an employing organisation. Meaning is created for the physical actions that prison officers carry out at work – walking, listening, speaking, lifting etc. While it is true that each individual creates this meaning, they nevertheless do so in a social context in which understandings are shared (Crotty 1998) and often contested (Adler & Longhurst 1994).

Organisational research has focused on the use of discourse to shape the way individuals' roles within organisations have been constructed, particularly more recently through

managerial discourses (du Gay 1996). However, the agency of the worker in this process is often overlooked (Halford & Leonard 1999). Conceptualisations of prison officers' work, then, can be considered to be shaped both by, and in reaction to, discursive practice. As Halford and Leonard (1999) suggest 'new discourse ... is not all-consuming, all-transformative: it merely adds to the complex and often contradictory multiplicity of discourse to which all of us are subject'.

New organisational ideas about a work role, they argue, are applied to human material 'which is already highly differentiated along the lines of gender, ethnicity, class and generation for example' (Halford & Leonard 1999:2120).

This research started from the proposition that the effect of new discourses designed to shape worker identities cannot be anticipated. It sought to explore the way in which understandings of the role of the officer were being articulated in South Australian prisons, through interviews with staff from three (of the eight) prison sites in the State. These three prisons represent the diversity of prisons in terms of geographical location, size and populations housed. The inclusion of both the only private prison in the State and the only women's prison added to the diversity of prison contexts. Interviewees were recruited using a non-probability sampling process. Research with staff within prisons can pose difficulties of access (DiIulio 1991:5; King 2000; Patenaude 2004) resulting both from staff suspicion of outsiders (Sparks 1996:349) and from the logistical difficulties posed by a secure environment. In this research, staff self nominated in response to announcements made by managers at staff gatherings in the weeks prior to the interviews. Whilst care was taken to encourage staff with a diversity of experiences and views to participate, the resultant sample may not be representative of prison workers and therefore the results should not be over-generalised.

The interviewees can be clustered into four role groupings. The first and most numerous group, the prison officers (25 interviewees), are those who perform the immediate custodial role – they are responsible for working with prisoners on a day to day basis and for the security functions of searching and monitoring. The second group, the senior officers (12 interviewees) includes experienced staff not currently working as prison officers, although they have performed this role in the past. At the time of the interview, these interviewees were performing a variety of roles including a first line management role and as Case Management Coordinators. The third group, the auxiliary staff (4 interviewees), had not necessarily worked as prison officers and contributed in the interviews from the perspective of their role as social workers or Aboriginal liaison officers. The final group, the managers, are the three managers responsible for each institution. Although each of the managers interviewed had also worked as a prison officer, they were separated from other senior officers on the basis that their current role involved a greater breadth of responsibilities and involvement with policy. They had less day to day contact with prisoners and the staff who have the immediate management responsibility.

Although the majority (27 out of 44) of those interviewed were men, the proportion of female interviewees in the interview sample is greater than the proportion of female staff in the prison worker population. This over-representation of female interviewees resulted both from the fact that, in each prison, female staff responded to the invitation to be interviewed at a proportionately higher rate than male officers and the fact that the Adelaide Women's Prison, which employs a much higher ratio of female to male staff than the rest of the prison system, was one of the research sites. Finally, interviewees had been employed in corrections for periods of time ranging from three months to 20 years.

Change and Complexity in the Work of the Prison Officer

Prisons were seen as dynamic work environments as a result of both altered expectations of prisons and changed understandings of the work of the prison officer. Interviewees described how their understanding of their work had altered in response to changes in the prisoner group over time, the increased complexity of their work, and in response to departmental reconstructions of the role of officers. Interviewees emphasised the complexity of the work but the way in which they understood this notion varied.

The Complex Security Role

The simple custodial role can be seen to have evolved into a more complex security role. Competing understandings of this role illustrate the complexity of its performance in a modern prison. Interviewees focused on either control for its own sake, control as a means of keeping prisoners within the walls or control to keep prisoners safe. The focus on control for its own sake positioned security work as the fundamental aspect of the prison officer's role. It was the security of the prison and the prisoner which dictated the nature of the relationship between officer and prisoner; that structured the day and that provided the challenge of the role. This account of security work emphasised the importance of adherence to rules and that the vulnerability of prisoners, staff and community required the prison to be securely under the control of officers. Through sharing stories of times when failures to keep to the rules could have resulted in prisoners escaping from prison or being unsafe within the prison, interviewees claimed respect for this role and the public service it performed.

A competing construction of the security role as mechanistically focused (keeping prisoners inside the prison walls) was employed in a number of interviews. Security technology featured strongly in these discussions, directing officers' attention to the formal institutional acts that create a secure prison, such as running the control room. A legal discourse was often used in the construction of this understanding of the security role. Prisons and those who worked within them were seen to be accountable for delivering the safety that the community expected by ensuring that those sentenced to prison were contained within the prison.

Certainly security is probably the most important thing that we have to do. Our mandate is to keep prisoners inside prison so the community can feel safe. We do that but it must be said that in the modern day and age your static security systems are pretty reliable. They are pretty foolproof. You have to be trying fairly hard to make a mistake. Having said that, the biggest battle is probably complacency among staff. Your electronic systems will do their job but if you take your eye off the ball they won't do their job, if that makes sense. [Interviewee 27]

Although this definition of the role was not constructed as requiring a high level of skill, it served to establish performance indicators for the prison and those who work within it that were both measurable and achievable.

The third definition of security work, ensuring the safety of those within the prison, was a construction utilised by many interviewees. In this construction of the role, the most important audiences for officers' work are those who live and work within the prison – prisoners and officers. Successful performance of the role was defined as ensuring the safety of prisoners and staff, and emphasised

... the security of people's safety inside, not just our safety to the prisoners, but the prisoners' safety to other prisoners. So, it's every single day, it's a major part of the day is what's happening; who's doing what; who's collecting, what sort of an atmosphere have you got in this

room? It's every day. Security in that sense, not the escape security but the safety inside of here: behaviour and possible misbehaviours happening. [Interviewee 14]

Prisoners' safety is at risk not just from other prisoners, but also from their own actions. This security role included a focus on the issue of self-harm.

We're not only making sure that our security, our safety is paramount, but also the prisoner's safety is also paramount. We definitely don't like the idea of a prisoner slashing up or committing suicide because then the question's asked, 'Well, what was done to help him?' and if we just shrug our shoulders there'll be a lot of trouble. As I said, the prisoners' safety is paramount. [Interviewee 30]

The expression 'dynamic security', reflecting the policy language of Unit Management, was used to describe how security obligations are carried out by engaging prisoners and becoming knowledgeable about them as people and as a small community. The professionalism of the security role was also emphasised by those interviewees who talked about security awareness being constantly present in the work of officers, often operating at a subliminal level. Respect for the skills required to perform this role were claimed by interviewees who identified the observational component of security as an important intelligence operation.

I guess I talk about, it's not physical, it's not a physical job; it's more of a mental job about observation of prisoners and the security sorts of things, about how you have to be on your toes all the time about what you think about and what you do and what you say and how you deal with people. [Interviewee 19]

A lot of it's intuition as well. You'll sense if something's not quite right or you'll see a lot of movement around the prison. We had an instance a week or two ago where there was a couple of blokes walking around the perimeter, it was about half past six, seven o'clock at night, in the dark. Two that don't normally walk around and before we knew it there was a car outside the fence and we were expecting that they would get a drop over the fence, which was foiled because we were on to it and it didn't happen. So that's I guess what you call dynamic security. Everyone was aware that those two don't normally do the laps and it's dark and another officer was looking out and saw the vehicle pull up with the headlights off and then cracking branches and all that sort of thing. So you've got to be switched onto it all the time. [Interviewee 35]

Challenging the Emphasis on Control

Alongside this acceptance of the centrality of the security role, the value of the control discourse in the construction of the prison officers' role was explicitly challenged by many interviewees who argued either that the overarching emphasis on control was unnecessary or that it had detrimental effects. In advancing their views, interviewees sought to differentiate prisoner groups as the audience for the performance of an officer's work and to highlight alternative ways of performing the role with particular groups of prisoners. Interviewees involved in the women's prison questioned the way security was constructed.

But I don't think the security needs to be as much of a focus as what it is. I think women are different. I think women, when they come to prison, are in a sense relieved ... people think that's so odd. But I think when they come into prison it's the first opportunity they can start focusing on themselves, rather than what are their kid's doing, what are their husbands doing, what are everyone else doing, are the bills getting paid and this and that, cooking meals and all the washing and I think it's the first time they can just sit down and think about where they've been and where they need to go.

So, security is ... I mean it's important – we're in a prison – but I don't think it needs to be as much of a focus as what it is, with women in particular. [Interviewee 25]

Other prisoners were also seen as having special needs that required the officer to perform with a more compassionate creativity than control.

A lot of the prisoners now have got mental health issues, so you deal with them. You're trying to basically keep the ones who've got serious problems; you're trying to keep them occupied. You're trying to keep them occupied and it might be mundane jobs. 'Do you want to come and clean the bins for the day?' 'Oh yeah!' and they'll go off, and do the best job in the world. They'll work their guts out just to clean half a dozen bins. It keeps them busy. And you try and find mundane jobs like that just to keep them going. [Interviewee 16]

Working with Indigenous prisoners was also seen to require a performance of the role that was inadequately described by control discourses.

You're controlling them for the eight hours that you're here and, as I say, you're telling them what to do and you're trying to teach them things, not so much like a school ... like a lot of these people you've got to teach them how to clean a cell ... general life skills. Particularly with the Nunga fellas, the Aboriginal fellas, they live out in the lands and they've never had to clean anything and they don't know how. There's only a handful of us that will do it but we'll actually go and put gloves on and actually clean the cell with them there and say to them, 'This is how you do it.' And once you've done that you don't have a problem. Because they don't know and they won't come and ask because it's an embarrassment, a shame, to come and ask. [Interviewee 9]

These challenges to the simple understanding of the prisoner emphasised that the custodial role needed to be sufficiently flexible or responsive to the particular needs of some client groups. Other challenges to the pervasiveness of control discourses claimed that they increased the vulnerability of those who worked within the prison. Officer vulnerability resulting from the performance of the security role was described with intensity by a number of interviewees. Issues raised included the destructive impact of the work on their relationships with others, the resultant lack of trust that underpinned all their relationships even with colleagues and people outside the prison, and the burnout effects of the constant alertness.

Successfully Performing Security Work

Despite the above challenges, interviewees were able to describe measures of success in the security role. Many such measures were explicitly related to a particular definition of security work, for instance keeping prisoners inside the prison, but interviewees also constructed performance indicators for the security role that were inclusive. As in the United Kingdom (Liebling & Price 2001) for many, success in the security role was associated with a lack of problems.

A quiet day's a good day. [Interviewee 31]

Most correctional staff have a saying, 'If you come and you go home and no-one gets hurt we've had a good day. After that nothing else matters.' And the next step up is prisoners got hurt but no staff hurt. It can be a war zone in there sometimes. [Interviewee 19]

Achieving that quiet day was seen as a skilful role albeit with distinct professional differences of opinion.

The Human Services Role

In elaborating the complexity of prison officers' work, a human service role was central for some interviewees.

That is your job. That is the job. Getting to know 'em. You can't help someone you don't know. You gotta get to know 'em and you've got to know how they tick. What makes them tick, what makes them fire up. [Interviewee 24]

However, as with the security role, there were alternative constructions of the human services role. Rehabilitative discourses were used extensively to describe the role and to express a sense of purpose for the work.

I've probably got a bit of a radical view on case management. I think every officer should basically be involved in every prisoner's case management ...

Every officer should be saying to the prisoners, 'do this, do that.' You're in here for beating up your missus or doing something like that. It's got to stop sometime. Now do you want to stop it in 2003? Or do you want to stop it in 2008 after you've been in jail for three of those five years?' [Interviewee 11]

Their own desire to see the imprisonment experience being one that led to change for the prisoners motivated a large number of staff. Whilst there were many explanations of the prisoners' circumstances, the combination of drug use and mental health issues were most frequently nominated as explanations.

... I guess it's fairly well known, from what I've seen over the last ten years, I think we deal with more and more prisoners that are ... well, they certainly keep re-offending, but it's drug-related type crime. Therefore, eventually they become almost a special needs type of prisoner with the psychotic problems that go with it. [Interviewee 15]

In positioning prison officers as having a contribution to make in motivating that change, interviewees made a strong claim for the importance of the human services role.

A specific example of human services work was case management. For many the title 'case manager', related to a small group of prisoners for whom prison officers performed important and responsible aspects of their role, as a case officer.

There has been numerous restructures and stuff to try and get more responsibility to the base grade staff and not so much left to the professional services, social workers and psychs and counsellors and drug counsellors etc, the list goes on. So it has become good case management, the responsibility is back onto the case officer to work with a small group of prisoners, in some issues it's one on one and our guys have one to six each and I think that it is a big part of the officer's role. [Interviewee 7]

Performing the role of case manager was seen as responsible work, with the emphasis not just on the relationship between officer and prisoner, but also the role the officer performed as a case officer in the prison system contributing to sentence plans, case reviews and the availability of programs.

An alternative definition of human services work, in terms not synonymous with case management, was found in a focus on interaction between officers and prisoners.

Working with the offender: an officer's work with the offender is based around just interacting on a day to day basis, and the operational instructions of Group 4 say something along the lines of 'try to make their everyday activities as normal as they would be if you were outside'. [Interviewee 39]

In these terms, prisoners were often spoken about as those who now experienced not just a loss of liberty but a limitation on their capacity to exercise the normal responsibilities of life. The role of the officer was to minimise the destructive effects of these limitations.

It's really frustrating for them to call out to a partner and if the partner hangs up the phone and they don't have any money left and I can imagine how frustrating that would be if you've got no

money and you can't talk to the person who's hung up or keeps hanging up on you continually. And then they're locked in their cell, unable to do anything about the problems they've got at home and they stew on it, and so we can talk to them. We can't actually give them advice. We're not qualified to. [Interviewee 42]

The work involved engaging with the dramas of prisoners' lives, being available to chat with them about what was happening, and to provide support when necessary. In this context, there were a range of views about what interaction might be considered human services work. One interviewee argued that even the most symbolic of security interactions (such as conducting a body search) could provide the opportunity for positive interaction with a prisoner.

Challenging Human Services

Rehabilitative goals were also raised and challenged in many interviews. The fact that the human services role required the cooperation of prisoners was seen as a fatal flaw. It was argued that there was very limited prisoner motivation for the case management process.

And when it's time for contact with the prisoner, it's the same old same,

'How're you travelling?'

'Fine',

'Everything going all right?'

'Yep, fine'. [Interviewee 28]

The idea that prisoners would change their behaviour as a result of their imprisonment experience was questioned by many interviewees, who argued that the forces that shaped individual behaviour were complex, social and rooted in individual histories.

And when he gets out, you don't know. Most of them re-offend but that's more in their life, that group of people. You see people that come in to see other prisoners, their families and that; it's like a different world. Even the areas they live tend to be all together. [Interviewee 31]

Prison officers were also seen to be vulnerable in performing the human services role. One small group of interviewees, emphasising the services in human services, constructed the need to provide a range of services to compensate for the prisoners' inability to do things for themselves as demeaning, and possibly lessening the authority of the officer and thus the respect due to the role.

...we spend a lot of time actually waiting on prisoners. That's how I see it. [Interviewee 27]

We are at times, we're everybody's secretary, we feed them and we supervise kitchen duties and, you know, we're cooks, cleaners, post office, we're everything. [Interviewee 6]

From a different perspective, several interviewees argued that a range of ethical issues arise from the interactivity required by the human services role. They argued that there were dangers in the interactions between officer and prisoners, expressing concern about interpersonal boundaries and the maintenance of appropriate professional relationships. The issues were summarised by one interviewee as follows:

[The human services role is] a major part [of prison officers' work], sometimes a troublesome part because you're trying to walk a very thin line. By nature, I'm very open and prisoners tell me everything about their life, their background, their hopes, their dreams: everything. So this is where this emotional involvement comes in. And at the same, all the time, you're forever on guard against that becoming too much the other way, where it could be seen to be being taken advantage of, or being put in a compromising position. So you're balancing that all the time. With one hand I'm putting out my hand and saying, 'I wish you the best for the future. Try and

do this, try and do that. Why don't you head in this direction? Why don't you ...?' You know? And at the same time, but I don't want you to know who I am, or where I live. So, it's a fine line.
[Interviewee 14]

Successfully Performing Human Services Work

Underpinning discussions of the human services role was a strong philosophical commitment from many interviewees. These officers were committed to making a difference to prisoners' lives and had a concern about the extent to which this could be successfully achieved. The importance of defining these 'success measures' was described by one manager:

A crucial part of our role is human services. We don't make anything in prisons. We don't make a product, our product is people; our product is interaction and human relationships. It's not as though we make green bottles and at the end of the day we can measure how many green bottles we've made in order to measure our performance. [Interviewee 44]

Success indicators differed depending upon how the human services role was understood. Those utilising the rehabilitative discourse faced a challenge if they wanted to measure success as changes in prisoner behaviour, as that behaviour change did not depend just on the activity of officers. Success in performing this role required the officer to motivate the prisoner to engage in change and even then was only one intervention in a complex arena. This role required significant resources. The difficulty of performing the human services role in a context in which resources are limited was raised by several interviewees.

I consider myself a very soft, lenient easy going sort of officer. I'm tarnished by the fact that the barriers that are presented before a correctional officer or someone in corrections, and it's not just a correctional officer, it's all professions within, and obstacles inhibit the performance in the rehab side of it. It's all very well having strategic plans and the 20/20 vision plans and all the rest of these things, and they say lots of wonderful things but when it comes down to brass tacks, generally we're understaffed, not so much in the blue shirts as most people say, but in the professional areas. We're definitely understaffed in social workers and we're definitely understaffed in obviously psychiatrists because we don't have one, and even the medicos.
[Interviewee 8]

Reconciling Security and Human Service Roles

Whilst the recognition of the complexity of the work of the officer pervaded the responses of interviewees, the relationship between the security and human service roles of the officer troubled many interviewees, who sought to conceptualise the work in terms that reconciled the competing demands without overly simplifying either role. They argued that constructing the work of a prison officer in a way that achieved a balance between security and human services work was both essential and challenging.

We actually are asking people at times to take two roles, one as a security officer, and a turnkey at times, to one as a case manager and one that portrays empathy and actually does contribute to making these people better citizens and getting them through that. [Interviewee 21]

Very different skills sets were seen by some to be required in performing these roles and it was possible that an individual officer may not be a strong performer in both skill areas.

Some people are more one side than the other. Some people are really security focused and lose sight of the fact that they are also dealing with living, feeling people. Other people are living feeling people focused and forget that, 'Shit, we've got rules for a reason. We don't bring mobile phones through the gate for a reason. We don't come to work with \$500 in our pocket for a reason.' So the best officers are the people that can get a grip on both of those things and

mesh them together and work effectively, without losing sight of the importance of either of them. [Interviewee 37]

The importance of the relationship between prisoner and officer was at the centre of the need to reconcile the roles. A respectful relationship was seen by many as the key to performing officers' work. Practically, many interviewees believed that fair treatment of prisoners can be expected to result in proper behaviour in response. To achieve this, a number of interviewees argued that it was important that officers be able to separate the prisoner from the crime and thus be able to establish an ethical, professional relationship with the prisoner.

Everybody here's done different crimes but you can't judge one prisoner against the other. You cannot discriminate against the paedophile and talk to a bank robber, sort of thing. [Interviewee 31]

At the same time, the prisoners' capacity to understand the complexity of the officers' role was identified as a potential barrier to success.

I think the dual role is really, really difficult, how to be the tough security type person and then to be the friend and the companion and to assist these women at 2 o'clock in the morning when they can't sleep. I think that's really, really difficult. I think people forget that. [Interviewee 25]

The idea of performing the role through respectful interactions with the prisoner was acknowledged as one of the areas of contestation. Interviewees reported that a proportion of officers conceptualised prisoners in terms that allowed them to behave in disrespectful and arrogant ways toward them, exercising petty power in dealing with them and being unwilling to take small steps to make a prisoner's life run more smoothly.

He men: they can't be human about it. They pull on the blue shirt, 'I'm the fucking boss, look out.' What they do is belittle themselves in the eyes of these people and these people have got all the time under the sun and they'll square up one day. Now we had an assistant manager in [one unit] here not long ago calling them 'fucking pieces of shit' and they heard it. Now, if anyone called me that I'd floor 'em. And the day's going to come this bloke's going to get his just desserts, but he'll scream and cry 'Poor me, what have I done wrong?' They're shot in the head, they really are. [Interviewee 24]

The Complexity of the Prison Context

Prisons, by their nature have much in common with one another and interviewees constructed the role of the officer through an emphasis on particular characteristics of the prison as a work environment. In particular, attention was drawn to the negativity of the environment, the dangers it presents as a work context and the isolation of prison work.

That prisons should be seen as a negative work environment may not be surprising. As interviewees described:

It's a very angry place, jail, because the anger, they're supposed to contain it but they can't and ... [Interviewee 11]

... and it's very aggressive, and it's mean and they talk really horrible to you and I have had to learn words in English that I had never heard in my life before. [Interviewee 25]

However, for many interviewees the negativity of the prison as a work environment related to failed expectations, to a sense of failure to change prisoners or their situation, as described by an auxiliary staff member.

Lots of hard work and lots of disappointment and they're the ones that get the brunt of the women's anger and, if they want to throw things they're the ones that see it. [Interviewee 25]

In addition to this negativity that comes from angry people unable to change themselves or their environment, the danger of the prison as a work environment added to its complexity. This danger, that made officers' lives vulnerable, was threaded through the comments of many interviewees, but was powerfully expressed by this interviewee who had worked through the feelings of anger and frustration that resulted from the harm done to his friend.

Yeah, my best friend got stabbed seven times a couple of years ago. But there ain't much point in dwelling on it; I can only hate the bloke that did it. I can't say because he's a prisoner all prisoners did it. That's really not fair. [Interviewee 11]

Whilst these attributes of the prison as a work environment contributed to the construction of the role of the prison officer as complex and unusual, uncertainty about public reaction to the work enhanced the social isolation and officers talked about the need to cover their uniform on a visit to the shops on the way home from work and of avoiding identifying what they did for a living in social situations.

Length of Employment within Prisons and other Variables

The length of time that a person had worked in corrections appeared to be very influential in an understanding of his or her role. Interviewees themselves noted that these variations were present within the prison, identifying that officers who had entered the work more recently brought different attitudes and values to those who had been performing the role for longer periods of time.

And I think with the younger officers, in particular, maybe because they're close to the age group – I've got no idea – they tend to be, the communication is a lot higher, the respect levels are a lot higher between the prisoners and the officers. But the older type of officer I think, who's been in the system a long time, especially working in the men's prisons and coming through to the women's prison, who hasn't had the professional sort of guidance or supervision in a sense, they're the ones that I think are causing some of the hard work. And it's unintentional. I'm sure they don't intentionally mean to go out there and go ... whatever. But I don't think they've learned their skills and their abilities to be able to say, 'Well, no, let's be objective. This woman's been sent there. This is her punishment. Now we need to support her the best that we can', as opposed to reinforcing the punishment mode. [Interviewee 25]

Interviewees who had been in corrections for less than 10 years were more likely to choose rehabilitative and managerial language in talking about the work.

There are some [prisoners] that I'm pretty sure will turn themselves around and there's some I'm pretty sure we will never see again, and they're worth considering and giving a little bit more time perhaps, and spend a bit of time with them and listening to what they've got to say. [Interviewee 41; employed 1 to less than 5 years]

I was more into the rehab and perhaps the deterrence aspect of it. The protection also comes into those as well. But I was more interested in what I could do to make a difference which is very sort of ... not high moral ... Some people say it's dreaming, but one person can make a difference, basically based on how they conduct themselves basically: lead by example, if you like. [Interviewee 8; employed 5 to less than 10 years]

The context of prison officers' work is, however, not homogenous. Understandings had been developed in diverse prison locations (including, but not exclusively, the three in which they were currently working). Each prison is placed in a particular community context, plays a particular role within the prison system (including housing groups of prisoners with different security mixes), has a unique history, and is of specific size.

Conceptualisations of the role of the officer were moderated by the prison in which the interviewee was working. Mount Gambier prison, with its separate identity as the only

private prison in South Australia and employing only staff who had worked in corrections for less than 10 years, is an environment in which there are a cohesive set of expectations of the role. In this prison, about it was common to speak of the role of the officer as a manager of prisoners. This was underpinned by their belief that prisoners appreciated that Mount Gambier was a good place to serve their sentence.

Mount Gambier interviewees sought to claim that the way they worked was superior to the way the role was constructed in departmental prisons, thus claiming respect for the work of the officer and the prison. The officer was positioned positively as a worker within an organisation whose legitimacy needed to be bolstered and affirmed. The officer was constructed as a vulnerable worker, whose job might disappear:

Yes. Group 4 is very important to me. I don't think they realise how important it is because I've got such a lot to lose if anything happens. I know when I finish here it's most likely I will not work again because of my age. [Interviewee 36]

Arguing that the work undertaken at Mount Gambier was unique and superior served to justify the ongoing private management of the prison and thus maintain the jobs that interviewees valued.

Neither Port Augusta nor Adelaide prisons provide such a cohesive social context for understanding prison officers' work. These prisons differ both from Mount Gambier and from each other, although they share a departmental context that influences understandings of prison purpose and prison process. Port Augusta prison, with its large, diverse prisoner population is a prison context in which divergent conceptualisations of prison officers' work are constructed and defended. A higher proportion of interviewees from this prison had worked in corrections for 10 years or longer. Views about prison officers' work took into account both changing political developments within the department and its political context and perceived gaps between rhetoric and resources. The prisoners were entirely involuntary and diverse both in racial mix and in security ratings. These interviewees described a broader range of constructions of prison officers' work which both reflected and created more turbulent workplaces, where tensions were expressed about the importance of different skills sets and the risks involved in the construction of prison officers' work in particular ways. Interviewees had worked in a variety of institutions and units within institutions and brought to their current role appreciations of the different ways that the role could be performed and a critical awareness of the limitations of their own institution. The complexity of the work was accentuated by the range of roles performed within the prison and very different expectations of prison officer relationships were described by interviewees working with different groups of prisoners such as long-termers or Work Camp participants. When asked about the desirability of change, less than half of those interviewed at Port Augusta wanted to see further changes in the way the role of the officer was organised.

Adelaide prison, incorporating interviewees from the co-located Adelaide Women's prison and Northfield Pre-release centre, provided the context for officers undertaking a range of unusual roles – working with women and with prisoners in their last 12 months prior to release. Staff were more restless and critical both about possible conceptualisations of the role of the officer and other issues such as the very poor state of the prison estate in their area. In this they are, arguably, protecting themselves from the public criticism being made of the women's prison while joining with the critics who argue for better facilities, and more and appropriately non-gender stereotyped employment possibilities. However, these interviewees also identified themselves with the Adelaide prison and asserted the significant differences between this prison and others within the system. A common theme

was that you required a very different skills set to work as a prison officer in the women's prison. The lack of societal respect for the imprisonment of women (as demonstrated by the highly criticised prison infrastructure, lack of credible work for prisoners and security limitations), was demoralising according to interviewees working in this prison. This demoralisation created a context in which there was little agreement about the nature of prison officers' work and a sense that unrealistic expectations of the role left officers vulnerable both to harm and to failure.

Interviewees from this prison were those most likely to want to see the conceptualisation of prison officers' work within their prison changed. The majority of interviewees, whether they had worked for 10 years or more or less than 10 years, argued that they would like to see the basis for the construction of the role of the officer altered fundamentally. There was one clear difference between these groups of interviewees that its worth noting here. Those who had worked for 10 years or longer wanted to separate the human services and security roles more so than those who had worked for the lesser period.

Finally, the variable of gender was found to be of minimal importance in determining roles of staff within the prison setting.

Conclusion: Embracing or Problematising Complexity

In recent decades there has been an increasing emphasis on the need to bring together security roles with human services components within prison work. Staff working within prisons continue to struggle with the challenges presented by trying to serve these two masters. Indeed, being seen to be 'helping' those who are the subject of general community opprobrium places prison staff in a difficult position. Add to this their role in dealing with people with complex needs and high levels of volatility, and one can appreciate quickly that prison officers' work is best described as a complex balancing of custodial and human service roles.

The study found that some officers embraced this complexity while others found it problematic. Longer serving interviewees were more likely to problematise the increasing complexity of the role. Included in this group were the small number of interviewees who argued that the custodial and human services roles should be separated entirely, with staff mandated to perform one or the other role. However, other longer serving staff were happy to be engaged with the dual roles, but identified problems in meeting the conflicting expectations of their colleagues, prisoners and the wider community. The use of managerial metaphors to describe the role of the prison officer illustrates a respect for the diverse range of tasks performed.

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