

THE PRISON OFFICER: A CONFLICT IN ROLES

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THE ENGLISH prison officer is the most important person in the lives of about 35,000 men and women who comprise our prison population. During the last 50 yr, and more especially during the last 20, his job has become increasingly stressful, not because prisoners have become more "difficult", but because of the changing goals of the prison system, and the conflict which has been created by those changes. When people contemplate the role of the prison officer they often conclude that he is unique, in the sense that his work appears to be nakedly coercive, and that the problems which emanate from it are in some way confined to England. But the stresses in his work can be found in other professions which create situations where people are put into a dependent role which is productive of ambivalence or outright hostility in clients. Thus the central conflict in the work of the prison officer can be found to some degree in the role of the social worker, the psychiatric nurse, the residential child care officer, and others engaged in what Goffman calls "people work" [1]. But it is the same conflict, emanating from the same professional dilemmas. It is becoming increasingly obvious that the distinctions between psychiatric hospital, prison, old peoples' home, and other total institutions are less significant than the similarities. There is not enough space to catalogue these, but the reception process is illustrative. Typically, a person entering a total institution is stripped and bathed, even if he is not dirty. He is then, typically, given institutional clothing and a new identity, being described as 22707746, or Brother John, or Mary, or the dark haired schizoid. He promptly loses control over his work, food, sleeping habits and a host of other features of everyday life. And he is deprived of many pleasures. All sorts of reasons are given for creating this situation: that he is defective, dangerous, criminal, sick, or that he has asked for it. Whatever the staff may offer as justification, the *effect* on the inmate is the same. It has been summed up as "institutional neurosis" [2].

Some institutional staff, notably in the psychiatric field, or in child care, find it very difficult to accept that all institutional experience has a generic pattern. Perhaps the most appropriate people to ask are the people who undergo it. They certainly record the similarities [3]. Naturally, there are degrees of intensity in the experience, but the common denominators are there. The point is that *all* institutional staff should recognize this common denominator, and examine the discrepancy between their intentions and inmate experience. The only difference between the prison officer and many others engaged in such work, is that he experiences the conflict in a sharper form. An analysis of the role of the prison officer can help to understand the stresses and strain in other work where the same basic conflicts exist, although not perhaps in the same degree. This, I believe, justifies discussing prisons in a group primarily concerned with mental illness. Nor is the conflict of a unique English variety. It can be found in all prison systems which allege a reformatory goal, at all times and in all places. Prison work is not some kind of aberrant activity—it is merely a variant of other social work

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activity. What I am discussing goes beyond the narrow confines of the English prison. I am discussing problems which are timeless and universal. The role of the English prison officer merely exemplifies these. What is the conflict? The conflict is caused by confusion over the aims of the prison system in theory and in practice. What are these aims? To understand the source of the confusion, it is necessary, briefly, to discuss the recent history of our prison system. This is an appropriate moment to emphasize that the prison officer is not a professional isolate but is a member of the most centralized of our public services, and is subject to considerable direction.

There was no prison "policy" in this country until the prisons were centralized in 1877. Then was defined a policy of deterrence, which was embodied in the phrase "hard labour, hard fare and a hard bed" [4]. Security was paramount, escapes were rare, and the shooting of absconding prisoners was not only condoned, but defined as legal. At the end of the 19th century, a Committee [5] recommended that the prison system should have *two* tasks, reformation *and* deterrence. A moment's reflection will lead one to conclude, that, unless there is indulgence in verbal acrobatics, these tasks are mutually incompatible. The effect of this recommendation, in time, was an impressive programme of reforms too long to catalogue here. The most dramatic were the setting up of "open" institutions, the abolition of some of the more degrading features of prison life such as the cropping of hair, and the wearing of broad arrows, and the introduction of a hostel scheme. This scheme enables prisoners to work at a normal job during the day, returning to the prison at night [6]. This looks impressive, and reformers, within and without the prison service were loud in their praise. The prison officer knew better. He knew that his ability to control the prisoners was being eroded by the introduction of those freedoms which were concomitant with the reforms. He was acutely aware that many of these improvements were introduced without adequate preparation, and with little thought of the consequences for the total administrative configuration. He knew too that if anything went wrong in prisons, society would evaluate him not as a reformer, but as a custodian. The prison officer knew what all workers in total institutions, and now a few outside know, that society wants its deviants contained, and is angry when such people, whether they are delinquent children or psychotic patients, are allowed so much freedom that they become a "threat". The prison officer's role at this point is very like that of any worker dealing with deviants, especially in institutions. Part of it may be described as the "referee" component, for such workers have to stand astride the line which divides the community from the deviant, balancing the needs of the one against the needs of the other, and interpreting the views of one to the other. This is, indeed, one of the most stressful aspects of social work.

There were other features of the reformatory era which made prison officers anxious and hostile. They felt that all the attention and good will of the Prison Commission was directed towards prisoners. They pointed out that as prisoners became more free, staff became less so. They still view with some distaste, the practice of "lionizing" well known prisoners. A crisis had to come [7].

It came as a result of the escape of George Blake, a spy, who has the distinction of being awarded the longest fixed sentence ever awarded in a British court, 42 yr. In 1966, Blake escaped from Wormwood Scrubs, and the moment had arrived. The community was outraged, and further angered by more escapes, especially that of Frank Mitchell from Dartmoor. As the prison officer expected, the reformatory

successes were forgotten (or nearly), and he was blamed for the failure to contain prisoners in a system about which he had complained for 40 yr.

The events of the 1960's revealed that an important contributory factor to the "low morale" which was commented upon by Mountbatten and many others, was the breakdown in communication between the Head Office of the Prison Department and the penal institutions. For those concerned with the administration of the social services, this period provides a fruitful case study, as well as an important set of lessons, on the relationships between macro-administration, morale and the milieu within which things happen, or do not happen to clients of the system. Lord Mountbatten [8] was asked to report on these events, and recommended the construction of a top security prison to contain novel kinds of prisoners, those sentenced to very long terms, and those "lifers" who are not likely to be released for a long time, if at all. Had this been done, the security problem could have been isolated, and the rest of the prison system could have paid attention to the "training" which is, formally, prison policy. One of the great blunders of penal administration in our history is that this recommendation has not been implemented. Instead, top security prisoners are to be "dispersed" to a number of prisons, with the result that a sense of crisis is generated throughout the prison service, non-security risk prisoners are submitted to gratuitous oppression, and officers are once more in a dilemma about priorities. At the moment, it is probably true to say that morale has been raised by the positive action consequent upon Mountbatten. But this will not last.

As well as this conflict between the reformatory and the custodial aims of imprisonment which is a commonplace of the experience of many institutional workers, the prison officer has to cope with a related, though rather different confusion of feeling in society. This is the argument about deterrence and reformation. The point has been made that these two are incompatible. They rest upon different suppositions about the nature of human behaviour. Those who advocate deterrence believe that man is responsible for his own predicament, is able to reflect on his situation, and can prepare himself to avoid trouble in future. The reformers take the view, either implicitly or explicitly that men are not altogether responsible for their positions. To some degree reformers are determinists. If a prison system is to deter, it can punish heavily. But the withdrawal of personal responsibility which is part of the punitive experience is not calculated to make a man function more effectively when he is released from prison. If a system is to reform then prison must be as much like life outside as possible. This, however, looks suspiciously like "mollycoddling the prisoner" in the classic phrase. And here is the central dilemma of prison treatment; society cannot have both. How can such conflicts be resolved? The conflict over safe custody could be resolved in part at least, by classification, and the separation of those prisoners who need maximum security. Intelligent architectural design and careful staffing would go some way to modifying the conflict. The other, between deterrence and reformation is more difficult because of the chronic, persisting, ambivalence of society on the issue. Some prisons, notably in North America, try to solve the problem by having two grades of staff, one for custody, one for treatment. This merely externalizes the conflicts, putting them in two men instead of one. The most perhaps that can be achieved is a modification of the conflicts by a continuing opportunity for prison staff to discuss them, and by the encouragement of the qualities of maturity which can be seen in the best prison officers and which manifest

themselves most strongly at critical times. Maturity here means the ability to balance the conflicting needs which society puts upon the prison officer, no easy task.

It is worth noting in conclusion that a preliminary to any such process is a realization by community, politicians, and prison administrators at a senior level, of the problems which exist. If officers are to be encouraged to function in a mature fashion, then they must be regarded as mature people whose views on prisons are not aberrant or pathological (although some might be), and who should be taken seriously. Much of the stress in prison work derives like that of social work generally, from the essential nature of what is going on between people. But much stress could be modified, and even eliminated, by a display of the kind of wisdom from policy makers, which the latter look for so anxiously in workers in the field.

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