

Chapter 6

When things go wrong: suicide and conflict

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the growing numbers of people in prison, the painful and emotional nature of imprisonment, the domestic and claustrophobic nature of the prison setting and the limits on available resources, prisons do not always run smoothly. On the contrary, a variety of problems and difficulties arise on a day-to-day basis, but these are generally settled (or at least die down) relatively quickly. Occasionally serious problems arise, and these are more difficult to solve. Sometimes, for example, in the case of a prison suicide, they are impossible to solve, and prison officers must simply deal with the situation as it stands. In this chapter I want to discuss two types of prison incident that have the potential to impact significantly on staff emotions. The first of these is prisoner suicide and the second is prisoner dissent – particularly dissent at the collective level. Later in the chapter I focus on (formal and informal) staff responses to the dissent, and highlight the ways in which such responses maintain the more ‘traditional’ occupational cultures of prison and raise staff morale.

Suicides in prison

The suicide of a prisoner can be very distressing for prison staff, particularly for those who are unfortunate enough to find the prisoner’s body (usually the night staff since most suicides take place at night). Like many of us, officers finding a suicide may never have seen a dead body before. During my fieldwork, a number of young men took, or attempted to take, their own lives in their cells. The suicide of one prisoner, a young

man of seventeen, had a significant impact on the officer who found his body – a man who up until nine months earlier had been employed as a carpenter. The young man's body, discovered during his night duty, was the first dead body he had ever seen; his comments, in response to my questions about how the experience had affected him, are illustrative of both the immediate and delayed impact that prison suicides can have on officers' emotions. Although this officer initially claimed to have felt 'okay' since finding the body, he subsequently admitted that he had found the experience upsetting: 'He looked awful. I had to take his weight so that the other officer could cut him down, and then we laid him on the bed. The smell was awful 'cos he had fouled himself. It was terrible' (male officer, YOI). The distress experienced on such occasions is not an issue that prison officers are inclined to talk to their colleagues about, in case their emotions are seen as inappropriate because 'it's only a con'. Officers who have had to deal with suicides in prison, however, often challenge claims of indifference: 'Staff who find suicides are *always* upset by the experience. Anybody who says they're not moved by it has got to be lying' (male officer, Stoke Heath).

The following comments provide insights into 1) the distress that prisoner suicides can generate amongst prison officers; 2) the emotional labour officers feel they must engage in such circumstances in order to match their emotions and emotional displays to the feeling rules of the prison; and 3) the impact of prisoner suicides on staff's perceptions of their job:

A successful suicide is the worst scenario we could have on nights ... it's the worst scenario. At the time you deal with it; you sort stuff out, someone might even manage to make a joke ... but when it's over, that's when the shock sets in. You never get over it; I think it's the sense of failure. (Male officer, Portland)

Similarly:

I had a lad that hung himself. I found the lad by his bed, and it looked like he had tried to hang himself and then thought better of it, 'cos he was on one knee as if trying to get up again. He was stone cold when I found him. Phew ... That was very upsetting that was. (Long-serving male officer, Portland)

And again: 'I can remember that incident of three or four years ago as clearly as I could then. It was horrific. I questioned my job, the service, and everything' (officer, Portland).

There is a considerable literature on death and dying but very little of it explores how sudden death is managed, or the anomaly of the newly dead body (Meerabeau and Page 1998). The newly dead body, though literally an inanimate object, has a marginal, ambiguous status: for example nurses may continue to see the newly dead body not as a body, but as the person they looked after. It is not surprising that prison officers report similar feelings; describing his emotions in the hours and days after the suicide, a middle-aged, newly recruited officer who had found a prisoner's body found it difficult even to go past the scene of death. The ambiguous status of both the cell and the body is apparent in the following comment: 'At first I tried to avert my eyes when going past the cell, but I *made* myself look in – and it was just an empty cell.'

As Leibling (1992) has also noted, the impact of suicide on prison officers can be great. Many report feelings of shock, guilt, disappointment, depression and anxiety both at the time of the death and during the time surrounding inquest proceedings. When a suicide occurs, prison officers initially respond in very different ways. Some officers laugh and joke about what has happened (the 'That's one less for dinner'/'There's an extra portion of chips going spare now'/'Hope it's not stew on the menu today' approach). Others simply shrug their shoulders – theirs is the 'This is a prison, he's a prisoner, so what?' approach. Yet others tell 'dead body stories' (these officers recount the details of the scene of death over and over again) or take a 'good riddance' attitude (the 'That's one less to mug a granny' approach). In contrast, other officers – particularly those who discover the body or had a particularly good relationship with the deceased – may be visibly shocked and upset. Despite these feelings, these officers may also prefer not to talk to the care team, even though debriefings after events such as suicide, hostage and riots are intended to enable people to create a meaningful narrative of what happened to them and hence 'move on'. Several officers, for example, said they preferred to talk to their wives and partners, yet they had been approached on numerous occasions by members of the care team, who advised that they should also talk to *them*. These approaches were often resented; as one of the officers put it: 'I felt that they almost wanted me not to cope so that they would have some caring to do.' This 'sheep dip' approach to counselling (Tehrani 1999) – the blanket use of post-trauma intervention 'just in case' – is indeed a controversial one (see McFarlane 1988; Raphael *et al.* 1995; Bourne and Oliver 1998).

Given concerns from various quarters (see, e.g., Leibling 1992; HMCIP 1999; about the growing numbers of suicides in prisons, I want to make, at this point, a comment on what I shall (hesitatingly) term a 'culture of

staff carelessness' that was evident, albeit to significantly varying degrees, in all the prisons of this study. There have been numerous accounts, in the literature and reports on prisons, of the tendency of some officers to behave in a blasé manner towards the prisoners in their care – i.e. ignoring or jamming cell bells (on the presumption that the prisoner simply wants a light for his cigarette or such like) and claiming that potentially suicidal prisoners are just 'trying it on' or 'just trying to get attention'. Indeed I heard and saw this for myself throughout the course of my research. Clearly, such attitudes and behaviour can never be justified, not least because prison officers have a legal 'duty of care' towards prisoners. None the less, as Liebling (1998: 76) notes, such attitudes may (at least to some extent) be *understandable*. She observes that officers who *as a group* feel unvalued and uncared-for, and who often have more prisoners than cells, are likely to deny and minimise prisoners' problems and to express frustration and other negative attitudes towards prisoners requesting attention. In short, unsupported staff may be more likely to leave prisoners unsupported. Arguably officers' common and long-standing refrain that 'prisoners get more than we do' is extremely pertinent here.

Prisoner dissent

As we have seen, control is achieved, in the main, through positive staff-prisoner relations. Sometimes, however, control is lost, both at the collective or (more usually) the individual level. When prisoners do not conform, and control breaks down, officers have a number of responses at their disposal to try to regain it. The first, and most obvious, response is for the officer simply to talk to the prisoner, since unco-operative behaviour often stems from feelings of anxiety, from fall-outs with other prisoners or from receiving bad news. Another response available to the officer is to put the prisoner 'behind his door' until he quiets down. If such measures fail, more formal, reactive mechanisms are set in train. Methods of controlling resistant prisoners have changed somewhat over the years; the formal reactive response used throughout the 1960s and 1970s – what some officers called the 'mêlée of fist, staves and feet' – has been replaced by a 'technology of the body' known as 'control and restraint' (see below) – a reactive response which is (or is supposed to be), clinical, methodical and strategic. Abusive and inappropriate methods for dealing with prisoners do, however, still exist and as we have seen are still put into practice.

Dissent¹ in prison may present itself in a variety of forms; everyday dissent includes 1) prisoner-on-staff assaults (some serious, others less

so); and 2) prisoner-on-prisoner assaults. When dissent takes place, the prisoner (or prisoners) is usually removed to the segregation unit, either under 'control and restraint' or, if the prisoner is calm, by allowing him to walk there, escorted but under his own steam. Attempts have increasingly been made to deal with dissent proactively through good prison management. Proactive management of dissent depends on forward planning and introducing consistency and predictability into the regime (Barclay *et al.* 1994). As Barclay *et al.* note, two Reports – Dunbar's (1987) *Sense of Direction* and the Woolf Report (1991) – envisaged concepts which are applicable to the management of dissent. The former pointed to the need to achieve 'dynamic security'² while the latter emphasised the need to strike a balance between security, control and justice. Both are concerned with the management of dissent on a day-to-day basis. Sometimes, however, proactive strategies to manage dissent are ineffective and staff must resort to reactive strategies. As we have already seen from the comments of long-serving officers, the removal of prisoners to the punishment block was often a brutal affair. Although most long-serving officers are glad that they had 'got past the days of blood and snot on the landings' (male officer, Lancaster Farms pers. comm.), apocryphal stories (illustrative but not necessarily entirely accurate) about old methods of subduing unco-operative inmates still survive and are retold on the landings. They tell of groups of staff protecting themselves with old mattresses and using whatever means they could to restrain prisoners. Before the development of C&R the removal of unco-operative prisoners from their cells was carried out in a 'chaotic' as well as brutal fashion, as illustrated by the following comments (all ranks, all six prisons pers. comm.):

Before C and R, we were mob-handed. We all piled in. I remember during one scuffle the SO shouted 'whoever's got hold of my leg will they let go?' (Male officer, Stoke Heath)

There was much more rough-and-tumble before C&R. The methods of subduing an inmate have changed; all you could rely on before was numbers. You just all piled on! (Senior officer, Wymott)

There were no set guidelines for dealing with violent inmates before C&R came in. You just gave inmates a hammering. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

C and R put an end to a lot of staff-on-inmate violence ... All you had before, basically, was a mattress and about ten officers [each] with a stick. (Senior officer, Stoke Heath)

Previously, we had no strategy for dealing with it ['trouble' from inmates]. It was just a mass fight. (Male officer, Wymott)

Officers told me that in these circumstances, injuries to prisoners were often deliberately inflicted. For example, officers attempting to remove an unco-operative prisoner from a cell simply: 'used a mattress and just splattered the inmate against the back wall' (principal officer and C&R trainer). As I suggested earlier, the removal of a prisoner to the segregation unit was often an opportunity for other officers to 'settle old scores'; as one senior officer recalled: 'In the old days, if an inmate played up on the wing, you'd get an officer run in and give him a kick and then disappear into the background.' Dissent was also managed medically. According to an ex-Parkhurst officer:

It was a case of jump on where you could ... and we used the wicker suit and large doses of muscle relaxant.

Following the creation of minimum use of force tactical intervention squads (MUFTI) in the 1970s (such squads were developed and used to break up demonstrations and disturbances) prisons began routinely to employ MUFTI techniques when dealing with disruptive individuals. On such occasions, teams of officers, wearing hard building-site hats, thick gloves and carrying batons and perspex shields, would enter cells and remove the prisoner to the segregation unit. The only real difference from what went before was that they had abandoned the old mattress and acquired a perspex shield, gloves and a hat; according to numerous officers, the 'minimum use of force' part was somewhat inaccurate. As they recall, 'staff still just piled in and did as much damage as possible to the inmate'.

Those of my interviewees who had worked in the Prison Service in the 1970s commented that offering violence to prisoners was never questioned – it was simply what one *did*: 'Risley was a brutal regime. We'd beat them up and throw them in the corner of the cell, and if they looked at you, you'd beat them up a bit more. We didn't know any different then.' However, even when they did 'know different', many staff simply carried on, sometimes with the full knowledge of their managers:

[When I worked at Strangeways], some officers went further than shouting and bawling; they used physical force on a fairly regular basis. [How did they get away with this?] They got away with it 'cos those in charge turned a blind eye. (Male officer, Lancaster Farms)

The regime in place at Strangeways up until 1990 has, of course, been discussed a great deal (see especially Woolf 1991). It was a regime in which antagonism between staff and prisoners was intense, and where 'pay back' was commonplace. Describing the occupational culture of Strangeways in that period, this same officer commented:

If an alarm went off, a *mêlée* ensued — you'd get officers running 300 yards just to get a punch in! [Really? Why?] Oh yeah. Cos they had this macho image they wanted to live up to. I've never seen that in the whole of the five years I've been at Lancaster Farms. You get physical force, but not brutalising of inmates for the sake of it.

The following quotation illustrates the *communicative* quality of staff violence; it is intended as an individual and general deterrent:

Hand on heart, I've never seen un-called-for violence in *this* jail, but traditionally, if a prisoner performed, you bounced him off every wall on the way to the block! That was to show *others*, as well as him, that officers wouldn't put up with that. (Senior officer, Lancaster Farms)

Similarly:

At Manchester, the, the heavy mob — which was just a collective term for whoever was free at the time — was quite impressive. And they sent out a very clear message: 'If you behave yourselves, you've got nothing to fear from us, but if you come on strong, this lot will come for you.'

Aggressive displays such as these are iconic and indexical (Pierce 1940). Weaponry, costume (in this case riot gear) and the thudding of running feet demonstrate the threat posed to those who refuse to conform in prisons. This threat is signalled both to the rule-breaker and the potential rule-breaker; it sends out a message to all that rule-breakers will be dealt with.

Technologies of the body: control and restraint

It was not until 1983 that C&R procedures were developed. C&R is a reactive, but defensive method of physically dealing with prisoners. It uses controlled actions aimed at minimising physical injury, according to laid-down rules of authority and accountability (Barclay *et al.* 1994: 161). The basis of C&R is a team of three officers; two officers restrain the

prisoner by the application of wrist-locks and the third officer holds the prisoner's head. C&R procedures are carried out at three different levels. Level 1 is restricted to the use of arm locks, cell removals and breakaway techniques. All uniformed staff are trained to this level. Level 2 involves training in the correct use of staves and shields. Staff trained to Level 3 (C&R advanced) are taught riot control techniques and strategies for barricade removal; only staff trained to advanced level are permitted to attend an 'Operation Tornado', i.e. engage in riot control (see below). These officers do not only work in riot situations; they can also be put on stand-by if, say, the drug dogs are brought in to search cells and staff suspect they will face resistance from prisoners.

Generally speaking, the introduction of C&R has reduced the level of injuries to both staff and prisoners, but on occasion C&R techniques *have* caused injuries to prisoners, usually because specific holds have been applied incorrectly or for too long. Annual refresher training is now mandatory (see IG 90/1996) following an increasing number of formal complaints from prisoners that they had been injured by inadequately trained staff.

Collective dissent: riots and riot control

Much less common than day-to-day altercations between prisoners, and between prisoners and staff, are incidents of hostage-taking and collective disturbances. Clearly, the Prison Service must be prepared for incidents of serious conflict with prisoners and it is for this reason that the Prison Service ensures that a certain number of officers are trained in C&R techniques to an advanced standard.

When a collective disturbance takes place at a prison, three-man teams trained to an advanced standard are combined together. When the disturbance occurs elsewhere, i.e. in another prison, six teams of three (eighteen officers) are initially sent from establishments nearest the one in difficulty. If the disturbance worsens, officers are drawn from prisons further afield. These Operation Tornado staff wear protective clothing comprising a helmet with visor (some with radio headsets), boots, shin guards, a 'box' to protect genitals, a stout leather belt, fire-proof overall and heavy-duty gloves. They carry side-handled batons and transparent short or long shields that can withstand repeated poundings and stabbings by make-shift weapons such as scaffolding poles, and protect officers from a variety of projectiles that may be hurled by prisoners as the teams advance forward (length of shield determines the position in team, i.e long shields in front, short shields behind).

Riot training

Riot training is noisy and dirty and officers are often hurt in the process. It is, however, a spectacular sight for the observer; as I stood on a gantry I was able to observe scores of officers form serried ranks which move forward, act, split, move forward, act, split and so on, removing 'barricades' as they advance into the 'prison'³ itself. Even during riot training the noise and the smoke are intense and the 'conflict' is extremely realistic.⁴ As I watched, officers held on to each other's belts as they progressed through the smoke, while 'prisoners' (trainers kitted out in orange boiler suits) hurled obscenities and lumps of wood (which rained down on helmets and visors) and delivered blows with scaffolding poles. As I watched, one male officer was hit in the mouth by a block of wood (he had forgotten to lower his visor) and another two officers (both of them men) fell down a flight of stairs.

C&R advanced training is strenuous and, despite the protective clothing, entails a relatively high risk of some degree of physical injury (sprains and cuts are commonplace). The course is, none the less, a very popular one amongst uniformed staff, especially younger officers taking part in the course. All the latter told me they had found it 'exhilarating' and 'exciting' but also 'scary'. The riot scenario proceeds in as realistic a manner as possible; realism is certainly achieved, given the comments from this Lancaster Farms officer who had taken part in it:

It's very heavy on your arms holding up the shields for hours. Your visor's all steamed up, you're dripping with sweat ... you're knackered. The first day it's blocks of wood, then it's bricks bouncing off your helmet and it hurts sometimes 'cos it jars your head ... The adrenalin kicks in though, and when you do the arrest [of the 'prisoners'] – even though they're your colleagues – you really do have to stop and think about what you're doing. The 'red mist' descends, it really does ...

It is common for officers to get emotionally 'carried away' with the excitement of riot training. One of the trainers commented that officers sometimes get so involved in what they are doing that they 'switch off' and are no longer able to respond to trainers' instructions. As the trainer put it: 'Somebody's in but the bloody lights are out! They nod [when you tell them to do something] but then they go and do something different.'

Several officers admitted to having succumbed to an overwhelming feeling of anger during the 'riot'. This is one such comment: 'You get carried away doing the training ... You'd make a pact with your mate not

to hurt each other but you do. You can't help it' (male officer, Lindholme Training Unit).

Given the physical intensity of the training, it helps if the officers are physically fit; unfortunately not all officers are: as one officer put it 'For fit lads, it was okay but my arms were trembling like hell with holding the shield up above my head for so long.'

Discussing the poor levels of fitness of some of the officers taking part in the course, one trainer remarked that although the criterion for attendance was that the officer should be fit physically and mentally, many were neither. He remarked that in terms of physical fitness: 'I've seen some that have come in here and they couldn't blow a bloody candle out!'

At the time of my observations, officers did not have to produce a medical certificate to show that they were physically fit to gain a place on the course. However, the trainers understood that the Prison Service was aiming to have mandatory certification in place by the year 2000. Neither, at the time of my observations, was the service fully geared up for women officers to engage in riot training. The protective clothing was too big for most of the female officers; as a result they had to roll up their overalls, wear foam in their helmets to make them smaller and make do with shin-pads so long that they came up to their knees. The trainers told me that this problem was also being addressed.

On each training course there are, perhaps inevitably, usually one or two 'loose canons' – officers who are 'out of control' during the scenarios (C&R trainers pers. comm.). These officers act over-aggressively. In contrast, some officers 'freeze' when they are confronted by an angry group of 'prisoners' who are screaming and shouting. In real-life situations, the intensity of prison disturbances – the noise (the banging of scaffolding poles on metal gates, the shouting, swearing and threats from prisoners), the darkness (all lights on the landings and stairways may be extinguished) and the smoke from burning buildings – sometimes proves too much for officers to cope with, particularly if they have arrived at the disturbance with ongoing personal problems of their own. These officers may suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome and have to retire from the service (PSSCWS pers. comm.).

Riots as repair work

In some circumstances, however, riots can be beneficial to the morale of both uniformed staff and governors. When staff feel that staff–prisoner relations are no longer 'right' (i.e. when they feel that the prisoners are

outside their control) they may wish for a riot, because that will put an end to the status quo and create a space for change. When the then governor of one of the prisons in this study commented that he thought staff stress levels had fallen since the most recent riot at his establishment, I asked him, hesitantly, if that meant that the riot had had some positive results. He agreed that this was indeed the case: 'We felt so fed up about the place we felt like giving the inmates a box of matches. But in the end, they got their own matches [and the prison was much better afterwards].' Similarly, from a male officer working in the same prison at the same time: 'The riot was the best thing that happened to us.'

Riots are also significant events for the reaffirming of staff solidarity and for the identification of 'suspect' staff:

If things go well, staff feel they can rely on each other again in similar situations. They're very quick to make derogatory remarks about their colleagues though ... For example, if they are asking for staff to go to a riot [at another prison], and one declines, some officers will be very quick to claim he has 'bottled out'.

Prison riots generate a mixture of emotions. Although acutely aware of the anxieties which grip their families when riots take place (see Chapter 8) many officers find riots exciting – good fun even:

Riots are very stressful for wives, but brilliant for male officers ... In riots, you *know* that you can't lose. If there's a chance of that, you wait for reinforcements. Basically you're a highly organised and trained team versus a rabble.

Prison riots, then, can both generate and rekindle staff solidarity: as one officer put it 'this is what it's all about ... [During riots] All past differences go out the window' (male officer, Portland). Several officers also commented on the polarising effect of riots – in such circumstances the staff–prisoner relationship becomes explicitly one of 'Them and Us'. Relatedly, many officers commented on the more positive effects of disturbances on staff morale, especially the reaffirming of comradeship. The following comment from a principal officer is illustrative of all these issues: '[When there's a riot] It's "Them and Us" without any doubt then ... [afterwards] there's a good buzz about the place ... [with sandwiches and that.] Also, disturbances allow officers to "get a bit of venom out".' 'Getting a bit of venom out' relates to 'pay back' (see above), but it also indicates the extent of officers' routine management of resentment, anger and frustration.

Concluding comments

The most exhilarating form of action available to prison officers is responding to a riot situation. A major disturbance is, for prison officers, both a highly symbolic and functional event. It makes (dramatically) explicit the notion of 'Us' and 'Them' and in so doing coalesces a staff group that may be demoralised and fragmented into a cohesive force with a communal aim – that of overpowering 'the enemy'. In such situations, petty squabbles and rivalries are forgotten and teamwork is to the fore; whatever their earlier differences with colleagues, prison officers are ready to do whatever it takes to regain the establishment and look after each other. Officers' tales about their feelings *before* ('When you're on the bus going to the prison you're shitting yourself 'cos you don't know what to expect'), *during* ('at Strangeways you could hear the helicopters overhead and see the spotlights flashing by the windows ... it was like being in Vietnam') and *after* the operation to retake a prison are important for the maintenance of the occupational culture and for raising morale. In attempting to theorise the significance of the riot for achieving as well as maintaining solidarity, it may be fruitful to borrow, from anthropology, the concept of the 'ceremony of aggregation', whereby the riot becomes a ceremony 'in which social relations that have been interrupted are about to be renewed' (Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 243 but see also Kuper 1983).

As I indicated earlier, riots are not, of course, everyday occurrences. Rather, many prisons usually manage to 'go on' from week to week, from month to month and from year to year with relatively few serious conflicts between prisoners and staff. When conflict does occur, it is usually at the individual rather than the collective level. Moreover, conflicts in prisons are not solely prisoner-staff conflicts. On the contrary, disagreements between individual officers, groups of officers and between officers and their managers constituted a significant degree of conflict in every prison in this study, and these divisions are rooted in the ideologies and working practices and styles of individual members of uniformed staff. It is to these issues that I turn in the next chapter.

Notes

- 1 Dissent in prisons can broadly be conceived as any episode or expression of non-conformity to generally accepted and established rules or practices. Although dissent may start at a simple level as verbal attacks, it often spirals into more complex conflict situations that are difficult to manage (Barclay *et al.* 1994: 158).

- 2 'Dynamic security' (i.e. security resulting from well developed staff-prisoner relationships and an active regime) is recognised by many prison managers as more important than physical security in the maintenance of control. Dynamic security is characterised by strong visible leadership and good communication; control depends upon staff knowing what is going on (Dunbar 1985).
- 3 At HMP Lindholme, where these observations took place, the training 'scenarios' were carried out in and around the 'landings' of mock prison wings located inside a large aircraft hanger. Each 'wing' was built to a different design; for example one was designed like a Victorian galleried wing (where sight-lines were relatively good) and another as a 'spurred' wing where sight-lines were extremely poor.
- 4 Because of new health and safety guidelines, the C&R scenario has had to be 'toned down'. According to C&R trainers, the scenario 'used to be like a pub room brawl ... We used to use concrete blocks and that'.